

NATIONAL SOCIALIST GERMANY

PREFACE The inability to ensure economic security and political stability soured German support for democracy. The constant squabbling of more than thirty political parties led many Germans to long for the good old prewar days of authority and order. The traditional elites—the army and naval officers, the upper-level civil servants, the judges, the clergy, the industrialists, the university professors—all treated the republic with contempt throughout its brief, turbulent life. The republic, an orphan of defeat, had been born into a cruel world. It was so tainted with bastardy that no official celebrations marked its anniversaries. The German people saved their parades and fireworks for 18 January, the day that Bismarck had founded the Second Reich in 1871. And each year, on 28 June, they hung out black bunting to mourn the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. Thus, they nurtured their myths and hatreds.

Germans took no pride in their democracy, which to them meant indecision, pusillanimity, and national humiliation. The German path to glory had been built, as Bismarck recognized, on blood and iron, not representative assemblies. The Wilhelmian period showed that free institutions were not necessary for prosperity and security. To Germany, the great theme of the modern age was the intensification of the power of the community over the individual, not that of the individual over the government. The mobilization achieved during World War I was a triumph of this spirit, just as the defeat was its undoing. The Germans had been psychologically devastated; now, presented with new and unwelcome burdens, they turned to those who promised a return to past greatness.

The growth of the National Socialist movement was part of this search, but the party itself remained on the fringe of the antidemocratic movement until it was able to profit from the chaos of the Great Depression. Then, the Germans, threatened with the loss of their livelihood for the second

time in less than ten years, turned on the Weimar Republic with savage hatred. In the elections of 1930 and 1932, the Nazis received more popular votes from a wider range of people, classes, and districts than any other party in the history of the Weimar Republic.¹ Large sections of the middle and lower-middle classes and the peasantry completely abandoned democracy and became converts to Nazism.² Women voted for the Nazis in almost equal numbers as the men. German society in the 1920s was quite traditional, despite the women's movement associated with such large cities as Berlin. Therefore much of the support that Hitler received from women came precisely because of his blatant antifeminism.³

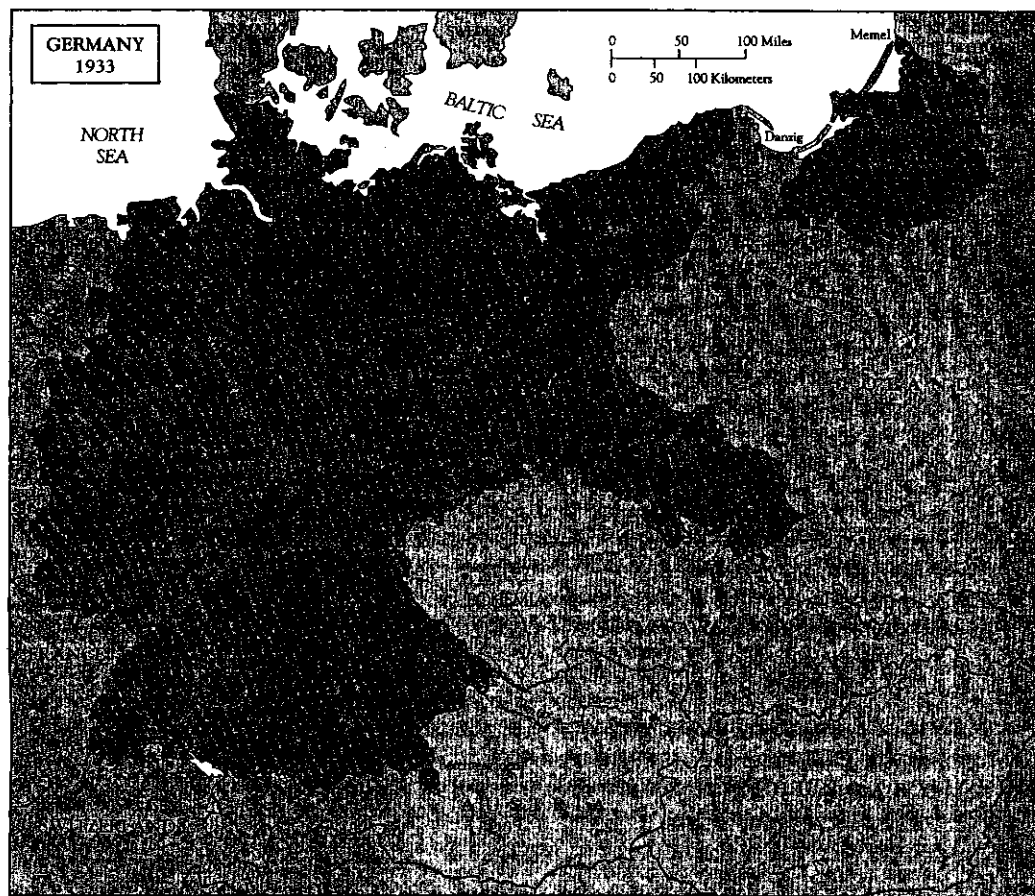
The Nazi system exuberantly exploited the widespread frustration with the new democratic system. Hitler was a consummate demagogue who was able to convince people that his party had viable solutions to pressing problems and that he had a positive program for national regeneration. He successfully presented the Nazi party as the true heir of Frederick the Great and Bismarck. Hitler knew the prejudices of his constituents and became an active expression of their general will. He spoke openly of his willingness to curtail civil liberties. But by then, to many Germans, democracy did not seem as important as adequate food and heat.

Hitler appealed to the sympathies of people from both the political Right and Left by synthesizing the two great movements of modern times: nationalism and socialism. He did not direct his appeal to one class or to one part of society. In taking a position above the class structure, he was akin to Mussolini who also was able to unite many disparate groups in one mass movement committed to the cause of rebirth and greatness. Both men also exploited the political circumstances at hand, coming to power when their respective democratic systems were about to collapse. But their success was not inevitable. Both had organized their movements to take advantage of the prevailing crises, but neither could have had a chance to rule without the support of the traditional ruling classes which saw in Hitler and Mussolini a means to preserve their own prerogatives. But although Hitler and Mussolini used the old ruling classes to gain power, neither intended to let these groups rule. Once the dictators seized the reins of power, they surrendered them to no one and proceeded to drive the state toward their own destinations.

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The Fall of German Democracy

The End of the Weimar Republic. On 28 March 1930, President Hindenburg asked centrist leader Heinrich Brüning to form a new government to replace the republican coalition headed by Hermann Müller. Brüning, a leader of the right wing of his party, was the personal choice of General Kurt von Schleicher, the



Map 7

head of the political department of the Reichswehr. Schleicher was a friend of the Rhenish-Westphalian industrialists whose opposition to democracy was well known. Schleicher saw Müller's fall as an occasion to break the power of the Social Democratic party, which he and his friends loathed for its constant opposition to German rearmament.⁴ The new government represented only a rightist minority in the Reichstag, but could rely on the personal backing of Hindenburg, who was prepared to buttress its authority with the threat of dissolution and the use of emergency powers under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution.

Brüning's government pretended to be above special interests, but it was intimately concerned with the welfare of the Junker landowners. Ostensibly, its agricultural policy aimed at protecting all German farmers against the collapse of world food prices, but the special subsidies for refinancing agricultural debts and the new tariffs against foreign competition particularly favored the inefficient es-

tates of East Prussia. The eastern aid program (*Osthilfe*) established a special protective tariff on rye, which enabled the Junker farmers to charge the consumer *schwarzbrot* and pumpnickel twice the world market price.

The government's financial program was deflationary: Brüning proposed cut government expenditures and increasing taxes. He intended to dock 2.5 per cent from the wages of government officials as national assistance (*Reichshilfe*) to reduce unemployment payments. He enacted his budget by decree.

The September elections gave the political extremes an opportunity to demonstrate their power.⁵ Although the democratic parties still held a majority, no parliamentary government had virtually ceased to exist. Brüning routinely used emergency powers under Article 48. His program to cut social security expenditures backed the Social Democrats to the wall. They feared the disastrous consequences of overthrowing the government and watched in horror while the entire process for which they had fought since the birth of the republic was reduced to naught. But the Communists were delighted, and the Nazis flourished.

Brüning's spartan measures only exacerbated the political crisis. He cut and reduced wages, curtailed social services, and introduced price controls, hoping to outlast the depression. The remnants of the old Weimar coalition were reluctant to overturn his emergency decrees for fear of worsening the crisis. The president's willingness to support Brüning still provided a measure of stability, but Hindenburg's term of office was due to expire in the spring of 1932. Brüning felt only Hindenburg had the mass appeal sufficient to preserve the republic and persuaded him to run again to save Germany from civil war.

The election of 1932 was bitterly contested. The National Socialists carried a vicious smear campaign against Hindenburg. Nazi leader Adolf Hitler staged public rallies, sometimes giving three major speeches a day. The results of the March polling gave Hindenburg a plurality of the votes, but not the absolute majority he needed for election.⁶ In the runoff election, held on 10 April, Hindenburg won sufficiently, but not impressively.⁷ The presidential election revealed that a great many Germans were disgusted with their democratic system. Brüning returned to the chancellery, but with diminished authority. He proposed a new land resettlement scheme for eastern Prussia in May 1932, but encountered the universal opposition of the large landowners who protested directly to Hindenburg that such expropriation would take away the ancestral land of some of Prussia's oldest and most distinguished families and would undermine the will of the farmer to defend the soil against foreign invaders. They convinced the feeble old marshal that Brüning had been responsible for tarnishing his reputation in the recent election. On 29 May, Hindenburg announced his intention to reconstitute the cabinet. Brüning resigned.

A Back Room Intrigue. During its last eight months, the Weimar Republic was run by a coalition of antidemocratic aristocrats, who acted in the interests of the traditional ruling class. On 1 June 1932, Franz von Papen, a former member of the Catholic Center party who had recently joined forces with the Nazis, replaced Heinrich Brüning as chancellor and formed a cabinet "of independent men"; four of its members were barons, another was a count, and Papen had served in socially respectable regiments, like the Potsdam Guards or the Prussian Dragoons. No German government since the war had had less experience and received less support from the parties in the Reichstag. This hardly mattered for Papen's goal was to destroy German democracy once and for all and to r

it with an authoritarian government. His first major act was to smash the Social Democrat-controlled government in Prussia.⁸

Acting on the pretext that the Social Democrats had failed to guarantee public order, he used his emergency powers to oust their leaders from office and, on 20 July, appointed a Reich commissioner in their place. The Social Democrats protested, but had no significant allies who could help them counter the action. The Nazis had heavily infiltrated the police, and the labor unions were too divided to call a general strike. In fact, the Communists rejoiced at Papen's coup, seeing it as the beginning of a general collapse that they thought would bring them to power. This was not the first time the Communists had actively worked against the republic. In 1925, they had gratuitously helped to split the working-class vote, thereby ensuring the election of Hindenburg. In 1930, they combined with the Nazis to attack the Social Democrats, the only major party that was genuinely interested in preserving German democracy.

Papen tried to increase his popular support and set new elections for 31 July. But the strategy backfired. Adolf Hitler fought a furious campaign and managed to capture 230 of the 608 seats in the Reichstag—his was the largest party delegation. The Nazi popular vote, combined with the total votes for all the anti-democratic parties of both the Right and the Left, showed that more Germans had voted against the Weimar Republic than had voted for it.⁹ The two antidemocratic parties, the Nazis and the Communists, controlled 52 percent of the seats in parliament.

The Nazis were the most virulent manifestation of a larger antidemocratic movement that included the Communists, the Nationalists, and a sizable group of Catholic Centrists. The traditional monarchist opposition to democracy had been replaced by a more savage threat manifested in the countless right-wing organizations that followed the breakup of the Freikorps movement. The largest, and most dangerous, of the older veterans' organizations was the *Stahlhelm* (Steel Helmet), which issued a "declaration of hate" against the Weimar Republic in 1928. From time to time, the *Stahlhelm* formed alliances with the Nazi party and the Nationalist party. Alfred Hugenberg, the leader of the Nationalists, helped form the antidemocratic cabal that helped Hitler become chancellor. But many "ordinary" Germans also never accepted the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic. The republic had failed badly to dramatize the importance of free institutions and to embody national honor. Regional animosities and the mounting forces of separatism also enabled the Nazis to lay claim to the heritage of Bismarck.

While the political situation remained more confused than ever, the economy did experience some improvement. The recession hit bottom in August 1932. According to the official statistics, unemployment peaked at 6,192,000, but this figure was probably understated by about 15 to 20 percent, and vast numbers of workers could find only part-time employment. Threatened by the loss of their livelihood, disgusted with the cowardice of the Weimar regime, large sections of the middle class and the peasantry, who had tolerated the republic during its period of prosperity, were willing converts to Nazism. Many of those who supported Hitler did not regard him as the embodiment of destructive nihilism, no matter how fanatical his oratory or his street tactics. They viewed him chiefly as a forceful spokesman for moral and national regeneration. Hitler concentrated on uniting other like-minded political groups under his leadership and on seeking financial and political support from powerful interest groups, like the Rhineland industrialists. He had left no doubt about his intention to establish a one-party state. There was nothing unconstitutional about such a goal. The Weimar Constitution

contained no articles forbidding the destruction of the democratic republican system, providing the job was done legally. The constitution also made no mention of political parties and gave them no specific protection.¹⁰

Papen reacted by trying to entice Hitler into joining his ministry by offering him the post of vice-chancellor. He believed that the Nazi party "could be neutralized" by being saddled "with its full share of public responsibility."¹¹ But Hitler refused to serve in a cabinet he could not control. Parliamentary government of any sort became impossible, and Papen again dissolved the chamber and called for new elections. In the voting of 6 November, the Nazis lost some strength, but still had the largest delegation, while the Communists managed modest gains. Lacking the strength to form a viable government, Papen resigned. His place was taken by General Kurt von Schleicher, the army's political expert and an intimate of President Hindenburg.

Schleicher, who heretofore had been playing politics behind the scenes, had been the architect of the policy of negotiating with the Nazis to get their support for a presidential government. But as chancellor he had no more luck than Papen in these negotiations. The Nazis still refused to cooperate, and Schleicher's attempt to form a "labor axis" government with the Catholic Center party and the Social Democrats failed because the Social Democrats had difficulty believing in Schleicher's good faith. Schleicher also came up empty-handed when he tried to split the Nazi party by bringing Gregor Strasser, the leader of the party's left wing, into his cabinet. Strasser left the Nazi party under a cloud. At the end of January 1933, Schleicher confessed that he had failed to neutralize the Nazis or form a viable parliamentary coalition, and he requested that President Hindenburg grant him special powers to establish an emergency dictatorship. Hindenburg refused and Schleicher resigned.

The stage was set for Papen's scheme to control the Nazis by taking them into an alliance with the traditional Right. Papen touted Hitler as the man who could save Germany from Bolshevism and civil war, and, on 30 January, Hindenburg appointed Hitler head of the government.¹² Since Hitler did not have the necessary majority, he became head of a presidential cabinet like his three predecessors. This meant he could stay in office as long as he managed to avoid a vote of no confidence. Hindenburg was not particularly enthusiastic about this political upstart, but Hitler seemed the candidate most likely to garner the necessary support for a conservative cabinet, thereby ending the use of Article 48 and returning to normal constitutional government. He had the parliamentary strength and mass support that Papen and others like him lacked. Papen, who became vice-chancellor, believed that his special relationship with Hindenburg would make him the real head of the government. He was confident Hitler could be controlled and even boasted to one of his aides that in two months Hitler would be pushed into a corner so hard that he would be squealing. But Hitler was the sort of political leader they little understood. Whereas the conservatives merely wanted to destroy the power of the Left and curb democracy, Hitler wanted to effect a fundamental restructuring of the relationship between the individual and the state, in much the same way as he had already organized the Nazi party itself.

Profile:

The last chancellor of the Weimar Republic was born on 20 April 1889 in the small, provincial Austrian border town of Braunau on the river Inn. His father, Alois Hitler, was a minor customs official of the Habsburg civil service. His mother

was Klara Pözl, a domestic servant, who was also her husband's niece-in-law and was twenty-three years his junior. (It is not known whether they were in any way blood relatives.) She was Alois's third wife, and Adolf was the third child of their marriage. Alois was demanding and tyrannical, obsequious to the outside world, but frequently violent at home, often beating his wife and children and kicking the dog. He was also stingy but did provide for his family's creature comforts. Alois had been born out of wedlock, and until he was legitimized in 1876, thirteen years before his son's birth, he had gone by his mother's family name of Schicklgruber. Although the future dictator was sometimes derisively referred to by this matronymic, his legal name was always Hitler.¹³

Intimidated by his father, Adolf became extraordinarily close to his mother. All his life he carried her picture with him. When he became chancellor, he always kept a portrait of her hanging over his bed in his official residences. Yet his strong attachment was not without hostility, prompted in part by her docility in not standing up to her husband. Adolf began his formal education in 1895, the year of his father's retirement. He started well enough, but by his twelfth year, when the family moved to Linz, his performance began to decline. His father's death in 1903 came as a relief; he remembered the years immediately following as the happiest of his life. Freed of this parental authority, he assumed the role of a gentleman dandy, deliberately undermining his father's plans to have him prepare for the life of a civil servant. His studies continued to flag, and in 1905, at the age of sixteen, he abandoned school altogether, probably at official insistence.

For the next two years, Hitler hung around Linz, dabbling in the arts. He haphazardly wrote poetry and dreamed about achieving the architectural transformation of Linz—his enthusiasm for construction would later develop into a mania. He displayed the aptitude of a decent Sunday painter, but was incapable of the discipline necessary to develop his talents. He reacted to an unappreciative society by withdrawing and brooding about his destiny in the manner of a nineteenth-century romantic. He lacked any capacity for self-criticism and seemed unlikely to pursue any course of action long enough to succeed. As long as he remained in the provinces, his moody, aristocratic pose had some success, but all this changed when he moved to Vienna in 1907 during his eighteenth year.

Life in the Austrian capital was more cosmopolitan, but also more lonely and frustrating. Hitler applied to the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts but was rejected. He tried again a year later and was turned down a second time. Between the two examinations, he had characteristically done nothing to improve his chances. As usual, he blamed his failure on others. Without a secondary school diploma and with no vocational training, Hitler had to rely on his orphan's pension and a small inheritance to keep from falling to the lowest level of proletarian existence. Although he was never destitute, he later exaggerated his poverty, claiming that he had never had enough to eat: "Hunger was then my faithful bodyguard; he never left me for a moment and partook of all I had, share and share alike."¹⁴ Hitler included this typical revelation of the misery of his early life in an explanation to the Austrian authorities of why he had failed to register for military service. From 1910 to 1913, Hitler performed various odd jobs: beating carpets, serving as a red cap at the railroad station, and painting small watercolors for sale at fairs and beer halls. He hated his frugal life and, in frustration, denounced the Habsburgs, the Roman Catholic clergy, the Social Democrats, and, especially, the Jews whom he believed were masterminding a worldwide conspiracy to subjugate the Teutonic or, as he called it, the Aryan race.

The Führer's anti-Semitism developed from the small town provincial milieu in which he was raised. In such a conservative society, Jews were regarded as

outsiders and, although tolerated, were considered an affront to Christianity because of their role in the crucifixion of Christ. But Hitler's antipathy went much farther and became bound up with his feelings of inadequacy and his search for personal identity. To him Jews became a satanic presence on which he projected the faults of society.¹⁵ He blamed them for pornography, prostitution, psychiatry, treason, incest, Marxism, decadence in art, disease, economic exploitation, and the collapse of society. "Once," he wrote, "as I was strolling through the Inner City, I suddenly encountered an apparition in a black caftan and black hair locks. Is this a Jew? was my first thought. For to be sure, they had not looked like that in Linz. I observed the man furtively and cautiously, but the longer I stared at this foreign face, scrutinizing feature for feature, the more my first question assumed a new form: Is this a German?"¹⁶ For Hitler, mere difference became a rationale for removal.

Hitler moved to Munich in 1913. His life-style here was hardly better than in Vienna, but he rejoiced at living in a "truly" German city. He claimed that he had been revolted by Vienna's conglomeration of races: "this whole mixture of Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Serbs, and Croats, and everywhere, the eternal mushroom of humanity—Jews and more Jews." The city had seemed to him "the embodiment of racial desecration."¹⁷

Hitler probably would have finished his days a total nonentity had it not been for World War I. He volunteered for a Bavarian regiment and was sent to the Western Front as a dispatch runner. There he participated in such battles as Ypres, the Somme, Arras, and Passchendaele and was promoted to lance corporal.¹⁸ He received the Iron Cross second and first class—an unusual recognition of bravery for an enlisted man in the imperial army. In October 1918, he was temporarily blinded in a British gas attack and was still in a military hospital when the Armistice was signed. War had been his great adventure, an experience that had given his life a sense of purpose—"a release from the painful feelings of my youth." He wrote that he had thanked Heaven for granting him the good fortune "of being permitted to live at this time."¹⁹ When he heard the news of the defeat, he threw himself on his bunk, buried his head in his pillow, and cried. It was, he said, only the second time in his life he had shed tears, the first occasion being his mother's funeral.

Unwilling to believe that Germany had been defeated on the battlefield, he zealously endorsed the nationalistic myth that held that domestic traitors—the Social Democrats, Communists, and Jews—had stabbed the army in the back. These "November criminals" were synonymous with everything Hitler despise: democracy, international cooperation, and peace. With demobilization, he found employment in the political department of the District Military Command, which in early autumn 1919, assigned him the task of investigating the German Workers' party. Like countless other political groups, this recently formed political organization had grown out of the prevailing political chaos and discontent. Hitler had come a member of the party's central committee and ultimately its leader. Within a decade he would build this small collection of malcontents into German Workers' party. In the critical early days, he was helped by Captain Ernst Röhm, a District Command staff officer, who swelled the party's ranks with army veterans who were used to create the nucleus of a party army, the Storm Troops (*Sturmabteilung* or the SA), known as the Brownshirts from their uniforms.

Hitler had a genius for demagoguery. He appealed to racists and nationalists demanding the destruction of the Treaty of Versailles, the unification of all Germans into one state, and the disfranchisement of the Jews. He convinced of like-minded political groups to accept his leadership and solicited financial