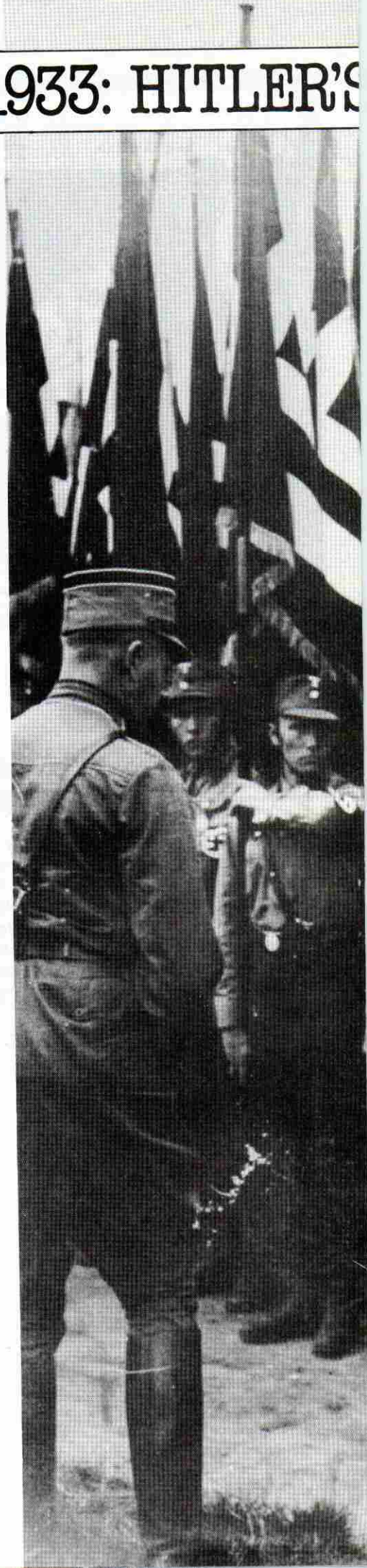
RE OF POWER' ✠ JANUARY 1933: HITLER'S

Fifty years ago this month, Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor of Germany by the ageing President Hindenburg.
How were the Nazis able to 'seize power' in this way? In the following articles **Jeremy Noakes** explains their success, **Ian Kershaw** places Hitler's Reich within German history and **W.A. Coupe** illustrates the cartoonists' view of the political upstart, Hitler.

THE RISE OF THE NAZIS

Jeremy Noakes



FIFTY YEARS AGO, ON JANUARY 30th, 1933, Adolf Hitler, the leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, was appointed Reich Chancellor of Germany. A regime began which, within twelve years, had been responsible – directly or indirectly – for the death of some forty million people, including around six million Jews murdered simply on the grounds of their ethnic origin. The Nazi take-over of power is still one of the central issues of twentieth-century history. How was it possible for such a barbaric regime as the Nazi Third Reich to gain power in one of the most economically advanced and culturally sophisticated countries in the world? Foreign historians have sometimes blamed the German national character; conservative German historians have blamed the coming of mass democracy and the demonic nature of Hitler; Marxist historians have blamed the machinations of monopoly capitalism. Others have looked to simpler, immediate explanations: Versailles, fear of Communism, unemployment, Hitler's demagogy, Goebbels' clever propaganda, and so on. When submitted to detailed investigation, none of these explanations is satisfactory, though each contains a grain of truth. To understand how the Nazis rose to power requires answers to two separate but related questions: first, how did the Nazis achieve mass support; secondly, how did Hitler secure his appointment as Chancellor?

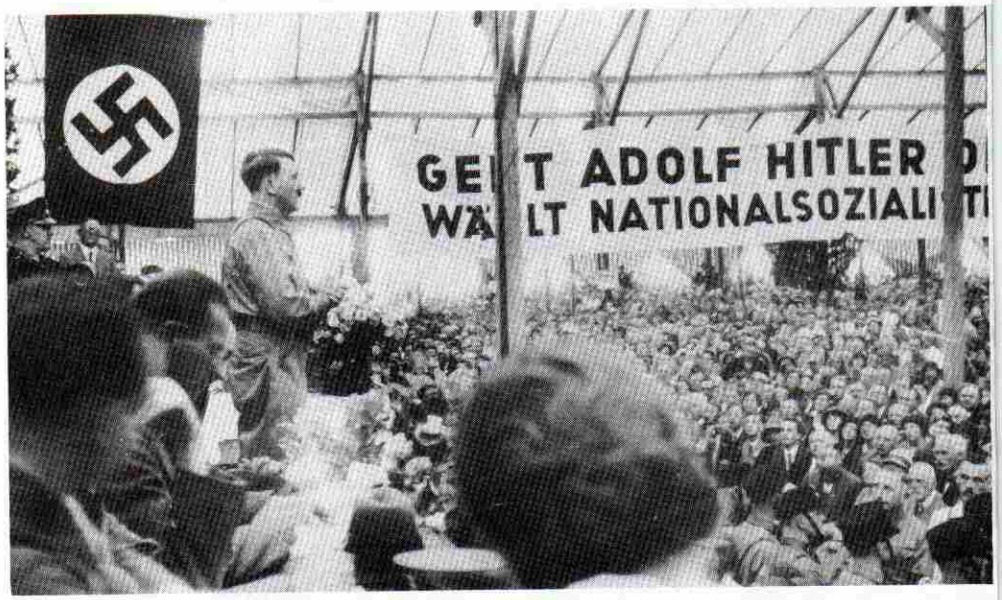
'SEIZURE OF POWER' JANUARY 1933: H

The road to power (left). Hitler in 1931 after the Nazis' electoral success in Thuringia.

Power (below). A joyous crowd in the Wilhelmstrasse, Berlin, besieges Hitler's car in January 1933. He was appointed Chancellor on January 30th.

Firstly, there was no single type of Nazi supporter. Different people supported the Nazis in different ways at different times and for different reasons. Above all, the Nazi party before about 1930 was different from the party after that date, when it became a real mass movement. Before 1929-1930, Nazi supporters – both members and voters –tended to be activists committed to the party's ideological programme of extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism; the movement was in some ways more like a religious sect than a conventional political party. From 1925, the party grew slowly year by year, absorbing members of the numerous anti-Semitic organisations and right-wing paramilitary groups which flourished in the post-war years, who were attracted by the Nazis' greater drive and radicalism and also by Hitler's effective leadership.

Between 1915 and 1927, the party was mainly based in the towns and concentrated unsuccessfully on trying to win over industrial workers. There were converts here and there but basically the party remained a fringe group. The workers were not interested – they were loyal to the Social Democrats or, if they became more extreme, tended to go left to the Communists, rather than right to the Nazis. The middle classes generally found the Nazis too scruffy and radical – after all, they proudly proclaimed themselves to be the National *Socialist* German *Workers'* Party and this emphasis frightened off many among the middle class. The party's support was mainly limited to a few malcontents among the lower middle class – artisans and small



The Nazi party gathers support. (Above) Hitler takes the salute at a parade of stormtroopers in Weimar in 1930. (Below) Hitler addresses a rally.

retailers – but also a few extreme nationalists among the educated middle class – teachers, civil servants, doctors and ex-military men.

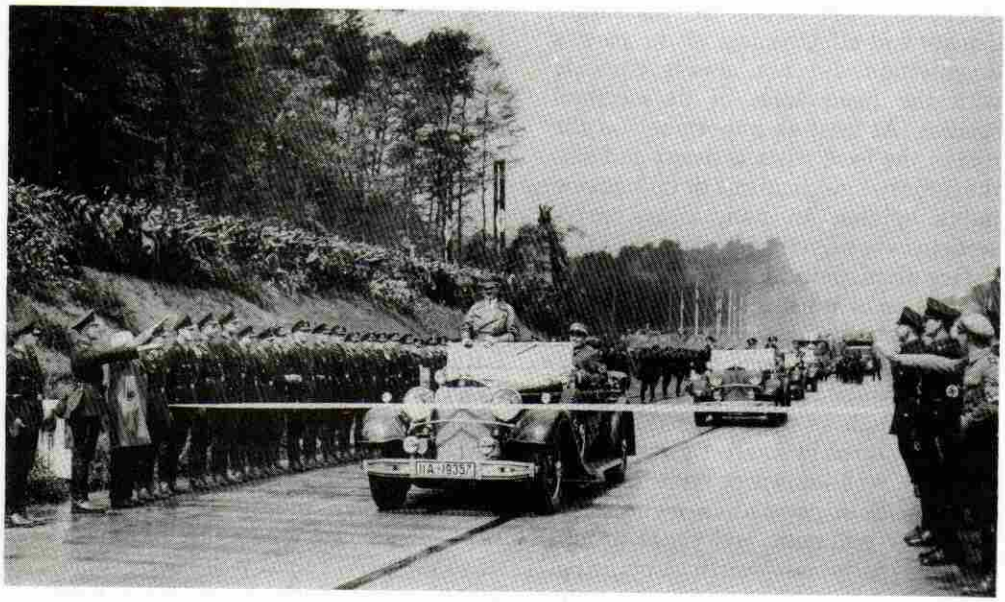
By the beginning of 1928, it looked as though their enthusiasm would not be enough. In the 1928 general election the Nazis won less than 3 per cent of the vote; the party was exhausting the reservoir of the radical Right and the workers were not being converted. However, between 1928 and 1930, the breakthrough was achieved. It occurred, firstly, through increasing discontent among the rural population owing to the impact of a world-wide slump in agricultural prices which began in 1928, discontent which the Nazis cleverly exploited; and secondly, in the shape of an alliance with the German Conservatives in a campaign against the new 'Young Plan' for war reparations payments. This latter alliance helped to make the party acceptable to the middle class. In consequence, the Nazi party began to change its nature. It was no longer a small sect; it became a mass movement. A bandwagon developed and all kinds of people began to jump on it.

On the whole, these people were not – as some have suggested – the so-called rootless and alienated masses of the cities. The six million unemployed workers did not make up the bulk of the Nazi voters, though of course many Nazi members and voters were unemployed, particularly the SA stormtroopers. In fact, the Nazis did best in the rural areas and small towns of the Protestant parts of Germany, particularly in the north and east. They won much of their support from the most rooted and traditional section of the German population – peasant farmers, self-employed artisans, craftsmen and small retailers – the butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers of old Germany. These people felt threatened, but were by no means economically desperate. In urban areas, the party did best in those towns and cities which were administrative or commercial centres with large civil servant and white collar populations, rather than in industrial centres; and they tended to win most support in upper-middle-class districts. Nazi support also tended to be strongest among the younger generation. This was particularly true of the membership, which was also overwhelmingly male.

Knowledge of the social background of Nazi members and voters, however, only takes us so far. It immediately raises the question of why these particular groups supported the Nazis. Studies of the image presented by the party through its activities have emphasised its skill at adapting its image in order to appeal to each particular social and occupational group. Traditionally, explanations for the rise of Nazism have tended to stress the extent to which support for Nazism was motivated by irrational hopes and fears. Recent research, on the other hand, has tended to emphasise more or less rational calculations of self-interest – without, however, denying the significance of the irrational element. In this connection, it is clearly necessary to differentiate between different groups. Thus, it is plausible to assume that for those peasants and artisans engaged in an economic fight for survival, concrete calculations of economic advantage were likely to weigh more heavily than with young people with few responsibilities who were free to indulge their emotions.

Part of the background to the rise of Nazism was disillusionment among many sections of the community with their existing political and economic representatives. Parties and pressure groups were widely considered to have failed in their function of defending the interests of their supporters and clients. Many middle-class people felt resentful towards a political system which they felt had betrayed them. They sensed that since the collapse of the old German Empire there had been a shift in the balance of power in favour of the cities and against the countryside, in favour of industry and against small business, and in favour of the working class organised in trade unions and against the farmer and small business man. They faced high taxes, high social security contributions, and now, on top of this, had come the slump.

These groups felt themselves being squeezed between the forces of big business on the one side and organised labour on the other. But they reserved their bitterest hostility for the forces of the Left – the Social Democrats, the trade unions, and the Communists. For, although they resented big business, at least it upheld the principle of private property and private enterprise, whereas the Left with its Socialist ideology appeared to threaten the whole basis of their existence. A specific fear of Communism was probably less important than this general hostility to the Left, a hostility which, however emotional, was



Hitler's appeal to those with a grievance: a programme of public works for the unemployed. (Above left) Workmen salute the Führer after he has laid the foundation stone of the new Reichsbank building in 1934. (Above right) Hitler talking to Nazi youth in 1933. (Left) The triumphal ride down a newly-opened *autobahn* in 1935.

rooted above all in the fact that the organised Left with its consumer co-operatives, its trade unions, and its political weight in parliament in support of workers' and consumers' interests represented a real threat to their economic position, a position which was under severe pressure from the economic crisis.

Thus, apart from promises to deal with specific grievances of the various economic and social groups – of which there was no shortage in the party's propaganda – by projecting itself as, above all, an enemy of the Left, the Nazis promised to defend the interests of the middle class more ruthlessly and effectively than had their previous representatives. Moreover, by promising to destroy the Weimar state and create a new political order, they were also offering the middle classes a new deal at a time when disillusionment not only with parties but with the state itself ran deep, a state which had proved unable to deal with the economic situation and protect their interests.

It would, of course, be a mistake to see the decision of these middle-class groups to support Nazism as an entirely rational process. The economic crisis contributed to an atmosphere of insecurity in which emotional responses to the situation – fear, resentment, and despair, on the one hand, and a kind of millennarian optimism, on the other – were heightened. These emotions were encouraged and exploited by the Nazi movement through its propaganda, its vigorous political violence, and its projection of a pseudo-religious sense of national mission. Nevertheless, traditionally hard-headed peasants are not known for emotional indulgence and it is unlikely that they allowed their political decisions to be governed by irrational considerations. Above all, they were influenced by the fact that the Nazis had succeeded in creating an image for themselves as a party which could promise a better deal for the peasants. The same was true for other groups as well; indeed, it was even true – though to a lesser extent – of young people.

The Nazi appeal to young people was also characterised by a mixture of reason and emotion, although in rather different proportions than was the case with the peasantry and other occupational groups. The element of rational calculation can be seen best in the case of students, one of the earliest groups attracted to Nazism. For many it was partly a question of their future prospects. The job situation for new graduates in the early 1930s was appalling and the Nazi party and its programme of a new order offered – apart from anything else – prospects for future employment for men like the recent graduate in architecture, Albert Speer.

But the appeal of Nazism to young people went deeper than this. Nazism offered young people action, comradeship and a sense of personal commitment to a cause wider than themselves. They had the illusion that they were participating in the rebirth of their country in a much more direct way than as members of conventional parties. In short, Nazism appealed to their idealism. Young people also liked the simplification of Nazi propaganda – everything was conveniently divided into friends against enemies, black against white; there were no grey areas to complicate matters. Not much thought was needed; a lot of exciting emotion could be generated.

Then again, political practice in the Nazi party seemed much more straightforward, even heroic, than the bargaining and compromise of ordinary politicians, carried out in smoke-filled committee rooms by grey-haired men in dark grey suits. Many young people, weaned on the German youth movement, found the style of Nazism more attractive than the colourless forms of conventional politics. There were the flags, the uniforms, the mass rallies. Above all, there was the feeling of belonging to an in-group fighting an enemy and being at odds with the rest of society – with the world of their parents. And there were leaders whom one could hero-worship –

A Nazi poster for the Prussian elections in 1932. The Nazi programme is described as 'reconstruction'. The building blocks are labelled, 'work', 'freedom' and 'bread'.

Hitler from afar, one's local storm troop leader near at hand. These leaders had to prove themselves by their toughness and daring. The nearest equivalent to the psychology of a Nazi storm troop in a city like Berlin is that of the street gang, though the Nazi SA men had an additional sense of self-righteousness when they put the boot in to a Communist – it was their contribution to saving the Nation. The SA also provided concrete material benefits. At a time when social security benefits barely existed, the SA provided food and shelter for those who lacked them in its *ad hoc* barracks and soup kitchens. Above all, it gave the young unemployed something to do – a focus for their lives, and also the comradeship of others in the same boat as themselves and now working for the same cause. And it was a cause which seemed to offer them some future – these were all powerful incentives to commitment.

The role of nationalism and anti-Semitism, so significant in many accounts of the rise of Nazism, was strongest in its impact on the educated middle classes and of rather less significance for some other important groups, such as the peasantry. The appeal of anti-Semitism appears to have been largely confined to specific areas where there was a tradition of anti-Semitism, such as Franconia and Hesse, although the fact that latent anti-Semitism was extremely widespread meant that the party's anti-Semitism was generally tolerated even where it had little active support.

The Nazis, then, were successful in appealing to a whole range of different groups through a multifaceted image which offered the prospects of concrete material advantages as well as a kind of general hope of national revival and, last but not least, for those taking part they offered a sense of personal fulfillment, an emotional fix, which was otherwise lacking in their lives.

The party's success in getting its message across to the electorate may have been less due to both Hitler and the national propaganda machine than is often imagined. For, despite Hitler's hectic speech-making activities, there were, after all, limits to the numbers of those whom he could reach directly. Moreover, the areas of maximum density and effectiveness of the party's organisation did not always coincide with the main areas of its electoral success. At least as important was the role of the local party activists and also the informal mechanisms of influencing public opinion. In many cases, people seem to have been recruited through face to face discussions in bars, clubs, and at their place of work as much as through attending meetings or reading propaganda literature. Similarly, the conversion of opinion leaders within the community, such as the village teacher or leading figures in interest groups – for example, well-known peasant leaders – was crucial in persuading members of particular economic and social groups that the party was worth supporting.

Chancellor Brüning in Berlin, 1932.

Indeed, much appears to have depended on how far the party succeeded in winning acceptance or at least toleration by the local establishment, including the press. Its success rate in integrating itself in some local communities and achieving respectability among the middle class even before 1933 is quite striking.

Yet, although the Nazis won a considerable measure of popular support, it was not enough to secure them power. For, although by the summer of 1932 they had succeeded in becoming the largest party, at that point – with 37 per cent of the vote – they came up against the limits of their electoral success under a system of proportional representation. The industrial working class and the Roman Catholic population, particularly those in rural areas, remained largely resistant to the Nazi appeal and their parties won over 50 per cent of the electorate.

By the autumn of 1932, therefore, the Nazis were in deep trouble. Failure to gain power undermined their attractive impression of invincibility. In the general election of November 1932, they lost 1.25 million votes and their organisation was riven by faction and sapped by disillusionment. In other words, the Nazis were not swept to power on an irresistible wave of popular support. There was nothing inevitable about the Nazi take-over. Indeed, had they been kept out of power for another six months or so the party might well have disintegrated, particularly since there were already the first signs of economic recovery. Yet, Hitler was appointed Chancellor by the Reich President, Hindenburg, who, acting under the emergency powers vested in him by Article 48 of the Constitution, was entitled to empower a Chancellor to by-pass parliament and rule by decree. Such a step was made possible by the breakdown of parliamentary government in March 1930, as the deeply flawed political system of Weimar Germany proved unequal to the exceptional burdens placed upon it. This collapse was a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition to produce a Nazi take-over. The fact that Hitler was appointed Chancellor was the consequence of the political infighting between 1930 and 1933 and, in particular, during the months between the fall of Chancellor Brüning in May 1932 and January 30th, 1933.

With the collapse of parliamentary government the main focus of power had shifted to the Reich President and his entourage. The intrigues of cabinet politics replaced the rhetoric and bargaining of parliamentary and party politics. Élite pressure groups which were fundamentally hostile to parliamentary democracy – the army, industry (particularly heavy

industry) agriculture (particularly the Junker landowners of East Eliba) – were able to exercise pressure directly on the centre of power. The exact role of these groups, especially that of industry, is still controversial. Moreover, Hitler and the Nazis were by no means their first choice. But when it became apparent that the Nazi movement alone could provide the necessary support for the establishment of a right-wing regime, they decided there was no alternative to the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor. They hoped the Nazis would act as a kind of public relations machine for an authoritarian state geared to the needs of the traditional German establishment. 'Don't worry, we've hired him' was the response of the Vice-Chancellor, Franz von Papen, to those who expressed their concern at the alliance with Hitler. It proved one of the most costly misjudgments in history, and unfortunately the main costs were borne by those who were innocent of the decision.

The rise of Nazism represents one of the most fateful events in recent history. After fifty years of analysis it is clear that there are no simple mono-causal explanations. Yet the need to understand how it happened is as urgent as ever. Indeed, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi take-over there is a strong sense of *déjà vu*. With unemployment high and rising, with the international financial system looking increasingly vulnerable, with both major political parties discredited by past and present failures, with signs of a break-down of the post-war political consensus and of a political polarisation with extremism growing on left and right, and – last but not least – with the danger of a younger generation growing up alienated from the parliamentary system – with all these problems and no obvious solutions in sight, the history of Germany between 1918 and 1933 is no longer a remote and purely academic subject. It brings us uncomfortably close to home. But, for that very reason, it may be that we can now understand that period rather better than before and, in turn, a study of it may give us insights into our own.

FOR FURTHER READING

David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic. Political Economy and Crises* (Princeton University Press, 1981); W.S. Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power. The Experience of a Single German Town, 1930-1935* (Eyre &Spottiswoode (now Eyre Methuen, 1965); K.D. Bracher, *The German Dictatorship* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971 and Penguin Books).

1933: CONTINUITY OR BREAK IN GERMAN HISTORY?

The Chancellor and the President. Hitler and Hindenburg shake hands, a symbol of what Hitler called 'the marriage between the old grandeur and the young power'.

Ian Kershaw

THE NOTION OF 'CONTINUITY' IN historical study clearly implies something beyond the mere chronological progression of events in a time continuum. It contains a suggestion of explanation and causality, in the sense that the continuity of specific social or political structures might be seen as conditioning the framework within which particular types of historical development could take place. Historians also use the concept in a rather different way, especially when studying times of apparent notable upheaval, to indicate a high degree of identity with what went before, despite an impression of cataclysmic change. Obviously, no society contains one single thread of continuity, and the 'identity' cannot be with everything which went before. 'Continuity' is, in fact, the historian's abbreviation for the persistence, survi-