

LAST YEARS OF WEIMAR REPUBLIC 1929-33

The Weimar Republic faced two major problems in the fall of 1929: Gustav Stresemann died on October 3, 1929. Despite the fact that all Germans detested the Versailles Treaty and its war guilt clause, Stresemann had emerged to symbolize confidence and success. His successors were to symbolize more negative traits.

The United States' stock market crash of October 1929 would take its greatest toll on Germany. Stresemann observed:

I must ask you always to remember that during the past year we have been living on borrowed money. If a crisis were to arise and the Americans were to call in their short-term loans, we should be faced with bankruptcy.

American financiers immediately demanded payment on their loans. The depression led to massive unemployment in Germany: 1,368,000 in 1929; 5,668,000 in 1931; 6,014,000 by 1933. Wages were cut and the jobless wandered the streets with cries of "give us bread."

These double setbacks revealed the weaknesses and mistakes of the Weimar Republic. The Republic had been like a candle burning at both ends, with the Communists on one end calling for a dictatorship of the working class and the Nazis on the other end calling for a dictatorship of the few. The Republic had been kind to most of its enemies. The German army had not been destroyed in World War I and the Republic used it to put down uprisings. Hitler had served only one year in prison for political treason. Only the Communists were punished ruthlessly.

The Nazis would gain the most from the Republic's troubles. While Hitler's rise to power might now be possible, it was not clearly inevitable. Many complicated explanations are available, but no simple solution exists.

The political scene from 1930 to 1933 resembled a corrupt political chess game with all participants invoking article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which stated that the chancellor could rule by decree in emergency situations.

Herman Brüning, chancellor from March 1930 to March 1932, was the most humane of the group. Brüning was an intelligent economist (he later taught at Harvard), but he was a dull speaker and always sounded as if he were delivering a treasurer's report. In September 1930 the Nazis were able to get more members elected to the Reichstag; an increase from 12 to 107. Chancellor Brüning found it increasingly difficult to deal with this growing Nazi party; coping with the Nazis was now a major problem.

After becoming a German citizen in February 1932, Hitler challenged Hindenburg for the presidency. He conducted a whirlwind campaign and often flew from speech to speech, but Hindenburg still outpolled Hitler 18,000,000 (49.6%) to 11,000,000 (30.1%). Since no candidate received a majority of the votes, a run-off election was required. In April,

Hindenburg received his majority with 19,000,000 (53%), while Hitler polled 13,000,000 (36.8%). Hitler was a loser, but 13,000,000 Germans had voted for him in a free, democratic election.

Following the election, Hindenburg appointed Franz von Papen as chancellor. Von Papen sought ways of bringing the Nazis into a coalition government so that they might be under control. In the July elections of 1932, the Nazis had emerged as the strongest single party; they increased their Reichstag representation from 107 to 230. The Nazi representatives showed up at the Reichstag in uniform. Herman Goering, the second most important Nazi, was now appointed president of the Reichstag. Chancellor von Papen was not allowed to speak in the Reichstag because Goering would not recognize him. The wily von Papen, who later served the Nazis, proved to be a disaster; he would be replaced in December 1932.

Meanwhile, Hindenburg arranged to meet with Hitler in August 1932. Hitler was awed by the 87-year-old president, and performed badly. Hindenburg offered him the job of vice-chancellor, but Hitler refused. The Nazis suffered defeats in the November elections; their membership in the Reichstag declined from 230 to 196. Some Nazis despaired that Hitler might not get another chance to become chancellor.

On December 2, 1932, General Kurt von Schleicher became the last chancellor before Hitler. He convinced the senile Hindenburg that the Nazis could be controlled. One way to do this was to convince the Nazi leaders below Hitler to join the government. Von Schleicher hoped to convince these Nazis that if they remained with Hitler, they would never get a chance to gain power at all. Von Schleicher failed to bring them into the government and, as a result, he resigned on January 28, 1933.

Hindenburg now had little choice. He still regarded Hitler as a “bohemian corporal.” He didn’t want to appoint him, but Hitler was in charge of the largest party. Hitler had held out for the “best deal” and now he got it when Hindenburg asked him to form a “nonpartisan” government. At 11 a.m. on January 30, 1933, Hitler became chancellor.

Some people argue that Hitler’s rise to power was a natural outcome of German history. Some see his rise to power as sheer luck. Others say it was nothing unusual, since dictatorships were established in over a dozen European countries by the 1930s. Still others point out that the German leaders underestimated Hitler and felt they could control him. The most important issue may lie in these words by the provocative British historian, A.J.P. Taylor:

The real problem in German history is why so few of the educated, civilized classes recognized Hitler as the embodiment of evil. University professors; army officers; businessmen and bankers—these had a background of culture, and even of respect for law. Yet virtually none of them exclaimed: “This is anti-Christ.” Later, they were to make out that Hitler had deceived them and that the bestial nature of National-Socialism could not have been foreseen. This is not true. The real Character of National-Socialism was exposed by many foreigners, and even by some German observers long before Hitler came to power.