

Dictatorship in Germany

Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor on 30 January 1933. His rise to power and the decline of the Weimar Republic are sufficiently complex to justify a preliminary section relating the main developments up to that date before proceeding to look at explanations.

THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC AND THE RISE OF HITLER, 1918-33

The formation and development of the Weimar Republic, 1918-29

The Weimar Republic was born of military defeat and revolution at the end of the First World War. Under the threat of military collapse the Kaiser's Second Reich was transformed into the Weimar Republic during what has come to be known as the 'German Revolution'.

This occurred in two phases. The first was a revolution from above as, early in October 1918, the military establishment handed over power to a civilian cabinet. The High Command, under Ludendorff and Hindenburg, sensed the inevitability of defeat and tried to ease the way towards an armistice with the Allies by advising Kaiser Wilhelm II to appoint Prince Max of Baden as Chancellor. A powerful underlying motive was the army's desire to avoid any direct blame for Germany's surrender when it came. The Allied response, however, was unfavourable; President Wilson argued that the German power structure was still intact and that he could deal only with a genuine democracy. Prince Max now prevailed upon the Kaiser to dismiss Ludendorff from his command and it seemed that, despite the Allies' reservations, the Second Reich had the most genuinely representative government since its formation in 1871.

The second phase was a revolution from below which brought down the Second Reich altogether. In late October and early November the sailors of the German fleet mutinied in Kiel and Wilhelmshaven, while military discipline was also subverted in Hamburg and Cologne. Similarly dramatic events occurred in the south, as Kurt Eisner declared Bavaria an independent republic. Prince Max, fearing the complete disintegration of Germany, resigned on 9 November, to be replaced as Chancellor by the leader of the Social Democrats, Friedrich Ebert. On the same day the Kaiser and the lesser German rulers abdicated, and a republic was proclaimed by another Social

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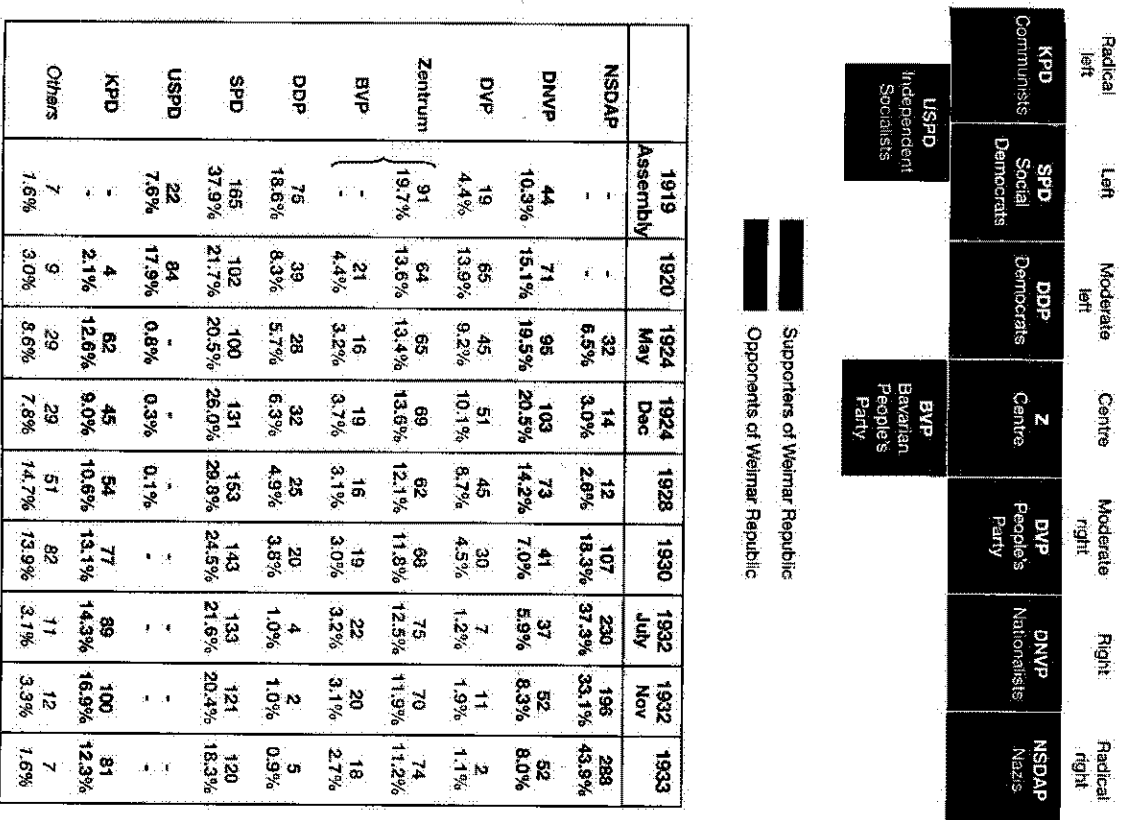


Figure 3 German parties and Reichstag election results 1919-33

Democrat, Philipp Scheidemann, from the balcony of the Reichstag building in Berlin. Scheidemann's concluding words were: 'The old and rotten - the monarchy - has broken down. Long live the new! Long live the German Republic.'² Two days later, on 11 November, Germany signed an armistice with the Allies.

But the German Revolution was not yet complete. The country now experienced a brief period of civil war as rival groups of the left competed for power. The main contenders were the Social Democrats (SPD) and two more radical groups, the Independent Socialists (USPD) and the Spartacists. At first a Provisional Government was established, comprising both the SPD and the USPD. The former, however, were afraid that Germany might follow the example of Russia the year before, and that the Provisional Government would be destroyed by a coup from the radical left, perhaps from the Spartacists. To prevent this, Chancellor Ebert made a controversial deal with the army commander, General Groener, to put down any Bolshevik-style revolution which might occur. The test was not long in coming. In December the Independent Socialists withdrew from the government, while the Spartacists (who now called themselves Communists) demanded the 'sovietization' of Germany and the continuation of the revolution. The SPD put down subsequent Spartacist demonstrations in January 1919, and in the violence and bloodshed the two Communist leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were killed. A second Spartacist uprising was suppressed, with much greater bloodshed, in March, while, in April, troops were sent to overthrow the Republic of Soviets which had just been proclaimed in Bavaria. Moderate socialism now appeared safe from the far left, but the latter neither forgot nor forgave the experience of 1919.

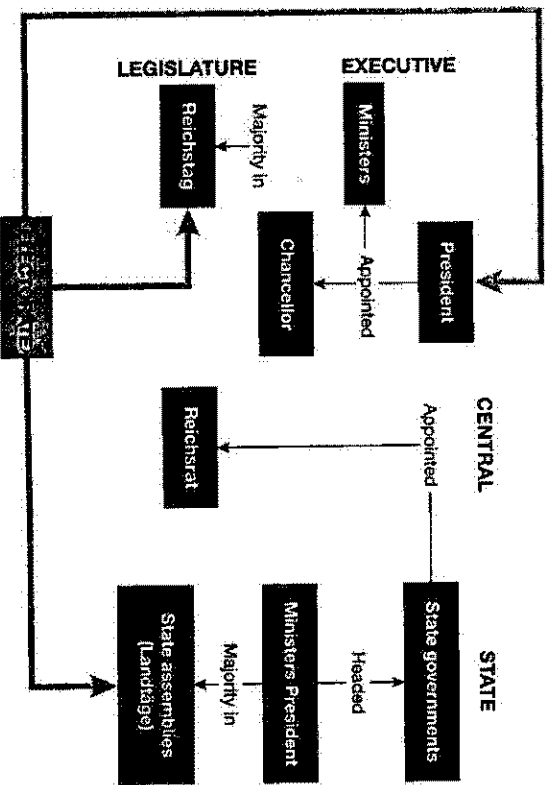


Figure 4 The Weimar political system

During this crisis a move was made towards establishing permanent institutions. Elections were held in January 1919 and a Constituent Assembly convened in Weimar, away from the street violence of Berlin. Three of the moderate parties formed a coalition government: the Centre Party (Z), the Democratic Party (DDP) and the Social Democrats (SPD). In opposition to the coalition were the parties of the right - the Nationalists (DNVP) and the People's Party (DVP) - as well as the Independent Socialists (USPD) of the far left. The Communists (KPD) did not contest this election. Ebert now became the first President of the Republic, with Scheidemann his Chancellor until June 1919.

Meanwhile, a constitution was being drafted by a special committee under the jurist Hugo Preuss. Eventually promulgated in August 1919, this embodied many advanced principles of democracy and borrowed freely from the experience of England, France and the United States. The main terms were as follows. The head of state was to be the President, elected every seven years by universal suffrage. He was given, by Article 48 of the constitution, emergency powers: 'In the event that the public order and security are seriously disturbed or endangered, the Reich President may take the measures necessary for their restoration.'³ The head of the government was to be the Chancellor, appointed by the President and needing the support of the majority of the legislature, or Reichstag. The Reichstag, elected by universal suffrage by means of proportional representation, would be able to deal with legislation, defence, foreign policy, trade, finance and security. The last section of the constitution carefully itemized the various 'rights and duties of the Germans'.⁴

By the end of 1919, therefore, the republic had overcome pressures from the far left and had acquired a legal framework. The question now arising was: could it survive? The next fourteen years saw, in succession, a period of instability and severe problems (1919-23), a remarkable recovery and a period of consolidation (1923-9) and, finally, the crisis which eventually destroyed the republic (1929-33).

The most serious obstacle to the new government in 1919 was the signing of the Treaty of Versailles with the victorious Allies. The German delegation was horrified by the harshness of the terms but the Allies were determined not to make major modifications. In June, Scheidemann resigned as Chancellor in protest but his successor, Bauer, eventually agreed to accept the treaty. Versailles was to prove a millstone around the neck of the republic, and had much to do with the second problem of this early period: inflation. The devaluation of the mark started during the war but was aggravated by demobilization and by the stiff reparations imposed, under a provision in the Treaty of Versailles, in 1921. Speculation, massive overprinting of paper money and the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 all completed the collapse of the mark and, for a few weeks, barter unofficially replaced the use of coinage. During the same years, political challenges compounded the difficulties of the republic. One example was the Kapp Putsch (1920), an unsuccessful but frightening attempt by the far right to seize power in Berlin; another putsch was tried by Hitler in Munich (1923) in circumstances described in the next section.

Nevertheless, the period 1923-9 saw a remarkable recovery and greater stability. This is generally known as the 'Stresemann era' because of the profound influence exerted by this leader of the DVP, first as Chancellor in 1923 and then as Foreign Minister until 1929. Vital economic developments included the stabilization of the

currency in the form of the Rentenmark and an agreement on reparations with the Allies in 1924 known as the Dawes Plan. Massive investment followed, mostly from the United States, which enabled German industry to recover almost to 1913 levels, despite the loss of resources and land in 1919. At the same time, Stresemann stabilized Germany's relations with the rest of Europe. He followed the 1922 treaty with Russia with another in 1926, participated in a collective defence pact with four other countries at Locarno in 1925, and took Germany into the League of Nations in 1926. Underlying these achievements was a period of relative political stability as coalition governments functioned more or less effectively, lubricated by the political diplomacy of Stresemann himself.

These halcyon years did not last. Stresemann died in 1929, a year in which Germany was suddenly confronted by economic catastrophe. Meanwhile, lurking in the background, and preparing to take advantage of any such change of fortune, were Hitler and the Nazis.

The early years of the Nazi movement, 1918-29

Many Germans were bitterly opposed to the revolution of 1918, blaming Jews, socialists, liberals and Catholics for the fall of the Second Reich and military defeat. Particularly resentful were the *völkisch* groups which sprang up all over the country and issued racist and anti-liberal propaganda.

One of these was the German Workers' Party (DAP), formed by Anton Drexler in Munich in January 1919. It was joined, in September 1919, by an Austrian with unfulfilled artistic pretensions who had fought in a Bavarian regiment in the German army throughout the First World War. Hitler blamed the republic for Germany's surrender and openly expressed his 'hatred for the originators of this dastardly crime'.⁵ He rose rapidly to the position of the party's theorist and chief propaganda officer, and his talent as a public speaker was apparent even at this early stage. In February 1920 he headed a committee which devised the party's twenty-five-point programme, consisting of a variety of nationalist, socialist, corporatist and racist principles. Meanwhile, the name was extended to 'National Socialist German Workers' Party' (NSDAP), commonly abbreviated to 'Nazi'. Branches were organized beyond Munich and support came from disbanded soldiers and from some elements of the army, or Reichswehr. The mouthpiece of the NSDAP was the *People's Observer* (*Völkischer Beobachter*), acquired in 1920. The next stage was Hitler's rise to the leadership of the party. By mid-1921 he was in dispute with the committee under Drexler over the question of organization and strategy. Eventually he outmanoeuvred Drexler and was elected Party Chairman in July. He immediately decided to demonstrate that the NSDAP was radically different from all traditional 'bourgeois' parties and to centralize everything, especially propaganda, on Munich. The movement was given teeth by the formation, in July 1921, of the Sturmabteilung (SA), a violent paramilitary organization intended, in the words of the newly named *Völkischer Beobachter*, 'to develop in the hearts of our young supporters a tremendous desire for action'.⁶ The SA proceeded to intimidate opponents, disrupt other parties' meetings and engage in bloody clashes in the streets. Hitler developed a sense of irresistible power and overwhelming confidence, and was prepared to prove the *Beobachter's* maxim that 'history does not make men, but men history'.

Mussolini, it seemed, had demonstrated this in his March on Rome in 1922. Could Hitler do the same in 1923? The republic was experiencing a many-sided crisis at least as serious as that confronted by the Italian monarchy. Hitler hoped to march on Berlin with the support of the right-wing Commissioner of Bavaria, Gustav von Kahr, and the Bavarian armed forces; the majority of the Reichswehr would then be won over. In November 1923, 600 SA men, under Hitler's command, took over a meeting being addressed by Kahr in the Bürgerbräu Keller, one of Munich's largest beer halls. Kahr, even at gunpoint, refused to support the putsch and an SA street demonstration the following morning was dispersed by the Bavarian police. Hitler's attempt at power therefore ended in ignominious failure and he was put on trial for treason. He was, however, treated leniently by sympathetic judges, and was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in Landsberg Castle. He served just over one year, in comfortable conditions which enabled him to write the first volume of *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*). On his emergence from captivity in December 1924 he found the NSDAP in total disarray; in his absence it had disintegrated into warring factions. Hitler was not displeased with this, as it guaranteed his own indispensability and meant that he was well placed to resume control.

During his interment Hitler had time to develop a more systematic version of his ideas and aims. Up to this stage they had developed untidily over three main stages. During his early life in Vienna (1907-13) he had been profoundly influenced by anti-Semitic literature and the political utterances of Karl Lueger. He had also developed a deep hatred of the multi-ethnic empire of Austria-Hungary, identifying instead with the newer German nation. His experiences of the war and its immediate aftermath (1914-19) left him with a burning resentment, a drive for vengeance and a deep hatred of the far left. The period 1920-4 saw the fusion of anti-Semitism and anti-Communism and the development of a vision of expansion by Germany against the 'inferior races' of eastern Europe; this would follow the preliminary revolution and internal reordering within Germany. According to Kershaw, 'By the mid 1920s, then, Hitler had developed a rounded philosophy which offered him a complete view of the world, its ills and how to overcome them. Its substance never changed down to his death.'⁷ This substance is considered briefly in Chapter 2.

When he refounded the NSDAP in February 1925, Hitler emphasized the need for a change of strategy. Until November 1923 he had assumed that the Weimar Republic could be overthrown directly. But the failure of the Putsch showed that democratic government was more resilient in Germany than in Italy. Hitler would therefore have to settle for a constitutional or 'legal' path to power. This did not mean a fundamental conversion to the principles of constitutional democracy; on the contrary, parliamentary politics would be the means, not the end. Revolution was still the ultimate aim, but would now be the result of achieving power rather than the means by which power would be achieved. For the time being it would be necessary, in Hitler's words, 'to hold our noses and enter the Reichstag alongside Marxist and Catholic deputies'. At the same time, he saw a continuing need for the SA and paramilitary influences. In fact, Hitler now led the Nazis at two levels. On the surface they were a parliamentary party, aiming at gaining electoral support at the expense of their rivals. Below the surface they remained a mass movement, committed to gaining mass support. Their chance would come in the future, after the victory of the 'legal' approach.

To accomplish this change of strategy it was necessary to extend the Party's appeal. The Nazi Party had to move away from its narrow working-class base. It could not hope to compete effectively for the working-class vote with a moderate SPD and a revolutionary KPD. Instead, Hitler decided to reformulate parts of the 1920 Party programme so as to appeal to different parts of the population. This meant that he had to move away from socialism; in 1927 he told his economic adviser, Keppeler, that the economic goals of the original programme were now 'unusable'. By attacking socialism and the left, Hitler began to exercise more of an appeal to the middle classes and the right. This meant that Hitler increased the emphasis on nationalism, on the 'stab in the back' and 'November Criminals' myths of 1918 and the Versailles 'diktat' of 1919.

Despite this new approach, the period 1925-9 proved exceptionally difficult for the Nazi Party and the movement. In the first place, Hitler was confronted by opposition from north German leaders, especially Gregor Strasser, who considered that the party's ideology should place heavier stress on socialism and the nationalization of key industries. Hitler eventually gained unquestioned ascendancy over the northern units of the party at the Bamberg Conference (February 1926) in which he out-argued Strasser and, by the force of his rhetoric, won over one of his arch critics, Josef Goebbels. (The latter had, only a short time before, demanded the expulsion of the 'petty bourgeois Adolf Hitler'!) The overall result of this victory was that Hitler tightened his control and established the monolithic structure he had always sought. In the subsequent reorganization, cadres of dedicated activists were set up in the basic party units, the *Gau*, under the control of the officials, or *Gauleiters*, who were appointed by Hitler himself.

The second and more intractable problem of this period was the stability of the republic and the poor electoral performance of the NSDAP. In the Reichstag election of December 1924, for example, the NSDAP acquired only fourteen seats, making it the least significant of the national parties in terms of electoral support; its performance in 1928 was even poorer, resulting in only twelve seats. Yet the party was nothing if not resilient. It showed a remarkable capacity to survive these hard times and switched its campaign from the cities to the rural areas, which agricultural depression had made more volatile. The *Völkischer Beobachter* observed in May 1928: 'The election results from the rural areas in particular have proved that with a smaller expenditure of energy, money and time, better results can be achieved there than in the big cities.'² The party therefore developed an electoral base which expanded rapidly as Germany came under the grip of economic recession.

The years of crisis, 1929-33

The origins of the Great Depression are dealt with in Chapter 1. Of all the industrial states, Germany was undoubtedly the most vulnerable to a sudden downturn in economic conditions. Her industry was heavily dependent on foreign investment to the tune of 5 billion marks per annum by 1928. Her banking system was geared to the use of short-term loans for long-term enterprises and, as a result, was potentially very vulnerable. As the depression deepened, foreign loans were withdrawn and the banking system eventually collapsed in 1931. Meanwhile, industrial output had to be cut back through lack of investment and the contraction of overseas markets. The boom years of the late 1920s came to an abrupt end with a dramatic rise in the number

of bankruptcies. The inevitable result was a rapid increase in unemployment, from 2 million in 1929 to 3.5 million in 1930, 4.4 million in 1931 and over 6 million in 1932.

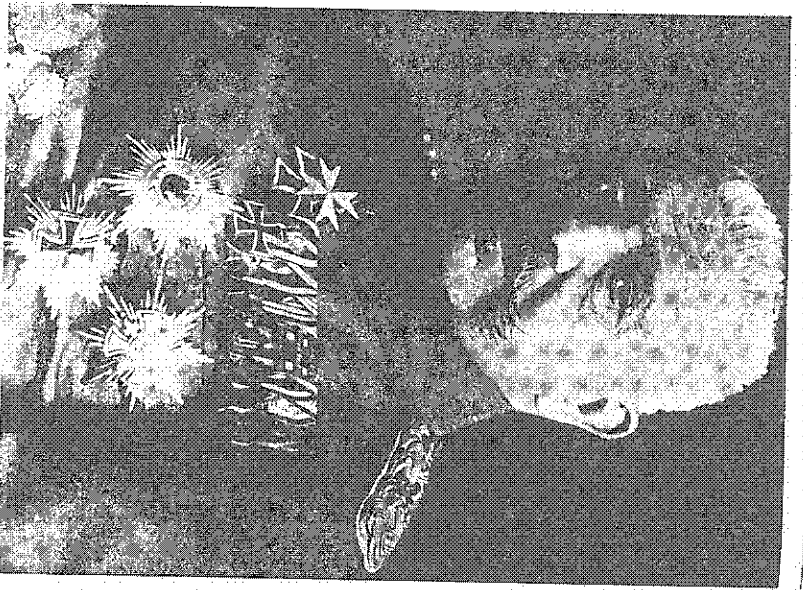
The depression dealt a devastating blow to democracy in Germany. Chancellor Müller's coalition fell apart on 27 March 1930 over the question of cutting dole payments. Since the power of the Chancellor depended on the support of the Reichstag and the economic crisis had made collaboration between political parties more difficult, the initiative now passed to the President. The republic's second President, elected in 1925, was Field Marshal Hindenburg. Very much a product of the old establishment of the Second Reich, he had an authoritarian approach to politics. During the stable years he had had no option but to play an inactive role in the manoeuvring for power between the various parties. From 1930, however, he was able to fill the vacuum left by the sudden death of consensus politics. Under the influence of one of his main advisers, General Schleicher, Hindenburg appointed the Centre Party leader, Brüning, as Chancellor. When Brüning tried to introduce a deflationary budget it was rejected by the Reichstag. Hindenburg sought to enforce it by presidential decree, under Article 48 of the constitution. The Reichstag objected to this course, with the result that Hindenburg agreed to Brüning's request for an election in September 1930. The results proved disappointing to Brüning and he was forced to carry on without the support of the Reichstag. He resorted increasingly to the use of presidential decrees so that, by the time of his fall in May 1932, parliamentary democracy had virtually disappeared.

Meanwhile, the NSDAP was rapidly expanding the base of its support. It was geared to take full advantage of the republic's crisis, as Hitler arranged mass rallies, travelling speakers and a flood of material from the propaganda department. The Reichstag election of 1930 was a triumph for the NSDAP, which secured 6.5 million votes and increased its representation from 12 to 107 seats, thus becoming the second largest party in the Reichstag. Hitler capitalized on this success by cultivating connections with the traditional right, including the Nationalists (DNVP), the army, industrialists like Thyssen, and agriculturalists; this alliance was formalized in the Harzburg Front of October 1931, directed against the republic's policies and record. In January 1932 Hitler made a direct appeal to German industrialists in his Düsseldorf speech, denouncing parliamentary democracy and highlighting the 'Bolshevik threat'. He was carefully establishing his credentials as an anti-revolutionary.

Hitler's self-confidence was now at its peak and he challenged Hindenburg for the presidency. The 1932 election ran to two ballots. On the first, Hindenburg obtained 18.7 million votes (49.6 per cent of the total), Hitler 11.3 million (30.1 per cent) and Thälmann, the Communist leader, 5 million (13 per cent). On the second ballot Hindenburg secured an overall majority with 19.4 million (53 per cent) to Hitler's 13.4 million (26.8 per cent) and Thälmann's 3.8 million (10.2 per cent). This result was a disappointment to Hitler, who had expended a massive effort to no avail. The only other possibility was now to try for the second most important office — the chancellorship.

In this he was to prove more successful and ultimately he came to power by the back-door methods of diplomacy and intrigue rather than over the threshold of electoral support. The process was highly complex, involving President Hindenburg, General Schleicher and an aristocrat, Franz von Papen.

6 Paul Hindenburg,
1847-1934
(Pepperfoto)



The first stage was the collapse of Brüning's government in May 1932, largely because it had lost the support of those who mattered, namely the President and his retinue. Schleicher had been alienated by Brüning's decision to ban Hitler's SA, and Hindenburg by a proposal to take over bankrupt Junker estates for use by landless peasants. Hindenburg therefore pushed Brüning into resignation and Papen was installed as the new Chancellor, the first in the history of the republic not to have the basis of party support. Hitler agreed not to oppose the new government in exchange for the removal of the ban on the SA and new Reichstag elections. The latter, held in July 1932, showed another sensational swing to the NSDAP, which now became easily the largest party, with 230 seats and 37.3 per cent of the popular vote. When Hitler was invited by Papen to join his cabinet he demanded, instead, the chancellorship. This was refused, however, by President Hindenburg. Papen then tried to weaken the position of the NSDAP by calling yet another Reichstag election in November 1932. This time the NSDAP lost electoral support, declining to 196 seats in the Reichstag and 33.1 per cent of the vote. Clearly Hitler's popularity had peaked and it would have come as no great surprise if the Nazi phenomenon had faded to

its semi-obscurity of the late 1920s. This was due partly to a slight upswing in the economy and partly to the disillusionment of part of the electorate as Nazi violence and intimidation intensified on the streets. Already in 1930 the Prussian state government tried to curb this by banning outdoor meetings and parades, along with SA uniforms. The extent of the criminality of the SA was to be evident in 1932: within one month of an emergency decree, issued by Papen to legalize the SA, 99 people had been killed and 1,125 wounded in street attacks.⁹ Then on 10 August nine uniformed SA men broke into a miner's home in Pomerania in Upper Silesia, beating and torturing him to death. In the subsequent court case the assailants were sentenced to death and Hitler did his reputation little good by delivering an impassioned appeal in their support. No one could claim that the Nazi movement had not already shown its violent credentials before 1933.

But then events swung back in Hitler's favour. Papen proved incapable of holding power for very long and the chancellorship went to Schleicher, who had managed to convince Hindenburg that he could broaden the base of his support by detaching members of the NSDAP from their support for Hitler. In this he failed disastrously: the only Nazi who seemed interested in his offer was Strasser, who was promptly thrown out of the party. Meanwhile, Papen felt sufficiently slighted by Schleicher to intrigue against him with Hitler. In January 1933 Papen persuaded Hindenburg to appoint Hitler as Chancellor in a coalition government which would contain only three Nazis and which would be carefully monitored by Papen as Hitler's deputy. Schleicher had tried to keep his own government afloat by asking for further emergency powers. These Hindenburg was not prepared to grant, since he now had an alternative. On 30 January 1933 he confirmed Hitler's appointment, believing that sufficient precautions had been taken to tame the radicalism of the NSDAP. In fact, Hitler proceeded to destroy the Weimar Republic within weeks of his coming to power. Only one more election was to be held before Germany was subsumed into the Third Reich.

EXPLANATIONS OF THE RISE OF HITLER

The rise of Hitler involved distinct processes which, although connected, did not lead inevitably from one to the other. One was the collapse of democracy within the Weimar Republic and the development after 1930 of an authoritarian regime which was hostile to the whole basis of the republic. Another was the emergence of an entirely new form of right-wing movement which, under Hitler, eventually replaced this authoritarian system with a totalitarian regime. The latter could not have occurred without the former. Hitler's rise was accomplished through the collapse of the republic. But this collapse was not necessarily tied to a historical trend leading inevitably to Nazism; it could have been followed by an alternative system.

An explanation as to why Hitler became Chancellor can be advanced in three stages. First, the Weimar Republic became increasingly destabilized with the disintegration of effective democracy. Second, Nazism emerged as a dynamic movement which was capable of gaining support from a substantial part of an electorate which had become disillusioned with the republic. And third, the conservative right provided a channel which enabled this new dynamic to penetrate and force open the flawed structure. The whole picture is complex, and it is necessary to avoid any one-sided or oversimplified view.