

HOW
HITLER
SEIZED POWER

Could it Happen in America?

JOAN FRANCIS

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How Hitler Seized Power: Could It Happen In America?

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CONTENTS

Contents	1
Introduction.....	1
Why Was Hitler’s Government Called the Third Reich?	5
World War I and the Treaty of Versailles.....	7
What Really Caused World War I?	11
Germany After Versailles.....	13
Hitler’s Movement.....	15
Hitler’s Uses of the Arsenal of Democracy	23
Parallels Between Germany of the 1930s and the United States of Today.....	27
The Arsenal of Democracy and Its Uses	29
About the Author.....	35
Bibliography.....	37

Never in the history of our inspired experiment in self-government has our nation been in greater danger. If we value our freedom and democracy we must understand how the German's lost theirs in 1933.

Joan Francis

INTRODUCTION

When Adolf Hitler seized power in 1933, Germany had a constitutional democracy with all the guarantees of freedom, including elected national legislature, elected state governments, legal and uncorrupted police and court systems, and a constitutional bill of rights. Yet despite these legal and institutional guarantees of freedom and democracy, Hitler was able to destroy the democratic government and establish an absolute dictatorship in three months. How did he do that? Could his tactics be used in the United States?

Though most people are fully aware of the atrocities Hitler committed *after* he seized power, relatively few are aware of the mechanisms used to bring him to power. Consequently, there are numerous deeply held beliefs about Hitler's rise to power that are simply not true. Before finding the truth, one must first peel away the layers of fiction.

First, contrary to popular belief in the United States, Hitler was not *elected*. Nor was he swept into power by his great personal popularity. Many are sure of his popularity because they remember the film footage of Hitler's speeches from a dais high above a crowd of thousands of cheering Nazis. Few realize that those were propaganda films and were shot after Hitler had seized power, and had consolidated that power. The truth is that throughout the decade of the 1920s, Hitler's party received between two and six percent of the German vote. During these years, most Germans considered Hitler some kind of nut and thought that his party, the

National Socialist German Worker's Party, (NSDAP) was an unimportant fringe party. Political rivals gave this party the nickname of Nazis, a nickname not loved by the NSDAP. They called themselves National Socialist even though their socialist platform was abandoned after Hitler took over the group. Not until the depths of the Great Depression did their vote share rise, and even then it did not rise enough to get Hitler elected.

Second, Hitler didn't use a military coup to overthrow the government. He tried that once on November 8, 1923. It was such a ridiculous and flawed attempt that, if you could forget it was Hitler, a movie about his *Beer-Hall Putsch* would play as a farce, a Peter Sellers comedy. Though the coup failed, it is important to know that from that attempt, and Hitler's subsequent trial and prison time, he learned a basic lesson that was to provide him with the true key to power. *What he learned was that no group could seize power unless they first made alliances with the national institutions of power.* The importance of this principle must be understood because everything Hitler did from 1924 until 1932 was guided by this principle.

Third, though Hitler himself was always and unquestionably anti-Semitic, it was not his rants against the Jews that brought him to power. In fact, before he achieved power he was careful where and to whom he ranted against the Jews. The truth is that Hitler, like Joseph McCarthy, had a far softer target: anti-communism. And like McCarthy, Hitler played the anti-communist card very well, using it to attack everyone left of center, including the Social Democratic party whose members were the strongest supporters of the Democracy.

Fourth, we need to deal with that old chestnut, that inflation gave rise to Hitler. You can't bring up Hitler's coming to

power without someone saying, “Oh, Germany had terrible inflation. You needed a wheelbarrow of cash to buy a loaf of bread.” What they don’t say and don’t know was that this “terrible inflation” existed only nine and a half months, from January 31, 1923 until November 15, 1923, which was ten years before Hitler seized power. The runaway inflation of this nine months did indeed make the German Mark worthless and impact everyone in Germany, however, it was not hard to stop. It simply took unusual political courage to accomplish because it could only be stopped by laws that hurt people who held large sums of marks, bonds, mortgages, or bank accounts. This was done by the courageous Gustav Stresemann, who was admired outside Germany as one of his country’s finest Chancellors. In Germany he was equally hated by both the left and the right.. None-the-less, he accepted the difficult and unpopular task of issuing a new currency on November 15, 1923 and ending the run-away inflation. To accomplish this, however, he had to employ the double edged sword: The Enabling Act of Oct 13, 1923. Because Parliament was so divided, and the left and right were so unable to cooperate, they could do nothing, rather like our current Congress. The Enabling Act allowed the Chancellor to execute a law without legislative action by the Parliament.

Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933. By the end of April, he had demolished the democratic government; by the end of the year he had consolidated his absolute tyranny. How did he move from a comic failure in the Beer-Hall Putsch of 1923 to modern history’s most abhorrent tyrant? How did he, without a military coup and without popular support, overthrow a constitutional republic and establish an absolute dictatorship in just three months? It is of crucial importance that we

understand this because there are many frightening parallels between Hitler's methods and events happening in our politics today.

To understand Hitler's campaign for power from 1922 through 1933 we need a few clues in regard to what was happening to Germans in those years.

WHY WAS HITLER'S GOVERNMENT CALLED THE THIRD REICH?

THE FIRST REICH

Reich is a German term that means realm but implies a grand realm of an emperor or king. The first Reich is the term used for the time of Charles the Great, (Charlemagne) beginning about 800. He united Western Europe and his empire was called the Holy Roman Empire.

GERMANY'S SECOND REICH LASTED 48 YEARS

In 1871 Otto von Bismarck, the *Iron Chancellor*, succeeded in unifying a multitude of German principalities that had been bound loosely together under the German Confederation. Under Prussian leadership, Bismarck set up a modern German Nation ruled by the Hohenzollern, the first Monarch being Kaiser William I.

In concession to a strong democratic movement in Germany, this government offered universal male suffrage to elect representatives to the government. Though true power was maintained in the hands of a well-trained bureaucracy consisting of the *Junker*, (the elite landed aristocracy) this regime was for the most part

well liked and was drifting toward a British form of constitutional monarchy.

To understand how Hitler succeeded in seizing power and claiming the grandiose title of Third Reich for his government, one needs to understand what happened to this ruling power of monarch and aristocracy tempered by representative government. How did Germany come to be ruled by a short-lived constitutional democracy?

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