The NSDAP as an Alternative Elite for Capitalism in Crisis

John D. Nagle

The rise of German fascism presents a question common to most fascist movements that have eventually achieved state power: namely, how is it that an extremist political elite is able to evolve from a political position of marginality, distrust, and disinterest vis-à-vis established social elites to a position in which political entrepreneurs from established elites are able to hand over state power to this same extremist elite?

Three Developmental Hurdles

This is a problem of general interest for the study of fascism, since most capitalist democracies have fascist "pretenders" as a more or less standard feature of the political landscape. From Louis Bonaparte and his Society of December 10 in the Second French Republic through the Moseley and Quisling movements of the 1930s to the current National Front in Britain, Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front in France, and the Lyndon Larouche sect in the United States, fascist leadership groups have presented themselves as an alternative political elite and offered their services to established centers of power in business, state, and military sectors.¹

Fascism as a political-elite alternative for a capitalist society faces several developmental or evolutionary hurdles before it can achieve state power. Of the many fascist pretenders, only a few have succeeded
in achieving this goal. Only some have evolved beyond political marginality; fewer still have convinced established elites within society or elites representing foreign powers that they are useful and/or necessary for dealing with some crisis those established centers of power are unable or insufficiently able to deal with using their own resources. This could be called the recognition problem, the necessity for fascism to make its services attractive or even vital to the interests of important established centers of power.

A second problem for fascist pretender movements can be called the assurance (or reassurance) issue: a fascist elite must be able to assure established elites that in collaborating with this radical alternative political elite, or in helping it to achieve state power, the main interests of these established elites will themselves not be attacked. This is a problem not to be taken lightly, since the fascist movement has differentiated itself in various ways from the norms and rhetoric of mainstream elites, and the fascist elite may be viewed as insufficiently reliable or as potentially revolutionary, certainly as less calculable than more familiar political vehicles for safeguarding the established social order.

A third hurdle might be termed the normalization issue: established elites must have adequate reason to believe that, after some initial period of extraordinary service by the fascist movement, to accomplish certain critical tasks, the fascist political elite will over time “settle down” or transform its behavior to conform to more “normal” standards for a political elite in capitalist society. This is a longer term expectation, and may be subordinated to the more immediate needs for short-term crisis solving and reassurance described above, but it is important that existing elites, if they are to undertake actions that support the gaining of state power by a fascist pretender elite, have some plausible reasons for thinking that in the long run the fascist leadership will “mature” into a more normal governing elite, meeting the more normal definitions of leadership recruitment, style, and career. Although these evolutionary hurdles may generally be sequenced as suggested here, there may be considerable overlap in time and some of these issues may reappear at rather separated critical points in the development of the antidemocratic political project that brings fascism to power, as well as within the period of fascist rule.

The Recognition Problem

The clearest element of the development character of the National Socialist German Workers party (NSDAP) in Weimar rests with its
breakthrough as a mass mobilization vehicle after 1928, and its defeat of the Protestant bourgeois parties (The German Democratic party—DDP, the German People's party—DVP, the German National People's party—DNVP, and the Wirtschaftspartei—WP or Economy party) as political rivals. This also put the NSDAP in position to play a necessary and indispensable role in the anti-democracy projects proposed by established political elites.

With the decline in strength of the liberal DDP and the moderate-conservative DVP even before the economic collapse of 1929, certain bourgeois political elites were becoming more and more hostile to the continuation of the Weimar system, which is to say parliamentary democracy.

The rise in the mid-1920s of the WP party at the expense of the German Democratic party was an early signal of growing dissatisfaction among middle-class voters. It offered opportunities for political elites who represented these voters to take positions more openly hostile to Weimar democracy (the Weimar system), and to engage in political strategies intended to undermine the functioning of the democratically elected Reichstag. The Wirtschaftspartei drew heavily from former Democrats, and made its early gains at their expense, attacking the Democratic party as a party of big business, big banks, Jews, and collaborators of the Social Democrats.³

The 1926 Görlitz program of the WP called for a revision of the constitution, which would enable a strong central government to rule independently of Reichstag majority support, a more aggressive foreign policy toward eastern Europe, the regaining of German colonies overseas, and the resurrection of borders “matching the honor and greatness of the German Volk.”⁴ Even in advance of the depression, therefore, among the Protestant middle-class parties there was a shift underway from those political elites most favorable to Weimar democracy to those openly hostile to the Weimar system. Yet once the economic collapse hit, these “half-way house” parties, as Knauerhase has termed them, were unable to provide a credible basis for either mass antidemocratic mobilization or elite-level action to destroy the Republic.⁵ Profoundly antidemocratic and an additional burden to the Weimar democracy, the small Wirtschaftspartei was an early symptom of the political weakness of the liberal and moderate political elites as supports for the Republic, and later for the pathetic attempts by class-based interest-group elites to provide mass support vehicles for smashing the Weimar system.

By 1928, the most liberal leadership groupings in the Democrat party were losing ground and were already rethinking their political allegiance to and identification with the Weimar democracy. After the
1928 Reichstag elections, which again brought a Social Democrat into the chancellor’s office, the Democrats’ leadership took a sharp turn to the right, in a forlorn attempt to compete with other Protestant political elites already staking out more hostile anti-Weimar positions.\(^6\) Within the DNVP a decisive shift in leadership from the more moderate Count Kuno von Westarp to the vehemently antidemocratic architect of the Harzburg Front, Alfred Hugenberg, also reflected a shift over to the anti-system right. In 1928 the Catholic Center (Zentrum) party also chose a new and more right-wing chairman, Prelate Kaas, who would in the depression years be less supportive of the Weimar system.\(^7\)

After 1929, among the bourgeois parties, both Protestant and Catholic, there was a further progressive shift to the right, what Hamilton has called a “competition in toughness,” to which we must add a competition for a leading position to undermine or overthrow the parliamentary democratic system.\(^8\) In this political environment, none of the bourgeois parties took a line of strong defense of the system, or renewed their commitment to work with the moderate Social Democrats to keep the system functioning. They opted instead to compete through projects that would in substance destroy the Weimar system, and in this competition they were no match for the NSDAP as an alternative political elite.

But why did the NSDAP win this struggle with the bourgeois parties, and why therefore did German fascism make this critical breakthrough as an increasingly recognized and appealing element in the antidemocratic projects that finally came to fruition in January 1933? First and foremost, the NSDAP was in many ways a “modern” party organization, able to rely on its own manpower and financial resources in order to function. It was also, in Hamilton’s phrase, a “virtuous organization” in its fighting and work capabilities, resting on the bonding and war-fighting skills of the front generation that populated its units.\(^9\) In many respects, the NSDAP was an extremist fore-runner of the modern Volkspartei or “catch-all” party, able and willing to project political slogans and policy outlines toward the most diverse segments of the population, with differential effect, of course, but without much concern for the contradictory nature of its total package of appeals.\(^10\)

Second, recent studies have emphasized the role of the newspapers and election-campaign speeches and posters in spreading the message of the NSDAP, and in making the party a known factor in the political landscape for voters. In this regard, special attention should be paid to Hamilton’s findings about the role of leading bourgeois newspapers in their favorable and highly biased reporting of the activities of the
NSDAP, especially in respect to the street-fighting clashes with the Marxist parties. Hamilton points out that this reportage in newspapers widely read in the best upper- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods portrayed the Brownshirt fighters as defenders of these neighborhoods against the asserted growing threat of leftist violence and revolutionary upsurge. This research has shown more specifically how the NSDAP built its huge and contradictory voter following, from upper-class neighborhoods to “Tory” working-class voters to rural farming communities. Of special interest here is the evidence that the highest level of voter support for the NSDAP on the scale of social class was to be found in the upper-class neighborhoods of the largest Protestant cities. In the “best” neighborhoods of Berlin and Hamburg, for example, 60 to 70 percent of the upper- and upper-middle-class Protestant voters cast their votes for the NSDAP in the July 1932 elections. This indicates the overwhelming effectiveness of the NSDAP appeals, mediated by certain elements of the press, precisely among the families of established social elites, which could not have failed to have an effect on these elites’ own perceptions of the Nazis as useful—even necessary—allies in any anti-Weimar political project. In fact, although Hamilton does not want to explore this line of reasoning, one might assert that there was something approaching a consensus among upper-class Protestants that the NSDAP represented their salvation as a social class.

Hamilton makes good points about the cleavage between Catholic and Protestant voting patterns, but his research actually supports the argument that in the Protestant big cities, where modern class relations and modern class struggle in the midst of the economic crisis would be expected to be most clear-cut and most bitterly fought, the socially advantaged classes were the greatest electoral supporters of the NSDAP, in proportions approaching what could reasonably be called a class consensus. Whether the bourgeois press played a planned or an unintended role in this process is an interesting question. The newspapers owned by Alfred Hugenberg certainly played a rather conscious role in legitimating the NSDAP to social elites, but the main point is that these social “betters” were not in any way bastions of resistance to Nazi appeals. Rather these social elites and their families were in fact voting for the NSDAP in higher percentages than was the lower middle class, on whom earlier theories of disproportionately high electoral support for the NSDAP had focused. One of Hamilton’s additions to our understanding of this period is precisely that it was not the lower middle class that was most “panicked,” or most susceptible to Nazi appeals, but rather the social milieu of the dominant Protestant urban establishment.

The NSDAP leadership was able to portray itself more credibly as an alternative political elite, an alternative to those bourgeois political
elites that had participated in the Weimar system, even though they were increasingly more hostile to that system since they no longer seemed able to make it work in their interests. The NSDAP had developed a leadership profile that set it apart from its bourgeois rivals, both generationally and occupationally. The bourgeois political elites that in the last years had denounced the Republic were overwhelmingly the same leaders who had sat in the Reichstag and participated in government coalitions before 1928; their verbal distancing from their own past behavior was not as convincing as was the Nazi leadership assertion of itself as a young, more diversely representative and physically aggressive, violent opponent of parliamentary democracy. From Reichstag parliamentary almanacs of the Weimar period, containing photos and short autobiographical sketches of each deputy, one can see the differences between the NSDAP Reichstag faction, with its emphasis on uniforms, fierce poses, war records, and fighting ability, and its bourgeois political opposition, older men of conventional upper-class credentials, even for the most notorious antidemocratic conspirators such as Hugenberg and Franz von Papen. (See Table 1).

Between 1928 and 1932 the old leadership groupings of the bourgeois parties did not give way to a younger, more vigorous cohort, nor did younger leaders in those parties succeed in ousting or overthrowing the old guard. Instead, there was a shift to the right within the old-guard leadership generation, and the plotting and playing out of a series of political projects by these bourgeois political elites, each designed in its way to undermine the Reichstag and to destroy the electoral process. After 1929, however, these antidemocratic political scenarios had to deal with the recognition that the NSDAP was a necessary and useful element in any plan to destroy Weimar.
There were many reasons for established elites in politics, business, the military, and elsewhere to be distrustful of the Nazi leadership as a possible alternative political leadership. The NSDAP since its revamping in the early 1920s had attempted to market its putschist skills to the antidemocratic right-wing establishment elites. Indeed, one of Hitler’s steady goals had been to secure elite backing for his party and its activities. For the most part, however, these early attempts to build bridges to established elites received little interest and only occasional financial support. Turner is probably correct in his assessment that business elites who regularly funded political organizations continued until 1933 “to bestow the bulk of their funds on opponents or rivals of the Nazis.” What Turner does not mention, however, is that these big-business political funds in the early 1930s were funneled to more respectable bourgeois political elites, such as von Papen and Hugenberg, who were engaged in their own schemes to destroy the Republic, utilizing Nazi strength but trying to maintain political control for themselves. Naturally big business was more comfortable with this type of prospect, but it does not make the big-business elites into supporters of democracy or excuse them from their support of von Papen and Hugenberg, who played such key roles in handing state power over to Hitler.

Several issues raised the anxiety level of elites about the NSDAP leadership. Most important perhaps was the Nazi economic program, which under the rubric of “national socialism” raised the suspicion that the Nazis might be, after all, “national Bolsheviks.” The Nazi attacks on banking and finance circles, the glorification of village and peasant life exemplified by Walter Darre’s Blut und Boden (Blood and Soul) völkisch philosophy, the call for the breaking up of department store chains, and the strength of the Strasser (Otto and Gregor) “left” wing of the party presented considerable difficulties for established elites. Precisely the contradictory appeals of the NSDAP, necessary to win support from farmers, rural and small-town residents, owners of small businesses, and “Tory” or anti-Marxist workers, also stirred some doubts about the NSDAP as the ultimate weapon for the salvation of German capitalism.

Hitler tried to resolve this problem by following a conscious two-pronged strategy. In a series of private talks, he attempted to reassure business and banking elites that he had no intention of attacking private property or the private banking system (except for Jewish businesses and banks), and in June 1930 he threw Otto Strasser and his more serious left followers out of the party. Yet the influence of
Gregor Strasser remained strong until the end of 1932, when Strasser lost influence after his discussions with General Kurt von Schleicher on the possible formation of some sort of militarist-populist dictatorship. Through the series of 1932 elections, including the November Reichstag elections, the Nazis continued to deploy their full array of anti-capitalist slogans to their intended audiences to keep their massive but very diverse voter following together.

A second source of distrust of the Nazi leadership stemmed from the fact that it was different, socially and behaviorally, from conventional elite standards, and was proud of that difference. This social distance was more bothersome to business elites than to Reichswehr elites, who generally had a more positive attitude toward Hitler and his party’s militarist organization, cultural values, and foreign policy goals. Turner takes this relative difference to mean that it was the military elite that bears an institutional guilt for the rise of Hitler, whereas the business elite was largely innocent. Turner does not consider the overlapping economic interests and inter-elite social ties between big business and the Reichswehr leadership as important factors in the antidemocratic projects to destroy the Weimar system.

Many young NSDAP militants had indeed destroyed whatever business and professional careers they might have developed in the mid-1920s through their combative, often violent, behavior. By committing “economic suicide” in advance of the Depression they broke with normal bourgeois society and cemented a commitment to the militarized and continuous political activism of the NSDAP. The NSDAP had also proven its capacity to build up a tough and competent party organization and street-fighting army that was largely self-supporting and beyond the control of established elites. This organization was on the one hand attractive for its antunion and antileft coercive potential, but was also more independent of manipulation by financing, or by socializing, than elites of the bourgeois parties. Yet at the same time these social elites were drawn to Hitler’s appeals for national renewal, for overturning Versailles, and for smashing the unions, the Marxist parties, and the Weimar democracy. These appeals, combined with the apparent power and aggressive nature of the NSDAP, had a wide resonance and produced great enthusiasm among individuals of the established elite. Many observers have noted the simultaneous mixture of expressions of dizzying adulation, suspicion, and distrust with which leading businesspeople, military, and bourgeois party leaders described Hitler. This sense of often messianic support mixed with anxieties of social distance was in part mirrored in the discrepancy between very high levels of upper-class voting support for the Nazis, and relative reluctance—before January 1933—to join the party.
Still another element of distrust revolved around the role of the street-fighting army (Sturmabteilung, or SA) which in the early 1930s under Ernst Röhm was claiming to be not only the military arm of the NSDAP but its political arm as well. While the bourgeois elites applauded the SA attacks on the Social Democratic party (SPD) and the German Communist party (KPD), and increasingly viewed SA violence as a useful asset that the Nazis would bring into any coalition of forces to undermine the democracy, it was also true that the Nazis had employed their thug tactics against bourgeois political parties as well. These attacks started with Jewish candidates of the liberal Democrats as the targets, but grew to include non-Jewish candidates of the DDP and the moderate conservative DVP as well. With the "revolutionary" rhetoric and antibourgeois polemics of the SA, this use of coercion and violence against bourgeois party candidates and meetings might well have given pause to many established elites as to the reliability of the Nazi leadership as an ally, and about its true intentions if brought to state power with the help of established elites. Taken together, these doubts about Hitler and the NSDAP leadership constituted a second evolutionary hurdle for the party, and for those among the established bourgeois political and military elites who most wanted to utilize the Nazis as a weapon to bring down the Weimar Republic.

The empirical analysis of the process by which these anxieties were quieted has been enhanced by recent research. Kater has detailed the role of the Protestant church, through its clergy and church elders, between 1929 and 1932, in legitimizing the Nazi elite as a political alternative for executives, business people, professionals, and intellectuals. Hamilton has stressed the biased, even hysterical, reporting of leading bourgeois newspapers, in heightening the fear of Red revolution, in defending and glorifying Nazi street-fighting actions, and in picturing NSDAP leaders as well-intentioned and honorable, if somewhat brash and overly idealistic. Other reassuring messages transmitted through leading bourgeois newspapers included statements from high-status individuals such as that of Prince August Wilhelm that Hitler was "sent by God to the German people," and reports from Italy on the merits of Italian fascism. The presentation of Italian fascism as a political model acceptable to the upper classes represents another avenue of reassurance "learning." This process of selective communication networking and elite "vouching" for the legitimacy and reliability of the NSDAP as an alternative political elite, as well as the massive voting percentages for the Nazis among the families of Protestant urban elites, it can be argued, served to reduce elite anxieties, to facilitate the work of the leading bourgeois political anti-democratic schemers in negotiating an alliance with the NSDAP, and to head off
the possibility of specifically anti-Nazi political projects led by more moderate elites.

What took place, therefore, from early 1930 to January 1933 was a series of political projects, undertaken by “political entrepreneur” groups from within the ranks of the antidemocratic bourgeois political elites, Reichswehr officers, business representatives, and Hindenburg advisers, to fashion a coalition of forces that could undermine the Weimar system as a functioning parliamentary democracy, and put in place a strong right-wing government not responsible to a freely elected Reichstag and not responsive to left or liberal parties or trade-union interests.

This process had begun in 1930, with the removal of the SPD from government and the elevation of Heinrich Brüning from the right wing of the Catholic Center party to reich Chancellor, permitted to govern under emergency powers of President Hindenburg under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, without heeding Reichstag majority support. 25 During the entire year of 1932, the development of projects to bring the NSDAP into some political project to destroy Weimar democracy and to smash organized labor and the political left intensified as the NSDAP reached the heights of its electoral support (37 percent in the July Reichstag elections) and even more after the Nazis showed signs of weakening in the November elections, losing over 2 million votes and dropping to 33 percent of the total vote. Hörster-Philipps has described the series of measures undertaken by the government of Franz von Papen in the course of 1932 aimed at putting in place the elements of a rightist coalition, which would be able to utilize the power of the NSDAP as a part of government. 26 Von Papen’s government initiated actions that first tested the level of resistance that might be expected from the workers’ movement and the Social Democrats in case a fascist government should come to power in Germany, and then engaged the NSDAP leadership in protracted negotiations over the role Hitler would be willing to accept in a new governing alliance of von Papen, Hugenberg’s DNVP, and the NSDAP.

The von Papen government, from its first day in office on June 4, 1932, undertook measures that decreed major cuts in spending for pensions, jobless benefits, and war veterans. Ten days later it readmitted the Nazi street-fighting and paramilitary SA and SS organizations, while turning police and judicial forces against liberal and socialist self-defense organizations. The major test provocation of democratic forces, however, came with the deposing by Reich authorities of the elected SPD-Catholic Center government of Prussia, which in 1932 was the last great stronghold of democratic political strength in the Reich.

The next stage, according to Hörster-Philipps, was to bring the
NSDAP into negotiations that would include the Nazi leadership in a new Reich government. These discussions came up against Hitler's demand that he be named chancellor, and despite advice from Fritz Thyssen and Hjalmar Schacht that he accept von Papen's offer, Hitler refused to join a reconstituted von Papen government as a junior partner.

After this setback, von Papen attempted to put through a new economic program favoring big business, and to engineer a constitutional reform project designed to legitimize a presidial-presidential central government; the latter in practice would have ended parliamentary democracy, while keeping the facade of an elected but ineffectual Reichstag. Von Papen's government was heavily supported in this attempt by members of leading big-business and military circles, and big business in particular put its political funding weight behind von Papen's allies in the November Reichstag elections. The result was a disaster for von Papen; his political allies garnered only 10.7 percent of the vote, and it was clear that without the NSDAP, there was no mass base of support behind his efforts to destroy the Republic.

The November elections, however, also demonstrated the possibly weak staying power of the NSDAP. In fear that the Nazi party might decline as rapidly as it had grown, the pressure to bring Hitler into the government actually increased. The signs of Communist electoral strength (nearly 18 percent of the vote) and increased strike activity added to fears that the political momentum might be swinging to the left, and that by waiting the right might miss its historic moment. Recent research by David Abraham on the Deutsche Führerbriebe, the internal political correspondence of German industry, shows the turnaround in the political thinking by the leading export sectors of German industry from support of Weimar in the mid-1920s to both support for Nazi participation in government and enthusiastic backing, by November and December of 1932, for Hitler to be named chancellor.

An analysis of the election results by the NSDAP's Reich Propaganda Leadership also concluded that the Nazi coalition was beginning to come unstuck, and that further free elections could be disastrous for the party; Childers concludes that had the NSDAP not come to power very quickly, it might well have declined rapidly in electoral strength, and Goebbels' RPL analysis made clear that there must be no more elections. The Cologne banker Kurt von Schröder, who hosted a decisive round of negotiations in early January, stated to Allied authorities in 1945: "When the NSDAP suffered its first defeat on November 6, and had thus passed its peak, the support by the German business community became especially urgent."

One last alternative project was undertaken by von Papen's former defense minister, General Schleicher. Schleicher attempted in De-
December, during his brief interregnum, to put together an alliance of military (Reichswehr) and paramilitary (SA, Stahlhelm) forces, along with the left wing of the NSDAP (led by Gregor Strasser), and hopefully some worker support from both nonsocialist and socialist unions. Schleicher’s scheming was viewed by many business elites as representing some sort of reparliamentarization process with further elections; this fear, voiced openly in the Führerbriefe, added all the greater critical importance to the immediate success of von Papen’s project. Schleicher’s attempt to split the NSDAP as well as the working-class followings of several parties and give a mass basis to a military-led dictatorship not only failed but forced Strasser to resign his party offices, giving another “reassurance” message to established elites that a Hitler government would not be dominated by the Strasser wing of the party.

By January, the political environment again favored the antidemocratic political entrepreneur grouping of von Papen, Hugenberg, and Hindenburg’s adviser circle. Turner details the remaining opposition to a Hitler-led government among big-business leaders, but his studies show that their line of preference fell mainly between a rightist coalition including Hitler but led by von Papen, and a coalition including von Papen but led by Hitler. Naturally, most big-business elites felt more comfortable with the Herrenklub-personage of Franz von Papen, but this hardly makes the case for their innocence in the whole process of destroying Weimar and shaping the rise of German fascism. Despite understandable remaining anxieties and jitters, which were expressed in these fateful moments, business elites, like military and bureaucratic elites, were disposed to work with the new regime from its first days in office, to continue to seek reassurances, and to influence the unfolding of government policies in their favor. Big-business leaders who really feel threatened by a regime know how to express their opposition: investment boycott, decapitalization, capital flight, and emigration of families abroad. With the obvious exception of Jewish capitalists, these classic signs were remarkably absent in the first months and years of the Nazi regime. Turner, following Schumpeter, calls this “adapative” behavior on the part of big business, but at the same time notes all the overlapping areas of policy agreement with the NSDAP. In these areas, no adaptation was necessary; the political understandings were broadly mutualistic, and the end effect synergistic, for the evolution of German fascism as a political elite alternative for capitalist interests.
What expectations did established elites have about the longer term evolution of a governing fascist political elite? Beyond the immediate jubilation over the SA terror directed against the KPD, SPD, and trade-union organizations in the first months of the Nazi regime, how did social elites imagine that this new governing elite would develop? In particular, would the Nazi elite gradually conform to standards expected by social elites, becoming a more "normal" political leadership? Most scholars of German fascism have emphasized the belief among many bourgeois leaders that the Nazi elite could be tamed, or that it would mature with proper tutelage from bourgeois circles. Some, like von Papen and Hugenberg, believed that the Nazis could be used for their own reactionary, antidemocratic, and antileft purposes and later dismissed. More moderate elites, who had opposed the Nazi rise to power, hoped that the Nazi movement would quickly burn itself out in office, and that by cooperating with the NSDAP (for example, in supporting the granting of emergency powers to Hitler in March of 1933) they might pave the way for a moderation in its behavior and a return to a more civil politics. Generally, these hopes and expectations of bourgeois leaders have been treated as evidence of political myopia, self-delusion, and incompetence, which on the personal level may be quite accurate. Certainly the Nazi leadership immediately used its newly acquired state power to suppress its left opponents and to scatter the organizations of its bourgeois party rivals.

On the other hand, despite the absence of bourgeois political liberty and bourgeois parties, the NSDAP elite did evolve in ways that represented a kind of normalization to established elite standards. Most often cited here are the defeat and bloody purge of both the Strasser left wing of the party and the Röhm SA leadership on June 30, 1934. Bracher also reports that by the end of 1934, nearly 80 percent of the political leadership consisted of newcomers who had joined the party since the beginning of 1933, and that only the Gauleiter ranks were predominantly still from the “old fighter” cohort. Likewise, the Nazi regime, while still paying lip service to Walter Darre's villagization plans and the protection of small business and small farms, pursued an economic policy, starting in June 1934, that was most favorable to big business and detrimental to small business. Certainly the share of national income going to capital rose each year from 1932 to 1939, as did retained earnings of corporations. By comparison with the pre-Depression year 1928, property-entrepreneurial income rose from 29.2 percent of national income to 33.8 percent in 1939 and retained corporate earnings from 1.8 percent to
5.4 percent, while wages and salaries dropped from 65.1 percent to 58.8 percent. Nazi rhetoric about strengthening small enterprise and artisans was an empty promise in actual practice.\textsuperscript{38} Private investment had risen by 267 percent in the 1932-38 period in steady progression, and armaments investment had risen by 2400 percent; government nonarmaments investment had risen too, but by only 180 percent, and was in 1938 still 12 percent below the 1928 figure.\textsuperscript{39}

The actual beneficiaries of Nazi economic policy, therefore, were those elite sectors in big business and the military whose interests, far from being threatened by the NSDAP regime, were in fact strengthened by the changes within the NSDAP elite, resulting in closer working collaboration and wide-ranging mutualism of interests. Looking at the evolving social composition of the NSDAP leadership, established elites had reason to believe that that leadership was not a revolutionary elite, but rather one which might reasonably be expected to gradually adjust to standards of established power centers. Careful scholarship has for some time now largely disproven Lerner's earlier notion of the Nazi leaders as a collection of "marginal men" or social outsiders, and recent research indicates that at the top levels of the NSDAP hierarchy, leaders were themselves predominantly from elite backgrounds.\textsuperscript{40} This elite class in Weimar society, which represented only 2.8 percent of the population, accounts for 14 of 17 NSDAP Reichsleiters, 46.3 percent of Gauleiters (1925-28), and 36 percent of 1933 NSDAP Reichstag deputies. By contrast, in 1933, when social elites were joining the party in relatively higher proportions, still only 12.2 percent of new Nazi party members were from elite social backgrounds.\textsuperscript{41}

Kater shows that during the Third Reich, the NSDAP elite also aged in office, becoming far less a generation of "angry young men" distinct from the expected age of a political elite in noncrisis times. The Nazi leadership had been notable for its youth during Weimar; once in power, this elite generation became quickly entrenched in office (see Table 2).

The NSDAP Reichstag deputy contingent, already quite young in 1928 in comparison with other parties (except the KPD), and even more radically rejuvenated by 1932, underwent a gradual aging through 1938. Nearly 60 percent of Nazi Reichstag deputies in 1938 were over forty years of age, compared with only 43 percent in 1932 (November). In the five years from 1933 to 1938, despite the tremendous influx of first-time deputies to the all-Nazi Reichstags of 1933(II), 1936, and 1938, the average age rose by more than three years. The average age of Reichsleiters rose from forty-three in 1933 to fifty-four by 1944, and of Gauleiters from forty to forty-eight over the same period.\textsuperscript{42} At lower levels of the NSDAP organization, the Nazi lead-
Table 2
NSDAP Reichstag Deputies, 1932–38

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth decade</th>
<th>NSDAP only 1932</th>
<th>NSDAP only 1933</th>
<th>NSDAP only 1933</th>
<th>all-NSDAP Reichstags 1936</th>
<th>all-NSDAP Reichstags 1938</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pre-1870</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870s</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880s</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890s</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900s</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910s</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Roman numerals following 1932 and 1933 reflect the fact that there were two Reichstag elections in those years.

ERSHIP was also stagnant, entering middle age in office. The NSDAP did not represent a fundamentally different, innovative, or revolutionary type of political elite in this respect. While affirming in part the lower-middle-class values of the majority of the party leadership, Kater concludes:

This judgment, however, requires three reservations, all of which emphasize the importance of elite elements in the leadership. First, the relative proportion of elite elements was higher among the leaders than in the party or in the Reich population. Second, the elite portion tended to increase with rank. And third, the elite element was particularly influential when extraordinary leadership was called for, as in the period between 1932 and 1934. These three points show that even the monopolistic party of the Nazi regime, whose corporate behavior has been described as impulsive, disorderly, and confused, was affected by the elite’s rules of rationality, performance, and efficiency.43

The Nazi leadership, as an alternative political elite, was torn between the old fighter (lower-middle-class) mentality and the establishment “upper-class consciousness.” Once in power, the NSDAP elite did not revolutionize the social order, nor did it undermine established elite social values, despite its pre-1933 antibourgeois rhetoric.

Can it be deduced that the NSDAP leadership constituted a new elite in German society, as has been argued by a score of writers? No, that was not the case. . . . To classify as a counter-elite, the leaders would have had to bring about the completion of the National Socialist revolution, but this they were not able to do. And, coming after and aping in various respects their austere Prussian pre-cursors, they retained far too many epigonal
characteristics to be considered a new species. . . . There were too many elements of accommodation, of fusion, of absorption. In social composition alone, the pattern of mutual interactions and interlockings between the two groups was nearer to collusion than to collision.\textsuperscript{44}

The mutual penetration of party elite and social elite (already considerable before 1933), the purging of SA and Strasser leadership factions, and the aging in office throughout the entire Third Reich era all indicate that the German fascist leadership was undergoing a normalization process; established elites were not foolish or myopic in their belief that the NSDAP would be critically useful, as an alternative political elite: safe, and ultimately unable to revolutionize the social order.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{The Debate on the NSDAP as an Alternative Elite}

In recent years, various scholars have attempted to exonerate established elites, and in particular big business, from responsibility for the rise of German fascism. The line of defense has been that big business and other elements of the established elite did not favor handing over state power to the Nazis, and were surprised and outflanked by a small group of conspirators around von Papen, Hugenberg, and Hindenburg. The later collaboration with the NSDAP is either not dealt with, or is seen as an accidental by-product of Nazi policies, not as a preexisting mutuality of interests or as the fruits of a mutually sought political coalition.

It is ironic that the research findings of these scholars in fact provide additional evidence for the thesis of a bourgeois-fascist coalition-building process, a process with several hurdles, to be sure, but one of conscious political projects designed to bring down the Weimar democracy, to utilize the NSDAP mass support and street-fighting army, and to bring about a decisive shift in economic and military policy in favor of elites in big business and the military. Several entrepreneurial efforts were undertaken to accomplish these goals, and the offers to the NSDAP started at a lower level than Hitler would accept. In the end, the bidding included the acceptance of Hitler as chancellor, and the effective handing over of state power to the fascist elite. This was not the first choice of established elites for solving their problems with the Weimar system, but it was a conscious choice, an opportunity they did not let slip through their fingers.
Notes


9. See ibid. for a well-documented accounting of this "virtuosity," especially compared with its competition, both on the left and among the bourgeois parties.


11. Hamilton fails to give a credible explanation for this pro-Nazi bias in reportage, instead attributing it and its effects to unintended consequences and political myopia (Hamilton, *Who Voted For Hitler?*, pp. 414–19, 436–37).


20. Hamilton and Turner both make the point that big business consistently overestimated its manipulative capabilities through political funding even for bourgeois parties. Still, the relative difference with respect to the Nazis is important, and was probably recognized as a different situation by business elites involved in political funding.


27. Ibid., p. 122.
32. Turner, *German Big Business*, ch. 5.
33. Ibid., p. 349.


38. Ibid., p. 130.

40. Kater, *The Nazi Party*, esp. pp. 194–95. See also Daniel Lerner, *The Nazi Elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institute, 1951); and Nagle, "Composition and Evolution of the Nazi Elite." Max Knight, even in the earliest Hoover studies, disputes Lerner's "marginal men" thesis, in his study of German cabinet members from 1890–1945, finding that within the cabinet, the Nazi regime represented a restoration of military, and aristocratic, backgrounds, and for the first time a sizable contingent from business, banking, engineering, and insurance backgrounds (cf. Max Knight, *The German Executive* [Stanford: Hoover Institute, 1952], p. 41).

41. Ibid., p. 252.
43. Ibid., p. 229.
44. Ibid., pp. 232–33.
45. Kater argues that the July 1944 putsch revived, too late, Hitler's hatred for the old elite (ibid., pp. 237–40).