

exist in May 1932 when Hindenburg appointed Papen as Chancellor with responsibility to him, not to the *Reichstag*.

Was it inevitable that Hitler and the Nazis would come to power?

The majority view is that this need not have happened; Papen, Schleicher, Hindenburg and the others must take the blame for being prepared to invite him into power, and then failing to control him. According to Ian Kershaw, Hitler's most recent biographer:

There was no inevitability about Hitler's accession to power ... a Hitler Chancellorship might have been avoided. With the corner turning of the economic Depression, and with the Nazi movement facing potential break-up if power were not soon attained, the future – even under an authoritarian government – would have been very different. ... In fact, political miscalculation by those with regular access to the corridors of power rather than any action on the part of the Nazi leader played a larger role in placing him in the Chancellor's seat. ... The anxiety to destroy democracy rather than the keenness to bring the Nazis to power was what triggered the complex development that led to Hitler's Chancellorship.

However, there were some people in Germany, even on the right, who had misgivings about Hitler's appointment. Kershaw tells us that General Ludendorff, who had supported Hitler at the time of the 1923 Munich *Putsch*, now wrote to Hindenburg: 'You have delivered up our holy German Fatherland to one of the greatest demagogues of all time. I solemnly prophesy that this accursed man will cast our Reich into the abyss and bring our nation to inconceivable misery. Future generations will damn you in your grave for what you have done.'

14.2 WHAT DID NATIONAL SOCIALISM STAND FOR?

What it did *not* mean was nationalization and the redistribution of wealth. The word 'socialism' was included only to attract the support of the German workers, though it has to be admitted that Hitler did promise a better deal for workers. In fact it bore many similarities to Mussolini's fascism (see Section 13.2). *The movement's general principles were:*

- 1 It was more than just one political party among many. *It was a way of life dedicated to the rebirth of the nation.* All classes in society must be united into a 'national community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*) to make Germany a great nation again and restore national pride. Since the Nazis had the only correct way to achieve this, it followed that all other parties, especially communists, must be eliminated.
- 2 Great emphasis was laid *on the ruthlessly efficient organization of all aspects of the lives of the masses* under the central government, in order to achieve greatness, with violence and terror if necessary. The state was supreme; the interests of the individual always came second to the interests of the state, that is, *a totalitarian state* in which propaganda had a vital role to play.
- 3 Since it was likely that greatness could only be achieved by war, *the entire state must be organized on a military footing.*
- 4 *The race theory was vitally important* – mankind could be divided into two groups, Aryans and non-Aryans. The Aryans were the Germans, ideally tall, blond, blue-eyed and handsome; they were the master race, destined to rule the world. All the rest, such as Slavs, coloured peoples and particularly Jews, were inferior. They were to be excluded from the 'national community', along with other groups who

were considered unfit to belong, including gypsies and homosexuals. The Slavs were destined to become the slave race of the Germans.

All the various facets and details of the Nazi system sprang from these four basic concepts. There has been great debate among historians about whether National Socialism was a *natural development of German history, or whether it was a one-off, a distortion of normal development*. Many British and American historians argued that it was a natural extension of earlier Prussian militarism and German traditions. Historian Shelley Baranowski goes along with this interpretation (in *Nazi Empire*, 2010). She points out that before the First World War Germany's African colonies, including Tanganyika, Namibia, Cameroon and Togo, were difficult to control, and that Prussian military doctrine held that the complete destruction of all enemy forces must be the prime objective of any war. In the case of rebellious colonies, this became mixed in with racist elements, producing a genocidal mentality. In Tanganyika, following unrest and uprisings, almost half a million Africans were killed, some by deliberate starvation. An uprising in Namibia was dealt with in the same way. Similar trends were apparent during the First World War, after the defeat of the Russians. In March 1918 Germany gained control of former Russian territories containing a large proportion of Russia's coal, iron-ore and oil resources. In the few months before Germany's own surrender, German troops suppressed all nationalist movements in these territories with great brutality, treating the Slav inhabitants as second-class citizens. Baranowski suggests that Nazi brutality in eastern Europe during the Second World War was a revival and continuation of the Germans' pre-First-World-War attitudes, as was the creation of the concentration camps in 1933 for opponents of the Nazis. However, she does stop short of arguing that the Germans in general had developed a genocidal mentality that led directly to the Holocaust. As she puts it: 'The deliberate scouring of a whole continent, and potentially the entire surface of the globe for Jews to be carried off to assembly-line extermination in gas chambers or killing pits had no precedent.'

Marxist historians believed that National Socialism and fascism in general were the final stage and culmination of western capitalism, which was bound to collapse because of its fatal flaws. British historian R. Butler, writing in 1942, believed that 'National Socialism is the inevitable reappearance of Prussian militarism and terror, as seen during the 18th century.' Sir Lewis Namier, a Polish Jew who settled in Britain and became an eminent historian, was understandably bitter:

Attempts to absolve the German people of responsibility are unconvincing. And as for Hitler and his Third Reich, these arose from the people, indeed from the lower depths of the people. ... Friends of the Germans must ask themselves why individual Germans become useful, decent citizens, but in groups, both at home and abroad, are apt to develop tendencies that make them a menace to their fellow-men? (*Avenues of History*)

On the other hand, German historians like Gerhard Ritter and K. D. Bracher stressed the personal contribution of Hitler, arguing that Hitler was striving to break away from the past and introduce something completely new. National Socialism was therefore a grotesque departure from the normal and logical historical development. This is probably the majority view and it is one that found favour in Germany, since it meant that the German people, contrary to what Namier claimed, *can* be absolved from most of the blame.

Ian Kershaw recognizes that there are elements of both interpretations in Hitler's career. He points out that

the mentalities which conditioned the behaviour both of the elites and the masses, and which made Hitler's rise possible, were products of strands of German political culture