Chapter 6: The Nazi dictatorship

- Secondly, a law of 7 April 1933 created Reich governors (Reichstathalter) who more often than not were the local party Gauleiters with full powers.
- Finally, in January 1934 regional parliaments were abolished. The governments of all the states were subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior in Berlin central government.

By early 1934 the federal principle of government was as good as dead. Even the Nazi Reich governors existed simply 'to execute the will of the supreme leadership of the Reich'.

The trade unions

Germany's trade union movement was powerful because of its mass membership and its strong connections with socialism and Catholicism. In 1920 it had already shown its industrial muscle when a general strike defeated the Kapp Putsch (see page 46). German organised labour was hostile to Nazism so posed a major threat to the stability of the Nazi state.

Yet, by May 1933 it was a spent force. The depression had already severely weakened it by reducing membership and lessening the will to resist. However, the trade union leaders deluded themselves that they could work with the Nazis and thereby preserve a degree of independence and at least the structure of trade unionism. Their hope was that:

- in the short term, trade unionism would continue to serve its social role to help members
- in the long term, it could provide the framework for development in the post-Nazi era.

However, the labour movement was deceived by the Nazis.

The Nazis surprisingly declared 1 May (the traditional day of celebration for international socialist labour) a national holiday, which gave the impression to the trade unions that perhaps there was some scope for co-operation. This proved to be the briefest of illusions. On the following day, trade union premises were occupied by the SA and SS, union funds were confiscated and many of the leaders were arrested and sent to the early concentration camps such as Dachau.

Independent trade unions were then banned and in their place all German workers' organisations were absorbed into the German Labour Front (Deutscher Arbeitsfront, DAF), led by Robert Ley. DAF became the largest organisation in Nazi Germany with 22 million members, but it acted more as an instrument of control than as a genuine representative body of workers' interests and concerns (see pages 220–1). Also, it lacked the most fundamental right to negotiate wages and conditions of work. So, by the end of 1933, the power of the German labour movement had been decisively broken.
Political parties

The process of Gleichschaltung could never allow the existence of other political parties. Nazism openly rejected democracy and any concessions to alternative opinions. Instead, it aspired to establish authoritarian rule within a one-party state. This was not difficult to achieve:

- The Communists had been outlawed since the Reichstag fire (see pages 150–1).
- Soon after the destruction of the trade unions the assets of the Social Democrats were seized and they were then officially banned on 22 June.
- Most of the major remaining parties willingly agreed to dissolve themselves in the course of late June 1933 – even the Nationalists (previously coalition partners to the Nazis) obligingly accepted.
- Finally, the Catholic Centre Party decided to give up the struggle and followed suit on 5 July 1933.

Thus, there was no opposition to the decree of 14 July that formally proclaimed the Nazi Party as the only legal political party in Germany.

**SOURCE A**


Art 1. The Nationalist Socialist German Workers’ Party constitutes the only political party in Germany.

Art 2. Whoever undertakes to maintain the organisation of another political party or to form a new political party shall be punished with penal servitude of up to three years or with imprisonment of between six months and three years, unless the act is subject to a heavier penalty under other regulations.

The success of Gleichschaltung

By the end of 1933 the process of Gleichschaltung was well advanced in many areas of public life in Germany, although far from complete. In particular, it had made limited impression on the role and influence of the army, big business and the Churches (although an agreement was made with the papacy in July 1933, see page 220). Also, the civil service and education had only been partially co-ordinated. This was mainly due to Hitler’s determination to shape events through the ‘revolution from above’ and to avoid antagonising such powerful vested interests. Yet, there were many in the lower ranks of the party who had contributed to the ‘revolution from below’ and who now wanted to extend the process of Gleichschaltung. It was this internal party conflict which laid the basis for the bloody events of June 1934.

**2 A ‘second revolution?’**

- What was the nature of Hitler’s political dilemma in 1933–4?
- Did Germany undergo a political revolution in the years 1933–4?

Within six months of coming to power Hitler had indeed turned Germany into a one-party dictatorship. However, in a speech on 6 July 1933 to the Reich governors, Hitler warned of the dangers of a permanent state of revolution. He therefore formally declared an end to the revolution and demanded that ‘the stream of revolution must be guided into the safe channel of evolution’.

Hitler was caught in a political dilemma. He was increasingly concerned that the behaviour of party activists was beyond his control. This was likely to create embarrassment in his relations with the more conservative forces whose support he still depended on, for example big business, civil service and, above all, the army. Hitler’s speech amounted to a clear-cut demand for the party to accept the realities of political compromise and the necessity of change from above.

**The position of the SA**

Hitler’s appeal failed to have the desired effect. If anything, it reinforced the fears of many party members that the Nazi leadership was prepared to dilute National Socialist ideology. Such concerns came in particular from within the ranks of the SA giving rise to calls for a ‘second revolution’.

**KEY TERM**

‘Second revolution’ The aims of Röhm and the SA were for social and economic reforms and the creation of a ‘people’s army’ which would merge the army and the SA. These aims were more attractive to ‘left-wing socialist Nazis’ or ‘radical Nazis’.