What were the elements that could have prevented Hitler from achieving power?

Conservative Nationalists: the more traditional Conservative party in German politics. It shared some common ground with the Nazis, but was not an extreme, and did not seek to destroy the constitution.

Franz von Papen (1879–1969)

1921
Entered politics as leader of the Centre Party in Prussian legislature.

June 1932
Hindenburg's preferred choice for chancellor, but had no parliamentary majority.

July 1932
Collaborated with Hitler hoping to dilute Hitler's radicalism.

September 1932
Lost chancellorship over policy disagreement with Hindenburg.

January 1933–34
Served as vice-chancellor to Hitler.

1934–38
In Austria he assisted Anschluss (union of Germany and Austria).

1946
Died at Nuremberg for 'conspiring to wage aggressive war' and 'acquitted'.

Conclusion
Hitler rose to power because of the failure of the Weimar Republic to find an answer to the economic depression or to evolve an effective system of government. From 1930 power was in the hands of a group of Conservative Nationalists, who could admit or expel members of the government at will. So Hitler's accession was a matter of a single decision on their part, though it was underpinned by Nazi electoral success, its powers of organisation and its application to the task of achieving power. Despite its clear dynamic elements, the Nazi movement, and more particularly Hitler himself, was consistently underestimated by the Conservatives.

In other words, the Hindenburg clique thought they could install him in power and control him. This, more than anything else, gave the Nazis their peaceful accession to power.

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Further study


What was different about Hitler's foreign policy?

To many at the time, and to many historians since, Hitler's foreign policy looked like a continuation of the expansionist policies of Bismarck and the Kaiser. But were appearances deceptive?

On 22 June 1941, Hitler's armies invaded the Soviet Union. It was the climax of an expansionist foreign policy that had driven National Socialism since its beginnings. It marked the start of 5 years of occupation that not only killed millions and brought suffering to millions more, but also created the context for the systematic genocide of Europe's Jews.

Yet this was not the first time Germany had sought to annex huge swathes of eastern Europe. In early 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had forced the Bolsheviks to cede much territory, in a peace which, if short-lived, was certainly harsh and vindictive. The experience of defeat in November 1918 meant, of course, that Germany was forced to swallow its own bitter medicine shortly thereafter.

Traditional perspectives

These two crucial moments—the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union—have traditionally been at the centre of debate, not only in continuity in German foreign policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but on discontinuity of broader economic, social and political continuities from Bismarck to Hitler. In 1961, for example, Fritz Fischer published his highly controversial study of Germany's 'grasp for world power' in the First World War, which implied—contrary to everything that West German historians had argued since 1945—that Hitler's foreign policy had been the culmination of decades of German imperialism expansionism going back to the Kaiserreich. Building on Fischer's pioneering work, historians such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler argue in the 1970s that Hitler had been the final point of a German 'special path' going back to 1871.

According to this view, the most and continuous ideational, authoritarian political system and culture had manifested itself in a similarly continuous policy of expansionism, over the same period.
Nowadays, historians are less inclined to stress long-term political continuities from the nineteenth century, and tend to focus more on the role of Nazism as a revolutionary new force that broke with the traditions of the old Prussian-German conservatism. Accordingly, they have recently been less inclined to stress continuities in German foreign policy since 1871. Historians emphasise the fact that the aggressive biologically-racial vision which underpinned Naziism's grasp for Lebensraum (living space) is essentially a break from the traditional great power ambitions which drove Germany's previous bids for colonial territory.

Stresemann and the 1920s

This is not, of course, to say that Hitler's foreign policy emerged in a vacuum. His initial campaign to revise the Treaty of Versailles built upon the diplomatic efforts and achievements of all German (Weimar Republic) governments since 1919. If we wish to place Nazi foreign policy within a broader context, it is arguable that the Treaty of Versailles that we should start (see Ruth Henig's articles in MODERN HISTORY REVIEW Vol. 12, No. 4 and Vol. 13, No. 4). Revision of the treaty was a goal shared by all German political parties, from the moderate left to the radical right, from 1919 onwards. It was the attempt to avoid reparations payments which led, ultimately, to the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923, for example. Moreover, although it was modest by the standards of what was to come under Hitler, we should note that secret remuneration had begun by 1926 at the latest. Despite the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the core of what we would now call the military-industrial complex of the First World War remained intact in the 1920s, ready to be reactivated in the 1930s by the Nazi regime.

Some historians have also seen precursors of Nazi foreign policy in the diplomacy of Gustav Stresemann, German Foreign Minister from 1923 until 1929. In the Treaties of Locarno of 1925, for example, Germany agreed to accept its new western borders as final, but conversely avoided doing the same for its borders in the east. Some of Stresemann's principal correspondents also suggest that his foreign policy was motivated by the long-term desire to alter Germany's eastern borders.

Yet it must be stressed that any ambitions aimed at for Stresemann were intended to be achieved peacefully, and that German foreign policy up until 1929 was essentially one of fulfillment, designed to point out the inadequacies of the Treaty of Versailles by showing how impossible it was, in practice, to implement its terms. 1930-37: the years of aggressive revisionism

The transition to a more aggressively revisionist German foreign policy began in 1930, inaugurating a general shift towards right-wing authoritarianism under Chancellor Brüning, von Papen and von Schleicher. It was the more nationalist, armed forces-minded elements that profited. In April 1933 Brüning was replaced by von Papen, who brought in von Schleicher. It was the more nationalist, armed forces-minded elements that profited. In April 1933 Brüning was replaced by von Papen, who brought in von Schleicher. It was the more nationalist, armed forces-minded elements that profited. In April 1933 Brüning was replaced by von Papen, who brought in von Schleicher. It was the more nationalist, armed forces-minded elements that profited. In April 1933 Brüning was replaced by von Papen, who brought in von Schleicher. It was the more nationalist, armed forces-minded elements that profited. In April 1933 Brüning was replaced by von Papen, who brought in von Schleicher. It was the more nationalist, armed forces-minded elements that profited. In April 1933 Brüning was replaced by von Papen, who brought in von Schleicher. It was the more nationalist, armed forces-minded elements that profited. In April 1933 Brüning was replaced by von Papen, who brought in von Schleicher.

Key points

Hitler's foreign policy must be placed within the broader context of German foreign policy from 1871 to 1934.

However, recent interpretations have tended to downplay the existence of long-term continuities, focusing instead on the 1920s and 1930s.

From 1919 onwards all German governments sought to revise the Treaty of Versailles.

German foreign policy was becoming more aggressive by 1925, i.e. before Hitler came to power.

Hitler's foreign policy was initially supported by the old Conservative forces. However, in 1937-38 he broke with them and pursued a more radical policy of expansionism.

There was an intimate link between Nazi foreign policy and racial policy, culminating in genocide.

"GERMANY SHALL NEVER BE ENCIRCLED!"

fulfilment: carrying out the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.
revisionist: rejecting the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.
authoritarian governments: the governments of Hitler, von Papen and von Schleicher.
etrics: those at the top of society.
ideological goals: aims set by political belief (ideology), rather than just addressing an existing problem.
Hitler

A weak dictator?

After years of propaganda showing Hitler as an all-powerful dictator, the idea that Hitler was really a weak ruler looked intriguing and attractive. But has it been taken too far?

Popular interest in how Hitler ruled Germany dates especially from the publication of Ian Kershaw's The Nazi Dictatorship (1985). The title of chapter 6 poses the question: 'Hitler: Master in the Third Reich' or 'Weak Dictator?' The contrasting phrases were originally coined by Norman Rich (1973) and Hans Mommsen (1971). Examiners have leant on them eagerly to test students' knowledge about the politics of the Third Reich.

The Nazi dictatorship

Kershaw's discussion provides plenty to think about. For example, it analyses the nature of weakness. Hitler could have been weak if he started decision-making or had to take steps to protect his image. His decisions could have been ignored or diluted. His room for manoeuvre could have been restricted by the political structures of the state, or by the demands of society as a whole. But Kershaw's conclusion looks like an exercise in fence-sitting. He quotes Marx as saying, 'Men do make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, nor under conditions of their own choosing, but rather under circumstances which they find before them, under given and imposed conditions.' Ultimately The Nazi Dictatorship leaves the interpretation of Hitler's leadership open.

Sterotype: master

The idea that Hitler was an all-powerful leader has a number of very obvious roots. Administrative textbooks written in Germany in the 1930s showed well-organised governmental systems which were structured in rigorous, hierarchical pyramids, culminating in the single figure of the Führer. The tables and diagrams of the Nazi state implied that whenever Hitler gave orders, his organisation implemented them swiftly, efficiently and without question. This impression, incidentally, was reinforced during the war crimes trials of the post-1945 period, in which Nazi functionaries typically pleaded that they had only been 'following orders' when they carried out one evil deed after another.

During the 1930s, constitutional theorists questioned up to justify Hitler's personal dominance.Helmut Nicolai worked in the interior political department of the Brown House between 1931 and 1932. When he drafted a possible constitution for the Third Reich, it specified that the Führer should bear the total power of the state. Hans Frank was the leader of the Nazi Party's legal office and president of the academy for German law. He declared repeatedly that the mission of the state was identical with the will and personality of Adolf Hitler.