

# Nazi Germany 1933-1945

## Nazi Dictatorship 1933-39

### Hitler's consolidation of power

**Legal revolution:** Reichstag Fire Degree & Enabling Act gave legality to Nazis' actions.

Hitler emphasised the need for national unity in his speeches.

Nazis moved to bring into line those parts of the political system that were anti-Nazi.

- H reorganised state parliaments so that each had a Nazi majority. Regional parliaments were dissolved & Reich governors took over.
- **28<sup>th</sup> Feb 1933 Decree for the Protection of the Nation & the State.**
- **23<sup>rd</sup> March 1933 Enabling Act**  
All German judges required to swear oath of loyalty to Nazis or dismissed.
- **Law for the Restoration of Professional Civil Service April 1933:** removed Jews & political opponents of the Nazis from the Civil service, schools & courts. Nazis put in place. Removed officials who wouldn't follow Nazi beliefs & dismissed anyone whose former political activities couldn't guarantee Nazi control. Wanted Gleichschaltung – co-ordination.
- **May 1933 Trade unions abolished:** offices attacked Feb 1933. Many unionists arrested. workers' interests were now protected by Nazi-controlled Labour Front. Striking becomes illegal.
- May 1933 Nazis occupied offices of SPD & KPD, confiscating their funds.
- Hundreds of Left-wing newspapers were closed.
- Around 150,000 political opponents of the Nazis were arrested & placed in concentration camps.
- June-July 1933: other political parties dissolved themselves & Germany became a one-party Nazi state. 3000 SPD party workers arrested, imprisoned.  
**July 1933 – Act to ban new parties.**
- **Jan 1934 Reconstruction of the State Act:** local gov organised into regions – each elected its own assembly to manage local affairs.  
Local gov leaders unsympathetic to Nazis removed & replaced by Nazi party.
- **April 1934 Act to set up the people's Court**

## Nature of Nazi Rule

### Hitler's leadership style

The spirit of the Third Reich was embodied in Hitler's remark that there could be only one will in Germany, his own, and that all others had to be subservient to it. He saw politics essentially as the actions of great men and the solving of problems as a matter of willpower. Decision-making in the Third Reich was thus inspired by Hitler's personal whim rather than by administrative procedures.

While he was the only source of real authority, he rarely involved himself in the day-to-day discussions that led to the formulation of policy. Cabinet meetings became less frequent (only one in 1938) and he did not see some ministers for months at a time. His aversion to systematic work meant that decision-making was often a chaotic process.

### Authoritarian anarchy

Nazi propaganda depicted Hitler as an effective, all-powerful leader with total control. However, most historians now think that Hitler's Germany was inefficiently governed.

- There was a proliferation of bureaucracies (decisions made by state officials rather than Hitler) and agencies and no precise relationship between them. No attempt was made, for example, to fuse the institutions of the Nazi Party and the state administrations. They functioned uneasily alongside each other, competing to implement policies that Hitler did little more than outline.
- The Nazi Party was by no means a unified whole. It consisted of a mass of organisations such as the SS and the Hitler Youth which were keen to uphold their own interests.
- Hitler's tendency to create new agencies, with the job of speeding up particular projects, added to the confusion. Powerful figures such as Goering and Himmler built up their own empires, largely ignoring everyone except Hitler.

Historians Broszat and Mommsen claimed that the anarchic system controlled Hitler, rather than he the system. In consequence, they believe that historians should focus upon the structure of the Nazi state rather than upon Hitler himself. In this 'structuralist' or 'functionalist' view, many of the Nazi regime's measures, rather than being the result of long-term planning or even deliberate intent, were simply knee-jerk responses to the pressure of circumstance. Mommsen has suggested that Hitler was a 'weak dictator', who took few decisions and who had difficulty getting these implemented.

However, the functionalists have probably exaggerated the 'authoritarian anarchy' of the Third Reich.

- In reality, there was not always confrontation between party and state bureaucrats.
- The men who staffed both the party and state machinery conducted their business with reasonable efficiency.
- The special agencies did get things done quickly.
- The idea of 'authoritarian anarchy' does not fit the remarkable success of the Third Reich up to 1941.

To view Hitler as a 'weak dictator' is to misconstrue the situation. He was ultimately in control. He did not concern himself with everything. However, in those areas he considered vital, for example foreign policy, he showed real firmness of purpose: he made the strategic decisions; subordinates hammered out the details.

# The Impact of War 1939-45

## Impact of WW2 on German society

In September 1939 Hitler invaded Poland, bringing about war with Britain and France. There is evidence that many Germans were fearful of Hitler's actions. However, early successes helped to bolster morale.

- By July 1940 Germany controlled or was allied with virtually all of Europe, with the exception of Britain and the USSR.
- The war initially had a limited impact on most Germans.

Hitler seemed invincible until his invasion of the USSR in mid-1941. It was not until reverses in the east in 1942—43 that the pressures of total war significantly worsened the lives of German civilians.

## German workers

In order to maximise the productivity of workers, wages were reduced and bonuses and extra overtime payments banned in September 1939. This strategy backfired as it led to increased absenteeism. Consequently, wage levels were soon restored.

Conditions did not really deteriorate until 1943. As part of the policy of total war, the regime tried to mobilise labour more efficiently by moving people from 'non-essential' to 'essential' work. By 1944, the war's impact grew more severe.

- Holidays were limited and working hours extended to a minimum of 50 hours per week.
- Workers could be fined for absenteeism or have their reserved status removed.
- Food and consumer products were rationed – more to those with good attendance
- August 1944: ban on holidays. Working week 60h.
- Paid by production, not by hour

## The German elites

The German elites — large landowners and big businessmen — who had generally benefitted from Nazi rule before 1939, continued to benefit (particularly businessmen) until the war turned against Germany in 1943. The Nazi government benefited enormously from the fact that it could harness the skills and ambitions of the German business community as it took over large parts of Europe. However, the co-operation between big business and the Nazi regime was one between unequal partners. The Nazis controlled big business rather than big business controlling the Nazis. The Nazis thus succeeded in utilising the dynamics of capitalism, ensuring that large German firms fulfilled Nazi priorities. Those priorities were essentially political rather than economic.

## The role of women

- Nazi ideology stressed the role of women as mothers and home-makers. In 1939 Hitler refused to authorise the conscription of women into the workforce. The numbers of women employed in industry fell between 1939 and 1941.
- The National Socialist Women's League organised women to aid the war effort, for example by collecting food parcels for the troops.
- The families of conscripted men received enhanced welfare benefits.
- From 1943 all women aged between 17 and 45 were required to register for work. There were exceptions for pregnant women, those with two or more children and farmers' wives.
- By 1945 60% of workers were women and the age limit for compulsory work had been extended to 50. May 1939 – 37.4%
- By May 1945 nearly 500,000 women were working for the military in auxiliary roles.