

Was Hitler's Rise to Power Inevitable?

Some commentators would give a clear 'yes' to this question. However, one would then need to consider when Hitler's appointment became inevitable – in 1930, or 1932, or not until the last days of January 1933, or was it inevitable as far back as 1919 when the new Weimar government signed the Treaty of Versailles?

Many historians object to this degree of DETERMINISM. If one argues that Hitler's rise was inevitable right from the beginning, it undermines the reasons for studying the events of 1920 to 1933. One would just be tinkering with a development that had already been determined. Partly for this reason, most historians are very cautious about the word 'inevitable'. Some react against it to such an extent that they maintain that nothing is inevitable until it happens. It is probably wise to use phrases such as 'more likely' or 'highly probable' rather than 'inevitable'.

Here we are going to look at two issues that shed light on the possible inevitability of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor.

- Was Hitler lucky to be appointed Chancellor just as the Nazis were on the verge of disintegration?
- Were there viable alternatives, either authoritarian, liberal or communist?

One intriguing aspect of the debate on the inevitability of Hitler's coming to power is the evidence that the Nazi Movement was in severe difficulties by late 1932: it seems possible that if Hitler had not been appointed Chancellor in January 1933 the Movement might well have declined. Hitler's options in those circumstances might also have been limited. For example, he might have tried to repeat his putsch of 1923. Given his greater mass support, his prospects for success looked brighter, and there were radical elements in the Nazi Party, and especially the SA, who urged a seizure of power after he had been refused the chancellorship in August 1932. Hitler himself, however, seems to have abandoned the idea of a putsch. His strategy was based on winning electoral support to gain the chancellorship, ideally through controlling a majority of the Reichstag, but, if that proved impossible, by being in such a position that there was no alternative to Hindenburg's appointing him. With Nazi electoral support falling, if Hindenburg had not appointed him Hitler's prospects looked bleak.

Chart A: The Nazis' Position in late 1932 and early 1933

1. Election results

a) Reichstag

- In November 1932 the Nazis lost 2 million votes and 34 seats, partly because some voters were disillusioned as they had failed to gain power. Their protest vote seemed to be getting nowhere.
- The inexorable (unstoppable) advance of the Nazi Movement had thus been reversed.
- Some middle-class voters were alienated by Nazi moves to attract more working-class support, e.g. by supporting the Berlin transport strike in November 1932, and by the party's radical propaganda.
- The Nazis were still the largest party in the Reichstag where anti-parliamentary parties had a majority.

b) State Elections

- The Nazis did badly in local elections in November and December 1932, e.g. they lost 40 per cent of their vote in the Thuringian municipal elections.
- In January 1933 the Nazis poured resources into the elections in the small state of Lippe; they increased their vote and claimed a comeback.

2. Finances

- By the end of 1932, Nazis finances were very low due to the cost of competing in so many elections.

3. Organisation

- The SA had 400,000 members in 1932 – making it four times larger than the Reichswehr.
- Party membership stood at 850,000, but there was a high turnover.

4. Internal Disagreements

- There was considerable discord in the party and SA; some in the party criticised the SA's unruly behaviour and its lack of commitment to electioneering in November.
- The internal disagreements in the Nazi Party were evident enough for General Schleicher to believe that he could split the Nazi Movement.
- Hitler's 'all or nothing' tactics worried some: e.g. Gregor Strasser, who resigned in December 1932.
- There were internal Nazi Party reports of low morale.

5. Other Points

- The SPD newspaper *Vorwärts* predicted in December 1932: 'The decline [of the NSDAP] will hardly be less rapid than its rise has been.'
- The Nazis had to be successful to keep the party together and to maintain their sense of momentum.
- In April 1932 Goebbels said, 'We must come to power in the foreseeable future. Otherwise, we will win ourselves death in elections.'
- Apart from the KPD, the Nazis were the only party not associated with a discredited government.

ACTIVITY 1

1. Study Sources 1-4 and Chart A. What evidence is there that:
 - a. The Nazis would have been in difficulty if Hitler had not been appointed Chancellor in January 1933?
 - b. The Nazi Party was still a powerful movement that could influence the course of German history?
2. Explain why the awareness of Nazi weaknesses and divisions in late 1932 might actually have encouraged the elite to risk recommending Hitler's appointment.

SOURCE 1 – Secret report by the Reich Propaganda Leadership (a Nazi organisation), November 1932

We are of the opinion that little can be salvaged by way of propaganda... New paths must be taken. Nothing more is to be done with words, placards and leaflets. Now we must act... It must not come to another election. The results could not be imagined.

SOURCE 2 – Extracts from Josef Goebbels' diary for 1932

- 13 Aug: *Nothing is more difficult than to tell victory-flushed troops that victory has been snatched out of their hands.*
- 14 Aug: *Great hopelessness reigns among the party comrades.*
- 15 Oct: *Party workers became very nervous as a result of these everlasting elections. They are overworked.*
- 8 December: *Severe depression prevails... Financial worries render all systematic work impossible... The danger now exists of the whole Party going to pieces... Dr Ley telephones that the situation in the Party is becoming more critical from hour to hour... [Gregor Strasser's] letter to the Fuhrer [resigning his offices] is dialectic pettifoggery [argumentative quibbling]... Treason! Treason! Treason! ... For hours on end the Fuhrer walks anxiously up and down the hotel room... Once he stops and merely says: 'If the Party should ever break up, I'll make an end of things in three minutes with a revolver.'*
- 13 December: *It is hard to hold the SA and the Party officials to a clear course... If we succeed in holding the movement together we shall also succeed in saving the situation.*
- 29 December: *It is possible that in a few days the Fuhrer will have a conference with Papen. There a new chance opens.*

SOURCE 3 – H. Heiber, *The Weimar Republic*, 1993, p. 205

[By late 1932 the Nazis were in barren opposition] wavering between claims to legitimacy and revolutionary slogans, between socialistic promises and conservative contacts.

SOURCE 4 – T. Childers, *The Formation of the Nazi Constituency*, 1986, p. 254

After an ascent of unparalleled swiftness, the NSDAP had reached the limits of its electoral potential and now [in December 1932] faced almost certain decline. The policy of legality, of mass mobilisation for electoral campaigning had reached a dead end.

The Political Situation in 1932

During 1932 the Brüning, Papen and Schleicher governments embarked on public works programmes. Unemployment reached its peak in December 1932, then started to fall. To some, it seemed that the worst of the crisis was over and that the Weimar Republic had weathered the storm. For example:

- Allied troops had withdrawn from Germany in 1930.
- Reparations had been virtually ended in July 1932.
- In December 1932 Germany was granted the right to equality of armaments at the Geneva Disarmament Conference.

However, these developments did not stop the communist vote increasing in the November 1932 Reichstag election.