
The History Place™

World War II in Europe

Hitler's Enabling Act

On March 23, 1933, the newly elected members of the German Parliament (the Reichstag) met in the Kroll Opera House in Berlin to consider passing Hitler's Enabling Act. It was officially called the 'Law for Removing the Distress of the People and the Reich.' If passed, it would effectively mean the end of democracy in Germany and establish the legal dictatorship of Adolf Hitler.

The 'distress' had been secretly caused by the Nazis themselves in order to create a crisis atmosphere that would make the law seem necessary to restore order. On February 27, 1933, they had burned the Reichstag building, seat of the German government, causing panic and outrage. The Nazis successfully blamed the fire on the Communists and claimed it marked the beginning of a widespread uprising.

On the day of the vote, Nazi storm troopers gathered in a show of force around the opera house chanting, "Full powers - or else! We want the bill - or fire and murder!!" They also stood inside in the hallways, and even lined the aisles where the vote would take place, glaring menacingly at anyone who might oppose Hitler's will.

Just before the vote, Hitler made a speech to the Reichstag in which he pledged to use restraint.

"The government will make use of these powers only insofar as they are essential for carrying out vitally necessary measures...The number of cases in which an internal necessity exists for having recourse to such a law is in itself a limited one." - Hitler told the Reichstag.

He also promised an end to unemployment and pledged to promote peace with France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union. But in order to do all this, Hitler said, he first needed the Enabling Act.

A two thirds majority was needed, since the law would actually alter the German constitution. Hitler needed 31 non-Nazi votes to pass it. He got those votes from the Center Party after making a false promise to restore some basic rights already taken away by decree.

However, one man arose amid the overwhelming might. Otto Wells, leader of the Social Democrats stood up and spoke quietly to Hitler.

"We German Social Democrats pledge ourselves solemnly in this historic hour to the principles of humanity and justice, of freedom and socialism. No enabling act can give you power to destroy ideas which are eternal and indestructible."

This enraged Hitler and he jumped up to respond.

"You are no longer needed! - The star of Germany will rise and yours will sink! Your death knell has sounded!"

The vote was taken - 441 for, only 84, the Social Democrats, against. The Nazis leapt to their feet clapping, stamping and shouting, then broke into the Nazi anthem, the Hörst Wessel song.

They achieved what Hitler had wanted for years - to tear down the German Democratic Republic legally and end democracy, thus paving the way for a complete Nazi takeover of Germany.

From this day on, the Reichstag would be just a sounding board, a cheering section for Hitler's pronouncements.

Copyright © 1996 The History Place™ All Rights Reserved

[Return to The History Place - World War II Timeline: 1933](#)
[The History Place Main Page](#)

Terms of use: Private home/school non-commercial, non-Internet re-usage only is allowed of any text, graphics, photos, audio clips, other electronic files or materials from The History Place.