

WHEN GERMAN DEMOCRACY FAILED: The Warnings of History

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The Warnings of History

Thom Hartmann

The 70th anniversary wasn't noticed in the United States, and was barely reported in the corporate media. But the Germans remembered well that fateful day seventy years ago—Feb. 27, 1933. They commemorated the anniversary by joining in demonstrations for peace that mobilized citizens all across the world.

It started when the government, in the midst of a worldwide economic crisis, received reports of an imminent terrorist attack on a few famous buildings.

But the warnings of investigators were ignored at the highest levels, the man who claimed to be the nation's leader had not been elected by a majority vote and the majority of citizens claimed he had no right to the powers he coveted. He was a simpleton, some said, a cartoon character of a man who saw things in black-white terms and didn't have the intellect to understand the subtleties of running a nation in a complex and internationalist world. His coarse use of language—reflecting his political roots in a southernmost state—and his simplistic and often-inflammatory nationalistic rhetoric offended the aristocrats, foreign leaders, and the well-educated elite in the government and media. When an aide brought him word that the nation's most prestigious building was ablaze, he verified it was the terrorist who had struck and then rushed to the scene and called a press conference.

“You are now witnessing the beginning of a great epoch in history,” he proclaimed, standing in front of the burned-out building, surrounded by national media. “This fire,” he said, his voice trembling with emotion, “is the beginning.” He used the occasion—“a sign from God,” he called it—to declare an all-out war on terrorism and its ideological sponsors, a people, he said, who traced their origins to the Middle East and found motivation for their evil deeds in their religion.

Two weeks later, the first detention centre for terrorists was built in Oranianberg to hold the first suspected allies of the infamous terrorist. In a national outburst of patriotism, the leader's flag was everywhere.

Within four weeks of the terrorist attack, the nation's now-popular leader had pushed through legislation—in the name of combating terrorism and fighting the philosophy he said spawned it—that suspended constitutional guarantees of free speech, privacy, and habeas corpus. Police could now intercept mail and wiretap phones; suspected terrorists could be imprisoned without specific charges and without access to their lawyers; police could sneak into people's homes without warrants if the cases involved terrorism.

To get his patriotic “Decree on the Protection of People and State” passed over the objections of concerned legislators and civil libertarians, he agreed to put a 4-year sunset provision on it. Legislators would later say they hadn't had time to read the bill before voting on it.

Immediately after passage of the anti-terrorism act, his federal police agencies stepped up their program of arresting suspicious persons and holding them without access to lawyers and courts. In the first year only a few hundred were interned, and those who objected were largely ignored by the mainstream press, which was afraid to offend and thus lose access to a leader with such high popularity ratings. Citizens who protested the leader in public—and their were many—quickly found themselves confronting the newly empowered police's batons, gas, and jail cells, or fenced off in protest zones safely out of earshot of the leader's public speeches. (In the meantime, he was taking almost daily lessons in public speaking, learning to control his tonality, gestures, and facial expressions. He became a very competent orator.)

Within the first months after that terrorist attack, at the suggestion of a political advisor, he brought a formerly obscure word into common usage. He wanted to stir a “racial pride” among his countrymen, so, instead of referring to the nation by its name, he began to refer to it as “The Homeland.” As hoped, people's hearts swelled with pride, and the beginning of an us-versus-them mentality was sewn. Our land was “the” homeland, citizens thought: all others are simply foreign lands. We are the “true people,” he suggested, the only ones worthy of our nation's concern; if bombs fall on others, or human rights are violated in other nations and it makes our lives better, it's of little concern to us.

Playing on this new nationalism, and exploiting a disagreement with the French over his increasing militarism, he argued that any

international body that didn't act first and foremost in the best interest of his own nation was neither relevant nor useful. He thus withdrew his country from the League of Nations in October 1933, and then negotiated a separate naval armaments agreement with Anthony Eden of the United Kingdom to create a worldwide military ruling elite.

His propaganda minister orchestrated a campaign to ensure the people that he was a deeply religious man and that his motivations were rooted in Christianity. He even proclaimed the need for a revival of the Christian faith across his nation, what he called "New Christianity." Every man in his rapidly growing army wore a belt buckle that declared "Gott Mit Uns"—God Is With Us—and most of them fervently believed it was true.

Within a year of the terrorist attack, the nation's leader determined that the various local police and federal agencies around the nation were lacking the clear communication and overall coordinated administration necessary to deal with the terrorist threat facing the nation. He proposed a single new national agency to protect the security of the homeland, consolidating the actions of dozens of previously independent police, border, and investigative agencies under a single leader.

He appointed one of his most trusted associates to be leader of this new agency, the Central Security Office for the homeland, and gave it a role in the government equal to the other major departments.

Those voices questioning the legitimacy of their nation's leader, or raising questions about his checkered past, had by now faded from the public's recollection as his central security office began advertising a program encouraging people to phone in tips about suspicious neighbours. Those denounced often included opposition politicians and celebrities who dared speak out—a favourite target of his regime and the media he now controlled through intimidation and ownership by corporate allies.

To consolidate his power, he concluded that government alone wasn't enough. He reached out to industry and forged an alliance, bringing former executives of the nation's largest corporations into high government positions. A flood of government money poured into corporate coffers to fight the war against the Middle Eastern ancestry terrorists lurking within the homeland, and to prepare for wars overseas. He built powerful alliances with industry; one

corporate ally got the lucrative contract worth millions to build the first large-scale detention centre for enemies of the state. Soon more would follow. Industry flourished.

But after an interval of peace following the terrorist attack, voices of dissent again arose within and without the government. Students started program opposing him (later known as the White Rose Society), and leaders of nearby nations were speaking out against his bellicose rhetoric). He needed a diversion, something to direct people away from the corporate cronyism being exposed in his own government.

With his number two man—a master at manipulating the media—he began a campaign to convince the people of the nation that a small, limited war was necessary. Another nation was harbouring many of the suspicious Middle Eastern people, and even though its connection with the terrorists who had set afire the nation's most important building was tenuous at best, it held resources their nation badly needed if they were to have room to live and maintain their prosperity. He called a press conference and publicly delivered an ultimatum to the leader of the other nation, provoking an international uproar. He claimed the right to strike preemptively in self-defence, and nations across Europe—at first—denounced him for it, pointing out that it was a doctrine only claimed in the past by nations seeking worldwide empire, like Caesar's Rome or Alexander's Greece.

It took a few months, and intense international debate and lobbying with European nations, but after he personally met with the leader of the United Kingdom, finally a deal was struck. After the military action began, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain told the nervous British people that giving in to this leader's new first-strike doctrine would bring "peace for our time." Thus Hitler annexed Austria in a lightening move, riding a wave of popular support as leaders so often do in times of war. The Austrian government was unseated and replaced by a new leadership friendly to Germany, and Germany corporations began to take over Austrian resources.

In a speech responding to critics of the invasion, Hitler said, "Certain foreign newspapers have said that we fell on Austria with brutal methods. I can only say; even in death they cannot stop lying. I have in the course of my political struggle won much love from my people, but when I crossed the former frontier [into Austria] there

met me such a stream of love as I have never experienced. Not as tyrants have we come, but as liberators.”

To deal with those who dissented from his policies he began a press campaign to equate him and his policies with patriotism and the nation itself. National unity was essential, they said. In times of war, he said, there could be only “one people, one nation, and one commander-in chief” (“Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer”). His advocates in the media began a nationwide campaign charging that critics of his policies were attacking the nation itself. Those questioning him were labeled “anti-German” or “not good Germans,” and it was suggested they were aiding the enemies of the state by failing in the patriotic necessity of supporting the nation’s valiant men in uniform. It was one of his most effective ways to stifle dissent and pit wage-earning people (from whom most of the army came) against the “intellectuals and liberals” who were critical of his policies.

Nonetheless, once the “small war” annexation of Austria was successfully and quickly completed, and peace returned, voices of opposition were again raised in the Homeland. A full-out war was necessary to divert public attention from the growing rumbles within the country about disappearing dissidents; violence against liberals, Jews, and union leaders; and the epidemic of crony capitalism that was producing empires of wealth in the corporate sector but threatening the middle class’s way of life.

A year later, to the week, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia; the nation was now fully at war, and all internal dissent was suppressed in the name of national security. It was the end of Germany’s first experiment with democracy.

As we conclude this review of history, there are a few milestones worth remembering.

February 27, 2003, was the 70th anniversary of Dutch terrorist Marinus van der Lubbe’s successful firebombing of the German Parliament (Reichstag) building, the terrorist act that catapulted Hitler to legitimacy and reshaped the German constitution. By the time of his successful and brief action to seize Austria, in which almost no German blood was shed, Hitler was the most beloved and popular leader in the history of his nation. Hailed around the world, he was later *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year.”

Most Americans remember his office for the security of the homeland, known as the Reichssicherheitshauptamt and its SchutzStaffel, simply by its most famous agency's initials: the SS.

We also remember that the Germans developed a new form of highly violent warfare they named "lightening war" or blitzkrieg, which, while generating devastating civilian losses, also produced a highly desirable "shock and awe" among the nation's leadership according to the authors of the 1996 book "Shock and Awe" published by the National Defense University Press.

Reflecting on that time, the American Heritage Dictionary (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983) left us this definition of the form of government the German democracy had become through Hitler's close alliance with the largest German corporations and his policy of using war as a tool to keep power: "fas-cism (fbsh'iz'em) n. A system of government that exercises a dictatorship of the extreme right, typically through the merging of state and business leadership, together with belligerent nationalism."

Today, as we face financial and political crises, it's useful to remember that the ravages of the Great Depression hit Germany and the United States alike. Through the 1930's, however, Hitler and Roosevelt chose very different courses to bring their nations back to power and prosperity.

Germany's response was to use government to empower corporations and reward the society's richest individuals, privatize much of the commons, stifle dissent, strip people of constitutional rights, and create an illusion of prosperity through continual and ever-expanding war. America passed minimum wage laws to raise the middle class, enforced anti-trust laws to diminish the power of corporations, increased taxes on corporations and the wealthiest individuals, created Social Security, and became the employer of last resort through programs to build national infrastructure, promote the arts, and replant the forests.

To the extent that our Constitution is still intact, the choice is again ours.

[Source: Excerpts from article, 16 Mar. 2003; www.CommonDreams.org.]

