

The Rise of the Nazi Party in Germany

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Numerous books, papers, and journals have been written to explain how and why the German people would allow the Nazis to take power in the early 1930's. Individuals from within and outside of Germany to this day ask themselves how such evil could come out of one of Europe's cultural centers. In all honesty, it is my belief that the victorious allies of the First World War are at fault for the eventual rise of Adolf Hitler and the evil that he would unleash on the rest of Europe. "Few would have thought that the Nazi Party, starting as a gang of unemployed soldiers in 1919, would become the legal government of Germany by 1933" (Rise 1). How could Europe not see this coming? I believe that the eventual rise to power of the Nazi Party and Hitler had a direct correlation with the German surrender and the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles.

One of the main causes of the eventual rise of the Nazi Party is the German defeat of World War I. Not only was the defeat considered a disgrace to the soldiers on the battle lines, but a total surprise, as they did not believe they were losing the war. "We were angry because we did not feel we had come to the end of our strength" (Rees 16). These words were spoken by a German war veteran, Herbert Richter, who fought in France and found out the news of Germany's surrender while still engaging Allied troops. This decision, to sign an armistice to end the war, would have a direct relation to Hitler's desire to enter the field of politics. It was the belief of Hitler, as well as other German war veterans, that the German people were betrayed by members of the left and Jews, both groups that had a direct voice in the new Weimar Republic and who brokered the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. "Those military and political leaders who were responsible claimed that Germany had been 'stabbed in the back' by its left wing politicians, Communists, and Jews" (Rise 1). Hitler shared a similar dissatisfaction with

the way the war ended while in a military hospital near Berlin. “I could not stand it no longer. I groped my way back to the ward, threw myself on my bunk and dug my burning head into my pillow. So it had all been in vain ... the two million dead. Had they died for this? So that a gang of wretched criminals could lay hands on the Fatherland” (Shirer 25). It was evident that the German army, as well as the German people, did not believe that the ending of the war was justified, even though the Emperor had abdicated the throne.

The sudden war’s end was also a surprise to the people of the German Empire, as they were all assured through propaganda that Germany was on the verge of being victorious. “But in Germany the terrible torment of war ended in defeat and national humiliation, in political and economic collapse, a shock to all the greater because until the last days of the war the German government had encouraged its people to believe in ultimate victory or at worst an honorable stalemate” (Rich XXX). In all actuality, the Germans would have won the war had a workers strike of well over 400,000 in Berlin and another million in other cities not taken place as the armies of Germany were within 40 miles of France. “In the early summer of 1918 Emperor William and the German people thought themselves within sight of victory when suddenly disaster struck” (Bradley 8). Striker’s set-up workers councils and wrestled control away from the monarchy. “German propaganda had not prepared the nation for defeat, resulting in a sense of injured German national pride” (Rise 1). The result of this injured pride was an abrupt end to the war, with William leaving the throne, and those on the left assuming power and signing what would later be disregarded by Hitler, the Treaty of Versailles.

With the signing of the treaty, the mighty German army felt a feeling of betrayal by its leaders back in Berlin. The military felt that they were not losing the war, nor were they retreating. The “stab in the back” theory, which is also called the “November Revolution” would have a lasting impact on the army, as well as how the institution would react to Hitler’s eventual rise to power. I am unclear as to why the leaders of the new Weimar Republic did not stick out the war with such conditions, although it has been said that some top military leaders did want an armistice. “It resigned, but when President Ebert asked the army’s opinion, both the Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and his second in command, General Groener, told the President quite categorically that Germany had to accept the peace terms” (Bradley 26). It is interesting to note that von Hindenburg would later become the President of Germany who invokes an article of the Constitution granting the power to rule by Presidential decree, as well as the President who appointed Hitler as what would be the last Chancellor of the Weimar Republic. Interesting to note that it was not the fault of the top leaders of the Weimar Republic for this treaty, as the top two generals of the army told then President Ebert to agree to its terms. The army made the spin that they never lost, and that it was in fact the leaders of the newly created republic who “stabbed it from behind” (Bradley 26). This would be a heavy burden for the leaders of the republic to shake off, and would be one of the causes of its eventual collapse.

The Treaty of Versailles had several painful clauses to it, including a loss of land to Germany’s neighbors. The German Empire was shattered, losing lands to a newly created Poland, lands to Denmark, and the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to France. Germany also was forced to have the entire western region bordering France

demilitarized. “The Constituent Assembly ... to sign the treaty which was immediately described by the disappointed Germans as a Diktat. Although this diktat entailed territorial losses ...” (Bradley 26). While the loss of territory was not as large as that of the Austrian Empire, it had significant meaning to the German people, who as mentioned before, were never prepared for defeat. “The treaty had the effect of humiliating the German nation before the world. This would lead to a passionate desire in many Germans, including Adolf Hitler, to see their nation throw off the "shackles" of the treaty and once again take its place in the world - the ‘rebirth’ of Germany through a strong nationalist government” (Rise 2). It is evident that with this territorial loss, the feelings of anger and hatred towards the allies would become a cause for concern later in the future.

Another side effect of the Treaty of Versailles was the terrible economic times faced by the German people due to the reparations to the victorious allies. One of the major stipulations of this treaty was for Germany to admit total fault for the war, thus being forced to pay hefty war reparations. “The German population swallowed the bitter pill of defeat as the victorious allies punished Germany severely. In the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was disarmed and forced to pay reparations to France and Great Britain for the huge costs of the war” (Rise 1). These costs would have a permanent negative effect on both the state of the economy, as well as the general feeling of the people. When the treaty was signed, the German government was not even told of the actual costs that would have to be repaid, which resulted in the German people’s resentment towards the treaties terms. “To the vast majority of Germans the Treaty of Versailles appeared to be a dictated and unjust peace, a treaty designed to keep Germany

in permanent political and economic subjugation to the victor powers” (Rich XXXi).

This ideal, the ideal that the treaty was forced upon the German people and was unjust, as well as the thinking of the German military that traitors signed the treaty, would lay the foundation for right-wing parties, such as Hitler’s Nazi party, to use as a means to get the people on their side.

The stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles would have lasting effects on the economic and social conditions of the German people. It would add to the “stab in the back” theory used by the army, as well as create emotional feelings that Hitler will be able to use during his rise to power. Not only was this emotional feeling created, but German people were displaced from the newly created Weimar Republic. Many Germans were left in the newly created Czechoslovakia, as well as Poland. Another disappointing feature of the treaty was the demilitarization of the Ruhr area, which is the industrial center of Germany. French troops patrolled this zone, causing even more hatred towards the drafters of the treaty; the members of the Weimar Republic leadership. “The French were particularly incensed and were determined to teach the Germans a lesson. In January 1923 the Reparation Commission reported that the Germans had deliberately defaulted over their coal deliveries: French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr to enforce delivery” (Bradley 37). The intrusion of the French would play well into the hands of the Nazi party, whose ranks were filled with demobilized soldiers.

The economic conditions under the Weimar Republic played well for right-wing parties, including the German Worker’s Party, who later change their name to the Nazi Party. The German Mark was weakened following the conclusion of the war, and its value continued to drop. “The Germans kept their internal economic situation artificially

unstable in order to avoid paying reparations imposed on them by the Treaty of Versailles. As a result of the war Germany had a huge internal debt of some 144,000 million marks” (Bradley 36). Not only did the Germans mass such uncontrollable debt, but the extent of the debt to the value of the mark rose sharply. In 1923, one US dollar was worth 18,000 German marks, and later that year, one US dollar was worth four billion German marks. This level of inflation would pose a serious threat to the leadership of the Weimar Republic, and aid the anti-Semitism movement that is beginning to show up in German society. “Inflation and food shortages within those first few years were enormous. The general public blamed the Weimar as well as the Jews but soon the two became synonymous” (Political 1). The German people needed a group to blame, and found such a group in the Jewish population, many of whom were rich bankers and in higher levels of government following the conclusion of the war.

As the economic conditions worsened, so did the level of distrust in the government and the rise of influence in right-wing parties. The one party who gained the most was the Nazi party, with membership starting small in the German state of Bavaria. Notable members were former soldiers, including Adolf Hitler, the eventual leader of the party. “In Munich there were many alienated, maladjusted soldiers and ex-soldiers with a thirst for adventure and a distaste for the peace brought on by the Treaty of Versailles and the resulting democratic republic. They joined the German Worker’s Party in growing numbers” (History 1). The party played on this distaste through Hitler, who was an emotional speaker that captivated the minds of those who listened. Hitler was able to use the armistice against the government, as many soldiers did not feel the time was right, if ever, to surrender. Hitler also played on the terms of the ensuing treaty, a loss of land

and a loss of dignity. In the end, it is the fault of the victorious allies of World War One for creating the German Workers Party and its leader, Adolf Hitler. Had the terms of the treaty not included the reparations terms like it did, causing mass inflation on the German economy, I do not believe the Nazi Party or World War Two would ever have happened. One must remember that Hitler did not forcefully take power; he was constitutionally elected by the German people. It is my hope that victorious nations learn from the errors of France and Great Britain following World War One, as leaders like Hitler could legally come to power. German-born philosopher Karl Jaspers once said, "That which has happened is a warning. To forget it is guilt. It must be continually remembered. It was possible for this to happen, and it remains possible for it to happen again at any minute. Only in knowledge can it be prevented" (Rees 9).

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