

# Gleichschaltung in Nazi Germany

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The consolidation of Nazi rule within the state itself [required]...breaking the liberal-democratic order altogether. This process, known as *Gleichschaltung*—“bringing into line” or “synchronization”—defined the period of consolidation of the new political order in the years 1933–34. This meant politically integrating each of the state’s separate entities, including the parliament, judiciary, civil bureaucracy, military, and the local and regional branches of government, and extending this to the major organs of the ideological state apparatus within civil society, or the educational institutions, the media, trade associations, and more.<sup>1</sup> This synchronization was accomplished by means of a combination of ideology, intimidation, enforced cooperation, and coercion, usually by pressuring these institutions into “cleaning their own houses.” The leading Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt promoted the two principles governing *Gleichschaltung* in the German case: (1) the removal of “non-Aryans,” and (2) the *Führerprinzip* (“leadership principle,” placing the leader above the written laws). During this period, a kind of judicial cloak legitimated the consolidation of power, to be largely dispensed with later. As Schmitt explained, the object of *Gleichschaltung* was unity and purity, achieved through the “extermination of heterogeneity.”<sup>2</sup>

*Gleichschaltung* in Germany was aimed at all the separate branches of the state and the ideological state apparatus simultaneously, but underwent several stages or qualitative breaks. The Reichstag fire, set only a month after President [Paul von] Hindenburg’s appointment of [Adolf] Hitler as chancellor in January 1933, prompted the issue of two executive decrees providing a legalistic justification for the violation of the constitution. These decrees were further legitimized by the Enabling Act, or “Law to Eliminate Peril to Nation and Reich,” in March 1933, giving Hitler unilateral power to enact laws independent of the Reichstag. This was soon accompanied by the arrest and purging of political opponents. This period also saw the initiation of the “Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service” that allowed for the application of *Gleichschaltung* to all civil service workers. This initial stage of bringing into line ended in July 1933 with the abolition of all political parties other than the National Socialist German Workers Party [the Nazi Party].<sup>3</sup>

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This article is excerpted from John Bellamy Foster, *Trump in the White House: Tragedy and Farce* (Monthly Review Press, 2017), 27–30, 64–66.

The second stage was aimed at establishing control over and integration of the military, as well as the universities, the press, and other social and cultural organizations. Not only did Hitler move to consolidate his control of the military (the *Wehrmacht*), but, in the attempt to integrate the military with the Nazi project, he declared in December 1933 that the army was “the nation’s only bearer of weapons,” undermining the claims of the Nazi Party’s paramilitary, brown-shirt wing, the SA – *Sturmabteilung*, “Assault Division” or Stormtroopers.<sup>4</sup>

The “extermination of heterogeneity” within major cultural institutions is best illustrated by the absorption of the universities into Nazi doctrine. As rector of the University of Freiburg, beginning in 1933, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger was charged with the institution of *Gleichschaltung* as his main official duty. Heidegger carried out these functions to the letter, helping purge the university and denouncing colleagues. In these years, he worked closely with Carl Schmitt to promote the Nazi ideology, helping to rationalize anti-Semitism and presiding over symbolic book burnings.<sup>5</sup>

The third, decisive stage of *Gleichschaltung* was initiated with the bloody purge of the SA leadership from June 30 to July 2, 1934, and the subsequent establishment, particularly following Hindenburg’s death that August, of Hitler as the ultimate source of law, as celebrated in Schmitt’s article “The Führer Safeguards the Law.” From this point on, fascist rule was consolidated in all of the main institutions of the state and the chief ideological organs of civil society.<sup>6</sup>

Other fascist states have followed a similar, if less totalizing, trajectory. “In the much slower process of consolidating Fascist rule in Italy,” Robert O. Paxton writes in *The Anatomy of Fascism*, “only the labor unions, the political parties, and the media were fully ‘brought into line.’”<sup>7</sup>

Many of these developments were specific to Europe in the 1930s, and are unlikely to recur in anything resembling the same form in our day. Nevertheless, neo-fascism today also has as its aim a shift in the management of the advanced capitalist system, requiring the effective dissolution of the liberal-democratic order and its replacement by an alliance between large capital and what is now called the “alt-right,” openly espousing racism, nationalism, anti-environmentalism, misogyny, homophobia, police violence, and extreme militarism.

The deeper motive of all these forms of reaction is the repression of the workforce. Behind Trump’s appeals to alt-right bigotry lie the increased privatization of all state-economic functions, the reinforcement of the power of big business, and the shift to a more racially defined imperialist foreign policy. Yet to put such a neo-fascist strategy in place requires a new kind of *Gleichschaltung*, whereby various institutions – Congress, the

judiciary, the civil bureaucracy, state and local governments, the military, national security state (the “deep state”), media, and educational institutions – are all brought into line...<sup>8</sup>

Hitler rose to power not by abolishing the Weimar Constitution, but rather, as historian Karl Bracher explained, through “the erosion and abrogation of its substance by constitutional means....”<sup>9</sup> Once at the helm, Hitler moved quickly to invoke Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which authorized the executive, together with the army, to claim emergency powers and enact any measures deemed necessary to restore public order (originally intended as a safeguard against the left). This meant that the executive was free to act independently of the parliament, promulgating laws on its own, and suspending civil liberties. With the setting of the Reichstag fire...Hitler was able to wield Article 48, thereby concentrating power in the executive. This was soon followed by the Enabling Act (the Law to Eliminate Peril to Nation and Reich), which further eroded the separation of powers.<sup>10</sup> However, the transition to full power and the consolidation of the Third Reich required a process of *Gleichschaltung*...over the course of 1933–34, during which most other branches of the state and civil society were incorporated into the new Nazi order – largely voluntarily, but under a growing terror regime.

It is important to recognize that all of this was given legal form, as was fascist management of the state in general. Historian Nikolaus Wachsmann notes that far from renouncing the law or the judiciary, the Nazi state imposed a system of “legal terror”:

The Third Reich did not become an all-out police state. Leading Nazis occasionally even made public gestures of support for the legal system, at least in the early years of the dictatorship. Hitler himself publicly promised in his speech on 23 March 1933 that the German judges were irremovable. At the same time, though, he also expected the legal system to fall into line with his general wishes, demanding “elasticity” in sentencing. Crucially, Hitler and other senior Nazis stressed that judges were ultimately answerable to the “national community,” not to abstract legal principles. The only guideline for judges, it was said, was the welfare of the German people, and the mythical “will of the national community” was frequently invoked to justify brutal punishment. That this “will” was in reality nothing more than the will of the Nazi leaders, or more precisely Hitler’s own, was not seen as a contradiction.... The legal apparatus was an essential element of Nazi terror. It played a central role in the criminalisation of political dissent and the politicisation of common crime. Trials were not completely hidden from the public. On the contrary, the Nazi media were full of news about court cases and sentences.<sup>11</sup>

Hitler explicitly refused to set aside the Weimar Constitution and codify his new order, arguing that “justice is a means of ruling. Justice is the codified practice of ruling.” A new constitution would therefore be premature, and would only weaken the “revolution.” Eventually, of course, the *Gleichschaltung* process was complete, and the identification of the Führer with the law was absolute.

## Notes

1. Karl Dietrich Bracher, “Stages of Totalitarian ‘Integration’ (*Gleichschaltung*): The Consolidation of National Socialist Rule in 1933 and 1934,” in *Republic to Reich*, ed. Hajo Holborn (New York: Vintage, 1972), 109–28; Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 123–24; Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 39–58.
2. Faye, *Heidegger*, 151–54; Carl Schmitt, “The Legal Basis of the Total State,” in ed. Roger Griffin, *Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 138–39.
3. Bracher, “Stages of Totalitarian ‘Integration,’” 118–22. On the Reichstag fire, see John Mage and Michael E. Tigar, “The Reichstag Fire Trial, 1933–2008,” *Monthly Review* 60, no. 10 (March 2009): 24–49.
4. Bracher, “Stages of Totalitarian ‘Integration,’” 122–24.
5. Faye, *Heidegger*, 39–53, 118, 154–62, 316–22; Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993).
6. Bracher, “Stages of Totalitarian ‘Integration,’” 124–28. Here, what Bracher called the third and fourth stages of *Gleichschaltung* in the German case are treated as one.
7. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 123.
8. “There’s a German Word that Perfectly Encapsulates Trump’s Presidency,” Quartz, January 26, 2017; Shawn Hamilton, “What Those Who Studied Nazis Can Teach Us About the Strange Reaction to Donald Trump,” *Huffington Post*, December 19, 2016; Ron Jacobs, “Trumpism’s *Gleichschaltung*,” *Counterpunch*, February 3, 2017.
9. Karl Bracher, *The German Dictatorship* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 192–93.
10. Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*, 193–98. On the Reichstag fire, see Mage and Tigar, “The Reichstag Fire Trial, 1933–2008.”
11. Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Hitler’s Prisons* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 69, 71.

## MONTHLY REVIEW *Fifty Years Ago*

I have said all I can say on this occasion about the degradation of work in the twentieth century. In brief, this degradation consists, beyond the surrender of the tools of production and the products of production into alien hands, in the loss of control by the workers over the process of production and their transformation into instruments in the hands of capital—instruments of no special qualities, exchangeable and replaceable. Further, it consists in the narrowing of the base of productive labor upon which the economy rests, to the point where an ever smaller portion of society labors to maintain all of it, while the remainder is drafted, at lower rates of pay and even more demeaning conditions of labor, into the unproductive economy of capitalism. And, finally, it consists in the misery of unemployment and of outright pauperization, which are aspects of the reserve army of labor created by capital more or less automatically in its accumulation process.

—HARRY BRAVERMAN, “Work and Unemployment,” June 1975.