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Social Activism & the NSDAP: A Force of Radical Change in Germany

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The National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) formed in the 1920s, focusing on the rights and prosperity of Aryan-Germans and the German State. Furthermore, the NSDAP became socially active after the First World War, during the rule of the Weimar Republic. This paper examines the social activism of the NSDAP, showing how they advocated for the rights of Aryan Germans and the improvement of the state, focusing on their activities in 1920-1926, and on the presidential elections in the 1930s. Additionally, this paper details the methods the Nazis used to gain the popularity of the German people. Written eyewitness accounts of the NSDAP and documents made by and about the NSDAP from 1919-1933 provides an understanding of why the Germans in the 1920s were slowly persuaded to support the NSDAP over time. This research shows how a political party can use social activism as a force of change but not necessarily as a force for good. The German people were persuaded to join a radical party due to economic and national problems with their state.

The German people were more susceptible to the Nazis party because they were being oppressed by foreign governments like France and Britain. To explain further, the Treaty of Versailles ended World War One, and Article 231 within the treaty forced Germany to take full responsibility for starting the war. The Treaty of Versailles restricted their military, removed their colonies, and economically crippled Germany for a period of time. Moreover, the treaty stated that Germany also had to make reparation payments to the Allies, in particular France and Great Britain for damages caused by the war.¹ These reparations resulted in a devaluation of the German currency because the Weimar government printed out too much currency to make these reparation payments. Consequently, when the Weimar Republic kept printing its currency, it rendered it practically worthless and resulted in an economic depression in Germany.

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919>. s.v. "Treaty of Versailles."

The Nazi party claimed that if they were to become the leading party in government then they would remove the burdens placed upon Germany because of the Treaty of Versailles. This promise encouraged their supporters to turn a blind eye to the antisemitic policies in their agenda and not be critical of the Nazi party. Instead this radical change seemed necessary to bring Germany out of poverty. As a result of voting for the Nazi party, Adolf Hitler over time removed the restrictions placed on the German military by combating the Treaty of Versailles and broke Germany out of an economic depression by pushing for infrastructure programs to create jobs.

This paper adopts a political history approach, with elements of cultural history. This approach shows the political agenda of the NSDAP, and the cultural shift in Germany to favor such a party that established itself from the beginning as anti-Semitic. This paper examines the growth of the party over time and how it reflects this political shift within Germany favoring such a party over the previous ones. Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP set the stage of Fascism in Germany, over time becoming the Nazi Party that society knows today. They used social activist tactics and revolution to gain public support, eventually seizing power of the government in 1933.

In February 1920, the NSDAP held a public meeting to share the agenda of their party, showing their National Socialist policies but also revealing their anti-Semitic beliefs. This document, authored by Adolf Hitler, Anton Drexler and Gottfried Feder, was written in early 1920 and later presented at a public meeting at Hofbräuhaus, a beer cellar in Munich, on February 24, 1920.² The 24 points of this program revealed the political agenda of the party,

² “The Programme of the German Workers Party,” in *Nazism, 1919-1945: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (1st American ed. New York: Schocken Books: Distributed by Pantheon Books, 1990), 14.

prioritizing themes of anti-Semitism and the pro Aryan-German focus of the party. The first four points include:

1. We demand the union of all Germans in a Greater Germany on the basis of the right of national self-determination.
2. We demand equal rights for the German people in its dealings with other nations, and the revocation of the peace treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain.
3. We demand land and territory (colonies) to feed our people and settle our surplus population.
4. Only members of the nation may be citizens of the state. Only those of German blood ... may be members of the nation ... Accordingly, no Jew may be a member of the nation.³

The program of the NSDAP focused on the rights of the Germans, especially Aryan-Germans, on the removal of restrictions placed upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, on the cultivation of the Germany by expanding their border for the growing German population, and on the removal on non-Germans. When examining their policies, they stated when they demanded the removal of recent non-German from the state: “All non-German immigration must be prevented. We demand that all non-Germans who entered Germany after 2 August 1914 shall be required to leave the Reich forthwith.”⁴ This conveys the strong pro-Aryan German view that the Nazi party had even in the 1920s; this view was the core of their party agenda and way of thinking, ensuring the cultivation of Germany and its rightful citizens, in their eyes.

Furthermore, to appeal to their fellow Germans who did not share their pure-blooded German beliefs, the NSDAP had these socialist policies that were less anti-Semitic but no less nativist: “We demand that the state shall make its primary duty to provide a livelihood for its citizens ... if it's proven impossible to feed the entire population ... non-citizens must be deported from the Reich.”⁵ This showed that the Nazi Party would allow current non-citizens

³ “The Programme of the German Workers Party,” 14-15.

⁴ “The Programme of the German Workers Party,” 15.

⁵ “The Programme of the German Workers Party,” 15.

(non-pure blooded Germans) to stay, but if the state was not able to provide for Germany's citizens, then non-pure blooded Germans would be removed from the state in order to keep the population fed. The Nazi Party also focused on the improvement of the German workers, to have them gain a healthy standing in Germany and not be in poverty.⁶ These tactics seem to have largely succeeded because by 1923, the membership of the NSDAP had grown to 55,000 (prior to the Beer Hall Putsch).

To achieve a strong national socialist government, the party sought to have a strong central government that would oversee everything in parliament in order to facilitate these programs.⁷ The political leaders of the NSDAP, Adolf Hitler and Gottfried Feder, worked tirelessly to ensure the program came into fruition and utilized any method necessary. The twenty-fifth point in their program revealed this dedication: "Leaders of the party promise to work ruthlessly—if needed to sacrifice their very lives to translate this program into action."⁸ This sacrifice included political leaders promoting the removal of non-pure blooded Germans, especially Jewish people, and restricting the rights of non-Germans within Germany. Consequently, this led those dedicated political leaders to make those deemed non-Germans second-class citizen within Germany. They hoped that this reduced status would entice them to leave Germany like the party wanted them to do, showing the preliminary stage of Nazism in Germany prior to 1933.

In 1923, dedicated members of the NSDAP attempted an armed revolution which is called the Beer Hall Putsch (B.H.P.) and an official report made for the subsequent committee of inquiry showed an account of this attempt at armed revolution. This report showed the growing

⁶ "The Programme of the German Workers Party," 15.

⁷ "The Programme of the German Workers Party," 16.

⁸ "The Programme of the German Workers Party," 16.

popularity of the NSDAP. Supporters who attended the B.H.P. on November 8-9, 1923 demonstrated either as members of the party or personal police called Brown shirts:

The column of National Socialists about 2,000 strong, nearly all armed moved on through the Zweibuckenstrasse across the Marienplatz ... The Police stationed in the Residenz tried to cordon off it as well ... Numerous citizens hurried on ahead the actual column in Residenzstrasse and pushed the police barricade Suddenly, a National Socialist fired a pistol at an officer ... the comrades of the officer opened fire.⁹

This report showed the gathering of members of the Nazi party revolt against the Weimar Republic, in particular highlighting their use of force in their protest and their attempts to take over the government. This Putsch ended in failure, and key members of the NSDAP were arrested; those members were Hitler, Ludendorff, and Pohner, who were promptly sent to jail.¹⁰ The Weimar government promptly banned the NSDAP in 1923 because of their attempt to overthrow the government.¹¹

However, the failure of the Putsch, the imprisonment of Adolf Hitler, and the subsequent trial against the Putsch leaders for treason turned the NSDAP's failure into successful propaganda for their political movement.¹² This shift in popularity was due to Hitler's rhetoric during the trial in Munich Germany on February 26, 1924. Hitler portrayed himself and his fellow leaders as acting for the sake of the country.¹³ An example of his rhetoric that gained sympathy from the court is preserved in the transcript written for their trial: "You may pronounce us guilty a thousand times, but the Goddess who presides over the Eternal Court of History will with a smile tear in pieces the charge of the Public Prosecutor and the verdict of this

⁹ "Official report made for the subsequent inquiry," in *Nazism, 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader, The Rise to Power 1919-1934*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, (*New ed. Exeter Studies in History, Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1998*), 33.

¹⁰ Noakes, *Nazism, 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, 33-34.

¹¹ "Official report made for the subsequent inquiry," 33.

¹² "Official report made for the subsequent inquiry," 33.

¹³ Noakes, *Nazism, 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, 33-34.

court. For she acquits us.”¹⁴ The failure of the Putsch and the trial for treason turned Hitler into a hero to anti-Semitic Germans throughout Germany who had never heard of him and the NSDAP prior to this event.¹⁵

Because of the failure of the Putsch, Adolf Hitler changed the approach to NSDAP’s goal of revitalizing the State of Germany from above instead of below. He believed that if there were to be any change to the German government body and system, it had to be made from the inside. This meant that Hitler no longer deemed it fruitful to implement the policies of the NSDAP by overthrowing the government; the only effective way to do so was to be inside the government. Moreover, their method was to use propaganda and social activism to gain the backing of the people, in order to have NSDAP members appointed as government officials and to campaign for Hitler for the next presidential election.

Propaganda was the starting point for the NSDAP’s bid for political power in Germany. The effectiveness of their propaganda is revealed in a document by the Prussian Minister of the Interior on May 1930:

Hardly a day passes on which there are not several meetings even in narrowly restricted areas. Carefully organized propaganda ... ensure that the speaker and his subject of his talk are adapted to the local and economic circumstances ... [in] halls which are almost invariably overcrowded with enthusiastic listeners.¹⁶

Their propaganda meeting were not only frequent but also had “an audience of between 1000 and 5000 people”—it introduced their policies, including reforming the government to have a healthy middle class and the cultivation of the pure-blooded Germans.¹⁷ Their meetings were

¹⁴ “Transcript of Hitler's plea in his trial for High Treason on February 26, 1924,” in *Nazism, 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 35.

¹⁵ “Official report made for the subsequent inquiry,” 33-35.

¹⁶ “The Prussian Ministry of the Interior on Nazi propaganda activity, May 1930,” in *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945*. (New York: Viking Press, 1975), eds. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, 101-102.

¹⁷ The Prussian Ministry of the Interior on Nazi propaganda activity, May 1930,” *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945*, 102.

also very popular: “Frequently a second or several parallel meetings have to be held because the hall cannot hold the numbers who attend.”¹⁸ As a result of these successful meetings the Nazi party became the second largest party in the Reichstag, with 6.5 million votes in the election of 1930.¹⁹ As a result of the Nazi party's success in the Reichstag in 1930, Adolf Hitler ran for president in the presidential elections of 1932.

Hitler, when running for the presidency, utilized propaganda to spread his party's message across Germany. Excerpts from the Reich Propaganda Department directives show examples of their propaganda during the presidential elections of March-April 1932: “Those who want everything to stay the same vote for Hindenburg. Those who want everything changed vote for Hitler ... the great propaganda journey of the Fuhrer through Germany will start, through with about a million people are to be reached directly through our Fuhrer's speeches.”²⁰ The Fuhrer that the quote is referencing is Adolf Hitler; he had become the main advocate for the NSDAP and most popular figure among the public for the Nazi party. Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP over time gained public favor, which led to the rise of Hitler to power when he was appointed chancellor in January 1933 and created Nazi Germany, through the efforts of social activism.²¹

This research sheds a new light on how a party—despite what they call themselves—can use social activism for radical and unjust means. For example, the NSDAP called themselves a National Socialist party that advocated for the rights of German workers, but they also believed

¹⁸ “The Prussian Ministry of the Interior on Nazi propaganda activity, May 1930,” *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945*, 102.

¹⁹ “The Prussian Ministry of the Interior on Nazi propaganda activity, May 1930,” *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945*, 102.

²⁰ Noakes, “Nazi instructions for the Presidential election of 1932”, in *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945*, 103-104.

²¹ “The appointment of Hitler as Chancellor, 30 January 1933”, in *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945*, 146-151.

in immoral and radically discriminating policies. These policies restricted the rights of citizenship for any who were labeled as not pure-blooded Germans. These individuals, including Jews who were labeled as non-citizens of the state in the fourth policy of the NSDAP program, were discarded as less than human. Likewise, the National Socialist German Workers Party advocated for the rights of workers and Germans but used a prejudiced definition of what a German was. They believed that to be German, an individual would have to be a pure-blooded Aryan-German and not of Jewish descent; further, if individuals were labeled as non-Germans, they would either be sent out of the country or be treated as second-class citizens. Nevertheless, the NSDAP received public support and elected one of its prominent party members as Germany's Chancellor, Adolf Hitler. Hitler provided a National Socialist program for Germany on paper but, in practice, created a fascist oppressive government that focused solely on the growth of Germany.

In conclusion, the social activism of the NSDAP brought the rise of Nazism throughout Germany by electing Adolf Hitler as chancellor. The Nazi party through its militarism and social programs helped bring an end of the economic depression within Germany, from the burden placed upon the Germans by the Treaty of Versailles. Its economic growth from militarism also led to conquest of neighboring European countries, which led to the Second World War. The cost of this economic growth was the creation of an oppressive system of government that was not only Nationalist-Socialist but also Anti-Semitic. The Nazis only offered authentic social and economic progress to those it deemed to be pure-blooded Germans.

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