

Why did parliamentary government decline in Germany 1930–3 and why was Hitler appointed Chancellor in January 1933?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

We now come to the last part of our study of the key years 1929–33 that led to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. We have seen how, mainly owing to the influence of the Depression, the Nazis had become the largest party in the Reichstag. However, 37 per cent of the vote was not sufficient in itself for Hitler to become Chancellor. He either had to obtain a majority in the Reichstag, or, more likely, he had to persuade President Hindenburg to appoint him.

In this chapter, we focus on what was happening in the Reichstag and within governing circles. We look at the problems facing the parliamentary system, and how the elite increasingly looked to establish a more authoritarian regime. This will enable you to decide whether effective parliamentary government was over before Hitler was appointed. Was Hitler indeed more the beneficiary than the cause of the Weimar Regime's failure?

It is important to avoid the assumption that Hitler's appointment as Chancellor was inevitable. In these years there were various ways in which German politics and government could have developed, as you can see in Chart 8A.

ACTIVITY

Before you begin this chapter in detail, think yourself into the political situation in 1930. Consider each of the four outcomes at the bottom of Chart 8A. List the reasons for and against each outcome taking place.

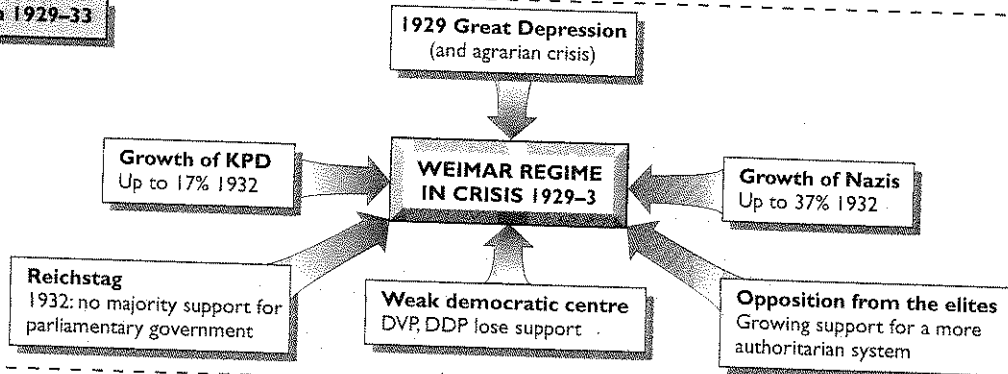
- Why did parliamentary government decline after 1930? (pp. 132–5)
- Brüning: potential saviour or destroyer of Weimar democracy? (pp. 136–7)
- Was Hitler's rise to power inevitable? (pp. 138–41)
- Why was Hitler appointed Chancellor in January 1933? (pp. 142–44)
- Review: Why did parliamentary government decline in Germany 1930–3 and why was Hitler appointed Chancellor in January 1933? (pp. 145–50)

8A The Weimar regime in crisis

Long-term problems

- Germany's authoritarian tradition
- Nature of the Weimar regime
 - Limited nature of 1918 Revolution
 - Proportional representation
 - Article 48
- The Versailles Treaty
 - Territorial losses
 - Reparations
 - Disarmament
 - Allied occupation
- Opposition from left and right
 - Revolts 1919–23
 - Armed opposition died away 1924–8, but potential still there
 - Elites increasingly hostile

Problems in 1929–33



Possible outcomes

Communist state

Continuation of
parliamentary democracy

More authoritarian system,
e.g. a restored monarchy

Nazi dictatorship

A Why did parliamentary government decline after 1930?

You are now entering a danger zone. Not only was this a hazardous period for the Weimar regime, but it is also one that has seen many a history student become confused. You have already seen how, in the 1924 and 1928 elections, parties loyal to the Weimar system did well. These elections produced a series of coalition governments that managed to get their legislation passed by the Reichstag. Potentially the strongest of these was the 'grand coalition' government led by the Socialist Hermann Müller that took office in 1928. However, even before the Depression, there were worrying signs for the parliamentary system. President Hindenburg and his associates were discussing a more authoritarian system to 'put an end to the impotence [powerlessness] of politics'. This new form of government would not negotiate with parties in the Reichstag, but instead would rely on using Article 48 to issue decrees and would threaten DISSOLUTION of the Reichstag if it opposed the government.

So let us first try to establish a clear, basic view of the period and then look at the detailed chronology of the changes in government.

This period saw the gradual decline of democracy, as Germany moved from parliamentary government to presidential government, and then to dictatorship under Hitler. Article 48 of the constitution, giving the President powers to issue decrees, had been intended to be used only in an emergency, to defend the regime against potential enemies. After 1930 it was increasingly used to sustain governments that were unable to get their legislation through the Reichstag.

The prospect of parliamentary government surviving was further weakened by the Reichstag elections of 1932. In both July and November the majority of voters supported the two extremist parties who were hostile to the parliamentary regime.

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Explain the difference between parliamentary and presidential government.
- 2 Explain how presidential government came to replace parliamentary government in 1930-2.

8B The decline of parliamentary government

Parliamentary Government 1928-30

Müller led a coalition government with majority support in the Reichstag.

Presidential Government, 1930-3

Hindenburg dismissed Müller. He was succeeded by a series of Chancellors (Brüning, Papen, Schleicher) who had little support in the Reichstag and depended upon President Hindenburg for support and to issue decrees. There was a growing move to change the Weimar system, by reducing the power of parliament and establishing a more authoritarian government.

Dictatorship

In 1933 Hindenburg appointed Hitler, leader of the largest party, as Chancellor. Within a year he set up a dictatorship.

SOURCE 8.1 The role of the Reichstag and the President 1930-2

	1930	1931	1932
Presidential decree laws	5	44	66
Reichstag laws	98	34	5
Reichstag days sitting	94	42	13

Chart 8C introduces you to five of the most important politicians in 1930-2.



Herman Müller



Heinrich Brüning



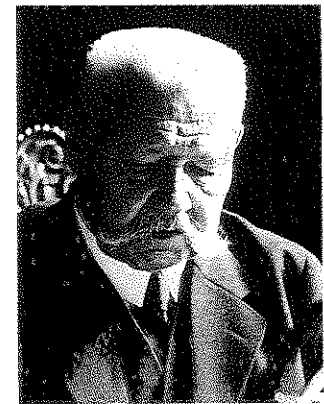
Franz von Papen



Kurt von Schleicher

Paul von Hindenburg, 1847–1934

A somewhat reluctant President, Hindenburg played a key role, through his appointment of Chancellors and the use of Article 48. Having refused to appoint Hitler after his election success of July 1932, he reluctantly did so in January 1933. Hindenburg was the last potential obstacle to Hitler as dictator, but died in 1934.



Paul von Hindenburg

Hermann Müller, 1876–1931

As Foreign Minister, Müller signed the Treaty of Versailles for Germany in 1919. He was briefly Chancellor after the Kapp Putsch in 1920 and from that year onwards was leader of his party, the SPD. In May 1928 he became Chancellor for the second time and formed a grand coalition government ranging from the SPD to the DVP. It failed to agree on how to fund the rising unemployment payments brought about by the Depression. When President Hindenburg refused to support him, he resigned in 1930. His was the last genuine parliamentary government. He died within a year of leaving office.

Heinrich Brüning, 1885–1970

The son of a Catholic merchant, Brüning became a teacher and from 1915 to 1918 served as an infantry officer. In 1924 he was elected to the Reichstag and became the Centre Party's Reichstag leader in 1929. He was appointed Chancellor in 1930. In July 1930, in order to win Reichstag support, he called a new election which led to major gains for extremists. He failed to take action to reduce the impact of the Depression, and his austerity programme earned him the nickname of the 'Hunger Chancellor'. He was forced to resign when he lost the confidence of Hindenburg over plans to divide up bankrupt estates in east Germany. He emigrated in 1934 and settled in the USA. See also pages 136–7.

Franz von Papen, 1879–1969

Born into a Catholic noble family, Papen married the daughter of a Saar industrialist. He became a cavalry officer. In 1921 he was elected as a Centre Party candidate to the Prussian LANDTAG. He was chairman of the conservative newspaper *Germania*. At heart, Papen remained a monarchist. A friend of Hindenburg, he had limited political experience but was asked to be Chancellor in 1932. After his dismissal, he intrigued with Hitler to replace Schleicher. In January 1933 he was appointed Vice-Chancellor. He resigned in July 1934, becoming ambassador to Austria, then Turkey. He was tried at Nuremberg (see page 426) but acquitted. In 1947 a German denazification court sentenced him to eight years in a labour camp, but he was released in 1949.

Kurt von Schleicher, 1882–1934

From a noble family, he became an officer in Hindenburg's regiment. General Schleicher considered the army the true embodiment of the nation, far more so than the new Weimar Republic. He became a confidant of Hindenburg and his son. Between 1919 and 1932 he held various posts, linking the army and governments. He also cultivated links with key individuals, wanting to make the army the centre of power. This upset other generals, such as Blomberg, who wanted the army to have a lesser political role. Schleicher was responsible for getting Hindenburg to appoint Brüning, then Papen and then, reluctantly, himself as Chancellor. By 1932, worried about the power of the Nazis and the danger of civil war, he tried to tame them by including them in government. He was murdered by the Nazis in the Night of the Long Knives, 1934 (see page 173).

By the time of his re-election as President in 1932, Hindenburg was 85. How might that have affected developments in 1932–3?

■ Learning trouble spot

The Brüning, Papen and Schleicher governments

In many ways it is more important to grasp the overall nature of the period than to get bogged down in detail. The three chancellorships had a lot in common: all were looking to reorder the Weimar parliamentary system into a more authoritarian form of government. The key differences between the various governments can be summarised as follows:

- Brüning was probably more prepared to accept a greater role for the Reichstag than Papen or Schleicher. He tried to work with the Reichstag but found this increasingly difficult. Brüning included trade union leader Adam Stegerwald in his government and planned agrarian reforms, yet his austere (harsh/severe) policies and inability to inspire the masses meant he was unpopular and his agrarian reforms upset some in the elite. His position was also weakened by his hostility to co-operation with the Nazis.
- Papen was the most hostile to the Reichstag. His 'government of barons' had no real chance of getting Reichstag support on any positive basis.
- General Schleicher was a complex character. He considered Papen's approach was too narrow and that it risked civil war, which as a general he was concerned to avoid. He described himself as a 'socially minded general' and tried to create a broader based government through links with trade unions and the more socialist wing of the Nazis. This failed and, like Brüning, his preparedness to consider agrarian reform upset the elite.

■ Learning trouble spot

Papen's coup against the Prussian state government

This event often causes confusion, and many students decide not to bother about it as it seems unimportant. All historians have to decide which events are significant, so why not discard this complex one? However, it was not only important in its own right but it also illustrates much about the Weimar Republic.

Firstly, it reminds us that the new Weimar Republic remained a federal state. Prussia was by far the most important state government. Since 1919 it had been run by an SPD-Z coalition which had acted effectively to reform the state. This has been seen as an example of what could have happened nationally if parties had co-operated. However, in 1932, under the impact of the Depression, the SPD-Z lost its majority in the Prussian Assembly, continuing as a caretaker government. During this period there were political fights in the streets of Berlin. Papen used this decline of law and order to intervene under Article 48 to depose the state government and put it under federal control. A parliamentary system was thus replaced by an authoritarian government. This shows how Article 48, designed to protect democracy, could be used to replace it. Furthermore, Papen's coup was a massive blow to the morale of the Left. The SPD lost its last stronghold without resisting. The deposed Prussian government stuck to the course of legality and just appealed to the courts. It was intimidated by the threat of the Reichswehr and refused to organise mass protest, since high unemployment weakened the prospects for a general strike as had happened in 1920 against the Kapp Putsch.

When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933 he inherited control of the Prussian state and used the precedent of Papen's actions to overthrow other state governments. Once again, the Left did not resist. Papen's coup has thus been seen as a mortal blow to the Weimar regime.

ACTIVITY

- 1 For each government between 1928 and 1933, list:
 - a) how it came to power
 - b) its main policies and actions
 - c) the reasons for its fall.
- 2 How did German voters harm the prospects for parliamentary government? (Source 3.2 on page 63 will also help you answer this question.)

ACTIVITY

Study Chart 8D. Match each of the descriptions below to the correct Chancellor.

- 1 He was lucky to be appointed, since his support was falling. However, he did have a good chance of getting support in the Reichstag. Appointed through intrigue amongst the elite, he was underestimated.
- 2 The scheme behind his government was too ingenious in attempting to attract support from the Nazi and socialist Left, whilst also being concerned to buttress the elite. He became a victim of intrigue amongst the elite.
- 3 His was the last genuinely parliamentary government. This illustrates the key role of the Depression and shows Hindenburg's hostility to the SPD.
- 4 His two-year chancellorship marked a decisive shift away from parliamentary government. Eventually, some major improvements were seen, but he lost the support of the elites. A victim of intrigue, both his appointment and his fall show the key role of Hindenburg.
- 5 His chancellorship was a blatant attempt at authoritarian government with no hope of Reichstag support. He enacted a major blow against the SPD yet made concessions to the Nazis. A victim of intrigue amongst the elite.

1928–30 MÜLLER'S GOVERNMENT

1 March 1930: the fall of Müller's government

Once Müller's SPD-led coalition had got the Young Plan through the Reichstag, Hindenburg began looking to replace him as Chancellor. The government was divided over measures to deal with the slump, particularly over whether to

increase unemployment contributions (from 3 to 3.5 per cent) to fund the increased numbers needing relief. The SPD argued employers as well as workers should bear some of the extra costs; the DVP argued relief benefits should be cut. In March 1930 Müller resigned when President Hindenburg refused to

use Article 48 to support his government.

This was to be the last coalition government with a working majority in the Reichstag. It marks the effective end of parliamentary government.

1930–2 BRÜNING'S GOVERNMENT

2 The appointment of Brüning as Chancellor

In March 1930 Hindenburg, on General Schleicher's advice, appointed Heinrich Brüning, a prominent member of the Centre Party, as Chancellor. He formed a government from the centre-right, but one without a majority in the Reichstag.

In July, the Reichstag rejected the government's finance bill. Instead of trying to compromise to win parliamentary support, Brüning had the bill issued by Article 48. The Reichstag demanded its withdrawal. Brüning then persuaded Hindenburg, unwisely as it turned out, to dissolve the Reichstag in the hope of gaining more support in a new Reichstag.

3 September 1930: Reichstag election

In the new election the Nazis caused a shock by making major gains. The increase in deputies from extremist parties (Nazis 107, KPD 77) harmed the effective working of the Reichstag.

Any government would find it hard to get a majority in the Reichstag. Frightened foreigners withdrew 800 million marks in investment funds.

4 Brüning's government struggles on

Despite the election setback, the Brüning government survived. It relied on presidential decrees, rather than the Reichstag. The SPD tolerated Brüning's government for fear of another election and further gains by extremists. As they said, 'Anything but Hitler.'

Brüning tried to use the worsening economic situation to get reparations ended, and to reorder the Weimar welfare state. He took little action to reduce the impact of the slump that was causing a massive rise in unemployment. In 1932 after the suspension of reparations, he belatedly began modest reflation via public works and land reforms. In April 1932 Brüning banned the SA in an attempt to reduce street violence.

5 March–April 1932: the presidential election

In the scheduled presidential election, Hindenburg, now supported by the moderate Left and Centre, defeated Hitler. Hitler gained 37 per cent of the vote. The rise in the Nazi vote led some to believe that the Nazi Party must be included in government.

6 The fall of Brüning's government

General Schleicher, who had supported Brüning's appointment in 1930, now turned against him. He felt that Brüning's opposition to the Nazis was wrong and that some co-operation was needed. Brüning's proposals to break up bankrupt Prussian estates finally persuaded Hindenburg to dismiss him in May 1932. Brüning was not dismissed after losing a confidence vote in the Reichstag, but merely because Hindenburg had turned against him.

MAY–DEC 1932 PAPEN'S GOVERNMENT

7 The formation of Papen's government

In May 1932, Schleicher persuaded Hindenburg to ask Franz von Papen to form a non-party government of 'national concentration'. It consisted of the elite, or 'barons'. The government did not contain any members of the Reichstag; it was seen as a presidential government. Papen hoped to gain support from the Nazis to help sustain his government.

8 July 1932: Papen's coup against Prussia

In June, Papen lifted the ban on the SA. Next month he used emergency powers to depose the Socialist-led coalition government in Prussia. This was a further blow to democracy in Germany. The Reich Chancellor became Prussian Minister-President, with a Reich Commissioner as Prussian Interior Minister. Papen also agreed to Hitler's demand to call for new elections.

9 July 1932: Reichstag election

With deadlock in the Reichstag, Hindenburg agreed to dissolve it and hold an election. The results were a disaster for the Weimar regime. Extremists made further major gains. The Nazis and Communists won over half of the Reichstag seats.

10 Hitler demands to be made Chancellor, August 1932

After his party's success in the Reichstag election, Hitler, with 37 per cent of the vote, demanded that Hindenburg should make him Chancellor, with an Enabling Act allowing him to issue decrees. Hindenburg, who disliked the upstart 'Bohemian corporal', bluntly refused. (Hindenburg had apparently been misinformed that Hitler came from Bohemia, part of Czechoslovakia since 1919, not Austria. But Hitler had only been a German citizen since February 1932.)

11 September 1932: Papen humiliated in the Reichstag

Papen carried on and tried to gain support in the Reichstag. It was a hopeless task. In September the new Reichstag voted no confidence in him by 512 votes to 42. (Only the DNVP and DVP supported him.) Hindenburg dissolved the Reichstag after one day; Papen and Hindenburg originally planned not to call a new election (contrary to the constitution), but Schleicher was afraid this would cause civil war and he persuaded Hindenburg to allow new elections. This, however, was unlikely to solve anything.

12 November 1932: election

In the new election the Nazis lost 2 million votes (their share fell from 37 to 33 per cent). The KPD made further gains. The new Reichstag would be as unworkable as the old.

13 Attempts to end the deadlock

The elite discussed a possible new government. Schacht and industrial leaders asked Hindenburg for a government led by Hitler; Hindenburg said only if Hitler could get a Reichstag majority; Hitler refused to make the necessary compromises; he wanted a strong government. Papen wanted to continue as Chancellor and proposed permanently to replace the Reichstag, and to use the army to suppress opposition. There would be a new authoritarian constitution.

Schleicher was hostile to this drastic option, and advised Hindenburg that it risked civil war. Schleicher was developing links with the trade unions and sections of the NSDAP around Gregor Strasser in a 'diagonal front' stretching from Right to Left to try to gain popular support for major constitutional change.

DEC 1932–JAN 1933 SCHLEICHER'S GOVERNMENT

14 Schleicher's attempt to form a stable government

In December 1932 Schleicher persuaded Hindenburg to dismiss Papen and appoint himself as Chancellor. He tried to get support for his plans by making the Nazi Gregor Strasser Vice-Chancellor and developing Brüning's land resettlement schemes. However, Schleicher not only failed to win support on the Left he also alienated the elite who warned Hindenburg of 'agrarian Bolshevism'.

15 Papen's intrigue against Schleicher

Papen now took the initiative against Schleicher; he wanted revenge. In January 1933 he met Hitler several times. Hitler still insisted on being Chancellor; Papen could be Vice-Chancellor. Hindenburg's son, Oskar, also now favoured a Hitler-Papen government, as did others in the elite.

HITLER BECOMES CHANCELLOR

16 January 1933: the appointment of Hitler

Hindenburg refused to back Schleicher's request to rule by decree and suspend further elections. After discussions, and after he had gained the support of the army with General Werner von Blomberg agreeing to be Defence Minister in a Hitler government, Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor, with Papen as his deputy.