
OTHER NATIONS

*How Hitler
Rose to Power*

"How Guilty Were the Germans?" by Istvan Deak, in *The New York Review of Books* (May 31, 1984), P.O. Box 940, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

The dry facts of Adolf Hitler's life (1889–1945) document his rise to power, but explaining how an entire nation could embrace insanity is another matter. According to Deak, a Columbia historian, new scholarly studies are beginning to provide some answers.

The conventional view is that Germany's tradesmen, shopkeepers, and farmers—all hit hard by Germany's economic troubles after World War I—constituted the core of Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) Party when it first scored big in the 1932 elections. But close scrutiny of party rosters and German voting records reveals that the Nazis enjoyed a much broader appeal. Among their supporters were university students, civil servants, and factory workers. Women (drawn by the ideals of *Kinder, Küche und Kirche*, or Children, Kitchen, and Church) and the elderly cast a surprisingly large share of Hitler's ballots. What the new studies do confirm is that the rural Protestants of northern Germany were far more favorably disposed toward Hitler, an Austrian, than were their Bavarian-Catholic countrymen.

A group of reactionary politicians and businessmen mistakenly judged that they could control the Nazis. In January 1933, they managed to get Hitler named chancellor, even though the Nazis remained a minority party.

Much of Hitler's charisma can be attributed to his stout nationalism and to his call for a return to traditional values. His violent anti-Semitism was not nearly as popular. Deak writes that most Germans who voted for Hitler in 1932 (when the Nazis won 7.3 percent of the popular vote) did so "less because of the Party's extreme anti-Semitism than because of the Depression, fear of communism, the desire to revenge the Versailles Treaty, and sundry other reasons." Indeed, in a 1938 opinion survey of party members, more than half voiced "extreme indignation" at Hitler's harsh treatment of the Jews.

Given Germany's relatively small Jewish population—500,000 in 1933—and the fact that most of the death camps were isolated or located outside Germany, it is conceivable that few Germans were fully aware of the extent of the Final Solution.

That is not to say that they had no inkling, argues Deak. Not only did six million Jews perish at the hands of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), Hitler's elite military force, but "the Nazis starved to death or otherwise murdered three million non-Jewish Poles and 3,300,000 Russian prisoners of war." Word of such monumental brutality must have filtered back to ordinary Germans. Yet, few even inquired after their missing German-Jewish neighbors. In the end, Deak writes, "what condemns the German population . . . is not that they volunteered to kill [Jews], because they generally did not, but that they were indifferent."