In the 1928 election the Nazi Party only won 12 seats out of over 400 in the Reichstag. It appeared to be a small, insignificant party with little hope of gaining power. However, by the end of 1933 the Nazis were the largest party in the Reichstag and Hitler was Chancellor of Germany. How had this happened?

THE EFFECTS OF THE WALL STREET CRASH

When American banks recalled the money they had loaned to Germany many businessmen went bankrupt or had to cut back production. As factories were producing less some of their workers were sacked and became unemployed. This meant that there were fewer people with the money to buy goods and so factories sold still fewer goods. So even more workers were sacked.

Factories cut production or went bankrupt

Factories sold less goods

People become unemployed or had their wages cut

Less people could afford to buy goods

Farmers were also affected because the unemployed bought less food and farm prices dropped forcing many farmers and farm workers into unemployment. The German economy had plunged into what was known as the Great Depression. This depression was worldwide.
Unemployment kept rising. By 1933 there were six million Germans out of work. Unemployment led to misery and despair. Many middle class and working class families lost their homes. Businessmen went bankrupt. Small farmers lost their farms. Many Germans blamed the government for the situation and lost confidence in democracy. Many turned to extremist parties who seemed to have a solution to the economic problems. All this misery was just the opportunity that Hitler and the Nazis needed.

HITLER’S IDEAS

After his release from prison in 1924 Hitler had started to reorganise the Nazi Party to make it more effective in elections. Party offices were set up all over Germany. He also started the Hitler Youth for boys and a new fighting force, the SS. Marches and torchlight rallies were staged to publicise Nazi ideas. More and more people joined the party but in the elections of 1928 the Nazis did not do well. This situation changed, however, when the Great Depression hit Germany. Voters were increasingly attracted to Hitler’s ideas.

Hitler set out many of his ideas in ‘Mein Kampf’, the book he wrote when he was in Landsberg prison after the failure of the Munich Putsch.

- Hitler believed that the weak leadership of the Weimar governments had caused many of Germany’s problems. Germany, he said, needed a strong leader like himself.

- Hitler also said that the Nazis would make Germany a strong country again by overturning the Treaty of Versailles.

- The Nazis would then make Germany a great military power by increasing the size of the army.

- Hitler said that he would make Germany prosperous again after the misery of the Depression.

- Hitler believed that the so-called Aryan people (blond, blue-eyed Germans) were superior to other races. Inferior races, from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa, mattered less than the superior ones. The most inferior of all were the Jews. Hitler hated the Jews (anti-Semitic) and blamed them for most of Germany’s problems. German people, he argued, had to be ‘purified’ of all Jewish blood before they could become the master race and dominate the world.

- Hitler wanted all Germans to feel part of ‘the people’s community’. He wanted them to work together to make Germany great again and to forget the old class divisions and political divisions. Their individual lives, he said, were less important than their contribution to Germany itself. Individual rights, like the right to think differently from others, were less important than loyalty to the country, the people and the leader.

- Hitler hated communism and pledged himself to destroy it.
When the Depression hit Germany in 1929, the government was a coalition of four political parties. They had no solution to the problem of rising unemployment. People began to lose faith in the government. In the election of 1930 the four coalition parties lost seats in the Reichstag as the voters turned to the extremist parties:

1. Many working class people voted for the Communists who promised to restore Germany’s wealth and share it out fairly. The Communist Party did well in the election.

2. The middle classes turned to the Nazi Party. The Nazis promised them strong leadership, an end to the Depression and a prosperous Germany. They also promised to overturn the Treaty of Versailles and make Germany a powerful nation again. They accused the Jews of being responsible for Germany’s problems and provided the Germans with scapegoats ie. someone to blame. The Nazis won 107 seats in the Reichstag in the 1930 elections. They were now the second largest party. Only the Socialists had more seats (143).

The coalition government continued to govern Germany because the four coalition parties still had a majority of the seats in the Reichstag. But in March 1930, the largest party in the coalition, the Socialists, didn’t agree with the policies the other parties wanted to introduce and left the government. Without the support of the Socialists Chancellor Bruning did not have enough support to get his laws passed by the Reichstag. Instead of resigning, he asked President Hindenburg to ‘rule by decree’. Ruling by decree could only take place during an emergency. It meant that the President could pass Bruning’s laws without the agreement of the Reichstag.

Bruning resigned in 1932 because he had failed to stop unemployment rising. President Hindenburg chose Von Papen as the next Chancellor and there was another election in July 1932. Von Papen hoped that the democratic parties that supported him would win a majority. He was to be disappointed. The middle class voters continued to turn away from the moderate parties and gave their support to the Nazis who promised to make Germany prosperous and powerful again. The Nazis won 230 seats and became the largest party in the Reichstag. Hitler demanded that he should be made Chancellor, but President Hindenburg did not trust him and continued to support Von Papen. Elections were held again in November 1932 to try and gain more support for Von Papen. This failed and Von Papen was replaced as Chancellor by General Von Schleicher. The Nazis had won 34 fewer seats in the November election but still continued to be the largest party in the Reichstag.

Von Schleicher lasted only 57 days as Chancellor. Like Von Papen he could not get enough support for his policies in the Reichstag and had to rule by presidential decree. President Hindenburg realised that this situation could not continue and he would have to give the Nazis a chance. After all, they were the largest party in the Reichstag. He was forced to make Hitler, a man he did not trust, Chancellor of Germany. The Nazis did not have a majority in the Reichstag and Von Papen
persuaded Hindenburg that Hitler would need the support of the other parties to stay in power. Von Papen and Hindenburg thought that they could dominate Hitler. As a result, Hitler became Chancellor on 30th January 1933.

**REASONS FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE NAZIS**

1. **The Depression**

   The Depression caused people to turn to the extremist parties. The Weimar government appeared to be incapable of solving the economic crisis while the Communists and Nazis put forward simple solutions. The Communists wanted to overthrow the Weimar government and set up a communist society where the wealth was shared fairly between the people. The Nazis promised to make Germany prosperous and strong again under the strong leadership of Adolf Hitler. As unemployment rose so did support for these extremist parties. But the impact of the Depression can only partly explain the success of the Nazis. Why were the Nazis able to convince the German people that they were better equipped to solve the country’s problems than the other political parties?

2. **Nazi appeal**

   The Nazis appealed to the German people at two levels:

   - They appealed to the whole of the country on issues which concerned everyone. For instance, they promised to overturn the hated Treaty of Versailles and make Germany a powerful country again. They also promised to end the Depression and make Germany prosperous again. The Nazis were offering work and hope. They accused the Jews of being responsible for all of Germany’s problems and provided the Germans with scapegoats.

   - The Nazis also tried to win the support of different sections of German society. They promised the working classes jobs, decent wages and good working conditions. They promised the middle classes that they would destroy communism. The middle classes feared that the high unemployment would lead to a communist revolution in Germany. If this happened they would lose everything they had worked for. The farmers were promised good prices for their produce. Women, who made up half of the voters, were promised support for family values.

3. **Propaganda**

   The Nazis used the normal methods of politicians to gain votes. They held rallies and marches, made speeches and used the radio, posters, books and newspapers to put across their message. However, some of their methods were different from those of other political parties. They used mass rallies as great stage-managed occasions to impress the desperate people of Germany. Hitler flew across Germany to speak at rallies in every major city.
4. Violence

The Nazi Party used the SA to disrupt the political meetings of the other parties and to intimidate their political opponents. Their violence was particularly aimed at the Communists and the Socialists. They claimed to be ‘dealing with the communist threat’. Many unemployed and disillusioned young people, who admired the discipline and aggression of the SA, were attracted to the Party.

5. Financial backing

The Nazis needed money to finance their election campaigns so they set out to get the support of wealthy businessmen. By promising to destroy trade unions and keep wages down, they won the support of rich industrialists like the steel baron, Fritz Thyssen, who paid huge sums of money to the Nazis. Another wealthy supporter was Alfred Hugenberg who owned 500 newspapers and cinemas throughout Germany. He was the leader of the Nationalist Party, but in 1929, decided to help the Nazis by giving them massive publicity in his newspapers and cinemas.

6. Hitler

Hitler himself was a great political speaker who could inspire people with enthusiasm. During the election campaigns he was portrayed as the strong leader that Germany needed. Nazi propaganda showed him as a superman who could restore Germany’s fortunes. His personal popularity was shown in 1932 when he stood against Hindenburg in the presidential elections and gained 13 million votes against Hindenburg’s 19 million.

7. The weaknesses of the Weimar government

The government tried to deal with the economic crisis by increasing taxes, cutting wages and reducing unemployment benefit. The Socialists did not approve of these measures and left the coalition. This meant that the government no longer had a majority in the Reichstag, and the three Chancellors who ruled Germany between 1930 and 1932 had to rely on President Hindenburg using the presidential decree to get their laws passed. Despite this, unemployment continued to rise and the government appeared to be making a hopeless mess of handling the situation.

Who voted for the Nazis?

The Nazis did not succeed in gaining much support from the working classes. The workers in the industrial cities remained loyal to the Socialist and Communist Parties. In fact, the number of Communist MPs in the Reichstag rose between 1929 and 1932.

It was the middle classes who increasingly started voting for the Nazi Party. They saw the number of Communist MPs increasing and feared that the Depression would lead to a communist revolution. The Weimar government appeared to be incapable of
dealing with the economic crisis and the Nazi Party seemed the only chance of saving Germany from communism. Therefore, the middle classes voted for the Nazis even though they didn’t like some of their methods.

The Nazis also became popular in the countryside. The Depression had resulted in a drop in food prices and many farmers were suffering hardship. They turned to the Nazis. The working classes in many of the small towns of Germany also voted for the Nazis.

**THE CONSOLIDATION OF POWER 1933-34**

When Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, he was one of just three Nazis in the government. The other eight members of the government belonged to other parties. Von Papen, who was vice-Chancellor, was sure that he could control Hitler. But Hitler had other ideas. He was determined to end democracy and make himself dictator of Germany. To do this, however, he needed a large majority in the Reichstag.

**The Reichstag Fire, February 1933**

Shortly after he became Chancellor, Hitler arranged for another general election to be held in March. He hoped that the Nazis would win a massive victory so that he would get a majority of the seats in the Reichstag. He could then change the constitution and make himself dictator of Germany. During the election campaign Hitler, in his position as Chancellor, made it difficult for his opponents to run a proper campaign. For instance, in Prussia, the largest German state, the police were encouraged to break up the political meetings of the Socialists and Communists.

On 27th February, 1933, the Reichstag building burned down in Berlin. Marianus Van de Lubbe, a young Dutch communist, was caught with matches and firelighters inside the building. At his trial he confessed to the crime. The court couldn’t find any connection between him and the German Communists who had been arrested after the fire.

Many people believed that the Nazis planned the fire. What is more important is, they used it to frighten many Germans into believing that the communists were about to start a revolution. Hitler persuaded President Hindenburg to pass an emergency decree – **The Law for the Protection of the People and the State**. This gave special powers to Hitler to arrest any person suspected of plotting against the government. The Nazis used this new law to make it difficult for the Socialists and Communists in the election campaign.

Hitler, however, still didn’t win enough seats in the election. Even with the support of the Nationalists, the Nazis didn’t have the two-thirds majority needed to change the constitution. Hitler quickly solved the problem. He made a deal with the Centre Party (this was the party most Catholics voted for). He promised not to interfere with the Catholic Church in Germany, if the Catholic politicians would vote for his laws. Also, all Communist MPs were banned from taking their seats in the Reichstag.
The Enabling Act, March 1933

When the new Reichstag met in the Kroll Opera House, Hitler presented his Enabling Act. This gave the Chancellor the power to make laws, for four years, without the Reichstag voting on them. The Enabling Act was passed by 444 votes to 94. Only the Socialists were brave enough to risk intimidation by the SA and the SS (who were surrounding the building and the voting chamber) and voted against it.

Destroying the opposition and creating a one-party state

Hitler quickly used his new powers to destroy any opposition:

1. In April 1933, he put Nazi officials in charge of all the German states.

2. In May 1933, he abolished trade unions and made strikes illegal. Trade union leaders were imprisoned. Workers were made to join the new Nazi-controlled German Labour Front.

3. Other political parties were banned and their leaders imprisoned. Then in July 1933 a Law against the Formation of New Parties was made. This said the Nazi party was the only political party allowed to exist: anyone trying to set up or run another party would be imprisoned. Germany had become a one-party state.

The Night of the Long Knives June 1934

President Hindenburg was the only person who might have stopped Hitler. However, he was old, senile and hadn’t long to live. Hitler wanted to become President as well as Chancellor when Hindenburg died, but he needed the support of the rich businessmen and the army to do this. But the army was very suspicious of the SA and its leader, Ernst Roehm. Roehm wanted the SA to take over the army. The businessmen were also suspicious of the SA because they were the socialist wing of the Nazi Party and wanted to improve conditions for the working classes. In order to get the army and the businessmen on his side, Hitler turned on the SA and on 30th June 1934, he had all the leading officers of the SA arrested and executed without any trial. Over 400 people were killed in what became known as the Night of the Long Knives. The executions were carried out by the SS.

Hitler becomes Fuhrer August 1934

One month later, President Hindenburg died. Hitler combined the posts of Chancellor and President and gave himself the title Fuhrer which simply means leader in German. On the same day all officers and men of the army swore an oath of personal loyalty to Hitler.

Between January 1933 and August 1934 Hitler had changed Germany from a democracy to a Nazi dictatorship. The Weimar Republic was finished and the Third Reich had begun.
THE NAZI CONTROL OF GOVERNMENT

As soon as he became Chancellor, Hitler was determined to turn Germany into a totalitarian state. A totalitarian state is a state, or country, in which the power of a single leader or party is absolute. The state uses its power to control most parts of people’s lives. Opposition is not allowed and secret police are used to spy and report on anyone who disagrees with the government.

Such laws as the Enabling Act, and the banning of other political parties destroyed democracy in Germany. After Hindenburg’s death, Hitler combined the powers of Chancellor and President, and made the army swear an oath of loyalty to him. All these things gave Hitler, in theory, all the power he needed. However, he had to make sure that the German people continued to obey him and the Nazi Party. One way of achieving this was through terror. If people would not accept Nazi ideas through choice then they must be forced to accept them. Germany became a police state. This means that the police had the power to arrest and punish people who disagreed with the Nazis.

Hitler developed a number of organisations to enforce this terror:

The SS

The SS (Schutzstaffel) was set up in 1925 as an elite section of the SA. Whereas many of the SA were undisciplined thugs, SS members were highly disciplined and utterly loyal to Hitler. In the early days they wore blackshirts. In 1929, Heinrich Himmler took control of the SS and, after 1933, used it to cruelly enforce Hitler’s policies against the Jews, and run the concentration camps. When Hitler decided to get rid of Roehm, it was the SS that did the dirty work. After the Night of the Long Knives the SS became the main security force. In 1936 it was given control of the ordinary police and the Gestapo. By 1939 the SS consisted of three parts:

1. State security – they had to search out and deal with enemies of the Nazi Party.
2. Waffen SS – provided the most committed and dependable soldiers in the armed forces.
3. ‘Death’s Head’ units – controlled the concentration camps and later the death camps.

The Gestapo

This was set up in 1933 by Hermann Goering as a secret state police. The job of the Gestapo was to track down opponents of the Nazis and send them to concentration camps. In 1936, the Gestapo came under the control of the SS and it was run by Reynhard Heydrich, who was one of the most ruthless Nazis.
The Courts

Since the SS and the Gestapo could put people in concentration camps without a trial, the courts were unable to protect Germans from them. However, had the opponents of the Nazis been given a trial, the outcome would have been the same. The judges were all Nazi supporters. In 1934 Hitler set up the People’s Court to try people for crimes against the state. By 1939 it had sentenced over 500 to death and sent many more to concentration camps.

Informers

The Nazi Party had members everywhere. Every town in Germany was divided into small units called blocks which included only a handful of homes. The local Nazi – the Block Warden or Blockleiter – checked on the people in the block. The Block Wardens were the eyes and the ears of the party. They reported anything suspicious to their party superiors, who in turn told the police. Failure to give the Nazi salute, or the telling of anti-Hitler jokes were enough to get a person reported to the police.

Concentration Camps

The Nazis set up their first two concentration camps, Dachau and Oranienburg in 1933. They were set up for ‘preventative detention’. This meant that opponents of the Nazis were sent to them as a precaution, to ensure that they did not do anything to harm the Nazi state. People didn’t have to have done anything wrong at all; it was enough that they were suspected of it. People were afraid of being reported to the SS or Gestapo and being sent to one of these camps and kept silent even if they didn’t like the Nazis.