

World War II: Germany

Germany was the focus of World War II, which lasted from 1939 to 1945, and the reasons for this focus were diverse. Germany's nationalist aggression under the Nazi government stoked fires of distrust against Soviet Communism. The nations of Europe were drawn into the war one by one until the war spread across the continent. During the war, many actions (such as the Holocaust) of Nazi Germany were immoral and illegal. Historians often study Germany's government during the time of the war because it was a valid, legitimate government and not merely a revolutionary group. The Nazi government forced Germany into a totalitarian state (a government that controls all aspects of public and private life) that engaged most of the world's countries in war, and it is significant to examine the political structure of Germany.

After the First World War, Germany struggled through a series of revolutions and finally, in 1918, formed the Weimar Republic. The Weimar Republic was Germany's attempt to establish a democratic government. The Weimar Constitution was written as the law of the land and it explained the nature of the new government. One of its key parts was the creation of a parliament. This parliament was called the *Reichstag* and the people of Germany voted for their representatives in the parliament. In 1925, President Paul Hindenburg was elected. He did not want to be president, but he supported the Constitution and appointed a group of advisors to help him. Unfortunately, these advisors did not all favor the Constitution as their president did.

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor of Germany. President Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor after Hitler had refused the position of Vice-Chancellor. From this point on, a distinct program which the Nazi's used to obtain totalitarian power can be seen. These efforts are called the *Gleichschaltung*, which is a term the Nazi's used to mean "coordination." Using this program, the Nazi political party took steps which would increase their power in Germany.

A few months after Hitler was named Chancellor, the building in which the Reichstag met was burned to the ground. There was some evidence that the arsonists were communists and had deliberately attacked the German government. Therefore, the next day, February 28, 1933, Hitler asked the President to sign a decree called the Reichstag Fire Decree. This Decree allowed the suspension of many civil rights of the German people including freedom of the press and freedom to assemble. It also allowed for confiscations, searches, and the interruption of the postal service. The President believed that the attack on the parliament by communists warranted this decree to protect the people of Germany from dangerous communist attacks. After this Decree was signed, the Communist Party's offices were raided and its members were arrested.

In March of 1933, the Enabling Act was passed by the parliament and signed by Hindenburg. Since the Reichstag's building had burned, the parliament met in the Kroll Opera House in Berlin.

Name _____

Date _____

World War II: Germany (Cont'd)

This Act gave Chancellor Hitler and his advisors the right to make laws, which bypassed participation by the Reichstag. Due to this Act's reasoning, neither the president nor the parliament was needed to make or ratify new legislation. The Act also gave the control of the budget and the right to make treaties with other countries to the Chancellor and his advisors. The Fire Decree and the Enabling Act centralized powers around the Nazi party and increased their powers so that legally there was no opposition.

On July 14, a law was made that said that the Nazi political party was the only political party allowed in Germany. Anyone who tried to create or maintain another party was punishable under the law. This law solidified the single-party totalitarian rule of the Nazi's. The enactment of this law showed that the Weimar Constitution was no longer being followed and instead the Nazi regime had taken over the government almost completely. Without any opposition, or any way to form opposition, the government was changed from a democracy to a totalitarian state. By only allowing one political party, the Nazi's were able to install their beliefs and agendas throughout the country. Hitler and his supporters had managed to take over the German government.

President Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934, and a law was made that combined the offices of president and chancellor. In this way, Hitler became known as Fuehrer and Reich Chancellor. Hitler also made all of the officers and servicemen of the military swear an oath of allegiance to him personally. Therefore, Hitler became the dictator of a German totalitarian state.

This brief history of the start of Germany under Nazi rule shows how the government and its laws were manipulated by Hitler and the Nazi party in order to cancel the democracy of the Weimar Republic and institute a one-party rule led by a dictator.

Name _____

Date _____

World War II: Germany Questions

Multiple Choice:

1. This man was elected to be the president of Germany in 1925:
 - a. Hitler
 - b. Horace
 - c. Hindenburg
 - d. Stalin
2. The parliament in Germany was called:
 - a. Reichstag
 - b. Chancellor
 - c. Nazi
 - d. Hitler
3. This term means "coordination:"
 - a. Reichstag
 - b. Gleichschaltung
 - c. Heilchung
 - d. Communist

True or False:

- ___ 4. Hitler died on August 2, 1934, and a law was made that combined the offices of president and chancellor.
- ___ 5. On February 28, 1933, Hitler asked the President to sign a decree called the Reichstag Fire Decree.
- ___ 6. During the war, many actions (such as the Holocaust) of Nazi Germany were immoral and illegal.
- ___ 7. Germany's nationalist aggression under the Nazi government supported Soviet Communism.

Fill Ins:

8. The _____ Republic was Germany's attempt to establish a democratic government.
9. Hitler became the dictator of a German _____ state.
10. The _____ Act gave Chancellor Hitler and his advisors the right to make laws.

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Date _____

World War II: Germany Answers

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8. The Weimar Republic was Germany's attempt to establish a democratic government.
9. Hitler became the dictator of a German totalitarian state.
10. The Enabling Act gave Chancellor Hitler and his advisors the right to make laws.