

The german situation and rise of communism



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Introduction

In January 1933, arguably one of the most extreme political parties of the 20th Century came to power within Germany; The German National Socialist Workers' Party. What is more astounding is that less than 4 years prior to this was that " the Nazi Party [as they are commonly referred to] was still very much on the fringes of politics." [1] This can be illustrated most intrinsically by the German elections of 1928, where the Nazis managed to obtain only 2.6% of the votes, equivalent to 12 (of 584) seats in the Reichstag. [2]

Hitler's rise to power is of significant interest as it contributes to the understanding of the features and factors within a state that can lead to the end of a democracy and the establishment of an authoritarian state, which in this case arguably triggered World War II and caused the death of millions of people. Historians have considered several pivotal factors, including the Great Depression and the weaknesses of the Weimar Republic. However, various historians have often accredited communism with a minimal role in contributing to Hitler's rise, although acknowledging that there was widespread fear throughout Germany of a communist revolution. For this reason, the following essay has a focus on how significant the growth of communism, within Germany, was in contributing to the rise and establishment of the Nazi regime?

Although it is clear that there were several other factors that contributed to the rise of the Nazis, including the effects of the Great Depression, the weaknesses in the Weimar Republic and the Versailles Treaty, the author will

argue that the growth of communism within Germany was also a significant factor that was central to the rise and establishment of the Nazi government. Hence, this investigation will explore the rise of Hitler in a different context, attempting to illustrate that communism had a major influence on politics within Germany.

This essay focuses on two main elements of the Nazi Party's rise that need to be examined to determine the role of communism on Hitler's rise to power. After exploring the political and economic climate within Germany and explaining the rise of communism, the effect of the rising communist movement on the Reichstag election of July 1932 will be investigated, focusing specifically on the middle class. The middle class had a core role as "it has long been customary to blame the middle classes, in particular the petite bourgeoisie, for the rise to power of the National Socialists." [3] Following this is an examination of how the rising communist movement contributed to Hindenburg's decision to sign the Reichstag Fire Decree, as it is a crucial turning point that led to the development of Hitler's dictatorship.

The German Situation and the Rise of Communism

Germany, following its crushing defeat in World War I, was in a state of recovery and rehabilitation. Although immediately subsequent to the war "there was a huge variety of extremists" [4], it was clear that following this period of precarious instability, and until the Great Depression hit, Germany had been recovering to become comparatively prosperous to what it had been following the war. It was also clear that there was little political support for extremists. This is evident, for example, as historian William Shirer

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explains that “ one scarcely heard of Hitler or the Nazis, except as butts of jokes usually in connection with the Beer Hal Putsch, as it became known.”

5[5]This is primarily because the economic situation was improving significantly, a direct result of the “ foreign loans, primarily from the United States, offset the reparations payments that were leaving Germany.”[6]

However, in October 1929, the Great Depression abrogated and annulled all the progress that Germany experienced throughout the decade. The foreign investments and loans that Germany so heavily relied upon, coming largely from the United States, were being withdrawn and recalled “ at the worst possible moment.”[7]In this period of desperateness and depression, foreign investors began to extricate themselves from the German market.[8]Having lost much of its capital, the economy of Germany collapsed, its currency relegated nugatory and a large number of civilians starved in poverty on the streets.

Table Source: League of Nations, World Economic Survey: Eighth Year, 1938/1939 (Geneva, 1939), 128With the Depression came a meteoritic rise in unemployment. This can be seen in Table 1, where the economic survey of the League of Nations shows that unemployment increased by two hundred percent in the period between 1929 and 1932. However this source is limited, as it fails to encompass the full effect of the Depression on employment. These figures reveal only a portion of the ramifications, as many other millions only continued to work at reduced hours and rates. Furthermore, most workers were reduced to part-time unskilled jobs as many jobs had disappeared in the looming recession.[9]

The unemployment brought about by the Depression had many effects. Firstly, it resulted in the German people's loss of faith in the government. With many Germans, whose faith had already been heavily shaken by the 'November Criminals', this was the last straw. They could no longer rely upon their government to provide them with enough food, let alone economic security. As a result, men grew desperate, which is illustrated by Michael Burleigh's description, in his renowned book *The Third Reich A New History*, of the situation of many Germans at the time:

“ Men tried to keep warm in waiting rooms and fed themselves by scavenging in dustbins. Their clothing became frayed and threadbare, the soles of their shoes worn, making it harder to find jobs since appearances counted. Others held signs or carried placards advertising their desire to work. Many became apathetic and resigned to being unemployed.”[10]

This account reflects the desperation that was blatant in German society at the time. This is registered clearly in the suicide rate of 260 per million, a figure tripling most other European countries at the time.[11]As a result, and as noted by Burleigh, “ many unemployed people were extremely bitter”[12]and “ mass unemployment contributed to political extremism”. [13]Thus, with this crisis, came a revival of the popularity of extremists and socialists, which in turn sparked a large-scale insurrection of violent street demonstrations and clashes amongst various radical factions.

It was from this group of parties that the Nazi Party as well as the Communist Party reemerged. The latter, as the “ gulf between those in and out of work translated eventually into political affiliation”[14], predominantly

rose through the frustrated unemployed and began to garner immense support with “ about 30 percent of the unemployed showed a clear sympathy for the Communists”.[15]This sudden growth in the communist movement was made patent in society through the 1930 Reichstag elections, where the Communist Party received almost 4, 600, 000 votes. [16]And this growing movement, a direct result of the darkening Depression, began to affect politics and society to an extent far exceeding its own numbers.

The Effect of Communism on the Middle Class

By 1930, it was clear to the German populace that the government was beginning to collapse. This was seen most evidently in the government’s inability to assume effective leadership and administer the economic situation in an assertive manner.[17]The population could no longer rely upon or believe in their current government that had disappointed and failed them yet again. At this point in the convoluted situation, unemployment was rapidly increasing, paralleled by greater divergences into extremism, principally toward the Nazi and Communist parties. In the 1930 Reichstag elections, the Nazi Party attained a total of 107 seats, equivalent to 18. 3 per cent of the electoral vote.[18]At this election, as prominent German historian Richard J. Evans concludes in *The Coming of the Third Reich*, although there was a limited degree of middle class Nazism, many were “ still repelled by the Nazi’s violence and extremism”[19]and that the majority of Nazi supporters were farmers, various kinds of other workers, the unemployed, servants and first-time voters.[20]However, by the time of the Reichstag elections of July 1932, when the Nazi Party became the largest party in

Germany with 37 percent of the total electoral vote, the Nazi movement became more than an outlet for the frustration of the various groups of blue collar workers and unemployed. Rather, it became, as it is precisely described, a middle-class phenomenon by several prominent historians. The cause of this revolutionary change in the direction of the German people can be plausibly extrapolated through the economic self-interest theory and the growing communist movement.

Following the electoral results of 1930, it was the sentiment of the German populace that a revolution was impending amidst the violent chaos and economic pitfall. The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) had achieved moderate success and became the third largest party, which sparked fear within the German people as the KPD made clear the political threat, and hence economic danger, framed by the unemployed.[21] This deep suspicion of a communist uprising was furthered by the rallying, violence, assassinations and arson attacks that they carried out throughout Germany. The recurring crimes and displays permeating throughout Germany was also a reminder of the role of Communists in the attempted revolution of 1918-1919.[22]

The possibility of a Communist uprising was far from impossible as even the intelligent and conservative-moderate man Victor Klemperer, in his column on the popular newspaper 'Leben Sammeln' in July 1931, considered heavily the danger of Communism and appraised the question; "Is the government going to fall?"[23] Although it is unreasonable to base the argument that there was wide spread speculation that the communist movement was imminently close to a revolution on the deliberations of one man, there is <https://assignbuster.com/the-german-situation-and-rise-of-communism/>

other evidence that supports this argument. This can be illustrated, for example, in the practice of employers and union bosses at the time who after identifying Communists, sacked them, resulting in the loss of many jobs for Communist Party members.[24] This precautionary policy was instigated throughout Germany in order to limit the funds and power of the Communist Party and hence reduce the risk of a successful insurrection.

The steps that were taken by the middle class against communism, as well as their fear of communist growth were because the idea of a communist uprising was antithetic to the economic security that the middle class had attained. Thus, they were primarily fearful of a communist revolution because of their economic self-interest. As a result, the middle class, who were well aware of the repercussions onto their counterparts in Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917,[25] were terrified of the Communist movement that was “ promising the destruction of capitalism and the creation of a Soviet Germany.”[26]

As a result of their political situation, for a larger number of the middle class than in the 1930 elections, these voters considered, as Frank Tipton extrapolates, that “ the threat of a communist uprising seemed serious enough to require strong and even dictatorial measures.”[27] Some historians, including Henry Ashby Turner, agree that the German people were looking for a reformed democracy, however at this point in time, many were “ appalled at the failure of the government to solve the crisis.”[28] Members of the middle class were desperately searching for a source of leadership and authority to lead them out of the chaos, economic poverty and threat posed by communism in their land; and secure and

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authoritative leadership was exactly the brand that Hitler and the Nazi Party were offering to the middle class. Through the fear that was generated “ in the minds of the God-fearing, property-owning, law-abiding classes”[29], the result was, as distinguished historian Jill Stephenson elaborates, “ the KPD’s modest success was overshadowed by the explosions of the Nazi’s vote, whose size was undoubtedly enhanced by those who were alarmed by the very fact of the Communists’ gains.”[30]

It is superficial to argue that it was only the middle class’ fear of communism that drove them toward the Nazi Party, rather than accrediting parts of their success in the polls to the fact that Hitler and Nazism promised to reverse the ‘ dictat’ of the Versailles Treaty or their other pledge to “ pave the way for a flourishing economy.”[31]Therefore, although it is thus far clear that the threat of communism was a significant factor, the question that must be considered further is how significant the fear of communism was in contributing to the middle class’ support for Hitler rather than the other moderate, conservative parties? This can be answered by examining some of the repercussions of political division.

The Depression resulted in the loss of faith that the middle class had invested in the moderate parties, resulting in the disintegration of these parties. This was calamitous as the “ Grand Coalition broke up in disarray”[32]and hence could not deal with the crisis effectively because of their divisions on how to proceed. The other significant consequence, as Evans Richards describes it, was the “ polarization of politics”[33], with the Communists on one side and the Nazi’s on the other while “ all that was left of the moderate centre squashed helplessly between them.”[34]

The threat of communism was most apparent in the Reichstag, where their representatives were continuing on their political struggle. They contrasted significantly with the Nazis who had from their sudden breakthrough in the September 1930 elections began to create a new portrait of themselves, as guardian of Germany and its respectable traditions, promising to fight the threat of the communists while abandoning its radical anti-capitalist rhetoric.

[35]Through this new found image, the political vacuum that was quite visible was taken advantage of by the Nazi Party, whose manipulation of the fear of communism was accomplished, as Stephenson articulates, “ most successfully by the NSDAP, with its paramilitary wing, the SA (storm troopers), ostentatiously in the front line combating ‘ the reds’ in the streets of Germany’s town in the early 1930’s.”[36]

Some historians argue that the violent antics that the SA demonstrated against the communists in the streets alarmed and antagonized many middle class voters and were noncontributory to assisting in Hitler’s rise. Although to a limited extent this was true, many others were relieved that there was someone out there actively fighting and defending the state against communism. Furthermore, the Nazis made it appear as though they were victims of Communist aggression and were merely responding to Communist incitement. This was achieved by their guileful practice of orchestrating attacks on their own headquarters and offices, which further contributed to the atmosphere of fear and support for the Nazi’s.[37]Along with these reasons is the fact that at the time most people were unwilling to believe or consider that their only hope in the battle against communism was, as Hindenburg described them, “ a party that was biased against

people who had different views from their own.”[38]The end result was that the Nazi Party maintained a “ respectable face as well as a rough one”[39]and that individuals of the middle class were deciding to “ leave the squabbling little factions of the political right and gravitate towards the Nazis instead.”[40]This is most evident when examining the previous electoral decisions of middle class voters who voted for the Nazis in the July 1932 elections, many of whom were former conservatives or liberals.[41]

The Contributions of the Middle Class

The Nazi Party, having received the support of a great deal of the middle class, was now on the course to becoming the largest party in the Reichstag following the July 1932 elections. However, even though the middle class was a significant electoral win for the Nazi Party, it would not be this alone that allowed the Nazi Party to gain the largest number of seats in the Reichstag. They would obviously need many more votes in the election than the support they garnered by procuring the middle class.

Many middle class supporters were desperate to ensure that the Nazi Party would form government so that they would ascertain the defeat of communist growth and revolution. As they already relied on the Nazi's to defend them against the instability of flourishing communist anarchy, the question that should be asked is: what did they do to promote Nazism? Their contribution is both quite simple and tremendous; they financed the Nazi Party. This is explored by Evan J. Richard where he argues that the Nazi Party did “ finance its activities mainly through entry fees to its meetings, through the income from its press and publications and through the donations from small businesses rather than large ones.”[42]These funds were central to the

Nazi Party's movement, in terms of the fiscal needs of their programs and organizational bodies, such as the Hitler's Youth and the storm troopers, as well as their extensive propaganda scheme.

The detailed and widespread use of propaganda by the Nazis was perhaps, without question, one of the main factors that contributed to the growth of the Nazi Party. This is the general consensus of historians acquainted with the Nazi Party's rise as well as many other memoirs and recounts by Germans in this period. Richard J. Evans in *The Coming of the Third Reich* most amply elucidates the idea of propaganda being central to the Nazi's popularity, where he writes:

“ The cult of leadership which they created around Hitler could not be matched by comparable efforts by other parties to project their leaders as the Bismarcks of the future. All this was achieved through powerful, simple slogans and images, frenetic, maniac activity, marches, rallies, demonstrations, speeches, posters... they were a movement, sweeping up the German people and carrying them unstoppably ...”[43]

Hitler attacked the fears and desperation of the people through the use of propaganda.[44]This is most evident in the fliers all around Germany, an example of which can be seen in Appendix 1, where he utilizes the farmers' fear of communism and makes it appear as though the Nazis were the only solution to the problem.[45]The storm troopers were also a source of propaganda for the Nazis, as they were heroically battling the Red Communists in the streets and often appeared to be retaliating to Communist aggression against the government.[46]

Although various historians agree that it was the middle class who contributed most significantly fiscally, there is some debate over this issue as several historians argue that it was the upper class that supported and financed the Nazis. For instance, Fabrice D'Almeida in *High Society in the Third Reich*, argues that Hitler received a great deal of support from the higher socialites, who played a large role in financing Hitler and his rise to power.[47] However, a breakthrough in this debate was made by Henry Ashby Turner in his book *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler* as he provides, unlike many other authors with contrasting interpretations to this issue, archived documents and records that show that big businesses and the social elites contributed little in the July 1932 elections.[48]

Thus, it is clear that not only did the Nazis gain significant votes in the 1932 elections through the middle class, but they also received a great deal of financial support from them, which contributed to the Nazi Party to officially become the largest and most politically influential body in the Reichstag elections of 1932.

Communist Role in Hindenburg's Big Decision and its effects

The middle class had given Hitler a considerable amount of both political and economic power, and contributed significantly to him becoming the Chancellor on the 30th of January 1933, however “ he was still far short of the absolute authority that he sought”[49] as at this point in time Hitler did not have a parliamentary majority. A coalition was not even able to be formed as the three largest parties, the Social Democrats, the Nazis and the Communists, were obstinately and utterly opposed to each other.

The weaknesses in the Weimar Constitution were a factor that contributed to Hindenburg's decision to sign the Reichstag Fire Decree. However, the increased communist presence in the Reichstag contributed severely to the government's inability to rule and pass legislations to improve the current situation of the state as they opposed the policies of other parties.[50]As a result Hindenburg was becoming desperate to solve the issue, which remained unresolved following several mid-term elections. Furthering this atmosphere of political confusion at the time was the increasing violence on the streets that appeared to be revolts by uncontrolled communists as well as the continued and unabated influence of the Depression on lives throughout Germany.

However, quite obvious is the fact that the most significant reason that President Hindenburg signed the Decree is the burning of the Reichstag building on the 27th of February. The actual conspirators and perpetrators of the Reichstag Fire is still today a scholarly debate with various interpretations. Some are convinced that it was indeed the acts of communists, while others argue that the " Reichstag Fire Decree rested on fiction"[51]and the Nazis planned this attack to further their aims for power. [52]Though all these views are plausible, it is indisputable that Hitler took advantage of the fear that was circulating throughout Germany and claimed that the Reichstag Fire was a " signal for bloody rebellion and civil war"[53]and that the fire also " signaled a Communist uprising".[54]Through the failing Reichstag, compounded by the unrelenting Communist delegates, the widespread violence as well as his own fear of a communist uprising,

heightened by the Reichstag Fire, Hindenburg signed the Reichstag Fire Decree.

The Decree was significant toward the rise of Hitler's dictatorship as it suspended many personal rights and liberties, most significantly, the freedom of person, freedom of expression and the freedom of the press. The Decree was effectively and immediately utilized by Hitler to arrest and imprison his political rivals. Within two weeks, approximately four thousand communists were arrested, which included all the leading communist officials and Reichstag seat holders.[55] This was significant for two major reasons. Firstly, due to the loss of much of its organizational body, in the March Reichstag elections,[56] the Communist Party lost around 4.5% of its votes and this contributed to the increase in the Nazi vote.[57] More importantly, it allowed Hitler's press for the Enabling Act to be passed. " Together with the Reichstag Fire Decree it provided the legal pretext for the creation of a dictatorship"[58] that tacitly legitimized events such as the Night of the Long Knives.

As a result of these two decrees, Hitler no longer required the majority that was necessary to rule effectively in the Reichstag, but had now achieved, for all intents and purposes, a legitimized dictatorship for a period of four years. [59] In this period all opposing political parties were dissolved, political opponents arrested or killed and Hitler established his notorious one-party state.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the growth of communism within Germany contributed significantly to the rise and establishment of the Nazi regime. The middle class, fearing an upheaval in the political structure of the state, flooded unreservedly to the only leader apparent to them that would prevent the communists from attaining power.

Furthermore, in their desperate effort to ensure the defeat of communism, we can also conclude that it was the monetary contributions of the middle class that significantly funded the functioning of the Nazi Party, including the storm troopers fighting against communists in the streets, as well as the elaborate propaganda program that gave the Nazi Party the edge over the other parties.

The threat of communism also had a significant role in President Hindenburg's decision to sign the Reichstag Fire Decree. Hindenburg was influenced by the increasing violence of uncontrolled communist riots, the divided and failing Reichstag contributed to by the Communist Party, and the threatening communist movement, apparent in the burning of the Reichstag building. This Decree led to the seizure of many individual rights and eventual establishment of Hitler's dictatorship.

Although the growth of communism was pivotal to Hitler's rise, it is reasonable to conclude that the Great Depression was more significant. The Depression itself was th