

Timeline: (1919-1934)

Germany's Transition from Democracy to Dictatorship

Creating Context

The Nazis went from having no formal power in 1920, to some power, to all of the formal political power in Germany in 1934. At the same time, citizens went from having the power to elect representatives, join a variety of political parties, and enjoy civil rights such as freedom of speech, to losing much of that power when Hitler became Führer. The timeline in this reading outlines many of the steps, both small and large, that the Nazis took to transform German government and society.

You will need to know the following vocabulary terms in order to fully understand this reading:

democracy dictatorship Reichstag	totalitarianism president constitution/article	führer inevitability opportunism	chancellor veto
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November 1932 — The Nazi Party wins 33% of the votes, giving them more seats in the Reichstag than any other political party.

January 1933 — German President Paul von Hindenburg understands that he will need the support of the Nazi Party to get any laws passed. As a result of the success of the Nazi Party in the elections, President Hindenburg appoints Hitler to the position of Chancellor—the head of parliament.

February 1, 1933 — Hitler proclaims the new government of Germany by speaking directly to the German people on the radio, not by speaking to members of parliament. He declares, “[The] new national government will consider it its first and supreme duty to restore our nation’s unity of will and spirit. . . . In place of turbulent instincts, the government will once again make national discipline our guide.” A parade is held in Hitler’s honor.

February 27, 1933 — The Reichstag (parliament) building is set on fire. Hitler quickly blames the communists, a rival political party.

February 28, 1933 — Using the fire as a justification, Hitler convinces President Hindenburg to invoke Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution in order to protect public safety.

February 28, 1933 — Hitler uses the emergency power of the president to issue two laws. He says the purpose of these laws was to protect public safety. The first law allows the government to search and confiscate private property. Government officials are now permitted to read mail and to take belongings from people’s homes. The other law allows him to arrest anyone belonging to rival political parties, especially communists. Because of Article 48 these laws do not need to be approved by the Reichstag. If a majority of the members of the Reichstag do not approve of a law, they still have the power to veto it. But, with many of his opposition jailed or scared to speak out, none of Hitler’s laws get vetoed.

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March 11, 1933 — Hitler creates a new government department, the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. The purpose of this department is to spread Hitler's ideas among the German public.

March 23, 1933 — Hitler opens a jail for people he thinks are plotting to overthrow the government, especially members of the Communist Party. These jails were called "concentration camps" because they *concentrated* a targeted or undesirable group of people in one place where they can be monitored.

March 23, 1933 — Hitler announces the Enabling Act, which is then approved by the Reichstag. The Enabling Act gives Hitler dictatorial powers for four years. It allows (or "enables") Hitler to punish anyone he considers an enemy of the state. This law also says that Hitler can pass laws that are against the ideas in the constitution. Some members of parliament do not agree with this law. While some opponents of the Enabling Act vote against it, many opponents of the law are in jail or in hiding. So there are not enough votes in parliament to veto the Enabling Act.

April 7, 1933 — The Nazis pass the "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Service," giving the government the power to dismiss any civil servant who was politically undesirable or who would not "support the national state at all times and without reservation."

April 26, 1933 — Hitler organizes a secret state police called the Gestapo to "protect public safety and order." Gestapo police can arrest people and place them in jail without any oversight by a court or judge.

May-June, 1933 — The Nazis outlaw trade unions and all other political parties. Even special interest groups—glee clubs, soccer teams, historical societies, and so on—had to receive permission from the government in order to meet.

May 6, 1933 — Nazis begin holding public book burnings. Germans are asked to burn any books considered offensive to Germany, including books by Jewish authors.

June 30, 1934 — Hitler orders the SS and the regular army to eliminate all opposition within the Nazi party. Ernst Roem, leader of the SA, and over 200 other SA leaders are murdered. Kurt von Schleicher, a former chancellor, and his wife are also murdered by the SS. This event became known as the "Night of the Long Knives."

August 2, 1934 — President Hindenburg dies. Hitler proposes a new law that would combine the role of president and chancellor in a new position called the Führer (which means "leader" in German). He calls for a vote of the German people.

August 19, 1934 — 95% of registered voters in Germany go to the polls. Nazi soldiers were present at most voting booths. 90% of these voters approve of Hitler's law making himself Führer. Now Hitler can say that he became the supreme leader, or dictator, of Germany through the direct will of the people.