

March 21st and May 1st, 1933:
Nazi Germany and the Nature of Fascism

By
Kiegan Barron

Supervised by
Dr. Tom Saunders

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Before proceeding, several issues need to be addressed. The first concerns the argument that Nazism is distinct from fascism in its obsession with racism and anti-Semitism. Zeev Sternhell maintains that racism and anti-

Socialism likely endorsed anti-

argues that fascism touts the value of “absolute violence in the political realm.”¹⁴ Mann expands on this notion, arguing that paramilitarism and violence represent the key organizational feature of fascism.¹⁵ Eksteins also highlights the importance of violence, quoting an Italian fascist writer, who, when describing Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia, wrote, “war is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the pauses, the scents and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony.”¹⁶ Mussolini himself exalted violence, talking about how the “anti-pacifist spirit is carried by fascism even into the life ta6

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Focus on World War One and the past more broadly can be tied to another element of fascism, the goal of national rebirth. Roger Griffin explains this concept succinctly, asserting that palingenetic ultranationalism is a core component of fascism.²³ In other words, he argues that fascism is a backwards and forward-looking phenomenon, which appeals to a nation's history, but reinterprets that history in a modern context, thereby creating a new vision for a nation's future.²⁴ Neocleous agrees with this assertion, arguing that fascism makes a firm commitment to modernity and a mythicized past.²⁵ Eatwell makes similar statements, contending that while fascism looks to the past, its desire to create a "holistic nation that transcend(s) divisions" suggests a forward-looking nature.²⁶

Closely tied to this notion of national rebirth is the concept of a people's community, a "classless" society in which "the people" are "equal." Morgan argues that the Nazis aimed to create a society where "the people," regardless of their income, occupation, or educational background, could be seen as a single unit for the nation's future. For the nation's community, a

determined by characteristics like race.

In summary, while exactly what the revolution entails is unclear, the secondary literature is clear that fascism is revolutionary.

While much of what has been focused on so far has been ideological, fascism also has a core set of practices. Among these, fascist regimes notably saw massive displays of spectacle. Morant highlights the Nuremberg Rallies as celebrations designed to display the importance of the “Volk” and the “nation.”³⁸ Eley notes the spectacle of the KDF vacation programs, commenting on how they helped encapsulate the notion of a reborn nation by creating a cause and effect relationship between German’s wellbeing and Nazi programs.³⁹ Fascist Italy was also known for its massive celebrations that conveyed a sense of spectacle, with Berezin describing Mussolini’s regime as a “Festival State” that used celebrations to accomplish its political goals.⁴⁰ In short, spectacles and celebrations, both big and small, characterize fascist politics.

Section 2: Two Crucial Dates

Before considering elements of fascism that offer a lens to analyze March 21st and May 1st, 1933, it is necessary to provide some context and give a general explanation of the events themselves. Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany on January 30th, 1933. The reaction from ardent believers and Nazi sympathizers was one of almost indescribable joy. In his diary, fifteen-year-old Nazi Franz Schall wrote, “A fresh wind will soon be blowing across Germany... Germany will now meet a man (Hitler) who will forge a nation out of its anguish and disgrace, a

³⁸ Morant, “The German Fascists: Nazi Political Culture,” 150.

³⁹ Eley, *Nazism as Fascism: Violence, Ideology, and the Culture of Consent in Germany 1919-1945*, 72; Eley also comments on how the KDF programs functioned to demonstrate the “supremacy” of the Aryan race. However, as this thesis is not focused on race, elaborating further would be irrelevant.

⁴⁰ Mabel Berezin, “The Festival State: Celebration and Commemoration in Fascist Italy,” *Journal of Modern European History*, no. 1 (2006), 61.

nation that will finally defy the world.”⁴¹ A nationalist school teacher from Hamburg, Luise Solmitz, also wrote, after seeing a torchlight parade, that she was “drunk with enthusiasm.”⁴² Perhaps most interestingly, in an interview with Theodore Abel about a year later, a pro-Nazi farmer remarked about January 30th that “the workman in the office or behind the plow, the one behind an anvil and in the mines, the government employee, the farmer, the artisan, all had their faith in Germany restored.”⁴³

However, support for the Nazis was hardly as universal as the farmer suggested. For instance, despite rampant political violence and voter intimidation, the Nazis only won 43.9 percent of the vote in the election about a month later on March 5th.⁴⁴ Moreover, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) won 18.3 percent of the vote and 119 seats in the Reichstag, only losing one seat from the previous election.⁴⁵ The Communist Party (KPD) also garnered almost five million votes, despite violent persecution of its leadership and membership.⁴⁶ Indeed, only with the help of the German National People’s Party (DNVP), which won eight percent of the vote, were the Nazis able to reach over fifty perc(a)4 (m)-2 (ont)-2 6.PC /Span .PC C /Spae pyn yna.MC 3/Span 2

Peter Fritsche's book, *Hitler's First 100 Days* provides a framework to understand this process by addressing the two events under examination as exercises in trying to reach the unconvinced. The Day of Potsdam on March 21st celebrated the re-opening of the Reichstag after it caught fire on February 27th.⁴⁷ The main ceremony took place in the Garrison Church in Potsdam.⁴⁸

speech, proclaiming that the “old spirit of this celebrated shrine” would “lift us up from selfishness and party strife and bring us together in national self-consciousness.”⁵⁵ Hitler responded with his own speech, asserting that, despite the upheaval of the last month, Hindenburg had allowed for the “marriage between the symbols of the old glory and young strength.”⁵⁶ He then famously turned

believing Hitler would maintain the “foundation of the country’s life and morals.”⁶³ While writing to justify his role in Hitler’s appointment after the horrors of the Second World War, von Papen’s recollection is consistent with the contemporary observations of Goebbels and Poncet.

Accounts from the time indicate that Potsdam also resonated with everyday Germans. Erich Ebermayer, a member of the German Democratic Party, listened to the ceremony with his family on the radio. Despite recognizing its staged nature, Ebermayer wrote that the two months in government had turned Hitler into a “real statesman.”⁶⁴ He then described its emotional impact, writing, “father is deeply impressed... mother has tears in her eyes. I silently leave the room... I must be alone.”⁶⁵ Non-Nazi newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung* also wrote that “never before have we had representation in which pure national idealism was so plainly evident.”⁶⁶ Finally, a Great War veteran remarked that “after eighteen years of darkness,” this event had made Germany “light and beautiful” again.⁶⁷

Only two days later, the Reichstag assembled in the Kroll Opera House with the Enabling Act on the agenda, a piece of legislation that, if passed, would allow Hitler to rule without Hindenburg or the Reichstag. A two-thirds majority was needed for its approval. As the KPD leadership had been arrested soon after the March 5th election, and the party kept from attending the March 23rd session, this threshold was easier to reach.⁶⁸ The SPD still spoke out against it, with their leader Otto Wells proclaiming that “no Enabling Act gives you (HitCu (HitCu (Hitrova (r)5 ()-10 6 (g)2 (a

occurred at the Tempelhof airfield, which contained an airshow, the unveiling of a new zeppelin, and a fireworks display, culminating in a speech from the chancellor.⁷⁶ As this was broadcast over the radio, German life came to a stop and was followed by two minutes of silence.⁷⁷ Celebrations also took place in other major German cities. For example, left-wing Frankfurt journalist Lili Hahn observed bands m

of March 21st through May 1st remains. Indeed, while personally unconvinced, Hahn's observations of changes throughout this period indicate that overall, German society was

Furthermore, although the Enabling Act was formally passe

living in Berlin, asserted that March 1933 saw the violent elimination of most non-Nazi political institutions, leaving millions of Germans without representa

reading, one that looked to the past but also the future. For instance, Hitler spoke of the “marriage... between the symbols of the greatness of the olden days and the vigour of youth.”¹¹⁰ He also drew upon German history, asserting that while Bismarck’s unification of Germany seemed to signify “an end to the long period of internal war between the German tribes,” the result of World War One destroyed this stability and unification.¹¹¹ However, he then juxtaposed this history with an appeal to the future, asserting that with the people’s “will,” the Nazis would “restore the unity of spirit and will to the German nation.”¹¹²

Several firsthand accounts provide insight into how these promises connected with Germans and in some cases, helped convince them of the broader “merits” of National Socialism. Elisabeth Gebensleben, a Protestant living in Braunschweig, had long been anti-republican, expressing anger towards Weimar due to the Treaty of Versailles. She attended a DNVP meeting on the eve of the March 1932 election but by January 30th, 1933, she was a full-blown Nazi, “we(eping) for joy” upon hearing the news of Hitler’s appointment as chancellor.¹¹³ While anti-Semitism and anger towards World War One contributed to her conversion, the Nazi promise of national rebirth further entrenched her support, as exemplified by her reaction to the Day of Potsdam. In a letter to her daughter on March 22nd, Gebensleben wrote how moving it was to see “the field marshal from the World War and the ordinary front soldier now both the leaders of their people.”¹¹⁴ She also wrote that this government’s job would be to reconstruct the German nation, praising the ceremony for conveying a forward-looking mentality.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Peter Longerich, *Hitler: A Biography*, trans by Jeremy Noakes and Lesley Sharpe (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019), 296.

¹¹¹ Hitler, “Speech at the Garrison Church, March 21st, 1933,” 272.

¹¹² Hitler, “Speech at the Garrison Church, March 21st, 1933,” 272-273.

¹¹³ Hedda Kalshoven, *Between Two Homelands* (2019) a9B 07 Tw4(H)-4. n.1rd3.01 Tmr(r)U n.1 og a weHe U n.1(o)-10 (l)-3.1

Gebensleben was not the only person caught up in this sentiment of national rebirth. For instance, a previously noted quote from a veteran, who after the ceremony, asserted that “after eighteen years of darkness,” Germany was “once again light and beautiful” indicates that he too shared this feeling.¹¹⁶ Perhaps mostly interestingly, twelve-year-old Hoimar von Ditfurth recalled that, despite his conservative father initially negatively colouring his opinion, Hitler’s promise to “free” the German people and create a “national revolution” convinced the young boy that he was a man worth following.¹¹⁷ In other words, despite having negative preconceptions, Ditfurth was made a Nazi through Hitler’s promise for something better, an assurance that the German nation would be reborn.

In his speech to the Reichstag on March 23rd, Hitler stated that “we want to build a true community from all the German tribes, classes, occupations, and former classes.”¹¹⁸ In other words, Hitler wanted to create a society where people from all classes could be seen as contributors to the nation, a people’s community. The May 1st celebrations were the first major opportunity to put this concept into practice. For instance, Childers argues that by introducing a delegation of workers to Hindenburg, Hitler intended to display that all workers were unified, regardless if one was a coal miner or the Reich President.¹¹⁹ Moreover, in his speech in the evening, Hitler proclaimed that “the millions of people divided into professions, separated into artificial classes... must find a way to come back together!”¹²⁰ The two minutes of silence that followed encapsulated

¹¹⁶ Fritzsche,

a day of national celebration no doubt occurs very rarely in the history of a people” and noting the “shouts of unrestrained joy” echoing throughout the city.¹²⁶ On March 22nd, Berliner Börsenzeitung, a non-Nazi conservative newspaper, also wrote that “nationalist enthusiasm swept over Germany yesterday...and broke open doors which until now had been defiantly closed to it.”¹²⁷

On May 1st, the Nazis once again infiltrated German’s lives through celebratory spectacles.

Evidence of this transformation can be seen in events immediately following May 1st. Indeed, it is one thing to agree with a government's denunciation of certain ideas but it is another thing to raid the offices and workplaces of those propagating such ideas, as happened when students, in coordination with the SA, plundered Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Research on May 6th.¹³⁶ One of them converted to National Socialism just days earlier, proclaiming that a "new page" had been turned in his "own history."¹³⁷ Nationalistic sentiments were also common in other countries but deliberately destroying literature of an "un-German spirit," as occurred on May 10th, suggests radical devotion to "the nation."¹³⁸ Again, the account of Martha Dodd suggests something similar, as she noted the crowds of fervent believers and their "intoxicating" nature.¹³⁹ All these examples indicate that rather than passive endorsement, many Germans were devoted to the principles of National Socialism, suggesting a core transformation of who they were only months previously.

Section4: A Useful Analytical Tool?

As explored in section two, most attribute the success of the Day of Potsdam to Nazi ability to ease the concerns of anxious conservatives. Moreover, the National Day of Labour is traditionally understood as a celebration meant to appeal to workers. While both are true, by considering the five aforementioned components of fascism, section three presented another lens through which to understand the Nazification of German society. However, it is worth reflecting on whether this lens is the best way to understand this transformation. Indeed, v

four years before the Nazi's rise to power, SA violence was widespread on German streets.¹⁴⁴ Also, while March 21st and May 1st were not violent, they were both followed by events that either gave the Nazis legal power to do violence as they saw fit, as was the case with the Enabling Act, or that were explicitly violent, as was the seizure of trade unions. In short, to argue that Nazi violence simply materialized during this period for practical reasons would be incorrect. It existed in the context of a longer commitment that pointed to the ideological priority of active struggle and combat to attain political goals. Nonetheless, actions can and often do have more than one motivation, and thus, the instrumentality of Nazi violence must be considered along with its intrinsic value to the movement.

As previously noted, Roger Griffin argues that fascism is a backwards and forward-looking phenomenon, looking to a nation's history but reinterpreting that history in a modern context and creating a new vision for the nation's future.

Volksgemeinschaft thus noticing the spectacle of the “masses” and the ideological connotations of the “Volksgemeinschaft”¹⁵⁴ Lili Hahn, while noting the supposed breakdown of class structures, also commented on the marching bands and “police horses pranc(ing) along rhythmically.”¹⁵⁵ In sum, the pageantry and spectacle of March 21st and May 1st need to be considered in conjunction with the messages conveyed, as this combination played a role in German conversions to National Socialism.

Finally, revolution is a useful concept for understanding the shift in German society during this period and on () 7 (i)0 (d0)-2 (od h (w)2 (hi)-2 (c)4 (p(t)-2 (hi)c)4 hi)cn cn(f)3 h(a)4 (n-2 (od a0 Tdpp r)3

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bringing Germans together, or remarks from Willy Cohn that class hatred had been overcome, suggest appreciation for a revolutionary shift in German society.¹⁶⁰

It is not enough for people to be more or less reconciled to our regime, to be persuaded to adopt a neutral attitude towards us; rather we want to work on people until they have capitulated to us, until they grasp ideologically that what is happening in Germany today not only **must** be accepted but also **can** be accepted.¹⁶⁵

This quote indicates the active goal to transform German society fundamentally by turning Germans into Nazis. Indeed, all the aforementioned examples and primary accounts of radicalism, from the book burnings to the persecution of academics perceived to be “un-German,” indicate that some form of social revolution was in train. The growing outrage of the neighbours of Matthias

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important to consider as well, as the celebrations won over Germans through the awe they inspired and their ability to represent certain ideas and values. Finally, revolution also captures what occurred, since national rebirth and people's community were revolutionary ideas, violence was used to further the revolution from above and below, and many Germans became convinced believers. All five components of analysis need to be understood in relation to each other. The intersectionality, indeed synergy, of violence, national rebirth, people's community, revolution, and spectacle deserve particular emphasis. Together they represented both essential features of National Socialism as German fascism and a powerful instrument of political persuasion.

8,397 words

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