

Reading 7

The Beginning of the Nazi Party



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Thousands of men returned home from the war bitter and angry. Many blamed military leaders and politicians for wasting so many lives in the name of national pride. Others, believing in the “stab in the back” myth, were outraged over the nation’s defeat, the terms of the armistice, and the Treaty of Versailles (see Reading 2, “Rumors of Betrayal”).

Adolf Hitler, a corporal originally from Austria, was among those angry veterans. Like many of his comrades, he felt that fighting in the war had given him a sense of purpose and a way of distinguishing himself. Bitterly disappointed by the outcome of the war, many men like him vowed to continue the fight for Germany by entering politics. Some joined the Communists, while others, including Hitler, turned to various extreme nationalist parties. (Nationalists believe that their nation and its people are superior to all others and deserving of their undying devotion.) Hitler joined the German Workers’ Party.

By February 1920, the party had a new name and a platform. The new name was the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*—or *Nazi*, for short). The name was meant to convey nationalism and socialism at the same time, although the socialism in the Nazi platform benefited only the members of an ever-narrowing definition of the German nation. The platform, proclaimed by Hitler at the first large party gathering in Munich that month, included the following provisions:

Nazi Party Platform

- We demand the unification of all Germans in a Greater Germany on the basis of the right of national self-determination.
- We demand equality of rights for the German people in its dealings with other nations, and the revocation of the peace treaty of Versailles . . .
- We demand land and territory (colonies) to feed our people and to settle our surplus population.
- Only members of the nation may be citizens of the state. Only those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be members of the nation. Accordingly, no Jew may be a member of the nation.
- Non-citizens may only live in Germany as guests and must be subject to laws for aliens.

- The right to vote on the State's government and legislation shall be enjoyed by the citizens of the State alone. We demand therefore that all official appointments, of whatever kind, whether in the Reich, in the states or in the smaller localities, shall be held by none but citizens.
- We demand that the State shall make its primary duty to provide a livelihood for its citizens. If it should prove impossible to feed the entire population, foreign nationals (non-citizens) must be deported from the Reich.
- All non-German immigration must be prevented. We demand that all non-Germans who entered Germany after 2 November 1914 shall be required to leave the Reich forthwith.
- All citizens shall have equal rights and duties.
- In view of the enormous sacrifices of life and property demanded by a nation by any war, personal enrichment from war must be regarded as a crime against the nation. We demand therefore the ruthless confiscation of all war profits.
- We demand profit-sharing in large industrial enterprises.
- We demand the extensive development of insurance for old age.
- The state must consider a thorough reconstruction of our national system of education (with the aim of opening up to every able and hard-working German the possibility of higher education and of thus obtaining advancement). The curricula of all education establishments must be brought into line with the requirements of practical life. The aim of school must be to give the pupil, beginning with the first sign of intelligence, a grasp of the notion of the State . . .
- The State must ensure that the nation's health standards are raised by protecting mothers and infants, by prohibiting child labor, by promoting physical strength through legislation providing for compulsory gymnastics and sports, and by extensive support of clubs engaged in the physical training of youth.
- . . . To facilitate the creation of a German national press we demand:
 - (a) that all editors of, and contributors to newspapers appearing in the German language must be members of the nation;
 - (b) that no non-German newspapers may appear without express permission of the State. They must not be printed in the German language;
 - (c) that non-Germans shall be prohibited by law from participating financially in or influencing German newspapers . . .
- We demand freedom for all religious denominations in the State, provided they do not threaten the existence nor offend the moral feelings of the German race.

The Party, as such, stands for positive Christianity, but does not commit itself to any particular denomination. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit within and without us, and is convinced that our nation can achieve permanent health only from within on the basis of the principle: The common interest before self-interest. . . .¹

¹ Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919–1945: A Documentary Reader*, vol. 1: *The Rise to Power 1919–1934* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1998), 15–16.

The Nazi Party platform was just one of many programs advanced by one political group or another. Yet by 1921, Hitler was attracting thousands of new members. One early member—who also belonged to the Nazis' paramilitary group, known as the SA (officially the *Sturmabteilung* or storm troopers)—explained the attraction:

We, oldtime National Socialists, did not join the S.A. for reasons of self-interest. Our feelings led us to Hitler. There was a tremendous surge in our hearts, a something that said: "Hitler, you are our man. You speak as a soldier of the front and as a man; you know the grind, you have yourself been a working man. You have lain in the mud, even as we—no big shot, but an unknown soldier. You have given your whole being, all your warm heart, to German manhood, for the wellbeing of Germany rather than your personal advancement or self-seeking. For your innermost being will not let you do otherwise." No one who has ever looked Hitler in the eye and heard him speak can ever break away from him.²

Connection Questions

1. Summarize the points of the Nazi political platform. What does the party platform indicate about the Nazi universe of obligation? What parts of the document may have seemed the most reasonable? What parts of the document might have been most popular?
2. What elements of Hitler's biography and personality were attractive to people in Weimar Germany?
3. Do you agree or disagree that when a person supports a political party, he or she must agree with all of the party's beliefs? Why might someone support a political party even if he or she is uncomfortable with some of its proposals?
4. While the SA member's statement that "no one who has ever looked Hitler in the eye and heard him speak can ever break away from him" is not literally true, Hitler's personality played an important role in generating support for the Nazi Party. What is charisma? How does the power of a leader's personality shape the response to his or her message?

² Quoted in Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came into Power* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1938; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 153.

Reading 8

The First Nazi Uprising

On the night of November 8, 1923, Adolf Hitler and a band of supporters dramatically burst into a Munich beer hall. Hitler ordered one of his men to fire a shot at the ceiling, and then he declared that German President Friedrich Ebert and the national government had been ousted. (This was not true.) The local police quickly restored order and, two days later, arrested Hitler. Indicted for plotting to overthrow the government, he believed the trial would bring his message to a national audience.

Throughout the court proceedings, Hitler and his followers openly showed their contempt for the Weimar Republic by calling it a “Jew government.” When the prosecution objected, the judge ruled that the Nazis could continue to use the term because they were “guided in their actions by a purely patriotic spirit and the noblest of selfless intentions.”¹ That view also guided the verdict. Although Hitler and his supporters were found guilty, the judge refused to deprive them of their privileges as citizens. Instead, he gave them the minimum sentence possible under the law—five years in prison.

In 1923, Hitler was still an Austrian citizen. As a foreigner convicted of a serious crime, he should have been deported. Indeed, the law required deportation, but the judge chose not to follow the law. He explained: “In the case of a man whose thoughts and feelings are as German as Hitler’s, the court is of the opinion that the intent and purpose of the law have no application.”² Hitler and his comrades served just nine months of their prison term. The rest of their term was suspended.

During his time in prison, Hitler and an ally, Rudolf Hess, worked on a book about Hitler’s life, his beliefs, and his plans for the future. Most of his ideas were based on antisemitic literature he had read before the war, lessons he had learned in the trenches, and observations made in the years that followed.

In Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), published in 1925, he maintained that conflict between the races is the catalyst of history. A *catalyst* makes things happen. In Hitler’s view, different races have different roles to play in society. Because he believed that the “Aryan” race was superior to all others (see “Creating the German Nation” in Chapter 2), he insisted that “Aryan” Germany had the right to incorporate all of eastern Europe into a new empire that would provide much-needed *Lebensraum*, or living space, for it. That new empire would also represent a victory over the

1 Quoted in Ingo Müller, *Hitler’s Justice: The Courts of the Third Reich*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 15.

2 Richard A. Posner, *Overcoming Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 147.

Communists who controlled much of the territory Hitler sought. Hitler regarded them as enemies of the German people. He repeatedly connected the Communists to Jews, whom he also saw as an enemy, by claiming that the Jews were behind the teachings of the Communist Party. "Jewish Bolshevism" became the phrase he and his fellow Nazis used to link the two groups. (The Bolsheviks were the communist political group that gained power in Russia in the 1917 revolution and established the Soviet Union.)

The Jews, according to Hitler, were everywhere, controlled everything, and acted so secretly that few could detect their influence. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler declared that there was a hierarchy of groups. At the bottom were not only Jews but also "Gypsies" (Roma and Sinti) and Africans. Hitler was not interested in facts. Instead, he would repeat a false statement again and again; the constant repetition had an impact even on those who knew it was a lie. Hitler's speeches often referred to a mythical time in the past when a community of "Aryans" lived peacefully together. He called upon the German *Volk* to restore that community by removing inferior races and eliminating the class hatred preached by the Communists. British historian A. J. P. Taylor once called Hitler's ideas "a distorting mirror" of European thought. He saw Hitler as someone who took ideas that were widely held and carried them to an extreme.

Hitler's trial and imprisonment made him a national figure in Germany. One war veteran who subsequently joined the Nazi Party recalled his impressions:

Then came a light in the darkness. A movement for freedom was founded in Munich. In 1923 we heard the name of Adolf Hitler for the first time. Who was the man? He was a simple front soldier, an Austrian who had fought and bled under the German flag. What did he want? The thoughts raced through my brain. Truth, honor, faith, discipline! What marvelous words! Unity of all people of German blood! . . . Here was a man of action! . . . Then treason did its work and the undertaking [the first Nazi uprising] collapsed. Trials followed in the courts. How that man Hitler spoke! Those days of his trial became the first days of my faith in Hitler. From that time on I had no thought of anyone but Hitler! His behavior moved me to give him my whole faith, without reserve. There was not much to weigh or study. All a man had to do was to think about the courage and heroism of his beginnings. The ideas of the leader cannot be got from books, be they ever so learned. The philosophy of National Socialism must take roots in one's very heart! Ever since those days I have fought and striven for my Führer, Adolf Hitler. I shall readily give my all for him at any time he may demand it.³

By 1925, Hitler was out of prison and once again in control of the Nazi Party. The attempted coup had taught him an important lesson. Never again would he attempt an armed uprising. Instead, the Nazis would use the rights guaranteed by the Weimar Constitution—freedom of the press, the right to assemble, and freedom of speech—to win control of Germany.

³ Quoted in Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came into Power* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1938; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 69–70.

Connection Questions

1. In what ways was the justice system biased toward Hitler and his allies after their attempt to overthrow the government? Why was this the case?
2. How did Hitler use earlier ideas about “us” and “them” in his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*? What policies did he advocate based on those ideas? How did the clarity or simplicity of Hitler’s ideas contribute to their acceptance?
3. Why was the war veteran quoted in this reading attracted to Hitler?
4. How did Hitler’s arrest, trial, and prison sentence change his beliefs about how to win control of Germany?