THE LOCKE SOCIETY
LIFE, LIBERTY & EDUCATION

Unit	Topic
WWII	**Before the Reich: How the Nazi Party Used Violence to Gain Power (Pre-1933)**

Lesson Plan

Aim

To analyze how the Nazi Party's use of violence and intimidation before taking power contributed to the erosion of democratic institutions in Germany.

Rationale

In today's political discourse, the term "Nazi" is used far too frequently and often inappropriately. Drawing parallels to the Nazi Party is a serious matter that carries historical weight and potential harm when misapplied. Public debate about the causes and culprits of violence in America is frequently shaped by partisan reporting, which could lead to more harm. Although analyzing contemporary violence is important, equating it with one of history's greatest evils oversimplifies complex realities. Some critics have labeled figures of American government administrations as "Nazis," yet a careful study of history and the Nazi regime's strategic use of violence to seize and maintain power makes such comparisons misguided and historically inaccurate. Some teachers have embraced this dangerous narrative and built it into their curriculum, intentionally or not, embedding falsehoods in students' minds that Nazis are having a moment in real American leadership. This lesson guides students to examine the key actions and events that defined the Nazi Party's unique rise in Germany in the 1920s. Additionally, this lesson emphasizes the importance of understanding the inappropriateness of casually using the term "Nazi" or labeling others with it. Such language not only trivializes one of the darkest periods in history but also undermines thoughtful and respectful dialogue.

Student Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Describe how the Nazi Party used violence and intimidation before coming to power in Germany, including the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, the circumstances of 'Altona Bloody Sunday,' and antisemitism.
2. Identify reasons why many Germans began to see democracy as weak at this time.
3. Discuss how fear and chaos can help extremist groups gain control.

Civics Connection

Why is this topic especially important for active participation in a democratic society?

Vocabulary

Weimar Republic; Paul von Hindenburg; Nazi Party (NSDAP); Sturmabteilung (SA); Putsch; Propaganda; Antisemitism; coup

Materials and Resources

TEXTS (3): *Violence as Politics: The Nazi Campaign of Chaos Before Power, Beer Hall Putsch (1923), Altona* [Additional texts/resources for mini-lesson/background information]

HANDOUTS: *Violence as Politics* Discussion Questions, Essential Question For Discussion

Procedure

**Lesson Prep: Students will have read and annotated 'Violence as Politics' as homework before the lesson.*

Do Now: Respond to the following question: *If most people agree that violence is wrong, how and why does it spread?*

Students discuss in pairs or small groups for 3–5 minutes, then share thoughts aloud with the class to discuss.
[Transition: Explain that today's class explores how Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party used violence before it ever won an election.]

Group Activity 1: Each group will discuss the thought questions for the 'Violence as Politics' article. Each group member will record the response with which they most agree.

Mini-Lesson: Background on Germany in the 1920s: Germany's circumstances following WWI, Weimar Republic, birth of the Nazi Party, Economy, Culture, Antisemitism

Independent Activity: Read and annotate 'Beer Hall Putsch' and 'Altona'

Independent/Group Activity:
Each group will discuss the following questions in preparation for a larger classroom discussion: *Who/what played the most significant role in enabling the Nazi Party to come to power? What could they have done differently? What should they have done differently? What implications would have limited their ability to respond?* [Possible 'who' options: government (Hindenburg), middle-class, upper-class, lower-class, teachers, lawyers, reporters, etc. *Keep in mind the limited technology of the time]

Share: The teacher will lead a classroom discussion that emphasizes respectful listening and thoughtful dialogue. The teacher may then summarize the discussion by presenting a shared conclusion as the class's collective answer to the question.

Closure: Students will respond to the following question: In what ways do fear and chaos contribute to the rise of extremist groups, and what common patterns appear in their actions and behavior?

Modifications

- Teachers may assign half of the 'Violence as Politics' questions for homework and half to be done in class, or select a few to use to lessen the time needed for completion.
- To support the post-reading discussion, the teacher may provide a more structured scaffold, consisting of a breakdown of each question and targeted prompts addressing specific 'who' subjects for students to respond to directly.
- Provide rote and critical thinking questions to support comprehension during reading, particularly defining the academic vocabulary (SA, Beer Hall Putsch, Altona). Questions can be prepared separately for each reading.

Extension

Inquiry: Are fear and chaos both necessary for an extremist group's rise to power? Explore historic and/or modern-day examples to formulate a response.

Notes

**Use discretion for activities according to what is appropriate for your class.*

Violence as Politics: The Nazi Campaign of Chaos Before Power

Before Adolf Hitler became chancellor in 1933, the Nazi Party was not a governing force but a radical movement that made violence the centerpiece of its politics. In the years of the Weimar Republic, the Nazis used brutality, intimidation, and chaos to erode faith in democratic institutions and position themselves as Germany's only alternative to disorder. For them, violence was not a failure of politics—it was politics itself.

The Nazis' organized violence took shape early through their paramilitary wing, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), or "Storm Troopers." A paramilitary is a group organized like a military force but not part of a country's official armed services. Composed largely of young men, unemployed workers, and World War I veterans, the SA's mission was to protect Nazi rallies, attack opponents, and dominate the streets. Their brown uniforms became a visible sign of both menace and belonging. SA squads regularly clashed with communist and socialist paramilitaries in brutal street battles that turned many German cities into near war zones. They assaulted political opponents, smashed shop windows of Jewish-owned businesses, and made intimidation a tool of recruitment and propaganda.

These orchestrated brawls, such as the 1932 Hamburg street battle that left casualties on both sides, were more than spontaneous violence. Historians suggest they were part of a deliberate strategy to destabilize public life. Every riot, beating, or march demonstrated the weakness of the Weimar police and government to maintain order. At the same time, the Nazis promised to restore "law and order" once they took power—an order they claimed only their movement could impose. In this way, they created the chaos they later vowed to end.

Though most German policemen were not Nazis, enforcement was inconsistent. Some officers sympathized with nationalist aims and occasionally warned Nazis of impending raids. More often, the overwhelmed police hesitated to intervene fully, wary of appearing to suppress free speech or political assembly under the democratic constitution. That ambivalence allowed Nazi street terror to spread almost unchecked, normalizing violence as part of everyday politics.

Violence also worked in tandem with threats and coercion. Nazi activists harassed local officials, beat voters, and warned that "scores would be settled" when Hitler took power. Political opponents—especially Communists and Jews—were driven from their jobs and communities. Through such tactics, the Nazis combined physical terror with psychological intimidation, making open opposition risky long before dictatorship was officially installed.

The violence reached an earlier climax in November 1923 with the Beer Hall Putsch, when Hitler led an armed attempt to overthrow the Bavarian government. The coup failed spectacularly, resulting in deaths, arrests, and a temporary ban of the party. Yet even after this failure, the Nazis never

abandoned their commitment to force. They merely adapted it—mixing street terror with electoral politics to appear both revolutionary and respectable.

By the late 1920s, this blend of intimidation and spectacle had reshaped Germany's political culture. Many ordinary Germans, disillusioned by economic collapse and weak coalition governments, saw Nazi militancy as proof of strength and discipline. The Nazi movement's deliberate use of violence blurred the line between civic life and civil war, convincing growing numbers that democracy itself was the source of disorder.

Historians suggest the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 was not the sudden triumph of a peaceful party but the culmination of years of organized violence. The SA's terror on the streets paved the way for dictatorship by breaking the democratic norms of public debate and substituting fear for persuasion. The Weimar Republic did not collapse under the weight of argument—it was beaten down in the streets.

Nazi Antisemitism in the 1920s

In 1928, Hitler and the Nazi Party began softening their public image by downplaying their most extreme antisemitic positions after receiving only 2.6% of the vote in the Reichstag (national parliament) in May of that year. They did this not because their hatred of Jews had lessened, but because they wanted to broaden their appeal and win more votes, especially among middle class and rural Germans who might be put off by openly radical and violent language. Despite moderating their tone and emphasis, antisemitism remained central to their ideology and propaganda.

Germans still understood that the Nazis were deeply antisemitic. Nazi newspapers continued to publish antisemitic propaganda and conspiracy theories about Jews. People often heard Nazi groups singing antisemitic songs and shouting violent slogans calling for Jews to be expelled or attacked. Many Germans also saw Nazis boycotting and vandalizing Jewish owned shops and physically assaulting Jewish people in public around this time.

The Beer Hall Putsch (1923)

The Beer Hall Putsch of November 8-9, 1923, exemplifies the Nazi Party's early reliance on paramilitary violence when it held no position of national or local power in the Weimar Republic. Operating as a marginal extremist group amid hyperinflation and political instability, Adolf Hitler and his followers launched a premature coup attempt in Munich, highlighting their status as powerless insurgents rather than a governing force.

Historical Context

In 1923, the Nazi Party (NSDAP) was just a beginning organization confined to Bavaria, lacking electoral success or institutional control. Inspired by Benito Mussolini's March on Rome, Hitler sought to exploit regional discontent by targeting a meeting at Munich's Bürgerbräukeller beer hall, where Bavarian state commissioner Gustav von Kahr, military leader Otto von Lossow, and police chief Hans von Seisser were addressing a crowd. Around 600 armed Sturmabteilung (SA) Storm Troopers stormed the venue; Hitler fired shots into the air, proclaimed a "national revolution," and took leaders hostage to demand their allegiance for an advance on Berlin.

On the night of the Beer Hall Putsch, participants faced immediate chaos, violence, and arrests as the coup collapsed. This act underscored the Nazis' outsider position, as they coerced support through intimidation without any legal authority.

Escalation to Armed Confrontation

The following day, November 9, approximately 3,000 Nazis marched from the beer hall toward the city center. At Odeonsplatz, they encountered a police cordon; when ordered to halt, volleys of gunfire erupted from both sides. Nazi participants fired aggressively into police lines, resulting in 14-16 Nazi deaths, four policemen killed, one civilian bystander slain, and over 100 wounded—a toll reflecting their street-brawler tactics as an unauthorized militia. Lacking broader support, the march disintegrated; Hitler fled but was captured two days later, imprisoned at Landsberg, and tried for treason.

He was sentenced on April 1, 1924, to five years but served only about nine months (264 days), from early April until his release on December 20, 1924. Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* while imprisoned at Landsberg.

Significance and Aftermath

This historic episode illustrates how pre-1933 Nazi violence stemmed from desperation as a powerless fringe group challenging the Weimar state. The putsch's failure exposed the Nazi Party's powerlessness in 1923, leading to its temporary ban, the flight or arrest of leaders, and a five-year sentence for Hitler (serving only nine months). Instead of building their power, the event pushed a shift to legal election paths as an option for moving forward.

Altona (1932)

An example of Nazi violence during the final years of the Weimar Republic is the street battle known as "Altona Bloody Sunday," which took place on July 17, 1932, in the working-class town of Altona, near Hamburg (part of Prussia). The incident shows how the Nazi Party deliberately used paramilitary confrontation to destabilize democracy and polarize German society. A paramilitary is a group organized like a military force but not part of a country's official armed services. Nazi paramilitaries deliberately engineered street confrontations like Altona Bloody Sunday to create chaos, discredit opponents, and pressure authorities into dismantling democratic safeguards.

By mid-1932, political tensions in Germany had reached a breaking point. After the government of Franz von Papen lifted an earlier ban on the Nazi SA and SS, uniformed Nazi paramilitaries once again poured into the streets. In this atmosphere, the authorities approved a massive march of roughly 7,000 SA men through Altona, a district known for its working-class population and strong Communist presence.

The route itself was a calculated provocation. SA men, or "Brownshirts," marched in full uniform through neighborhoods that locals called "Red Altona" and "Little Moscow" because of their politics. Everyone involved understood that this was likely to spark confrontation, yet the demonstration was allowed to proceed with insufficient, and in key moments absent, senior police leadership.

Street Fighting and Chaos

Thousands of SA men armed with clubs, knives, and some concealed pistols—snaked through the narrow, twisting streets of the old town, chanting slogans like "Germany awaken!" Onlookers from the cramped workers' tenements hurled insults, stones, and bricks from windows and doorways, met by SA squads breaking ranks to charge alleys and drag opponents into brutal beatings.

Gunfire erupted sporadically at first—two SA men fell dead, likely shot by individuals in the crowd—prompting police to unleash a barrage into buildings and rooftops, claiming sniper fire from "Red" hideouts. In reality, autopsies later revealed most of the 16 civilian dead were hit by police bullets during the chaos; no organized Communist snipers were found, and claims of rooftop ambushes crumbled under scrutiny. The SA, meanwhile, amplified the disorder by pushing into side streets, escalating clashes. This wasn't random violence but a calculated Nazi strategy: march into enemy territory to guarantee a fight, then leverage the inevitable casualties to portray themselves as victims of "Bolshevik terror." Within hours, Nazi newspapers screamed headlines blaming Communists entirely, framing the SA as defenders of order against anarchy.

From Street Violence to Political Weapon

Within three days, Papen used the incident as a pretext for a sweeping political move: the Prussian coup d'état (sudden overthrow of leadership) of July 20, 1932, quickly replacing top leaders. Citing the violence as proof that the Prussian state government could no longer

maintain order, Papen and President Paul von Hindenburg suspended the democratically elected Prussian authorities by emergency decree and placed Prussia under direct control from Berlin.

This step fatally weakened the largest and most important state government still committed to defending parliamentary democracy. It helped clear the way for further authoritarian measures and, ultimately, the Nazi seizure of power in 1933.

How Nazis Manipulated Democracy Through Altona

In Altona, the Nazis used democratic rights as tools to attack democracy itself. They asked for and got permits to march through neighborhoods that opposed them, expecting fights to break out. When violence happened, they blamed the police for being "too weak." Nazi propaganda focused on the deaths of their own followers in the fighting, while ignoring the deaths of local people. This pressured President Hindenburg and Chancellor Papen to take action against the Communists.

Why Altona Bloody Sunday Matters

Altona Bloody Sunday stands as a stark example of how Nazi violence operated during the Weimar Republic. The SA provoked confrontation in a hostile district, street fighting and panic followed, and the resulting bloodshed was then exploited to weaken democratic institutions and criminalize the regime's opponents.

In that sense, the events in Altona were not an isolated riot but part of a broader pattern. Near the end of Weimar, political street warfare—especially between Nazi paramilitaries and communist groups—became a central feature of public life, contributing to a climate of fear and instability. Altona shows how this violence helped transform Germany's fragile democracy into a pathway to dictatorship. Some historians argue that these tactics turned democratic freedoms—free assembly, press, fair trials—into tools paving Hitler's path to total power.

Violence as Politics: The Nazi Campaign of Chaos Before Power

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe that a uniform is needed to create 'menace' and a sense of 'belonging'? Explain.

2. What were the limitations on law enforcement that historians argue allowed 'Nazi street terror' to spread?

3. Can violence ever become "normalized" as historians suggest happened during this time period? Explain why and consider examples to support your claim.

4. What is 'psychological intimidation' and why is it serious?

5. Describe the weaknesses in the Weimar Republic that historians argue led to the point in which democracy was undermined? Do you agree that these factors are what really led to the rise of the Nazi Party?

6. Explain the meaning of the following line and whether you agree: "The Weimar Republic did not collapse under the weight of argument – it was beaten down in streets."

ESSENTIAL QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Essential Question:	Who/what played the most significant role in enabling the Nazi Party to come to power? Explain.
Follow Up #1:	What *should* they have done differently?
Follow Up #2:	What *could* they have done differently?
Follow Up #3:	What implications would have limited their ability to respond?