2 Ideology and the nature of the state

Key questions

- To what extent was Nazi ideology rooted in the past?
- What did Hitler himself contribute to Nazi ideology?
- How important was the role of ideology in Nazi Germany?

Overview

- Many of the elements that made up Nazi ideology were already to be found in 19th- and early 20th-century thought – for example, the belief in the superiority of the Aryan race, anti-Semitism, the cult of the leader or Führerprinzip, and the concept of the survival of the fittest, known as Social Darwinism.
- Hitler brought his own belief in German nationalism to the NSDAP and drew on the discontent in post-war Germany to establish a new doctrine of Nazism. In 1920, his 25-point programme set out the principles of nationalism, racialism, anti-Semitism and Volksgemeinschaft (community). In the 1920s and 1930s, there was an increasing emphasis on anti-communism, anti-feminism, the need to prepare for war to combat communism and obtain Lebensraum (living space) in the east, and on the aims of achieving racial unity, the elimination of the Jews and total authoritarian control.
- Ideology remained fluid throughout the 12 years of Nazi rule and was adapted according to circumstances. However, it was used to justify policies that seemed to make little practical sense, such as the murder of millions of Jews at a time when Germany was suffering an acute labour shortage.

Timeline

1905 Hitler begins to develop his ideas in Vienna
1919 Weimar Republic is established; Treaty of Versailles is signed, which influenced Hitler’s thinking
1920 25-point programme is introduced reconciling nationalism and socialism
1924 Hitler writes his semi-autobiographical Mein Kampf while in Landsberg Fortress
1933 Hitler becomes chancellor and is in a position to put ideology into practice
1942 Final details of the Holocaust are established

A poster showing Nazi anti-Marxism and anti-Semitism; a Marxist ‘angel’ is walking hand-in-hand with a wealthy Jewish businessman and the text says: ‘Marxism is the guardian angel of capitalism. Vote National Socialist.’
Below is a list of Hitler’s main ideas, with brief definitions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idea</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supremacy of the state and Volksgemeinschaft</td>
<td>the belief that loyalty to the state is more important than any other loyalty; people should feel bound together by blood as a single community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Darwinism</td>
<td>the acceptance that life is a constant struggle and, without interference, the strongest will always win; this was indirectly derived from Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lebensraum</td>
<td>the right of the superior German race to acquire living space for its peoples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pan-Germanism – Herrenvolk</td>
<td>the supremacy of the German Aryans as the master race</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-democracy</td>
<td>a conviction that democracy gives undue weight to weaker peoples and mediocrities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Führerprinzip</td>
<td>the principle that the leader’s will is the source of all political authority; from this developed the ‘cult of the leader’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-feminism</td>
<td>the belief that a woman’s role is as the bearer of future Aryans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-Marxism</td>
<td>hostility to Marxism as an international creed that weakens nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-Semitism</td>
<td>a belief that Jews are the lowest race in the social hierarchy and should be persecuted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blut und Boden (blood and soil)</td>
<td>the belief that the blood of the community is rooted in the soil</td>
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**To what extent was Nazi ideology rooted in the past?**

Most elements of Nazi ideology were absorbed from Hitler’s study of works that grew out of the political, economic and scientific changes of the 19th century, as moulded by his own experience.

**The superiority of the German race**

The idea of a superior German Volk (the Herrenvolk or people) originated in the writings of the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder at the end of the 18th century, at a time when Germany was divided into many separate states. The term Volk (meaning a special race of people) was commonly used in the 19th century and the German philosopher Georg Hegel proved a powerful inspiration to subsequent German nationalists by suggesting it was the destiny of the Germans to emerge as a single people in a strong unified state.
Hitler's desire to unite all people of German race, create a sense of national community (Volksgemeinschaft), emphasise the superiority of the Germans and demand a strong German state can all be traced back to these ideas. This attitude is sometimes referred to as 'pan-German'.

**Anti-Semitism**

The persecution of Jews was not unique to Hitler's Germany. European Jews had suffered for centuries, but by the mid 19th century most Jews outside Russia had been assimilated into their communities, and laws, for example confining them to ghetto districts, had been relaxed. However, the growth of industrialisation, which provided Jews with new opportunities for money making, had led to a revival of anti-Semitic feeling by the end of the century.

This rise in anti-Semitism was encouraged by writings such as those of the Frenchman Arthur Comte de Gobineau and the Germans Paul de Lagarde (an assumed name) and Julius Langbehn. Langbehn used vocabulary that foreshadowed Hitler's later ranting. Langbehn referred to the Jews as 'pest and cholera' and as 'poison' polluting the purity of the Volk. When the journalist Wilhelm Marr published *The Victory of the Jew over the German* in 1873, it was so popular that it went into 12 editions within six years.

Kaiser Wilhelm II and most of the conservative élite of late 19th- and early 20th-century Germany were anti-Semitic in their views, although they may not have expressed them in quite such an extreme form.

**The cult of the leader – the Führerprinzip**

In the 1880s, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche put forward the idea that, just as there were superior races, so there were superior individuals. He suggested that a man with the 'will to power' was needed to lead the lower orders and that such a leader would be naturally superior – an Übermensch (superhuman). This idea was to be used to justify the Nazi idea of the Führerprinzip or indispensable leader.

The contempt shown by Nietzsche for ordinary people was shared by the French psychologist Gustave Le Bon. His *Psychology of Crowds* (1895) portrayed most people as unthinking and easily swayed by their emotions. This too was a direct influence on Hitler.

**Struggle and the survival of the fittest**

'The survival of the fittest' was a phrase first coined by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer in his *Principles of Biology* (1864). The idea came from the new scientific ideas about evolution that were put forward in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwin had never expected his theories to be used to justify human action, but Social Darwinists distorted his ideas to argue that, just like animals, humans, races and states were driven by an instinctive fight for survival. They suggested that struggle and warfare were healthy activities that allowed the best to rise to the top while leaving the weak to perish. Furthermore, in the fight for the survival of the strongest state, individuals were unimportant.

A number of writers, including the German composer Richard Wagner, accepted these Social Darwinist ideas. Wagner's operas, based on German folklore, were to become favourite of Hitler. Wagner's son-in-law, the Social Darwinist Houston Stewart Chamberlain, was celebrated as the 'seer of the Third Reich'.

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**Fact**

Charles Darwin (1809–82) was a British naturalist who studied evolution. He came to the conclusion that animals become stronger and more adapted to their environment over time as weaker specimens die out, and features that are necessary for their survival become more pronounced. This is known as the theory of the 'survival of the fittest'.

**Question**

Explain the link between Darwin's scientific theories and Hitler's racialism.

**Third Reich**

This term describes the German state (literally empire) in the years 1933–1945. It was known as the 'Third Reich' because Germany had known two former empires. The Holy Roman Empire (962–1806) was referred to as the First Reich and the German Empire, which was established by Kaiser Wilhelm I in 1871 and lasted until 1918, was known as the Second Reich.
What did Hitler himself contribute to Nazi ideology?

The development of Hitler’s ideas before 1914

Four of the basic elements of Nazi ideology – the superiority of the German race, anti-Semitism, the cult of the leader and the survival of the fittest – were already well established before Hitler emerged as a politician. Nazi ideology was also shaped by Hitler’s own experience. His upbringing and his experiences in Vienna before the First World War (see page 67) helped to turn him into a fervent German nationalist and anti-Semite.

Hitler probably possessed a dormant anti-Semitism before his arrival in Vienna, but it was here that he observed and read pamphlets, newspapers and books that reinforced his prejudices. He attended the operas of Wagner and read the anti-Semitic Viennese newspaper the Volksblat and the pro-Aryan monthly journal Ostria, which carried the swastika logo.

Hitler’s time in Vienna also taught him to despise democracy. He hated the ‘mediocrity and compromise’ that he witnessed from the public gallery of the Reichsrat (the Austrian parliament). He rejected the views of the Austrian social democrats, a socialist party devoted to the interests of the working man, but he approved of their methods. He learnt from the way they swayed the crowds through powerful speeches and threats.

Hitler also learnt from Austria’s Pan-German Nationalist Party founded by Georg Ritter von Schönerer. Schönerer used the title Führer, held impressive rallies and adopted the ‘Heil’ greeting. This party wanted the ‘racially superior’ German-speaking lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to be reunited with the German Reich. Another major influence was Vienna’s racist mayor, Karl Lueger, infamous for calling Budapest ‘Judaist’. Hitler’s ‘ideal’ party, bringing together elements that were both ‘national’ and ‘socialist’, seems to have been born in his mind through the fusion of these two Austrian parties.

The development of Nazi ideology in the aftermath of war

The First World War ended disastrously for Germany in 1918. This provoked a bitter reaction in Hitler, who had served for four years as a soldier on the Western Front. He believed the armistice to be ‘the greatest villainy of the century’ – a view typical of many who accepted the myth that the German army had been ‘stabbed in the back’ by politicians.

The creation of the Nazi Party was part of this nationalist reaction, although the 25-point programme of 1920 included a number of other fundamental principles such as racialism, anti-Semitism, anti-democratic sentiment and the need to work together for the greater good of the community.

Hitler’s ideas were brought together in Mein Kampf, which was written during his prison sentence in Landsberg Fortress after the failure of the 1923 Munich Putsch. The main messages of Hitler’s Mein Kampf were:

- Germany had to fight international Marxism (communism) in order to regain her world power status.
- Marxism/communism was the invention of Jews intent on Jewish world domination.
A first-edition copy of Hitler's Mein Kampf (My Struggle), featuring the Führer on the frontispiece

- National Socialism was the only doctrine capable of fighting communism. Liberal ‘bourgeois’ or ‘middle-class’ democracy was the first stage to socialism and communism.
- Nazism had to prepare the population for war in order to obtain Lebensraum (living space) in the east. To achieve this there had to be racial unity, the elimination of Jews, authoritarian control and no tolerance of diversity or dissent.

The ideological principles of the Nazi Party in its early years were broader than those that subsequently dominated. In the early years, the party embraced socialism, with demands for the abolition of unearned income, the nationalisation of businesses and the closure of big department stores in favour of the small trader.

However, these socialist elements did not last long. Once the Nazis decided to contest Reichstag elections from May 1924, Hitler gradually came to realise that it was only by associating with big business and the middle classes that he could hope to win.

By the later 1920s, the nationalist aspects of Nazism were emphasised at the expense of the socialist. The nationalism that formed the core of Nazi ideology had a strong anti-communist element. This came in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the spread of communism in the politically and economically unstable post-war Germany (see page 65).

Anti-communism was also linked to Hitler's racial theories, as he identified prominent communists with Jews. Hitler's other drive - the need to prepare the Germans for war in order to obtain Lebensraum (living space) in the lands of the Slavs in the communist USSR - was also a reason for his anti-communism.

**Fact**
Nationalised industries were run directly by the state. However, in order to retain support, the Nazis proposed that shareholders and owners of enterprises should be given compensation in return for their co-operation in this process.

**Questions**
What is the difference between nationalism and Nazism? Was there anything new or unique about Hitler's ideology?
Nazism also became an increasingly anti-democratic, anti-modern and anti-feminist movement. The Nazis regarded all that was new and forward-looking in the Weimar Republic as degenerate and weakening. This attitude was not, however, unique to Nazism, since other conservative and nationalist groups also disapproved of so-called ‘modernism’.

What really set Nazi ideology apart was the way nationalist intolerance was combined with racial intolerance. Nazism embraced nationalist principles but added to them a belief in a new society to which only the racially pure within the state belonged. If the ‘socialist’ element of National Socialism still meant anything by the 1930s, it was this. Hitler himself put it clearly enough when he said ‘We socialise human beings.

How important was the role of ideology in Nazi Germany?

Hitler’s emergent ideology and vision for the future played a key role in his rise to power, attracting and inspiring followers. Once he was established as the German chancellor (1933) and Führer (1934), he devised policies in keeping with his fundamental beliefs.

Through Gleichschaltung (see page 72) he co-ordinated all aspects of the state to serve his ends, and the idea of Volksgemeinschaft was spread through youth, community and workers’ organisations such as Beauty of Labour and Strength through Joy.

The belief in the importance of competition and the survival of the fittest was seen in the way policies were carried out. Intolerance permeated the regime in its political consolidation and social policies. Nationalism underpinned Hitler’s defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, while racialism led to actions against minority groups and virulent anti-Semitism, through a series of anti-Jewish actions and legislation.

However, while policies were shaped in the light of ideology, it was often the case that practical politics prevented ideological principles being carried out immediately, or in their entirety. The growth of Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies, for example, displayed no coherent pattern. Persecution remained fairly low-key until 1935, and there was no Holocaust until the years of war. Even then, it did not come immediately. Similarly, it took six years before Hitler led his country to war. When he did so, women, who had been forced out of the workplace in 1933–34, were again encouraged back into factories.

Furthermore, the name of the party itself (NSDAP – National Socialist German Workers’ Party) had become meaningless by the 1930s. Although the Nazi regime pursued a persistent ‘nationalism’, there was, by that stage, no longer any ‘socialism’ for the benefit of the working class driving their programme. Similarly, although Nazis continued to use the slogan Blut und Boden (blood and soil) to emphasise the pure racial qualities of the German agricultural worker (see page 108), it had become mere propaganda. The latter received scant consideration and once Hitler was entrenched in power, the Nazis provided little state aid. There was no national revolution in Germany, as had been promised in the early 1920s. Instead, Nazism denied the existence of class differences and channelled people’s energy into national expansion.
Ideology was crucial to the success of Hitler as a single-party leader. However, Hitler controlled how ideology was used to further his own political ends. He was not driven simply by the desire to put ideological principles into practice, but had his own agenda and moulded Nazi ideology to fit it.

**End of unit activities**

1. Draw up a chart with the main characteristics of Nazi ideology on the left-hand side and, when you have studied Units 3 and 4, add the policies that appear to carry out those beliefs on the right.

2. Discuss the following questions. Did Hitler’s ideology offer:
   a. a new form of society
   b. a new social structure
   c. new values?

3. Carry out further research into the writers and thinkers from whom Hitler gleaned his views. You might produce a poster with summary details of the authors whose ideas came together in a new form in Hitler’s ideology.

4. There were some radicals within the Nazi Party who placed a greater emphasis on the ‘socialist’ side of National Socialism than Hitler. Find out about the Strasser brothers and make a chart to show how their view of socialism differed from Hitler’s.

5. Choose a section of *Mein Kampf* that reveals an important aspect of Hitler’s ideology. Explain your chosen extract to the rest of your group.

**Theory of knowledge**

**Ideology and historical motivation**

- Is ideology essential for political success?
- Does a firm ideology always bring intolerance?
- What is the main quality that defines an ideology? Should it be revolutionary? Should it be inspirational? (Can you suggest another quality?)
- What ethical issues arise from Hitler’s racialist theories? Are we likely to judge such ethical considerations differently today from those living at the time?

**Question**

Which policy areas might you expect to be particularly influenced by Nazi ideology? Why?

**Historical debate**

The main area of historical debate relates to conflict between the intentionalist and structuralist schools of thought. Intentionalists (see page 89) argue that Hitler’s policies were shaped by ideology and that he knew from a very early stage what he wanted to accomplish. They see Hitler’s actions as part of a carefully conceived plan to translate ideology into action. Structuralists, on the other hand, believe that Hitler’s actions were moulded by circumstance and that, while he had broad ideological principles, the actual detail of his policies evolved almost haphazardly.