

ANTÓNIO COSTA PINTO
Edited by



**RULING ELITES
AND DECISION-MAKING
IN FASCIST-ERA
DICTATORSHIPS**

SOCIAL SCIENCE MONOGRAPHS

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	xi
Introduction: Political elites and decision-making in fascist-era dictatorships <i>António Costa Pinto</i>	xv
1. Mussolini, charisma and decision-making <i>Didier Musiedlak</i>	i
2. Political elite and decision-making in Mussolini's Italy <i>Goffredo Adinolfi</i>	19
3. Ministers and centres of power in Nazi Germany <i>Ana Mónica Fonseca</i>	55
4. Nazi propaganda decision-making: the hybrid of 'modernity' and 'neo-feudalism' in Nazi wartime propaganda <i>Aristotle Kallis</i>	83
5. The 'empire of the professor': Salazar's ministerial elite, 1932–44 <i>Nuno Estêvão Ferreira, Rita Almeida de Carvalho, António Costa Pinto</i>	119

6. Political decision-making in the Portuguese New State (1933–9): The dictator, the council of ministers and the inner-circle	137
<i>Filipa Raimundo, Nuno Estêvão Ferreira, Rita Almeida de Carvalho</i>	
7. Executive, single party and ministers in Franco's regime, 1936–45	165
<i>Miguel Jerez Mir</i>	
8. Single party, cabinet and political decision-making in fascist era dictatorships: Comparative perspectives	215
<i>António Costa Pinto</i>	
<i>Contributors</i>	253
<i>Index</i>	257

Ministers and centres of power in Nazi Germany

Ana Mónica Fonseca

The operation of the Third Reich's political system has always been a subject of debate in international historiography. The major division emerges when Hitler's position within the regime is analysed. On the one hand, there are those who argue National Socialism was no more than 'Hitlerism': that Hitler's role was both fundamental and determining in the prosecution of the policies that were followed—from foreign policy to racial questions (e.g. Hildebrand 1994; Bracher 1993). On the other hand, there are those who argue Hitler was a weak dictator and that Nazism was actually a system with a multi-dimensional structure in which 'Hitler's authority, albeit significant, was only one element' (Kershaw 1993: 64). For those who subscribe to this view, the study of the relationship between the state and the party, the public services and the various party organisations, amongst others, enabled them to brand the Nazi regime as a 'polyocracy': in other words, the regime that ruled the Third Reich could be characterised by the existence of several centres of power that competed with each other for the Führer's attention (see Neumann 1963; Broszat 2007; Jürgen, Möller and Schaarschmidt 2007).

This chapter seeks to describe the socio-political profile of the Third Reich's ministerial elite from 1933 to 1945, and to understand the recruitment variables that led to the appointment of these men to Hitler's government. The chapter is based on published biographical data and primary sources: particularly on the personal documents

of the various ministers, which have been deposited in the Munich Contemporary History Institute (IfZ—Institut für Zeitgeschichte). With the information thus collected, it was possible to complete the prosopographic data and to conduct a general analysis of the composition of the Nazi ministerial elite.

Consolidation of power in the Third Reich

The arrival in power of Adolf Hitler and his followers in the German National Socialist Workers' Party (NSDAP—Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei [Nazi Party]), was made possible due to the agreement between the conservative parties, especially the Christian conservative Centre Party (ZP—Zentrumspartei) and the German National Peoples' Party (DNVP—Deutschnationale Volkspartei) and the president, Paul von Hindenburg. Hitler took power as German chancellor on 30 January 1933, heading a coalition government that included members of both the DNVP and the ZP, which governed by authority of a presidential decree. There were only two other Nazis in the cabinet: the minister of the interior, Wilhelm Frick, and Hermann Göring, who was minister without portfolio and interior minister for the state of Prussia. Despite this, within a few months Hitler had succeeded in transforming the political system in such a way as to concentrate all power to the Nazis (Evans 2003).

The first phase of the Nazi regime—its seizure of power—lasted until Hindenburg's death in August 1934 and was characterised by the creation of a regime in which the Nazi Party tried to dominate all areas of German public life: from the unions to the youth organisations, the public administration and the army. One of the first measures Hitler introduced as chancellor was the dissolution of the Reichstag and the convocation of elections for March 1933. By doing so, Hitler sought to increase the Nazi Party's power within the government. In order to achieve his goal, he began the ferocious persecution of left-wing parties—the Communists (KPD—Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands) and the Social Democrats (SPD—Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands)—a strategy that pleased the Nazi's conservative

coalition partners as much as it did the Nazis. On 4 February, Hitler approved a decree law 'for the protection of the German people', which greatly limited individual freedoms, and which outlawed the opposition press and public meetings that could place the 'integrity of the state' in peril. In fact, this law was the legal 'umbrella' that authorised the persecution of the opposition.

This notwithstanding, the Nazi goal was greatly helped when, on 27 February 1933, the Reichstag was set ablaze. The alleged arsonist, a young Dutch communist, was soon captured. While today the identity of the real authors of the Reichstag fire remains a matter of debate, the fact is that it represented an excellent opportunity for the Nazis to increase their persecution of communists (Deiseroth 2005). The Reichstag fire created the conditions in which the government was able to approve an emergency law that restricted those individual and political freedoms that had been protected by the constitution of the Weimar Republic. The 'Law to Protect the People and the State' established a state of emergency that authorised the arrest of all communist deputies and leaders, while also allowing the central government to 'temporarily' replace the regional governments. This decree is seen as one of the first acts that were to become the National Socialists' *modus operandi*, through which unexpected situations led to the discovery of improvised solutions that have the appearance of legitimacy (Broszat 2007: 100).

Thus, the 5 March elections took place in an atmosphere of crisis, with the opposition practically destroyed. Despite this, there was no guarantee that the Nazis would obtain the majority Hitler desired, although it served to legitimate the coalition government that had obtained 'moral support' for the prosecution of its policies. One of the first initiatives following the election was the creation of the ministry of information and propaganda headed by Josef Goebbels. Behind this decision was the belief that it was necessary to prevent political apathy, and that the 'pure terror' that the SA (Sturmabteilung) and the SS (Schutzstaffel) had spread throughout Germany during the election campaign, was not enough to ensure the government's popularity remained high. On 23 March, and with the

support of the ZP, Hitler obtained the necessary majority of two-thirds of the Reichstag with which to approve the law of exception, the Enabling Act (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*), that dissolved parliamentary power. Now guaranteed freedom of action without depending on authorisation from either the Reichstag or the president, the Nazis were able to occupy all positions of political power. They achieved this by purging the middle and higher ranks of the civil service and by filling all of the leadership positions within the Länder with Nazis, in a move that became known as 'co-ordination' (*Gleichschaltung*) (Evans 2003: 375-90).

When in 1934, after the decapitation of the SA's leadership in the wake of the 'night of the long knives', and following Hindenburg's death, Hitler became Führer and Reich Chancellor, a process began in which the party increasingly meddled in the functioning of the state through the establishment of parallel institutions that were often superimposed on those of the state, particularly at the local and regional levels.

The Nazi Party's internal structure was organised in a similar way to that which the historian Richard Overly calls the 'shadow state', becoming 'a bureaucratic structure that rivalled the state', including the number of its employees (2005: 206). There were specific party departments, headed by a national leader (Reichsleiter) for every subject: from foreign policy to agriculture; propaganda to public works and not forgetting security. Quite often the Reichsleiter would influence the positions of the ministers, with the Reichsleiter often going on to be appointed ministers. At the regional level, the party representative was the regional leader (Gauleiter), which was an important position within the Nazi system as it guaranteed the party's regional structures. Many Gauleiter were to go on to become the Reich's representatives at the regional level. As well as the obvious superimposition of powers, Gauleiter controlled all political activities within their regions (Jürgen, Möller and Schaarschmidt 2007).

In addition to these characteristics, we can say that the role of the government during the Third Reich suffered a diminution: that is, it gradually lost significance to the extent that new parallel institutions

that answered only to the Führer were being created. The leading examples of this type of institution are the SS, the German Labour Front (DAF—Deutsche Arbeitsfront) and even Göring's four-year plan. On the other hand, the majority of ministers had little contact with Hitler, with the less important ministries having almost complete freedom of action (Frei 2001: 98–113; Broszat 2007: 326–62).

Hitler's first government, such as it was formed in January 1933 and maintained until after the 5 March elections, was still a coalition. There were only two Nazi ministers: Göring, minister without portfolio and minister of the interior for Prussia, and Frick, minister of the interior. Goebbels did not join the government until 13 March, when he was appointed minister of information and propaganda. The other ministers were conservatives and nationalists who had survived from the governments of Franz von Papen and Kurt von Schleicher, namely Konstantin Freiherr von Neurath (foreign affairs), Lutz Graf Schwerin von Krosigk (finances), Franz Gürtner (justice) and Paul Eltz von Rübénach (transport and communications), who had led these ministries since June 1932. In addition to these, Franz Seldte, the leader of the para-military Stahlhelm (Steel helmets), was appointed to head the ministry of labour, while other important portfolios were given to Von Papen—who had been appointed vice-chancellor in order to 'control' Hitler—and Alfred Hugenberg, leader of the DNVP (economy and agriculture) (Rolf's 1996). The ministry of defence was given to General Werner von Blomberg, who, while defending the view that the armed forces must remain above political parties, was clearly close to the Nazis (Schaefer 2006).

As time passed, so the conditions for the political system changed. In July 1933, the establishment of new political parties was prohibited, with the KPD and the SPD being banned. The remaining parties closed down 'voluntarily' (including both the ZP and the DNVP, which were members of the governing coalition). These prohibitions led Hugenberg to resign from the government: he was replaced by Kurt Schmitt (economy) and Walter Darré (agriculture). Von Papen, the vice-chancellor and leader of the conservatives, remained in gov-

ernment until the summer of 1934, after which the position of vice-chancellor was abolished.¹

Analysis of the composition of the Third Reich's government leads us to the conclusion that its composition did not alter significantly during the regime's 12-year existence. The main alterations came in the wake of the February 1938 Blomberg-Fritsch crisis, in which two military leaders—Werner von Blomberg (minister of war) and Werner Freiherr von Fritsch (navy chief of staff)—were dismissed from office for disagreeing with the decision to go to war. The war ministry was abolished and replaced with the armed forces supreme command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) under the leadership of Wilhelm Keitel. In fact, the radicalisation of Germany's foreign policy and the decision to go to war also led to a change of foreign minister, with Neurath being replaced by Joachim von Ribbentrop (Frei 2001: 148–50).

Thus, we can say that there was continuity in the Nazi governing elite. The occupation of ministerial office was long, with the majority of ministers (48.7 per cent) remaining in the same office for more than eight years, a very long period of time for a regime that had only a 12-year lifetime. The long duration of ministerial careers also explains the low level of mobility between portfolios, with 70.3 per cent of ministers occupying only one ministerial position, while of the 29.7 per cent (the equivalent of 11 ministers) who held two or three portfolios, only nine had the office of minister without portfolio.²

From a total of 37 ministers (during the entire Nazi regime), and from a government that included between ten (in January 1933) and 16 ministries (from 1941),³ the number of ministers without portfolio

¹ The position of vice-chancellor had been created on Von Papen's insistence, and it was through this office that he hoped to control Hitler's access to Hindenburg (Broszat 2007: 82–3).

² ICS database on the fascist elite (2009).

³ The cabinet of January 1933 included the following ministries: foreign affairs, interior, justice, finances, economy, labour, agriculture, war, communications, and transport. The ministries of information and propaganda (Goebbels) and aviation (Göring) were created in March 1933. Ministries that were created later included:

is significant. This position was attributed for many reasons. In January 1933, Herman Göring entered the government as a minister without portfolio: that is, he was appointed so that the Nazis could have more power within the coalition cabinet. Some influential Nazi figures were appointed ministers without portfolio so that they could represent the party at cabinet meetings (as was the case of Rudolf Hess, the Führer's representative, who was minister without portfolio from December 1933 until his flight to the United Kingdom in 1941, and of Heinrich Lammers, secretary of the Reich Chancellery, who was minister without portfolio from November 1937) and who simultaneously saw their prestige rise (Freeman 1987: 49). Still others were appointed ministers without portfolio as a form of compensation after they had left the government: this was true of Neurath (minister of foreign affairs, 1932–February 1938) and Hjalmar Schacht (minister of the economy, 1934–7), with the latter serving as minister without portfolio until 1943, when he distanced himself from the regime. Schacht was later involved in the July 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler, following which he was arrested by the SS.

Ministerial reshuffles were timely and were not waves of radical alteration in the composition of the government, which is clear from the number of ministers who occupied only one portfolio. This means that, with some exceptions, removal from a particular ministerial office meant the end of participation in the government. This was true of Von Rübenach, who was dismissed from the ministry of transport and communications in February 1937 for having openly criticised Nazi policy towards the Church. After being removed from office, Von Rübenach (a conservative who had served in the governments of Von Papen and Von Schleicher) was watched by the Gestapo until his death in 1943. A similar case was that of Darré, who was dismissed from the ministry of agriculture, which he had led since June 1933, in May 1943. His dismissal was a result of the differences of opinion between him and Heinrich Himmler in relation to agri-

education (1934), ecclesiastic affairs (1935), armaments and munitions (1940) and eastern occupied territories (1941) (Freeman 1987).

cultural management in the occupied territories of Eastern Europe. Darré had been an important figure within the Nazi Party, particularly as a consequence of his racial ‘blood and soil’ (*Blut und Boden*) doctrine, but he soon became a secondary figure within the Third Reich. He retained his positions within the party, i.e. leader of the Reich’s Farmers’ Confederation and Reichsleiter for agriculture, until the end of the regime (Bramwell 1985).

We see, then, that the Third Reich’s ministerial elite was characterised by long terms of office, which are explained by the operation of the Nazi regime. As we shall see below, a characteristic of the Third Reich was the superimposition of authority, particularly with the creation of organisations responsible to the Führer, the authority of which clashed with that of the various ministries. Thus, the ministerial elite’s authority was highly diffused, diminishing as the regime radicalised, achieving its nadir in 1938, when cabinet meetings ended.

Who were the Nazi ministerial elite?

Born in the last decades of the 19th century, the Nazi ministerial elite were from the generation that had lived through the First World War. They had also witnessed the rise and fall of the Weimar Republic and had experienced the ‘humiliations’ that had been imposed on Germany. However, the leading figures of this governing group—Hitler, Goebbels and Göring—were very young when they took power: Hitler was only 43 when he was appointed chancellor, Göring was 40 and Goebbels was the youngest, aged 35 in March 1933 when he took office as minister of information and propaganda (Read 2005: 292). According to Bracher, the members of the Nazi government were much younger than the ministers in other Western countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where the average age was 56 and 53 respectively (1993: 299).

Generally speaking, their family origins allow us to conclude that they were predominantly from the middle- and upper middle-class (ministers whose parents were in business, had university degrees, were teachers or civil servants). These familial characteristics help ex-

plain the ministers' educational profile. With the exception of Hitler and Martin Bormann, who was Hitler's secretary and head of the chancellery, all of the ministers—both military and civilian—had a university-level education (see Table 3.1), with 29.7 per cent of university educated civilian ministers having a doctorate (see Table 3.2). With respect to the nature of their qualifications, we note that law predominated, followed by social sciences and humanities, and engineering (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.1
Educational level of ministers (%)

Level	%
Civilian non-university educated	5.4
Military non-graduate	0.0
Civilian university educated	83.9
Military graduate	10.8
N	37

N = Total number of Nazi ministers.

Source: *ICS database on the fascist elite* (2009).

Table 3.2
University degree of the civilian ministers (%)*

Degree	%
Incomplete	0.0
Graduate	83.8
Post-graduate	0.0
Doctorate	29.7
N	31

* Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

N= Number of all civilian ministers who were university educated.

Source: *ICS database on the fascist elite* (2009).

Table 3.3
Fields of higher education of ministers (%)*

Fields of education	N	%
Agronomy and veterinary	3	8.1
Economics and management	3	8.1
Engineering	4	10.8
Humanities and social sciences	4	10.8
Law	15	40.5
Mathematics and natural sciences	2	5.4
Military	4	10.8
Medicine	0	0.0
Other	4	10.8
Total**	37	89.1

* Multiple coding has been applied because some ministers held degrees in two, or even three, academic specialisations. Percentages do not total 100.

** Total of ministers.

Source: *ICS database on the fascist elite* (2009).

Regarding the occupational profile of the Third Reich's ministers, we note the importance of public servants. In fact, 16 ministers, or 43.2 per cent of the total (see Table 3.4), were employed by the state (as judges, diplomats, civil servants or university professors). However, there is no doubting that the most common occupation was professional politician (56.8 per cent). Included in this category are all of those whose professional activities were exclusively related to the party. Some names, such as Hitler, Goebbels and Hess, are obvious—they were men who spent their entire careers within the Nazi Party. Other names are less obvious, but no less important. One such example is Bernhard Rust, the minister of science and education since the ministry was created in 1934, and who, before taking office, was an employee of the Nazi Party, becoming a Gauleiter in Braunschweig and a senior group leader (Obergruppenführer) in the SA (Pedersen 1994). Another example is that of Hans Frank, who had been a minister without portfolio since 1934 and governor-general of Poland

Table 3.4
Ministers' occupational background*

Occupational categories	N	%
Military	4	10.8
<i>Army</i>	2	5.4
<i>Navy</i>	1	2.7
<i>Air force</i>	1	2.7
Judge or public prosecutor	5	13.5
Diplomat	3	8.1
Senior civil servant	7	18.9
Middle-rank civil servant	0	0.0
Officer of state corporatist agencies	4	10.8
University professor	1	2.7
Teacher	0	0.0
Employee	0	0.0
Writer or journalist	1	2.7
Lawyer	2	5.4
Medical doctor	0	0.0
Engineer	1	2.7
Manager	0	0.0
Businessman, industrialist or banker	1	2.7
Landowner or farmer	0	0.0
Full-time politician	21	56.8
Other	1	2.7
Total	55	137.8

* Occupations immediately before the first ministerial appointment. Multiple coding has been applied. Percentages do not total 100.

Source: *ICS database on the fascist elite* (2009).

from 1939. However, from 1927 until his appointment to the cabinet, he was employed in various positions within the party, serving as the director of the party's legal department (*Leiter der Rechtsabteilung der NSDAP*) and as president of the League of German Advocates

(Nationalsozialistische Rechtswahrverbund). From 1933, he served as minister of justice for Bavaria and was responsible for the homogenisation and Nazification (*Gleichschaltung*) of justice across the different Länder (Schenk 2006). Finally, one other important name is that of the Third Reich's minister of the interior from January 1933 to 1943, Wilhelm Frick. Frick was one of the longest-serving Nazi Party members to belong to the Nazi government. He had been a deputy since 1924, becoming leader of the Nazi group in parliament (Nelibe 1992).

In this way, we have identified a certain degree of homogeneity in the Nazi ministerial elite, particularly with respect to its educational and social past. The large majority of the 37 men who served as ministers during the Nazi regime had a university level education in such disciplines as law, the social sciences and humanities, or engineering, while their professional experience was within the civil service or in political office.

Ministerial recruitment in the Third Reich

What route did the members of the Nazi elite take that led them to ministerial office? In order to answer this question we must first analyse some variables, particularly the positions they held prior to their first appointment to government, so that we can assess whether the occupation of political office was a determining factor, or, rather, if their position within the party was the main reason for their appointment. Table 3.5 illustrates that the main political role undertaken by those who went on to serve as ministers in the Third Reich was that of parliamentary deputy (51.4 per cent), followed by party employees (48.7 per cent). The total rises to 23 ministers (62.2 per cent) when those who had been Gauleiter or Reichsleiter are also counted, making this—being a party officer—the main element the Nazi ministerial elite had in common.

However, it is necessary to note that immediately after the Nazis came to power in 1933, the Reichstag's functions were severely limited as a result of the Enabling Act of 23 March, and that in July that same year the NSDAP became the only legal political party in

Germany and, therefore, the only one with parliamentary representation.

Table 3.5
Political offices held by ministers*

Political offices	N	%
None	8	21.6
Mayor or local councillor	6	16.2
Deputy	19	51.4
Secretary or under-secretary of state	8	21.6
Member of <i>cabinets ministériels</i>	3	3.1
Ministerial director	4	10.8
Gauleiter or Reichsleiter	5	13.5
Party officers ¹	18	48.7
Total	71	186.9

* Occupations immediately before the first ministerial appointment. Multiple coding has been applied. Percentages do not total 100.

¹ Includes one militia (2.7%) and five members of para-state institutions (13.51%).

Source: *ICS database on the fascist elite* (2009).

There were four parliamentary elections in the 12-year history of the Third Reich: 5 March and 12 November 1933; 29 March 1936; and 4 December 1938. As we saw above, the March 1933 elections were designed to legitimate Hitler's government and to guarantee the necessary political conditions to ensure approval of the Enabling Act. The November 1933 election of 661 deputies was the first with an exclusively Nazi Party list of candidates. This election, which was little more than a referendum, was made from a list that was presented as 'The Führer's List', and not as that of the NSDAP. For the first time the representatives of the conservative ZP and nationalist DNVP were incorporated into the Nazi Party list, the only party represented in the Reichstag (Broszat 2007: 127–8).⁴ In a dem-

⁴ There continued to be 'invited' deputies who did not belong to the NSDAP. These deputies were not recognised as members of any other party. The *Reichsta-*

onstration of its lack of importance to the regime, parliament met only seven times between December 1933 and March 1936. The 741 members of parliament, elected on 24 March 1936, met only three times, with the first meeting being held in January 1937—almost a year after the election. Finally, the last elections to the Reichstag during the Third Reich took place on 4 December 1938 in the wake of the annexation of Austria and the occupation of the Sudetenland. In order to include the 41 representatives of this region, a total of 814 deputies were elected to the Reichstag. The final meeting of this parliament took place on 26 April 1941 (*Verhandlungen des Reichstags*, vols 457–60).

After the introduction of the 1933 Enabling Act, which removed much of parliament's legislative authority, Hitler generally used the Reichstag as a 'platform for his speeches and from which to make important announcements', although it did also 'occasionally' function as a legislative body. This happened in January 1934 when parliament approved the state reform law that abolished the federal governments and transferred their powers to the national level, and again in August 1935 when it approved the Nuremberg Laws for the Protection of German Blood, which were the legal foundations upon which the Third Reich's racist and anti-Semitic policies were constructed (Brozdat 2007: 128–9).

If we compare the number of ministers who were deputies during the Weimar Republic, we see that this position continues to represent the main political office, alongside those who had not occupied any position in German political life. In fact, these reach a high value (35.1 per cent), suggesting a relative degree of rupture between the two regimes (see Table 3.6).

Table 3.7 shows the number of parliamentary mandates each minister served during the Weimar Republic. The parliament that emerged from the March 1933 election, which included deputies from several conservative and nationalist parties, is included in this

gshandbuch (1933) lists 22 'invited' deputies within the NSDAP list, including Von Papen and Hugenberg.

Table 3.6
Political offices held by ministers
under the Weimar Republic*

Political Offices	N	%
None	13	35.1
Mayor or local councillor	2	5.4
Deputy	13	35.1
Secretary or under-secretary of state	3	8.1
Ministerial director	0	0.0
Minister	2	5.7
Gauleiter or Reichsleiter	6	16.2
Party officer ¹	12	32.4
Total	51	138.0

* Multiple coding has been applied. Percentages do not total 100.

¹ Includes one militia member (2.7 %) and one member of a para-state institution (2.7 %).

Source: *ICS database on the fascist elite* (2009).

data. Rudolf Hess and Franz Seldte were the two ministers who were only elected once: in March 1933. Their inclusion, for the first time, in the NSDAP list was a form of political recognition that was, in Hess's case, reinforced by a December 1933 appointment to the government as a minister without portfolio.⁵

What is immediately obvious from Table 3.7 is the large number of deputies who served four or more parliamentary mandates (27 per cent): although it should be noted that the DNVP leader, Alfred Hugenberg, and the ZP's Franz von Papen, were elected by their parties nine and six times, respectively. Of those elected from the Nazi Party list, Wilhelm Frick served seven parliamentary mandates, being first elected to the Reichstag in 1924 as a member of the National Socialist Freedom Party (NSFP—Nationalsozialistische Freiheitspartei), which

⁵ In the words of the historian Joachim Fest (2006: 263), Hess was 'a kind of minister for the party'. Seldte had been minister of labour since 30 January 1933.

amalgamated with the NSDAP in 1925. The other Nazi deputies were elected in the May 1928 (Goebbels, Göring and Hitler) and September 1930 (Frank, Himmler, Alfred Rosenberg and Bernhard Rust).

Table 3.7
Ministers' previous parliamentary experience
in democratic liberal regime*

	Number of times			
	1	2	3	4+
N	2	0	1	10
% ¹	5.4	0.0	2.7	27.0

* Number of mandates until 5 March 1933

¹ Percentage based on the total number of Nazi ministers (37). Data includes the results of the elections of 5 March 1933.

Source: *ICS database on the fascist elite* (2009).

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the party was the main source of political recruitment during the Third Reich, and that membership of the NSDAP was essential in order to obtain advancement within the Nazi regime. The overwhelming majority, around 90 per cent, of the Third Reich's ministers were Nazi Party members, with around 78 per cent having been members before Hitler was appointed chancellor. Understandably, neither Von Papen nor Hugenberg joined the NSDAP, preferring to remain faithful to their own parties, the ZP and the DNVP, despite their having been abolished in mid-1933.

It would thus seem fair to say that membership of the party was almost essential for advancement to ministerial office. But not only that: above all, occupation of senior positions within the party machine—whether by serving as a parliamentary deputy, or by being a national or local NSDAP leader—was the determining factor. Through our analysis of the database, we are in a position to conclude that the majority of ministers who were members of the NSDAP—the equivalent of around 49 per cent of the 33 ministers—joined the party during the 1920s, followed by the eight ministers (24.2 per cent) who joined between 1930 and Hitler's appointment as chancellor.

Of the nine ministers who joined the NSDAP after January 1933, three did so almost as soon as Hitler became chancellor (Werner von Blomberg, Seldte and Karl Doenitz).⁶ The rest waited until January 1937 when, in celebration of the Third Reich's fourth anniversary, Hitler proclaimed that all ministers must be party members at the same time as he presented them with one of the party's highest honours, the gold party badge (*Goldenes Parteiabzeichen*). While the majority accepted this honour, Paul Freiherr Eltz-Rübenach, minister of transport and communications since 1932, refused it (Heinemann 1979: 83–5; Mierzejewski 2000). As a Catholic, Eltz-Rübenach refused to join a party that supported a religious policy that he strongly criticised. As a result of his stance he was dismissed and closely watched by the Gestapo. He and Kurt Schmitt, who had been Hitler's minister of the economy until 30 January 1935, were the only members of Hitler's government who did not join the Nazi Party.

In January 1937, three ministers joined the ranks of the Nazi Party: Franz Gürtner, Von Neurath⁷ and Lutz Graf Schwerin von Krosigk.⁸ From that moment on, acceptance of ministerial office was conditional on party membership. Thus, Eltz-Rübenach's successor at the ministry of transport, Julius Dorpmüller, joined the NSDAP in February 1937 (Gottwaldt 1995); Wilhelm Keitel, chief of the armed forces, joined in 1938; and Franz Schlegelberger, who became minister of justice following Gürtner's death, joined in 1941. Looking at their careers, it is no wonder that these men only joined the party so late on in the life of the Third Reich. They had all watched the Nazi regime's

⁶ Von Blomberg was minister of war from January 1933 to February 1938 (Schaefer 2006); Doenitz was commander of the German submarine fleet and later navy chief-of-staff.

⁷ Von Neurath, 'never considered himself a member of the party; he never paid dues and told friends, even in later years, that he had no reason to join the party' (Heinemann 1979: 84).

⁸ Gürtner served as minister of justice from June 1932 until his death in 1941; Von Neurath was minister of foreign affairs from 1932 to February 1938, when he became minister without portfolio; Von Krosigk was minister of finance from the Von Papen government until the downfall of the Reich.

development from positions of privilege: as ministers (in the case of Gürtner, Von Neurath and Von Krosigk); as holders of important positions within the public administration (in the case of Dorpmüller, who had been president of the national railway company, the Reichsbahn, since June 1926); or, like Schlegelberger, who had been a secretary of state within the ministry of justice since 1932 (Wulff 1991).

Ministerial recruitment in the Third Reich was based on membership of the Nazi Party, particularly on those who had been party members for some time. Generally speaking, the majority of Nazi ministers had already served in political positions, most commonly as parliamentary deputies, and their professional lives centred on occupations related to either the party or to politics. However, what relationship did these men have with Hitler? What was the government's and its ministers' actual place within the Nazi regime? We will attempt to provide an initial response to these questions through an analysis of the way in which the political system in Germany operated from 1933 to 1945, and by examining the development of some of its minister's careers.

The operation of the Nazi regime

According to Broszat (2007) and Frei (2001), there were three stages in the development of the Third Reich. The first, which lasted until Hindenberg's death in August 1934, was marked by some resistance to Hitler by both the conservative parties that were part of the governing coalition, and by President Hindenberg. Following this there was a four-year period until 1937-8, during which the regime was consolidated. During this time, which can be described as 'the good pre-war years', the regime and its leaders had an opportunity to stabilise and consolidate, to bring about the rise of new Germany by achieving economic rehabilitation (Frei 2001: 96-7). From 1938, the Nazi regime began the process of radicalisation, which was pursued through its march to war and the intensification of its policies of racial persecution.

During the period of normalisation and stabilisation, the government was the 'weakest part' of the still-young Nazi regime. In fact, there

were still a large number of conservatives within the government before 1937 who remained important either because of their numbers or as a result of the ministerial positions they occupied. The maintenance of the conservatives in power can be seen as a *modus vivendi* of Hitler's government and some 'key elements of the German economic establishment' (Gorlizki and Mommsen 2009: 73). Since the middle of the 1920s, German law granted ministers a large degree of governmental autonomy, and since Hitler did not abolish this rule ministers retained this autonomy of action after 1933. As Broszat has claimed, the ministers' autonomy actually increased with the dissolution of the Länder and the introduction of the Enabling Act (Broszat 2007: 327). The cabinet saw its importance greatly diminished, being reserved for public rituals, and it ceased to meet definitively on 5 February 1938. The cabinet was seen, both constitutionally and by the party, as an instrument totally subservient to the power of the Führer: that is, not with a power of its own, but only with a figurative role (Gruchmann 1973). Furthermore, from 1933-4, as a consequence of the *Gleichschaltung*, the Führer began to appoint important party figures to head the 'special' organisations. For the most part, these organisations were on the same footing as the ministries, but without their administrative obligations. Since they were positions in the Führer's direct gift, those who were appointed could pursue their policies independently of the government, but with the assistance of the government apparatus. The main characteristic of these organisations was the fact they had the authority to interfere in the minister's area of responsibility, thereby stripping them of authority 'undermining [the] executive's unity and the government's monopoly of authority' (Broszat 2007: 328).

There were several motives for this dispersion of institutions. As Broszat states, these 'leader-retinue-structures' were not only tolerated but they were created by Hitler himself (2007: 276). As a leader, Hitler is often described as lacking interest in the organisation of government. He also avoided personal conflicts and demanded the decisions were already discussed before being presented to him. He willingly granted his deputies the opportunity to create their own power bases, allowing them to establish personal empires, such as those of

Göring and Todt. However, by giving them this freedom he also avoided the need to be called upon to decide on conflicts. Quite often his 'unwillingness to deal head-on with decisions of fundamental importance' led to the creation of even 'more administrative units' as a means of solving problems (Gorlizki and Mommsen 2009: 65-6).

As Ian Kershaw put it, whatever unification and coherence the Nazi regime had, it was achieved through a general notion of 'working towards the Führer' (Kershaw 1997). Thus, each agent or institution could claim to be serving the Führer's will, however subjective this may be. This phenomenon had its origins in the Nazi movement of the late-1920s: the highly decentralised organisation of the party made it necessary to rely on the cult of the leader to keep the party unified. After 1934, this cult of the Führer was reflected in the way the different organisations and institutions developed (Gorlizki and Mommsen 2009: 58-61).

Of the many possibilities that existed to illustrate what have just noted, two cases have been chosen: Fritz Todt and Hermann Göring. Both held many and varied official positions during the Nazi regime, leading institutions that perfectly exemplify the 'polyocracy' of the Third Reich. The choice of these two examples is equally justified by the fact they were both men who also formed part of the Nazi ministerial elite and, as such, are included in the statistics analysed above.

Fritz Todt: 'constructor' of the Third Reich

Todt was appointed inspector-general of German roads (Generallinspektor für das deutsche Strassenwesen) on 30 June 1933. With a doctorate in engineering from the Munich Technical Institute and having been a member of the Nazi Party since 1922, he had always been involved with engineering and civil construction, and from 1933 headed the NSDAP's technical department (Seidler 2000: 39). On being appointed inspector-general of roads, he came to exercise jurisdiction over everything related with construction and road transport in Germany, overlapping the jurisdiction of the ministry of transport, which was headed by the conservative Von Rübenach. In October 1933, Todt successfully managed to ensure that everything that was

related to roads was removed from the remit of the transport ministry and made the responsibility of his department, which was thus transformed into a 'supreme Reich authority' (OR—Oberste Reichsbehörde), although the possibility of its further transformation into a ministry was immediately rejected. The OR had to remain removed from the administrative tasks the ministries undertook, meaning that 'the creation of an administrative apparatus was out of the question' (Seidler 2000: 101). The inspector-general had to have maximum authority over everything in respect of the road system, and for this his position had to remain as independent as possible. At its root, the OR had all the appearances of a ministry, including the authority to make laws. Todt also assumed responsibility for negotiating contracts with private companies, for labour contracts, etc., and was also able to issue extraordinary measures (such as traffic laws and wage regulation). With his position being dependent only upon the Führer's authority, Todt had the means to create all of the conditions necessary for him to achieve his goals.

In 1938, Todt's powers increased again when, as a result of Göring's four-year plan, he was appointed to the position of general delegate for the regulation of the construction sector (Generalbevollmächtigter für die Regelung der Bauwirtschaft) with overall responsibility for the construction of the western defences (Westwall). Todt thus broadened the framework of the project by adding construction management and official control of the workforce. This new organisation, which combined full control of civil construction, involved private firms and controlled the recruitment of labour (which began to be forced), was named the Todt Organisation. When in 1940 he was appointed minister of armaments and munitions, the Todt Organisation became the Third Reich's construction authority: Todt became concerned with military construction, and with the army's engineering units being placed under his control (Seidler 2000: 203–23).

The three positions occupied by Todt (inspector-general of roads, general delegate for the regulation of the construction sector and minister of armaments and munitions) placed the Todt Organisation in a position of unrivalled strength within the Nazi regime. Its uniqueness

rests in the fact that it combined the organisation of private construction companies with the authority of the state and with control over labour. These characteristics relieved the Todt Organisation of all administrative or legal obstacles, giving it a large degree of autonomy, flexibility and efficiency. On the other hand, these same characteristics transformed it into a 'state within the state', on the same footing as the SS, the police and the army: it often escaped the state's administrative control to become a body typical of the 'extraordinary' executive, directly and exclusively responsible to the Führer and on the same level as any ministry (Broszat 2007: 331-2). It is possible that Todt would have risen even higher within the Third Reich had he not died in an aircraft accident in 1942. His successor at the ministry of armaments and munitions was the architect Albert Speer, who remained in that position until the end of the regime.

Hermann Göring

Göring is immediately identified as one of the Nazi regime's leading figures, alongside Hitler and Goebbels. This is fully understandable when we take into account the many important positions he held within the Third Reich.

President of the Reichstag since 1932, on Hitler's appointment as chancellor Göring was appointed Prussia's president minister and minister of the interior, and also minister without portfolio in the Reich government. In May 1933, he became minister of aviation (Reichsminister der Luftfahrt), transforming the existing OR into a ministry (*Reichsgesetzblatt* I: 241). In July 1934, he was called to head the forest and hunting Reich Authority (Reichsjäger und Reichsforstmeister). In 1935 he was promoted to the rank of general following his appointment as supreme commander of the German air force (Luftwaffe).

Nevertheless, despite the great importance of all of these portfolios, which are of themselves representative of the multiplicity of the positions that were concentrated in a single person, the one that truly indicated Göring's important position within the Third Reich was that of plenipotentiary for the four-year plan. The objective of this

plan, which came into force on 18 December 1936, was to make Nazi Germany completely self-reliant in raw materials in order to provide a boost to its war industry (Tooze 2006). The appointment of Göring to this important body gave him almost unlimited power over economic affairs and the authority to issue decrees affecting economic and labour policy. By simultaneously controlling the Luftwaffe, the administration of Prussia and the nation's economic policy (even as the ministers of economy and finances—Schacht and Von Krosigk, respectively—remained in office), Göring became the second most important figure in the Nazi regime.

In addition to its significance for the analysis of Göring's powers, the four-year plan also represented the evolution of the Nazi political system, above all because it represented the end of the phase of stabilisation and coexistence with those conservatives who still remained in power. Until then, Hitler required a 'strong economy in order to ensure the political stability of the regime and to resolve the more immediate social and economic problems'. The four-year plan marked the reversal of these principles. The economy, which was now strong and stable, was to serve the regime's political interests—preparations for war and rearmament—without giving any thought to private interests and without any economic rationalisation. In order to achieve these goals, the Nazi elite could no longer allow the conservatives to continue with their control of the economic instruments: it was essential for the Nazis to take control. The four-year plan can be viewed as the Nazification of the economy, just as the public administration and the police had been Nazified earlier (Overy 2000: 48).

The actual structure of the four-year plan was highly complex. A general council was created that functioned as an internal government for the economy; however, this council never met. The other elements were the result of a mixture of the creation of new institutions and the absorption of some that already existed. In order to overcome the resistance of the conservatives, who still dominated the economic apparatus, Göring decided to appoint men he could trust as four-year plan delegates: members of the Nazi Party, some of whom had also

served as secretaries of state in key ministries. These men included Herbert Backe, secretary of state in the ministry of agriculture and food, who became Göring's loyal agent by undermining the activities of the minister, and Walter Darré, whom he succeeded in May 1942. Another was Friedrich Syrup, who was a secretary of state in Franz Seldte's ministry of labour, and who saw his position as delegate of the four-year plan become more important than that of his minister (Broszat 2007: 372). By capturing these individuals for the plan, Göring managed to infiltrate the state apparatus's economic structure, greatly limiting its activities.

One almost immediate consequence of this superimposition of authority was the dismissal of Hjalmar Schacht from the ministry of the economy in November 1937, and, in January 1939, from the presidency of the Reichsbank, which he had held since 1923. This exit coincided with more changes to the structure of government in February 1938, which included the removal of Von Neurath from the ministry of foreign affairs (he was replaced by Von Ribbentrop), and the substitution of Von Blomberg, who had served as a minister since 1933, by Keitel at the ministry of war.

The year 1938 was marked by another event that defined the character of the Nazi regime: the end of government cabinet meetings. By reducing the frequency of cabinet meetings since January 1933, it is no surprise that it became less important. While during the first months of the regime the cabinet met every two days, by May/June 1933 they had become less frequent. Around 1935, cabinet meetings were held once or twice each month, there then followed intervals of several months during which it met only when it was necessary to approve laws that had already been introduced.

The government met for the last time on 5 February 1938, at which point the cabinet had been reduced to a tool at the service of the Führer. However, this does not mean that Hitler took more responsibility for leading the government; rather, he increasingly distanced himself from it, to such an extent that he transformed the office of the president into a Reich Authority, with Hans-Heinrich

Lammers as head of the Reich Chancellery (with the rank of minister from November 1937). Lammers became the *de facto* head of government, in which position he controlled access to Hitler (Brozgat 2007: 349–54; Frei 2001).

This distancing of Hitler from the governing process was at the root of the dispersal of political decision-making, particularly when we take into account the profusion of different institutions with legislative powers that were superimposed on the ministries that continued to exist.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to provide a political profile of the Nazi ministerial elite. The group of Third Reich ministers were individuals with university-level education, most of whom with law degrees, and with an average age of around 50. Politically, the majority had previously occupied political office, particularly as parliamentary deputies, during both the Weimar Republic and after Hitler's rise to power, which they accumulated with positions within the party apparatus.

The ministerial career, as a consequence of the characteristics inherent to the operation of the Nazi political system, was long and stable. The majority of ministers occupied only one ministerial office, and generally held it for more than eight years. However, the main particularity of the Nazi political system was the overlapping of authority by several institutions, particularly through the establishment of supra-ministerial organisations that were solely responsible to the Führer, and which could undermine the ministers' authority and annul their decisions. Above all, the case of the Third Reich demonstrates the extreme diminution of the power of government, which was achieved by strengthening the Nazi Party's parallel apparatus. In this way, the Nazi Party was transformed into practically the only recruitment source for the ministerial elite, taking control of the government while simultaneously diminishing the relevance of that elite. We saw, in the examples of Fritz Todt and Hermann Göring, how the concentration of power in these special organisations cre-

ated 'states within the state', altering the normal functioning of the decision-making process.

The creation and development of several power centres that competed amongst themselves, profoundly affected the operation of the regime. This 'polyocracy' became stronger after 1938, when the leaders of the more important sectors were reshuffled in the middle of the return to terrorism and violence that was typical of the phase of the Nazi's rise to power. Here we are referring to the removal of Von Blomberg from command of the armed forces, of *Kristallnacht* and of the removal of the conservative Von Neurath from the ministry of foreign affairs and his replacement with the Nazi Von Ribbentrop and the removal of Schacht from the important economic posts he held as minister of the economy and president of the Reichsbank. With these cabinet changes, the Third Reich was ready to embark on its more radical and violent phase, with the escalation of international tensions that resulted in the outbreak of the Second World War.

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