

■ Learning trouble spot

Did Hitler come to power legally and democratically?

It is sometimes said that Hitler was elected into office. This is not really the case. The way of being elected into office in a parliamentary system is to win a majority of members of parliament. Hitler never did this in free elections. As the Weimar Republic had a proportional representation electoral system, unlike Britain's first-past-the-post method, Hitler could only have become Chancellor directly through elections by winning 50 per cent of the vote. He peaked at 37 per cent.

Hitler came to power because Hindenburg, legally, appointed him Chancellor. If Hindenburg had not made this decision, Hitler could not legally have become Germany's leader. However, he did win 37 per cent of the vote (far more than any other party except the SPD in 1919); he led the largest party in the Reichstag, and thus had a 'moral' (if not constitutional) claim to be Chancellor. Having 'won' both Reichstag elections in 1932 he was appointed constitutionally by the democratically elected President.

However, some historians argue that Hitler's use of violence means that he cannot be seen as coming to power legally. The violence committed by the Nazis in the streets that intimidated communist opponents contributed both to the Nazis' electoral success and to the preparedness of the elite to use the Nazis and then tame them. This violence helped create an atmosphere where many favoured strong government to restore law and order, and also won the support of many of those who were worried by the threat of communism.

Some also consider the fact that Hitler's programme was fundamentally undemocratic relevant to this issue.