“WHAT WE ARE WITNESSING BELOW, these thousands upon thousands and ten thousands upon ten thousands of people, who, in a frenzied delirium of exultation and enthusiasm, are acclaming the new leadership of the state—this is truly the fulfillment of our dearest wish, the crowning achievement of our work. We are fully justified in saying Germany is awakening!” The man who spoke these elated words into the microphones of the radio stations of the German Reich in the late evening of January 30, 1933, was Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda chief of the NSDAP. Hitler had been named chancellor that same morning. Goebbels was standing at the window of the chancellery in the Wilhelmstraße in Berlin. He was enjoying the torch parade that the SA, the paramilitary unit of the party, and the Stahlhelm were putting on between the Brandenburg Gate and the Wilhelmstraße on the occasion of the party’s assumption of power, ostensibly in honor of President Paul von Hindenburg but mostly for their own leader, the new Chancellor Adolf Hitler.

This staged outpouring of jubilation, which would be followed by many state spectacles organized by Goebbels, was the origin of the legend of the national revolution, of Hitler’s “assumption of power” (Machtergreifung). Goebbels was a tireless disseminator of this phrase, using it to divert attention from the fact that Hitler had been named chancellor at the head of a coalition government in which his own NSDAP was only a minority, represented by Wilhelm Frick as the new minister of the interior and Hermann Göring as minister without portfolio. None of these men had any prior experience in public office, with the exception of Frick, who had served as a minister in Thuringia for fourteen months.
The new chancellor and his two fellow National Socialists in the Reich cabinet were in the company of experienced and self-confident conservatives. These included Alfred Hugenberg, media tycoon and German-national minister extraordinaire (of economics and food and agriculture). The posts of deputy chancellor and commissioner for Prussia fell to Franz von Papen (a former member of the Catholic Center Party), who acted as the kingmaker of this government and who had brought four experts from his prior “Cabinet of the Barons” into the new “Government of National Concentration”: Foreign Minister Constantin Freiherr von Neurath, Minister of Finance Schwerin von Krosigk, Minister of Justice Franz Gürtner, and Postmaster General Eltz von Rübenach. The leader of the anti-Republican Stahlhelm, Franz Seldte, joined the cabinet as minister
of labor, while General Werner von Blomberg became minister of defense. Papen, who, in a grandiose misreading of the political situation, had persuaded the senile, eighty-six-year-old president to appoint Hitler chancellor, was deeply satisfied with this triumph of his statesmanship. The keys to real power seemed to be in the hands of those who stood for conservative values—the German National People’s Party (DNVP), the Reichswehr, and the Stahlhelm—while the Hitler party would be used only for the rough stuff of politics.

Many observers, even abroad, shared Papen’s belief that Hitler and his party could be tamed. Some were hoping that high office would transform Hitler from a demagogue into a statesman—the same Hitler who as the head of his movement had always demanded absolute power and who had left no doubt about his will to radically change state and society once he had attained it. Others simply had faith that the nightmare could not last that long. In the face of the NSDAP’s radical nationalist slogans, some forgot the explosive power of the movement, which was resolutely ready to wage civil war and had demonstrated as much for years in meeting hall brawls and street battles. Others argued that things would not turn out as bad as all that, taking comfort in the belief that the excesses perpetrated by the SA and its subdivision, the SS (the NSDAP’s praetorian guard, which in January 1933 comprised at least 600,000 uniformed men), had been committed in the frenzied aftermath of their party’s assumption of power. “If the Führer only knew about that,” people told themselves, he would surely put a swift end to these unchecked activities.

What many considered national exuberance—militant National Socialists settling scores with their Marxist enemies, which they understood to be the Communist Party ( Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD), the Social Democratic Party ( Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD), and the Republican organization Reich Banner Black-Red-Gold, and the harassment of Jews as targets of racially based hatred—was in reality the beginning of state terror. Soon this terror was no longer spontaneous but was carried out with the help of an increasingly effective apparatus of oppression.

A cleansing of state and society seemed necessary, tough action natural to all who believed in the dawn of a new era, in the rebirth of national greatness and glory. In February 1933, Hermann Göring, in his capacity as Prussian minister of the interior, set up an auxiliary policy force, transforming 40,000 SA and SS ruffians into an organ of the state. He emphatically encouraged them to employ the “harshest measures,” which meant the use of deadly force in the interest of “the national population,
which is being continually constrained in its activities.” Under the eyes of conservative “tamers,” Göring applied the instruments of power to the fullest extent possible.

During his first twenty-four hours in office, Hitler himself had destroyed another part of the political framework by prevailing upon his coalition partners to agree to a dissolution of the Reichstag and to new elections. Electioneering in those days meant confrontation to the point of civil war,
and the NSDAP, now a governing party, would use every means, including terror and violence, to expand and solidify the power it had just been given. This meant war against all parties, against the democratic system, against the Communist left as well as against German national rivals, whose parliamentary basis (52 of 584 seats, or 8.9 percent of the vote in the November 1932 election) was weak. Hitler had his way. Reich President Hindenburg dissolved parliament on February 1, with new elections scheduled for March 5. These five weeks were put to good use. On the basis of Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which gave the president the power to declare a state of emergency, other parties were obstructed, freedom of the press was restricted, and civil servants were dismissed. This was called a “cleansing of public administration” (the victims were chiefly Social Democrats and other supporters of the parliamentary system) and “securing of national concerns.” In actuality it was the prelude to the establishment of a dictatorial system and the dismantling of the rule of law.

One particular incident, so fateful and fraught with symbolism that many believed it had been instigated by the National Socialists, accelerated all these developments. In the night of February 27–28, 1933, the Reichstag in Berlin caught on fire. The building, if not a symbol of democracy at least a symbol of state power and of German unity following the establishment of the Reich by Bismarck, was the target of an attack by a
single individual, the Dutchman Marinus van der Lubbe. The arsonist was quickly apprehended, though some thought it much more plausible that this was the work of the Communists, whom Goebbels effectively blamed in the public media, while others believed it was a National Socialist coup. In point of fact the Nazis were completely caught by surprise. Hitler was a dinner guest at the house of his propaganda chief Goebbels when news of the fire reached him. “I consider this a crazy, fabricated report and refuse to inform the Führer,” Goebbels noted in his diary. Eventually he did tell him, and they hurried to the scene of the fire.

Word went out that the fire was evidence of an attempted Communist coup and justified a state of emergency. That same night, the decision was made to go after the Communists (who were the third-largest party, with 100 seats and 17 percent of the votes) and to suppress the Social Democrats (121 seats and 20.7 percent of the votes in the election of November 1932). On February 28, President Hindenburg put his signature on the Decree for the Protection of the People and the State (also known as the Reichstag Fire Decree). The decree suspended important basic rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and association, and postal and communications privacy. It did away with the principle of the inviolability of a person’s home and tightened penalties for certain offenses. The death penalty could now be imposed in cases of high treason and arson.

“Protective custody,” a phrase that would take on crucial importance for the suppression of any stirrings of opposition in the years ahead, was legalized for the detention of political enemies and was soon put into practice in the new institution of the concentration camp. In the days immediately following publication of the decree, protective custody was used first against Communist functionaries and elected officials. The Reichstag Fire Decree established a state of emergency that would last until the end of the Nazi regime and that was constitutionally formalized in March 1933 by the so-called Enabling Act. The critical point was that the decree of February 28 placed the instruments of power directly in the hands of the chancellor and the National Socialist minister of the interior and did not link the state of emergency to the authority of the president. Hitler’s coalition partners from the DNVP and Papen, who as a confidante of the president fancied himself in the role of influential behind-the-scenes power broker, did not realize the extent to which they had tied their own hands by agreeing to the state of emergency, which they regarded as very much in the tradition of the presidential emergency decrees by which Hitler’s predecessors had governed since the fall of 1930.
The National Socialists knew how to take full advantage of the emergency decree and made it very clear during the electoral campaign what they wanted. During an electoral speech in Frankfurt on March 3, Göring declared that the measures he was taking as Prussian minister of the interior would "not be afflicted with any kind of legal concerns," and that his job was not to exercise justice but "only to destroy and exterminate." War against the critics and enemies of National Socialism, at first especially against Communists and Social Democrats, meant terror and despotism, mistreatment, illegal detention, and murder. In spite of the elimination of the KPD and the intimidation of the SPD and the Catholic Center Party (Zentrumspartei), the only meaningful opponents, in the last election in which multiple parties were allowed to participate and which took place under more or less legal conditions, the NSDAP won only 43.9 percent of the vote. Together with the DNVP, the coalition, with 52.5 percent of the vote and 340 of the 647 seats, held a parliamentary majority (against 120 deputies of the SPD and 92 of the Catholic Center Party; the 81 elected Communist representatives were no longer able to take their seats in parliament), a majority it disdained. Hitler did not wish to be dependent on the Reichstag, he wanted dictatorial powers: he had said as much in countless speeches over the years, and in March 1933 he made good on that demand. Following the so-called Treachery Law, which the president had issued as a decree for "defense against treacherous attacks on the government of the national uprising" and which made criticism of the Hitler government punishable by law, the Enabling Act was intended to suspend parliament and all other constitutional checks and balances of the government and establish a dictatorship, initially for a period of four years.

Passage of the Enabling Act by the Reichstag on March 23, 1933, had been prepared by actions that employed enticement and coercion, terror and national apotheosis in a way that would become typical of National Socialist rule. Political enemies were silenced and intimidated through the terror of the SA in the streets and in improvised detention and torture chambers that sprouted everywhere like mushrooms. Sympathizers and traditional elites were offered a national spectacle in the Day of Potsdam," an event intended as an emphatic demonstration that the goals of the revolutionary National Socialist movement, as represented by Adolf Hitler, were in harmony with Prussian virtues and civic-conservative patriotism, as embodied in First World War Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg.

The director of this state event was Joseph Goebbels. Following the electoral success of the NSDAP, on March 13 Goebbels was named min-
ister of public enlightenment and propaganda, an appointment that marked the Führer’s creation of a new department—the first of its kind in the world—dedicated to controlling public opinion and orchestrating acclamation of the regime. In Potsdam, Goebbels introduced sentimentality and kitsch as forms of National Socialist self-representation. The backdrop for the Day of Potsdam, the goal of which was to situate the Hitler movement within the tradition of the Bismarckian Reich, was provided by the delegates of the new Reichstag. Following the constitutive ceremony with the president in Potsdam, the delegates met in the Kroll Opera House, the parliamentary quarters that replaced the burned-out Reichstag. It was highly symbolic that the few sessions of parliament held between 1933 and 1942 took place in an opera house. Once the Reichstag had completed its self-emasculating, when passage of the Enabling Act placed all power in the hands of the Hitler government, it was left with the theatrical function of offering applause and a background chorus in homage to the dictator’s sway.

Passage of the Enabling Act required a two-thirds majority in the Reichstag. The eighty-one delegates of the KPD were no longer able to participate in the March 23 session. Moreover, twenty-six Social Democrats had also been arrested or were on the run. Göring, who was president of the Reichstag, used procedural maneuvers to control the session. Above all, the Hitler government needed the consent of the Catholic Center Party and the Bavarian People’s Party (Bayerische Volkspartei). These two parties, representing political Catholicism, were internally divided and in the end decided to support the Enabling Act. The prelate Ludwig Kaas, chairman of the Center Party, believed that a “no” vote by his party would not change the balance of power, while a “yes” vote would at least protect ecclesiastical and religious concerns, such as influence on the schools and the education of the young, and ensure the survival of Catholic organizations. To “prevent even worse” and to improve their relationship with the NSDAP, the Catholic delegates, many of whom had vigorously opposed the Nazi party only a short while before, submitted to the demands of the National Socialists, only to discover soon after that the promises they were given in return were worthless.

The meager remnants of the middle-class liberals put aside their “serious misgivings” in the “interest of the Volk and the fatherland and in expectation of lawful development,” as Reinhold Maier declared on behalf of the German State Party (Deutsche Staatspartei), and likewise approved the granting of unlimited power to the Hitler government.

The 444 “yes” votes were opposed by merely 9 “no” votes from the
Social Democrats. Otto Wels, the chairman of the SPD, justified his rejection of the proposed law in one of the most stirring speeches ever delivered in a German parliament. The governing parties of the NSDAP and the DNVP, Wels argued, held the majority and could govern in accordance with the letter and spirit of the constitution. Where such a possibility existed it had to be taken. “But we stand by fundamental principles of the constitutional state, of equality of rights, of social justice. . . . In this historic hour, we German Social Democrats solemnly affirm the principles of humanity and of justice, of liberty and Socialism. No enabling act gives you the power to destroy ideas that are eternal and indestructible. . . . We salute the persecuted and the harassed. We salute our friends in the Reich. Their steadfastness and loyalty deserve admiration, the courage of their convictions, their unbroken confidence guarantee a brighter future.” These were words of departure, to be followed in short order by the emigration of the party leadership and the withdrawal of the intimidated party members from the political stage.

Hitler had called the vote on the Enabling Act a “decision about peace and war” when he appealed to the delegates with his typical mixture of threat and pathos, which he cultivated as an air of statesmanship. At an election event in the Berlin Sportpalast in February, he had stepped “before the nation” as a tribune and praetorian and had beseeched it: “German Volk! Give us four years’ time—then judge and pass sentence on us!”

But any possibility of judging and passing sentence on Hitler and his NSDAP was deliberately, swiftly, and thoroughly eliminated in the spring of 1933. In the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the central organ of the NSDAP, one could read how quickly the conservative “taming” concept had fallen apart, how the illusion of making use of the Hitler movement to establish an authoritarian state as envisioned by Hugenberg and Papen had vanished into thin air: “For four years Hitler can do whatever is necessary to save Germany. Negatively in the extermination of the *Volk*-corrupting Marxist powers, positively in the building of a new *Volk* community.” In plain language this meant that Hitler was on his way to a totalitarian dictatorship—the authoritarian ideas of his coalition partners were no longer a topic for serious debate.

Soon the talk was not of a national but of a National Socialist revolution. Another new term in the German vocabulary was *Gleichschaltung*, roughly, “coordination.” It appeared for the first time in laws that enforced conformity with the NSDAP and its goals by removing ministers, civil servants, and deputies in states that were not yet under Nazi control. These were primarily the Hanseatic cities of Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen,
along with the states of Saxony, Hesse, and in the south, Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden. Beginning on March 5, the minister of the interior appointed commissioners to replace the constitutional governments. The preliminary Law for the Gleichschaltung of the States with the Reich required that the composition of the parliaments reflect the results of the Reichstag elections; the same was true for all self-governing bodies at the

“The Potsdam celebration was the first to be held in the National Socialist style,” Goebbels confided to his diary. After the event he expressed his satisfaction because everyone had been “profoundly moved.” Hindenburg had even had tears in his eyes: “All rise from their seats and pay jubilant tribute to the aged field marshal, who extends his hand to the young chancellor. A historic moment. The shield of German honor has been washed clean once again.”
district and communal level. This move provided many National Socialists with positions and offices and prepared the ground for the centralization of every kind of authority. The development was made definitive on April 7 with the Second Gleichschaltung Law. Commissioners with dictatorial powers were dispatched to all the states (with the exception of Prussia, where, since Papen’s coup d’état against the democratic government on July 20, 1932, state commissioners operated simultaneously as Reich minister). These commissioners functioned as governors of the territories, which had lost their political autonomy and soon maintained the names and institutions of their former statehood merely as decoration.

Gleichschaltung was also extended to organizations: henceforth they were compelled to march in lockstep with the NSDAP or, in anticipatory obedience, did so voluntarily. Another measure of the gleichschaltung campaign was the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, passed on April 7, 1933, and used to purge civil servants whose political loyalties were suspect. Though Social Democrats were the chief victims of the law, it also affected other committed supporters of the Weimar Republic and especially Jews, who, in accordance with one of the demands of the NSDAP’s program, were to be excluded from the civil service. The “Aryan paragraph” was formulated for the first time in this law: it demanded that civil servants of “non-Aryan” descent be sent into immediate retirement. Initially this paragraph applied only to public service and, through a separate law promulgated the same day, to lawyers; later it was gradually expanded to include many professions, though at first it granted exemptions for First World War veterans who had fought on the front lines. But a broad social trend of adaptation to the new times became visible very quickly, as sports and bowling clubs, singing clubs, student fraternities, and social organizations began, without any compulsion by the state, to exclude their Jewish members. And the definition of who was a “Jew” was entirely a matter of National Socialist racial ideology: the self-definition of those affected, many of whom had been Christians for a long time and had no cultural bonds to Judaism, made no difference in this drive toward exclusion.

With Hitler’s assumption of power, anti-Semitism, the NSDAP’s racially based hatred of the Jews, became state doctrine. What began as rowdy scenes and excesses in the streets, carried out by the SA and other Nazis and aimed at individual Jews, became—without a word of protest from coalition partners or the public and excused by the majority as the side effect of national euphoria—an official, nationwide action against German Jews. The NSDAP had called for a boycott of Jewish stores, businesses, doctors, and lawyers on April 1, 1933, and had issued appropriate
slogans. “Germans, defend yourselves! Don’t buy from Jews!” was written on placards and banners that SA men held up to passers-by who they prevented from entering Jewish shops and department stores—or tried to prevent from entering, for there were many examples of solidarity with the harassed minority on that day. Many shoppers refused to be intimidated and ignored the action, which had been launched in response to alleged anti-Hitler agitation by the foreign press. This coercive action against Germany’s Jews was called off on April 3, in part for economic reasons, in part because of diplomatic repercussions, and in part because of the indifferent response of the public. One example of the latter is the course the boycott took in the town of Wesel on the lower Rhine. There the owner of the Jewish department store, Erich Leyens, adorned with his First World War medals, distributed a leaflet to passers-by asking whether this was the gratitude of the fatherland for the 12,000 German-Jewish soldiers killed in the war. His action won support among residents and forced the SA to withdraw.
Two other events in the spring of 1933 sent a powerful signal and had a profound impact. The Reich government had declared May 1, 1933, National Labor Day and for the first time a legal holiday. This traditional celebration of the international labor movement was usurped by mass rallies of the NSDAP invoking a worker-friendly “Volk community.” The next day the offices of the labor unions were occupied by government forces, headed by the SA and the National Socialist Shop Cell Organization (Nationalsozialistische Betriebszellenorganisation, NSBO), the NSDAP’s surrogate for the labor unions. The unionists offered no resistance; their fainthearted leaders, taken by surprise, were paralyzed. As they had done on July 20, 1932, when then-Chancellor Papen had deposed the Social Democrat–led Prussian government in a coup d’état, the leaders of the labor movement urged their members not to budge an inch from the path of lawfulness and not to seek confrontation through a general strike or militant action.

The crushing of the unions and the theft of their assets ended with the compulsory incorporation of their members into the German Labor Front (Deutsche Arbeitsfront, DAF), which was established on May 10. Under the leadership of Robert Ley, the DAF, an “allied organization” of the NSDAP, was built up into a monolithic organization of “all working Germans,” a compulsory association of employers and employees. With roughly 23 million members by 1938, the DAF was the largest Nazi organization, developing into an empire of its own with enormous financial resources but without any real competence in social or economic policy. The DAF did not have authority over the pay scale, which had been the core power of the unions. Instead, beginning on May 19, 1933, so-called public trustees of labor regulated labor contracts by way of state coercion.

The other event that proclaimed the spirit of a new time was the solemn burning of books by authors who had fallen into disfavor. On May 10, 1933, students in every university town, with the active participation of rectors and professors, spouted condemnatory “fire speeches” and hurled the works of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Heinrich Mann, Erich Kästner, Erich Maria Remarque, Carl von Ossietzky, Kurt Tucholsky, and others into the flames. These “bonfire celebrations” had been organized by the National Socialist German Student Association (Deutsche Studentenschaft). The proclamation “Twelve Theses against the Un-German Spirit” was part of the ritual everywhere and made it very clear that the universities were not offering any resistance to National Socialism. In Berlin, this action, to which the public generally responded with indifference, re-
ceived a special blessing in a defamatory speech made by the minister of propaganda against the banned authors. Not only was the book-burning an obvious act of barbarism, it also demonstrated the NSDAP’s claim to cultural hegemony. In literature, the arts, and the sciences, opinions that diverged from those of Nazi ideology were spurned—the auto-da-fé made this clear and that is how it was understood.

The Nazis tolerated political competition only for as long as it was unavoidable. The parliamentary mandates of the KPD delegates had been annulled on March 9. Functionaries of the party had either been arrested or were in hiding. Party members had prepared themselves for a political battle that would have to be waged from a position of illegality, and for a long time they continued to make their presence known—while incurring heavy losses—with resistance actions, leaflets, and slogans painted on walls. The SPD, while determined to adhere strictly to legal action vis-à-vis the government, took the step of sending its leading functionaries out of the country to safety. Under the leadership of Otto Wels and Hans Vogel, an exile executive committee of the SPD was established in Prague,
from which it maintained contact with the party in Germany through “border secretariats” and couriers. When the SPD group in the Reichstag voted in favor of a foreign policy declaration by Hitler on March 17, it triggered a conflict with the émigré members of the party leadership, who disapproved of the accommodation and did not share the hope that Hitler would reward this kind of loyalty. All further illusions came to an end when the SPD was outlawed on June 22, 1933. Other parties preempted a similar fate by dissolving themselves. For those that failed to see the light, Nazi terror proved persuasive. On June 27, Hugenberg, leader of the DNVP, Hitler’s coalition partner, a double minister and in a very strong position in January but by now driven into a corner by the Nazis, asked to be relieved of his offices. The Ministry of Economics was given to Kurt Schmitt, the Ministry of Agriculture to NSDAP ideologue Richard Walther Darré. The DNVP’s delegates in parliament switched to the NSDAP and the party dissolved itself on June 27, as did the national-liberal German People’s Party (Deutsche Volkspartei). The German State Party (the last incarnation of the German Democratic Party, Deutsche Demokratische Partei) followed suit on June 28, the Bavarian People’s Party disappeared on July 4, the Center Party the following day. The NSDAP’s claim to political monopoly was no longer in question. There was now only a single party in Germany, and all other associations that could possibly compete with it were “coordinated.” On Hitler’s orders, the Stahlhelm, allied with the NSDAP in the Harzburg Front since October of 1931, was subordinated to the SA leadership on July 1.

The Law against the Founding of New Parties, promulgated on July 14, 1933, put the finishing touches on the Nazis’ monopolization of power. In September a Party Day of Victory was held in Nuremberg, which would henceforth be known as the “City of the Reich Party Days.” Here the NSDAP celebrated itself with a parade of all its branches and associations. In the years to come this parade would evolve into the most important ritual of National Socialist self-representation.