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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

How Democracy Produced a Monster



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COULD something like it happen again? That is invariably the first question that comes to mind when recalling that [Hitler](#) was given power in [Germany](#) 75 years ago last week. With the world now facing such great tensions and instability, the question seems more obvious than ever.

Hitler came to power in a democracy with a highly liberal Constitution, and in part by using democratic freedoms to undermine and then destroy democracy itself. That democracy, established in 1919, was a product of defeat in world war and revolution and was never accepted by most of the German elites, notably the military, large landholders and big industry.

Troubled by irreconcilable political, social and cultural

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divisions from the beginning, the new democracy survived serious threats to its existence in the early postwar years and found a semblance of stability from 1924 to 1928, only to be submerged by the collapse of the economy after the Wall Street crash of 1929.

The Nazis' spectacular surge in popular support (2.6 percent of the vote in the 1928 legislative elections, 18.3 percent in 1930, 37.4 percent in July 1932) reflected the anger, frustration and resentment — but also hope — that Hitler was able to tap among millions of Germans. Democracy had failed them, they felt. Their country was divided, impoverished and humiliated. Scapegoats were

needed.

It was easy to turn hatred against Jews, who could be made to represent the imagined external threat to Germany by both international capitalism and Bolshevism. Internally, Jews were associated with the political left — Socialist and Communist — which was made responsible by Hitler and his followers for Germany's plight.

Increasingly, Hitler seemed to a good third of the German electorate the only hope to putting the country back on its feet, restoring pride and bringing about national salvation. By 1930 it was effectively impossible to rule Germany without Nazi backing. But while Nazi electoral gains could block democracy, they were insufficient to bring Hitler to power.

From 1930 onwards, therefore, the German state was locked in stalemate. Democratic forms remained. But democracy itself was in effect dead, or at least dying. The anti-democratic elites tried to broker solutions, but failed on account of Hitler's intransigence. Ultimately, because he could find no other authoritarian solution, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler as head of government, or chancellor, on Jan. 30, 1933. What followed led to disaster for Germany, for Europe and for the world.

These distant events still have echoes today. In Europe, in the wake of increased [immigration](#), most countries have experienced some revival of neo-fascist, racist movements. Not so long ago, Serbian nationalism, inflamed by President [Slobodan Milosevic](#), set off war and ethnic cleansing within the continent.

Today, too, skillful politicians around the globe have proved adept at manipulating populist sentiment and using democratic structures to erect forms of personalized, authoritarian rule. President [Vladimir Putin](#) has gradually moved Russia, a country increasingly flexing its muscles internationally again, in that direction. Venezuela, under President [Hugo Chávez](#), has also showed distinct authoritarian tendencies, though these have been at least partly blocked through his defeat in the December referendum to change its Constitution.

In Zimbabwe, President [Robert Mugabe](#) has turned democracy into personal rule, ruining his country in the process. In Pakistan, democracy largely provides a facade for military rule, even if President [Pervez Musharraf](#) has now put aside his uniform. Most worryingly,



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perhaps, President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) has used populist support in a pluralist system to push Iran into a hazardous foreign policy, though he does remain formally subordinate to the “supreme leader,” Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#).

None of these examples, however, poses a close parallel to what happened in Germany in 1933. Neo-fascist movements in Europe can certainly terrorize minorities. And they have had success in stirring such resentment about immigrants that mainstream political parties have taken account of the swell of feeling.

However, short of some unforeseeable eventualities like major war or, perhaps less unlikely, another meltdown of the economic system, neo-fascist movements will remain on the fringes of politics. And none of these parties, unappealing though their internal policies are, can today conceive of preparing for a war of conquest with the ultimate aim of a grasp at world power.

Elsewhere, there are — and always will be — nasty forms of authoritarianism (some supported by democratic governments). But neither in their acquisition of power nor in their use of it do modern authoritarian rulers much resemble Hitler. International organizations and institutions that did not exist in interwar Europe — the [United Nations](#), the [European Union](#), the [World Bank](#), the [International Monetary Fund](#) — also provide some barriers to the sort of calamity that engulfed Germany.

Moreover, democracies under pressure can still pose obstacles to creeping authoritarianism. Vladimir Putin looks as if he will indeed step down as president and not risk a breach of the Constitution (though effective power will probably remain in his own hands), while Hugo Chávez has been forced (maybe temporarily) to give up his ambitions to become a president for life. Even once Hitler had been appointed chancellor, it took the Reichstag fire, a month later, to begin the destruction of the last vestiges of democracy and pave the way to his full control.

Mercifully, what happened in Germany in 1933, and its aftermath, will remain a uniquely terrible episode in history. What took place then reminds us even so of the illusory assumption that democracy will always be a favored choice of a population torn apart by war, facing enormous privations and burning with resentment at national humiliation through perceived foreign interference. It also reminds us — if such a reminder is necessary — of the need for international cooperation to restrain potential “mad dogs” in world politics before they are dangerous enough to bite.

Ian Kershaw, a professor of modern history at Sheffield University, is the author of the forthcoming “Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution.”

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