

Nazi Party



Third Reich

Adolf Hitler addressing a rally in Germany, c. 1933.

of Adolf Hitler, the party came to power in Germany in 1933 and governed by totalitarian methods until 1945.

Anti-Semitism was fundamental to the party's ideology and led to the Holocaust, the systematic, state-sponsored killing of six million Jews and millions of others.

Nazi Party, political party of the mass movement known as National Socialism. Under the leadership

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Founding of the Nazi Party and the Beer Hall Putsch

The Nazi Party was founded as the German Workers' Party by Anton Drexler, a Munich locksmith, in 1919. Hitler attended one of its meetings that year, and before long his energy and oratorical skills would enable him to take over the party, which was renamed National Socialist German Workers' Party in 1920. That year Hitler also formulated a 25-point program that became the permanent basis for the party. The program called for German abandonment of the Treaty of Versailles and for the expansion of German territory. These appeals for national aggrandizement were accompanied by a strident anti-Semitic rhetoric. The party's socialist orientation was basically a demagogic gambit designed to attract support from the working class. By 1921 Hitler had ousted the party's other leaders and taken over.



Beer Hall Putsch

Nazi paramilitary troops participating in the Beer Hall Putsch, November 9, 1923.

Under Hitler the Nazi Party grew steadily in its home base of Bavaria. It organized strong-arm groups to protect its rallies and meetings. These groups drew their members from war veterans groups and paramilitary organizations and were organized under the name Sturmabteilung (SA). In 1923 Hitler and his followers felt strong enough to stage the Beer Hall Putsch, an unsuccessful attempt to take control of the Bavarian state government in the hope that it would trigger a nationwide insurrection against the Weimar Republic. The coup failed, the Nazi Party was temporarily banned, and Hitler was sent to prison for most of 1924.

The Nazi Party and Hitler's rise to power

Upon his release Hitler quickly set about rebuilding his moribund party, vowing to achieve power only through legal political means thereafter. The Nazi Party's membership grew from 25,000 in 1925 to about 180,000 in 1929. Its organizational system of gauleiters ("district leaders") spread through Germany at this time, and the party began contesting municipal, state, and federal elections with increasing frequency.

However, it was the effects of the Great Depression in Germany that brought the Nazi Party to its first real nationwide importance. The rapid rise in unemployment in 1929–30 provided millions of jobless and dissatisfied voters whom the Nazi Party exploited to its advantage. From 1929 to 1932 the party vastly increased its membership and voting strength; its vote in elections to the Reichstag (the German Parliament) increased from 800,000 votes in 1928 to about 14,000,000 votes in July 1932, and it thus emerged as the largest voting bloc in the Reichstag, with 230 members (38 percent of the total vote). By then big-business circles had begun to finance the Nazi electoral campaigns, and swelling bands of SA toughs increasingly dominated the street fighting with the communists that accompanied such campaigns.



German troops

A Nazi Party rally at Nürnberg, Germany, in 1933.



Reichstag fire

The Reichstag burning in Berlin on February 27, 1933.

When unemployment began to drop in Germany in late 1932, the Nazi Party's vote also dropped, to about 12,000,000 (33 percent of the vote) in the November 1932 elections. Nevertheless, Hitler's shrewd maneuvering behind the scenes prompted the president of the German republic, Paul von Hindenburg, to name him chancellor on January 30, 1933. Hitler used the powers of his office to solidify the Nazis' position in the government during the following months. The elections of March 5, 1933—precipitated by the burning of the Reichstag building only days earlier—gave the Nazi Party 44 percent of the votes, and further unscrupulous tactics on Hitler's part turned the voting balance in the Reichstag in the Nazis' favour. On March 23, 1933, the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act, which "enabled" Hitler's government to issue decrees independently of the Reichstag and the presidency; Hitler in effect assumed dictatorial powers.

The Nazi Party in the Third Reich

On July 14, 1933, Hitler's government declared the Nazi Party to be the only political party in Germany. On the death of Hindenburg in 1934 Hitler took the titles of Führer ("Leader"), chancellor, and commander in chief of the army, and he remained leader of the Nazi Party as well. Nazi Party membership became mandatory for all higher civil servants and bureaucrats, and the gauleiters became powerful figures in the state governments. Hitler crushed the Nazi Party's left, or socialist-oriented, wing in 1934, executing Ernst Röhm and other rebellious SA leaders on what would



Ernst Röhm

Ernst Röhm, 1933.



newspaper coverage of the Night of the Long Knives

Article about the Night of the Long Knives on the front page of the Pennsylvania newspaper *The Bethlehem Globe-Times*, July 2, 1934.



Heinrich Himmler and Adolf Hitler

Heinrich Himmler (left) and Adolf Hitler reviewing an assembly of Hitler's personal guard.



Nazism

become known as the “Night of the Long Knives.” Thereafter, Hitler’s word was the supreme and undisputed command in the party. Its vast and complex hierarchy was structured like a pyramid, with party-controlled mass organizations for youth, women, workers, and other groups at the bottom, party members and officials in the middle, and Hitler and his closest associates at the top wielding undisputed authority.

The history of the Nazi Party after 1934 can be divided into two main phases. The years between 1934 and 1938 were used by the party to establish virtual total control of all political, social, and cultural activities in Germany. This phase began in earnest with the death of Hindenburg on August 2, 1934. The functions of the military and government were subsumed into the party, and all troops and officials were forced to take the oath of fidelity to Hitler personally. Subordination of the broader German populace was achieved primarily through the unification of all the police, security, and Schutzstaffel (SS) organizations under the direction of Heinrich Himmler and his chief lieutenant, Reinhard Heydrich.

A core element of the Nazi Party ideology was anti-Semitism, and Hitler used this period of consolidation to mobilize the power of the Nazi police state against Germany’s Jewish citizens. Jews were deprived of virtually all legal rights under the Nürnberg Laws of September 15, 1935, and prewar state-sponsored persecution of Jews reached its climax on Kristallnacht (November 9–10, 1938). Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels ordered these pogroms, in which SS-directed rioters damaged or destroyed more than 1,000 synagogues and ransacked some 7,500 Jewish-owned homes and businesses. Scores of Jews were killed in the violence, and tens of thousands of Jewish men and boys were arrested and imprisoned in concentration camps. After Kristallnacht, the bulk of all Jewish property was confiscated, and Germany’s Jews were effectively erased from public life.

The years between 1938 and 1945 witnessed the effort to impose Nazism on territories outside the Third Reich. This phase was initiated in 1938 with the suppression of the last conservative influences in the two remaining bulwarks of an older, authoritarian but civilized Germany—the army and the foreign office. In that year

View of the opening ceremonies at the Deutsche Kampfspiele ("German Combat Games") in Nürnberg, Germany, June 1934.



Kristallnacht

Pedestrians viewing a Jewish-owned store in Berlin damaged during Kristallnacht, November 10, 1938.



Buchenwald concentration camp roll call

Prisoners arrested during Kristallnacht assembled for a roll call at Buchenwald concentration camp, near Weimar, Germany, November 1938.



Joseph Goebbels addressing a Nazi rally

Joseph Goebbels addressing a Nazi rally in Reichenberg, Sudetenland (now Liberec, Czech Republic), November 19, 1938.

Hitler began German territorial expansion, carried out through threats and diplomatic pressure, by "peaceful" means. In such a way he incorporated into the Third Reich first the republic of Austria and then the Sudetenland (the German-speaking parts of the republic of Czechoslovakia).

By 1939 the military preparations, including the militarization of German life and education and the establishment of a war economy, had made such progress in Hitler's opinion that he could challenge the European order even at the risk of a second great war. On August 23, 1939, Hitler, without consulting his Italian and Japanese allies, concluded a pact of friendship and nonaggression with the Soviet Union. The agreement contained a secret treaty between Germany and Russia partitioning Poland and dividing the whole of eastern Europe into spheres of influence. It opened the road into the heart of central Europe to Joseph Stalin and was the immediate prelude to World War II, which began in Poland on September 1.

The Nazi Party in World War II

When Germany started World War II, it came as the logical outcome of Hitler's plans—known to Germans since the publication of *Mein Kampf* (1926)—and of his systematic preparations since 1933. From the beginning, the Nazis did not intend to establish a new order of authoritarianism and inequality for Germany alone. Therein Nazism imitated communism. Its dynamism was bound to expand and to spread. By its own nature it could not recognize any limits to its own volition, only limits set by opposed superior forces. To a certain extent World War II repeated the pattern of World War I: great initial German military successes, the forging of a large-scale coalition against Germany, the loss of the war because of German overreaching and conduct.

Prior to Germany's invasion of Poland, local Nazi affiliates had been present in areas outside the Reich, typically where there existed a sizable population of German descent. One notable group was the German-American Bund, a pro-Nazi paramilitary organization in the United States that was secretly funded and organized by the German government. These Nazi client organizations typically existed on the fringes of political life, but Germany's early military successes



Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler reviewing German troops in Warsaw, 1939.



German invasion of Poland in World War II

German soldiers breaking down a barricade at the Polish border at the outbreak of World War II, 1939.



German-American Bund; Nazi Party

A rally by the German-American Bund held in Madison Square Garden, New York City, 1937.



German-American Bund; Nazi Party

brought them to the fore, especially in occupied territories. On April 9, 1940, German troops invaded Norway, and Vidkun Quisling, the leader of the small Norwegian National Socialist (Nasjonal Samling, or National Union) party immediately proclaimed a “national government.” Quisling’s party had virtually no domestic support, and his government collapsed within a week. Nevertheless, Quisling continued to serve the Nazi occupation forces, and he was named “minister president” in February 1942. German troops also occupied Denmark; although the Danish Nazi Party never managed to achieve a position of political prominence, it was able to orchestrate the creation of a Danish “Free Corps” of volunteers who fought on the Eastern Front as members of the Waffen-SS.

The outbreak of war also saw the full implementation of the Nazi Party’s “final solution to the Jewish question” in all areas controlled by the Third Reich. The ultimate goal of the Nazis’ anti-Semitic ideology was nothing less than *Vernichtung* (“annihilation”) of Europe’s Jewish population. Jews in occupied territories were forced into ghettos or systematically killed. Mass shootings by Einsatzgruppen units gave way to the industrialized murder of millions in concentration and extermination camps. The Nazis killed victims from other groups—homosexuals, Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Poles, and political opponents were chief among them—but the destruction of European Jewry remained paramount in the eyes of the Third Reich. In German-occupied Europe, out of a prewar population of about 8.3 million Jews, some 6 million were killed or died in extermination camps of starvation or disease.

Postwar neo-Nazi parties

Hitler’s dream of a “Thousand-Year Reich” came to an end with Germany’s defeat in 1945, after almost six years of war. Out of the ruins there arose a divided and occupied Germany. The Nazi Party was banned, and its top leaders were convicted of crimes against peace and against humanity. Remnants of Nazi ideology remained in Germany, however, and former Hitler Youth leader Artur Axmann was arrested by Allied forces in December 1945 while attempting to reorganize the Nazi Party. A small number of Nazi-oriented political parties and other groups were formed in West Germany from the late 1940s, though some were later banned.

Members of the German-American Bund and Italian American fascists giving the Nazi salute at Camp Siegfried, a Bund-operated children's summer camp in Long Island, New York, 1937.



German-American Bund

German-American Bund parade in New York City, October 30, 1939.



Nazi Party

Danish "Free Corps" volunteers arriving in Germany before their departure for the Eastern Front, c. 1941. The "Frikorps Danmark" was created by the Danish Nazi Party, and its soldiers fought with the German army as members of the Waffen-SS.



Einsatzgruppen

A member of the Einsatzgruppen, the Nazis' special mobile killing units, preparing to shoot a Ukrainian Jew kneeling on the edge of a mass grave.

The American Nazi Party was active in protests against the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and in 1978 the National Socialist Party of America won court approval to hold a demonstration in Skokie, Illinois, a city that was home to a large Jewish population, including individuals who had survived the Holocaust. In the 1990s gangs of neo-Nazi youths in eastern Germany staged attacks against immigrants, desecrated Jewish cemeteries, and engaged in violent confrontations with leftists and police. In the 21st century, small neo-Nazi parties were to be found in many European countries as well as in the United States, Canada, and several Central and South American countries. They were rare, but not unheard of, in the rest of the world. After 1945, however, Nazism as a mass movement was virtually nonexistent.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica This article was most recently revised and updated by Tracy Grant.



Belzec death camp execution victim

A woman about to be executed at the Belzec death camp in German-occupied Poland.



Artur Axmann; Nazi Party

Artur Axmann.



Nazi Party; neofascism

Members of the American Nazi Party marching outside Greater Mount Hope Baptist Church in Chicago, August 19, 1966. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Chicago Freedom Movement were meeting inside the church to discuss expanding housing access for the local Black community.

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