

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 269

“Chancellor Hitler”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

On New Year’s Day, 1933, the consensus among German politicians and newspaper editors was that Adolf Hitler and the strange phenomenon of National Socialism had peaked, and the movement was now losing steam.

Thirty days later, President Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler the next German chancellor.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 269. Chancellor Hitler.

We ended last week’s episode in Germany on New Year’s Day 1933. You’ll recall from last week that 1932 had been a busy year in German politics, what with four national elections that year: a first-round Presidential election, then the runoff, and then two elections for the Reichstag. There was also a general election in Prussia, which is like more than half of Germany, and other state elections.

It was an especially busy and exhausting year for Adolf Hitler and his party, the NSDAP, which went all in on every one of these elections, and while they racked up vote totals that were impressive, and exceeded the expectations of many, they kept falling short of a majority, while Hitler’s steadfast refusal to compromise with other political parties left them out of government, even when they were the largest party.

The election results of 1932 also broke down the awkward and uneasy political truce that began in 1930, with a minority government ruling by a string of emergency Presidential decrees. Hindenburg won another term as President, defeating Hitler easily enough, but victory did not taste sweet to the old general. It turned to ashes in his mouth with the realization that he owed his office to the politicians he most despised: the Weimar Coalition parties that in his view had undermined the war effort and cost Germany—and Hindenburg—victory in 1918. The people he respected, and whose support he wished for, were on the political right. They were the old

aristocracy, the industrialists, the officers and soldiers who had fought so valiantly and stubbornly during the Great War. Only they had voted for Hitler.

Hindenburg reacted to his stinging victory by moving farther to the right. He had been flexible, accommodating to the center and the left in a way few foresaw back in 1925 when he first ran for President. But if it was going to cost him the support of the only people whose support mattered to him, then he would become inflexible and unaccommodating.

Historians have described German politics of this period as a “creeping coup.” The first step away from representative democracy was the instillation of the unpopular Brüning government, backed not by a parliamentary majority but by the power of the President to issue decrees. But once Hindenburg dismissed Brüning and replaced him with Papen, after the 1932 Presidential election, Germany had taken a second step away from democracy. Papen was a politician with no notable support, apart from Hindenburg and, I should add, the military. He was meant to be a figurehead chancellor, although to his credit, Papen was not content to take orders from Hindenburg and Schleicher.

But this creeping coup kept creeping along not only because of support from Hindenburg and the military, but also because of the deadlock in the Reichstag. Had the various political parties represented in the Reichstag been able to put together a majority coalition, that coalition could have reclaimed the government. But no such coalition was possible. Two of the largest parties in the Reichstag, the NSDAP and the KPD, both refused to enter into coalition with any other parties. In fact, those two parties combined could have formed a majority by themselves. Of course, that was unthinkable. They hated each other. Adolf Hitler went around saying that if he accomplished nothing else in his life, he'd settle for the utter destruction of Marxism in Germany. The Communists had no use for the National Socialists either, although they saved their fiercest contempt for the Social Democratic Party. Hitler hated the SPD also, but for the opposite reason. To Hitler, the SPD were the traitors who had cost Germany victory in the Great War; to the Communists, the SPD were the traitors who had cost German workers victory in the Revolution that followed.

There's no one a leftist hates more than a center-leftist.

If you crunch the numbers and examine all the possible combinations of parties, you'll find there's only one other way to reach a majority in the Reichstag. That would be a coalition of the NSDAP, the National Socialists, plus a couple of smaller center-right parties. For a brief moment, a coalition between the National Socialists and the Centre Party looked feasible, a so-called brown-black coalition, because black was the color of the Centre Party. After the second Reichstag election in 1932, that coalition would no longer get you to a majority, but you might add in Alfred Hugenberg's German National People's Party. That three-way coalition would still get you to a majority, even after the second election.

But all attempts to form coalitions between the National Socialists and any other party or parties kept foundering over Hitler's demand that he be chancellor in any such coalition government. Hitler's unwillingness to compromise on this point created dissent even within his own party, and drew mockery outside it. On the face of things, though, this was not an outrageous demand. Hitler was the party leader of the largest party in the Reichstag; this is normally the person who gets the top job in government in any parliamentary system, right?

It is notable that Hitler for chancellor was a non-starter with so many other German political figures. For us today, with the benefit of hindsight, the reason why you wouldn't want Hitler as chancellor is obvious. If we had access to some kind of time machine that allowed us to send messages back to Germany in 1932, the message we would urgently send to the German ruling elites would be: do not let Adolf Hitler anywhere near the levers of power. It's worth any price you may have to pay to keep Hitler out of government, because the alternative will be much worse.

That's because in our time, we regard Adolf Hitler as History's Greatest Monster. That's not a figure of speech. Adolf Hitler is literally History's Greatest Monster. But that's the benefit of hindsight. We would understand if Germans in 1932 couldn't see that as clearly as we can. Still, I'm struck by the fact that they *did* see it, more or less. If not for exactly the same reasons we despise him, most of Germany's ruling elite understood at the time that putting Hitler in power would be deeply problematic.

There were a number of reasons for this. Hitler kept insisting he was the only person who could save Germany from its economic and political woes, but he didn't offer any kind of rational program with which to back up that claim. To aristocrats like Hindenburg, Hitler was a commoner, a presumptuous little man with no breeding or education or other notable qualification. The leadership of the military—a group that overlaps considerably with the aristocracy—thought Hitler should be respected for his patriotism and his service to the nation, but still. He had only been a corporal, not even officer material. To the journalists and academics, he was a figure long on grievances but short on solutions. To the other politicians and party leaders, he was an odd duck. While Hitler could be well-mannered, even charming, he had an unsettling tendency to forget himself and launch into harangues that lasted as long as an hour, as if he were on a podium speaking before an enraptured crowd and not, you know, in a meeting or at a dinner party. These harangues were typically litanies of complaints about all the people Hitler disliked, and he disliked a lot of people: communists, socialists, Jews, the Weimar coalition, Jews, foreigners, communists, plutocrats, socialists, Slavs, Jews, the French, and did I remember to mention communists, socialists, and Jews?

The remarkable thing about this moment in German history is not that they couldn't see what a monster Hitler was, or would become; it was the extent to which so many people did at least see that Hitler was unsuited to lead a government, or a country. But it must also be said that in addition to a perceptive evaluation of Hitler as an individual, a certain amount of blunt classism

was also in play. Hitler was a physically small man with a common background. He was not, as they say, “one of us.” And Hitler was well aware of the disdain in which he was held by the upper classes and he resented it.

It was as if a Hitler boycott was in effect among German elites, with a few notable exceptions, like the banker Hjalmar Schacht. And it was doing damage, both to Hitler’s image and to that of his party. Hitler proved he could rally a large segment of German voters—as much as 37%—behind him and his party, but he had so far failed to prove he could work cooperatively with anyone in the other 63%. His truculence was tarnishing the Party, as well. After four hard-fought election campaigns in one year, the National Socialists seemed no nearer to power at the end of 1932 than they had at the beginning, and in the most recent election, the NSDAP lost seats for the first time, which could be taken as a sign that the movement had peaked. Its supporters were becoming disenchanted with Hitler and his inability to cut a deal.

But this works both ways. The parties that represented the other 63% of the German electorate couldn’t reach a compromise either, with Hitler or with each other, which could cost those parties’ their support just as easily. It was an uneasy standoff between Hitler and his political adversaries. Who would give in first?

The answer to that question is: Franz von Papen, the former chancellor who had been chosen by Hindenburg and his advisors, notably Kurt von Schleicher, in the hope that he would be a useful figurehead, until he got dumped by an embarrassingly large vote of no confidence in the Reichstag.

In December 1932, after he was forced out of office, Papen gave a speech before the Berlin Gentlemen’s Club. In the audience was fellow aristocrat Kurt von Schröder, a banker who had become, if not an outright Nazi, at least Nazi-curious. Following the speech, Schröder approached Papen, and from their conversation emerged the suggestion that Schröder arrange a meeting between Papen and Hitler.

It is not clear with whom the idea originated, but Papen was very much resentful over his curt dismissal, and the thought of joining forces with Hitler and turning the tables on Schleicher, who had succeeded him as chancellor, held a certain appeal. As for Hitler, the offer of a meeting raised the tantalizing possibility of a crack in the wall of disapproval shown to him by the elites. Here were two wealthy, prominent Germans with “vons” in their names, and *they* wanted to talk to *him*. And they had contacts with other wealthy Germans with “von” in their name, including the biggest “von” of them all, President Paul von Hindenburg. Hmm. Intriguing. Tell me more.

This meeting was held on January 4, 1933, at Schröder’s home in Cologne, and one historian has called it “the hour in which the Third Reich was born.” Hitler opened the meeting by condemning Papen for his government’s treatment of the Potempa Five, which we talked about last time. Papen answered by tactfully suggesting the two of them put their past differences behind them and discuss ways they could work together in the future. He suggested

arrangements under which leadership of the government could be shared between them. Hitler launched into another of his harangues, this one about the chancellorship and why he alone should have it, although he suggested he was open to a coalition with other conservatives, so long as they would support Hitler for chancellor and his agenda of reforms. Reform number one would be the removal of all socialists, communists, and Jews from the civil service. The second would be the re-establishment of public order in Germany.

The only point on which the two were able to reach agreement was that Schleicher and his government must go, to be replaced by their coalition. They did not agree on what that coalition would look like, nor most importantly, on who would become chancellor, but they did agree to continue the discussions. Hitler left the meeting feeling encouraged.

They had gone to great lengths to keep this meeting a secret, but German newspapers got wind of it and headlines announced the news that Hitler and Papen were contemplating joining forces to oust the government. Publicly, Papen denied there was any kind of falling out between him and Chancellor Schleicher. In a private meeting with the President, Papen told Hindenburg that Hitler had given up his earlier demands and was now willing to join a right-wing coalition government. Hindenburg told Papen to continue with the negotiations.

Hitler and Papen met a couple more times in Berlin, at the home of a mutual acquaintance, an Army officer and aristocrat named Joachim von Ribbentrop. Ribbentrop and Papen had become friends during the war. Afterward, Ribbentrop left the Army and married the daughter of a winemaker. He had since become rich selling sparkling wines across Europe, and had joined the NSDAP just a few months ago. Now he was happy to volunteer his services as a liaison between Papen and Hitler.

Ribbentrop also hosted a meeting between Hitler and Oskar von Hindenburg, the President's 49-year-old son. The younger Hindenburg reported to his father that Hitler had impressed him at their meeting. Hitler's take on the meeting was a little different; he described the President's son as unusually stupid.

By late January, the negotiations between Papen and Hitler had progressed to the point where Papen was ready to abandon the idea of shared power and was willing to concede to Hitler the chancellorship, provided Papen would be vice-chancellor, but when Papen raised this idea with the President, Hindenburg refused. Undeterred, Papen suggested to Hitler that the old man might go for the idea if other right-wing parties were also part of the coalition, particularly Alfred Hugenberg's German National People's Party, or DNVP. You'll recall how Hitler and the NSDAP, Hugenberg and the DNVP, and some other right-wing nationalist groups had rallied together at Bad Harzburg a little over a year ago, and had formed the so-called Harzburg Front. The Front broke apart when elections came and the parties couldn't agree on a common list of candidates, but Papen now proposed reviving the front. He well knew that Hindenburg longed to be the leader of a united right wing, so why not give the old man exactly what he wanted?

[music: Beethoven, Symphony No. 6]

The new Reichstag—that is, the *new new* Reichstag, the one elected in November—was due to meet for the first time on January 31, and only one party, the German People's Party, had declared its support for the Schleicher government. The German People's Party, or DVP had once shared power as part of the Weimar Coalition; now it was the number six party in the Reichstag, down to a mere 20 seats, about 3% of the chamber. Such was the state of German politics by 1933. It sure looked like another vote of no confidence was imminent, and that it would pass overwhelmingly, dooming Schleicher and his government to the same fate that had befallen Papen.

But Schleicher refused to sit still and be humiliated. He proposed to Hindenburg that the President dissolve the Reichstag and use his emergency powers to postpone the election that action would normally trigger, in order to buy the government some time. It would also insulate the government from any kind of democratic accountability, and when the Social Democrats and the Centre Party got wind of this proposal, they warned Hindenburg that such an act would be unconstitutional, undemocratic, unacceptable, and would result in grave consequences.

Little did they know an even worse alternative was about to emerge.

When Hindenburg refused to grant the emergency decree Schleicher requested, Schleicher asked Hindenburg to dissolve the Reichstag anyway, which would trigger yet another general election in 60 days. For those of you keeping score at home, this would be Germany's fifth national election in less than a year. This Hindenburg also refused to do, leaving Schleicher with two alternatives: either appear before the Reichstag and take his medicine, or exercise the better part of valor and resign before it assembled. Schleicher made the latter choice.

With Schleicher gone, Hindenburg turned to Papen and asked him to form a new government, a move that sparked grumbling across Germany. The Reichstag had already expressed its clear disapproval of Papen, and barely two months later, the President was going to try to shove him down the country's throat once again.

While the drama of the fall of Schleicher and the reemergence of Papen played out in public, in private, Papen led the negotiations to put together a Hitler government. Alfred Hugenberg, leader of the DNVP, agreed to join the coalition, provided certain cabinet posts were reserved for his party. Franz Seldte, leader of the Stahlhelm, also agreed to support the coalition. Hitler in turn backed off from some of his earlier demands. Apart from himself as chancellor, the only cabinet posts he insisted go to National Socialists were: Wilhelm Frick for interior minister and Hermann Göring as deputy interior minister for Prussia. Hitler was drawing on the Nazi experience in Thuringia, where they had accomplished so much with just two cabinet posts. Now he was going to try this trick again. The interior ministries controlled the police. And if you control the police, you control a lot.

Hindenburg was impressed with Hitler's concessions. It seemed to him that the NSDAP had mellowed and was finally ready to make nice with other political parties. Also, the new government would include a number of apolitical cabinet ministers, holdovers from the Papen and Schleicher governments, so it seemed the new government would not represent a major break with the status quo, and so Hindenburg approved the deal, which was announced to the public on January 30. But Hitler had made one final demand in exchange for the concessions he'd agreed to: he wanted another election. There were objections from those who argued that the November election had accurately expressed the mood of the country and there was no need for another one. The argument almost broke the coalition on the very day it was to be announced, but in the end, Hitler got his way.

The Nazis were ecstatic. After two agonizing years of being almost, but not quite, in power, after multiple occasions when the goal was seemingly within reach, only to be snatched away, here they were. Adolf Hitler, the Great War corporal, had gone from a prison cell to chancellor of the Reich in less than eight years. Now, at the relatively young age of 43, a man who had no education beyond high school, spoke no foreign languages, and had never set foot outside the borders of Germany and Austria, unless you count his military service in Belgium and France, would lead the government of one of the world's Great Powers. He was only a few months older than Theodore Roosevelt had been when he became President of the United States in 1901.

The more traditional conservatives, like Papen and Hugenberg, believed they had successfully co-opted Hitler and his movement for their own purposes, as most of the government were from other parties or technocratic holdovers from earlier governments. As vice-chancellor, Papen fully expected to be running the show from behind the scenes. He told a friend, "In two months, we'll have pushed Hitler so far into a corner he'll squeak." Even outside the government, it was widely assumed that Hindenburg and Papen would hold the real power. "This is not a Hitler cabinet," declared the *Vossische Zeitung*. "It is a Hitler-Papen-Hugenberg government."

In fact, few people, in Germany or abroad, saw the new Hitler government as a watershed moment. Germany had gone from a Brüning government to a Papen government to a Schleicher government to a Hitler-Papen government in just eight months. This was merely the latest cabinet reshuffle in an ongoing political muddle. Hindenburg had already called new elections for March 5, when the smart bet would be that yet another government would succeed this one.

You can accuse Adolf Hitler of a lot of things, but one thing you can't accuse him of is being coy about his political program. He had laid out his views repeatedly, in his book *Mein Kampf* and in the countless speeches he had given across Germany. Domestically, he opposed the Weimar constitution and political system, which he believed had shackled Germany under the leadership of its worst elements; those who had betrayed the nation in 1918, cost Germany the war and made common cause with the Fatherland's enemies.

He had said that if he accomplished only one thing with his life, he wanted it to be the elimination of Marxism, root and branch, from Germany. He meant by this not only the KPD, the Communists, who took orders from the Bolsheviks in Moscow and made no bones about it, but also the SPD, the Social Democrats, the principal traitors of 1918 and the leading party of the equally treasonous Weimar Coalition afterward.

And then there were Jewish people. To Hitler, Jewish people were equally responsible for Bolshevism in Russia and the plutocracy in France, Britain, and America, both of which well understood it was German destiny to become the world's leading people, and in their jealousy and hatred sought to smother Germany by underhanded means before its dominance became total. And Jewish Germans were nothing less than the domestic agents of this international conspiracy, who secretly controlled the German socialists and sought to control German capitalism on behalf of the international conspiracy. Jewish power within Germany was insidious, dangerous, and had to be broken, by whatever means necessary.

Beyond that, the German people needed *Lebensraum*, or living space. Seventy million Germans would suffocate, crammed into a relatively small stretch of land in the middle of Europe. The twentieth century had seen the rise of the United States and Russia as major powers, and the reason was clear. The Americans controlled a huge territory to their west, which they conquered and exploited, their *Lebensraum*. The Russians had done the same in their own east. The British and French had colonial possessions scattered across the globe, which fueled their economic growth.

Germany could never manage an overseas empire of the kind Britain or France enjoyed. Geography ruled that out. The Royal Navy controlled the seas and the island of Great Britain literally sat astride Germany's sea routes to distant lands. That left the other option, the Russo-American option. Germany must expand to the east, the lands there to be redistributed to Germany's unemployed, so that the German nation and economy could grow the way Russia's and America's had. Hitler was rarely specific about which eastern lands he was referring to, but anyone listening had to know he was speaking about Poland and the Soviet Union.

And what about the people already living there? Germany would do the same as the Russians and the Americans had done to the indigenous peoples living in the lands they had appropriated. They would be relocated, or enslaved, or killed, as necessary.

That was the long-range plan. But Hitler's immediate problem was the general election he himself had insisted on, now scheduled for March 5, 1933. His goal was to use the tools available to him as chancellor to win the prize that had eluded him through three previous general elections: a Reichstag in which his party, the NSDAP, held an outright majority. No more coalitions, no more compromises, just 200 proof National Socialism.

But that is a story for next week's episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Suzanne and Daniel and Alan for their kind donations,

and thank you to the Bugala family for becoming patrons of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Suzanne and Daniel and Alan and the Bugala family 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 track the course of Germany's fifth national election campaign in a year. This one's going to be a little more eventful than the other four. You know, it took Benito Mussolini four or five years to go from prime minister of Italy to undisputed dictator of Italy. Adolf Hitler will tread the same path in four or five months. How did he do it? The Reichstag Fire, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. On the evening of February 3, 1933, Hitler's fourth day in office as chancellor, he attended a get-acquainted dinner with the highest-ranking officers of the German Army and Navy.

After dinner, Hitler gave a speech, which lasted two hours, and in it, once again, he laid out in plain language the National Socialist program. Marxism had to be eliminated, and the cancer of democracy removed from the German body politic. Much to the delight of his audience, Hitler asserted the need to free the German military from the restrictions placed upon it by the Treaty of Versailles. Germany had the right to be, and must be, the military equal of any other power.

To what end? Conquest of lands to the east, he told the generals and the admirals, and the "ruthless Germanification" of those lands.

Admiral Erich Raeder, chief of the Navy, later reported that Hitler's speech had been "extraordinarily well received by everyone who heard it." Hitler's pledge to expand the military insured he and his party would not be opposed by powerful figures in the Army. But you have to wonder how they would have felt had they foreseen that Hitler had just put them on the road that would lead to the largest military confrontation in human history, a road which would in turn lead to the deaths of over thirty million people, most of them civilians.

[music: Closing Theme]