

The Myth of the Inevitable: How the Mistakes of the Powerful Facilitated the Rise of Nazi Germany

Chiman Qian

Concordia International School Shanghai, China

ABSTRACT

When examining the lead-up to World War II, Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland is often seen as the catalyst for the war. However, this oversimplification neglects the circumstances that led Hitler to such a position. This essay challenges the prevailing notion that Hitler and the Nazis attained power solely through unwavering determination and exceptional political acumen. Instead, it argues that mistakes and misinterpretations by German and international leaders played a crucial role in facilitating the Nazi Party's rise to power and the establishment of the Third Reich. The Weimar leadership's political and economic miscalculations, combined with their misunderstandings of Hitler and his party's intentions, created an environment ripe for Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. Additionally, the miscalculations and misreadings of influential nations like Great Britain, France, and the United States enabled the Nazi regime to solidify its power and pursue expansionist goals while missing crucial opportunities to halt its progress.

Introduction

The notion that the Nazis and Hitler came to power through an unshakable will has loomed large in popular and academic writing for decades. However, this belief is based on the Nazis' own myth of the inevitability of the Thousand Year Reich and Hitler's role in its creation. As historian Ian Kershaw notes, "The personalized focus of the regime's "successes" reflected the ceaseless efforts of propaganda, which had been consciously directed to creating and building up the "heroic" image of Hitler as a towering genius."ⁱ On the contrary, the mistakes of powerful leaders in Germany and internationally were essential to this contingent historical outcome. Although the Nazis were skilled at using the crises of the Weimar Republic to mobilize a large support base for their party and at navigating Germany's complex parliamentary system, their ascent to power cannot be explained by their successes alone. Specifically, misinterpretations of the nationalistic and racist ideology and intentions of the Nazis by German and international leaders produced the conditions that ultimately allowed Hitler to seize power and proved more crucial to the party's rise than the party's successes.

The rise of the Nazi party in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s was a complex process influenced by domestic and international factors extending back to the First World War. Although the war was fought largely outside their borders, Germany's defeat and the post-war negotiations left severe consequences upon Germany's political and social climate that created the necessary conditions for the Nazi Party to gain traction. German nationalists, unable to accept defeat without even fighting on their own soil, turned to the "Stabbed-in-the-back myth" to explain their failure due to a betrayal by certain peoples on their home soil, most notably Jews and communists. The harsh conditions imposed upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, which included acceptance of blame for the war, the payment of reparations, and mandated demilitarization, allowed right-wing nationalists to frame the treaty as the product of an international Jewish conspiracy. To support this, they turned to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forgery that harkened back to medieval ideas about Jews and purported to give an eyewitness account of "international" Jews discussing their plans for global domination.ⁱⁱ Against

this backdrop, the Nazis established their ideological foundation by combining various nationalist, racist, and anti-Semitic beliefs with the promise of national redemption.ⁱⁱⁱ

Domestic Mishaps

However, the Nazis did not rise to power on their own but were assisted by a series of blunders by the Weimar leadership. Between 1919 and 1933, German leaders made a series of political and economic decisions that allowed the Nazi Party to exploit opposition to the regime to gain popularity and eventually representation in the Reichstag, the German parliament. First, the government undermined the stability it had created by purchasing massive amounts of foreign currency to pay its war debt and printing money to meet budget shortfalls, leading to massive inflation. By late 1923, government-printed 100,000,000,000 Mark notes were hardly sufficient for a loaf of bread.^{iv} As inflation wiped out middle-class savings, right-wing nationalists, including the Nazis, were able to exploit the growing resentment of the Weimar Republic to build opposition not only to the regime but to liberal democracy.^v That same year, following his arrest for an attempted coup in Munich, the right-wing vision of Germany's future espoused by its leader in court drew a minimal sentence from sympathetic judges. That man was Adolph Hitler, a German nationalist from Austria and veteran of the First World War. From prison, he was allowed to dictate his manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, which subsequently influenced many to join the Nazi Party's ranks.^{vi}

The rise of Nazis and Hitler's ascent to the Chancellorship was further facilitated by a series of missteps by the Weimar leadership. The first was to assume that the Nazis would operate within the government like other political parties of the liberal tradition. There was plenty of reason to suspect that this was not the case, however. For one, from their inception, the Nazis had demonstrated a penchant for violence against their political opponents through paramilitaries such as the SA. Despite their use of violence, the party remained relatively unpopular, only winning 2.6 percent of the vote in the 1928 parliamentary elections. Even as the economic collapse of 1929 fueled Nazis' electoral victories, many continued to see them as just another political party. For instance, even in 1932, following a substantial rise in Nazi representation, the Jewish journalist and political commentator Leopold Schwarzschild wrote that "As long as the democratic mechanism continues to function, even the maximum extension of Hitlerism will always remain within a limit which will mean that the slightest counter current will send it tumbling back into the minority."^{vii} These misconceptions about the intentions helped to convince President Paul Von Hindenburg to appoint Hitler as Chancellor following several failed chancellorship and extensive political maneuvering. Though he disliked Hitler personally, Hindenburg was persuaded to believe that as Chancellor, Hitler would be hamstrung by opposition to his party.^{viii} He and others failed to recognize the true nature of Hitler and the Nazi Party, which was committed to overthrowing democracy and establishing a totalitarian regime. In fact, when others expressed concerns about Hitler in a position of power, the former Chancellor Franz von Papen calmed Hindenburg's nerves by assuring him that "You're mistaken. We've hired him."^{ix} While the Weimar leadership propelled Hitler into a position of power, other countries did nothing to prevent Hitler's rise either.

The Ignorance Abroad

The failure of other countries to prevent Hitler's rise to power was also a contributing factor. Many countries were still recovering from the devastation of World War I and the global economic crisis and were hesitant to take any action that could lead to another complication such as war. Further, many countries also misunderstood

Hitler's ideology and intention and thus could not grasp the gravity of the situation until it was too late. This was especially true for Hitler's vehement anti-Semitism, which he laid out in explicit detail in his book, *Mein Kampf*. In it, Hitler makes clear that his "revolution" was to be one of retribution against the Jews, whom he viewed as an international cabal of parasites preying upon the "hardworking" nationalities, since "after the death of his victim, the vampire sooner or later dies too."^x Further muting the international reaction was the international nature of anti-Semitism, which was widely shared among global leaders at the time. In July of 1933, Hitler signed a Concordant with the Vatican promising not to intervene in Church affairs, giving the first breath of international legitimacy to the regime. In Britain, both the government and the press took a wait-and-see attitude. W.P. Crozier, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, wrote in 1935 that "[Germany] is entitled to have 'equality,' whether she is run by Nazis or Communists or anyone else," meaning that since the Nazis had come to power legally, their regime should be treated as legitimate.^{xi} Though criticism circulated over specific Nazis policies, few at the time felt it was in Britain's best interest to intervene. This was true in the United States as well, where, as in Germany, many believed that democratic institutions would contain Hitler's worst impulses. In January 1933, shortly after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, the *Cleveland Press* printed that "Though those industrialists are nationalists, it is not likely that they will permit Hitler to provoke a foreign war at this time."^{xii} As Jewish protests against the Nazis and their early anti-Jewish measures erupted across the United States in 1933, the government response was muted. Several times in the 1930s, Congress renewed the Neutrality Acts to promote US non-intervention in foreign affairs. Western powers would continue to tolerate Hitler-led Germany despite early warning signs of his intentions.

World leaders' misunderstanding of Hitler's intentions and fear of war also led them to tolerate Hitler's flagrant violations of the Versailles Treaty and his aggressive expansionism. One such instance was the Nazi rearmament, which the British and French feared Hitler might use to negotiate changes to the Versailles Treaty. Despite reservations, Britain and France largely took Hitler at his word that "Germany needs peace and desires peace. [...] Our love of peace is perhaps greater than that of the other nations, for we suffered most from this unhappy war."^{xiii} Following a meeting in Stresa, Italy, in 1934, France, Britain, and fascist Italy agreed to an alliance to oppose this. However, the alliance soon broke down over fears of Soviet intentions and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, leading to the decision to accommodate Hitler's request to expand Germany's navy.^{xiv} For the British, part of their calculation was to allow Germany to build up their military as a counterbalance to French power without threatening British sovereignty.^{xv} This same logic applied to Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, which British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain saw as unfortunate but not an imminent threat demanding a military response. Then, as Hitler planned to annex portions of the Czech Sudetenland, Chamberlain directly sent communications to Hitler essentially granting permission on the assumption that Hitler would go no further, lest he face war.^{xvi} Tensions arose following Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938, but Chamberlain and the Foreign Office concluded that Hitler would go no further and that neither Britain nor France were prepared for a long war.^{xvii} Yet, Hitler had clearly laid out his intentions more than a decade earlier to create a Reich that "embraces all the Germans and finds itself unable to assure them a livelihood...from the need of the people to acquire foreign territory...the plough is then the sword; and the tears of war will produce the daily bread for the generations to come."^{xviii}

In the final months leading up to the invasion of Poland, international leaders made the final blunders that would allow Hitler to kickstart the Second World War. As worries about Nazi Germany's aggressive expansionism increased, diplomatic efforts to prevent war grew more difficult, and tensions between Germany and its neighbors, particularly Poland, increased. This agreement gave Hitler the confidence to invade Poland without worrying about Soviet intervention. Hitler gave Poland an ultimatum, demanding the return of Danzig and a German-controlled transit route through Poland as diplomatic efforts from the West continued to fail. Poland rejected these demands with the support of Britain and France. World War II started when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. The brutal and quick invasion quickly outnumbered the Polish army. The international community condemned the aggression, and Britain and France declared war on Germany, but

their actions could not prevent the devastation that would follow in Poland and throughout Europe. The invasion of Poland highlighted Hitler and Nazi Germany's rise to power and with no immediate method of stopping them.^{xix}

Conclusion

While it is true that the Nazis exhibited great political skill in their rise to power during the 1920s and 1930s, they were assisted on many levels by the mistakes, misapprehensions, and blunders of their domestic and international foes. Domestically, the Weimar leadership's political and economic miscalculations, as well as their misunderstandings of Hitler and the Nazis' intentions, created space for the once-obscure leader of a once-obscure party to seize power in Germany in 1933. Internationally, the miscalculations and misreadings of Great Britain, France, and the United States facilitated the entrenchment of the Nazi dictatorship and its expansionist program while missing key opportunities to end it. Absent these mistakes, it is quite likely that the Nazis and their fascist program would have been stopped before they were able to dismantle the democratic machinery of the Weimar Republic. As this essay has demonstrated, the mistakes of the powerful were more important in paving the road to World War II in Europe than their plans.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

References

-
- ⁱ Ian Kershaw, "The Führer Myth: How Hitler Won over the German People." *Spiegel International*, January 30, 2008.
- ⁱⁱ David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews, 1933-1949* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 43; Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), 15.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hajo Holborn, "Origins and Character of Nazi Ideology," *Political Science Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (Dec. 1964).
- ^{iv} John Wilson, *Failed Hope: The Story of a Lost Peace* (Toronto: Ontario Arts Council, 2012), 25.
- ^v David Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 13.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 20.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 26.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 29.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, 30.
- ^x Cited in Walter Zwi Bacharach, "Antisemitism and Racism in Nazi Ideology," *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 71.
- ^{xi} Nigel J. Cox, "British Reactions to German Foreign Policy, January 1933 to June 1936" (MA thesis, Eastern Illinois University, 1980), 7.
- ^{xii} "The Nazis in the News: 1933." American Experience. PBS, n/d.
- ^{xiii} Gordon W. Orange, ed., *Hitler's Words: Two Decades of National Socialism, 1923-1943* (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Public Affairs), 181.
- ^{xiv} Ann Sinclair Bethel, "The French Perceptions and Responses to German Rearmament, 1932-1934" (Ph.D. diss., University of California Irvine, 1990), 403.

^{xv} Jeffrey L. Hughes, "The Origins of World War II in Europe: British Deterrence Failure and German Expansionism," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 882.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 868.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 866.

^{xviii} Howard Langer, *World War II: An Encyclopedia of Quotations* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999), 409.

^{xix} Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 231-32.