

BBC Bitesize GCSE History - 20th century Germany

Episode 3 - The rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party, 1920-1933

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Datshiane: I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And I'm Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

Katie: This is the third episode in a nine-part series on 20th-century Germany.

Datshiane: In this episode we'll be looking at life during the rise of the Nazi Party between 1920 and 1933.

Katie: We'll compare the reasons for this, including impacts of the Depression, the political system and unhappiness with the Weimar government.

Datshiane: And our time-travelling reporter will be giving us their eyewitness account from history, and we'll have hints and tips as to how to answer exam questions on this topic, a test and summary of the main takeaways too. Do have something to take notes along the way and feel free to press pause and rewind if you need to.

Katie: But don't fast-forward, otherwise we speak in double speed and get all out of breath.

Datshiane: Too right. OK, Katie, set the scene for us.

Katie: In the last episode we looked at the Weimar Republic in Germany in the 1920s. If you need a reminder, have a listen to that episode.

Datshiane: But right from its creation the Weimar Republic face serious enormous political and economic challenges. The constitution had a number of potential weaknesses, and combined with

the growth and reorganisation of the Nazi Party, this created an atmosphere where the Nazi Party was able to flourish. Let's look at those one by one.

Katie: OK, let's look at the weaknesses of the constitution first. First up, the German Reichstag, or Parliament, was made up from many parties, all voted in by proportional representation. This led to small fringe parties becoming part of unstable coalition governments.

Datshiane: This also meant that extremist groups like the Nazis and Communists could exploit the system to gain power, even though their goals were to destroy the democratic structure.

Katie: And we also saw in the previous episodes that the law Article 48 allowed the president to rule by decree in times of emergency, without parliamentary approval.

Datshiane: And that successive presidents defined what an emergency was for their own benefit and they used Article 48 to bypass democratic processes. This eventually paved the way for authoritarian rule under Adolf Hitler.

Katie: Next up, the economic problems. We saw that by 1924 the German economy was improving and this was mainly due to loans from foreign banks, especially American ones.

Datshiane: Katie, do you think the loans from America were a good thing for the German economy?

Katie: Well, it's both good and bad, I'd say. On one hand, the loans meant foreign investment which helped the German economy recover which boosted German industries creating more jobs and a better quality of life for German workers.

Datshiane: And on the other hand?

Katie: Well, it meant that the German economy was completely dependent on the success of the American economy, which is great if everything's going well, which it was; but in 1929, along comes a huge financial crisis, the Wall Street Crash, which then led to the Great Depression.

Datshiane: And now Americans can't afford German goods, American banks demanded the money they had lent to Germany back; and the German banks, they try to get this money from German businesses, many of whom go bankrupt.

Katie: And this leads to mass unemployment and widespread poverty.

Datshiane: So, an exam question might ask about the impact that the Great Depression had on Germany, and we can see that these were some of the economic and social impacts, but Katie, have you thought there might be important political impacts too?

Katie: Oh yeah, many Germans lost faith in democracy as the Weimar government struggled to respond to the Depression and so many turned to alternative ideas of extremist parties, especially the Communist and National Socialist German Workers or Nazi Party.

Datshiane: The Nazi party was led by Adolf Hitler, and he capitalised on this discontent by promising to restore national pride, create jobs and oppose communism.

Katie: In the elections for the German Parliament, the Reichstag, the Nazis went from being the eighth largest party in 1928 with only 2.6% of the votes and 12 seats, to the largest party in 1933 with nearly 44% of the votes and a massive 288 seats, though they still lacked an outright majority. OK, so let's take a step back to look more into what it was about the Nazi party that made them so popular and took Hitler to the brink of power. It wasn't just about discontent with the Weimar Republic.

Datshiane: No, it wasn't. They also used tactics to appeal to the masses with clever use of propaganda to get their message across. Don't forget, Hitler had tried to overthrow the Weimar Republic in 1923 in the Munich Putsch which had resulted in his arrest. Subsequently, he changed tactics by using the democratic system to win power legally. The Nazis then set up offices across Germany to spread their message and they made use of the new media such as radio and cinema and they bought newspapers to reach a wide audience. Younger German boys were also encouraged to join Hitler youth organisations.

Katie: So, let's head back in time to 1933 to our time-travelling reporter Kitty for more.

Kitty: I've come to find out why some Germans are turning to support the Nazi Party. Farmers first: they're struggling with poor crop prices and debt and are drawn to promises of land reforms and better prices for their produce. I met Wilhelm, who told me that he'd got no help from the Weimar government and had had enough and that the Nazis were promising higher prices for crops. But it's not just farmers. The youth are also full of enthusiasm. I spoke with a young man, maybe 19 or 20, who told me that he was looking forward to a brighter future. He said that he wanted the chance to rebuild Germany. He was at a Nazi campaign rally and was impressed to hear Hitler say that "millions of Germans find themselves in misery today. We National Socialists will end this misery and bring work to every hand." Middle-class shop owners and professionals, hurt by the hyperinflation of the 1920s, also see the Nazis as their saviours, and women, many of whom lost their husbands and sons

in the war, are drawn to Hitler's image of a future where the family is protected and supported. Then there's the wealthy class, industrialists who fear the growing influence of communism. Hitler's promise to restore national pride, bring jobs and rebuild a broken Germany is reaching many parts of society, but there's also a darker side to why people are supporting Hitler. Many are blaming the Jewish people for Germany's problems. Antisemitism has been around for centuries and Hitler's using this old prejudice to unite people by giving them someone to blame. Jewish people are being scapegoated for things from the economic crisis to Germany's defeat in the last war, and that's pulling even more people into his movement. This is Kitty reporting for Bitesize History. Back to the studio.

Datshiane: Thanks, Kitty. An exam question might ask you to consider or explain the reasons for Nazi support and think about which was the most important one. Press pause here and have a go at an exam question yourself.

Katie: But please do remember to press play again or we'll be sitting here for ages.

Datshiane: In the 1932 election, Hitler challenged President Hindenburg for the presidency of Germany. Although he won 13.4 million votes, Hindenburg won the election by securing 19.3 million.

Katie: In the parliamentary elections of the same year, the Nazis became the largest party, winning 230 seats.

Datshiane: Remember the features and problems associated with proportional representation in the Weimar constitution? Well, these helped to open the door for Hitler, and ultimately, they failed to protect Germany's democracy.

Katie: See, as a result of this success, Hitler demanded that Hindenburg make him Chancellor, but Hindenburg initially refused, as he was suspicious of the disruptive nature of the Nazis and he used his emergency power, Article 48 of the constitution, to appoint a number of different chancellors.

Datshiane: But eventually, after more political instability, in January 1933 Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. Hindenburg was convinced that with other conservative elites they could control him.

Katie: Hmm, I think history might prove otherwise.

Datshiane: OK, quick test time. Three questions on Hitler and the Nazis' rise to power. Five seconds on the clock to write those answers. Here goes.

Katie: What was the event that led to the Great Depression in 1929, and why did it have an impact on Germany's economy?

[correct bell sound]

Datshiane: OK, so that was the Wall Street crash in the USA and Germany had loans from American banks who demanded their money back.

Katie: Why was the voting system for parties in the Weimar Republic seen as a weakness, but also a way in which the Nazis began to gain political influence?

Datshiane: So, this was a proportional representation system, which meant that smaller fringe parties such as the Nazis could become a voice in unstable coalitions.

[correct bell sound]

Katie: As well as the right-wing parties such as the Nazis, who was the extreme left-wing party, also gaining support from the German people?

Datshiane: That would be the Communists.

[correct bell sound]

Katie: Three out of three for... everyone!

Datshiane: Final recap time, here goes. First, the Great Depression caused mass unemployment and poverty, creating widespread discontent with the Weimar Republic.

Katie: Hitler and the Nazis gained support by promising economic recovery, national pride and opposition to communism.

Datshiane: The Communist Party was the fringe party of the far left, also gaining support, but by 1932 it was the Nazi Party who were the largest party in the Reichstag.

Katie: And by 1933, Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany although Hindenburg was still President.

Datshiane: In the next episode we'll look at how Hitler consolidated power and how this led to the Nazi dictatorship.

Katie: There's loads more 20th-century Germany revision, hints and tips at the Bitesize website and in the other episodes in this series. Thanks for listening.