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Opening Extract from...

The Third Reich

A Chronicle

Written by Richard Overy

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CHAPTER 1

RISE TO POWER

1923–1933

Adolf Hitler was a little-known politician in 1923, leader of a small radical nationalist party in Bavaria with a reputation for street-fighting, anti-Semitism and socialist rhetoric. Within a decade Hitler and his party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), had become the dominant force in German politics, poised to take power. The ten years after the end of the First World War was a historical roller-coaster for the German people. Following defeat they were forced to accept a humiliating peace treaty that blamed Germany for starting the war. For the next three years the country experienced a high level of political violence between the extreme right and extreme left, against a background of massive inflation and economic hardship. The story of Hitler's rise to power can be explained by a mixture of luck, opportunity and ambition. Many German voters remained loyal to the existing parliamentary parties, and even at the peak before 1933, Hitler's party did not succeed in winning more than 37 per cent of the popular vote. Hitler and his party had been marginal to the

political system only a few years before, when the 1928 elections gave them only twelve seats in parliament. The economic slump paved the way for Hitler because it created a mixture of despair, anger at the outside world, and fear of communism, which persuaded many German voters that the future of Germany was at stake. Hitler posed as the ultimate saviour of Germany. For many people a Hitler vote was a risk, but it was one that millions took because it seemed the only hope. Without crisis a Hitler dictatorship was unthinkable. German National Socialism was an emergency choice, owing its success to the failure of the other parties and the parliamentary order as much as to its own strengths. Even then, Hitler achieved the chancellorship of Germany only through a backstairs political intrigue by a small band of conservative politicians who thought they could control a movement and a leader whose political potential they constantly underrated.

1923–1924

The Failed Putsch

On 9 November 1923 a procession of around 2,000 German nationalists led by the hero of the First World War, General Erich Ludendorff, and the young Austrian agitator, Adolf Hitler, marched through the centre of the Bavarian capital, Munich, down Residenzstrasse towards the Feldherrnhalle, a monument to past Bavarian generals. They were trying to stage a coup (*Putsch* in German) to overthrow the Bavarian regional government and, if they succeeded, the national government in

Berlin as well. The long procession of men, some in the scruffy uniform of the paramilitary groups that supported the uprising, carried flags and banners. Some were armed, including Hitler himself, who carried a revolver, though he had given orders for the weapons not to be loaded. The marchers saw themselves at a turning point in German history, the vanguard of a German national revolution to avenge the defeat of 1918.

To understand what Hitler, the self-appointed leader of the *Putsch*, was doing in Munich on that grey and snowy day in 1923 it is necessary to turn the clock back to the last days of the First World War. Adolf Hitler, a young corporal in a Bavarian army regiment, was lying in hospital recovering from a gas attack. When he heard the news that the German leaders' request for an armistice had been granted, to come into effect at 11.00 on 11 November 1918, he was overcome with inexpressible grief and anger. Like millions of other German soldiers, he had believed in the rightness of the German cause. The European war that broke out in early August 1914 was a war, so it was believed, engineered by the entente of Russia, France and Great Britain to emasculate German power and to impose the crude materialism of the Allies on a cultured and civilized people. Defeat when it came was a profound shock to millions of Germans who had not been told the full truth about the state of the German war machine, or of the difficulties in getting the home front to sustain any longer a draining and expensive war. For nationalists like Hitler, who had abandoned his native Austria to live in Germany in 1913, and willingly served in a German rather than an Austrian unit for four years

from 1914, the armistice was treason to the fatherland. Like thousands of others, Hitler blamed defeat on socialist workers and Jewish agitators, who, it was always alleged afterwards, had 'stabbed Germany in the back'. Defeat turned Hitler into an angry, disillusioned veteran, determined if he could to help Germany revive its natural place in the world and to take violent revenge on the Marxists and Jews who were accused of causing defeat in the first place.

Germany faced a serious political crisis as a result of the bitter divisions between left and right over how to react to the fact of defeat. The German social-democrats and liberals wanted an end to the monarchy and the establishment of a parliamentary republic; a new constitution was drawn up founding what became known as the Weimar Republic, after the city where it was formally adopted. German Communists, on the other hand, wanted a revolution like the one in Russia in 1917, which would create a workers' state. The revolutionary wave could only be held back, paradoxically, by an alliance between the social-democrats, the army and right-wing nationalists. Communist leaders were murdered and vigilante groups, the *Freikorps*, composed of veterans who had kept their uniforms and weapons, were set up to destroy working-class resistance and intimidate any other alleged threats to Germany's future.

On 28 June 1919, the new German government was compelled to sign the Versailles Treaty drawn up by the Allied side without negotiation. The Treaty disarmed Germany, took away valuable territories in Alsace Lorraine and Silesia,

abolished Germany's colonial empire and imposed, in Article 231 of the Treaty, the notorious 'War Guilt' clause, in which Germany was compelled to admit responsibility, together with its allies, for causing all the damage endured by the Allied powers. Germany was then required to pay extensive reparation for the damage caused; a sum finally fixed at 132 billion gold marks. Despite widespread hostility to the Treaty across the political spectrum in Germany, it had to be signed or risk an Allied invasion. One of the chief architects of acceptance, Matthias Erzberger, was murdered by *Freikorps* members on 27 August 1921; another politician closely associated with the new system, the Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau, was assassinated by the same group on 24 June the following year.

When Hitler emerged from hospital he returned to Munich where, in contrast to the account he later gave in the autobiographical volume *Mein Kampf*, he found himself siding with the radical revolutionary movement there as the spokesman for his regiment's 'soldiers' council'. Briefly arrested when the regular German army overthrew the Bavarian revolution and restored order, he was released in order to become an army agitator among returning German prisoners-of-war, whose political outlook was regarded as unreliable. Hitler immediately found his calling; he gave impromptu speeches on political subjects which proved to be an instant success.

On 12 September 1919, he was ordered to attend a meeting of a fringe radical right-wing group, the German Labour Party (DAP). A month later, on 19 October, he joined the party as member number 555 (membership began from 501); by the

middle of November he was invited to become one of the party's leading figures, responsible for propaganda. He soon earned a reputation as a popular local agitator, capable of bringing in crowds to hear him denounce Versailles, condemn the 'November criminals' and call for the expulsion of Jews from Europe. The key elements of his political creed – a revival of Germany, war against Marxists and other enemies of the German ideal, and the eradication of Europe's Jewish population – were in place within weeks of his decision to pursue a political career.

HITLER ON THE JEWS, 1920

The Jew brings Democracy and with it stifles Reason
Democracy = majority decision = Public opinion = Press = Capital = Jew
German democracy – means persuading the majority with reason
Jewish democracy – means killing the majority with reason
Democracy means breaking the nation's resistance
To that end – abolition of the death sentence
But final aim subjugation of all nations
Hence
Democracy Dictatorship of the Proletariat
Final resistance Class struggle
National intelligence
Must be destroyed
The Jew as leech

Bolshevism
The bloody Jew . . .
And present-day Germany? Fight between dictatorship and democracy
No Between
Jew and German
Who has grasped this?
The parties on the Left?
The parties on the Right?
Election slogan Middle class against proletariat
Class against Class instead of Germans against Jews

Source: Werner Maser (ed) *Hitler's Letters and Notes* (Bantam, New York, 1976), pp. 224–7, Hitler's notes for a speech, 1920

The DAP was founded and led by Anton Drexler, a railway mechanic with a mixture of extreme nationalist and anti-capitalist views. Hitler worked with him closely in the first year and a half of his membership. On 20 February 1920 the party changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) to make clear that its aim was to recruit workers, seduced by Marxism, back to the national cause. Four days later at the new Party's first public meeting, in front of 2,000 people, Hitler read out the 25-point Party Programme, prepared by himself and Drexler. The programme came to constitute the unalterable aims of the movement when, a year later, on 29 July 1921, Hitler staged a coup in the Party against Drexler, whose tactics he regarded as too moderate. He

succeeded in getting himself voted as the Party's sole leader and secured unconditional approval of the programme. By that stage Hitler already overshadowed the rest of the Party leadership; the ever-larger crowds who came to National Socialist rallies, came to listen to him. At the same meeting that approved his takeover of the Party, Hitler was described for the first time as *Führer*, the title he later took in 1934 when he became Germany's supreme authority. The term was chosen deliberately: both leader but also, in German, a guide. Hitler had begun political life hoping that he might be a drummer for the national movement, egging it along; by 1921 he saw himself as destined for larger things as Germany's saviour.

THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST PARTY PROGRAMME, 1920

The programme of the German Workers' Party is addressed to its era. After the goals of the programme have been achieved, the leaders refuse to set new ones for the purpose of artificially increasing the discontent of the masses, merely in order to make possible the continuance of the party.

1 We demand the union of all Germans – on the basis of the right of self-determination of peoples – in a Greater Germany.
2 We demand equality of the German people with all other nations, the abrogation of the peace treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain [applied to Austria].

3 We demand land and soil (colonies) for the nourishment of our people and for the settlement of our excess population.

4 Only he who is a racial member can be a citizen. Only he who is of German blood, regardless of his church, can be a racial member. No Jew, therefore, can be a member of the race.

5 He who is not a citizen shall live in Germany only as a guest and must be governed by the law for aliens.

6 The right to make decisions about leadership and law belongs only to citizens. We therefore demand that every public office, no matter what kind, whether national, provincial or local, be staffed only by citizens.

7 We demand that the state pledge itself to assure the productivity and livelihood of citizens above all others. If it is not possible to support the entire population, members of foreign nations (non-citizens) are to be expelled.

8 Any further immigration of non-Germans is to be prevented. We demand that all non-Germans who have entered Germany since August 2, 1914, be forced to leave the Reich immediately.

9 All citizens must possess equal rights and duties.

10 It must be the primary duty of every citizen to work mentally or physically. The activities of the individual may not conflict with the interests of the general public but must be carried on within the framework of the whole and for the good of all.

WE THEREFORE DEMAND

11 Abolition of income unearned by labour or effort;

BREAKING THE BONDAGE OF INTEREST

12 Considering the enormous sacrifices of property and blood which every war demands from a people, personal enrichment because of war has to be seen as a crime against the people. We therefore demand complete confiscation of war profits.
13 We demand nationalization of all (previously) incorporated companies (trusts).
14 We demand profit-sharing in big businesses.
15 We demand a generous extension of old-age insurance.
16 We demand the creation and maintenance of a sound middle class, immediate communalization of the great department stores and their leasing to small businessmen at low rents; most favourable consideration to small businessmen in all government purchasing and contracting, whether national, provincial or local.
17 We demand land reform suited to our national needs, creation of a law providing for expropriation without compensation of land for common purposes, abolition of taxes on land and prevention of all speculation.
18 We demand a relentless fight against those whose activities harm the common good. Traitors, usurers,

profiteers, and so forth, are to be punished by death, regardless of creed and race.

19 We demand the substitution of a German Common Law for Roman law. Roman law serves a materialistic world order.

20 In order to make it possible for every able and industrious German to obtain a higher education, and thereby to achieve a leading position, the state must take charge of a thorough extension of our entire national educational system. The curricula of all schools must be adapted to the demands of practical life. The school must impress an understanding of the state very early, at the very beginning of rational thought in the child. We demand the education of gifted children of poor parents at the cost of the state, regardless of the parents' status or profession.

21 The state must improve public health through protection of mother and child, prevention of child labour; by imposing a physical fitness programme by means of establishing legal obligations in gymnastics and sports, and by supporting all organizations concerned with the physical training of youth.

22 We demand the abolition of mercenary troops and the creation of a popular army.

23 We demand legal measures against the conscious political lie and its propagation through the press. In order to make possible the creation of a German press, we demand that:

a. all editors and contributors of German-language newspapers be racial comrades;

b. non-German newspapers must have the express permission of the state to appear. They may not be printed in the German language.
c. every non-German investment in or influence on German newspapers to be legally forbidden and be punished by the closing of the publishing house and the immediate expulsion of the non-Germans involved.

Newspapers which conflict with the common good are to be forbidden. We demand legal measures against any tendency in art and literature which has a subversive influence on the life of our people, and the closing down of any meetings or organizations which do not conform to these demands.

24 We demand freedom for all religious denominations within the state as long as they do not endanger the state or violate the ethical and moral feelings of the Germanic race.

The party as such subscribes to a positive Christianity without binding itself to a specific denomination. It opposes the Jewish materialist spirit within and around us and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our people can only come about by an effort from within based on the principle:

THE COMMON GOOD BEFORE THE INDIVIDUAL GOOD

25 In order to carry out these policies we demand: creation of a strong central authority in the Reich. The

central parliament must have unlimited authority over the entire Reich and all its organizations.

The formation of chambers according to occupation and profession, to carry out in the individual provinces the basic law enacted by the Reich.

The leaders of the party pledge that they will relentlessly seek the implementation of these points, if necessary at the cost of their lives.

Source: adapted from Barbara Lane, Leila Rupp (eds) *Nazi Ideology before 1933: A Documentation* (Manchester University Press, 1978), pp. 41–43. This version is based on a document taken by the Munich police dated 24 February 1920.

After Hitler assumed leadership of the Party it began to take on its future shape. On 3 August 1921 a paramilitary unit was set up, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), whose job was to protect party meetings and disrupt those of left-wing parties. In the spring of 1922 leadership of the SA was given to a young ex-pilot, Hermann Göring, who volunteered to work for the Party after hearing Hitler speak at a meeting. Göring had commanded the famous Richthofen Squadron at the end of the war and was an important recruit for the Party, eventually named as Hitler's successor as *Führer*. On 29–30 January 1922 the Party held its first rally, with around 1,000 delegates; the first national party congress was held a year later in Munich, on 27–29 January 1923. The Party rapidly developed a national reputation as a rowdy, violent, radical movement, hostile to

parliamentary rule, strongly anti-Semitic and in favour of some kind of national revolution. Hitler himself was arrested twice in 1922, serving a brief period in prison in between 24 June and 27 July. The Party was banned throughout most of Germany with the exception of Bavaria, its heartland. After the Italian Fascist Party leader, Benito Mussolini, staged a 'March on Rome' on 28 October 1922 which brought him the offer of the premiership, National Socialists began to think more seriously about launching a similar 'March on Berlin'. On 3 November Hitler addressed a Party rally on the success of Mussolini and Italian 'patriotism': 'In our country,' he announced, 'we will have to do the same …'

During 1923 the political and economic situation reached crisis point in Germany, making Hitler's idea of a national revolution less fantastic. On 11 January 1923 French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr industrial region in north-west Germany, ostensibly to enforce German compliance with the payment of reparations. The German government reacted with a campaign of passive resistance, while the numerous nationalist parties and leagues (including the National Socialists) campaigned noisily against the whole Versailles system and the 'November criminals' who had made it possible. The Ruhr occupation accelerated the sudden collapse of the German currency, which had been the subject of a steady inflation since the end of the war in 1919, thanks largely to a vast government debt left over from the war of more than 150 billion marks. By the summer of 1923 the inflation had changed into hyperinflation, with the mark almost worthless by the end of the

year. Millions of Germans dependent on pensions, or fixed incomes from investments or mortgages, were ruined; unemployment rose and there was widespread hunger in the cities. The conditions made for political extremism.

GERMAN INFLATION, NOVEMBER 1923

November 15, 1923 – Berlin

Unfortunate Germany! In constant turmoil, in constant unrest. A series of attempted Putsches has once more thrown the country into a state of excitement. In Munich the National Socialists, with Adolf Hitler and General Ludendorff, tried a *coup d'état*. On November 9 there were sudden revolts staged by Leftist elements in Saxony, Hamburg and Thuringia.

The value of the mark continues to drop to unbelievable figures, astronomical figures. When you go shopping you have to carry your banknotes in suitcases. Savings accounts have been absolutely wiped out. In order to mail a letter inside Germany I had to pay several million marks for a stamp. Germany's money is worth less than a scrap of paper. Foreigners can buy anything in Germany for a microscopic sum of their gold-backed currency.

Before I left Kitzingen I called on one of Mother's old friends, an old woman who had been one of the wealthiest women in that part of the country. I found the huge house stone-cold. All the rooms were practically empty. I found the

old lady, shivering in blankets, by the fireplace in the only heated room in the house.

'For heaven's sake, Aunt Paula!' I exclaimed. 'Where are your rugs, your pictures, your furniture?'

'All gone, child,' she said, 'All gone to the antique shop in Munich, piece by piece. I used to have an income. That is no longer worth anything, and my furniture and pictures have gone for bread, week by week. When the last of it goes . . .' she shrugged her shoulders hopelessly.

Source: Bella Fromm *Blood and Banquets: A Berlin Social Diary* (Geoffrey Bles, London, 1943), p. 20.

Under this charged atmosphere, the small nationalist parties began to collaborate with the idea of creating a political revolution. On 2 September 1923, following a fiery Hitler speech in front of 25,000 people, and in the presence of General Erich Ludendorff (who had been the most important senior German commander in the last years of the war), a Fighting Association (*Kampfbund*) was set up including the SA and other paramilitary groups with the purpose of overthrowing the Berlin government. Hitler tempted Ludendorff with the prospect of becoming commander-in-chief of a new national army. During September and October, despite efforts by the government in Berlin to force the Bavarian regional government to disband the *Kampfbund*, ban the National Socialist Party and close down its newspaper (the *Völkischer Beobachter*), the Munich regime

allowed Hitler to survive, anxious in case the crisis provoked a renewed threat from German communism.

In the chaotic atmosphere of the last months of 1923, Hitler and his Party leaders prepared to launch the national revolution and the March on Berlin from their Munich base. On 6 November the Bavarian government, under the temporary emergency authority of Gustav von Kahr, warned that any attempted *Putsch* by Hitler's organization would be suppressed by force. Hitler set the date for his coup as 11 November, but when he learned that von Kahr was to address patriotic associations on the evening of 8 November in the *Bürgerbräukeller*, he decided to change the date for his coup to the earlier one. That evening 600 SA men, armed with rifles and machine guns, surrounded the beer cellar. Hitler arrived in a red Mercedes car, dressed in his trademark trench raincoat. Inside von Kahr was talking to a bored audience about the perils of Marxism, when Göring and a group of SA men burst in and set up a heavy machine gun. Hitler then strode through the hall, jumped on a chair, fired a round from his revolver into the ceiling and announced the start of the national revolution. Kahr and two other government leaders were browbeaten into endorsing the *Putsch*, and Hitler's ally and former commanding officer, Captain Ernst Röhm, took a detachment of paramilitaries to occupy the Munich military headquarters.

The attempt to seize other military and police installations was a failure, and by the morning of 9 November it was clear that the coup was not even close to success. Kahr and his colleagues had escaped and were rallying forces against the

coup. Ludendorff suggested a march on the town centre and Hitler, after some hesitation, agreed. It was this march, by a tired and uncertain column of Party members and supporters, that arrived in front of the Feldherrnhalle at a little after midday. They were met by a large detachment of police with heavy machine guns and an armoured car. Someone in the procession fired at the police cordon and the machine guns opened up. Göring, in the front row, was hit in the groin and collapsed; Hitler threw himself to the ground, dislocating his shoulder, and was saved from death by his bodyguard, Ulrich Graf, whose own body was riddled with bullets as he shielded his leader. In all, thirteen of the procession were killed plus two more when Röhm's brief occupation of military headquarters was overcome. Four policemen were killed. Hitler limped away in the confusion and was taken to a friend's house outside Munich, where he was arrested on 11 November, threatening suicide. There were violent pro-Hitler demonstrations in Munich for the next two days, but with his arrest on charges of high treason the *Putsch* finally petered out.

The failed coup might have cost Hitler his life, and ought to have ended his political career. Hitler, Ludendorff and a number of other conspirators were put on trial in Munich on 26 February 1924. Hitler was given extensive opportunity to declare that he had only been acting as a patriot, and the trial attracted nationalist attention from all over Germany. On 1 April the court sentenced him to five years in prison and acquitted Ludendorff. Requests to ensure that Hitler was deported to Austria after serving his sentence (which was

legally possible) were overruled, and on 18 October 1924 the Austrian authorities withdrew his citizenship, making him formally 'stateless'. He began his sentence in Landsberg prison, where he dictated the first volume of his autobiography to his secretary and disciple Rudolf Hess, which was later published in 1925 under the title *Mein Kampf*, 'my struggle', with a second volume a year later. The Party was banned even in Bavaria and those of his supporters who remained loyal to the cause joined a new patriotic association, the National Socialist Freedom Movement, which on 7 April 1924 won 17 per cent of the vote in regional elections in Bavaria, and 50 per cent in Munich. In Hitler's absence, however, the momentum of the movement slowed, while Party leaders in other parts of Germany, particularly in Berlin, began to prepare for a new era without Hitler's leadership. His opportunity came as a result of the leniency of the Bavarian authorities. In recognition of his exemplary behaviour as a prisoner, he was freed on 19 December 1924 and could once again take up the reins of leadership after serving just nine months of his five-year sentence.

HITLER'S POLITICAL ADOLESCENCE

I have met him [Hitler] a few times – not at any of his meetings, of course. The first time was in 1920, at the home of my friend Clemens von Franckenstein, which was then the Lenbach villa. According to the butler, one of those present was forcing his way in everywhere, had already been there a full hour. It was Hitler. He had managed an invitation to Clé's

house under the guise of being interested in operatic scenic design. Hitler very likely had the idea that theatrical design was connected with interior decorating and wallpaper-hanging, his former profession.

He had come to a house, where he had never been before, wearing gaiters, a floppy, wide-brimmed hat, and carrying a riding whip. There was a collie, too. The effect, among the Gobelin tapestries and cool marble walls, was something akin to a cowboy's sitting down on the steps of a baroque altar in leather breeches, spurs and with a Colt at his side. But Hitler sat there, the stereotype of a head waiter – at that time he was thinner, and looked somewhat starved – both impressed and restricted by the presence of a real live Herr Baron…Eventually, he managed to launch into a speech. He talked on and on, endlessly. He preached. He went on at us like a division chaplain in the Army. We did not in the least contradict him, or venture to differ in any way, but he began to bellow at us. The servants thought we were being attacked, and rushed in to defend us.

When he had gone, we sat silently confused and not at all amused. There was a feeling of dismay, as when on a train you suddenly find you are sharing a compartment with a psychotic. We sat for a long time and no one spoke.

Source: Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen *Diary of a Man in Despair* (Audiogrove, London, 1995), pp. 23–4