



HISTORICAL EXHIBITION PRESENTED BY THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG

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### **Sham parliamentarism in the National Socialist era**

When the National Socialists established their dictatorship, they eliminated the parliamentarism of the Weimar Republic, but they did not abolish **Parliament**. The Reichstag continued in existence as the formal legislative organ of the Constitution until the end of the Nazi dictatorship. It had no political significance, however, nor was it democratic. The same applies to the **Reichstag elections and plebiscites** conducted by the National Socialists, and so we can only speak of sham parliamentarism.

Immediately after the **transfer of power** on 30 January 1933, the National Socialists began the elimination of parliamentarism and of the democratic parties in Germany. The **Reichstag Fire Decree** (*Reichstagsbrandverordnung*) of 28 February 1933 abolished important fundamental political rights enshrined in the Weimar Constitution. Although all parties were able to take part in the Reichstag election of 5 March 1933, it could not be regarded as a democratic election. The KPD and SPD in particular felt the brunt of the incipient **reign of terror**. Their members, officials and deputies were subjected to a massive campaign of intimidation, persecution and imprisonment under the new regime. On the basis of the Reichstag Fire Decree, all political mandates won by members of the KPD were cancelled on 8 March 1933. This also applied to the members of the KPD parliamentary group in the Reichstag, who had only just been elected three days before. By means of the law known as the **Enabling Act**, adopted by a two-thirds majority of the Reichstag on 23 March 1933, Parliament incapacitated itself and abolished the division of powers between the legislature and the executive. Parliamentary consent was no longer required for the enactment of laws. Only the Social Democrats had voted against the Enabling Act in the Reichstag.

On 17 May 1933, the Reichstag held its last sitting as a multi-party parliament before being dissolved. The KPD had been obliterated, the SPD was banned on 22 June 1933, all of the other mainstream parties disbanded, and the **Act Prohibiting the Creation of New Political Parties** (*Gesetz gegen die Neubildung von Parteien*) was enacted on 14 July 1933, leaving the NSDAP as the only lawful political party. Parliamentarism and the democratic party system in Germany had thus been destroyed by the summer of 1933. Thereafter, the Reichstag played no significant part in the development of the nation's political will or in the political decision-making process and only sat sporadically as a **sham parliament** during the National Socialist dictatorship.

After 17 May 1933 there were only **18 further sittings** of the Reichstag, which now consisted entirely of NSDAP deputies. Although it still formally possessed legislative powers, after the adoption of the Enabling Act the Reichstag adopted only **seven out of almost a thousand laws** of the German *Reich*. The last sitting of the National Socialist Reichstag took place on 16 April 1942. All **motions put to the vote** in the National Socialist Reichstag were carried unanimously **without debate**. There were no committees or parliamentary groups. Besides the formal adoption of laws, the few parliamentary sittings served as a backdrop against which Hitler delivered his government policy statements. Especially where foreign policy was concerned, the National Socialist leaders believed that the role of the Reichstag was to demonstrate national unity at home and abroad through its **unanimous acclamations**.

After the country went to the polls on 5 March 1933, there were three more **Reichstag elections** in the period up to 1945 under the Nazi dictatorship: on 12 November 1933, on 29 March 1936 and the elections to the 'Greater German Reichstag' on 10 April 1938. The election of April 1938 was combined with a plebiscite on the annexation of Austria. There was only one ballot paper for both votes. **Only candidates from the NSDAP** were allowed to stand for election to the Reichstag, their names being presented to voters in the form of a **single list**, to which they could only vote 'yes' or 'no'. The National Socialists also held several **plebiscites**: on Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations on 12 November 1933, on the fusion of the offices of President and Chancellor of the *Reich* in the person of Adolf Hitler on 19 August 1934 and on the annexation of Austria on 10 April 1938. Like the elections to the Reichstag, the plebiscites were only pseudo-democratic in character and were designed to legitimise decisions taken by the National Socialists. In every case, the purpose was to obtain **retrospective approval** for action that the National Socialists had already taken.

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