

Choices for the 21st Century: Weimar Germany and the Rise of Hitler

The Choices for the 21st Century Project was established to help teachers engage students in an examination of foreign policy issues, to improve student citizenship skills, to encourage discussion on public policy, and to develop critical assessment of government action. *Crisis, Conscience, and Choices: Weimar Germany and the Rise of Hitler* (3rd edition, 2000) encourages students to examine the factors behind the demise of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism under the totalitarian rule of Adolf Hitler. The student text contains readings, charts, and primary source material including cartoons, songs, poems, pamphlets and stories. They are designed to challenge students to consider multiple perspectives and to think critically about the era. Through role-playing and debate, students learn to identify policy options and express opinions based on evidence. The teachers' resource guide provides lesson plans based on the documentary material.

Written documents, examples of Weimar art and literature, and political posters engross students in German culture between the World Wars. Students discover a German society and people forced to respond to their nation's political and economic crisis. Defeat in World War I, the casualties and economic dislocation caused by the war, the punitive Treaty of Versailles, and the financial burden of reparation payments sent the German economy into a sharply downward spiral and lowered public morale to the point where the democratic Weimar Republic was seriously challenged by opposition and revolutionary parties from the left and right. This package provides students with a crucial context for understanding the collapse of parliamentary government in Germany and the assumption of power by Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party. Hitler and the Nazis preached a brand of extreme nationalism that appealed to a people threatened by economic deprivation and social chaos. This intense nationalism incorporated racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric and eventually led to both World War II and the Holocaust.

The Choices Approach draws on research showing that "students learn best when history is recreated with all of its uncertainties and tensions." Many teachers spend countless hours searching for accessible and interesting documents that present diverse views and take into account different student learning styles. These documents are provided here, making this an invaluable resource guide for the social studies classroom. - Jay Kreutzberger

Choices Publications: Order "Crisis, Conscience, and Choices: Weimar Germany and the Rise of Hitler" or other packages at the Choices for the 21st Century Education Program web site (www.choices.edu) or Choices Department, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Box 1948, Providence, RI 02912. Teacher sets (student text and teachers' resource guide) are \$15 each. Student texts (15 or more student texts) are \$7 per copy. For \$12, teacher sets can be downloaded from their website.

- Caught between Two Worlds: Mexico at the Crossroads (5th edition, 2002)
- Challenges to the New Republic: Prelude to the War of 1812 (1st edition, 2000)
- Charting Russia's Future in the Post-Soviet Era (7th edition, 2000)
- China on the World Stage: Weighing the U.S. Response (5th Edition, 2000)
- Coming to Terms with Power: U.S. Choices after World War II (3rd edition, 1998)
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1. Nazi Ideology and Popular Culture

(Based on material from “Crisis, Conscience, and Choices: Weimar Germany and the Rise of Hitler,” 21st Century Education Project)

A. Horst Wessel Song: Many of Weimar Germany’s political parties adopted songs as their unofficial anthems. The *Horst Wessel Song* became the Nazi anthem.

Hold high the Banner! Close the hard ranks serried!
S.A. marches on with sturdy stride.
Comrades, by Red Front and Reaction killed, are buried
But march with us in image at our side.

The Swastika gives hope to our entrenched millions,
The day for freedom and for bread’s at hand.

The trumpet blows its shrill and final blast!
Prepared for war and battle here we stand.

Gangway! Gangway now for the Brown Battalions!
For the Storm Trooper clear roads o’er the land!

Soon Hitler’s banners will wave unchecked at last,
The end of German slav’ry in our land!

Questions

1. Who were the “Brown Battalions”?
2. According to this song, what does the “Swastika” represent?
3. The Red Front is a communist youth group. What does the song say about these youth?
4. What is the message of the “Horst Wessel Song”?
5. In your opinion, why were songs like the “Horst Wessel Song” used to teach Nazi ideals?

B. The Hitler Youth Quex (1931): This book by Karl Schenzinger was written to teach Nazi political and social values to young readers. It tells the story of Heini, who is the 15-year-old son of an alcoholic, unemployed communist father. Heini’s mother suffers terrible abuse at the hands of her husband, who yells that he is a “class-conscious proletariat” while he beats her. During the book, she commits suicide. Despite the opposition of his father, Heini makes friends with members of the local Hitler youth group. He admires the Nazis because of their concept of German strength and honor, and is attracted to their military discipline. Two excerpts from the book follow. In the first excerpt, Heini describes seeing a group of Hitler Youth. In the second excerpt, Fritz, a Nazi youth leader, explains to Heini the importance of preserving the purity of the German people.

1. “He really liked the S.A. (*Strumabteilung* or Storm Detachment). They looked orderly, clean, robust, and their leather shone. They reminded him of order, good breeding, and discipline - just like it was in the old stories. . . Those lads, too, had worn leather gaiters. They marched past him one day; each one like the other, shining, lively and fresh, a flag up in front. For an hour he marched alongside them, with only one wish in his heard - to be allowed to march along in these rows, with these chaps, who were young like him, who sang songs. He was almost brought to tears with pride and happiness. These are Nazis!”

2. “I want to train, inside and out, so that I understand courage. I want to smell my blood and the blood of others who have the same blood as me. The word ‘Volk’ (people) has become ridiculous here in Germany. Man, just think! We should be ashamed whenever we see a herd of deer or an

elephant herd. They don't mix with one another. There, too, each animal has his place according to what he is and what he does for the herd. Isn't it so? The zoo is the best university that I know of."

Questions

1. Why does Heini admire the *Strumabteilung*?
2. Why does Fritz say that "the word 'Volk' has become ridiculous"?
3. What does Fritz mean when he says "the zoo is the best university that I know of"?
4. In your opinion, why is Heini's father portrayed as a brute who drives his mother to suicide?
5. In your opinion, why were stories like *The Hitler Youth Quex* used to teach Nazi ideas?

2. Legal And Ideological Underpinnings Of The Nazi Regime

(Based on material from "Crisis, Conscience, and Choices: Weimar Germany and the Rise of Hitler," 21st Century Education Project)

Instructions: Between February, 1933 and a series of speeches and laws established the legal and ideological underpinnings for the Nazi regime in Germany. Working in teams, examine the statements below. Identify the main idea in each passage. Select three of the speeches or laws that you believe were most important in establishing Nazi control over Germany. Explain why your team selected these passages.

Homework: Write an editorial for an American newspaper explaining why Americans should be concerned with events in Germany.

- **Hermann Goering, Orders to Prussian Police, February 17, 1933.** "I expect all police authorities to maintain the best relations with these organizations [S.A. and Stahlhelm, the ultra-nationalist veterans organization] that comprise the most important constructive forces of the state. . . The activities of subversive organizations are on the contrary to be combined with the most drastic methods. Communist terrorist acts are to be countered with all severity, and weapons must be used ruthlessly if necessary. . . Every official must constantly bear in mind that failure to act is more serious than errors committed in acting."
- **Enabling Law, March 24, 1933.** This critical legislation passed with a two-thirds majority of the Reichstag. With the Center Party also voting to grant dictatorial powers to Hitler's government. "National laws can be enacted by the National Cabinet [Hitler and his ministers] as well as in accordance with the procedure established in the Constitution. . . The national laws enacted by the National Cabinet may deviate from the Constitution so far as they do not affect the position of the Reichstag and National Council. The powers of the President remain undisturbed."
- **Law for the restoration of the Civil Service, April 7, 1933.** "Officials of non-Aryan descent [primarily Jews] are to be retired. Those who have honorary status are also to be dismissed. . . Those officials who have indicated by their previous political activity that they may not exert themselves for the national state without reservation may be dismissed."
- **Speech by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, at Mass Book Burning, May 10, 1933.** Thousands of students in coordinated demonstrations in over thirty university towns burned books by Albert Einstein, H.G. Wells, Jack London, Erich Maria Remarque, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, Upton Sinclair, Karl Marx, and other writers "un-German." "You have done well in the middle of the night to throw into the flames these unspiritual relics of the past. It is a strong, great, and symbolic performance that should document for all the world that here, tonight, the spiritual foundations of the November

[Weimar] Republic sink to the ground. But out of these ruins there will arise the phoenix of a new spirit, a spirit that we bear, that we demand, a spirit on which we have stamped its decisive character and its decisive features. So I beg you, my fellow students, to stand up for the Reich and for its new authorities. So I bet you to dedicate yourselves to the work and duty and banners of responsibility.”

- **Decree for the Coordination of All Activities, June 30, 1933.** “. . . all of the following are transferred to the jurisdiction of the Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda [Joseph Goebbels]:. . . general public enlightenment on the domestic scene, the Academy of Politics, setting up and celebrating national holidays and state ceremonies. . . the press, the radio, the German Library in Leipzig, art, music, including philharmonic orchestras, theater, cinema. . .
- **Law Concerning the Formation of New Parties, July 14, 1933.** “The National Socialist German Workers’ Party is the only political party in Germany. Anyone who seeks to maintain the organization of another political party or to organize a new political party is to be punished by confinement in a jail.”
- **Law for the Protection of Hereditary Health, July 14, 1933.** “Anyone who suffers from an inheritable disease may be sterilized surgically if, in the judgment of medical science, it could be expected that his descendents will suffer from serious inherited mental or physical defects. . . Sterilization may also be recommended by 1) the official physician, 2) the official in charge of a hospital, sanitarium, or prison. . . The proceedings of the Health Inheritance Courts are secret.”
- **Law to Promote National Labor, January 20, 1934.** “A labor trustee will be appointed for every large industrial area. It will be the duty of this officer to promote the maintenance of industrial peace. . . Each member of a working community is responsible for the conscientious performance of the duties entailed by his position in that community. His conduct must be such as to deserve the consideration attached to his position, and in particular he must be constantly mindful of his duty to devote his energies wholeheartedly to the service of the undertaking and to subordinate himself to the general good.”
- **Law for the Reorganization of the Reich, January 30, 1934.** “The popular assemblies of the individual states are hereby abolished. The sovereign rights of individual states are hereby transferred to the Reich. The governments of the individual states are to be subordinate to the Reich government. . . The Reich government may draw up new constitutional laws.”
- **Armed Forces Oath of Personal Loyalty, August 2, 1934.** “I swear before God this holy oath: that I shall give absolute obedience to the Fuehrer of the German Reich and people, Adolf Hitler, the Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht [army], and as a courageous soldier will be ready at all times to lay down my life for this oath.”
- **Law Regarding Labor Service, June 26, 1935.** “All young Germans of both sexes are obligated to serve their country in the Reich Labor Service. It is the purpose of the Reich Labor Service to educate German youth in the spirit of National Socialism so that they may obtain a true national community sentiment, a free conception of labor, and above all, a due respect for manual work.”
- **Nuremberg Laws on Citizenship and Race, September 15, 1935.** “A citizen of the Reich may be only one who is of German or kindred blood, and who, through his behavior, shows

that he is both desirous and personally fit to serve loyally the German people and the Reich. . . Only a citizen of the Reich may enjoy full political rights in consonance with the provisions of the laws.”

- **Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor, September 15, 1935.** “Any marriages between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood are herewith forbidden. . . Extramarital relations between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood are herewith forbidden. . . Jews are forbidden to employ as servants in their households female subjects of German or kindred blood who are under the age of forty-five years. Jews are forbidden from displaying the Reich and the national flag and from showing the national colors.”

Supplementary Decree on Citizenship, November 14, 1935. “A Jew cannot be a citizen of the Reich. He cannot exercise the right to vote; he cannot occupy public office. Jewish officials [government employees] will be retired as of December 31, 1935. . . A Jew is an individual who is descended from at least three grandparents who were racially full Jews. . . A Jew is also an individual who is descended from two full Jewish grandparents if. . . [four specific conditions are met].”