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Exam focus

OCR: Democracy and dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963

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This resource presents a sample answer and commentary to an OCR-style comparative question for Democracy and dictatorship in Germany 1919–1963.

Question

Which was of greater importance in establishing the Nazi dictatorship:

- The Reichstag fire
- The Night of the Long Knives

Explain your answer with reference to both points. (10 marks)

Answer with commentary

The exam board guidance states that it is possible to answer the questions by dealing with each point in turn or by taking a comparative approach throughout. Either approach is acceptable. You should aim to complete this answer in 20 minutes.

The Reichstag fire, which took place on 27 February 1933, was instrumental in establishing the Nazi dictatorship. Hitler believed his own propaganda that Communists were planning to take over and concluded that the Reichstag fire was the first act in the long-awaited backlash. Therefore it is clear to say that the Reichstag Fire was very important in the establishment of a Nazi dictatorship.

The opening to the response is clear and focused on the question. The candidate demonstrates a contextual awareness of the period.

Hitler had made it clear in the days immediately prior to 30 January 1933 that he would not be able to work with the Reichstag that had been elected in the November 1932 election. While the Nazi Party was the largest single party in it, this did not give Hitler a working majority as the two largest parties after the Nazis were both on the left — the Social Democrat Party and the Communist Party. New elections for the Reichstag had been called for 5 March 1933. The danger for Hitler was that he might

not get as much support in the new election as in the previous one. He was playing a dangerous game that could have ended his political career. Once the Reichstag fire happened it was immediately declared that the fire was the work of Communists and the SA were put on alert to maintain order. In turn on 28 February the Decree for the Protection of People and State was passed and the SA were allowed to search homes, close Communist newspapers and imprison over 4,000 Communists. The public were told that the Communists had burned down the seat of government in Germany and that the police and the SA were doing all that they could to save the nation from unrest and catastrophe. The collapse of the rule of law was given a legal veneer. The Nazis also captured the alleged perpetrator of the crime — a Dutch Communist called Marius van der Lubbe. He and four other Communists were charged with arson. The four others were later acquitted but van der Lubbe had to stand trial. He was accused of starting at least 12 fires in the Reichstag and put on trial in late November. Van der Lubbe was found guilty and executed in January 1934.

There is a great deal of information given in this section and the candidate demonstrates their knowledge of the events surrounding and after the fire. However, they need to make sure they remain focused and don't become descriptive. The analysis must be clear and there must be a sense that they are exploring the role of the fire not just giving details of what happened.

This proved to be very favourable to the Nazis as they could utilise what had happened at the Reichstag as a convenient way to discredit their Communist opposition, and whatever the truth of the fire, Hitler turned it into a skilful piece of propaganda to establish his authority. In establishing a dictatorship the Reichstag fire led to the Enabling Act, passed in March 1933. This allowed the chancellor to issue laws without consulting the Reichstag. He then used this act to ban all other political parties and this demonstrated to Nazi sceptics within the civil service and the judiciary that the takeover of power was being done legally. Perhaps the most significant reason why the Reichstag fire was important in establishing the dictatorship was the chain of events that it put in place, allowing Hitler to remove his greatest threat — the Communists — and subsequently present a legal takeover of power. He quickly moved to place Nazis in key positions. However, in the March 1933 election the Nazis only took 43.9% of the vote share, and whilst banning the KPD had given him a political advantage he was still not in receipt of an overall majority.

This paragraph is very focused and demonstrates a clear awareness of the chain of events that the fire put in place. It shows contextual awareness as well as demonstrating an analytical link to the question.

The Night of the Long Knives was one of the final moves taken by Hitler to establish a dictatorship in Germany. By 1934 Ernst Rohm, the leader of the SA, was suggesting that the SA should be the basis of a new German army. Hitler did not want to annoy the German military leaders and he suspected Rohm's loyalty and therefore acted swiftly. In June 1934 members of the SS murdered Rohm and other leading members of the SA. They claimed that Rohm was plotting to overthrow Hitler. It is thought 85 men were executed that night and thousands imprisoned in the following days as Hitler not only got rid of political opponents but purged his own party. This event was clearly significant in establishing a dictatorship as it demonstrated that Hitler was not afraid to get rid of internal opposition

as well as external opposition. He was not afraid to purge members within his own party if he perceived them as a threat to his power base. By the end of June 1934 Hitler had eliminated any opposition to his leadership both within and outside the party. More importantly, there was only one organisation that had the power to overthrow him and that was the army — the Night of the Long Knives won Hitler the respect of the army.

This paragraph shows a clear link to the question from the outset followed by developed knowledge and understanding of the Night of the Long Knives. There is a clear sense of why the event was important and the role it played in establishing the dictatorship.

Overall the Night of the Long Knives was key to the establishment of his dictatorship as all that was left after it was to wait for Hindenburg's death. However, I still think that the Reichstag fire was more important, as it paved the way for not only a legal takeover of power but for the elimination of all opponents from outside the party.

A clear judgement in relation to the two stated factors is made and supported.

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