The Reichstag fire and its effect

Although Hitler was appointed Chancellor on 30 January 1933, his political power was still limited. The NSDAP did not have an absolute majority in the Reichstag and, under the Weimar Constitution, President Hindenburg could still dismiss Hitler like other Chancellors before him. In order to get an absolute majority in the Reichstag and start dismantling democracy, Hitler called for new elections on 5 March. Six days before the election, on 27 February, the Reichstag was set on fire. A young Dutch communist was caught in the building and he admitted that he had started the fire by himself. The National Socialists, however, claimed that the fire was the beginning of a Communist takeover and acted quickly: by the following morning, 4,000 Communists had been arrested. Hitler then persuaded President Hindenburg to pass the Decree for the Protection of the People and the State (Verordnung zum Schutz von Volk und Staat). This emergency law suspended many civil rights guaranteed under the Weimar Constitution: freedom of the press, freedom of speech and of assembly. Hitler and his government then used the powers of the new decree to arrest another 40,000 Communists, Social Democrats and other political opponents. As the prisons were soon very full, the first concentration camps were established in early March 1933.

1. to declare sth. etwas ankündigen
2. et was entbehren to lack sth.
3. Rechtsstaat constitutional state
4. Gleichberechtigung equality
5. Menschlichkeit humanity
6. Gerechtigkeit justice
7. swastika Hakenkreuz

S1 National Socialist poster for the Reichstag election of 5 March 1933

Der Reichstag in Flammen!
Nationale Mitte soll sich von der Diktatur der Nationalsozialisten. Der Anschluss der Nation. Der Nationalsozialismus!

S2 Otto Wels, leader of the SPD parliamentary group, in a speech to the members of the Reichstag, 23 March 1933

After the Centre Party had already declared that they would vote for the Enabling Act, Wels declared the position of the SPD:


From: J. u. K. Hohlfeld (Hg.), Dokumente der deutschen Politik und Geschichte von 1848 bis zur Gegenwart, Bd. 4, Berlin a.O. 1. p. 34 ff

S3 Kroll Opera House in Berlin, photograph, 25 March 1933

Because of the fire damage to the Reichstag, the vote on the Enabling Act took place in the Kroll Opera House. To enter the building the Reichstag representatives had to pass through SS men who were guarding the building outside. Inside, the building was patrolled by SA men. A huge swastika banner was on the walls. The chanting of the SS men demanding the passing of the Enabling Act could be clearly heard inside.

The “Enabling Act”

Although the National Socialists used terror and violence against their political enemies, in the March election they only got 44% of the votes and still needed the support of Alfred Hugenberg and his party, the DNVP, to govern. Hitler’s aim was to achieve absolute power and, therefore, plans for an Enabling Act (Ermächtigungsgesetz) were made. This Act enabled the government to pass laws without asking the Reichstag for approval, effectively making Hitler a dictator. However, this change to the Weimar Constitution needed to receive a two-thirds majority in the Reichstag to become law itself. How was this possible? On 23 March 1933 the Enabling Act was put to the vote. A total of 109 members of the Reichstag could not or did not take part in the vote; 81 Communist Party members and 26 SPD members had already been arrested or had gone underground, another 2 representatives did not take part for unknown reasons. Other representatives were won over by promises or feared that they would be treated like the communists. Only the remaining 94 SPD representatives voted against the law. The Enabling Act was passed by a majority of 444 votes to 94.
Establishing and Consolidating Power II

Bringing Germany into line – Gleichschaltung
Now that the National Socialists had the right to make their own laws they started to bring every aspect of political and social life in Germany under their control. One of their first aims was to eliminate their opponents and the methods they used were called Gleichschaltung. Already in February 1933 around 50,000 loyal NSDAP members had joined Germany’s police force. Soon after the SS was put in charge of the police, including the secret state police, the Gestapo (Gehemne Staatspolizei), and it became possible to arrest anyone who was suspected of opposing Hitler’s regime.

In April the federal state system with its elected provincial governments and parliaments (Landtage) was undermined when Hitler appointed 18 NSDAP party members as state governors (Reichsstatthalter). They used their power to get rid of the democratically elected local governments. Civil servants (includingjudges) who were Jewish or political opponents were dismissed and were replaced by NSDAP members. In January 1934 the state parliaments were abolished completely and the state parliaments under the direct control of Hitler and central government in Berlin. In May trade unions, traditionally supporters of the SPD, were abolished. Trade union officials were arrested and taken to concentration camps. A new organization, the German Labour Front (Deutsche Arbeitsfront, DAF), was set up by the National Socialists and all workers had to belong to it. The National Socialists made people believe these measures were necessary to achieve a harmonious people’s community (Volksgemeinschaft) with no political differences.

In June the SPD was banned and the NSDAP became the only legal political party. All other parties either already been banned or had dissolved themselves. From July 1933, Germany was officially a one-party state. When President Hindenburg died on 2 August 1934 Hitler took over the President’s powers as head of state, including becoming commander-in-chief of the armed forces. His new title was Leader and Chancellor – Führer und Reichskanzler.

Key terms
Third Reich
The National Socialists called their state the Third Reich (empire) as the successor to the two first German Empires: the first was the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (962–1806) and the second was the German Empire (1871–1918). National Socialist propaganda claimed that their empire would last for 1000 years (tausendjähriges Reich).
The swastika (Hakenkreuz)
The swastika is a symbol with many meanings: since the 19th century it had been used as a symbol for anti-Semitic and anti-democratic ideas. In 1920 Hitler chose it as the symbol of the NSDAP.

Key terms
Schutzstaffel (SS)
The SS was formed in 1925 as Hitler’s personal bodyguards. Heinrich Himmler was its leader from 1929 to 1945. During WWII the SS was responsible for operating the extermination camps and also for the murder of millions of civilians in the territories occupied by the German army.

1. to consolidate sth. etwas festigen verstärken
2. legality Rechtsmaßigkeit
3. to persecute sb. jdn. verfolgen
4. broken people gebrochene Menschen
5. to convince sb. jdn. überzeugen
6. necessity Notwendigkeit
7. to denounce sb. jdn. denunzieren, anzeigen
8. to spread (sick) ausbreiten
9. radio broadcaster Rundfunkjournalist/in

Fear and terror
After the Enabling Act was passed on 25 March 1933, Hitler and the NSDAP were able to give the measures they took to consolidate their power the appearance of legality. Another factor which helped to explain why many Germans were not willing to oppose the National Socialists was the atmosphere of fear and terror that accompanied the Gleichschaltung. In the aftermath of the Reichstag fire, the number of people taken into “protective custody” (Schutzhaft) dramatically increased. Political opponents were publicly executed and arrested. As early as March 1933 the first concentration camps were established in which Social Democrats and Communists were brutally beaten or tortured for weeks or months. Many died or returned home as broken people.

Prisoners – political opponents and radio broadcasters – arriving at Oranienburg concentration camp, photograph, August 1933...

The National Socialists opened this camp near Berlin on 21 March 1933. Journalists were given guided tours in which the camp was presented as a model “re-education camp” for Communists and Socialists.

Social Democrats in Straubing, photo, 30 June 1933
Police are taking the men to the train station from where they will be transported to the concentration camp in Dachau. The photographer, a member of the SPD, died in Dachau in 1943.

"Wahither?" cartoon in the British newspaper
Daily Express, 29 June 1933

Language help: Wahither? = What will happen in the future?

S4 A member of the Social Democrat Party on why he wanted to leave the SPD, March 1933

From: K. Zentner, Mustertische Geschichte des Dritten Reichs, München, 1963, p.119

S5 Students of the Technical College Hanover, 1933

S6 Germany’s air force, 1933

S7 1 to eliminate sb./sth. etwas ausschalten, abschaffen
2 to be put in charge of sth. etwas verantworten, (bez) die Leitung übernehmen
3 to supercharge sth. etwas verstärken
4 to oppose sth. etwas widerlegen
5 to undermine sth. etwas untergraben
6 to get rid of sth/sth. jdn. etwas ausbreiten
7 civil servantsBeamter
8 to abolish sth. etwas abschaffen
9 harmonious harmonisch
10 to ban sth. etwas verbieten
11 to dissolve oneself sich auflösen
12 Schindelweg, Grossbritannien (GB)
13 etwas dulden to tolerate sth.
14 Ausstieg (here) leaving (at party)
Establishing and Consolidating Power III

Establishing a Dictatorship
After Adolf Hitler’s appointment to Chancellor on 30 January 1933, the NSDAP quickly consolidated its power. Using President Hindenburg’s constitutional powers Hitler completely transformed Germany into a police state.

Two important laws helped him to remove the opposition. When the Reichstag building burnt down, Hitler blamed the Communists and asked President Hindenburg to sign the Decree for the Protection of People and State. This emergency decree (“Reichstagsbrandverordnung”) of 28 February took away many of the basic rights of the German people, censored papers, limited meetings and allowed the police to arrest leading Communists. The Enabling Act (“Ermächtigungsgesetz”) was introduced on 23 March 1933. In an atmosphere of terror it was passed by a two-thirds majority in the Reichstag. Only the Social Democrats – the Communist deputies had already been excluded from parliament – voted against this act, which deprived the Reichstag of all its powers. It enabled the government to pass laws without parliamentary consent, thus abolishing the basic democratic principle of the separation of powers.

Bringing Germany into Line – the “Gleichschaltung”
Now that the Nazis could make their own laws, they reorganized the German political system and German society under Nazi control. This process was called “Gleichschaltung”. Step by step the Nazis eliminated any form of opposition in the first months after their seizure of power.

In April 1933 Hitler dismantled federalism by appointing state governors and abolishing the state parliaments. In May the trade unions were replaced by the German Labour Front (“Deutsche Arbeitsfront”, DAF). Their offices were occupied by the SA (“Sturmabteilung”), the paramilitary organization of the NSDAP, their leaders arrested and strikes forbidden. Also, the political parties were brought into line. The KPD and a little later the SPD were banned. Their offices were closed down and their leaders put in concentration camps. In July a Law Against the Creation of Parties provided that the NSDAP was the only remaining party and thus Germany became a one-party state. The civil service was also put under control by dismissing any civil servant from office who was not Aryan or did not pledge his unconditional loyalty to the Nazi state.

The “Night of the Long Knives”
By 1934 Hitler had destroyed democracy, but big business, the former aristocracy and the army remained intact. The SA under Ernst Röhm wanted to push ahead with the Nazi revolution, calling for socially radical policies and a new “People’s Army”. Hitler rejected these demands, knowing that he would need the support of the army and the industrialists in the wars to come. On 30 June 1934, in the “Night of the Long Knives”, he ordered the SS (“Schutzstaffel”) to execute Röhm, who had become a threat to his power, and hundreds of other SA leaders or political opponents without trial. A few months later grateful Reichswehr generals ordered all soldiers to swear loyalty to the person of Adolf Hitler rather than to the nation or the constitution.

Hitler – The “Führer”
The death of 86-year-old President Paul von Hindenburg on 2 August 1934 removed the final obstacle to Hitler’s complete power over Germany. A law combined the offices of Chancellor (the head of government) and President (the head of state); Adolf Hitler was henceforth addressed as Leader and Chancellor (“Führer und Reichskanzler”) and was both head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The day of the President’s death, a plebiscite was ordered for the German people to approve the combination of the two offices. Germany’s voters went to the polls and about 90 per cent approved. Only eighteen months after the fateful 30 January 1933 the “Gleichschaltung” was completed and Hitler had unchallenged power in Germany. A mixture of laws, acts of violence and a system of propaganda had paved the way for him.