

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 268

“A Private from Bohemia”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“The current, continually repeated message is: Adolf Hitler is not only our candidate—he is the future president. The entire party’s confidence in victory must be elevated into blind faith.”

Joseph Goebbels, in an internal campaign memorandum.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 268. A Private from Bohemia.

As you already know, the year 1931 was a restless one for Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or NSDAP. In the 1930 Reichstag election, the NSDAP had leapt into second place among the parties represented in the chamber, wedged between the number one Social Democratic Party, or SPD, and the number three Communist Party of Germany, or KPD.

Strangely enough, all three of these parties were in opposition, albeit for different reasons. You don’t often see a parliamentary democracy in which *none* of the top three parties are in government, but the times were indeed strange. The German Chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, led a minority government that held onto power thanks to the support of the President, Paul von Hindenburg, and to the toleration of the SPD, the number one party.

The Brüning government introduced harsh austerity measures to deal with the Great Depression, which was hitting Germany harder than any other country, with the possible exception of the United States. Brüning’s austerity measures were deeply unpopular, so much so that the Reichstag would not enact them. They had to be introduced by emergency Presidential decree, which was allowed under the German constitution. The Reichstag did have the power to nullify these Presidential decrees or to bring down the Brüning government through a vote of no confidence, but there was no majority willing to do either. In particular, the SPD, though it opposed Brüning’s policies, saw Brüning as the lesser evil, since the alternative—bring down the government and trigger new elections—seemed likely to lead to a Hitler government.

And so Germany limped through 1931 with this improbable form of governance. It was technically in compliance with the constitution, though it certainly wasn't what its authors had in mind. A minority government plugged along with unpopular austerity policies. It lacked popular backing, but it was backed by a sympathetic President who deployed his constitutional powers to keep it running. Also, it's important to take into account that Hindenburg had the military on his side. Meanwhile, the suffering in Germany deepened. Banks failed. People lost their jobs and livelihoods and went broke. Some were outright starving.

This situation could not go on, and in fact it had an expiration date: the 1932 German Presidential election, scheduled for March. Hindenburg was widely expected to step down. He would be 84 on Election Day. Can an 84-year-old reasonably be expected to run for another seven-year term as President? But against expectations, Hindenburg decided to run.

This decision came as a blow to Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP. The National Socialists had been staunch opponents of the government, which made them popular, and many inside and outside the Party saw Hitler as the natural frontrunner in the race to succeed Hindenburg. But the old general was still personally popular, and not even Adolf Hitler himself was confident he could defeat Hindenburg in a head-to-head matchup.

This was precisely the reason why people pressed Hindenburg to run: he was the candidate with the best chance of keeping Hitler out of the Presidency. The Weimar Coalition parties of the center and left, most notably the Social Democrats, refrained from offering their own candidates and instead endorsed Hindenburg, much to Hindenburg's chagrin. To him, the socialists of the SPD were the traitors who had cost Germany victory in the Great War. The right-wing aristocratic Hindenburg had run for President in 1925 to frustrate their efforts to introduce socialism; now his old enemies were supporting him, while the right wing that had put him into the Presidency were abandoning him and moving farther to the right; into the right-wing National People's Party, or the ultra-right-wing NSDAP.

The situation left Hitler uneasy. Ever since their stunning breakthrough victory in 1930, the NSDAP billed itself and its leader, Hitler, as not only inevitable, but destined to rule Germany and save the German people from the predatory plutocrats of the West and the Bolshevik barbarians of the East. A high-profile defeat at the hands of Hindenburg would scuff that carefully crafted aura.

But Hitler chose to run anyway. Now, the reason the NSDAP had grown to become the largest right-wing party in Germany was its mass appeal. Party leaders, especially Hitler and Goebbels, were skilled public speakers and masters of the new technologies for influencing public opinion. Goebbels oversaw the distribution of 50,000 phonograph records of Hitler's stump speech. The NSDAP produced talking pictures, including at least two with the assistance of the German subsidiary of the US motion picture company Fox Film Corporation. Yes, Fox was doing right-wing propaganda all the way back in 1932. These films were shown at outdoor public venues in

small towns and remote regions where Hitler could not personally campaign as an alternative way of getting the message out.

Hitler's first campaign speech drew a crowd of 25,000. His second drew a crowd of 50,000. There were no public opinion polls in those days, but with turnouts like these, it was hard not to feel optimistic. Soon Party leaders were privately expressing their regret at the humiliation the old general was about to experience. Nevertheless, in public, the campaign chugged along on all cylinders. Goebbels continued to press the image of Hitler as Germany's ordained and inevitable savior, as you can see in the quote I read at the top of the episode.

Hitler's campaign stops became spectacles themselves. Audiences traveled great distances and waited hours for the chance to hear him speak. Even those with no National Socialist sympathies regarded a Hitler speech as a must-see event. In his speeches, he did not attack Hindenburg personally; he called the old man "venerable," saluted him for his service to the Fatherland, but then insisted it was time for him to step down. It was time for the Great War generation to take charge. And he would add that Hindenburg needed to stop shielding "those whom we want to destroy," a reference to the socialists.

German Presidential elections were held in two rounds. If a candidate won a majority of the vote in the first round, it was over. Otherwise a second round would be held four weeks later, in which the candidate with the highest vote total would become President, whether that candidate won a majority or not.

Much to the chagrin of Hitler and his followers, who were hoping for a majority in the first round, he didn't get it. He didn't even win as many votes as Hindenburg. The good news for the NSDAP was that Hindenburg took only 49.6% of the vote, narrowly denying him an outright victory in the first round. Hitler came in second, with 30.1% of the vote. Communist Party leader Ernst Thälmann was third, with 13.2% and Theodor Duestenberg of the Stahlhelm was fourth, with 6.8%. No other candidate got more than one percent.

The National Socialists were so disappointed that the next day some Party offices flew their swastika flags at half staff. Hitler was also privately disappointed in the result, though publicly he trumpeted the fact that his share of the vote had been nearly double what the Party had drawn in the 1930 election. Hitler then threw himself into the runoff campaign, maintaining a grueling schedule of appearances in major cities across Germany, barnstorming the country by air, which was another modern campaign innovation. I already described to you in episode 255 how the airplane functioned as a symbol of fascism; here it is again. It was a remarkable campaign; Hitler is estimated to have appeared before more than a million people in a matter of days, all the more remarkable because Hitler actually suffered from a fear of flying. This was not made public, but Hitler screwed up his courage and boarded the planes, while the Party publicized his dedication as further evidence of his commitment to Germany using the slogan "*Hitler über Deutschland*," "Hitler over Germany," which of course can be understood in more than one way.

Meanwhile, Duestenberg dropped out of the campaign. Most of his right-wing voters could be expected to vote for Hitler, who also won a key endorsement from Crown Prince Wilhelm, eldest son of the deposed Kaiser Wilhelm. The younger Wilhelm had toyed with the idea of running for President himself, but his father had nixed that idea.

Hindenburg won the second round, increasing his vote share a little, to 53%. No surprise there. The Communist vote share dropped, but Hitler picked up more than two million new voters in the second round, finishing with 36.8% of the vote, a new record vote share for the National Socialists, a pretty good consolation prize.

Although Hitler had been denied the Presidency, the results looked grim to the leaders of the Weimar Coalition, or for that matter to anyone who cared about the future of democracy in Germany. Hindenburg didn't feel as if the results were anything to celebrate either. Estimates are that about 60% of the German voters who elected Hindenburg back in 1925 voted National Socialist this time around. Hindenburg wanted to be leader of the German nationalist right. Instead, Adolf Hitler seemed to be usurping that role; Hindenburg had only beaten him with the aid of the very people he most despised: the socialist and Catholic democrats, the very same people who, in his mind, had undermined the Army and cost Germany victory in 1918.

As for Hitler, now was not the time for him to rest on his laurels. State elections were pending in several German states, most notably Prussia, by far the largest and most important state in the German federation. Prussia held elections to its state Landtag just two weeks after the Presidential runoff.

Ever since the 1918 revolution, the government of Prussia had been in the hands of the Weimar Coalition parties, led by the SPD. Prussia was the SPD's political stronghold, and Hitler intended to take it by storm. He went on yet another grueling campaign tour, telling the crowds that the old Prussia, the Prussia of Frederick the Great, had always stood as an exemplar of "cleanliness, order, and discipline"—his words. Prussia had stood up to Napoleon in the name of German freedom and had been the standard-bearer for German unification. Now, Hitler vowed, Prussia would lead the German nation to its destiny once again.

In 1928, the National Socialists drew only 1.8% of the vote in Prussia. This time, they got 36.3%, displacing the SPD as the largest party in the Landtag. But it still wasn't a majority, and the state president, an SPD member, was able to appoint a minority government, frustrating the NSDAP's ambitions. The National Socialists also came in first in elections in Anhalt, Hamburg, and Württemberg, and came within a whisker in Bavaria. Nevertheless, they didn't reach a majority in any of those places, and only in Anhalt did they even get into government. Publicly, the Party celebrated these "victories," privately, Joseph Goebbels complained, "we win ourselves to death," echoing the lament of Germans during the Great War, when the Army won victory after victory, yet the war dragged on.

The Party also suffered an apparent defeat when Chancellor Brüning and the interior minister, Wilhelm Groener, after exerting a considerable amount of pressure, persuaded President Hindenburg to sign a decree ordering the dissolution of the SA and the SS, the National Socialist paramilitary organizations. Overnight, the brownshirts disappeared from the streets. Some breathed a sigh of relief. Others expressed surprise that the Nazi thugs had been disarmed by the stroke of a pen.

In truth, the German military was sympathetic to the SA and other right-wing paramilitaries. The new German republican Army, the Reichswehr, chafed at the limitations placed on it by the Treaty of Versailles and encouraged the creation of various right-wing paramilitaries. The Army saw these as an unofficial reserve force that could quickly be mobilized if needed. The commanders of the Reichswehr also didn't have much use for democracy, which they saw as a threat to German military preparedness. And so, Hitler and the SA got advance warning of the decree, and though the stormtroopers put away their brown shirts for the time being, they remained active in the Party, with the understanding that the ban was likely to be temporary.

Despite these apparent setbacks, the NSDAP repeatedly falling a little short of complete victory and the ban on the SA, in the private upper reaches of German government, events were moving in a more favorable direction, because President Hindenburg, still unhappy about the election result, decided that if he was no longer right wing enough for the voters' tastes, well then, he would just have to move farther to the right himself.

[music: Brahms, *Intermezzo No. 3*]

One of the most trusted members of Hindenburg's inner circle of advisers was an Army general named Kurt von Schleicher. Schleicher had a hand in every backroom deal, every shadowy operation, of the German military. Schleicher was involved with the secret murders of Germans assisting the Allied Control Commission, with the establishment of those right-wing paramilitary groups to evade the limit on the size of the German Army, and with the secret dealings with the Soviet Union, under which the Germany Army helped construct secret arms factories and training facilities in Russia, for the benefit of both the Red Army and the Reichswehr.

Schleicher was liaison between the Army and President Hindenburg and the advisor who had helped Hindenburg put together this new system of government under which Germany now found itself, with a chancellor appointed by the President and ruling by decree, which, as I said, was technically constitutional but certainly went against the spirit of democracy. That didn't bother Schleicher much; like most leaders of the German military, Schleicher saw democracy as a threat to the military, something to be opposed when possible, evaded when necessary.

Schleicher was also liaison between the Army and the Nazi stormtroopers. It was he who had tipped Hitler off about the coming crackdown. And now, in compliance with Hindenburg's wishes that the government move to the right, Schleicher met with Hitler to discuss the terms under which the NSDAP would join, or at least tolerate, the government, which would relieve

the government of the need to court the Social Democrats. Hitler and Schleicher agreed that Brüning had to go as chancellor, and Groener as defense minister. Hitler added two more conditions: the ban on the SA had to be lifted, and he wanted new elections for the Reichstag.

They had the outline of a deal, and it came to fruition in May. The Brüning government had a program going called Osthilfe, or Eastern Aid, which involved government subsidies to large estates in East Prussia. These estates were owned by old Prussian noble families, the ones often referred to as Junkers. Traditionally, these Prussian aristocratic families provided the officer corps for the Prussian, and later German, Army, and it was still true in 1932 that the Reichswehr officer corps counted a number of Junkers among its members, not to mention President Hindenburg, whose own family held a large estate in East Prussia. The Osthilfe program was a thinly disguised bribe to the military leadership to keep them loyal to the civilian government of the Republic.

Ostensibly, these estates needed government subsidies because they were losing money, as were farms all over the world. Farmers were struggling with low prices even before the Great Depression hit. But a program that took tax revenue from ordinary Germans and handed it over to some of the richest and most powerful families in the nation during the worst economy in living memory, when banks were failing and five million German workers were unemployed didn't sit well with a lot of people. The discontent only grew worse when it became public that these Prussian aristocrats who were on the dole were also toodling around Germany in chauffeur-driven Mercedes and BMWs when they weren't off on African safaris, hunting lions and elephants.

In May 1932, the Brüning Cabinet was forced to come up with a plan to address the inequities in the Osthilfe program. Instead of subsidizing distressed Prussian estates, the government proposed to purchase them and break them up into family farms, to be distributed to the poor and unemployed. The Cabinet drafted a decree and sent it to Hindenburg to sign, which by now was the normal route by which new proposals became law, but the Junkers went berserk when they learned of this plan. It was denounced as Bolshevism by the aristocracy and the military. Adolph Hitler, being a Nazi, declared that the solution to Germany's economic woes didn't lie in redistributing existing German lands, but rather in acquiring new living space in the East, if you know what I mean and I think you do, nudge, nudge, grin, grin, wink, wink, say no more.

When the draft Presidential decree for this new Eastern Aid program was presented to Hindenburg, he refused to sign it. Instead, he told Brüning he wanted the cabinet "reformed and moved to the right." Brüning complained to Hindenburg the government was being undermined by the leadership of the Reichswehr, and the Cabinet needed a guarantee of Presidential support. Hindenburg not only refused to offer one, he told Brüning he would no longer sign government-drafted emergency decrees, so that was that. Brüning tendered his resignation.

About a month later, representatives from Germany, France, and Britain met in Lausanne, Switzerland for yet another round of reparations talks. Herbert Hoover's one-year moratorium on reparations payments was still in effect; at Lausanne, the Britain and France agreed to extend the moratorium, conditioned on the United States extending its own moratorium on Allied war debt. In fact, the US would refuse any extension, but even so, the Allies would make no further effort to collect the reparations owed to them under the Treaty of Versailles. In the end, Germany got off paying only a fraction of what had initially been demanded.

In normal circumstances, this would have been terrific news for Germany. But circumstances were not normal. In the depths of the Great Depression, the news that Germans would no longer have to pay debts the payment of which was unimaginable anyway landed with a thud.

This was exactly the outcome Chancellor Brüning had been working for. He had convinced the Allies that Germany could not meet its reparations obligations without immiserating millions of Germans, and they had given in. He would later compare himself to a runner forced to leave the race a hundred meters before the finish line. That's perhaps overstating the accomplishments of his government but even so, Brüning had laid upon him the burden of navigating a fractured Republic through an historic economic crisis, which was certainly a tough row to hoe. Still, by severing the link between the government and the approval of the Reichstag, he had not only struck the Weimar Republic a mortal blow, he had put himself and his cabinet at the mercy of Hindenburg and the military, and thus become the architect of his own demise.

Hindenburg's choice to succeed Brüning was the 52-year old Franz von Papen. And if you're wondering who that is, so were a lot of people in 1932. He was an Army officer, the son of an aristocratic family from Westphalia. During the Great War, he first served as the German military attaché to the United States during the period of US neutrality, and in that role, he was involved in most of Germany's clandestine shenanigans in the United States. You remember those, right? He used secret German funds to buy up war supplies in the US to prevent them reaching the Allies. He plotted acts of sabotage in the US and Canada, conspired to restore Victoriano Huerta as ruler of Mexico, and was involved in plots to smuggle German arms to Irish and Indian nationalists. After British intelligence blew the whistle on his activities to the US government, and he was expelled from the United States.

After the war, Papen left the Army with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He got mixed up with the Freikorps and then went into politics, becoming one of many conservative aristocratic right-wing monarchist ex-Army officers in Weimar Germany. Papen was a little different, though. His politics would have put him solidly in the DNVP, the right-wing German National People's Party, but he was Catholic. So he joined the Centre Party, the political home of most German Catholics. Within the Centre Party, he was firmly in the right wing and had held a seat in the Prussian Landtag for most of the past decade.

It was Hindenburg's advisor, Kurt von Schleicher, who had brought Papen to the President's attention. His membership in the Centre Party would make him more palatable to centrist democrats, though in fact his political views were close to Hindenburg's own. More to the point, his background as a fellow aristocrat and soldier meant that Hindenburg trusted him. Schleicher would become defense minister in the Papen government and he saw the new chancellor as someone he could easily manipulate from behind the scenes.

When this new government was presented to the Reichstag, Hitler and the National Socialists kept up their end of the bargain by not voting against it, and Hindenburg kept up his end of the bargain by dissolving the Reichstag, calling new elections in sixty days, and lifting the ban on the SA and SS.

So a new general election for the Reichstag was held on July 31, 1932, but events were moving rapidly in Germany, so I have a couple of other things to tell you about before we even get to the election result. You see, once the ban on the SA was lifted, the stormtroopers suddenly reappeared on the streets of German cities, more aggressive than ever.

The German town of Altona, just outside Hamburg, was a working-class Communist stronghold. Despite what geography might lead you to believe, Altona was administratively part of the state of Prussia. On Sunday, the 17th of July, more than five thousand stormtroopers marched through the streets of Altona in a deliberately provocative demonstration. Confrontations between the stormtroopers and local Communists quickly turned violent. The police intervened. Eighteen people were killed, most of them by the police, in an event sometimes known as "Bloody Sunday," along with many others.

Three days later, on the 20th, President Hindenburg and the Papen government used the violence in Altona as a justification to issue an emergency decree dissolving the state government of Prussia. Remember that Prussia had been a Social Democratic stronghold since 1919. In the most recent election, the National Socialists had gained enough seats in the Prussian Landtag to deny the Social Democrats a majority, so the SPD had been limping along with a minority government. Under this latest decree, that government was swept aside and Chancellor Papen became the *Reichskommissar*, or Reich commissioner, of Prussia, putting him in charge of the state government. This also had the effect of seizing from the Social Democratic Party its most important remaining seat of power, and be sure; this was not an accident. This was the whole point. Hindenburg and Papen were deliberately aiming for nothing less than to bring down the SPD.

It's worth pausing for a moment here to consider political developments in Germany since 1930. The democracy instated in 1919 has gradually been deteriorating. First came the Brüning government, which lacked support in the Reichstag—at best it had only grudging toleration—but it was able to rule through Presidential decree, which was technically constitutional, though not anyone's idea of a functioning democracy. This went on for two years, until the 1932

Presidential election. Hindenburg was re-elected. He dismissed Brüning and demanded a government farther to the right, still lacking support in the Reichstag, further weakening German democracy. Now the elected government of Prussia, such as it was, had been brushed aside. Prussia would now also be ruled by Presidential decree.

Understand that when I call Prussia a “German state,” I’m not doing it justice. Prussia is *the* German state, by far the largest of the German states, or *Länder*. Prussia is more than 60% of the German nation, by population and by area, larger than all the other *Länder* put together. More than half the population of Germany lives under the administration of the Prussian state government, so to have it taken over by Chancellor Papen is a Big Freaking Deal, with a capital B, F, and D, and a serious blow to the concept of German federalism and democratic self-rule.

This takeover is known in German as *der Preußenschlag*. You might say in English, the Prussian Coup or the Prussian Putsch. Later in the year, it would be held partly unconstitutional by the German Constitutional Court, Germany’s highest court, but in a marvel of contradictory jurisprudence, the Court will rule that while the President did not have the power to dissolve the Prussian government, he did have the power to appoint a *Reichskommissar* to rule in its place, meaning the Prussian government was formally reconstituted, but it had no power.

You might wonder at this point why the SPD didn’t call a general strike in response, as they had in the past, for example in 1920 during the Kapp Putsch, episode 213. It’s a good question, and the failure to push back in any meaningful way against the Prussian Coup does not reflect well on the SPD. On the other hand, 1932 is not 1920. The German left is divided, and unemployment is at record levels; it isn’t clear how many of the dwindling numbers of German workers who still have jobs and bring home pay packets would be willing to risk them for the sake of protecting the SPD’s base in Prussia.

The German federal election came just eleven days after the decree on Prussia. Remember that between 1928 and 1930, Hitler’s NSDAP went from 2% of the vote to 18% of the vote, vaulting it from “minor party no one takes notice of” to the number two party in the Reichstag. This time, it went from 18% of the vote to 37%, more than doubling its seats to become the number one party in the Reichstag. The SPD dropped to second, with the Communists gaining a few seats to remain the number three party.

Hitler and the National Socialists of course crowed over this victory, the NSDAP depicting itself as advancing inevitably toward rule over all Germany. In his campaign speeches, Hitler spoke of the “miracle” of the NSDAP’s rapid growth, which he claimed was because the National Socialists were the only party that represented all Germans, not just a faction of them. And it would continue to represent all Germans, he vowed, without fear and without compromise.

Privately though, the Nazi leadership didn’t think the election result was all that great. The Party had drawn a slightly larger share of the vote than Hitler had personally during the second round of the Presidential election, which implied the NSDAP was peaking, at a level that still didn’t

give it a majority in the Reichstag, and it seemed that without an outright majority, they would never wield power.

Unless they joined a coalition. Joining the socialists or the Communists was out of the question, but the Centre Party was in fourth place, and the NSDAP plus the Centre Party would be just barely enough votes to wield a majority. Hitler considered it. The downside was that the Centre Party had joined with the SPD in the Weimar Coalition, making them part of the group Hitler regularly denounced as the “November criminals” in his public addresses.

After a few days of deliberation, Hitler dropped that idea, much to the relief of other top Party figures like Goebbels. He met with Schleicher on August 5 and laid out his demands, the price for NSDAP support of the government. They would be: himself for chancellor and four other seats in the cabinet for the National Socialists: Wilhelm Frick as minister of the interior, Gregor Strasser minister of labor, Hermann Göring minister of aviation, and Joseph Goebbels minister of education.

These demands were not extreme, considering that the NSDAP was the largest party in the Reichstag, and by the end of their meeting, Schleicher was convinced to support Hitler for chancellor. Hitler was willing to keep Schleicher on as defense minister, and it was likely Schleicher thought he could continue to run most of the government behind the scenes with Hitler as figurehead, just as he was currently doing with Papen.

As for the National Socialists, they saw a share of power as merely the first step on the path to total power. Beginning with these key ministries, Goebbels confided to his diary, “We’ll never give up power—they’ll have to cart out our dead bodies. This is a total solution. It will cost some blood, but [blood] cleanses and purifies...”

There was only one catch: President Hindenburg. He would have to go along with this plan. Papen presented the old man with two choices. Either accept another minority government, this time with Hitler as chancellor, or else the NSDAP and the Centre Party will form a coalition and force a new government. And you wouldn’t want the Centre Party in charge, now would you?

It turned out that Hindenburg didn’t, though he didn’t want Adolf Hitler in charge, either. He worried that Chancellor Hitler would not respect the power of the Presidency, which was likely correct, and also that Hitler would be a partisan, using his share of the government as a springboard to take full control, which was certainly correct. Hindenburg wanted the NSDAP in the government, but not leading it, and specifically, he would not approve Hitler as chancellor. Aside from these concerns, the aristocratic Hindenburg resented the commoner Hitler as an upstart, a presumptuous nobody trying to rise above his station. Or, as Hindenburg himself put it, “I cannot entrust the Empire of Kaiser Wilhelm and Bismarck to a private from Bohemia.”

Again, Hitler was not actually from Bohemia, although Hindenburg liked to say he was.

Next, Papen next met with Hitler and tried to get him to support the Papen government under terms acceptable to Hindenburg. The meeting lasted two hours and was heated. Papen offered Hitler the position of vice-chancellor, but Hitler angrily refused. Surely the chancellorship should go to the leader of the largest party in the coalition, the largest party in the Reichstag. They came to no agreement. A follow-up meeting between Hitler and Hindenburg also failed. Hindenburg told Hitler he couldn't justify handing over the government to a political party "so hostile toward people who thought differently."

It was a major political setback. Hitler and the NSDAP had carefully cultivated an aura of inevitability, yet now, on the threshold of power, the National Socialists were rebuffed once again. Outside the Party, Hitler was already widely perceived as rigid and intolerant—imagine that! His inability to strike a deal with Papen or Hindenburg reinforced that negative image, as did the Cabinet, when they told the public that the NSDAP leader had demanded full control over the government, which was not true. Hitler was willing to accept ministers from other parties as long as he was chancellor.

Not only did Hitler come across as inflexible and unyielding; his demands undercut his image and that of his Party as a leader and a movement that rose above petty factionalism and was solely concerned with the welfare of all Germans. Now the NSDAP looked as if it didn't care much about anything other than gaining power for itself.

Even worse for Hitler, there were those even within the Party who questioned his judgment on this. After the Party's long struggle, they had come this close to power only to remain shut out completely, as if they were still just a noisy little extremist group from Bavaria? Surely some scrap of power, the vice chancellorship and a couple of ministries, was better than the nation's largest political party remaining in the political wilderness. Gregor Strasser in particular urged Hitler to reconsider, but the Party leader would not.

It was also getting harder to restrain the SA. In the stormtroopers' world, if someone slams a door in your face, you break down the door. Hitler continued to urge SA leaders to restrain their men for the sake of his pledge to use only lawful means. But SA violence ramped up in the summer of 1932, particularly in the east. On August 9, the Papen government responded to the rise in stormtrooper violence by issuing an emergency decree that made politically motivated killing punishable by death. But that very night, in the village of Potempa in Upper Silesia, five SA members broke into the apartment of a coal miner and KPD member named Konrad Pietrzuch and beat him to death in front of his mother and brother. The assailants wore their SA uniforms and made no effort to hide their identities.

Pursuant to the emergency decree, the perpetrators were arrested and brought before a special court, where, less than two weeks later, they were sentenced to death. The National Socialists erupted in outrage. Two days after the verdict was announced, Joseph Goebbels published an article on the case headlined "The Jews Are to Blame," which tells you everything you need to

know about the content. Hitler sent the Potempa Five a telegram in which he denounced the verdict as monstrous and swore loyalty to them on his behalf and that of the Party.

A number of historians have pointed to this moment, when the National Socialists were swearing solidarity with murderers and blaming their crimes on the Jews, as a bright red flashing light, a blaring siren warning anyone in Germany—anyone anywhere in the world, really—of exactly how much Hitler’s pledge to seek power lawfully was worth, and what could be expected from a government led by Nazis. Some Germans got the message. *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* expressed amazement that the leader of a major political party would publicly declare his support for a gang of drunken thugs. But other Germans saw it differently and condemned the government and its emergency decree. Hjalmar Schacht sent Hitler a personal note offering his sympathy and encouragement, writing, “If you stay true to yourself, success is guaranteed.”

The outcry was sufficiently loud to make the Papen government back down. They commuted the sentences to life in prison.

If Hitler’s failure to strike a deal with Papen was damaging to Hitler and the NSDAP, it was also damaging to the government, which still lacked a majority in the Reichstag. Meanwhile, the National Socialists resumed talks with the Centre Party on forming a coalition, but former chancellor Brüning in particular was outspoken in his opposition and persuaded the leadership of his party that granting Hitler the chancellorship or appointing a Nazi interior minister was unacceptable.

So what to do? When the new Reichstag convened, Hermann Göring was elected president of the Reichstag, as that was a position normally assigned to the leading party. The position of first vice president normally went to the number two party, in this case the SPD, but the Nazis refused to support a socialist or a communist for a leadership position and a member of the Centre Party was elected instead.

When the Reichstag met for its first working session, Papen came with a red folder in hand containing a signed decree from President Hindenburg dissolving the Reichstag and calling another general election. The idea here was that the decree would give Papen leverage. He could demand the Reichstag support, or at least tolerate, his government and ratify its decrees, or else he could pull out the red folder and dissolve the Reichstag on the spot.

As matters played out, though, he never got the chance to use his leverage. Göring refused to recognize him and recognized instead a Communist deputy who moved for an immediate vote of no confidence in the government. Göring continued to ignore Papen during the debate that followed, even after the chancellor drew out the Presidential decree and laid it on Göring’s desk. Göring had the Reichstag proceed with the vote, and the result was devastating. It went 522 against the government versus just 42 in favor. Only the People’s Party and the National People’s Party, the fifth- and sixth-largest parties, supported Papen. Ninety percent of the Reichstag had rebuffed him. Papen would publicly dismiss the vote as irrelevant, since he had

notified the president of the Reichstag of the chamber's dissolution before the vote was taken, rendering it moot. But that in no way undid the rebuke.

But neither was a fresh election good news for the NSDAP. This November 6 general election would be the fourth national election in a year, not to mention all the various state elections, and the Nazi Party was short on funds, its members exhausted. The month of October 1932 saw the first-ever decline in Party membership.

Yet Hitler well understood now was not the time to ease up. Publicly, he struck a defiant tone as he embarked on yet another aerial whirlwind tour of Germany to campaign for the coming election. But privately, Hitler and the Party leadership worried that the tide might be moving against them.

The election result saw a 4% drop in support for the NSDAP, although it remained the largest party in the Reichstag. The SPD also saw a small drop, while the Communists increased their numbers yet again. Publicly, Hitler declared that his enemies' assault on him and his party had failed. Privately, the result was another disappointment. The National Socialists still did not hold a majority in the Reichstag and had no viable path to reach one, either at the ballot box or in coalition negotiations. The decline in the number of seats meant that even the long-shot possibility of a coalition with the Centre Party was now off the table. Worst of all, the NSDAP's first ever loss of seats punctured the Party's carefully constructed image of inevitability.

Hitler met with Hindenburg once again. They still couldn't come to an agreement, but the atmosphere of the meeting was more cordial this time. Hindenburg asked Hitler if he thought he could put together a coalition government; Hitler told Hindenburg the President would have to ask him to form a government first, before he could begin coalition talks. Hindenburg did not take the bait, but pleaded with Hitler to set aside partisan disputes and come together with his political opponents for the sake of the nation. Hitler suggested Hindenburg form another minority government that would rule by Presidential decree, only this time with Hitler in charge, and floated the idea of an enabling act, that is, special legislation that would allow the chancellor and cabinet to rule by decree, without need for Reichstag approval. An enabling act would require a two-thirds vote in favor. It had been done once before, during the inflation emergency.

Hindenburg thought it over, and later gave Hitler his decision. It was essentially the same as in August; he could not entrust the government to the leader of a party that had repeatedly shown its desire was to rule exclusively, without democratic cooperation with other parties. The decision came as no surprise to Hitler and his supporters.

After the dramatic way the Reichstag had rejected Papen's government in September, there was no way Hindenburg could continue to support him, though Papen wanted to continue in office. But Hindenburg turned to the defense minister, Kurt von Schleicher, to lead the new government. Schleicher sounded out Hitler about National Socialist support and got the usual

negative answer. Within the Party, Gregor Strasser continued to criticize Hitler for his rigid stance and urge compromise.

Some versions of this story claim that Schleicher and Strasser met secretly to discuss a plan under which Strasser would defy Hitler's no-compromise stance and accept the post of vice chancellor himself, and try to attract enough National Socialist support to form a majority coalition. It may be true, but we should be skeptical of the story, since the only source is Joseph Goebbels, whose honesty is, shall we say, not above question. They were enemies and Goebbels had every reason to want to discredit Strasser, so he may have invented this claim.

Still, either way, there's no doubt Strasser pressed hard for a more flexible Party attitude toward entering a coalition, and when Hitler refused to budge, on December 8, Strasser resigned all his Party positions and his seat in the Reichstag. Hitler was shocked and disappointed by the decision from someone he described as "one of my most intimate and oldest colleagues." He worried it was the beginning of a destructive split in the Party.

The next day, Strasser's resignation was the lead story in most German newspapers. Speculation was rampant that the NSDAP was disintegrating. But at a meeting with the other Party leaders at the Brown House the day after that, they all affirmed their support for Hitler. The Party rank and file were another story. Hitler was forced to travel around the country to give pep talks to local Party groups. He cited the example of his hero, Frederick the Great, who had faced multiple setbacks during the Seven Years War, but had triumphed in the end.

As the year 1932 drew to a close, and the newspapers ran their "year in review" articles, the majority of them were ready to declare the Nazis finished. "The massive National Socialist attack on the democratic state has been repelled," declared *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*. *Berliner Tageblatt*, looking back on 1932, joked that "[a]ll over the world, people talked about... what was his first name again? Adalbert Hitler? And later, he disappeared." *Der deutsche Volkswirt* told its readers, "The year 1932 has brought an end to Hitler's luck."

But the best news of all was this: the German economy had bottomed out and by late 1932 was showing signs of recovery. New Year's Day 1933 dawned with a sense that the crisis had passed, German democracy had survived, and the new year would be better than the old.

Thirty days later, Adolf Hitler would become chancellor.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Eshed for his kind donation, and thank you to Josh for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Eshed and Josh help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we delve into that fateful month of January 1933 and observe the next step in the pending catastrophe: Chancellor Hitler. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In last week's episode, I told you how Otto Strasser left the Nazi Party in 1930. His brother Gregor stayed on and remained an important figure in the NSDAP, though not always a compliant one, as we saw in today's episode.

Remaining with the Party would eventually cost Gregor Strasser his life during the Night of the Long Knives, which we will take a look at in a future episode. Otto Strasser was able to flee Germany and lived in exile in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, France, Bermuda, and finally Canada, where he lived for nearly ten years, before and during the Second World War. The German government put a price on his head, but it seems no one tried to collect.

After the war, Otto wanted to return to his native Bavaria but was at first barred by the US occupation forces. After the occupation ended, he was at last able to return and lived out his days in Munich, still professing a leftist sort of national socialism, while vigorously denying he had ever supported anything remotely resembling Nazi racism or anti-Semitism. In 1969, he published an autobiography, which he titled *Mein Kampf*, which to my mind seems not exactly the best way to distinguish yourself from Adolf Hitler. Otto Strasser died in 1974, at the age of 76.

[music: Closing Theme]