

NCSS Annual Conference, 2019: Informed Agency Advocacy Activism

## **It Can't Happen Here: Lessons from Hitler's Rise to Power**

November 23, 2019 2:00-2:55 PM

Austin Convention Center, Fourth Floor: Room 18 A

Elizabeth Lupfer [elupfer@glenbrook225.org](mailto:elupfer@glenbrook225.org) and Carol Pixton [cpixton@aol.com](mailto:cpixton@aol.com)

### Abstract:

How did Hitler come to power? Could it happen here? How teaching the Nazi rise to power can inspire students to actively value democratic values and norms.

### Overview:

The purpose of this presentation is to examine how Hitler gained control of the Weimar Republic in 1933 and turned it into a fascist dictatorship, and how to use this history to engage students about the need to safeguard democratic values. Using primary, secondary, and visual sources, this presentation offers a definition of fascism and analyzes the means Hitler used to secure power and destroy the Weimar Republic. Participants will be invited to explore the larger significance of these events for the future of democracy in the United States and elsewhere.

Fascism is a warning from history. As Hitler's biographer, Ian Kershaw put it, "Never since the war -- with new forms of fascism and racism more menacing than thought imaginable only a few short years ago -- has it been more important to understand the disaster which Nazism wrought on Germany and on Europe." Our students' understanding of the rise of fascism in the twentieth century can help them value the signal importance of the role of citizen agency, advocacy, and activism to defend democratic values today.

### Objectives:

- To look at examples of American writers and historians who have asked, "Could it happen here?"
- To provide a clear definition of fascism in historical context.
- To identify factors that contributed to the rise of fascism in Germany, such as mass rallies, party propaganda, use of emergency powers and violent suppression of opposition newspapers.
- To assess the economic problems that made the Weimar Republic so vulnerable.
- To identify the role of anti-Semitism in Hitler's ideology.
- To examine the way the term 'fascism' is used today and to assess when it is appropriately applied.
- To compare and contrast the historical context of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) with that of the United States in 2019.

- To consider ways in which active citizens can resist attacks on democratic values on the national scene in their own communities.
- To provide teachers with resources for teaching the history of fascism in Germany at the high school level, including chronologies, primary documents, literary works, and articles.
- To explore ways for encouraging students to consider their role as active and engaged citizens in support of democratic values.
- To offer participants opportunities to read (or view) and react to primary sources (texts and images) and to offer suggestions for ways to use this material in any European or World History, US History, International Relations, or Global Studies course.

#### Rationale and Content:

Understanding fascism in a historical context is more important than ever for students in 2019. In a world where democracy is threatened by rising authoritarianism, appreciating and protecting democracy is crucial. The term 'fascist' is often used loosely. Students need to understand the term in its historical context and to know by what process and with what actions the Weimar parliamentary regime was coopted and destroyed by the Nazi Party. The use of some of the language of right-wing fascism in our current political climate may not mean a fascist regime is imminent, but students can clearly comprehend how a constellation of extreme nationalism, racism, sexism and militarism combined to bring down representative government in Germany with disastrous results for the whole world.

Given this history, students should comprehend why we need to cherish our democratic institutions, however flawed, and to understand how crucial it is to protect them. Above all, students need to take action when they see democratic values wither.

"Every age has its own fascism," Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi wrote in a 1974, "and we see the warning signs wherever the concentration of power denies citizens the possibility and the means of expressing and acting on their own free will. There are many ways of reaching this point, and not just through the terror of police intimidation, but by denying and distorting information, by undermining systems of justice, by paralyzing the education system, and by spreading...nostalgia for a world where order reigned, and where the security of a privileged few depended on the forced labor and the forced silence of the many."

Levi's warning should loom large in our thinking today. A republic like the United States (popularly thought of as a democracy) needs strong institutional support, such as the justice system, a free press, and an educated citizenry dedicated to protecting the rights of all. Our students need to know how to stand up for their rights, to protest injustice, and to value democracy.

#### Political Background of Germany:

The German empire was not unified until 1871, under the leadership of Prussia. Bismarck's

carefully planned sequence of wars with Denmark, Austria, and France meant that military victories were part of the birth of the Second Reich. The process of unification had to overcome strong regional identities in order to forge a new polity.

Parliamentary government appeared to be established within the German Empire, where universal manhood suffrage (for men over 25 years of age) was established from 1871. However, the powers of the German Parliament, the Reichstag, were limited. The Emperor controlled the military, and the Reichstag could not initiate legislation. In the most important state in the empire, Prussia, Bismarck made sure that the votes of the upper class counted more than those of the lower class.

With less than fifty years of representative parliamentary rule within a conservative empire, Germany was ill-prepared to face the terrible stresses and economic destruction of World War I. The Versailles Treaty (whose centenary is marked this year), humiliated Germany by assigning it full responsibility for the war and costly reparations payments. Germany was overrun with demobilized veterans whose discontent and unemployment led them to form para-military groups acting on behalf of right-wing parties that stoked their resentment.

The Rise of Hitler:

As a German soldier in World War I, Hitler found war to be his *raison d'être*. He emerged from the war enraged at Germany's loss (like so many other veterans) and believing the false "stab in the back theory." This theory held that the Germany military was actually winning the war in 1918 but was defeated by "Jews" and "Socialists" on the home front. This was a bald-faced lie but was widely believed by many Germans. The truth is that on September 29, 1918 General Ludendorff (a member of the High Command) sued for peace on the basis of President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points.

Hitler joined a small right-wing party with other veterans, originally the Germany Workers Party, but "National Socialist" (Nazi) was added to create the NSDAP. Hitler's oratory led him to stand out among other Nazis. In 1923 (during the inflation crisis) Hitler attempted to seize power in a coup d'état in Munich (the Beer Hall Putsch.) His bid failed spectacularly, but the judicial system treated his treason with astonishing mildness: he spent a mere three years in Landsberg Prison, receiving visitors and writing his screed, *Mein Kampf*. Emerging from prison, Hitler vowed to come to power through the means of the ballot box, and he re-organized the Nazi Party to focus on appeals to the electorate and collecting funds. In spite of Hitler's efforts, the electoral successes of the party were quite limited until the Great Depression hit in 1929.

Then, in a series of electoral victories, the Nazi Party made a leap into national prominence, with Hitler's rallies and speeches driving their success. Their message changed depending on the audience, rural or urban, but they focused on fears, insecurities, anti-communism, and anti-Semitism. Just when the electoral success of the Nazis was receding, a crisis in the government led to Hitler being appointed Chancellor, even though the sitting President, the elderly

Hindenburg, despised him. Conservatives mistakenly believed that they could use Hitler but the opposite happened.

Fascist ideology:

Fascism was an *ideology of opposition*: it was defined primarily by what it was against, rather than what it was for. Fascist rhetoric blended a toxic combination of anti-feminism, anti-modernism, aggressive militarism, extreme nationalism, and, above all, anti-Semitism.

Anti-feminism was central to the Nazi ideology: women were to be in the home bearing and rearing children, and women's work outside the home was frowned upon. In Germany, Nazis described women's role as *Kuche, Kinder, and Kirke* (kitchen, children, church).

Nostalgia for a mythical past was central part of twentieth-century fascism. Hitler revived stories of the ancient Teutons, including fake archeological 'discoveries' that proved a mythical "Aryan" past in Germany. Born in Austria, Hitler nevertheless dedicated himself to restoring German greatness, and extolling the racially exclusive German *volk*.

Expansion by military conquest formed a core of fascist ideology. Germany was an 'unsatiated' state, filled with resentment at the international situation, and desirous of recapturing a leading role in Europe. Hitler focused on ripping up the provisions of the Versailles Peace Treaty and expanding Germany territory through demands, threats, and intimidation. The moribund League of Nations responded weakly and ineffectually to Hitler's challenges, allowing the actions to go unchecked which encouraged further outrages.

Anti-Semitism was at the heart of Hitler's plans. During his impoverished residence in Vienna in the early part of the century, Hitler had fully imbibed the poisonous and pervasive anti-Semitism. It was a key feature of his thinking and was clearly laid out in *Mein Kampf*. Although less than 1% of the German population in the 1920s was Jewish, Hitler stoked the fires of "the longest hatred" to direct people toward a common 'enemy.' Once in power, the full authority of the state was used to identify, separate, and ultimately remove citizenship from German Jews. The "Final Solution" emerged during wartime, and the results of that are well-known: some 6 million European Jews, along with Gypsies, homosexuals, and political opponents like Socialists and Communists, perished in the death camps.

Lessons from History

Democracies are underpinned by civic values, such as openness, transparency, public accountability, acceptance of diversity, and tolerance of differing opinions. Students can readily see how Hitler and those who helped him into power set the stage for a rapid shift from a democratic republic to an authoritarian dictatorship. This is a warning to call attention to how important those democratic values are and why students need to be active participants in civic life.

Today's political landscape offers many lessons on political activism and ways to support democratic norms. Student activists in the United States are bringing attention to the need for curbs on gun ownership, and all over the world young people are sounding the alarm on climate change. The 2018 election brought younger, charismatic Congressional representatives to Washington and made every citizen more knowledgeable about gerrymandering, voting rights, and democratic norms. We should not miss this opportunity to make our students more passionate about the democratic values shared by a large majority of Americans.

Skills:

- Analyzing the causes of the rise of fascism in Germany and showing how the weaknesses of democracies in the 1920s and 1930s were exploited.
- Exploring the impact of the rise of Hitler both in Europe and internationally.
- Analyzing primary source documents related to Germany during the Weimar Republic help students refine their ability to clearly assess point of view, purpose and intended audience for each document.
- Exploring the ways in which Hitler undermined the Weimar Constitution helps students better understand the threat of authoritarianism and the need to safeguard constitutional norms.
- Analyzing how anti-Semitism was whipped up and how it appealed to the darkest fears of Germans can help students explore how racism against a minority group helped destroy a democratic regime.
- Comparing and contrasting the weaknesses of democracies in Europe in 1919 with weaknesses of the US democracy in 2019.

Compelling questions:

- What factors were most instrumental in abetting the rise of fascist regimes and how could they have been averted?
- What methods do fascist parties use to appeal to voters and supporters? How can this appeal be resisted?
- To what extent does the political polarization in the United States today resemble that of Germany in the 1920s? Could it happen here?
- How can democracies be open and fair, and also protect democratic norms? Can public support for civil rights and the rule of law stave off authoritarian impulses?

Presentation strategies:

The presentation will consist of a PowerPoint assessing the historical context of the rise to

power of the Nazi party, as well as the ways Hitler exploited resentment of the Versailles treaty and economic depression within Germany to raise the party's electoral profile. Using mass rallies and demagoguery the Nazi Party increased its political power. During the crisis of the Great Depression, Hitler was "helped into power" by conservatives. He was appointed Chancellor in 1933 by Hindenburg, thereby coming to power legally. Once in power, Hitler took advantage of emergency powers to outlaw rival political parties, censor newspapers, put his Party in charge of the police, and force the Enabling Act through the parliament (Reichstag) turning the republic into a dictatorship.

During the presentation, participants will be asked to reflect on the vulnerabilities of American democracy today in comparison the Weimar Republic in 1933.

The presentation will end by identifying critical democratic values and norms in the United States and suggesting ways teachers can encourage students to act to protect them. Programs and organizations that encourage engagement with democratic values will be identified. Allowing students to see that their understanding of history can motivate their actions as citizens is a wonderful way to keep up their enthusiasm for the subject.

Audience participation:

In addition to contributing to the discussion of democratic values, several primary source documents will be read out loud by participants. They will also be asked to comment on political cartoons and historical photographs. The presentation will end with participants sharing ideas about using this content material in European, World and United States History courses, or in International Relations, Global Studies or Civics classes.

Handouts:

Each participant will get a packet including a select bibliography of books and articles pertinent to the presentation, a list of recommended websites, and short readings for use in the high school classroom. There will also be a link to a Google Drive folder (for participants who supply their email) with more extensive materials appropriate for use in a variety of different types of social studies courses.