Why was Hitler appointed Chancellor in January 1933?

On 30 January 1933 President Hindenburg summoned Adolf Hitler to Berlin and appointed him Chancellor. In many ways this was a surprising development. Hindenburg disliked Hitler. In August 1932 he had refused to appoint him Chancellor after the Nazis’ great electoral success. Since then Nazi support had declined and the movement had been torn by divisions. Many in the elite were also wary of the radicalism and the generally vulgar nature of the Nazi Movement.

Despite this, in January 1933, members of the elite persuaded Hindenburg to appoint Hitler Chancellor. By 1932, key industrialists and landowners were very concerned about the lack of effective government. They had never been committed to parliamentary democracy and now believed their fears were confirmed. Some saw the possibility of using the Nazis’ popular support to channel the political system in a more authoritarian direction. The Junkers were also upset by Brüning’s and later Schleicher’s reform proposals to buy up bankrupt estates to resettle poor farmers. This was seen by landowners as ‘agrarian Bolshevism’, and contributed to the intrigue that persuaded Hindenburg to dismiss both Brüning and Schleicher.

Members of the elite used a number of tactics in what has been called their ‘faming strategy’ for the Nazi Party.

1. The first tactic was to make Hitler Vice-Chancellor under Papen; this was put forward in August 1932, but Hitler rejected it, demanding to be Chancellor. Hitler’s rejection was risky, since he did not get the chancellorship, and it was seen as a great defeat by many Nazis.

2. The second tactic was used in December 1932. Schleicher, hoping to split the Nazis, proposed the idea of himself as Chancellor, with the Nazi Gregor Strasser as Vice-Chancellor. This failed, and Strasser left the Nazi Party.

3. The final tactic (arranged by a Cologne banker, Kurt von Schröder, members of the Reich Agrarian League, industrialists and Oskar von Hindenburg) was to put Hitler in office as Chancellor, but surrounded by Papen as Vice-Chancellor and other conservatives. The Nazis’ current difficulties would make them easier to control. Hindenburg agreed, against his own judgement. Papen committed to a friend, ‘We’ve hired him’, but he was totally wrong.

Hindenburg – a personal motive?

Some historians argue that Hindenburg’s decision to appoint Hitler as Chancellor was partly a selfish move.

In the late 1920s, German agriculture suffered from low prices for farm products. Large landowners in the east used their influence on governments to get financial help. This resulted in the Osthilfe (Help for the East) programme. Funds were allocated to large landowners to help them stay aloof. Hindenburg had been given back his family’s former bankrupt estate at Neudeck in East Prussia in 1927 as an eightieth birthday present. This was intended, successfully, to tie him close to Junker interests. However, in 1932 a Reichstag committee investigating the misuse of Osthilfe funds for gambling, supporting mistresses, etc. implicated the Neudeck estate in the scandal. This may have influenced Hindenburg’s decision to appoint Hitler in the hope that the investigation would be ended.

SOURCE B.13 Industrialists’ letter to Hindenburg, November 1932

Your Excellency! Like you, we are imbued [filled] with an impassioned love of the German people and the Fatherland… together with Your Excellency, we agree that it is necessary to create a government independent of the parliamentary parties…

The outcome of the Reichstag elections of 6 November has demonstrated that the present cabinet, whose honest intentions no one among the German people would doubt, has failed to find sufficient support among the German people; for its actual policies.

... It is quite apparent that another dissolution of parliament, leading to yet another general election with its inevitable frenzied party-political struggles, would be inimical [unwanted] to political as well as economic peace and stability. But it is also apparent that any constitutional change that does not have widespread popular support would have even greater negative economic, political and moral effects.

We therefore consider it to be our duty, Your Excellency, to humbly beg you to consider reconstituting the cabinet in a manner which would guarantee it with the greatest possible popular support.

We declare ourselves to be free from any specific party-political interests. But we recognize in the nationalist movement, which is sweeping through our people, the auspicious beginning of an era of rebirth, for the German economy which can only be achieved by the surmounting of class conflict. We know that the rebirth will demand great sacrifices. We believe that these sacrifices will only be made willingly when the greater part of this nationalist movement plays a leading role in the government.

The transfer of responsibility for leading a Presidential cabinet to the leader of the largest nationalist group would remove the waste and slag that inevitably clings to any mass movement. As a result millions of people who at present still stand on the sidelines would be swept into active participation.

Proudly trusting in Your Excellency’s wisdom and Your Excellency’s feeling for the unity of his people,

We greet Your Excellency with the greatest respect,

Bosch, Schacht, Thyssen, Krupp [and 20 other industrialists]
Review: Why did parliamentary government decline in Germany 1930–3 and why was Hitler appointed Chancellor in January 1933?

In this chapter you have studied the decline of parliamentary government and how within that context Hitler became Chancellor. Students can be confused about the relationship between the failure of the Weimar Republic and the appointment of Hitler. Was his appointment an abrupt end to Weimar democracy? Most historians now argue that seeing 30 January 1933 as marking the end of Weimar democracy is too simple. Indeed, it is argued that Weimar democracy was already in deep, perhaps terminal, trouble from 1920 onwards and that some form of authoritarian government was virtually inevitable. This could have taken many forms; the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor was just one of the options. In this view, the failure of the Weimar Republic happened for far deeper reasons than those behind Hitler’s appointment, which might have been avoided.

Students also sometimes assume that they need to explain why many Germans wanted to create a totalitarian Nazi dictatorship. However, you need not look for deep reasons why Germany succumbed to totalitarianism. This was not the intention of the elite, but the result of its miscalculation of how it could use Hitler for its own purposes. In addition, the millions of Germans who voted for Hitler did not do so because they wanted to kill millions of Jews or start a world war. These were the eventual results of their actions, but not the reasons for them.

Our final two sources are powerful testimony to why many ordinary Germans were prepared to support the Nazis and have Hitler as their leader.

SOURCE 8.18 The distinguished banker Johannes Zahn, writing in 1937, explains his feelings in the early 1930s.

You have to consider Germany’s general position [in 1930–3]. An unemployed man either joined the Communists or became an SA man, and so business believed it was better if these people became storm troopers as there was discipline and order . . . you really have to say this today, at the beginning you couldn’t see whether National Socialism was something good with a few bad side-effects, or something evil with a few good side-effects; you couldn’t tell.

Finally, we end this chapter by reading Kershaw’s summary of the reasons for Hitler’s appointment.


Access to Hindenburg was the key to power. Accordingly, the presidential palace became the focal point of intrigues of power brokers, even freed from institutional constraints, conspired with guile and initiative in private wheel-dealings to further their own power ambitions. And behind the macho power-brokers stood the lobbying of important elite groups, anxious to attain a political solution of the crisis favourable to their interests.

For . . . had Hitler as their first choice. But by January 1933, with other options apparently exhausted, most, with the big landowners to the fore, were prepared to entertain a Hitler government. Had they opposed it, a Hitler chancellorship would have been unacceptable. Hitler needed the elite to attain power. But by January 1933, they in turn needed Hitler as he alone could deliver the mass support required to impose a tenable authoritarian solution to Germany’s crisis of capitalism and crisis of the state.

Activity

Explain what each of Sources 8.15–17 shows about the Weimar Republic at this time.
ACTIVITY

Who killed Weimar democracy? A mock trial

You have now investigated in detail the collapse of parliamentary government in Weimar Germany. You will probably have concluded that, although the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor put the last nail in the coffin of Weimar democracy, parliamentary government was doomed well before that—tainted by the votes of the German people and the manoeuverings of Weimar politicians. You have probably formed your own view as to who bears most blame for its demise. You now have the chance to review all you have studied as you put the main culprits on trial. Chart 8H shows the main culprits and summarises their contributions to the power struggles of 1930–3. The following four defendants are on trial for their role in destroying Weimar democracy:

- Brüning
- Papen
- Schleicher
- Hindenburg

There are two charges to consider at the trial:

a) that this person deliberately undermined Weimar democracy
b) that this person was most to blame for bringing Adolf Hitler to power.

These charges are closely related but at the trial they are each to be considered and answered separately.

Before the trial

1. Allocate the following roles:
   - Judge: one person to preside over the court and run the trial.
   - Four defendants: Brüning, Papen, Schleicher, Hindenburg. (If you have enough people, each defendant could also have a defence lawyer.)
   - Four prosecutors: one to present the case against each defendant.
   - The jury: the rest of the group. You will be deciding how guilty each person is on a scale of 0–5.

2. The defendants and prosecutors will need to prepare their case in advance using the information in Chart 8H and in the rest of this chapter. They should refer particularly to pages 133 and 135, which outlines the attitudes and careers of the four accused.

At the trial

3. The first prosecutor makes his or her case on both charges.
4. The defendant and/or his lawyer replies, making a brief speech in his defence to explain his aims and actions.
5. The defendant is then cross-examined by the prosecutor.
6. The jury then gives the defendant a score out of 5 for each of the two charges (0 being not at all guilty, 5 being very guilty).
7. Steps 3–6 are repeated for the other defendants.
8. The jury then discusses the issues and reaches an overall conclusion as to who is the most guilty on each count. They can revise their own original score for a defendant if they wish.

After the trial

9. As a group, discuss the results of the trial and the issues that have emerged from it.
10. Copy and complete the chart below to give you a written record of what you have learned from the trial.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Responsibility for undermining democracy</th>
<th>Responsibility for bringing Hitler to power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brüning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papen</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Schleicher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hindenburg</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

GENERAL PAUL VON HINDENBURG

President: 1935–34
- Key power of appointing and dismissing chancellors
- Able to issue decrees
- Influenced by Schleicher, key civil servants, Junkers, bankers and his son Oskar
- Acted within the letter of the constitution
- Favourable to more authoritarian system
- Concerned about investigations into his estate
- Failed to support the Hitler government in 1930
- Supported presidential government 1930–3
- Hesitated to support Hitler, seeing him as an upstart
- Refused to make Hitler Chancellor in August 1932
- Appointed Hitler Chancellor in January 1933

HEINRICH BRÜNING

Chancellor March 1930–May 1932
- Tried to gain support from the Reichstag
- Fled to fewer more authoritarian system, possibly a monarchy
- Called elections July 1930 in which extreme parties such as the Nazis made a major gain
- Tolerated by Reichstag for two years but had no working majority
- Increasingly used presidential decrees rather than Reichstag laws to govern
- Failed to take action to reduce impact of slump (including the Hunger Chancellor)
- Hoped to use the Depression to change the regime and end reparations
- Made some reforms, but upset Junkers and Hindenburg with agrarian reform plans
- Forced to resign by Hindenburg

ADOLF HITLER

Chancellor January 1933 onwards
- Assumed enemy of democracy
- Tried to overthrow the Weimar Republic in 1933
- Led massive campaigns against the Weimar regime
- Nazi party tried to disrupt the Reichstag
- Nazi party violently attacked their opponents
- Leader of the largest party in 1932
- Papen's offer to him to support them
- Schleicher resisted his appointment
- Hindenburg opposed him as Chancellor
- Hindenburg backed him with emergency decrees
- Once in power, totally destroyed Weimar democracy
- When Hindenburg died in 1934 he declared himself President and dictator of Germany