At the beginning of the 1930s, Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party exploited widespread and deep-seated discontent in Germany to attract popular and political support. There was resentment at the crippling territorial, military and economic terms of the “Treaty of Versailles”, which Hitler blamed on treacherous politicians and promised to overturn. The democratic post-World War I Weimar Republic was marked by a weak coalition government and political crisis, in answer to which the Nazi party offered strong leadership and national rebirth. From 1929 onwards, the worldwide economic depression provoked hyperinflation, social unrest and mass unemployment, to which Hitler offered scapegoats such as the Jews.

Hitler pledged civil peace, radical economic policies, and the restoration of national pride and unity. Nazi rhetoric was virulently nationalist and anti-Semitic. The ‘subversive’ Jews were portrayed as responsible for all of Germany’s ills.

In the federal elections of 1930 (which followed the Wall Street Crash), the Nazi Party won 107 seats in the Reichstag (the German Parliament), becoming the second-largest party. The following year, it more than doubled its seats. In January 1933, President von Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor, believing that the Nazis could be controlled from within the cabinet. Hitler set about consolidating his power, destroying Weimar democracy and establishing a dictatorship. On 27 February, the Reichstag burned; Dutch communist Marianus van der Lubbe was found inside, arrested and charged with arson. With the Communist Party discredited and banned, the Nazis passed the Reichstag Fire Decree, which dramatically curtailed civil liberties.