

2013

Expanded Horizons: Reconsidering American Responses to Adolf Hitler

Andrew Wallin
Lehigh University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wallin, Andrew, "Expanded Horizons: Reconsidering American Responses to Adolf Hitler" (2013). *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 1660.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.

“Expanded Horizons”: Reconsidering American Responses to Adolf Hitler

by

Andrew Wallin

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

Lehigh University

May, 2013

© 2013 Copyright
Andrew Wallin

Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in the Department of History.

“Expanded Horizons”: Reconsidering American Responses to Adolf Hitler
Andrew Wallin

Date Approved

Roger Simon, Thesis Director

Nitzan Lebovic, Co-Director

Stephen Cutcliffe, Department Chair

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Introduction	2
Part II	9
Part III	17
Part IV	27
Part V	64
Vita	74

ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to take the broad historiographical issue of teleology and apply it to a specific historical event, namely, the rise of Hitler and the establishment of the Third Reich. The common narrative of this period typically follows a set structure: the Nazis come to power in Germany, begin agitating on the European continent, slowly expand their territory, oppress the Jews of Europe, and finally begin a military contest that precipitates the Second World War. This chronology reinforces the notion that not only was the Second World War an inevitable result of the Nazi policies that preceded it, but also that contemporary observers should have come to the same conclusions. In this study, the argument is advanced that while both the American government and general public were indeed aware of what we would now deem as warning signs of the trouble to come, at the time there was no reason to believe that Hitler's ascension to the German Chancellorship presented any imminent threat to the world, much less the United States. By exploring contemporary media reports, this essay contextualizes the events of early 1933 and attempts to arrive at contemporaneous, rather than present-day, understandings of the perceived implications of a Nazified Germany.

“Expanded Horizons”: Reconsidering American Responses to Adolf Hitler¹

Part I. Introduction

Surveying the wide and multi-faceted landscape of the twentieth century, one period in particular seems to rise above the rest; a looming mountain, casting shadows and coloring the appearance of the people and events both before and since. Though its peak is located over central Europe, its arms stretch south through Mediterranean Africa, north toward the Arctic circle, with some spurs thrusting out as far as the tiny islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. From 1939 to 1945, the Second World War raged across parts of four continents, leaving a legacy that stretches across both space and time. Not only did it precipitate the destruction and displacement of untold millions, but it has also occupied a place of prominence in collective consciousness ever since. In what is perhaps a natural consequence of this legacy, it has not been uncommon for historians to look at events and individuals that have followed, as well as preceded, this period through the smoky and blood-spattered lens of the war. In particular, the 1930s are more often than not viewed as a series of preludes—mere steps along the path that led systematically and with little divergence to all out warfare.

But such a teleological approach – one that assumes a certain unavoidable end result – flirts with the common but problematic issue of historical anachronism. In other words, such methods project knowledge acquired after the fact to a time in the past when

¹ For the title of this work, I have borrowed a concept from John Lewis Gaddis. See *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

that information was unavailable. For example, just because it is now generally agreed that appeasement at Munich in 1938 encouraged the German invasion of Poland in 1939 does not mean that Neville Chamberlain should have been excoriated as a “guilty man,” since he could hardly have known that his actions would lead to war.² As far as he knew, his policies were a blueprint for peace, not an invitation to conflict. In fact, his belief that his diplomacy had secured “peace for our time” offers a perfect illustration that although history is learned backward it is lived forward.

The implications of this uniquely historical issue have been the subject of much methodological discourse. According to Karl Löwith (1897-1973), a German-Jewish philosopher, this problem is a constant and perhaps even unavoidable consequence of the historical process: “The historical consciousness cannot but start with itself, though its aim is to know the thought of other times and of other men. . . . We understand—and misunderstand” the past, “but always in the light of contemporary thought, reading the book of history backward from the last to the first page. This inversion of the customary way of historical presentation is actually practiced even by those who proceed from past ages to modern times, without being conscious of their contemporary motivations.”³ More recently, Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis has also acknowledged the difficulties encountered by anyone trying to recapture a pure sense of the past. Unlike with other academic disciplines, where lab experiments or computer simulations can recreate specific conditions or circumstances, “we cannot relive, retrieve, or rerun”

² Chamberlain, along with fourteen other British public figures, was the subject of a pseudonymously published tract in 1940 that placed the blame for the present conflict on those men and the so-called policy of appeasement. See Cato [pseud.], *Guilty Men* (London: V. Gollancz, 1940).

³ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 2-3.

history. The past “is something we can never have.”⁴ But lest this admission discourage anyone from attempting to explore the past, Gaddis has suggested that perhaps the very thing that prevents us from reliving, retrieving, or rerunning the past actually helps us to better *understand* it. Those who live through history necessarily have a narrow perspective—one that precludes them from seeing larger patterns as events are occurring, or how one specific action might influence another. An historian, on the other hand, enjoys the benefits of an “expanded horizon,” wherein he or she can connect the complex and seemingly random dots of everyday life into a clear and cogent picture.⁵ Yet therein lies the problem. It is easy for the modern observer to look backward through time and see in the sequence of events in the 1930s a clear line leading from the Nazi political victories in 1933 to the red tide at Normandy or the unspeakable horrors of Auschwitz or Treblinka. But to impose that chronology upon the average American of 1933 is to promote a false temporality and ultimately an incorrect version of events. History assumes the ahistorical air of inevitability, and understandings of the present mar our perceptions of the past—symptoms of what Harvard’s Niall Ferguson has termed “the dubious benefit of hindsight.”⁶ But the challenge of history is to understand the past on its own terms—admittedly no small feat.

The historiography of the pre-war years of the 1930s brings this particular issue into sharp focus. Take the following description from one account of the foreign policy of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s. Diplomatic historian Robert A. Divine

⁴ Gaddis, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 80.

has portrayed FDR's neutrality policies of the mid 1930s as naïve—a characterization that itself implies that at the very least, the Roosevelt administration should have been braced for an inevitable German war. He then goes on to provide a more explicitly anachronistic assessment: FDR specifically and Americans in general failed “to comprehend that they were confronted by a revolution which threatened the very existence of the nation.”⁷ Aside from the somewhat hyperbolic tone, such an assessment is also problematic in that it faults the American government as well as the general population for what can only be considered a failure to predict the future. But what seems obvious in hindsight is rarely as clear in the present. It seems unfair, to say the least, to judge the actions and opinions of Americans in the 1930s based on what happened later in the 1940s. But as Löwith and others have posited, such is often the nature of historical analysis.

Characterizations of this type are not limited to only one historian. In fact, the general account of world affairs in the 1930s and 1940s only reinforces this sense of inevitability. One would be hard pressed to find a secondary account of those decades that veers too far from the following basic narrative: the Nazis come to power in Germany, begin agitating on the European continent, slowly expand their territory, oppress the Jews of Europe, and finally begin a military contest that precipitates the Second World War. The following passage from the University of Maryland's Wayne S. Cole might therefore seem unremarkable:

⁷ Robert A. Divine, *The Reluctant Belligerent: American Entry into World War II* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), 48.

Officially, Hitler had come to power through legal and constitutional means in January, 1933. But he quickly converted the Weimar Republic into a Nazi dictatorship and quashed all opposition. He suppressed Jews, promised to eliminate indignities that the Versailles treaty had imposed on Germany, and determined to reestablish Germany's place in Europe and the world. . . . Those alarming developments, however, were only preludes for even more terrifying crises in 1938 and after.⁸

The author furthermore states that although other global developments, like Japanese aggression in Manchuria and the Italian campaign in Ethiopia, were both shocking and alarming, “it was Nazi Germany under the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler that most frightened and shocked the moral sensibilities of Europeans and Americans alike.”⁹ At first glance, these statements seem pretty straightforward with little in terms of controversy. But perhaps that is because they fit the version of the story with which we are now so familiar. Like Divine's account referenced in the preceding paragraph, this passage is indicative of a point of view that is indeed expansive, as Gaddis has advocated. But it is worth asking: does it accurately represent a contemporary understanding? Or is it more so the product of a modern viewpoint? When Hitler came to power, were Americans really alarmed and frightened, and to what degree? Were they concerned from the very beginning, or did they only become so over time? Given the considerable amount of anti-Semitism in America, was the treatment of the Jews an issue of real, widespread disquiet? Did Americans view a Nazified Germany as an imminent threat, or were there other, more pressing matters both at home and abroad that took priority? These questions and others will provide the framework for this essay.

⁸ Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt & the Isolationists: 1932-45* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 274.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 274.

In characterizing developments in the 1930s as “preludes,” Cole, like Divine, subtly but surely introduces a teleological element into his version of events—as have many other accounts of that period. On one level such an approach is understandable. After all, it seems easy enough now to see how in Germany the end of democracy, the implementation of dictatorship, the oppression of Jews, and the overturning of Versailles laid the groundwork for Hitler’s vision of a Thousand Year Reich, which in turn led to a worldwide conflagration. But while it is important to make connections about the past, it is equally important to attempt to understand the past on its own terms. To borrow an idea from eminent historian Sir Geoffrey Elton, “The purpose of history is to understand the past, and if the past is to be understood it must be given full respect in its own right.”¹⁰ Thus, we cannot assume that the expanded horizons of the present were a part of the landscape of the past. Instead, we must acknowledge the presence of more limited vistas throughout history. When Adolf Hitler came to power in January 1933, no one, on either side of the Atlantic, could have known that he and his policies would precipitate another world war six years later. As the following analysis will endeavor to make clear, Hitler and the Nazis were essentially an unknown variable to Americans in the early 1930s. In fact, many observers even doubted whether the new chancellor and his party would still be in power through the rest of 1933. Though it is difficult to “unlearn” what we know about the horrific consequences of the Nazi period, we must attempt to do so

¹⁰ Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), qtd. on 197.

nevertheless, for that is the only way to truly begin to understand this specific point in history “in its own right.”¹¹

This study will therefore seek to take a broad historiographical issue and apply it to a specific historical event, namely, the rise of Hitler and establishment of the Third Reich. After reviewing some of the more recent, secondary accounts of the early stages of Nazi rule, this essay will examine select sources from the American mass media of early 1933 – newspapers, radio broadcasts, newsreels, and national periodicals – in order to get a better sense of the American reaction to developments in Germany. In doing so, it will become clear that contrary to most accounts of the pre-war years, while both the American government and general public were indeed aware of what we would now deem as warning signs of the trouble to come, at the time there was no reason to believe that Hitler’s ascension to the German Chancellorship presented any imminent threat to the world, much less the United States. That is not to suggest that no one voiced concerns. On the contrary, one can find numerous examples of Americans, Europeans, and no small amount of Germans who viewed Nazi governance with more than a modicum of unease. But to leave it at that is to ignore an important part of the story—specifically, that there was another, far larger group of Americans who were unconcerned, indifferent, and even receptive to the idea of Nazi rule in Germany.

¹¹ Ferguson has made a similar point regarding the historiography of the First World War. To him, the primary task of the researcher is to determine “how far the many narratives of escalating crisis have been constructed by historians not to capture the past as it actually was in 1914, but to create an explanation of the war’s origins commensurate with the vast dimensions of what happened in the succeeding four years.” With a few chronological alterations, that very sentiment can (and should) be applied to the period leading up to the Second World War. See Ferguson, 80.

Furthermore, as the following discussion will suggest, the discrepancies between our own, present-day take on the pre-war period and that of those for whom 1933 was, in reality, part of a *post*-war era are reflective of what this essay will refer to as gaps in historical consciousness. These gaps, as present in the policy-making of Franklin D. Roosevelt as in American reactions to German anti-Semitism, become evident only when we recognize the intrinsically limited nature of real-time assessments (versus the expanded scope of historical understandings). Using this framework will help us to understand not simply *what* Americans thought in the first few months of 1933 but *why* they thought what they did. This larger picture, however, emerges not by taking a step back, to survey the expanded horizon of history, but rather by taking a more narrow perspective, focusing on the more (necessarily) limited viewpoints of Americans in early 1933. It is January, the New Year has just arrived, and in the midst of nationwide excitement over the upcoming inauguration of an inspiring new president, news begins to filter through of a transfer of power in Germany as well.

Part II. Hitler's Rise: Reviewing Secondary Accounts

Given the role of Nazi Germany in the history of the twentieth century, it is utterly unsurprising that historians have explored the general trajectory of Hitler's ascent to power and the commencement of the Third Reich in great detail. But rather than reviewing the extensive bibliography related to this subject, two recent, comprehensive, and authoritative accounts by Michael Burleigh and Richard J. Evans will serve as

characteristic examples of how these events have been portrayed in post-war historiography. The following narrative of events will furthermore serve as a reference point for this essay's subsequent reevaluation of the manner in which the events in question were both reported and understood at the time.

The Weimar Republic was from the beginning a fragile creation. Established in the chaos following defeat in the Great War, its delicate nature was underlined by the method of its inception—Philipp Scheidemann announced the formation of a “German Republic” from a Berlin balcony, and it was so. “Gun battles, assassinations, riots, massacres, and civil unrest” ruled the day in Germany.¹² Slowly, and quite gradually, statesmen like Gustav Stresemann began to bring Germany back from the brink. An economic crisis triggered by crippling war debts and hyperinflation threatened to upset the delicate balance in the fledgling republic, but as foreign minister, Stresemann's maneuverings brought a semblance of stability to the still reeling country. Despite sanctioning the lenient treatment of an Austrian revolutionary who had attempted to incite an uprising in a Munich beer hall in 1923, Stresemann made few missteps in his handling of the state. Beginning with the Dawes Plan of 1924, he negotiated a reorganization of Germany's reparation payments, and in doing so helped to “ensure that paying them was a practical proposition.”¹³ The following year, the signing of the Locarno Treaties signaled Germany's reemergence on the world stage, joining the League of Nations and securing the evacuation of the last Allied troops from the Rhineland. But the promise of the 1920s soon gave way to despair.

¹²Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 78.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 108.

Whether it was the cause or merely a symptom, the collapse of the U.S. stock market in October of 1929 signaled the onset of a worldwide economic crisis. German recovery had been predicated in large part on foreign investment, particularly from the United States. Once those funds were no longer forthcoming, German industry ground to a halt. The tenuous hope of the 1920s quickly gave way to panic and despair. In less than three years the official number of unemployed jumped from 1.6 million to 6.12 million by February 1932. If one were to take into account all those who did not appear on the government's registry, the number may have been as high as 9 million. Including dependents, the total number of Germans affected by unemployment may have been as high as 23 million people—over a third of the country's total population.¹⁴ This enormous influx of government dependents put a devastating strain on an already overburdened relief system. With no other outlet, "boredom turned to frustration," and society seemed to descend "into a morass of misery and criminality."¹⁵ This environment proved to be fertile ground for extreme political groups. The National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) worked to provide unemployed members with free meals and lodgings. However, as Burleigh has noted, the relationship between unemployment and Nazi expansion was often an indirect one: since a good deal of unemployed Germans felt more drawn to the Communist Party, it was actually the increase in the Communist ranks that "helped to propel other anxious voters towards the Nazis."¹⁶ Whatever the case, the depression stimulated an escalation of paramilitary violence between various extremist

¹⁴ These figures are taken from Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 122-123.

¹⁵ Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 233.

¹⁶ Burleigh, 128.

groups, of which the Nazis and Communists were the most powerful. Significantly, “as Germany plunged deeper into the Depression, growing numbers of middle-class citizens began to see in the youthful dynamism of the Nazi Party a possible way out of the situation.”¹⁷

Though the economic crisis helped to create the conditions by which Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power in Germany, the crisis alone did not provide a sufficient environment in which the Nazis could simply seize power. Germany was still a functioning republic under the formidable aegis of *Reichspräsident* Paul von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg. Hero of the Great War and second President of the German Republic, Hindenburg was initially an implacable foe of the Nazis and contemptuous of their leader. However, over the tenure of Hindenburg’s administration, parliamentary government had undergone a “steady atrophy,” particularly under the governance of Chancellor Heinrich Brüning.¹⁸ A moderate politician with little sympathy for the Nazi cause, Brüning nevertheless played a significant role in laying the foundation for a National Socialist dictatorship. Under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, the German chancellor was legally granted the ability to rule without parliamentary consent in times of crisis. By issuing “emergency decrees,” with the approval of the sitting president, Brüning was able to effectively remove the Reichstag from the legislative process, often by simply dissolving that body when it protested. Brüning was neither the first nor the last chancellor to invoke Article 48 privileges, and few at the time would have doubted that the continuing economic disaster constituted a national crisis. Yet

¹⁷ Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 246.

¹⁸ Burleigh, 124.

during his two years in office, Brüning enforced measures that helped to blur the line “between parliamentary democracy and authoritarianism.”¹⁹ The implication here is clear: Hitler’s predecessors were slowly but surely undermining the foundations of democratic government.

When Brüning resigned in May 1932, two governments followed in quick succession, the first under Colonel Franz von Papen and the second under General Kurt von Schleicher. Their combined tenure of less than eight months was brief but momentous. Both men supported the idea of giving Nazi leaders access to power, albeit in a limited capacity. Unlike Brüning, his successors felt that saddling Hitler and his associates with a degree of governmental responsibility would serve to temper, or “tame” their radicalism. However, elections in November 1932 saw the Nazi vote fall by around two million, with a subsequent loss of 30 seats in the Reichstag. But no matter— Hitler’s “rat-like cunning” was more than enough to overcome a problem as trivial as a lack of votes.²⁰ Colluding with von Papen, still resentful of his unceremonious dismissal, Hitler hashed out an agreement that would bring him to the Chancellorship, with von Papen as Vice-Chancellor. Though their support had diminished, the Nazis were still a politically potent force. Working together, the two men successfully alienated von Schleicher and, more importantly, convinced Hindenburg to withhold from the chancellor the usual powers granted by Article 48. Thus, after a mere 57 days in office, von Schleicher resigned. Following a series of secret meetings and back room deals, von Papen

¹⁹ Burleigh, 124.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

convinced Hindenburg to endorse the Hitler-von Papen coalition government. He swore in the new chancellor on January 30.

January 30 therefore “marked the beginning of the Nazi seizure of power.”²¹ What followed in the next few months was a series of events that inexorably accelerated the demise of law, as well as a “creeping authoritarianism” that destroyed the last vestiges of German democracy.²² Though still nominally leading a coalition government, Hitler moved quickly to consolidate power in a series of political maneuvers. The first opportunity for action was presented by the Reichstag Fire on February 27. Allegedly the work of Communist agitators, one of whom had been found at the scene and already confessed, the fire was followed the next day by an emergency decree which “abolished rights guaranteed by the Weimar constitution.”²³ Civil rights were quashed. The rights to assembly, freedom of speech, of the press—all gone at the stroke of a pen. With such troublesome items as civil liberties out of the way, the Nazis’ “seizure of power could now begin in earnest.”²⁴ As Evans seems to suggest in this description, the Reichstag Fire Decree was simply another step in Hitler’s consolidation of power—a necessary stepping stone that bridged the gap between democracy and dictatorship. Less than a week after this measure was enacted, on March 5 a national election took place that would effectively serve as a referendum on the Hitler Cabinet. In the days leading up to the election the Nazis advanced a “combination of terror, repression, and propaganda”

²¹ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 11.

²² Burleigh, 151.

²³ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁴ Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 333.

throughout Germany.²⁵ But beyond that, Hitler and his associates made it clear that the election results were ultimately of no consequence. The Nazis had acquired power; Hitler would not be resigning due to a trifle like a vote of no confidence. Surely, it should have been obvious to any reasonable observer that these “elections” were not only shambolic in the sense that an intimidated electorate had little choice in terms of which party it could vote for, but also because Hitler and the Nazis had made it clear that they had no intentions of relinquishing power.

As it happened, the Nazi coalition won with a majority vote. For the moment at least, Hitler’s promise to stay in power even in the event of electoral defeat became a moot point. Yet he still had one more trick up his sleeve—one more step to firmly entrench himself in power. As things stood, parliamentary consent was an unnecessary feature of legislative enactment. However, presidential approval was still a requirement. Since such a potential check on power was unbecoming for a dictatorial government, Hitler proposed an Enabling Act which would, in essence, remove this last restraint on unilateral authority. Though the existence of the Reichstag as well as the president’s position would not be affected (in theory at least), the act would for all practical purposes make the Weimar constitution “a dead letter.”²⁶ As Burleigh dryly notes, while in some democracies “constitutional amendments are especially solemn moments,” under this new law in Nazi Germany “they were easier than changing the traffic regulations.”²⁷ The Reichstag obligingly passed the Enabling Act by a vote of 444 to 94, thereby allowing

²⁵ Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 339.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

²⁷ Burleigh, 155.

Hitler and his cabinet to rule by decree and establishing the basis for “the permanent removal of civil rights and democratic liberties.”²⁸ In other words, this latest event signaled the final death of German democracy.

Throughout the historical narratives of Evans and Burleigh (and countless other chroniclers of the Third Reich), a sense of inevitability permeates the story. A sequence of events emerges in which a clear progression from democracy to dictatorship is all too apparent. From the perspective of a modern day researcher, there is nothing inherently wrong with this view. In fact, such an analysis is a critical part of the historian’s job—to see connections, monitor developments, and link events together in order to come to a fuller understanding of a complex and confusing past. Yet as other historians have suggested (Evans himself included), viewing the past through the lens of the present introduces its own set of challenges. As subsequent portions of this essay will argue, though casual observers in January 1933 may indeed have viewed Hitler’s ascension to power in Germany as troubling, there were likely just as many who were unconcerned or even indifferent to who, exactly, was calling the shots in Germany—especially among the American populace, which is the subject of this particular discourse. Though it is clear today that developments like Hitler’s appointment as chancellor, the Reichstag Fire Decree, and the Enabling Act – all of which came about in quick succession early in 1933 – did indeed contribute to the rise of Nazi Germany, and by extension the destruction that state wrought, such understandings are a product of the present, and were by no means common to the average American who was living through those same events. In the

²⁸ Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 354.

following section, a detailed exploration of the events of January through March 1933, as reported in the American news media, will seek to reveal the extent to which Americans would have been aware of happenings in Germany. This analysis will form the basis of a later discussion that will suggest that the events in question were not, at the time, universally viewed with the same sort of foreboding portrayed in much modern scholarship.

Part III. Reporting Germany: The American Media

Even in the modern age of scientific polling and research institutions devoted to public opinion, gauging the pulse of the population remains a challenging and inexact endeavor. This venture becomes even more daunting when one attempts to assess the temperament of a populace nearly eighty years after the fact. But American public opinion in early 1933, while elusive, can provide important insights into the attitudes and assessments that greeted Hitler's ascension to power in German politics. As the discussion in the previous section has suggested, to assume the existence of a universal sense of dread or foreboding toward the emergence of a Nazified Germany may be premature. But in order to recapture both the nature and the scope of the contemporary American perspective (or more accurately, perspectives), it is first necessary to establish exactly how much Americans knew about the facts surrounding developments in Germany during this time. Once a clearer picture emerges of what Americans actually

knew, it will become a simpler task to draw conclusions about what they might have thought.

Whether through radio bulletins, daily or weekly print publications, or the newsreel footage that accompanied every viewing in movie theaters, Americans had ample opportunities to learn about the goings-on in the rest of the country as well as the world at large. By 1930, daily newspaper circulation in the United States was hovering around forty million, and steadily climbing.²⁹ By mid-decade, around 70 percent of all U.S. households had at least one radio set (twice as many as those which had telephones).³⁰ By decade's end, somewhere around eighty-five million Americans were heading to the movie theaters each week.³¹ In short, if anyone was uninformed, it was by choice. But the news provided Americans with more than just information. It gave them the facts with which to form opinions and, often, suggestions of what those opinions should be. A common theme in much of the literature surrounding the role of journalism in modern society is the extent to which it molds opinion. Historian of journalism Leonard Ray Teel has unequivocally stated: "What newspapers say forms public opinion."³² In a similar vein, Edwin Emery (1914-1973), another authority on American media, has characterized the dissemination of information through news outlets as the primary source "upon which public opinion is so largely dependent."³³ Thus, though

²⁹ Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 442.

³⁰ Alice Goldfarb Marquis, "Written on the Wind: The Impact of Radio During the 1930s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 3 (July 1984): 405.

³¹ Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939), 1.

³² Leonard Ray Teel, *The Public Press, 1900-1945: The History of American Journalism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 4.

³³ Emery, iii.

“public opinion” is far from a monolithic entity, an examination of some of the news reports in early 1933 throughout various media will give a reasonable depiction of both the opinions of certain Americans, as well as the information that helped to shape them.

In a country as vast as the United States, “mass media” takes on some very literal meanings. On the one hand, it was truly a resource for the masses. There was furthermore a truly massive amount of outlets for dissemination. Newspaper circulation alone was around forty million copies – daily – as early as 1930. This medium itself therefore presents real selection challenges. Of the four media types utilized for this analysis – newspapers, radio, newsreels, and national periodicals – the two print resources are drawn on most heavily. Not only are they more widely available for researchers, but they include a good deal of overlap with other media. As Teel has pointed out, early 1930s news broadcasts over the radio consisted of brief readings of items already published in dailies or acquired from newswire services, like the Associated Press or the United Press.³⁴ And despite the growing popularity of radio in America, during the first half of the 1930s, “few listeners considered their radios a major source of news.”³⁵ In other words, during this period, the printed word was still “the primary source of news and information in America.”³⁶ Additionally, transcripts from important radio broadcasts could often be found in printed news reports, including speeches by state leaders as well as commentary from radio journalists. As for newspapers and periodicals, two of the nation’s largest dailies and two of the largest national magazines have been chosen: *The*

³⁴ Teel, 146.

³⁵ Marquis, 405-406.

³⁶ John Tebbel, *The Compact History of the American Newspaper* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1966), 229.

New York Times and *The Chicago Tribune* for the former category, and *Time* and *Newsweek* for the latter. In addition to being among the country's leading publications, they were also generally representative of the two prevailing schools of thought in American foreign policy—isolationism and interventionism. *The Times* and *Time* magazine generally “strongly supported the president on foreign affairs,” while *Newsweek* and *The Tribune* in particular “headed the list” of isolationist publications in the United States.³⁷ Thus, these resources together provide us with a reasonably representative, if not exhaustive, sampling of information and opinions circulating in America in early 1933.

As 1933 dawned, an attitude of cautious optimism could be detected in the nation's leading newspapers. In Chicago, readers would hear of a hopeful spirit pervading the country, “expressive of the hope that the new year would bring better things.”³⁸ Business was improving and cafes, hotels, and restaurants were reporting excellent business for the first time since the Depression struck. New Yorkers were given a similarly optimistic picture: “the advent of 1933 again meant hope—hope for the return of prosperity.”³⁹ Yet all was not well with the world. As January wore on, Americans would have found themselves increasingly bombarded with news of political developments in Germany. On January 17, reports that German Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher was planning “the formation of a State militia or the readoption of conscription” that would return Germans to the “compulsory service of pre-war days”

³⁷ Cole, 478.

³⁸ “Chicago In Gay Mood Looks To Better Times,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 1, 1933.

³⁹ “1932 Is Hooted Out, New Year Greeted With Noisy Revelry,” *New York Times*, January 1, 1933.

found their way into American newspapers.⁴⁰ The undeniable allusion to the militaristic Germany that precipitated the First World War (then, simply The Great War) may well have given readers pause. Less than two weeks later, the media announced that Chancellor von Schleicher, “the Chancellor of peace,” had resigned from office, thereby leaving the political situation in Germany “a picture of complete confusion.”⁴¹ Perhaps even more ominously, the possibilities of that “militant leader of the National Socialists,” Adolf Hitler, taking power as chancellor were “greater than ever.”⁴²

When Hitler was, in fact, appointed as chancellor on the following day, concerned rumblings were reported from all over Europe. In Hungary, one official voiced his disquiet in no uncertain terms: “The only certain thing is that difficult times are ahead for Germany and a serious shock which may affect the destiny of all Europe can hardly be avoided.”⁴³ From Yugoslavia came similar sentiments, heralding the rise of Hitler as “the rebirth of the old, imperialistic, warlike Germany thirsting for revenge.”⁴⁴ One Austrian newspaper wrote that the appointment opened up “disastrous prospects for Germany at home and abroad.”⁴⁵ In Poland, the news was greeted as a welcome development—but only to the extent that it would alert the rest of Europe to the inherent danger posed by resurgent German nationalism.⁴⁶ So far, these accounts would seem to lend credence to the view that Hitler’s rise to power, even before he had performed a single act in his

⁴⁰ “Germany Planning A Federal Militia,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1933.

⁴¹ Guido Enderis, “Schleicher Quits; Hindenburg Seeks Coalition Cabinet,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1933.

⁴² Sigrid Schultz, “Hitler Claims German Rule As Schleicher’s Cabinet Falls,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 29, 1933.

⁴³ “Jubilant And Gloom Greet Hitler’s Accession To Power,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1933.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ “Poland Sees Reich Showing True Face,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1933.

capacity as chancellor, was received with widespread foreboding. Indeed, in an editorial appearing in the *Times* on January 31, one contributor wrote that it would be “useless to try to disguise the qualms with which the news from Berlin must cause to all friends of Germany.”⁴⁷ After all, Hitler was a man who had openly vowed to destroy the German Republic and set up a “personal dictatorship” in its place.⁴⁸ Clearly, concerns were present over the implications of a German government run by the National Socialist leader from the very outset of his administration.

In the weeks following Hitler’s appointment, news coverage continued to bring Americans all the latest developments coming from the German Reich. Early in February, Americans would have learned of ongoing rioting, political clashes, and the violent deaths of German partisans. One newsreel showed footage of torch lit processions, as uniformed paramilitary units marched past a glowering Hitler, haranguing his supporters from the Reichstag balcony. During the footage, the narrator informed viewers that “bloodshed is a daily occurrence” between Nazis and Communists.⁴⁹ Reports also surfaced of restrictions placed on the press. Reporting from Berlin, *Times* correspondent Frederick T. Birchall told Americans of measures curbing the abilities of political opponents to disagree with Hitler in print. Additionally, even foreign newspapers “critical of Chancellor Hitler, his party or his program” were forbidden to be circulated within Germany.⁵⁰ Equally startling may have been the speedy dissolution of the Reichstag. Since Hitler headed a government without a working majority, he “promptly obtained a

⁴⁷ “Germany Ventures,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1933.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ American History in Video, Release 119, Feb 13, 1933. Universal Newsreels. <http://ahiv.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.lib.lehigh.edu/View/731718> (accessed September 5, 2012).

⁵⁰ Frederick T. Birchall, “Reich Gags Press, Ends Prussian Diet,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1933.

decree dissolving the Reichstag” and called for new elections on March 5.⁵¹ That such knowledge troubled many Americans is beyond dispute. In what may have been a common sentiment, one editor in the *Tribune* expressed the view that as of yet, nothing about Hitler’s personality or the views of his party encouraged “much hope in the American mind that the Fascist movement will produce lasting good for Germany or avoid the costly errors of domestic tyranny and international friction or collision.”⁵² Here again allusions to a militaristic, imperial past can be detected. Though such a threat may not have been perceived as imminent at that time, the lessons of the Great War had shown just how costly the errors of “international friction” could be.

As the March 5 elections approached, some of the pronouncements coming from Hitler and other Nazi officials would have done little to mitigate the unease some observers may have felt. One member of the Hitler cabinet, Dr. Alfred Hugenberg, a nationalist but not a Nazi himself, told supporters in a speech that “the present Cabinet would hold on, irrespective of the results of the Reichstag election.”⁵³ On a similar note, Chancellor Hitler warned: “If the people should desert us, that will not restrain us! Whatever happens we will take the course that is necessary to save Germany from ruin!”⁵⁴ Additionally, word soon spread that the Nazis were moving to ban any political rallies supporting the opposition.⁵⁵ So much for democratic elections. In terms of foreign affairs, the outlook may have appeared equally unsettling. Hitler had recently made a “frank presentation” of his proposed foreign policy for Germany, in which he asserted

⁵¹ “Four Year Plans,” *Time*, February 13, 1933, 16.

⁵² “Hitler’s Appeal,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 4, 1933.

⁵³ Enderis, “Hugenberg Expects One More Election,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1933.

⁵⁴ “Nazi Notes,” *Time*, February 27, 1933, qtd. on 17.

⁵⁵ “Nazis To Repress All Foes’ Rallies,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1933.

that “Germany will increase her armaments unless France disarms,” and furthermore demanded control of the Polish Corridor, a narrow strip of land separating East Prussia from the rest of Germany.⁵⁶ Both of these demands were an apparent abrogation of the Treaty of Versailles, and moreover threatened to undermine the Disarmament Conference that had been taking place in Geneva since 1932. Given the nature of developments like these, it is unsurprising that many Americans had serious misgivings about the implications of Nazi leadership.

The next major event in Hitler’s assault on democracy occurred late in February, not even a full week before the Reichstag elections. On February 27, Nazi officials apprehended one Marinus “van der Lurgg” at the scene of the burning Reichstag building.⁵⁷ Van der Lubbe, as the man was actually named, was a Dutch bricklayer cum arsonist, with links to the Communist Party. An immediate crackdown on German Communists, including standing Reichstag members, followed. Suggestions soon came through the American media that perhaps the Communist conspiracy theories bellowed out by the Nazi leadership were less than credible. After all, it played nicely into Nazi hands that their main political rival seemingly lost the plot days before an important election. In *Newsweek*, it was reported that “patly enough, too patly to satisfy the foreign press,” the Nazis found the exact sort of conspiracy they had been warning the German people about.⁵⁸ *Time* gave a similar assessment, citing reports coming from outside of Germany that suggested the Nazis themselves were responsible for the fire, “for reasons

⁵⁶ “Hitler Presents German Claims Bluntly; Says Reich Will Rearm if Paris Won’t Cut,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1933.

⁵⁷ Birchall, “Incendiary Fire Wrecks Reichstag; 100 Red Members Ordered Seized,” *New York Times*, February 28, 1933.

⁵⁸ “Hitler Sits Firmer In Saddle,” *Newsweek*, March 11, 1933, 6-7.

only too obvious.”⁵⁹ But debates over whether van der Lubbe acted alone, under duress, for the Communists or for the Nazis were ultimately academic. The real issue appeared the following day, when the Hitler Cabinet enacted the Reichstag Fire Decree. Reactions in the press were measured, but a degree of anxiety was evident. Not only did the decree give Hitler “a tyrant’s powers,” but it also made possible “far reaching interference with personal liberty.”⁶⁰ In addition to the presence of a healthy dose of skepticism with regard to the source and motivation behind the fire in popular reporting, there was also a sense of wariness over the seemingly predictable Nazi reaction to it.

Evidence of this unease can be found throughout March as well. Reports that the chancellor would soon become a dictator were common. In the wake of the Fire Decree, *Newsweek* wrote that Hitler essentially ruled Germany “from border to border.”⁶¹ The *Chicago Tribune* was even more explicit: “Germany is now well on the way to Fascist dictatorship. Chancellor Hitler . . . has been given the legal tools to annihilate the last vestiges of the democracy which he considers a failure.”⁶² This sort of commentary was commonplace even before the Enabling Act passed later in the month. Thus, after the Act was finalized on 23 March, while some reactions were strong, hardly any exhibited much surprise. The Act, which “transformed an ex-corporal into a Dictator,” endowed in Hitler more power “than even Bismarck dreamed of.”⁶³ Similarly, the front page of the *New York Times* the day after the Act passed declared that Hitler was now, truly, “the master

⁵⁹ “General Massacre?” *Time*, March 13, 1933, 17.

⁶⁰ “Constitution Crimped,” *Time*, March 13, 1933, 17; “Fire Rages in Reichstag; Nab Red for Arson,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 28, 1933.

⁶¹ “Hitler’s Bright Sun Shines On Bloody Acts,” *Newsweek*, March 18, 1933, 16.

⁶² “Hitler Tightens Grip On German Rule At Polls,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 6, 1933.

⁶³ “Germany Throws Her Republic Overboard,” *Newsweek*, April 1, 1933, 3; “Hitler Enabled,” *Time*, April 3, 1933, 16.

of Germany with power greater than that of any of his predecessors.”⁶⁴ Such reports seemingly would have left little room to doubt the scope of Hitler’s victory. But although the media gave a realistic picture of Hitler’s power, it did not follow that all speculation on the future of Germany and the rest of Europe was uniformly negative.

It is easy to look back over some of the headlines in early 1933 and assume that readers would have seen the beginnings of a dark and dangerous period in world affairs. After all, the rise of a tyrant in a country with a less than stellar reputation when it came to its foreign relations could hardly be considered anything but troubling. But having concerns is not the same as accurately anticipating the trajectory of global events. As the following section of this analysis will attempt to show, although Americans were for the most part fully informed about developments in Germany, and often expressed a certain degree of trepidation about what they knew, in 1933 it was entirely unclear how things would play out. A whole range of factors, including what was going on domestically, developments in other parts of the world, and the very real uncertainty over the unfolding German situation suggests that rather than viewing the emergence of Nazi Germany as an imminent danger, Americans would have, initially at least, been more likely to regard the new chancellor as little more than a side show. Though they often get lost in modern accounts, there were other issues, other nations, and other developments in the early parts of 1933 that seemed to present more pressing concerns for the American populace.

⁶⁴ “Hitler Cabinet Gets Power To Rule As A Dictatorship; Reichstag Quits Sine Die,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1933.

Part IV. Alternate Perspectives: Contextualizing American Attitudes

Domestic Distractions

If one were to go back in time, poll the American public in the first few months of 1933, and ascertain which issue seemed most pressing – the election of a reactionary politician in Europe or the new president’s plan for economic recovery – it is likely that the overwhelming majority of Americans would have identified the latter. Though no such survey exists, a reexamination of contemporary media reports suggests that there were more than enough troubling domestic matters to either render news of a new German government inconsequential or, alternately, to make at least some Americans sympathetic to the seemingly drastic developments over in the German Reich.

In 1933 the United States was still very much in the throes of the Great Depression. The stock market had imploded, the banking industry was in shambles, unemployment grew unchecked, and, most alarmingly perhaps, “the fear of public unrest was such that machine guns guarded government buildings.”⁶⁵ This scenario, seemingly more suited to a totalitarian state, was what greeted Franklin Roosevelt as he took the oath of office on March 4. Even though the new president was taking office less than a week after Hitler’s Fire Decree and a day before the March 5 “elections” in Germany, the policies of the Nazi Party did not really figure into the American president’s thoughts—or at least not those thoughts he shared with the public. In Roosevelt’s own words, the purpose of his inaugural address, broadcast over the radio and reprinted in papers

⁶⁵ Joseph A. Pika and John A. Maltese, *The Politics of the Presidency*, 8th ed. (Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2013), 485.

nationwide, was “the putting of first things first.”⁶⁶ And those things were identified unequivocally: “Our greatest primary task is to put people to work.”⁶⁷ When he addressed the nation on that late winter day, his 1,800 word speech devoted a mere 54 words to foreign affairs. The gist of this brief aside was that America would follow a “good neighbor” policy. Though the details were short, his implication was clear: domestic and economic issues would be the administration’s primary focus.

This mindset was reflective of a “general belief that foreign policy must play a secondary role until the domestic crisis was eased.”⁶⁸ About a week later, in his first “fireside chat,” Roosevelt made no reference whatsoever to Hitler, Germany, or foreign affairs in general. If we recall that Roosevelt was speaking at a time that the public had full knowledge of Hitler’s victories in Germany – that coercive elections had been held, that legislation providing for the elimination of civil liberties from German citizens had been enacted, and thousands of political opponents had been subsequently jailed – it may seem surprising to the modern reader that next to nothing concerning these developments was coming from the chief executive. However, this lack of attention helps to illustrate the central argument of this study—namely, that while we understand that same progression of events in Germany as obviously leading toward the cataclysm of World War II, Roosevelt and his contemporaries did not (and could not) have the same understanding. This basic observation represents just one of the many “gaps” in historical

⁶⁶ Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), qtd. on 23.

⁶⁷ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *The Year of Crisis, 1933*, vol. 2 of *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: Random House, 1938), 13.

⁶⁸ Divine, 4. See also, Dallek, 23: “Starvation, unemployment, business and financial collapse made foreign relations a secondary concern.”

consciousness referenced in the opening section of this essay. While the knowledge of Munich in 1938 or Normandy in 1944 inevitably leads the modern-day historian to question Roosevelt's emphasis early in his administration, it can also obscure the fact that places like Detroit and D.C. were far more central to American concerns than Dunkirk or Dresden—which only seem relevant according to a post-war perspective.

Inherent in the above review of the all-consuming pressures of the domestic crisis is the idea that although what Franklin Roosevelt actually said was important in shaping domestic opinion, it is equally important to consider the things he did *not* say. If, as some historians have contended, Roosevelt played an instrumental role in swaying the American populace toward intervention in European affairs,⁶⁹ it seems reasonable to ask the question: did the president's lack of public engagement on foreign affairs early in his first administration contribute to a sense of indifference over events in Germany? It is a difficult question to answer with certainty but it seems logical to presume that had Roosevelt expended his considerable energies toward a more robust foreign policy earlier in his tenure, isolationist sentiment might not have lasted as a political force for as long as it did.⁷⁰ For when the president spoke, America listened. Though he purposely limited

⁶⁹ See Cole, 365: "None save Churchill was more effective than Roosevelt in using the spoken word to inspire and move those opposed to Axis aggression. The president's fireside chats, broadcasts, and messages to Congress were sources of information, inspiration, guidance, and leadership for Congress and the American people." See also Richard W. Steele: "Neither the gravity of the various crises confronting the Roosevelt administration nor the actions it took in response were in themselves sufficient to guarantee popular support." Rather, the author contends that it was the efforts the president made through the media (newspapers, radio, etc.) that decisively shaped opinion. See *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933-1941* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 171.

⁷⁰ Of course, Roosevelt *was* concerned with the developing situation overseas, particularly with regard to the persecution of German Jews. In June 1933, FDR told the newly appointed ambassador to Germany, William Dodd, that the "German authorities are treating the Jews shamefully." It was not, however, an American issue: "We can do nothing except for American citizens who happen to be made victims." Thus, Roosevelt, like many other Americans, initially took a pragmatic approach to the question of German

his radio addresses to the nation for fear that such repeated appeals would “erode his welcome and diminish the effect of his words,” when Roosevelt took to the airwaves, so many listeners tuned in “that unaffiliated stations carrying other programming at the same time found themselves without an audience.”⁷¹ But whatever the exact nature of his contributions toward American attitudes on Nazi Germany in the first few months of 1933, there is evidence that a desire to focus energy internally went beyond presidential pronouncements.

In February, one editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* opened by stating: “Our preoccupation is again with our own internal troubles.”⁷² In a similar vein, a feature by columnist Charles Mertz in *The New York Times* appearing the day after the inauguration outlined ten major issues confronting the new president. Though the author conceded that no brief summary could “adequately describe all of the questions with which the incoming President must deal,” only the last four issues were foreign in nature.⁷³ National currency, the budget, the national debt, the banks, farm relief, and railways were all more pressing issues domestically. As for foreign affairs, tariffs were “the first readily apparent problem,” in addition to war debts, armaments, and general security.⁷⁴ Tellingly, two of the four foreign issues were economic in nature, while the only specific reference to national security issues was “the troubled course of Far Eastern affairs.”⁷⁵ Later in the month, the same publication carried an editorial that summed up what may have been a

policy. See William E. Dodd and Martha Dodd, eds., *Ambassador Dodd's Diary: 1933-1938* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1941), qtd. on 5.

⁷¹ Steele, *Propaganda*, 8-9, 22.

⁷² “Deterioration Of National Defense,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 12, 1933.

⁷³ Charles Mertz, “Ten Vast Problems That Roosevelt Faces,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1933.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

popular opinion at the time: “As is proper, we are leaving to Europe the formation of plans to deal with problems that are most particularly European.”⁷⁶ A common theme is easy to find here: America needed to pull itself out of the Depression; until then, the rest of the world was on its own. Whether or not Roosevelt was the driving force behind this attitude is merely academic. The important point here is that although one can also find evidence that some Americans were concerned about the direction Germany seemed to be taking, there were others who were more anxious to solve problems at home first.

So worried were some Americans over combating the Depression that they were even willing to consider some unorthodox and even, perhaps, some un-American solutions. As early as his first inaugural address, Franklin Roosevelt floated the idea of expanding executive authority in light of the present crisis in no uncertain terms. While the “normal balance” of executive and legislative authority had been “wholly adequate” in the past, the “unprecedented demand and need for undelayed [*sic*] action may call for a temporary departure” from the traditional arrangement of power.⁷⁷ Even more tellingly, he warned that should Congress fail to agree to this so-called “temporary departure,” the president would not “evade the clear course of duty” as he saw it and would presumably act as he saw fit in spite of Congress.⁷⁸ Although his critics would accuse him of dictatorial ambitions (and not for the last time), Roosevelt’s message was “applauded” by many across the nation.⁷⁹ At this early stage, “the American people, the Congress, businessmen, workers, and farmers alike shared in an almost desperate eagerness to

⁷⁶ Edwin L. James, “Mr. Roosevelt Tackling International Problems,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1933.

⁷⁷ Roosevelt, *The Year of Crisis*, 15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁹ Pika and Maltese, 485.

follow a leader who might restore prosperity”—an attitude, incidentally, that was mirrored by more than a few German voters.⁸⁰

Public reaction to this seemingly startling course reveals that at least some Americans were unfazed and indeed supportive of such measures. In the *Tribune*, one editorialist argued the President’s case. It was necessary to “vest in the President full power to accomplish without check or delay” the process of economic recovery, “and therefore to the release and mobilization of the vast resources of the nation for the work of restoration.”⁸¹ Furthermore, the reasons for adopting this plan of action were “so concrete and so pressing that [FDR] had to act as he did in demanding immediate authority to carry out a program of economy.”⁸² Additionally, Americans would not have to worry about some of the less than savory sides to dictatorial government. For as one proponent had argued even prior to the inauguration, Roosevelt would not be “the grim and arbitrary dictator which some enthusiasts are declaring to be the need of the hour,” but rather a “genial and smiling one.”⁸³ Presumably, as long as the president smiled or laughed as he exercised (or abused?) authority, trickier questions of procedure or constitutionality would cease to matter. Whatever the case, even before Roosevelt took the oath of office, many Americans were “going over bodily” to the “conception of an absolute ruler.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Cole, 37.

⁸¹ “The Paramount Issue,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 11, 1933.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ “Dictator, Limited,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1933.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Moreover, it was not just private citizens who supported the scheme. Former Governor of New York Alfred E. Smith had earlier called for FDR to either act as or establish a “public works dictator” to aid in the nation’s industrial and economic recovery.⁸⁵ Roosevelt’s running mate John Nance Garner was equally adamant: “I want to give the President *unlimited power* to reduce the cost of government. Practical experience has shown that Congress is not going to do it I am really in earnest about this.”⁸⁶ The proposal to give Roosevelt “broad and extraordinary powers in the reorganization of the Federal Government for economy and efficiency” was likewise lauded by John Jay Hopkins, assistant to the outgoing Secretary of the Treasury.⁸⁷ Understandably though, not all were enthralled, especially some members of Congress. Senator from Idaho and leading isolationist William E. Borah wryly commented that “I should hope that if Congress should ever undertake to confer dictatorial powers” on the president, they would then have the decency to resign.⁸⁸ But on whatever side of the debate one fell, clearly this was a topic of some import. And while few, then or now, would liken the FDR administration to Hitler’s tenure, some obvious parallels are apparent nevertheless. Both men came to power as elected officials tasked with righting the ship of state. Both asked for expanded executive authority at the expense of the legislature to deal with unprecedented emergencies. Such similarities did not escape the notice of an engaged American audience.⁸⁹ And although it is difficult to conclude with certainty, it seems

⁸⁵ “Roosevelt Invites Governors Mar. 6 To Draft National Recovery Plans; Smith Urges Public Works Dictator,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1933.

⁸⁶ “Power To The President,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1933 (emphasis added).

⁸⁷ “Wide Power Asked For The President,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1933.

⁸⁸ “Against Dictatorship,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1933.

⁸⁹ As Ferguson has pointed out, “the resemblances between Adolf Hitler’s speech to the newly-elected Reichstag on March 21, 1933, and Roosevelt’s inaugural address are indeed a great deal more striking than

reasonable to surmise that given the broad perception of the need, unfortunate though it may have been, for a strong and authoritative leader at home, at least some Americans could have accepted a similar necessity faced by other countries. As absurd as it sounds in the twenty-first century to compare the newly-elected Franklin Roosevelt to the newly-appointed Adolf Hitler, if we recognize the vast difference between the historical consciousness of an American in the post-war world and an American in 1933, the juxtaposition of an American president with a German dictator becomes significantly less far-fetched.

Such a mindset may appear strange in hindsight. But it is important to remember that the Great Depression was a watershed event in not just U.S., but also global history. Andrew Nagorski, former foreign correspondent and senior editor for *Newsweek*, has gone as far as to claim that so greatly had the Depression “shaken many core beliefs,” many Americans felt “that everything was debatable,” including whether the dictatorial tendencies of Nazi government at this still early stage was a good or a bad thing.⁹⁰ In terms of the scope of its impact across society, few events can compare. Franklin Roosevelt used the crisis to affect a comprehensive reworking of the role of government in American society, the effects of which are still apparent to the present day. But more important for the purposes of this study is the extent to which it influenced the actions and attitudes of Americans early in 1933. During a time when, for many Americans, day

the differences.” While conceding that the United States and Germany took “wholly different political directions” henceforth, Ferguson’s point illustrates that the differences between the subsequent courses of each government were much more apparent in 1945 than in 1933. Thus, in March 1933, those comparisons would have seemed less tenuous than they appear to the modern reader. See Ferguson, 224.

⁹⁰ Andrew Nagorski, *Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazi Rise to Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 220.

to day existence presented a real struggle, happenings in other parts of the world may have simply seemed inconsequential to their more immediate concerns. What did the actions of an Austrian firebrand matter to a family without the means to buy food? And furthermore, why should Americans have cared if Germany was flirting with a dictatorship when similar ideas were circulating about (with a good deal of support, too) at home? If we examine the facts as they were in early 1933, it becomes clear that the happenings in Germany, no matter how distasteful they may have appeared (either then or now), may have quite easily paled in comparison to the troubled state of affairs domestically. And even for those who cared to look abroad in those first few months of 1933, it is quite likely that they would have seen far more causes for concern than rumblings of trouble brewing in Germany.

Foreign Affairs

During the first few months of 1933, Americans would have seen and heard with increasing regularity reports of violent oppression in a particular foreign country. One concerned writer took it upon himself to notify the folks at home of the conditions as they were: “a political reign of terror exists. There is no freedom of speech nor liberty of the press. A rigid censorship prevails. Criticism of the administration is barred; foreign papers are seized or confiscated.”⁹¹ In this country, rule is implemented through “high-handed methods and ruthless procedures by which all constitutional rights are dragged in

⁹¹ “Conditions In Cuba,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1933.

the dust.”⁹² Moreover, “numerous political prisoners are still in jail” and “an elaborate espionage system exists.”⁹³ *Times* columnist Russell Porter told a similar story, writing that this country’s leader had been ruling “with an iron hand,” to the extent that his detractors regarded him “as a dictator and a tyrant.”⁹⁴ The “secret police and strong-arm squads” terrorized the population, while the administration’s opponents clogged the nation’s jails.⁹⁵ In the capital city, American newspapers and magazines, including the prestigious *Time*, were “seized and destroyed” in retaliation for negative coverage of events there.⁹⁶ If one were to leave the account at that, many present day observers would, not unreasonably, make the immediate leap to Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. Indeed, much of the preceding description could be applied with equal validity to Hitler’s Germany, though perhaps not as early as 1933. The above accounts, however, in actuality refer to the government of Cuban President Gerardo Machado.

It is easy to forget that the pre-war world involved more than just a progressive German march toward war. Americans were certainly aware of Herr Hitler’s achievements, if not his ultimate designs, but as the above example illustrates, the rest of the world did not stand still while Hitler began to remake Germany in his own image. Cuba’s General Machado represented just one in a long list of potentially threatening foreign situations facing the United States in 1933. That some viewed Hitler with trepidation is beyond question. But it is also worth asking if other heads of state or

⁹² “Conditions in Cuba.”

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Russell Porter, “Revolt of Terror Going On In Cuba; Fear Of Riot Grows,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1933.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ “Cuba,” *Time*, January 23, 1933, 20.

matters of foreign policy may have given Americans at least as much pause as the new German chancellor. This type of contextualization is crucial if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the initial American reactions to Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Thus, in this present section we will explore pertinent topics such as the contemporaneous prevalence of dictatorial governments, the incidence of civil unrest globally, the presence of any threats, direct or otherwise, to U.S. security, and finally any additional mitigating factors that may have made the specter of Nazi Germany less menacing than it has appeared in hindsight. This investigation will provide further evidence that the appearance of Nazi government on the world stage did not, and could not, appear as momentous as later history would prove—and as later historians have made it to be.

In its first April issue in 1933, *Newsweek* gave a brief but significant synopsis of the global situation in the aftermath of Hitler's Enabling Act: if one were to survey the world's governments, it would soon become clear that the list of functioning dictators was now "a long one. Dictatorships since the war have been [as] common as thrones before it."⁹⁷ According to the article, Italy, Spain, Poland, Russia, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Austria, Albania, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, and Greece all represented the European contingent of authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian governments, with Germany only being the most recent member. South America too had its share, and as we have already seen, Cuba was the closest to the United States geographically. Therefore, although a Nazi dictatorship in Germany may still have been unwelcome, it certainly would not have been out of the ordinary given the prevalence of authoritarian regimes worldwide, and

⁹⁷ "Germany Throws Her Republic Overboard," 4.

especially in Europe. Furthermore, it is worth recalling that in light of the severe economic depression in many parts of the world, Americans would have been more likely than was their wont to view with understanding, if not outright support, strong executive, even dictatorial, governments at this time.

Indeed, in the case of Cuba some Americans had initially believed that the country “needed to be ruled by a strong man in the economic emergency,” that Machado “was doing the best he could in a very difficult situation,” and that “any alternative Cuban government would only make matters worse.”⁹⁸ Another report on the circumstances in Portugal under the rule of General Oscar Carmona suggested that dictatorship might even be a good thing under the right circumstances. After four years “without a Parliament or any elected body,” Portugal was enjoying a balanced budget, ample and cheap supplies of food and wine, and a generally peaceful political landscape.⁹⁹ These examples are not to suggest that all dictatorships were looked upon favorably by the American public, nor that every absolute head of state effected such encouraging results. What they do indicate, however, is that given the political and economic circumstances in early 1933, both domestically and abroad, Americans would have, perhaps, been at least as likely, if not more so, to receive news of Nazi leadership in Germany with a sort of hopeful indifference as with a sense of foreboding dread. Although the world was far from a peaceful place even before the Nazi depredations across Europe, given the unspeakable violence perpetrated in the name of dictators from Hitler to Pol Pot in the last sixty years of the twentieth century, the term “dictator” itself

⁹⁸ “Revolt of Terror,” 9.

⁹⁹ “Dictatorship Does Well By Portugal,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1933.

may have seemed far less threatening in 1933—yet another example of the gap in historical consciousness from then to the present day.

Another factor which may have mitigated a hyper-focused sensitivity to developments in Germany was the high incidence of civil as well as international unrest in a whole host of countries besides the new German Reich. In early 1933, the German people were not the only ones grappling with questions of domestic and foreign affairs. The first few months of 1933 saw reports of violence and infighting from all over the globe. Early in January, Americans would have learned that Ireland had dissolved its Parliament in the midst of deadlock and political infighting. Casualty reports coming from the ongoing Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay listed the total dead, wounded, or missing at 7,200 from a recent battle.¹⁰⁰ Items such as the Spanish government's debates over a "rebel massacre," Brazil's threats to rush its fleet into the Chaco conflict, "rebellious outbreaks" in Argentina, and a revolt by "80,000 Moslem tribesmen" against British colonials in India also punctuated news reports.¹⁰¹ On March 13, the *Tribune* reported on a Soviet air strike thought to have killed as many as 17,000 Cossack tribesmen.¹⁰² Even France was not free from the contagion of domestic turmoil: after being "overthrown" by "a boisterous, crowded chamber of deputies," the French government was "facing a fight for existence."¹⁰³ Taken as isolated events, none of the

¹⁰⁰ "Dail Is Dissolved; De Valera Orders Elections Jan. 24," *New York Times*, January 3, 1933; "Recent Chaco Toll Put At 2,100 Dead," *New York Times*, January 2, 1933.

¹⁰¹ "News Summary Of The Tribune," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 25, 1933; John W. White, "Argentine Rebels Revolt In North," *New York Times*, January 9, 1933; "1,000 Indian Troops Rushed To Alwar," *New York Times*, January 10, 1933.

¹⁰² "News Summary Of The Tribune," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 13, 1933.

¹⁰³ Edmond Taylor, "French Cabinet Quits, Falls In Finance Crisis," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 28, 1933.

above may have seemed particularly concerning for most Americans. Even as a whole, it may have only served to reinforce a sense that international issues were too complex, too widespread for the American government to address. However, when reviewing contemporary media reports, it is clear that with regard to one country at least, Americans were paying special attention to developments. It lay not in Europe or even South America, but in the Far East.

About a week before Hitler came to power, *Time* magazine featured a lengthy cover piece on the Japanese Empire. Quoting Japanese War Minister Sadao Araki, the article left little doubt that the island nation was promoting a dangerous brand of foreign policy: “The spirit of the Japanese nation is, by its nature, a thing that must be propagated over the seven seas and extended over the five continents. Anything that may hinder it must be abolished, even by force.”¹⁰⁴ Japan’s earlier takeover of Chinese Manchuria (renamed Manchukuo) provided a forceful testament to Araki’s statement. Despite international censure, in the form of a 42-1 League of Nations vote (the one dissenting vote coming from Japan itself) that Japan withdraw from Manchuria or risk sanctions, Japan remained adamant about their right to territorial expansion. This bellicose stance helped to contribute to a certain degree of wariness within the United States. One editorialist sought to avert the public’s gaze from domestic issues to “events in the far east and their implications,” namely, the fact that the U.S. ranked third in terms of auxiliary ships – naval vessels that were not classified as battleships – behind Japan.¹⁰⁵ Lest Americans be lulled into a false sense of security by the qualifier “auxiliary,” that

¹⁰⁴ “Japan,” *Time*, January 23, 1933, 20.

¹⁰⁵ “Deterioration Of National Defense.”

author warned readers that the term conveyed “a sense of unimportance which is erroneous.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, the piece implied that Japan, if not an outright threat, was at the very least a direct competitor to the United States.

Later, in March, after Japan had formally announced its withdrawal from the League of Nations, Chinese diplomat Eugene Chen made the Japanese threat much more explicit in a bulletin issued by the Chinese government: “Japan’s major object is to frustrate an Anglo-American naval combination in the Pacific, thus enabling Japan to consolidate its position on the Asiatic mainland in preparation for a decisive war against the United States.”¹⁰⁷ He went on to identify Japan’s main aim as to “drive the American fleet from the Pacific.”¹⁰⁸ Although the Chinese government likely had ulterior motives in inciting the U.S. to intervene with Japan, the fact remains that there were no similar warnings regarding Germany—at least to the extent that it was planning a “decisive war” against the United States. Furthermore, some Americans recognized a potential threat even before China’s warning. “Interestingly enough,” wrote columnist Edwin L. James, Japan’s claim for maintaining control of the Caroline Islands in the Pacific was that they were of “great strategic value to the Japanese navy” in that they served to “take the Japanese flag some thousand miles or more eastward in the Pacific”—towards the United States, as a matter of fact.¹⁰⁹ In sum, not only was Japan the only country breaching international agreements in early 1933, from the League Covenant to the Kellogg-Briand Pact, it was also more openly militaristic than any other nation—including Germany.

¹⁰⁶ “Deterioration Of National Defense.”

¹⁰⁷ John Powell, “Japan’s Future Aims Peril U.S., Chen Declares,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 27, 1933.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ “A Nationalistic Japan Nears The Cross-Roads,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1933.

Such could not have escaped the notice of most Americans. In fact, an early February newsreel featured cheering crowds greeting the army of Japanese General Tamon, after their “victorious campaign against Chinese and Manchurian irregulars.”¹¹⁰ Combined with the detailed coverage available in print and over the radio, such images would have only underlined the realities of Japanese aggression.

But in spite of what some may have perceived as threatening developments around the globe, all was not doom and gloom in early 1933. In fact, one can find evidence of a real sense of optimism regarding the future. If we recall that much of the world was engaged in serious discussions over disarmament in Geneva, then perhaps expressions like the ones found in certain opinion pieces make a bit more sense. Take the following sentiment from a January editorial: the author identified a “change in spirit” in world affairs. “The path to ultimate agreement may be long and stony, but the world is entering upon it. This is the main and sufficient reason for the universal lifting of morale.”¹¹¹ While a buoyed morale may have been, in reality, far from universal, it is safe to assume that at least some observers would have found the ongoing international engagement encouraging. Even once the Nazis had assumed control, there were those who saw reason to be optimistic. In late March, even “the gloomiest Chancellor of the Exchequer England ever had” said that “the world situation was likely to improve in the next few months,” and that “it was evident matters on the Continent had undergone a

¹¹⁰ Release 116, Feb 2, 1933. Universal Newsreels. Available at <http://ahiv.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.lib.lehigh.edu/View/731715>

¹¹¹ “A Better Feeling,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1933.

remarkable and beneficial change.”¹¹² Even though the statesman speaking was Neville Chamberlain, this was well before the momentous conference at Munich. It also does not change the fact his attitude reveals that optimism over the state of world affairs was present to a certain degree in early 1933. Though the Disarmament Conference had yet to achieve any significant accord, it may come as a surprise to learn that many contemporaries blamed the lack of agreement not on a menacing and saber-rattling German Reich, but on the vindictiveness and intransigence of one of the victors of the Great War.

The Treaty of Versailles had been a source of frustration and no small amount of bitterness to Germans of all descriptions since its ratification in 1919. In particular, Germans took issue with the crippling reparation payments as well as their relegation to second rate nation status relative to the military capabilities of their European neighbors. But it is important to note that Germany’s demand for arms equality and a more balanced reparations agreement actually received support from some of her erstwhile enemies. In principle, most of the major nations had agreed to “strive to obtain for Germany and other powers ‘equality of rights in a system which would provide security for all nations.’”¹¹³ But how that was to be achieved was a different issue entirely. For Germany at least, the answer was clear. Either other nations needed to disarm and come down to her level, or Germany needed to be able to rearm herself to international parity. This seemingly straightforward point of view was, in fact, widely accepted in Europe. Indeed, towards the end of March, one article from a European correspondent testified that “Statesmen in

¹¹² Charles A. Selden, “Our Gain A Miracle, Says Chamberlain,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1933.

¹¹³ “Germany,” *Time*, January 23, 1933, 19.

Europe” had come to a general agreement the Versailles treaty was “a cancer eating away the health of Europe and must be cut out before permanent health can be restored.”¹¹⁴ If Europe agreed to address the central object of German scorn, what then was preventing the implementation of a solution? Interestingly enough, it was France, rather than Germany, that came out as the major stumbling block to a peaceful resolution. As far as Great Britain saw it, the trouble was “caused by the French demand for security,” and their unequivocal insistence on “superiority of arms over Germany,” which they would not compromise “either by disarming France or by Germany rearming.” Moreover, the French stance in opposition to Italy’s pleas for naval equality was “equally menacing.”¹¹⁵ Though history would vindicate this Gallic obstinacy, most contemporaries were unable, or at least unwilling, to adopt such a seemingly aggressive posture.

Consequently, this view of France, rather than Germany, as the source of both past and future trouble was evident at home as well. In the *Tribune*, one commentator went as far as to declare that not only was France complicating the current European situation, but it was ultimately responsible for the demise of German democracy and the Weimar Republic “by exactions and repressions which the spirit of the [German] people could not tolerate . . . Conservative German statesmen, one after another, were broken when their peaceful overtures to France brought nothing but humiliation to the Germans.”¹¹⁶ Such failures in turn opened the door for radical politicians “and finally the

¹¹⁴ John Steele, “Treaty of Versailles Must Be Revised, Europe Agrees,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 23, 1933.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., “Disarm Parley Near Failure; MacDonald to Go to Geneva,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 4, 1933.

¹¹⁶ “France Destroys The German Republic,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 24, 1933.

land became a battlefield where communists and Hitlerites fought for control.”¹¹⁷ Aspects of this indictment are echoed in a similar piece that appeared in the *Times*, wherein the writer justified the negative view of France: “The record in this country in the last ten years shows we are interested in world peace, while that of France indicates that her prime consideration is national aggrandizement.”¹¹⁸ The author went on to berate the French for refusing to pay its own war debts, even though it had the resources, pointing out that when Germany missed a payment, “a French army was sent to the Ruhr.”¹¹⁹ In short, “other nations were willing to make concessions, but not France.”¹²⁰ These opinions, while surely not universal, nevertheless reveal a line of thinking that runs counter to the common narrative. Though Nazi Germany eventually proved a far greater threat to world peace than a wary France, in the first few months of 1933, it was the French that actually appeared to be a bigger problem in the eyes of some observers.

French obduracy aside, a peaceful resolution to European ills still seemed attainable at this early stage of Nazi rule, whether through progress at Geneva or other diplomatic channels. One such avenue still being explored at that time was the so-called Quadrilateral Theory, or what later became known as the Four Powers Pact, wherein the major players in European politics—Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy—would coordinate their respective energies in order to bring the Disarmament Conference in particular and international disputes in general “to a satisfactory end.”¹²¹ By the end of March, none other than Italy’s Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini made steps to formalize

¹¹⁷ “France Destroys The German Republic.”

¹¹⁸ “An American Trait,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1933.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ “Four-Power Union In Europe Is Urged,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1933.

the agreement to lay “the foundations for a European ‘peace club.’”¹²² Specifically, this Four-Power Pact was designed to strengthen the existing Locarno Treaty by guaranteeing maintenance of the existing Franco-German frontier but would also serve the larger purpose of ensuring “an era of world peace.”¹²³ Though an actual treaty had not yet been signed, news reports gave accounts of ongoing discussions for “an enlightened agreement between all countries of Europe” that would involve a revision of Versailles as a *sine qua non*.¹²⁴ Although the eventual treaty failed to live up to its lofty aims (in fact, France did not even ratify once it was signed), developments like this would have offered some measure of hope during a time which, as we have seen, had more than its due share of difficulties.

In reassessing the state of global affairs in the early months of 1933, it becomes apparent that although the initial maneuvers of the Nazi regime in Germany may have certainly troubled the American citizenry, these developments were far from the only source of concern. With dictatorships more widespread than ever, revolution raging just off the Florida coast, and naked Japanese aggression in Asia (to list but a few), it would have taken an unusually prescient observer to predict that a seemingly limited, if virulent, strain of German nationalism would become the springboard for another global war—especially in light of the ongoing and well-publicized efforts at international diplomacy. There were, of course, those who predicted just that, but as their foresight did not extend to an entire population, neither should we impose it upon that same group. To do so

¹²² David Darrah, “Mussolini Told Of War Danger By MacDonald,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 19, 1933.

¹²³ Arnaldo Cortesi, “M’Donald Reveals Rome Peace Plan Covers All Europe,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1933.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

would be to ignore the gaps in historical consciousness this essay has been endeavoring to establish. Rather, it is important to acknowledge the many factors that would have informed American public opinion, not the least of which being the news and pronouncements coming out of Nazi Germany itself.

Concerning Germany

The image that emerges from a review of the domestic landscape of early 1933 as well as the much broader picture of global affairs is one of equal parts activity and uncertainty—a recipe, incidentally, that could very well describe any period in history, up to the present day. In this final piece of the current analysis, we will conclude the investigation with a closer look at Germany itself. Domestic turmoil and no shortage of foreign distractions may have prevented some Americans from concerning themselves with Germany’s new Nazi rulers, but was there anything specific to the German situation itself – whether pronouncements from the regime’s leaders, criticisms from its detractors, or the apparent nature of the power structure – that might have ameliorated American anxiety? As the following examination illustrates, if any American was looking for more reasons to quell a sense of disquiet or concern, there were plenty of mitigating factors to be found within the German situation itself.

From Washington D.C., “little apprehension was voiced concerning the effect the appointment of Hitler might have on international relations. It was believed the responsibility imposed upon the new chancellor would result in a more conservative

policy than he has heretofore pursued.”¹²⁵ Such measured responses reveal that even outside of the context of domestic strife or other international matters, Chancellor Adolf Hitler did not induce a nationwide panic. Rather, there were a number of factors that would have led Americans to take the news with varying degrees of equanimity, indifference, and even hopefulness. First of all, we must consider the nature of Hitler’s rise to power. It often gets lost in modern discourse that Hitler and his Nazi Party came to power through a legal, democratic process. Though historians like Richard Evans have referred to a “Nazi seizure of power,” in reality Hitler’s appointment as chancellor and even his subsequent dissolution of parliamentary government were achieved through legal and constitutional means.¹²⁶ Reflecting on this phenomenon, the German author and expatriate Emil Ludwig noted towards the end of the Second World War that “no American President ever rode to Capitol Hill with more legal right than Hitler on his way to the Wilhelmstrasse.”¹²⁷ The reason why a misunderstanding of the early Nazi victories still persists may be due to pronouncements from the Nazis themselves, who labeled their takeover of government, legal though it was, as a *Machtergreifung*—literally, a seizure of power. Thus, Evans and others have simply taken their cues from contemporary accounts.

¹²⁵ “Jubilation And Gloom Greet Hitler’s Ascension To Power.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1933.

¹²⁶ Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 11. Not all modern commentators have neglected to explore this significant point. Eric Hobsbawm, for one, has noted that in Germany, the Nazis did not “conquer power” but rather came to power “in a ‘constitutional’ fashion.” Likewise, Peter Fritzsche has made a similar observation, skillfully arguing that the “Nazis did not so much seize power” as take advantage of the political fragmentation that characterized the end stages of the Weimar Republic. See Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 127; see also Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 236.

¹²⁷ Emil Ludwig, “The Moral Conquest Of Germany,” *The Reader’s Digest*, January 1945, 117.

It should be noted, however, that media portrayals in 1933 did in fact take note of the legality, or at least the constitutionality, of Nazi rule. After the March 5 elections, a *Tribune* article reported that while Hitler may now have the power to eliminate democratic government, that power had been given to him “by the vote of the people.”¹²⁸ Likewise in the *Times*, one writer opined that “despite surface appearances,” Hitler’s victories had been achieved “not by physical force but essentially by the employment of the spoken and written word” (incidents of voter intimidation notwithstanding).¹²⁹ Furthermore, the new government was a true expression of German will: “No German government since 1918 could lay equal claim to have been commissioned by its constituents.”¹³⁰ Moreover, if the abolition of democratic government was indeed the aim of the Nazi Party, it could do so with the “authorization from a majority of German citizens.”¹³¹ The article ends on an interesting note: “Democracy means different things to different people.”¹³² In other words, although the German government was tending toward a dictatorship, the fact that it was established through plebiscite meant it was still an expression of a democratic process.

If characterizing Nazi government as a form of democracy seemed too large a pill for Americans to swallow, perhaps the structure of the new regime would have proven more reassuring. Though the Hitler dictatorship is usually dated from January 1933, the chancellor was actually a member of a coalition government in the early part of his tenure. Surrounded by such powerful figures as Franz von Papen (a former chancellor

¹²⁸ “Hitler Tightens Grip On German Rule At Polls,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 6, 1933.

¹²⁹ Hugh Jedell, “Victory Of Nazis Was ‘Revolution,’” *New York Times*, March 12, 1933.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

himself), Nationalist leader Alfred Hugenberg, and, of course, the *Reichspräsident* Paul von Hindenburg, Hitler was by no means master of Germany. Of the eleven members of the new cabinet, only three, including Hitler, were Nazis. As *Time* magazine explained it, “the fact that Germany’s new Cabinet is so full of ‘safeguards’ sufficiently explained last week the equanimity with which best posted observers greeted the advent of Chancellor Hitler.”¹³³ And although Hitler was the titular leader of government, “closer scrutiny” revealed that the Vice Chancellor von Papen would be the one pulling the strings. A known favorite of Hindenburg, von Papen’s presence in the cabinet was widely understood to function as “a buffer to National Socialist influence.”¹³⁴ Additionally, the all-important matters of industry, agriculture, and labor were in the hands of Dr. Alfred Hugenberg—a nationalist like Hitler, but otherwise “diametrically opposed” to the new chancellor.¹³⁵ Even more significantly, the German Army, “the main factor for maintaining law and order,” fell under the authority of General Werner von Blomberg—“a soldier and nothing but a soldier.”¹³⁶ To wit, one of the general’s first acts as Minister of Defense “was to announce his intention of ‘purifying’ the army of all ‘political taint’ it might have acquired in the party struggles of recent years.”¹³⁷ Finally, there was “Old Paul” watching over everything. Even after the Enabling Act, commentators pointed out that the president still had the power “to dismiss any or all members of the Cabinet including Handsome Adolf himself.”¹³⁸ In short, the Hitler Cabinet was “generally regarded as an ingenious device whereby Hindenburg’s men [could] keep an eye – and

¹³³ “Rise of Hitler,” *Time*, February 6, 1933, 21.

¹³⁴ “Centrists Demand Hitler Make Clear His Cabinet Policy,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1933.

¹³⁵ “Hugenberg Differs Wildly With Hitler,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1933.

¹³⁶ “War Chief Takes German Army Out Of Politics,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 21, 1933.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ “Hitler Enabled,” *Time*, April 3, 1933, 16.

hand – on the Nazi chieftan.” The bottom line? Hitler was “regarded as a prisoner of von Papen, Hugenberg and the ‘Generals.’”¹³⁹

As anyone who cared to know would have found out, while Hitler’s initial power appeared fairly wide, there were also some significant limitations—at least in theory. But let us consider how the more cynical observer may have viewed things. For there were, of course, those who would have dismissed any talk of “safeguards” as little more than wishful thinking (which history has shown to be the case). Assuming that Hitler was both the nominal and de facto leader of the new government, there were still a number of reasons for Americans to look favorably upon a Nazi-run Germany. To begin with, his pronouncements concerning Germany’s position with regard to the rest of the world were almost uniformly peaceful. His first statement in the capacity of chancellor contained the following declaration: “We want to live in peace and friendship with our neighbors. We want peace and quiet internally to enable business to recuperate and give us time to reorganize the nation.”¹⁴⁰ Days later, in his “radio debut” as chancellor, Hitler articulated his main goals as rehabilitating agriculture and eliminating unemployment. He furthermore voiced his hope that the ongoing Disarmament Conference “would yield such results as not to make it necessary for Germany to rearm.”¹⁴¹ In general, Chancellor Hitler “spoke more moderately in tone and words” than he had “as the roving spellbinder of the last two years.”¹⁴² Though he remained firm on the principles of German freedom and equality among nations, he also “avowed full recognition ‘of the solemn duty of

¹³⁹ “Hitler’s Chances,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1933.

¹⁴⁰ Schultz, “Berlin Throngs Cheer Hitler As Chancellor,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1933.

¹⁴¹ Enderis, “Hitler Wins Dissolution Of Reichstag; Urges Nation To End Its ‘Humiliation’ At Polls March 5; Has 4-Year Plans,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1933.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

working for the preservation of international peace.”¹⁴³ Significantly, such policies did not represent any sort of departure from the stated aims of previous administrations, as various media reports made clear.¹⁴⁴

Perhaps as a result of this degree of continuity, American reaction to the chancellor’s statements was generally positive. His professions of honest friendship with America (it “could not be imagined otherwise”¹⁴⁵), his wish to combat the economic depression, to put Germans back to work, to secure “the rights of private property & capitalist enterprise,”¹⁴⁶ to rid the nation of Godless Communism, to ensure a peaceful Europe, his request for four years to right the ship of state (the same term, incidentally, as the U.S. President)—all these were goals that Americans could, and did, identify with. Many, even those who saw firsthand the early stages of Nazi government, were understanding, if not totally enamored, with Germany’s apparent new course. The outgoing Ambassador to Germany Frederic M. Sackett, for one, recognized economic recovery as a critical element in political peace: since economics were the basis of a nation’s politics, “a great many of the political dangers of Europe can be, I am sure, over

¹⁴³ Enderis, “Hitler Wins Dissolution Of Reichstag.”

¹⁴⁴ *Time* magazine made this point quite clearly, maintaining that with regard to scrapping the Versailles Treaty and ending reparation payments, “all German statesmen have those aims!” Similarly, concerning Hitler’s stance on rearmament, the *Times* reported in February that such a position “fundamentally suggest[ed] no divergence from familiar German aspirations,” and again in March: “The democratic republic and the policy it has followed in a straight line from Ebert to Hindenburg, and from Erzberger and Rathenau to Stresemann, Bruening and von Papen, still remains. That policy of peace, national reconstruction and international cooperation is likely to continue.” In other words, Hitler was simply the latest mouthpiece for well-established German policy. See “Rise of Hitler,” *Time*, 21; “Hitler Presents German Claims Bluntly; Says Reich Will Rearm if Paris Won’t Cut,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1933; Birchall, “Hitler Intensifies Drive On The Left; Hundreds Arrested,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1933.

¹⁴⁵ “Complete Disarming Is Urged By Hitler,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1933.

¹⁴⁶ “Pure Rising,” *Time*, March 20, 1933, 15.

come if there is a wise treatment of its economic problems.”¹⁴⁷ And if a dictator was required to affect that recovery, then so be it. It is significant that there were similar suggestions that America needed a dictator of sorts, and the connection to the German situation did not go unnoticed: “The belief that the United States is about ripe for an experiment in dictatorial government . . . prompts constitutional experts here to draw comparisons between the American and German charters, particularly with respect to the authority invested in the executives of the two countries.”¹⁴⁸ Though Sackett’s successor, William E. Dodd, left Germany with a decidedly (and understandably) gloomier outlook in late 1937, he too lacked an initial understanding of the implications of Nazi rule. In a letter to Roosevelt shortly after arriving in Germany, Dodd urged Americans to have patience with Germany’s new leaders: “fundamentally, I believe a people has a right to govern itself and that other peoples must exercise patience even when cruelties and injustices are done. Give men a chance to try their schemes.”¹⁴⁹

As for the battle against Communism, though Americans were still a couple decades away from the panic and paranoia of McCarthyism, the Red threat was a very real part of the American political culture, and consequently, a fear that made certain Nazi policies relatable. One *Tribune* writer opined that “American opinion shares the Fascist hostility to communism and must sympathize with any sane determination of the German people to overcome its menace, morally unify and invigorate the German spirit,

¹⁴⁷ P. J. Philip, “Plea For Germany Made By Sackett,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1933.

¹⁴⁸ Enderis, “Hindenburg Seen As Ideal Dictator,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1933.

¹⁴⁹ Erik Larson, *In the Garden of Beasts* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), qtd. on 82.

and restore and fortify the elements of German character and body politic.”¹⁵⁰

Furthermore, unlike “the Reds in Russia,” the Nazis were not “defying the established world.” They were “not seeking to create in Germany a people with spear heads pointed to the rest of the world but a nation reorganized for better association with other countries.” Their objective, at least in theory, was “to unite Germany, to free it from the limitations imposed by an unjust treaty and to give it the place to which its natural power and accomplishment would entitle it.”¹⁵¹ That some Americans in 1933 saw Communism as a more immediate threat than Nazism is a small but powerful illustration of the significant distance between contemporary understandings and present-day assessments—the breadth of the gap between historical consciousness then and now.

At the same time that some Americans were recognizing parallels in the domestic positions of Germany and the United States, they were also looking somewhat uncritically (today, one might say naively, but that is the very type of characterization this study strives to avoid) at Hitler’s assurances of his peaceful intentions. In an early meeting with the foreign press, Hitler had spoken to them “with tremendous earnestness: ‘Anybody who knows war as I know it knows what a tremendous waste of effort or rather what a waste of strength it is . . . nobody wants peace more than I do, more than the German people do.’”¹⁵² It is important to appreciate that to this point, there were no compelling reasons to doubt the chancellor’s professions (though that is not to say that no one did). Thus, even after the Enabling Act, *Newsweek* characterized the foreign policy

¹⁵⁰ “Hitler’s Appeal,” *Tribune*.

¹⁵¹ “Hitlerites Amuck,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 21, 1933.

¹⁵² “Hitler Disavows Speedy Remedies,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1933.

Hitler continued to advocate as “mild as milk.”¹⁵³ *Time* magazine only differed marginally in its assessment, arguing that German foreign policy was actually as “mild as buttermilk.”¹⁵⁴ Whichever bovine byproduct one prefers for comparison, these judgments are indicative of a willingness to give the new German leader the benefit of the doubt. That German foreign policy ultimately took a decidedly different turn over the lifespan of the Third Reich is beside the point.

If one needed further assurance that Hitler’s Germany was less threatening than some made it out to be, there was still the notion that the acquisition of power was indeed smoothing out the rougher edges of Nazi doctrine. Almost immediately upon Hitler’s appointment, reports were appearing with the suggestion that especially violent or radical aspects of the Nazi program were being tempered. By March, Hitler himself was issuing orders, through “manifestos” as well as radio broadcasts to his followers: “I call upon you to guard the honor and dignity of the new regime . . . I therefore enjoin on you, from now on, the strictest and blindest discipline. Henceforth all individual actions must cease!”¹⁵⁵ Additionally, he called on supporters to “seize such disturbers” who upset order or put the regime in a negative light and “surrender them to the police.”¹⁵⁶ Even more importantly, it appeared that his directives were taking effect. The arrest of three Nazis (by other Nazis, no less) in Cologne for the attempted robbery of a Jewish man was labeled in one article as “the direct result of Chancellor Hitler’s order to his followers to cease acts of terrorism and to refrain from interfering with the business life of the

¹⁵³ “Germany Throws Her Republic Overboard,” *Newsweek*, 3.

¹⁵⁴ “Hitler Enabled,” *Time*, 16.

¹⁵⁵ “Blindest Discipline,” *Time*, March 20, 1933, qtd. on 15.

¹⁵⁶ Schultz, “Hitler Orders Nazi Troops To End Terrorism,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 11, 1933.

nation.”¹⁵⁷ If one wanted verification from a more official authority, Secretary of State Cordell Hull went on record saying that the improving domestic situation in Germany, particularly among the country’s Jews, was due to the “demands for discipline by Chancellor Hitler.”¹⁵⁸

Jewish authorities in Germany had a similar message, some even going as far as to say that reports of anti-Semitic atrocities were “pure inventions,” and that the efforts to curb violence had been effective.¹⁵⁹ Some of these organizations may have simply been trying not to antagonize the new administration, but that would not have necessarily been apparent at the time. Or perhaps German Jews, most of whom considered themselves as simply German, did not *want* to believe that rhetorical anti-Semitism would ever become a reality.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, the German Jewish writer Carl Zuckmayer later wrote that “many Jews considered the savage anti-Semitic ravings of Nazis merely a propaganda device, a line the Nazis would drop as soon as they won government power.”¹⁶¹ Though few Americans would have gone as far as to deny the existence of anti-Semitism in the Nazi program as well as in German society in general, the impression given was that Hitler was working toward a more moderate domestic policy.

Although such a development would have proven welcome news to many Americans (Jewish Americans especially), the ugly truth is that anti-Semitism was not a

¹⁵⁷ “Blindest Discipline,” *Time*, March 20, 1933, qtd. on 15.

¹⁵⁸ “Nazis End Attacks On Jews In Reich, Our Embassy Finds,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1933.

¹⁵⁹ The Central Union of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith was responsible for this particular quote, but others, including the Patriotic Society of National German Jews, expressed similar sentiments. See “German Jews Call Atrocity Stories ‘Lies,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 25, 1933.

¹⁶⁰ The existential crisis faced by Victor Klemperer was surely shared by many other German Jews: “Where do I belong? To the ‘Jewish nation’ decrees Hitler. And *I* feel the Jewish nation . . . is a comedy . . . I have truly always felt German.” See quote in Ferguson, 252.

¹⁶¹ Larson, qtd. on 58.

uniquely German, or even European, phenomenon. The United States too has had a less than exemplary history of domestic anti-Semitism, though it should be noted that the “ingrained prejudices of respectable people” was ultimately a far cry from the violent, political anti-Semitism that exploded across Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶² Nevertheless, in the blunt estimation of Leonard Dinnerstein of the University of Arizona, “Jew hatred permeated the United States.”¹⁶³ It may be then, that an uncomfortably large percentage of Americans (who were overwhelmingly white and Protestant) would have felt little sympathy for the plight of the German Jew. In fact, just as there were those who supported Nazi foreign policies but condemned Nazi treatment of their own citizens, there were those Americans who were wholly averse to Hitler with the *exception* of his anti-Semitism. The son of financial tycoon J. P. Morgan once told a friend that he strongly disapproved everything about Hitler “except for his attitude toward the Jews, which I consider wholesome.”¹⁶⁴

Attitudes such as these were indicative of what Erik Larson has labeled as a “sentiment pervasive in America, that Germany’s Jews were at least partly responsible for their own troubles.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, as the economic crisis deepened in the early 1930s, “Hitler’s attacks on Jews as the root causes of the world’s economic and social problems no longer seemed so outrageous” to many Americans.¹⁶⁶ Even American Jews were divided on how best to respond to the evolving Nazi policies. On one side, the American Jewish Congress was calling for “all manner of protest” while the more cautious

¹⁶² Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, qtd. on 108.

¹⁶⁵ Larson, 38.

¹⁶⁶ Dinnerstein, 107.

American Jewish Committee “counseled a quieter path, fearing that noisy protests and boycotts would only make things worse for Jews still in Germany.”¹⁶⁷ But one point both organizations could agree on was that “any campaign that explicitly and publicly sought to boost Jewish immigration to America could only lead to disaster.”¹⁶⁸ In short, Nazi anti-Semitism was neither completely alien to American sensibilities nor was it a strong enough issue to unite American opinion. Whether harboring a latent, cultural anti-Semitism or no, Americans in the 1930s would have generally reacted less strongly to instances of legal discrimination and even physical violence than their present-day counterparts, who carry in their collective memory the chilling implications of phrases like *Lebensraum*, the Final Solution, and *Arbeit macht frei*.¹⁶⁹

For those who might have been unmoved by Germany’s economic plight, the German desire to right the wrongs of Versailles, Hitler’s calls for order, the stemming of overt discrimination, and for those who still remained skeptical of Nazi professions of peaceful intentions, comfort could perhaps be derived from the underlying sense of uncertainty over the Nazi Party’s ability to retain power. In the first few months of the Hitler Cabinet, there was no real consensus that either the chancellor or his party would be long in charge. Before Hitler’s appointment, the *Times* had noted that the recently dissolved von Schleicher government had been the twentieth cabinet in only fourteen

¹⁶⁷ Larson, 29.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 29. These assessments are borne out by polling data in the late 1930s, which show that despite 95% opposition to the Nazi regime, less than 9% of those polled wanted to amend existing immigration policy while a full 83% were completely opposed to increasing quotas—all this well after the events of November 1938 (*Kristallnacht*). See Saul S. Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1938-1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 31.

¹⁶⁹ This becomes especially apparent if one considers that in the 1930s American anti-Semitism was “more virulent and more vicious than at any time before or since.” See Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 66.

years of Weimar.¹⁷⁰ Clearly longevity had not been a feature of recent German government. Thus reports coming out of Europe wondering “how big and how prolonged a flash Chancellor Hitler will be in Germany’s pan.”¹⁷¹ Specifically, French papers were curious to see “whether Hitler succeeds in maintaining power or he very soon falls.”¹⁷² Ambassador Dodd, eventually an ardent critic of the Nazi regime and one of the earliest European-based Americans to sound a note of alarm, was himself initially unsure of Hitler’s staying power in German politics. In late 1933, after experiencing a tepid reaction from German theater-goers to a newsreel featuring Chancellor Hitler, he mused in his diary that the Nazi leader was “surely not so powerful with the people” as most assumed.¹⁷³

Unsurprisingly, Americans at home had similar questions. One *Tribune* contributor tersely summarized the vague sense of uncertainty following Hitler’s appointment: “What combination the kaleidoscope of post-war German politics will bring at any turn no one, not even apparently the wisest German, can foretell.”¹⁷⁴ So while it was certainly a possibility that Hitler and his Nazis would entrench themselves in their hard-won positions of authority, it was equally likely that the ruling coalition would collapse on itself like a dying star: “the National Socialist phalanx itself may disintegrate under the strain. There are even already some slight indications of such an

¹⁷⁰ “Schleicher Cabinet The 20th In German Republic’s 14 Years,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1933.

¹⁷¹ “Reactions To Hitler,” *Time*, February 13, 1933, 17.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷³ Dodd, 48.

¹⁷⁴ “Hitler’s Appeal,” *Tribune*.

outcome.”¹⁷⁵ If the Nazis managed to avoid that fate, there were other potential pitfalls. After returning from a trip to Germany, Dr. Thomas S. Baker, president of Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Institute of Technology, suggested that the German people themselves were unlikely to tolerate Nazi rule for long: “it will be surprising if a formidable resistance does not arise among the German people.”¹⁷⁶ Though Hitler was already promising a Thousand Year Reich, Americans and the world at large were hardly convinced.

But neither were Americans or the world convinced that Nazi Germany posed a real international threat, even were it so inclined. On the one hand, Germany in 1933 was hardly the world power that we think of in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The country was bankrupt, its territories had been reduced, and its once great military force had been gutted. It was, moreover, “surrounded by a ring of nations” which, because of proximity, could not afford “to remain indifferent to events within Germany.”¹⁷⁷ Thus, as one editorialist argued, any perceived threats coming from Hitler or his acolytes might “lead to consequences from which even the excited Nazi leadership might shrink.”¹⁷⁸ In other words: “Today Germany is not yet in a position to defy her former enemies.”¹⁷⁹ Nor, according to some opinions, did Germany want to antagonize the rest of the world. “No longer does the old Prussian spirit think it a badge of distinction to be

¹⁷⁵ Birchall, “Nazis Seize Jobs, Disregard Voters,” *New York Times*, February 24, 1933. There were also consistent rumors at this stage that a return to monarchy was imminent. Amid reports that the former Kaiser was having his luggage shipped back to Germany, well placed observers “who ought to know” seemed to intimate that the ex-monarch’s triumphant return was a question of when, rather than if (as it happened, the luggage was actually filled with used clothing that the Kaiser’s wife was sending to relief organizations in Berlin). See “Former Kaiser Awaiting A Call To Berlin; ‘Imperial Baggage’ Being Sent From Doorn,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1933; see also Schultz, “Hitler’s Aim To Restore German Monarchy Revealed,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 7, 1933.

¹⁷⁶ “Predicts Revolt Against Hitler,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1933.

¹⁷⁷ “Hitler In Power,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1933.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

criticized and disliked by other nations,” stated one writer.¹⁸⁰ “Germany today cannot shut her ears to the voices” of world opinion.¹⁸¹ On the other hand, a dictatorial and even militaristic (if not militant) Germany was simply not a novel or shocking state of affairs. A common theme in contemporary accounts of Germany and the German people was that of the importance of authority. According to the popular view, Germans were, by nature, a people who gravitated toward strong leadership figures.¹⁸² References to this belief were littered throughout contemporary news reports. One article reporting the results of the March 5 elections gave the following assessment: “the German collectivist leaning, the desire to be commanded rather than be free, has again prevailed.”¹⁸³ Edgar Ansel Mowrer, former president of the Foreign Press Association, wrote in his 1933 bestseller that any surprise over the unfolding failure of the Weimar Republic would only be due to an “unfamiliarity with the [German] national history,” since Germans were inherently “an undemocratic people.”¹⁸⁴ But perhaps the best explanation for why the arrival of a new German dictator would not have appeared especially ominous to many Americans can be found in an editorial that appeared the day after Hitler’s appointment.

¹⁸⁰ “Excuses That Excuse,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1933.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² For further reading on American assessments of the German authority complex, see Norbert Muhlen, *Germany in American Eyes: A Study of Public Opinion* (Hamburg: Atlantik-Brücke, 1959), 10-12. See also Arnold A. Offner, “Research on American-German Relations: A Critical View,” and Victor Lange, “An Untidy Love Affair: The American Image of Germany Since 1930,” in *The Relationship in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh, vol. 2, of *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

¹⁸³ Birchall, “Hitler Bloc Wins A Reich Majority; Rules In Prussia,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1933.

¹⁸⁴ Edgar Ansel Mowrer, *Germany Puts The Clock Back* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1933), 9, 190.

Throughout the piece, the author (who remains anonymous) writes about a difference between the political cultures of Germany and the United States. In America, “the military organization of conflicting political parties diametrically opposed in principle could only mean a quick explosion, dismemberment, and either anarchy or rearrangement into smaller units.”¹⁸⁵ In Germany however, armed Nazis and Communists were merely “natural expressions of the regimenting, gymnastic habits which have formed a part of German life” for generations.¹⁸⁶ Being unused to such habits,

We could not conceive of stability or permanence in the terms of reichsbanner divisions, Hitlerite corps, communistic armies, and other regimented, uniformed, and goose-stepping partisans who apparently wanted nothing so much as each other’s blood. One day’s parade of such competent, disciplined, numerous, and zealous partisans would fill us with the most profound conviction that our days in a federated union were numbered.¹⁸⁷

But not so in Germany. In short, “what in America would mean unquestioned if not immediate war may be kept within the bounds of administration, although there is occasional fighting in the new republic of central Europe.”¹⁸⁸ There was thus a fundamental difference between the American and German political culture—a different set of standards by which to gauge normalcy. Dictators, uniforms, marching, and even violence did not then equate to crisis. It was all par for the course for that “new republic in central Europe.”

¹⁸⁵ “The Marching German Republic,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1933.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

The legality of Hitler's attainment of power, the countervailing effects of coalition government, pacific announcements regarding foreign policy, a sense of kinship over similar economic (the Depression) and political (Communism) challenges, the seemingly tenuous nature of Nazi control, the existence of domestic anti-Semitic sentiment, the safeguards of the European balance of power, the relative weakness of German might, and the sheer predictability of German politics – to list but a few – all would have helped to soften the blow of the apparent loss of democracy in Germany. When taking all the other trials Americans were facing at home and across the globe into consideration as well, it becomes easier to adjust our thinking (or historical consciousness) to 1933 terms instead of those of the present day. That Adolf Hitler and his Nazi followers struck many Americans as troubling, unsavory, or even vaguely threatening is beyond debate. But by recalibrating our viewpoint and putting aside for the moment our knowledge of what was to come, the beginning of 1933 seems less a harbinger of trouble ahead than simply another commonplace, if complex, period of history—at least to those who were living through it. That there were those who, for whatever reason, had an accurate sense, inclination, or a plain old lucky guess of what the future held should not obscure the equally valid feelings of nonchalance, uncertainty, and yes, even receptiveness with which others greeted the coming of the Third Reich. To understand this period any differently would be to fail to understand it at all.

Part V. Conclusion

In a 1939 address to the prestigious Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, British historian Robert Ensor informed his audience that “very few great men of action have ever disclosed beforehand so clearly as Adolf Hitler the principles and purposes that guide their acts.”¹⁸⁹ The model, or *Weltanschauung*, that Hitler offered was one that would eventually require the German people “to fight a great war.”¹⁹⁰ The German dictator had clearly outlined his “cardinal concept” of *Lebensraum*, and at the time of the speech there was “less than no evidence” that Hitler’s fundamental thinking had changed.¹⁹¹ Why then, should there have been any surprise at the eventual trajectory of German politics? Ensor was referring, of course, to *Mein Kampf*, the rambling, anti-Semitic political tract Hitler composed while serving time in a Bavarian prison cell. But like so many of the other “warning signs” that have been discussed in this study, the chilling details of Hitler’s political creed resonate more deeply now than they did during the pre-war years. One reason for this is surely due to an extremely limited domestic circulation. By early 1933, the book had not even been published in English. In fact, from October 1933 (when the first American edition was published) through 1938, barely 15,000 copies were sold stateside.¹⁹² Clearly this was a work with which that vast majority of Americans were unfamiliar.

¹⁸⁹ R. C. K. Ensor, “‘Mein Kampf’ and Europe,” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939)* 18, no. 4 (July-August 1939): 478, 485, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3019298> (accessed March 25, 2013).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² C. Caspar, “‘Mein Kampf’: A Best Seller,” *Jewish Social Studies* 20, no. 1 (Jan 1958): 9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4465572> (accessed March 25, 2013).

Even many of Hitler's closest political allies apparently felt little urgency to acquaint themselves with their *Führer's* magnum opus.¹⁹³ For those Germans who did, C. Caspar has suggested that many may have agreed with the following response: "not even the most rightist circles in Germany ever took such hysterical ideas seriously."¹⁹⁴ Small wonder the majority of Americans would not have put much stock in such ideas, even among those few who may have been familiar with the book. But yet, perhaps the most salient reason the American public was generally unmoved by a perceived Nazi threat was that, simply put, the situation in 1933 was much more nuanced and complex than subsequent historical narratives have made it out to be. Just because our present historical consciousness can detect in a work like *Mein Kampf* the blueprint for the eventual course taken by Hitler's Germany, it does not follow that an American audience in 1933, limited as it was, should have perceived Hitler's pronouncements as anything other than "grotesque fantasies."¹⁹⁵

After a few short months in office, Adolf Hitler had effectively, through legal and constitutional means, set himself up as *Reichskanzler und Führer*, the undisputed master of Germany. With the passage of the Enabling Act, parliamentary government was a dead letter, President Hindenburg was little more than "a rubber stamp," and no one with any sense really thought that the four year term of the Act was anything less than a legal pretense. That the Enabling Act, like the Reichstag Fire Decree before it, was to provide

¹⁹³ Early Nazi leader Otto Strasser recalled a meeting at the 1927 Party rally at Nuremberg with top officials. When quotes from *Mein Kampf* were met by blank stares, concerned Nazis asked if anyone present had actually read the book. Goebbels, embarrassed, shook his head. Göring simply burst out laughing. See Caspar, 6.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., qtd. on 6.

¹⁹⁵ Ferguson, 469.

the “basis for the permanent removal of civil rights and democratic liberties,” none could doubt.¹⁹⁶ After all, “the brownshirt terror on the streets was already comprehensive enough to make it quite clear what was now about to happen.”¹⁹⁷ Or so the story goes. The facts of this now familiar narrative are beyond doubt, but the assessments require some modification. Although we now recognize this critical period in German history as providing the legal and structural foundations of the Nazi dictatorship, and everything that was to follow, as this study has suggested, the shape of the ultimate course of history *was* in doubt. It was most certainly *not* entirely clear what was about to happen. While understanding facts is a faculty common to both the historian and the historical figure, what the historical figure “cannot see and foresee are the potentialities of these facts. What became a possibility in 1943 and a probability in 1944 was not yet evident in 1942 and was highly improbable in 1941.”¹⁹⁸ How much more so then, must these potentialities have been beyond the understanding of an American, or of anyone for that matter, in 1933?

Perhaps one final illustration will serve to demonstrate the challenge of understanding the past on its own terms—as well as the length of the gap between contemporary and present-day historical consciousness. In late March of 1933, an article appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in which the policies of British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald (Europe’s “ambassador of peace”) came under attack from a fellow Member of Parliament. The MP, who accused the PM of “compressing the largest number of

¹⁹⁶ Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 354.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹⁹⁸ Löwith, 198.

words into the smallest amount of thought,” declared that the foreign policy of the current government had “brought Europe nearer to war than at any time since peace, making us weaker, poorer, and more defenseless.”¹⁹⁹ It would likely come as no surprise to the modern researcher to learn that the MP with the acerbic wit and prophetic tone was none other than Winston Churchill. Furthermore, from the perspective of the present day, it would be easy to imagine the writer of the article sneering as he typed “ambassador of peace,” or cheering as he described the lone, stolid figure of Churchill defying the shouts and boos of his fellow Parliamentarians. But the Winston Churchill of 1933 was not the Winston Churchill of 1945. Though by no means an unknown figure, he was not yet “the Lion of Britain.” In fact, he was probably most famous at that point for his role in masterminding the disastrous Gallipoli campaign of the First World War. Thus, if one were to take a moment and glance again at the very same report, this time with (in theory at least) no preconceived ideas, MacDonald may be recast as the wise, experienced statesman, offering the world a viable plan for peace, while Churchill is transformed into a bitter, disgraced figure, vainly trying to regain political relevance. Obviously the interpretation, then as now, depends on the individual but this brief thought exercise hopefully reveals the extent to which our own subjectivities can color (and sometimes corrupt) our understandings of the past.

As the examples given in this analysis have suggested, if a particular narrative gets repeated often enough, it acquires the patina of dogmatic truth—sometimes at the expense of less visible, though no less important bits of historical nuance. Thus, if

¹⁹⁹ John Steele, “Germany Must Have Equality, MacDonald Tells Commons,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 24, 1933.

Americans truly were “frightened and shocked” by Hitler’s rule in Germany from its onset, what is one to make of the pronouncements of a credible reporter over the NBC radio network, urging Americans to dismiss “any thought that Germany or the present rulers of Germany desire to go to war with anybody”?²⁰⁰ And if Germany was really the sole threat to world peace in the 1930s, how should one view the increasingly shrill headlines concerning another world power in 1933 (one with a fully mobilized military force to boot): “Japan Dares The World To Get Mandate Isles”?²⁰¹ Acknowledging such factors as economic preoccupation at home, civil and international turmoil across the globe, and hopeful signs from Germany’s new leaders is a critical starting point in evaluating the worldview of any given American observer at the beginning of this (now evidently) fateful historical epoch. It is furthermore an important approach to beginning any historical exercise, as an essential element of authentic historical analysis is the recognition that we, as researchers, bring our own thoughts, assumptions, and preconceived ideas (our own historical consciousness) whether consciously or otherwise to our explorations of the past. As the preceding pages have attempted to illustrate, we must attempt to shed this intellectual baggage in order to come to a fuller understanding of the people, places, and events we hope to understand.

Generally speaking, although the subject of this study has been Germany and America in early 1933, on a more fundamental level, its *object* has been one of function rather than form. Specifically, it has aimed to model a certain methodological approach when assessing any historical person, period, or event. Historians face a difficult task in

²⁰⁰ “Reviews Nazi Rise In Talk Over Radio,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1933.

²⁰¹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 17, 1933.

simultaneously using their exalted position (Gaddis' "expanded horizons") to make sense of the past without imposing their own temporality on the figures and events they seek to illuminate. For although we may not be able to relive the past, or to re-present it as it actually was, it does not follow that we should not seek to understand it, as Geoffrey Elton has said, "in its own right." When we do so (or at least make the attempt) we open the door to little known, forgotten, and sometimes, if we are lucky, to entirely new points of view—expanded horizons indeed.

Bibliography

- American History in Video. Universal Newsreels, Release 116, Feb 2, 1933.
<http://ahiv.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.lib.lehigh.edu/View/731715> (accessed September 7, 2012).
- Universal Newsreels, Release 119, Feb 13, 1933.
<http://ahiv.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.lib.lehigh.edu/View/731718> (accessed September 5, 2012).
- Burleigh, Michael. *The Third Reich: A New History*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2000.
- Caspar, C. ““Mein Kampf”: A Best Seller.” *Jewish Social Studies* 20, no. 1 (January 1958): 3-16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4465572> (accessed March 25, 2013).
- Cato [pseud.]. *Guilty Men*. London: V. Gollancz, 1940.
- Chicago Daily Tribune*. January 1933 – March 1933.
- Cole, Wayne S. *Roosevelt & the Isolationists: 1932-45*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
- Dallek, Robert. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Dinnerstein, Leonard. *Antisemitism in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Divine, Robert A. *The Reluctant Belligerent: American Entry into World War II*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966.
- Dodd, Jr., William E. and Martha Dodd, eds. *Ambassador Dodd's Diary: 1933-1938*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1941.
- Emery, Edwin. *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media*, 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.

Ensor, R. C. K. "“Mein Kampf” and Europe.” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)* 18, no. 4 (July-August 1939): 478-496.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3019298> (accessed March 25, 2013).

Evans, Richard J. *In Defense of History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.

----- *The Coming of the Third Reich*. New York: Penguin Press, 2005.

----- *The Third Reich in Power*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.

Ferguson, Niall. *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

Friedman, Saul S. *No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1938-1945*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973.

Fritzsche, Peter. *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Handy, Robert T. *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Lange, Victor. "An Untidy Love Affair: The American Image of Germany Since 1930." In Trommler and McVeigh, 232-242.

Larson, Erik. *In the Garden of Beasts*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2011.

Löwith, Karl. *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949.

Ludwig, Emil. "The Moral Conquest Of Germany." *The Reader's Digest*, January 1945.

- Marquis, Alice Goldfarb. "Written on the Wind: The Impact of Radio During the 1930s." *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 3 (July 1984): 385-415.
- Mowrer, Edgar Ansel. *Germany Puts The Clock Back*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1933.
- Muhlen, Norbert. *Germany in American Eyes: A Study of Public Opinion*. Hamburg, West Germany: Atlantik-Brücke, 1959.
- Nagorski, Andrew. *Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazi Rise to Power*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012.
- The New York Times*. January 1933 – March 1933.
- Newsweek*. January 1933 – April 1933.
- Offner, Arnold A. "Research on American-German Relations: A Critical View." In Trommler and McVeigh, 168-182.
- Pika, Joseph A. and John A. Maltese. *The Politics of the Presidency*, 8th ed. Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2013.
- Roosevelt, Franklin Delano. *The Year of Crisis, 1933*, vol. 2 of *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, edited by Samuel I. Rosenman. New York: Random House, 1938.
- Steele, Richard W. *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933-1941*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Tebbel, John. *The Compact History of the American Newspaper*. New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1966.
- Teel, Leonard Ray. *The Public Press, 1900-1945: The History of American Journalism*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006.
- Thorp, Margaret Farrand. *America at the Movies*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939.
- Time*. January 1933 – April 1933.

Trommler, Frank and Joseph McVeigh, eds. *The Relationship in the Twentieth Century*.
Vol. 2 of *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year
History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

Vita

Andrew C. Wallin

Academics

Undergraduate: Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania - (2003-2007)

❖Degree: B.A. History

❖Minors: American Studies and Political Science

❖Graduation: May 2007, Summa Cum Laude

❖GPA: 3.93

❖Awards/Honors: Elected to Phi Beta Kappa
Elected to Alpha Sigma Nu, the National Jesuit Honor Society
Elected to Phi Alpha Theta, the National History Honor Society
Elected to The National Society of Collegiate Scholars
SJU Presidential Scholarship
SJU W.W. Smith Scholarship
SJU W.W. Smith Prize Award

Graduate: Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania – (2011-present)

❖Degree: M.A. History

❖GPA: 3.92

❖Awards/Honors: University Fellowship, Department of History