

HITLER'S FIRST HUNDRED DAYS

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ALSO BY PETER FRITZSCHE

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Life and Death in the Third Reich

HITLER'S FIRST HUNDRED DAYS

WHEN GERMANS EMBRACED THE THIRD REICH

PETER FRITZSCHE

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INTRODUCTION

Quarter Past Eleven, One Hundred Days, a Thousand Years

THE POCKET WATCH told the time: it was shortly before eleven o'clock in the morning on Monday, January 30, 1933. The most powerful men in German politics had gathered in the first-floor office of Otto Meissner, chief of staff to the president of the republic, Paul von Hindenburg, who occupied the second-floor suite. They met in the Chancellery Building in Berlin, where Hindenburg and Meissner had temporary offices while the Presidential Palace underwent repairs. The men in the room were determined: they would destroy the republic and establish a dictatorship powerful enough to bend back the influence of political parties and break the socialists.

The men were powerful for different reasons. Chief negotiator Franz Joseph Hermann Michael Maria von Papen, the nation's

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unpopular chancellor from June to December 1932, had standing among conservative, antirepublican elites and clout because of his friendship with President Hindenburg. A contemporary described the fifty-four-year-old Westphalian Catholic as an antiquated caricature: “a figure from *Alice in Wonderland*” perfectly cast with “long-legged stiffness, haughtiness, and bleating arrogance.”¹ Press tycoon Alfred Hugenberg was powerful because he led the right-wing German National People’s Party, which had lost most of its voters over the years but remained crucial to any plan for a nationalist unity government. His enemies considered him a “hamster”; even his friends remarked on the sixty-seven-year-old’s lack of “political sex appeal.”² And forty-three-year-old Adolf Hitler, a veteran of World War I and the postwar political struggles but otherwise without experience in government, was powerful because he was the indisputable leader of the nation’s largest party, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, a violent, populist movement with an energized following that had swept with terrific force onto the political scene. To many observers, the man was a cipher. The satirist Karl Kraus remarked, “Hitler brings nothing to my mind.” Hitler “doesn’t exist,” said another funny man; “he is only the noise he makes.” True, Hitler was very loud, but people listened to him.³ Other men were present in the room, including current cabinet ministers who had agreed to join the new government that Hitler would lead, but these three were in charge.

Not at the meeting were the leaders of the Catholic Center Party, which was as it sounded—Catholic and centrist—though it leaned more to the right than the left. Also missing were representatives of the Social Democratic Party, Germany’s oldest (and, until 1932, largest) party and the most reliable pillar of German democracy, and the Communists, who, like the National Socialists, had gained votes by furiously attacking the “system” in the embittered years of the Great Depression. Together, the absent politicians represented

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more Germans than the conspiratorial men in the room, but they shared little if any common ground. There was no such thing as majority opinion in the country: not enough Germans supported Hitler, not enough supported the republic, and not enough supported the old-fashioned conservatives. Almost no one supported the old kaiser in exile. After all the electioneering of the previous year, the political system had checkmated itself.

Since July 1932, the two radical parties—the National Socialists, or Nazis (German acronyms usually incorporate syllables rather than letters), and the Communists, or the “Commune”—had composed a slim negative majority in the Reichstag. Given this, the other parties might have been expected to form a coalition to protect the constitution and preserve law and order. But German politics didn’t work that way. To understand how they did work, one must first understand the political divide that made even moderate Social Democrats unacceptable partners to the right-of-center groups. The inability of Right and Left to communicate—divided as they were on the issue of the November Revolution of 1918, which established the democratic Weimar Republic, and the “stab-in-the-back” legend, which blamed the revolutionaries for Germany’s defeat in World War I—disabled every level of government. The Right derided the new national flag, which replaced the imperial colors of black, red, and white, as a despicable mix of black, red, and “mustard.” It dismissed volunteers in the republican civil guard, the Reichsbanner, as “Reich bananas” or “Reich bandits.” The German Right’s hatred and dread of the Left drove the plot against the republic and pushed these plotters into the arms of the Nazis.

Yet those gathered in the Chancellery Building had reached no agreement on the best political plan. It was now past eleven o’clock, when Hitler and Papen were scheduled to present the new cabinet to President Hindenburg. Hitler, hoping to attain a Nazi-dominated

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supermajority in the Reichstag in order to revise or suspend the constitution, pressed Hugenberg to endorse the proposal for one last round of elections. As the leader of a relatively small party without modern campaign machinery, Hugenberg refused, at the last minute jeopardizing the plan. Hindenburg was expecting them upstairs.

The assembled men felt a real sense of urgency. In the past week, three big demonstrations had crowded downtown streets in the capital: Nazi storm troopers (Sturmabteilung, or SA) on January 22 (shouting, "Germany, Wake Up!"), Communists on January 25 ("Red Front!"), and Social Democrats on January 29 ("Freedom!"). The negotiations to put Hitler in the number one spot, as chancellor, had been difficult. And most of the men in the room had heard rumors that the army command was unhappy, although no one was sure whether the Reichswehr opposed the return of Papen to that post—which journalists thought the likely but highly unfortunate solution to the present crisis—or intended to block the last-chance gamble on the people's demagogue, Hitler, whose brown-shirted storm troopers vastly outnumbered the government's regular soldiers. Maybe the army wouldn't move at all. In consultations, Hitler quickly promised not to use future election results to rearrange the composition of the new cabinet, in which Hugenberg and his allies occupied powerful positions. From the perspective of Hugenberg, who suspected that any plan calling for the dissolution of the Reichstag and new elections would strengthen the National Socialists and ultimately result in legislation overriding the constitution and giving the Nazi leader emergency powers, Hitler's pledge was beside the point.

The issue of elections was important. The decision would determine the division of power in the room that morning and the hardness of the envisioned dictatorship. Without new elections, the leaders of the nationalist unity government would rule by

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emergency decree, which required the consent of the president. The new autocrats would bypass the Reichstag, ignore its negative majorities, and push aside the democratic opposition. Such a solution would be frankly authoritarian, but it would leave power divided between the chancellor and the president and preserve the political influence of the various right-wing partners represented in the cabinet. Government structures would remain in place. This was the “illegal” path to a “partial” authoritarian state supported by Hugenberg and his German Nationalists as well as Germany’s military, business, and civil service elites. As establishment figures, Hugenberg and Papen would serve as guarantors. With new elections, on the other hand, Hitler would pursue a “legal” though much more adventurous path. By cementing a coalition with Hugenberg, Hitler planned to lead the national unity government to an electoral victory, making the new Nazi majority powerful enough to revise the constitution and put emergency powers in his own hands. The “legal” path would lead to a “total” authoritarian solution that would allow the Nazis to dismantle the power of the presidency and consolidate the party’s power, all without any constraint on arbitrary rule or revolutionary ambition. Hugenberg was the lone holdout against Hitler’s proposal.

The men still had reached no agreement when Meissner entered the room, watch in hand. He pointed out that it was quarter past eleven. The eighty-four-year-old Hindenburg, whose face, “cut out of rock,” was without “a flicker of imagination or light or humor,” could be kept waiting no longer.⁴ The odd man out, Hugenberg, at the last moment, agreed to new elections. The conspirators walked up the stairs to Hindenburg’s office, and at eleven thirty the president administered the oath of office to Adolf Hitler, who became Germany’s new chancellor.

This was the moment the Nazis had been waiting for. They intended to use the forthcoming election campaign to win the

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battle on the streets, eradicate the socialist opposition, and install their "Führer" as dictator of a one-party state. That the men in the room got to the second floor in basic agreement led to the greatest man-made disaster in twentieth-century history: the rise of Hitler, the establishment of the Third Reich, and the Nazis' war on the world.

Yet, at a quarter past eleven, on one of the last days of the first month of 1933, events still could have transpired very differently. Hugenberg could have stuck to his position. Hindenburg could have remained faithful to his long-standing refusal to appoint Hitler chancellor without a Reichstag majority. This path, which most republicans and big-city newspapers editors expected the president to follow, would have left German politics in January 1933 muddled but kept Hitler outside the gates of power.

There was nothing inevitable about Hitler's appointment on January 30, 1933, or self-evident about Germany's Nazi future. There was no crowd at the Brandenburg Gate or march on Berlin to push the National Socialists into power. The National Socialists were not riding a wave of newfound popularity; indeed, in the last big elections, in November 1932, they had lost votes. If the public desired anything, it was a political truce, which many saw as the prerequisite for economic recovery. When the transfer happened that morning, those present in the second-floor suite had detected no decisive shift in the national mood that suddenly worked in Hitler's favor. Although the Nazis were the largest party, Germany remained extremely fractured: cleavages divided those loyal to the republic and those who hated the "system," divided Protestants and Catholics, divided Germans who had a job or a business and those who had neither. All these conflicts cut across the almost unbridgeable political divide that separated neighbors who stood with the socialist Left from those who aligned with the nationalist Right.

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There could only even be a “quarter past eleven” because the divisions in the country had created political paralysis, a stranglehold that concentrated power in the hands of a very few men around President Hindenburg. Hitler could seize power only by working with them. In the last half of 1932, everything hinged on the actions of the president. Hindenburg had the power to sign emergency decrees and bypass parliament, and this empowered his aides and counselors: his son, Oskar; Chief of Staff Meissner; former chancellor Papen; and current chancellor Kurt von Schleicher, an unpredictable, not entirely unsympathetic figure whose power base was the army. History only remembers the clock ticking in Meissner’s hand on Monday morning because the National Socialists had been unable to win an absolute majority in any of the four big elections held in 1932. Nonetheless, as the largest party, Hitler’s National Socialists were indispensable to the plot. Papen succeeded in bringing everyone together on January 30. In order to smash the Weimar Republic, the men in the room needed the Nazis, and to lever themselves into power, the Nazis needed the men in the room.

The last round of elections had shown that the National Socialists were no longer able to win over large numbers of new voters; they believed violence was the only available avenue if they were to remain in power. Hitler and Hugenberg talked about purges, bans, and arrests to smash the socialist and republican opposition. The idea that they would punch hard was understood. Violence was built into the “legal” path since the Enabling Act to suspend the constitution in March 1933 raised the stakes to total power—Hitler’s alone. The route from the drama in the Reich Chancellery Building to the horror of concentration camps such as Dachau in one hundred days was short and direct.

Quarter past eleven also tells the time of decision. Hitler’s appointment released enormous energy; it pivoted many people down a path they were willing to travel to escape endless political

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conflict and economic hardship. Better “an end with horror” than “horror without end,” asserted one Nazi leader, although he could not imagine that later Germans would repeat the same phrase to signal their acceptance of a harsh defeat at the hands of the Allies at the end of the war.⁵ Hindenburg, the old field marshal, had long opposed the appointment of Hitler, a demobilized corporal, to the chancellorship. Yet, once he had agreed, the *Reichspräsident* put the tortuous parliamentary conflicts of the past behind him; he had “jumped over the last hurdle and now has his peace.”⁶ Millions of Germans felt they had done the same. The trouble of the present gave way to a future in springtime—and the Nazis described their new regime in, literally, sunny terms to both create and exploit this optimism. The national mood did change and swung in Hitler’s favor—at first only perceptibly, in February, then decisively, after the elections of March 5, 1933.

More Germans were for Hitler than for any other thing in January 1933. And holdouts largely came around to him once he had become chancellor. Cascades of cheers accompanied the new dictatorship, testifying to its genuine popularity. As the clock ticked on after a quarter past eleven in the following days and weeks, the National Socialists who stood behind Hitler swept into real power through unprecedented violence against their enemies and newfound enthusiasm among cheering friends. A split-second decision had consolidated one of the most popular and wicked dictatorships in modern history with startling speed. A quarter past eleven led, in only one hundred days, to the Thousand-Year Reich.

The “crowding events of the hundred days,” as Franklin Roosevelt said around the same time to describe the early accomplishments of his presidency in 1933, completely redirected Germany’s national destiny by “crowding” out opponents and closing off alternatives. In just one hundred days, political actors rediscovered the power of collective action; the marching in 1933 would lead to war in 1939. The new regime was borne of coercion—but also of

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consent, even though the line between these two was as difficult to discern then as it is today. The story of Hitler's first hundred days is also about deferral and irresolution; no one knew for certain the depth of conversion, or the extent of mere appearance, or the effect of terror. The legitimacy of the Third Reich rested on a potent combination of genuine enthusiasm and doubt, the fact that no one quite knew who was a true Nazi believer and who was not.

COUNTING one hundred days out from January 30 takes us to May 9. The Nazis had won the elections and passed the Enabling Act to suspend the constitution, appointed Reich commissars to take over the separate federal states—Prussia, Bavaria, Hamburg, and so on—and seized the operations of local government to assume complete political control. They had dismantled the trade unions, coordinated many of the institutions of civic life, and promulgated laws denying German Jews equal rights as citizens. They had mustered their “gangsters,” as the British ambassador referred to Nazi paramilitaries, in the police force. Not only had the National Socialists destroyed their Communist and Social Democratic opponents, but many former Marxists had wandered into the Nazi ranks—even participating in ritualized burnings of their red flags on the market square and singing the “Horst Wessel Song,” the Nazi anthem.⁷ On the 101st day Nazi student organizations burned antipatriotic books in what *Time* magazine referred to as a “Bibliocaust” and *Newsweek* subheaded a “Holocaust.”⁸ Since supercharged university students lit the fires, the one hundred days revealed the calibration of the new era as much from below as from above. The fires in the immediate aftermath of the hundred days kindled the wildfires of persecution, war, and genocide.

In a few short weeks, once-firm ideological affiliations—Left versus Right, Catholic versus Protestant—no longer structured political thinking. It was Nazis versus non-Nazis. And the Nazis had

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seemingly established sturdy foundations for a fierce new national community, the Third, or Thousand-Year, Reich.

Everything changed, but how much?

Quarter past eleven tells us when—but little else. It does not tell us why the men were in the room or who the Nazis were or why they were so powerful. Nor does it explain the timing. Why the sense of urgency to make a decision on January 30, 1933? And why the apparent sudden shift in national mood in favor of the Nazis in the one hundred days that followed? To begin to answer these questions we must step back in time, first to the crisis of the Great Depression and then further back to the end of World War I and the November Revolution that established the Weimar Republic in 1918.

The enormous financial outlays by all the belligerents in World War I (1914–1918) upended the economic order. Extensive debt, inflationary pressures, overproduction, and unemployment after demobilization engendered a postwar decade hobbled by recession and currency devaluation. The late 1920s finally saw a measure of stability, but then came another crisis. The Great Depression, initiated at the end of 1929 with a sharp downturn in public stock valuation and thus private investment in the United States, the world's leading creditor, accelerated into a global crisis as international trade collapsed, factories closed, and a monetary liquidity crisis threatened banking operations. Government austerity measures aggravated rather than alleviated the situation.

The depression hit Germany, an industrial country heavily dependent on exports, particularly hard. Every winter pushed more workers into unemployment lines, and summer could not sweep enough back into temporary jobs in factories and construction sites. Between 1929 and 1932, one in three Germans lost their livelihoods. At the same time, young people had no prospect of entering the labor force. Given mechanization, international competition,

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and economies of scale, German farmers suffered terribly as commodity prices slumped.

What had been, first and foremost, a crisis of the “little man”—workers, artisans, and farmers—expanded to jeopardize the more prosperous middle classes in 1931, when unmet obligations and devalued investments caused banks to fail, which in turn prompted austerity measures limiting access to savings and cutting salaries and social entitlements. Germany’s Depression-era leader, the Catholic politician Heinrich Brüning, a severe man and a veteran of the war, became reviled as the “Hunger Chancellor.”

Compounding the economic crisis were political divisions familiar to other European countries but far deeper in Germany because of Weimar’s revolutionary origins. Not only did fiscal conservatives square off against trade union representatives, but nationalists, who remained largely fixed to the ways and means of the prewar world, battled socialists, who were determined to engineer a new, postwar one. Even on the local level, Germans associated with their own social, religious, and economic sets. Neighbors rarely crossed the ideological divide that separated socialist workers from nationalist burghers. A visitor to towns across Germany found two football clubs (one red, one black), two nature societies, two sets of choral and singing societies, and, on occasion, two voluntary fire companies (one for uptown, the other for downtown). Although confounded by the severity of economic problems, politicians also followed their own partisan interests and failed to forge parliamentary alliances as the crisis deepened.

One critic expressed his dismay at the absence of a way out: “whether the question is reparations or disarmament, the planned economy or federal reform, the parliamentary system or French-German relations, everywhere the same picture appears—a field of rubble.” The end of the war obviously had not halted the destruction on the ground. “We have undertaken all possible experiments,”

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he explained in 1931; we “have consoled ourselves and let ourselves be consoled, we have tried all methods without believing in any particular one. Now general misery chokes us at the throat. The past years have left nothing behind but a single new word for the unprecedented hardship, an eerie one: contraction.”⁹ Miserable, choking contraction, with no solution or end in sight: a state of siege constituted the state of affairs. People felt imprisoned in times that could not continue but somehow did. Commentators wrote books on crisis and sought its origins in moral laxity, religious indifference, and political radicalization. *Die Krise* became a state of mind. Receiving a few marks as “crisis support,” unemployed men and women fumbled the currency of despair in the pockets of their patched-up clothes.

Graphs mapped the crisis with a line that showed unemployment climbing from the bottom left corner to the top right, a line paralleled almost exactly by the growing numbers of Communist and Nazi voters. But the equation of hard times with radical votes is too simplistic. Circumstances in the wake of the 1929 crash did not create the economic and political pressure on their own; events in Germany in 1918 and 1914 had also shaped it.

Crisis talk about the Great Depression always incorporated debates about the “August Days” of 1914, which Germans remembered as a moment of great national unity at the outset of World War I, and about the 1918 November Revolution, which brought down the *Kaiserreich* and established the Weimar Republic. In some ways, the three dates compounded the sense of hopelessness because each illustrated what Germany had lost. Strung together, they plotted a trajectory of deterioration and decay and engendered a narrative of decline “concocted precisely by those who wanted to replace a democratic with an authoritarian system” under the sign of emergency.¹⁰ Many Germans held fast to the olden days. Surprised when Hindenburg won the election for the presidency in 1925, observers surmised that voters really hankered for a substitute, or ersatz,

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kaiser. The most popular movie in the postwar years was not a Weimar classic like *Metropolis* or *M* but *Fridericus Rex* (1922–1923), a portrayal of the tumultuous life of the eighteenth-century Prussian king Frederick the Great. Film audiences flocked to features set in romantic, timeless settings: “the Rhine and Neckar rivers flow through Berlin’s cinemas as if it could not be otherwise,” complained the novelist Erich Kästner in 1927. “Couples hold their hands in the dark and borrow each other’s handkerchiefs and shed a tear.”¹¹

Yet August 1914 and November 1918 also radically transformed the ways in which Germans imagined the nation. Both events had legitimized the people as the proper subject of political action, while delegitimizing the kaiser, class-based suffrage systems, and the pretensions of social elites. Between the experience of the August Days and the November Revolution, the future seemed to be Germany’s. Indeed, a “dance craze”—new moves, not old routines—marked the end of the war. “Berlin has never experienced such a New Year’s Eve,” commented the *Berliner Tageblatt* after city officials lifted the wartime ban on public dancing at the end of 1918; “everywhere, here, there, and over there, on the northside, on the westside, on the southside, and in the suburbs, New Year’s Eve balls.” Weimar produced novelty nonstop: the international style of metropolitan architecture, fashionable bobbed haircuts, live radio broadcasts, and the weekend excitement of airplane rallies and zeppelin flyovers. Illustrated magazines and mass-circulation newspapers beamed back the images of *das neue Leben* (new life) and *die neue Zeit* (new times). “The new life forms are entirely independent of party affiliations,” affirmed Eugen Diesel, son of the engineer, in 1931. “A lifestyle emerges from the spirit of technology to which we are all beholden, whether Communist or National Socialist.”¹²

At first, the open spaces of the postwar years favored Germany’s new democracy. In 1919, three-quarters of all Germans voted

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for the pro-republican Weimar Coalition made up of the Social Democratic Party, the Catholic Center Party, and the German Democratic Party. In an unacknowledged legacy of the revolution, political contenders of all types entered the public square. Their commemorations, assemblies, and marches attested to the energetic struggle to appropriate the future. Stepping out, the demonstrators, often in uniform, mirrored each formally; yet they deepened divisions between those who upheld the republic and those who rejected it and between radicals such as the Communists who dreamed of a “Soviet Germany” and the nationalists who looked to build a new German Reich.

For all these contenders, crisis represented jeopardy—but only in the first moment: it also presented opportunity, a break in the system that was also a break from Germany’s painful past. Germans would no longer be at the mercy of history (although that is precisely where they found themselves twelve years later, in 1945). In this sense, crisis was synonymous with refusal, forecast, and future. Other European powers were divided between Left and Right—victorious France, for example, just across the Rhine. But France’s citizens obsessed more about slow growth, old age, and feelings of constraint. Germany was a startling place in the years after the Great War in that political conflicts expressed themselves in the future tense and borrowed the rhetoric and choreography of rebellion and revolution.

In the end, antirepublican forces were the chief beneficiaries of action on the streets. The voices of refusal grew louder, and in little more than ten years, the republican majority had been cut in half. Nationalists instrumentalized the fear of Bolshevism—the Soviet Union loomed over Europe after the war—to smear both local Communists and moderate Social Democrats, claiming that members of these groups had stocked an insurrectionary home front, betrayed upstanding soldiers on the front lines, and manufactured

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Germany's defeat. (In point of fact mutinous soldiers more often accosted bewildered civilians with ideas of revolution.) Opposition to the Treaty of Versailles, at first a rare point of unity among Germans, ended up completely defining enemies of the republic. And the Weimar Republic itself, modern in appearance and progressive in its social policy, was criminalized as an oppressive, untrustworthy "system" or, once hard times had cheapened its promises, dismissed as a transient phenomenon not suited to Germany's destiny.

Observers just had to watch how Weimar elections unfolded. Middle-class voters moved from liberal to nationalist parties, abandoning the German Democratic Party, which had offered leading "personalities" to accompany the mass of socialist working-class voters. This was "the yeast in the cake," so to speak, in 1919 for more extreme antirepublican alternatives. First came the German People's Party, a middle ground that appealed most to older, wealthy men, and then the more hardline German National People's Party, which esteemed the single person, the authoritarian leader modeled on Bismarck but delivered in the form of Hindenburg. More and more young people joined paramilitary groups and threw themselves into the throng of political activity on Sunday afternoons: the Wandervogel, the Bismarckbund, the Tannenbergbund, and the Stahlhelm decked out with black, red, and white imperial flags and even swastikas.

Although the Weimar Republic offered unprecedented opportunities to Germany's Jews by removing informal barriers to social advancement—in the 1920s, a Jew could find a position in a German university more easily than in an American one—anti-Semitism spiked. Students and educators, people often forget, were among the earliest and most eager supporters of Nazism. No group after the war suffered the opprobrium Jews did, and no institution was as contemptuous of Jews as the university campus. Watched

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over by sympathetic professors, fraternities not only banned Jews by introducing the "Aryan paragraph" but denied Jewish fraternities "satisfaction" by refusing to fight duels with their members or even to appear alongside their representatives in official university ceremonies. Shoes scuffed against the floor when Jews entered the lecture hall, and passersby shoved Jewish-looking students in hallways. The German university was not a bastion of free or critical thought before or after 1933.

The 1918 revolution authorized everyone to speak, and anti-Semites spoke loudly. Released from the restraints of the authoritarian but decorous *Kaiserreich*, radical anti-Semitic groups burst on the scene and passed their cheap currency. Posters pasted side by side and on top of each other on a wooden fence featured a series of appeals to the Spartakists and their Communist leader, Karl Liebknecht: a plea for the republic's "young freedom," a call on newly enfranchised women to vote for bourgeois parties, and an ominous warning against the Judeo-Bolshevik threat to home and hearth.¹³ "In train compartments and streetcars," noted one reporter, "you hear people cursing the Jews," profiteers of the malodorous present who had extinguished the splendid past. Acquaintances casually distinguished Germans from Jews as from the French. "The Jew," complained one exasperated professor living in Munich in August 1919, "is blamed for everything: war and revolution, Bolshevism and capitalism." "It is a terrible tragedy" for Jews, of course, and somehow absurdly "comical at the same time."¹⁴ During the crisis, graffiti lectured passersby, "The Jews Are at Fault."

Advocates pursued political and cultural life in the Weimar Republic by continuously sharpening the knife edges of existential confrontation and utopian aspiration. It was as if the belligerence of the war on the front came to incorporate all aspects of life at home after the defeat.

The Nazis stood out as exemplary warriors on this contested battleground; they were wilder and more audacious. They built

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on the antirepublican ruckus of the German National People's Party, which had emerged as Germany's second largest in 1924, and they recruited from the miscellany of nationalist youth groups. They furiously denounced the "system," glorified their leader, the "Führer," Adolf Hitler, and energetically took to the streets to display their martial valor and combative spirit. They sought out political fights.

What was true for the other parties in the republic was also true of the Nazis—the experiences of 1914 and 1918 and the war years in between shaped how politicians thought about the contemporary condition—but National Socialists mined the recent past in a different way. They idealized the people's community glimpsed in August 1914, assailed the alien republic established in 1918, and used the combative spirit of the war and the destructive energy of insurrection to remake the nation in a genuinely popular German form that looked forward to a new future rather than the restoration of a familiar past. In the spirit of war and revolution, the time had come to move *vorwärts*, forward.

The National Socialists thrived as no other group did on the idea of crisis as the ultimate tipping point when they would rally to destroy the republic and inaugurate new times and the Third Reich. But unlike other right-wing groups, they welcomed workers and the "little people" into their ranks. They were more effective at integrating diverse social groups into the movement. As the name indicated, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) reached out into the alphabet of society, eventually attracting more workers than any other nonsocialist party and more Catholics than any other non-Catholic grouping. In its view, the party provided the model for the national community it promised to construct once it seized power. The Nazis succeeded by building on right-wing mobilization without being a component part; they refused to join efforts to strengthen a nationalist unity block because they believed they had realized it on their own. They hated Hindenburg

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as much as Hugenberg and conservatives (reactionaries) as much as Communists (the Red Front).

Like the party name, with its quirky combination of nationalism and socialism, the movement was full of paradoxes. It held out the prospect of national unity while being the most divisive, violent, and anti-Semitic political actor in the Weimar Republic. Germans responded with a mixture of great expectation, enormous apprehension, and utter contempt. They loved and reviled Hitler like no other twentieth-century politician. Given the prevalence of anti-Semitism in the 1920s, however, the party's vilification of Jews probably attracted more people than it repelled; it certainly did not make the majority of prospective voters uncomfortable. While anti-Semitism was not the hot-button issue in the big election year of 1932 that readers might assume when considering events from the perspective of the Holocaust, the public's acceptance of the persecution of the Jews in the early years of the Third Reich sheds light on how the Nazis resolved the paradox of promoting national unity by dividing the country.

They did so by promulgating a binary worldview. National Socialists gathered in friends and pushed out foes. They nurtured good Germans while clobbering bad ones. This two-way movement of inclusion and exclusion meant that the Nazis relied on both consent and coercion to fortify the Third Reich. National Socialists continuously strengthened and mobilized the virtuous against the enemies they themselves conjured, pitting patriotic Germans against subversive Communists, Aryans against Jews, the healthy against the sick, the Third Reich against the rest of the world. In the end, the Nazi view proved more compelling than not; the achievement of unity and prosperity, they claimed, rested on the destruction of corrosive elements threatening the German whole.

Whatever their philosophy, the Nazis were undeniably a highly mobile force, moving across Germany's patchwork geography,

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integrating diverse social groups, and taking up arms against enemies. After their electoral breakthrough in September 1930, they dominated political debate and strategy. Yet, by the end of 1932, they had clearly reached the limits of their ability to mobilize new allegiants; after four hotly contested elections in eight months, their electoral numbers hovered just below 40 percent. If some observers counted on the demise, at long last, of the Nazis, others, in a different political calculus, urgently resolved to collaborate with them while they were still at near-maximum strength in order to destroy the republic.

A quarter past eleven, on January 30, 1933, Hugenberg hesitated to agree to new elections because he well understood that Adolf Hitler was a ruthless political commander. The beginning of Hitler was the end of Hugenberg. At a deeper level, Hugenberg also realized that the National Socialists were far more suited to operating in the modern political landscape than were his own German Nationalists, old-fashioned political practitioners who had everything to lose in the tumult of mass politics. The Nazis constituted a huge political movement with a paramilitary force, party press, and extensive ground organization. But their superior capacity also explains Hugenberg's acquiescence. They could help with his party's larger goal: bringing down the republic and restoring Germany's national virtue. Hugenberg's long-standing aim to ravage the republic could not be achieved without the Nazis and, in a democratic age, after the mobilization on the streets in the years after the war, could only be realized on terms set by the well-populated ranks of angry, hopeful National Socialists.

Papen, the self-appointed ringleader of the antirepublican circus, which had more rings than he could imagine or control, fended off objections of more alert conservatives who warned against Hitler's appointment as chancellor. "We'll box Hitler in," he reassured. "In two months, we'll have pushed Hitler so far into a

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corner that he'll squeal." After all, said Papen, "we've hired him."¹⁵ These extraordinary misjudgments about Hitler and the nature of democratic power in the twentieth century underpinned the risks that Papen was willing to take. In the end, both Hugenberg and Papen calculated, "Better Hitler than Weimar."

The risk taking on January 30 recalls the deep divisions in German society: conservatives' disdain for Hitler and the democratic currents where his movement thrived; Hitler and his co-conspirators' hatred of the republic; nationalists' fear and loathing of Social Democrats and the "system." It also indicates that the principals in the room believed that some combination of carrot and stick could establish a new authoritarian order to bury the Weimar Republic.

When things change, they tend to do so quickly and unexpectedly. The extraordinary drama of Hitler's first one hundred days reveals how a disparate, contradictory, and, in many ways, extremely angry democratic society—streaked in brown and red, very nearly cleaved down the middle—disappeared in a few short weeks to make way for a Third Reich, energetically organized around the center and divided only between the many who valued the collective norms of community, nation, and the German "people" and the few who dissented or were excluded altogether as non-German. Even Berlin, whose inhabitants had prided themselves on living in a "red," or socialist, metropolis, transformed into the shiny "capital city of the Reich." Though not representative of Germany—smaller towns, where most Germans lived, were more conservative and more receptive to the National Socialists—Berlin deserves special attention. Its proletarian profile, socialist voters, and animated, racy cultural life heightened the drama of economic crisis, the rise of the Nazis, and the convulsions of the first one hundred days.

It was an astonishing transformation, considering that the so-called Thousand Year Reich lasted barely twelve. People felt the republic die in winter 1933, after which they never thought about returning to Weimar—just as most exiled Jews never considered

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returning to Germany after the war. Did contemporaries completely embrace the fresh growth of the Third Reich? Germans realigned, but did they become fixed in place? How was it possible for the new to drive out the old so quickly?

To answer these questions, the Germans of the Third Reich had to read signs. Divining an answer was also a political statement—and so reading signs also invited misreadings and manipulations. People were careful, anxious, but also eager readers, and as interpreters they were writers who turned signs into arguments.

Both before and after 1933, Germans examined small signals to draw larger conclusions about genuine consent and forcible coercion. As a German Jew who had converted to Protestantism, Victor Klemperer, a second-rate professor of French literature but a first-rate diarist, was particularly mindful of where people stood in the Third Reich. “I’m constantly listening for ‘symptoms,’” he noted as he walked around Dresden. The reckonings were themselves a topic of constant conversation: “The ‘Good morning’ or ‘Good afternoon’ is said to be increasing,” he reported. Klemperer took his own poll. What was the result? “At Zscheischler’s bakery five women said ‘Good afternoon,’ two said ‘Heil Hitler,’” and at Ölsner’s grocery store “they all said ‘Heil Hitler.’”¹⁶ “Whom do I see, to whom do I listen?” he wondered about identifying true believers. “Natscheff, Berger, the grocer, the cigar dealer in Chemnitzer Strasse, who is a freemason, the charwoman, whose forty-year old is stationed in the West and who is on leave just now, the coal heavers.” “Vox populi disintegrates into voces populi,” a frustrated Klemperer concluded.¹⁷ The readings formed an ouroboros: signs both for and against chased each other in endless circles.

One interpretation, on closer examination, revealed itself to be its opposite, or neither, or both. “For professional reasons, I meet with a family that had earlier sympathized with the Communists,” reported one informant who had slipped into Germany to figure out popular support after the regime had been in power for two

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years. "Immediately after we greet each other, the wife begins to loudly complain. Prices are rising faster, you can't buy eggs or butter anymore, potatoes have never been more expensive. We might as well just go hang ourselves." The traveler pressed a bit more: "Yes, but the people didn't want anything else; didn't they vote for the Nazis?" At once the housewife replied, "What do you think it would be like if the Nazis hadn't come along. Under the others we would have all perished a long time ago. At least all the parties have finally been cleared away and we have unity." The informant concluded, "People bitch like lunatics but are Nazis nonetheless."¹⁸ In this case, the sounds of hostility were not reliable indicators.

Reading signs was always a matter of perspective. From the point of view of German Jews, who watched the singing and marching, the Germans had marched over to the Nazis in unison. But from the perspective of National Socialists, this tidal force of converts made it impossible to discern who was a true believer and who was without conviction but swept up in the wave. Klemperer himself set his vignettes carefully. As usual, the talk among the guests in March 1933 was about the signs of the spirit of the times:

Fräulein Weichmann visited us. She tells how in her school in Meissen all are bowing down to the swastika, are trembling for their jobs, watching and distrusting one another. A young man with the swastika comes into the school on some official errand or other. A class of fourteen-year-olds immediately begins singing the Horst Wessel Song. Singing in the corridor is not allowed. Fräulein Weichmann is on duty. "You must forbid this bawling," urge her colleagues. "You do it then. If I forbid *this* bawling, it'll be said that I've taken action against a national song and I'll be out on my ear!" The girls go on bawling.

At first glance, everyone seemed to be falling into line with the National Socialists. Klemperer should have been horrified. But

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Klemperer's corroborators were fourteen-year-old adolescents who bawled and tenured teachers who trembled. Klemperer abstained from painting a compelling portrait of ideological conviction. He highlighted foolishness and fear. A careful reading of the diaries reveals that Klemperer constructed the entries in such a way that he could imagine himself living among Germans afterward, after the collapse of the Third Reich; he found his fellow citizens to be weak, feverish, poisoned, and bullied—but not basically criminal or fascist.¹⁹ Klemperer did not let go of his love of Germany, which distorted his view. Was he foolish, or was he right?

The press mediated and manipulated signals. The radio looped nonstop acclamation of the new regime. "If I read the newspaper," reflected Klemperer, or "see and hear the film reports, then we're doing sooo well, we love the Führer soo much and sooo unanimously—what is real, what is happening?"²⁰ (In diaries from the Third Reich, the "sooo" appears all the time—a stretched-out syllable that indicates great enthusiasm but also alertness to hype.) National Socialists themselves worked hard to edit the representation of collective desire in the media. In rallies and marches, they stage-crafted events so that citizens could experience the awakening of the nation. These attempts often fell short of the promised nirvana, since people spent a great deal of time standing around waiting, and the dead time allowed participants to closely observe the disorganization or disinterest or drinking around them. But the Nazis also reframed disappointments so that blemishes did not disrupt ideals. As long as those ideals were accepted as valid, actual experience did not necessarily nullify pretty illusions. The end effect of this acceptance was that the values of national community were strengthened rather than weakened. Signs of the national mood were manipulated, but the self-deceit occurred at all levels.

The drama of the first hundred days centers on an apparent seismic shift in public sympathies as Germans became Nazis. Germans were puzzled by the solidity of the new world of the Third Reich in

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which they suddenly found themselves. Signs were not always easy to read. To this day, scholars argue about the degrees of deception and self-deception and the scales of desire, opportunism, and coercion that made up the phenomenon of National Socialism. The Nazi revolution shuddered through every household. It detonated abroad as well, completely disrupting the scenes of twentieth-century life. The enormous power of National Socialism is evident in its long afterlife—all the talk about the Third Reich as families gathered after the war, the thousands of books on Hitler and his confederates, the long debates about the relationship between Germany's history and the rise of the Nazis, the maximum effort to create a democratic civic culture of remembrance and repentance after 1945, the irresistible historical analogies to Hitler and his appeasement, and the rekindled anxiety about fascist desire in our times.

This story is littered with the “forest of upraised arms,” “arms and hands over heads like leaves on the branches of a tree”; the voices in the unison of slogan and song; the marching columns unwinding the hours along cobblestoned provincial streets and the loud cheers booming out from newly purchased radios in response to aggressive, unyielding calls of speechmakers; the energetic public campaigns of charity drives and anti-Jewish boycotts; the cherished intimacy with “our Germany,” the ravished maiden of world history; and the feelings of relief after a crisis seemed past, the call to duty to guard a nation's future, and the desire for private happiness at home; but also: suspicions and misgivings about neighbors, their motives, and the tenacity of their beliefs.²¹ Everything changed, but how much?

CHAPTER ONE

“Crisis, if You Please”

BERLINERS famously celebrated the dynamic energy of their home. “Go, go, go” and “tempo, tempo” were the refrains of the city. On the move, Berliners even turned the routine practice of people watching into entertainment, and the popular Berlin newspaper the *Morgenpost* sponsored a contest, “Augen Auf!” (Keep Your Eyes Peeled!), which invited readers to win 2,000 marks by spotting one of its reporters, his face featured on “wanted” posters, as he crisscrossed the city on a November Thursday in 1919. (Though he was not nabbed, several “false arrests” were made.) The newspaper had choreographed the casual, inquisitive, and sometimes suspicious or frightening ways that people surveilled each other.¹ The spectacle of looking became part of city life. But as the Weimar Republic gave way to the Third Reich, the amateur detectives who ran around Potsdamer Platz on a hunt to identify pedestrians and expose their disguises evolved into confident state administrators

who made assignments according to unquestioned social and racial categories.

After World War I, German cities felt more perilous as social norms eroded. The popular crime movie *M*, a 1931 feature directed by Fritz Lang and starring Peter Lorre as a child murderer on the run, built on the pastime of watching passersby but screened this supposedly innocuous activity as terrifying operations of surveillance. In the citywide panic—"Who is the murderer?" screamed publicity posters—people scrutinized pedestrians. They kept watch over occupants of apartment buildings and worried about strangers lurking in stairwells. *M* anticipated the dangerous new formations that engulfed public spaces when the postwar state of flux deteriorated into a state of permanent crisis with the Great Depression. Berlin became much more belligerent after thousands of workers lost their jobs—nearly half the work-able population was eventually unemployed. It slowed down—no more "tempo, tempo"—as men and women pocketed streetcar fares and walked. More people loitered: the unemployed crowded welfare offices; itinerant peddlers and musicians worked the streets; beggars came up to the door. Policemen ordered idlers to "move on."

Berlin became louder as the Depression turned politics raucous and violent. Partisan rallies dominated landmarks like the Sportpalast, a cavernous venue that had opened on Potsdamer Strasse in 1910 with the ice capade "Fairie at the North Pole" and had always attracted thousands of spectators, who watched the frenzied action of the city's six-day bicycle races, ice hockey championships, and boxing matches: in an atmosphere of "maddening hubbub, beer steins clashing, shouts, louder and louder, applause," patrons "hollered for grilled sausages."² It became the site of political demonstrations—crowds made up of strangers wore uniforms and badges, visible declarations of party loyalty to Nazis, Social Democrats, or Communists. Such mobs made ordinary interactions in the

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city fraught. People punched and shoved each other. The sounds of marchers and marching songs echoed through the streets. The economic crisis of the early 1930s demanded self-examination and self-surveillance.

After their 1933 seizure of power, the Nazis would make this metropolitan habit a matter of patriotic duty. They undertook an extensive campaign to permanently affix signs of illness, depravity, and jeopardy to Jews and Communists, identifying them as dangerous enemies, and to require citizens to comply with strictures of public order. If the premise of the 1919 newspaper contest had been the basic illegibility of the city, the signs the Nazis put up after 1933 assumed the fundamental legibility of a society that distinguished between “us” and “them,” “Aryans” and “Jews,” comrades and enemies. In this way, the Nazis resolved in violent fashion both the troubling signs of crisis and the crisis of reading signs. By fixing who belonged and who did not, they imposed a kind of literalness onto the city. The 1919 game could no longer be played after 1933.

EVEN BEFORE THE NAZIS, the economic crisis created two clear categories: those who belonged and those who did not. The degree to which the city had come apart struck observers in the early 1930s: “tempo” on one side, “tristesse” on the other. Berlin had always been a working-class and left-leaning city, with just over half of its electorate splitting their votes between Communists and Social Democrats. “Berlin Stays Red,” workers chanted. But unemployment reshaped the city, dividing it between those who had work and those who did not, between those who had something to do and those who had nothing but time, between those who could afford to go out for a beer and those who subsisted on potatoes.

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Poverty itself was a business. One enterprising tour operator showed “sensation-hungry tourists” “the metropolis in crisis.” The itinerary of his tour, called “Crisis, if You Please,” included voyeuristic journeys to the “corridors where unemployed get stamped,” “shuttered factories,” and “empty new developments.” In the evening, patrons could inspect asylums housing the homeless and attend political rallies sponsored by radicals. And if the sounds of anger and despair were insufficient to satisfy customers, street-corner adolescents were hired to supply the expected wails.³

Such profiteering on human misery aside, traveling to working-class districts did afford the best observation and understanding of the metropolis in crisis. One journalist found it remarkable: “You get on the subway and get out at the next station—it is another world. A huge chasm separates here and there.” Regine, a character in the novel *Berlin 1932*, shuttled between two worlds. After visiting her parents in working-class Berlin North, she would take “Autobus #2 from Usedomer Street back home,” traveling west. It was as if “she came out of the perpetual darkness of a mine shaft back into bright daylight” “when the bus left Elsässer Street and turned into Friedrich Street,” putting behind it “the hideous city and arriving in a charming one.” North and West composed “two fundamentally different cities, like hell and heaven in the film *Metropolis*.” Residents, separated by “Autobus #2,” “seemed to belong to totally different races.” Since Regine herself had work and her husband did not, she experienced the shame, betrayal, and resentment that characterized each “race” in her own home.⁴ Neighborhood nicknames often underscored that difference and its racialized nature; in other German cities, the proletarian underworld was known as “Little Moscow” (Stuttgart, Frankfurt) or “Algiers” (Lüneburg).

There were other crass differences as well. Regine described her parent’s proletarian street as a “political street.” “The Communists have always set the tone here, but recently the National Socialists

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have emerged as dangerous intruders,” she observed. “The street is the scene of furious battles; gun shots,” and “sirens of riot squads pierce the night.” “There is never really peace or quiet,” a contrast to her neighborhood. These sorts of differences were typical of Berlin. Thoroughly mobilized terrain bordered on peaceful precincts.⁵ From the vantage point of the Great Depression, it was hard to say which of Regine’s streets indicated the direction events would take.

To try to determine where things were headed, journalists arranged their own tour of the “metropolis in crisis.” It usually began on Alexanderplatz, a large and busy intersection abutting the city’s poorer districts. In his first days in Berlin, in November 1932, Abraham Plotkin, a forty-one-year-old American trade unionist associated with the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and charged with investigating Germany’s social conditions, headed straight for Alexanderplatz. There he was “swallowed by the crowds,” which “mill about you and suddenly disappear, reappear and vanish again.” He found his way to Aschinger’s, an inexpensive chain restaurant described by novelist Alfred Döblin in his classic 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a place where “people who have no belly, can get one there” and “people who have one already, can make it big as they please.” Outside, on the sidewalk, Plotkin noticed a young woman selling candy boxes for ten pfennigs each, the price of a daily newspaper. She was thin and blonde and bitten by hunger. Suddenly she lurched, and Plotkin caught her before she fell. He picked up her boxes of candy and treated her to a bowl of soup at Aschinger’s, but the frightened woman was clearly out of place in the milieu where she now found herself. One of the impoverished middle class whose future had vanished, she no longer belonged.

Moving on, Plotkin wandered to the nearby Grenadierstrasse, where he encountered a prostitute in a bar. She appeared more aware of her choices, referring to her respectable past while affirming, “I