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11 Political intrigue and the appointment of Hitler

- ▶ Why did Papen and Schleicher fail?
- ▶ Why did President Hindenburg eventually appoint Hitler as chancellor?

The political strength of the Nazi Party following the July 1932 *Reichstag* elections was beyond doubt (see page 110). However, there still remained the problem for Hitler of how to translate this popular following into real power. He was determined to take nothing less than the post of chancellor for himself. This was unacceptable to both Schleicher and Papen, who were keen to have Nazis in the cabinet, but only in positions of limited power. Therefore, the meeting between Hitler, Papen and Hindenburg on 13 August ended in deadlock.

Papen's failure

As long as Papen retained the sympathy of Hindenburg, Hitler's ambitions would remain frustrated. Indeed, a leading modern historian, Jeremy Noakes, describes the period from August to December 1932 as 'the months of crisis' for the Nazis, since 'it appeared the policy of legality had led to a cul-de-sac'. Party morale declined and some of the wilder SA members again became increasingly restless.

On the other hand, Papen was humiliated when on 12 September the *Reichstag* passed a massive vote of 'no confidence' in his government (512 votes to 42). Consequently, he dissolved the new *Reichstag* and called for yet another election. In some respects Papen's reading of the situation was sound. The Nazis were short of money, their morale was low and the electorate was growing tired of repeated elections. These factors undoubtedly contributed to the fall in the Nazi vote on 6 November to 11.7 million (33.1 per cent), which gave them 196 seats. However, Papen's tactics had not achieved their desired end, since the fundamental problem of overcoming the lack of majority *Reichstag* support for his cabinet remained. Hitler stood firm: he would not join the government except as chancellor.

In his frustration, Papen began to consider a drastic alternative; the dissolution of the *Reichstag*, the declaration of **martial law** and the establishment of a presidential dictatorship. However, such a plan was completely opposed by Schleicher, who found Papen's growing political desperation and his friendship with President Hindenburg additional causes for concern. Schleicher still believed that the popular support for the Nazis could not be ignored, and that Papen's plan would give rise to civil commotion and perhaps civil war. When he informed Hindenburg of the army's lack of confidence in Papen, the President was forced, unwillingly, to demand the resignation of his friendly chancellor.

KEY TERM

Martial law Government and control by military authorities over the civilian population.

Schleicher's failure

Schleicher at last came out into the open. Over the previous two years he had been happy to play his role behind the scenes, but he now decided to become the dominant player when he gained the favour of Hindenburg and was appointed chancellor on 2 December.

Schleicher's aims, rather ambitiously, were to achieve political stability and restore national confidence by creating a more broadly based government. He had a two-pronged strategy:

- First, to gain some support from elements of the political left, especially the trade unions, by suggesting a programme of public works.
- Second, to split the Nazis and attract the more socialist wing of the Nazi Party, under Gregor Strasser, by offering him the position of vice-chancellor.

With these objectives Schleicher, therefore, intended to project himself as the chancellor of national reconciliation. However, his political manoeuvres came to nothing.

First, the trade unions remained deeply suspicious of his motives and, encouraged by their political masters from the SPD, broke off negotiations. Moreover, the idea of public works alienated some of the landowners and businessmen. Secondly, although Schleicher's strategy of offering Strasser the post of vice-chancellor was a very clever one, in the end it did not work. Strasser responded positively to Schleicher's overtures and he was keen to accept the post, but the appointment exacerbated the fundamental differences between Hitler and Strasser and led to a massive row. Hitler retained the loyalty of the party's leadership and Strasser was left isolated and promptly forced to resign from the party. This marked a major defeat to the radical Nazis.

Nevertheless, the incident had been a major blow to party morale, and tensions remained high in the last few weeks of 1932, as the prospect of achieving power seemed to drift away.

Hitler's success

Hitler's fortunes did not begin to take a more favourable turn until the first week of 1933. Papen had never forgiven Schleicher for dropping him and was determined to regain political office. He recognised that he could achieve this only by convincing Hindenburg that he could muster majority support in the *Reichstag*. Consequently, secret contacts were made with Nazi leaders, which culminated in a meeting on 4 January 1933 between Papen and Hitler. Here, it was agreed in essence that Hitler should head a Nazi–Nationalist coalition government with Papen as vice-chancellor.

Backstairs intrigue to unseat Schleicher now took over. Papen looked for support for his plan from major landowners, leaders of industry and the

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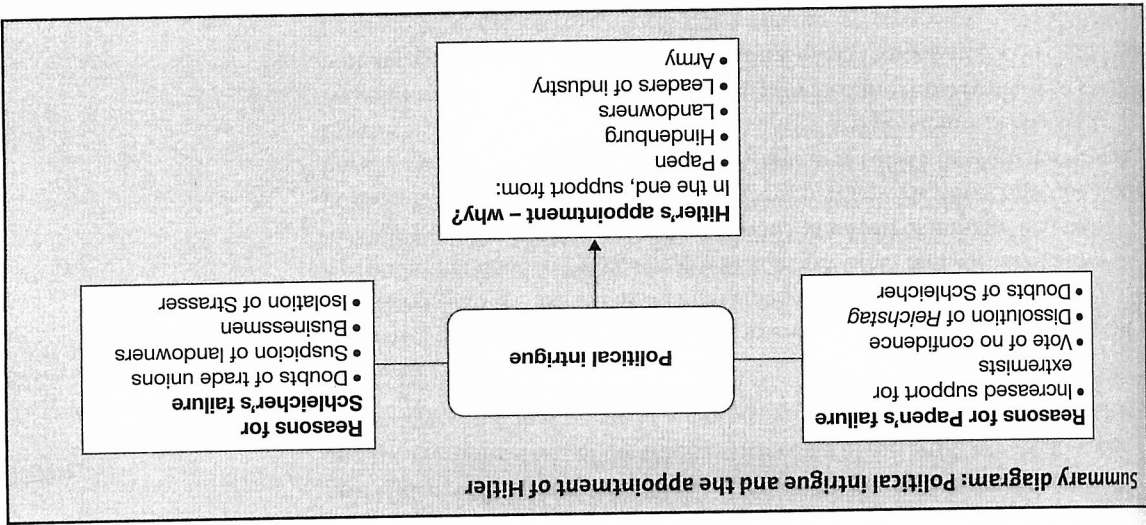
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army. It was only now that the conservative establishment thought that they had identified an escape from the threat of communism and the dangerous intrigues of Schleicher. But, above all, Papen had to convince the president himself. Hindenburg, undoubtedly encouraged by his son, Oskar, and his state secretary, Meißner, eventually gave in. Schleicher had failed in his attempt to bring stability. In fact, he had only succeeded in frichtening the powerful vested interests with his ambitious plans.

Hindenburg finally agreed, on the advice of Papen, to withdraw his support for Schleicher and to appoint Hitler as chancellor, in the mistaken conviction that Hitler could be controlled and used in the interests of the conservative establishment. Papen believed that Hitler would be a chancellor in chains and so, two days later, on 30 January 1933, Hindenburg agreed to sanction the creation of a Nazi-Nationalist coalition.



12 Conclusion

Why was Weimar replaced by Hitler and the Nazis?

The Great Depression transformed the Nazis into a mass movement. Admittedly, 63 per cent of Germans never voted for them, but 37 per cent of the electorate did, so that the Nazis became by far the strongest party in a multi-party democracy. The depression had led to such profound social and economic hardship that it created an environment of discontent, which was easily exploited by the Nazis' style of political activity. Indeed, it must be questionable