

Definition: **Reichstag** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

German Parliament building. Erected 1884-94, the Reichstag is where the lower legislative assembly of Germany met until 1933, when it was severely damaged in a fire. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, it once again served as the meeting place of Germany's Parliament.

Summary Article: **Reichstag**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(rīkhs'täk) [Ger.,=imperial parliament], name for the diet of the Holy Roman Empire, for the lower chamber of the federal parliament of the North German Confederation, and for the lower chamber of the federal parliament of Germany from 1871 to 1945. Under the German Empire (1871–1918) the Reichstag, which represented the country at large, had little real power; it was mainly a deliberative body. Election was on the basis of universal manhood suffrage.

The Reichstag under the Weimar Constitution

The republican Weimar Constitution of 1919 did not alter the structure of the Reichstag, but it introduced proportional representation and extended voting rights to women. The new Reichstag, however, was not powerless; it was the supreme legislative body of the republic. The states were represented by an upper chamber, the Reichsrat. The jurisdictions of the Reichstag and Reichsrat were limited to matters affecting Germany as a whole; in other matters the member states were sovereign. The Reichsrat had only a power of suspensive veto over legislation approved by the Reichstag.

The federal cabinet, appointed by the president and headed by the chancellor, was responsible to the Reichstag and normally had to resign if it received a vote of no confidence. However, the president of the republic could, on the advice of his cabinet, dissolve the Reichstag and order new elections before the normal term (four years) had ended. After 1930, under President Paul von Hindenburg, the Reichstag was suspended several times at the instigation of successive chancellors, and rule by presidential emergency decree began to replace parliamentary rule.

Hitler and the Reichstag Fire

In Jan., 1933, when Adolf Hitler became chancellor without an absolute majority, the Reichstag was dissolved and new elections were set for Mar. 5; a violent election campaign ensued. On Feb. 27, 1933, a fire destroyed part of the Reichstag building. Hitler immediately accused the Communists of having set the fire. President von Hindenburg proclaimed a state of emergency and issued decrees suspending freedom of speech and assembly. The elections gave a bare majority of seats to Hitler's National Socialists (Nazis; see National Socialism) and their allies, the German Nationalists. Severe measures were taken against the Communist party, and its deputies were barred from the Reichstag.

On Mar. 23 the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act, which gave the government, i.e., Hitler, dictatorial powers. Only the Social Democrats dissented. In the sensational Reichstag fire trial of 1933, a Dutchman named Marinus van der Lubbe was charged with having set the fire as part of a Communist plot. Several Communist leaders, including Georgi Dimitrov, were charged with complicity. Van der Lubbe was sentenced to death; the others were found not guilty. For many years it was assumed outside Germany that the Reichstag fire was carried out by the Nazis themselves as a propaganda

maneuver to ensure the defeat of the Communists and other leftist parties in the elections. However, later evidence indicated that Van der Lubbe alone set the fire, and that Hitler merely used it as a pretext to launch a campaign against the Communists. During Hitler's rule, the Reichstag was merely summoned from time to time to approve important government measures. The Reichsrat was abolished in 1934, along with sovereignty of the German states.

The Reichstag since World War II

After World War II the new constitutions (1949) of West Germany and East Germany replaced the Reichstag and Reichsrat with other legislative bodies. The Reichstag building in Berlin was redone in the 1960s, deemphasizing most of its former grandeur. After German reunification, a restored, redesigned, and largely rebuilt glass-domed renovation of the building, designed by British architect Lord Norman Foster, was reopened in 1999 to house the German parliament.

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