

ON PAGE 23 you learned how the German government dealt with the Munich Putsch in 1923. There are two interpretations of this event:

- It was a failure for the Nazis. Their putsch was a fiasco. It was easily crushed and showed how powerless they really were.
- It was a success for the Nazis. The putsch itself may have failed but it launched the Nazis onto the national scene, made Hitler famous and was the main building block for the Nazis' later success.

In this investigation you can decide which of the interpretations you most agree with.

Why did Hitler attempt a putsch in 1923?

Although the Nazis had grown in strength from 1919 to 1923 this success must be seen in perspective. Their support was still mainly in Bavaria (see page 34). They only had 3000 members. That is hardly the basis on which to organise a revolution to take over the whole of the country. But all the same, in November 1923, Hitler and the Nazis attempted to seize power in Germany. What reasons did they have to think they might succeed?

Reason 1: The support of the army

You will remember from your study of the German revolution (pages 11–14) how important the support of the army was in keeping control of Germany. Many right-wing groups, the Nazis included, thought the German army could be persuaded to abandon the government and support them instead.

Hitler was developing an increasingly close relationship with the former army leader, Ludendorff, and he believed that if it came to a crisis, Ludendorff would be willing and able to persuade the German army to desert the government and side with the Nazis.

Reason 2: The support of the Bavarian state government

The Bavarian government was right-wing. Its leaders had themselves been plotting against the Reich government. Hitler was sure that they would support a Nazi putsch.

The trigger

In September Stresemann's government called off passive resistance in the Ruhr (see page 23) and began again to pay the hated reparations to France. Many right-wingers in Germany saw this as a humiliating climb-down – yet another illustration of the weakness of the Reich government. Hitler believed that the time was right for a putsch.

Gustav Kahr, head of the Bavarian government, was not so sure. He doubted whether the army would support it. Hitler was furious at Kahr's hesitation and decided to force him to act.

8 November: What happened in the beer hall?

SOURCE INVESTIGATION

On 8 November Kahr, the Bavarian Prime Minister, and his two most senior Bavarian officials were addressing a meeting of around 3000 businessmen at a beer hall (a drinking club) in Munich.

Hitler and Goering arrived with 600 Stormtroopers. Hitler stopped the meeting, and took Kahr and his ministers into a side room at gunpoint where he persuaded them to support him in overthrowing the Reich government.

This is how one of the eyewitnesses reported the events in the beer hall.

SOURCE 1 An account by Karl von Müller. He was an historian who was at the meeting. This account is based on evidence he gave at Hitler's trial

“Kahr had spoken for half an hour. Then there was movement at the entrance as if people wanted to push their way in. Despite several warnings, the disturbance did not die down so Kahr had to stop speaking.

Eventually, steel helmets came into sight. From this moment on, the view from my seat was rather obscured. People stood on chairs so that I did not see Hitler until he had come fairly near along the main gangway.

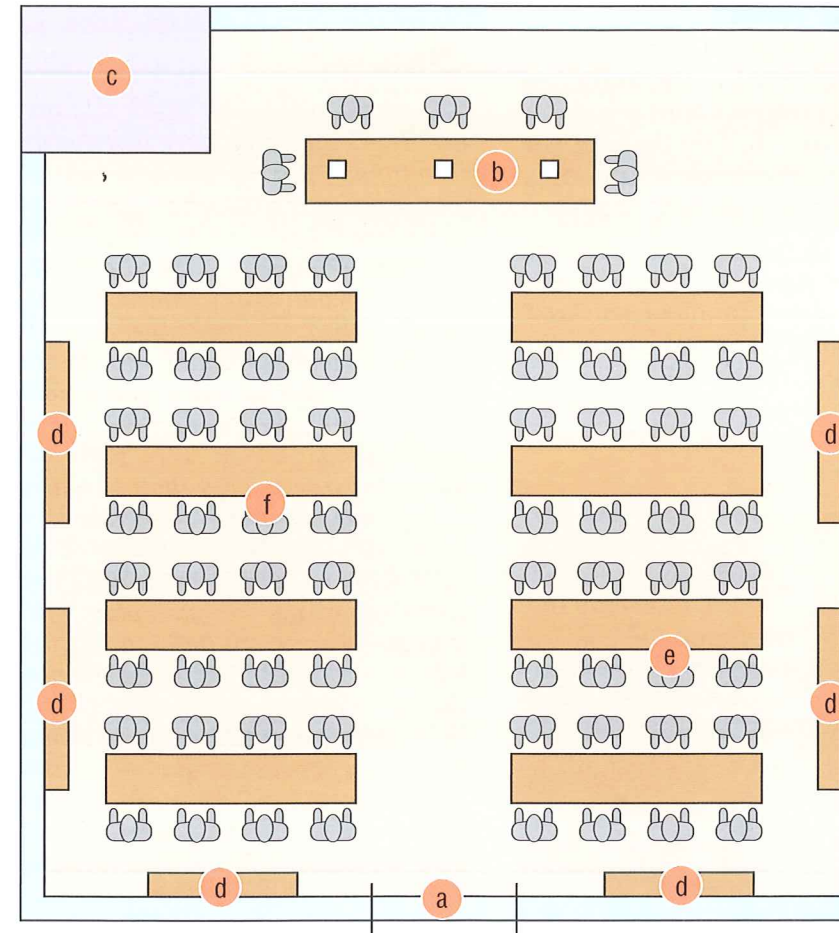
Just before Hitler turned to the platform, I saw him emerge between two armed soldiers in steel helmets who carried pistols next to their heads, pointing at the ceiling. Hitler climbed onto a chair on my left.

The hall was still restless. Hitler made a sign to the man on his right, who fired a shot at the ceiling. Thereupon Hitler called out (I cannot recollect the exact order of his words):

‘The national revolution has broken out. The hall is surrounded.’ Maybe he mentioned the exact number of men surrounding it, I am not sure.

He asked Kahr and the other two gentlemen to come out [to a nearby room]. He guaranteed their personal freedom. The gentlemen did not move. Hitler went towards the platform. What happened I could not see exactly. I heard him talk to the gentlemen and I heard the words – everything would be over in ten minutes if the gentlemen would go out with him. To my surprise the three gentlemen went out with him immediately.

SOURCE 2 An artist's impression of the layout of the beer hall on 8 November 1923



- Key**
- a Where Nazis entered
 - b Stage
 - c Side room
 - d SA troops
 - e Eye-witness historian
 - f Hitler speaking

The general mood – I can of course judge only from my surroundings, but I think this represented the general feeling in the hall – was still against the whole business.

The change came only during Hitler's second speech when he came back about ten minutes later.

When he stepped onto the platform the disturbance was so great that he could not be heard, and he fired a shot. I can still see the gesture. He got the Browning out of his back pocket, and I think it was on this occasion that he shouted angrily at the audience: ‘If you are not quiet, I shall have a machine-gun put up in the gallery.’

[When he spoke] it was a rhetorical masterpiece. In fact, in a few sentences he totally transformed the mood of the audience. I have rarely experienced anything like it.

He said that his prediction of everything being over in ten minutes had not come true. But he said it in such a way that when he finally went out it was as if he had the support of the whole audience to say to Kahr that the whole assembly would be behind him if he were to join.

It was a complete reversal of mood. One could hear it being said that the whole thing had been arranged, that it was a phoney performance. I did not share this

opinion because Kahr's attitude seemed to contradict it. Seeing Kahr at close quarters, one got the impression of confusion, of great dismay.

An hour after Hitler's first appearance, the three gentlemen came back into the hall with Hitler and Ludendorff. They were enthusiastically received. On the platform Kahr began to speak first without being requested to. Ludendorff too in my opinion spoke without being requested to. The other two gentlemen spoke only after repeated requests.

Throughout this time Hitler was radiant with joy. One had the feeling that he was delighted to have succeeded in persuading Kahr to collaborate. There was in his demeanour, I would say, a kind of childlike joy, a very frank expression which I shall never forget.

Excellency Ludendorff by comparison was extremely grave; when he came in he was pale with suppressed emotion. His appearance as well as his words were those of a man who knew it was a matter of life or death, probably death rather than life. I shall never forget his expression. ”

What happened in the side room?

The eyewitness in Source 1 gives you a very thorough account of what happened in the main beer hall. However, he cannot tell us about what happened in the adjoining room. To find that out we need to turn to other accounts. From the testimonies of those involved one historian has pieced together this account.

TASK 1

Both of these accounts tell you a lot about events in the beer hall on the night of 8 November 1923. Together they give a much fuller picture of the event than each on its own could do. However, having two such sources also poses a problem. When they describe the same thing – such as Hitler's second speech – there are contradictions.

1. What do the sources
 - a) disagree
 - b) agree
 about in their account of Hitler's second speech?
2. Where the accounts agree, can you be sure that they are both accurate?
3. Where the accounts disagree, which would you believe and why?
4. Which of these accounts is more useful to you as evidence of
 - a) Hitler's part in the events
 - b) the reactions of the crowd?
5. Explain why both of these statements are wrong.
 - 'Source 1 is more useful than Source 3 because it was written by an eyewitness, so he must know what happened.'
 - 'Source 3 is more useful than Source 1 because it was written by an historian who has had the chance of looking at all the evidence of what happened.'

TASK 2

Success or failure? On a scale of 1 (failure) to 10 (success), say how successful the Nazis were on 8 November.

SOURCE 3 William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 1959

“ [In the side room] Hitler told his prisoners: ‘No one leaves this room alive without my permission.’ He then informed them that he would give them all key jobs either in the Bavarian government or in the Reich government which he was forming with Ludendorff.

The three prisoners at first refused even to speak to Hitler. He continued to harangue them. They did not answer. Their continued silence unnerved Hitler. Finally he waved his gun at them. ‘I have four shots in my pistol. Three for my collaborators, if they abandon me. The last bullet for myself!’ Pointing the weapon to his forehead, he cried, ‘If I am not victorious by tomorrow afternoon, I shall be a dead man!’

But he was getting nowhere with his talk. Not one of the men who held the power of the Bavarian state agreed to join him, even at pistol point. The putsch wasn't going according to plan. Then Hitler acted on a sudden impulse. Without a further word, he dashed back into the hall. Mounting the platform, he faced the sullen crowd and announced that the members of the triumvirate in the next room had joined him in forming a new national government.

‘I propose that the direction of national policy be taken over by me,’ he shouted. ‘Ludendorff will take over leadership of the German national army. Tomorrow will find either a national government in Germany or us dead!’

When the gathering heard that Kahr and the others had joined Hitler, its mood changed abruptly. Not for the first time and certainly not for the last, Hitler had told a masterful lie, and it had worked. There were loud cheers. The sound impressed the three men still locked up in the little side room.

General Ludendorff now appeared as if out of a hat. The war hero was furious with Hitler for pulling such a complete surprise on him. He spoke scarcely a word to the brash young man. But Hitler did not mind, so long as Ludendorff lent his famous name to the undertaking and won over the three Bavarian leaders.

This Ludendorff proceeded to do; it is now a question of a great national cause, he said, and he advised the three gentlemen to co-operate. Aved by the attention of the generalissimo, the trio appeared to give in. Ludendorff's timely arrival had saved Hitler.

Overjoyed at his lucky break, Hitler led the others back to the platform, where each made a brief speech and swore loyalty to each other and to the new regime. The crowd leaped on chairs and tables in a delirium of enthusiasm, and Hitler beamed with joy. The meeting began to break up. ”

9 November: The march on Munich

The first part of Hitler's plan had succeeded. But now he made a big mistake. He let Kahr and his colleagues go, while he and Ludendorff planned how their supporters could seize Munich the following day. It was soon clear that Kahr's pledge of support, made at gunpoint, was worthless. When news of the putsch reached Berlin the government ordered the army in Bavaria to crush it. Kahr would not attempt to stop it. The Nazis could not backtrack now, however. They would march on Munich the next day as planned. They would challenge the army and the police not to fire on them, but to support them. With Ludendorff as their leader, Hitler hoped they might succeed.

So the next morning, in driving snow, Hitler, Ludendorff and 3000 Nazis marched into Munich. When they reached the city centre, they found the police and the army waiting for them. In a narrow street called the Residenzstrasse about 100 police blocked the path of the march.

The police used rubber truncheons and rifle butts to push back the crowd. One of the Nazis ran forward and shouted to the police: ‘Don't shoot, Ludendorff and Hitler are coming!’ Hitler cried out ‘Surrender!’ Then a shot rang out – no one knows who fired first – and a hail of bullets swept the street from either side.

Hitler fell, either pulled down or seeking cover. He had dislocated his shoulder. The shooting lasted only a minute, but sixteen Nazis and three policemen lay dead or dying in the street.

According to eyewitnesses Hitler now lost his nerve. He was the first to scramble to his feet. He struggled to a yellow motor-car which was waiting nearby. He was undoubtedly in great pain from his dislocated shoulder, and probably believed himself to have been wounded.

Ludendorff, on the other hand, marched onwards to the next square where he was arrested. Hitler himself was arrested two days later.

TASK 3

Success or failure? On the same scale of 1–10 (see Task 2) say how successful the Nazis were on 9 November.

SOURCE 5 A painting made later by one of the participants in the putsch. In the foreground the police are opening fire on the Nazis. Hitler stands with his arm raised with Ludendorff on his right

ACTIVITY

Work in pairs. Each of you should write a newspaper report describing the events of 8 and 9 November 1923. One of you write as a supporter of the Nazis. The other write as a critic of the Nazis.

The pro-Nazi article should explain how the putsch showed the authority and leadership skills of Hitler and the strength of Nazi support. The anti-Nazi article should make it clear how Hitler only achieved support by violence and threats, and how he showed his cowardice in the end.

Choose one of Sources 4 and 5 to illustrate your article. Explain why you chose that picture.



SOURCE 4 Nazis marching into the centre of Munich on the morning of 9 November



1924: The trial

In February 1924 the trial began of the leading members of the putsch. Hitler, Ludendorff and Röhm stood trial alongside other Nazi leaders.



SOURCE 6 The leading members of the putsch pose before their trial. Hitler and Ludendorff are in the centre, and Röhm is standing second from the right

It was at this point that Hitler seemed to snatch some kind of victory out of the jaws of defeat. The trial gave him a national platform on which to speak. He greatly impressed his audience by his eloquence and the strength of his nationalist feelings. Newspapers throughout Germany and around the world reported his claim that he had led the movement against the 'treasonable' Weimar system in Berlin. The trial established his reputation as the natural leader of extreme right-wing nationalist elements throughout Germany.

In the glare of publicity even the putsch itself seemed to confirm that Hitler was a man with immense and unusual political talent. By sheer bluff he had secured the support of the famed general

Ludendorff who had publicly promised to serve under the dictatorship of ex-corporal Hitler. Anyone who could so transform a situation by powerful public speaking was certainly a force to be reckoned with.

Hitler's performance at the trial undoubtedly influenced the judges. He was treated leniently. He was sentenced to five years' imprisonment, but served less than nine months before he was released. His prison was Landsberg Castle. He had his own room, was allowed as many visitors as he wanted, and spent the time writing his book, *Mein Kampf* ('My Struggle'). Ludendorff was let off without a prison sentence. Other Nazi leaders were given short sentences. Röhm, for example, received fifteen months but was released immediately.



Although the years after the putsch were a difficult time for the Nazis, Hitler emerged from it a much stronger figure. Ten years later this was Hitler's own assessment on how the putsch affected the prospects of the Nazis.

SOURCE 7 Hitler and his fellow Nazis pose for a photograph in Landsberg prison. Rudolph Hess sits second from the right

SOURCE 8 Hitler's assessment of the putsch. He was speaking in 1933

“ It was the greatest good fortune for us Nazis that the putsch collapsed because:

- 1. Co-operation with General Ludendorff would have been absolutely impossible.*
- 2. The sudden takeover of power in the whole of Germany would have led to the greatest of difficulties in 1923 because the essential preparations had not even been begun by the National Socialist Party.*
- 3. The events of 9 November 1923, with their blood sacrifice, have proven the most effective propaganda for National Socialism. ”*

■ TASK

Success or failure? Look back at your scores for Tasks 2 and 3 on pages 40 and 41. On the same scale indicate how successful the putsch was, viewed with hindsight. Finally, write a paragraph explaining your view as to whether the putsch was a success or failure.