

Observation no: 73

Country-year: Germany-1938

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No.

President Paul von Hindenberg appointed Hitler chancellor in 1933 after parliamentary elections.

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes.

Germany experienced an attempted, unsuccessful coup in 1920, known as the Kapp Putsch. It attempted to overthrow the newly formed Weimar government and received some military support in the *Reichswehr*. There is also some evidence that army units supported Hitler and Ludendorff's Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, which attempted overthrow the government of Bavaria. Most important, the army did little to stop these right-wing plots, which historians see as evidence of military complicity.¹

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No.

Hitler did serve in the military in World War I, but only as a low-level soldier. He was not an officer.

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

Yes.

Nazi Germany required strict German nationalist credentials of its officers. This almost goes without saying, since those lacking German blood were essentially denied Reich citizenship under the Nuremberg Laws of 1933.

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

¹ Anthony McElligott, "Political Culture," in *The Oxford Short History of Germany: Weimar Germany*, edited by Anthony McElligott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 33-4; and Wolfgang Elz, "Foreign Policy," in *The Oxford Short History of Germany*, p. 57.

Yes.

Entry into the officer corps required strict belief in German nationalism and in conservative military values, although a substantial faction of military officers in the late 1930s did not actually embrace Nazism and worried that it would undermine their own ambitions for Germany.²

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

No.

Some senior officers in the *Wehrmacht* were party officials, but many were not—they had joined the German military well before the rise of Hitler. However, SS leaders were committed Nazis.³

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes.

The *Wehrmacht* engaged in political indoctrination, and the quasi-military branches of the Nazi Party, the SA and SS, were by definition heavily ideological.⁴

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes.

Among other things, the SS was used to purge the SA in the Night of the Long Knives in 1934. In addition, the SA was routinely involved in violent and coercive internal efforts to enforce the Nuremberg Laws of 1933.

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

No.

The Nazi Party firmly maintained civilian (meaning Hitler's) control over the military. Hitler's desire to limit the political power of the armed forces was a major motivation for the Night of the Long Knives that purged one of the party's major paramilitary organizations, the SA. See question 10.

² Joachim Fest, *Plotting Hitler's Death: the Story of the German Resistance* (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 1996).

³ Fest.

⁴ Manfred Messerschmidt, "German Military Effectiveness between 1919 and 1939," in *Military Effectiveness, Vol. II: the Interwar Period*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen & Unwin 1988), p. 222.

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

Yes.

Hitler used the military branches of the Nazi Party, the SS and SA, to provide regime security outside the normal chain of military command in the *Wehrmacht*. Eventually Hitler believed the SA had become too powerful, however, so he used the Night of the Long Knives in 1934 to arrest, execute, and purge most SA leaders. The SS then emerged as the most powerful paramilitary organization in Nazi Germany, going on to play a major role in both internal security and Germany's external campaigns in World War II, as the Waffen-SS.⁵

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes.

The Gestapo was a branch of the SS charged with internal security across all sectors of German society. Its jurisdiction included military officers, and *Wehrmacht* members who plotted against Hitler lived in fear of discovery by the Gestapo.⁶

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

No.

Although Hitler distrusted the *Wehrmacht*, he did not engage in extensive purges of the type seen in the pre-World War II Soviet Union. In fact, Hitler later "commented that he often bitterly regretted not having purged his officer corps the way Stalin did."⁷

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

No.

According to Messerschmidt, "there was no regularly working body in Germany to discuss and formulate military and strategic policies." The *Wehrmacht* was politically weak and no formal mechanism for constraining or advising Hitler. The Enabling Act of 1933 also sidelined the Reichstag, eliminating the Minister of

⁵ Fest, especially chapter 2.

⁶ Fest.

⁷ Fest, p. 332.

Defense's responsibility to report to Parliament. Decision-making "became exclusively dependent on Hitler's personal will."⁸

⁸ Messerschmidt, p. 223-5.