



Fourteen Facts About Rise of the Nazis and the Holocaust

1. **The Nazis are an example of antidemocratic, anti-international, nationalist, and nativist movements in Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.** With varying emphases, each embraces right-wing, authoritarian, and often antisemitic beliefs as a response to the perceived global “threat” of the Left, refugee crises, and the trauma inflicted by the First World War. The Nazis build momentum only after the Great Depression in 1929 and at their peak in July 1932 become the largest of multiple political parties with a plurality of 37.4% of the vote. In parliamentary elections in November 1932, however, the Nazi Party loses ca. two million votes (down to 33.1%); its Reichstag delegation declines from 230 to 196 seats. Although the Nazis remain the largest delegation, the loss of support unnerves them and terrifies the conservative Right as it is matched by a similar advance for the Communists.
2. **Despite the Nazis undoubted sponsorship of antisemitism, German society during the Weimar era should not be viewed as inherently antisemitic.** Hitler is one of a wide range of antisemitic demagogues haunting the Weimar Republic. However, Hitler realizes that he is only appealing to the lunatic fringe and broadens the NSDAP’s political platform to embrace a traditional right-wing critique of the Republic: i.e., its inability to fundamentally revise the widely hated provisions of the Versailles Treaty, and its failure at addressing powerful economic weaknesses resulting initially in hyperinflation and ultimately in the worst depression experienced by any western society. From 1929 Hitler gains traction by underscoring one theme in his campaign speeches: Which party is not responsible for the failures of the “Weimar System?” Only the Nazis, he insists, have not been given a chance to fashion policy (he conveniently neglects to mention the Communists). Germany’s desperate middle classes, especially in the Protestant north, increasingly respond to these entreaties. What eventually leads to the advance of antisemitism is Hitler’s later success: his ability to end German unemployment and his facility at undoing the terms of the Versailles Treaty, broadens the appeal of his fantasies. Fringe antisemitic conspiracy theories, as articulated in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* fraud (invented in Russia before World War I), are reinforced by the “stab in the back” lie invented by German elites after World War I. This great lie of a secret Jewish conspiracy ignores the sacrifice of German Jews (85,000 serve. 70% see frontline duty. 35,000 medals for bravery. 18,000 Iron Crosses. 12,000 die) and shifts responsibility and blame away from military and political elites. Belief in conspiracy theories provides easily digestible explanations, feeds individual and collective identity needs, and justifies increasing violence under the guise of “self-defense”.
3. **Hitler fails at almost everything he does; yet, owing to a certain charisma, he is constantly rescued by those who seek to use him.** An Austrian, he crosses the border to fight for Germany in 1914. He is an arrogant and frustrated loner who blames everyone for his failures. He remains, nonetheless, fixated on his purpose and believes in his own genius. After the war he discovers his public speaking ability which becomes essential to his political success. He has a remarkable memory and keen eye for others’ weaknesses—which he instinctively exploits. He is an avid reader; however, only of books and pamphlets that confirm, not test, his beliefs. He remains throughout his life a narcissist with a deep-seated insecurity. Hitler likes to dominate younger, submissive women. From the outset of his political career, he exaggerates his self-importance and demands undivided loyalty. Devoid of human empathy, he delights in humiliating opponents. In social situations, he either sulks or dominates conversation, talking endlessly about himself and his destiny. He can adopt personas (from charming to serpent) to gain an advantage. He vacillates between euphoria, depression, frantic energy, lethargy, apathy, and idleness. In 1924, consumed with his public image after being imprisoned for treason in the aftermath of the November 1923 Beerhall Putsch, he formulates a more systematic political agenda while creating a mythical persona in *Mein Kampf*. The effective public-relations campaign that follows reinvents Hitler as a poor and frustrated artist, driven into politics against his will—a political outsider who speaks for the people and sacrifices everything for the nation. While able to mesmerize followers with his vision, he will remain disorganized and without administrative ability. He remains an all-or-nothing gambler, violent, impulsive, and rarely open to compromise. Fearing communism and loathing the Jews, he evolves the specter of “Judeo-Bolshevism,” using his uncommon power of persuasion to harness Germany to a mission of conquest, eugenic cleansing, and racial genocide. The result is national catastrophe.

4. **The Weimar Republic is not a healthy democracy when Hitler is given power in January 1933.** The Republic is founded under a cloud and never succeeds in transforming the dire economic and political circumstances that plague it from the outset. By the end of 1929, the Republic is in crisis due to a depression that dramatically aggravates Germany's political and social fragmentation, thereby paralyzing parliament's ability to legislate. From March 1930 until January 1933, Germany is led by three chancellors whose tenures are increasingly tied to the goodwill of President Paul von Hindenburg. Without sufficient parliamentary support to form governing coalitions, these chancellors rely on Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, an emergency prerogative whereby the president legitimately empowers a chancellor. With the depression demanding highly unpopular legislation—measures originating in the chancellor's office, not the parliament—hatred of democracy intensifies, fomented by the extreme Left (KPD) and extreme Right (NSDAP), the evidence of whose growing power is to be seen by way of pitched battles in the streets between the paramilitary organizations of both parties. Political power is centered not in the parliament, but in a small group of elites close to Hindenburg.
5. **Hitler is appointed chancellor.** Hitler is not elected, nor does he seize power with a coup. Hitler is the fourth chancellor appointed by President Hindenburg. Although initially despising Hitler, Hindenburg is convinced, by a coalition of nationalist, conservative power-brokers, that the Nazis can be utilized to fight the growing power of the German Communist Party (KPD). Promising that they can control Hitler and harness his power, they plan to dismiss him after successfully neutralizing their opponents and destroying the Weimar Republic. Initially in a relatively weak political position, Hitler will cunningly exploit his appointment to achieve far greater power.
6. **Paramilitary and political violence are keys to undermining German democracy.** It speaks to the cynical hypocrisy of the Nazis that, while fomenting much of the political violence that helped undermine the Republic during 1930-32, they point to themselves as the only hope in reestablishing law and order in Germany. Already targeting and imprisoning the political Left in so-called "wild" (unofficial) concentration camps in the immediate aftermath of Hitler's appointment, the Reichstag Fire (27-28 February 1933) sets the stage for several months of ubiquitous violence. Hermann Göring utilizes fear to target civil rights and left-wing opponents, and to initiate the legal underpinnings of a concentration camp system. Recognizing by the summer of 1933 that widespread political violence will undermine his role as a "law-and-order" leader, Hitler moves to shackle his principal paramilitary force (the SA or Sturmabteilung). Violence thereafter is internalized and discreet at the behest of Heinrich Himmler and the SS. The most important symbol of this change will be the "Night of the Long Knives" of June 1934, which witnesses the brutal purging of the SA's senior leadership.
7. **Supporters of Hitler and the Nazis are not victims or powerless, brainwashed followers.** The German police, Judiciary (to varying degrees), and especially the medical profession quickly reorientate themselves to supporting the regime. The German Judiciary plays a key role in upholding the "authoritarian legal order" which places state needs above individual rights. They uphold the Enabling Act of 1933 that, although arrived at through intimidation and suspect processes, becomes the legal basis for Nazi terror. It is helpful to consider individual initiative, in terms of "working towards the Führer", as a driving force for other supporters. As Nazi momentum builds, self-interest, patriotism, social pressures and individual choice influence the decisions of teachers, civil servants, farmers, musicians, businessmen, and soldiers.
8. **Concentration camps are always part of Nazi thinking (at least back to the failed Munich coup of 1923) and are not unique to Nazism.** German concentration camps emerge from Nazi paramilitaries that Himmler and the SS eventually consolidate (KL). They are public and seen as extra-legal tools whose purpose and legality are debated within state judiciaries. They are geared towards political and "asocial" prisoners who are sometimes killed or often worked to death. Hitler is prepared to dramatically decrease both the number of camps and the camp population in 1936. Himmler, believing his authority rests in large part on the KL system, convinces Hitler of the ongoing internal threat that requires their maintenance, if not expansion. After 1936 camp prisoners are seen as something other than political opponents. There are 980 concentration camps by the end of the war. Other camps evolve during the war to include forced labor camps (30,000), transit and special camps, ghettos (1,500), and the six gassing camps in occupied Poland. Only two of the killing camps (Majdanek and Auschwitz) have concentration camps. The killing camps are viewed as separate institutions and primarily, although not exclusively, target Jews and Roma/Sinti peoples.

9. **Eugenics, the discredited and racially based study of how to breed a better race, is central to Nazism and the Holocaust.** Englishman Francis Galton's idea of positive eugenics (he coins the term in 1883) encourages reproduction among the genetically advantaged to create a better human race. Negative eugenics (sterilization, destroying social safety nets, so-called euthanasia) evolves as the truly dark side of the movement. Sweden's Democratic Party passes a Sterilization Act in 1934, and it is supported by the Swedish Lutheran Church. The Nazis do not invent eugenics, but are driven, especially Hitler, by the early 20th century work of German and Americans working on negative eugenics. Early Nazi sterilization legislation is influenced by Americans such as Charles Davenport, Harry Laughlin, and Madison Grant. By 1933 over thirty U.S. states have sterilization laws and Nazi sterilization laws pick up momentum in 1935 by seeking solutions for the "Rhineland Bastard problem" (offspring of German women and black French soldiers). The German eugenics project continues to expand and shifts the medical profession towards caring for the "health of the state" and not the individual. Hitler and his team utilize American Jim Crow and race-based anti-immigration laws (1921 and 1924) to target German Jews. The Nuremberg Laws (September 1935) are significantly influenced by and predicated on eugenic race laws in the United States. Jews do not lose their citizenship, but become "nationals", second-class citizens, much like black and indigenous Americans. This allows Jews to retain their passports as the Nazis build pressure on them to emigrate. The Nazis create rules to loot Jews as they try to leave Germany.
10. **Targeting Homosexuals allowed the Nazis to create a national police force dedicated to persecuting the regime's enemies.** Even before the Nazis are given power, conservatives begin targeting homosexuals. Arrests become routine once the Nazis are given power. After the "Night of the Long Knives" purge of SA leader Ernst Röhm in early summer 1934, Nazi propaganda links homosexuality with treason and the subversion of eugenic ideals. Concentration camps are increasingly populated with "asocials" and deviants. Dropping "unnatural" from paragraph 175 of the 1871 Criminal Code against "unnatural indecency" allows Himmler to seek out "active" or "practicing" homosexuals and recruit informers to reveal those who are hiding or passing. Himmler obsesses with "combating homosexuality" and by creating a nationwide index on homosexuals and coordinating arrests under his newly unified German police force, Himmler is able to develop techniques for coordinated nationwide police roundups.
11. **The Holocaust (Shoah, Hebrew for "catastrophe") is the program of state-sponsored, systematic and attempted total annihilation of every Jewish man, woman, and child in the German sphere of power by Nazi Germany and their collaborators between 1941 and 1945.** The benefit of this definition (there are others) is that it reflects the intent and purpose of Nazi policy. It identifies the specificity of the target group and its unprecedented scope (every). Roma/Sinti peoples suffer a similar fate as Jews and should be included. This definition also identifies the year this specific genocide becomes official policy. However, this definition ignores the process of genocide which begins in 1933 or even before. By ignoring the process of building Nazi momentum, capacity, expertise, and expanding goals, other initial target groups (blacks, homosexuals, "asocials", handicapped...) are forgotten. This includes the mass killings of Poles (1939) and black French soldiers (1940). Anyone who suffers, suffers the most. There is no hierarchy of victimhood. Studying the Holocaust allows us to focus on and raise questions about the processes of genocide and the particularity of Nazi utopian thinking amidst the myriad of Nazi killing and torture.
12. **The Wannsee Conference (January 1942) does not initiate the Holocaust.** The meeting is held to discuss the "final solution to the Jewish Question in Europe". It is authorized by Göring, the person in charge of Jewish affairs. Originally scheduled for December 8, 1941, (the day the Chelmno killing camp begins operation) the meeting is postponed. When reconvened, the United States has entered the war and the Russians have mounted a significant counterattack outside of Moscow. As German forces are already implementing the Holocaust in the East, this meeting is focused on coordinating the "final solution" of European-wide mass murder program under SS control. Attendees include eugenics experts, the Gestapo and police, and the Secretaries of Foreign Ministry and Justice who will implement deportations from occupied and collaborating countries. Representatives from the Armed Forces (negotiates an agreement in Spring 1941) and the railroads (Hitler authorizes the *Reichsbahn* in September 1941) are not invited as they are already deeply involved in the killing.

13. **The Holocaust is not inevitable, but it is predictable.** Nazi policies and expectations, rooted in antisemitic and eugenic beliefs and driven by authoritarian leadership, evolve. Eugenics provides the foundations, framework, and expertise to implement utopian thinking. “Racial hygiene” begins with forced sterilizations and by 1939 has shifted to killing in the so-called “Euthanasia” (child killing) program. This shift begins just before the outbreak of war in September 1939. Under the guise of war, the “euthanasia” program expands into the T4 program (killing of teens and adults). T4 experts experiment with killing methods (lethal injection, starvation, gas chambers and crematoria) and develop procedures to mass murder using fixed “special treatment” gassing centers in German institutions. Jews are seen as a separate category and are shipped to Poland to be killed in the fall of 1940. After a Hitler order publicly cancels the T4 program due to public pressure (August 1941), T4 offers its institutional murder capabilities to SS concentration camps in Operation 14f13 (“14f” is SS shorthand for death of concentration camp prisoners). By the spring of 1942 Operation 14f13 winds down, T4 centers enter a phase of “wild” decentralized killing, and T4 experts find employment in the East developing and staffing the new SS killing centers. T4 experts help build Chelmno (September 1941) and the Operation Reinhard camps of Belzec (March 1942), Sobibor (April 1942), and Treblinka (July 1942). These fixed camps mirror T4 institutions in their use of subterfuge and carbon monoxide gas. Auschwitz expands separately into Auschwitz II (Birkenau) where the “red house” gas chamber begins operation in March 1942 and by August 1942 Auschwitz is using Zyklon B gas. Majdanek also operates for a brief period as a Zyklon B killing camp.
14. **World War II and the Holocaust are not separate events, but mutually interwoven.** Nazi goals and expectations expand and are shaped by the war. Invading Poland (September 1939) begins mass killing operations and creates dilemmas and roadblocks to realizing the dream of *lebensraum* (geographic expansion and demographic and ethnic engineering). Fighting for “race and space” has frustrating limitations in 1939. Unable to execute Himmler’s vision, ghettos are created as a stopgap measure. Competing agendas undermine the “Nisko Plan”, the SS idea of collecting a reservoir of exploitable slave labor around Lublin. When France falls (May 1940) the Nazis reexamine the “Madagascar Plan” to deport European Jews to their deaths in Madagascar. This plan collapses when Britain remains in the fight. The SS is experimenting in killing methods (explosives too messy and 14f13 too cumbersome). On March 26, 1941, Reinhard Heydrich submits a plan to Hermann Göring for deportations to the east and “A Territory yet to be Determined.” That territory is the Soviet Union. The invasion of the Soviet Union (June 22, 1941) will accelerate Nazi killing. On the eve of the invasion the German Army issues the Commissar Order (June 6, 1941) condoning mass murder and Himmler has submitted General Plan Ost for German settlement and the targeting of groups to be annihilated or enslaved. Four *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing squads) are deployed and inflict “Holocaust by bullets”. The *Einsatzgruppen* are run by the SS in coordination with the *Wehrmacht* (German army) and supplanted with volunteers from occupied countries. By the summer and fall of 1941 orders are given to kill every Jew and the final means presents itself as T4 experts arrive in the East.