Prologue

Setting the Stage

The last years of the Weimar Republic witnessed a dramatic shift to the right that culminated on 30 January 1933 in Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor. At the heart of this process stood two men, the first an icon of the authoritarian and military traditions with which Germany's rise to world power was so closely associated and the other a self-styled political revolutionary who saw the destruction of German democracy as an indispensable precondition for Germany's return to great power status. Not only did Paul von Hindenburg, president of the German Republic since 1925 and focal point of the restorationist hopes of the German Right, and Hitler represent two fundamentally different strategies for solving the crisis in which Germany had found itself since the end of World War I, but in the spring of 1932 they faced off against each other in two epic elections that defined the struggle for political power in the last months of the Weimar Republic. The elections, both in their execution and their outcome, were to have a particularly profound impact on the German Right. After all, Hindenburg was a candidate around whom the entire German Right should have rallied, as it had done in 1925. But in one of the many ironies that marked the late Weimar Republic, the bulk of Hindenburg's support now came from those parties that had opposed his candidacy seven years earlier. Many of Hindenburg's erstwhile supporters on the German Right were bitterly disappointed by his performance as Reich president and particularly by his dogged determination to exercise the powers of his office according to the letter, if not the spirit, of the Weimar Constitution. The campaign would thus draw into sharp focus the deep-seated cleavages that had developed within the German

Right since his election to the Reich presidency and destroy the last vestiges of right-wing unity in the struggle against Weimar democracy.

At the risk of gross oversimplification, one can distinguish between three basic positions on the German Right in the last years of the Weimar Republic. In the first place, there were those more moderate conservative pragmatists who, despite their profound reservations about the political system that Germany had inherited from the November Revolution of 1918, had come to realize that little could be accomplished with a policy of uncompromising opposition to Germany's new republican order and were prepared to work within the framework of the existing political system to effect its reform and transformation in accordance with what they held to be the tried and true principles of German conservatism. This was the faction that had come to the fore with Heinrich Brüning's installation as chancellor in the spring of 1930 and his efforts to right the ship of state by anchoring it to Hindenburg's magnetic aura. But Brüning's mandate to govern was severely compromised by the deepening economic crisis and his government's failure to ameliorate the suffering this entailed for virtually every sector of German society. Not only did this have a radicalizing effect upon those strata of the German public upon which Brüning depended for the bulk of his political support, but it emboldened those on the German Right to whom any concession to the existing political order was tantamount to an act of national treason to redouble their efforts to drive Brüning from office. But even among those who opposed the Brüning government, there was a sharp division between those who sought to use promises of support for Hindenburg's candidacy to force a change in the national government and those who sought to get rid of Hindenburg altogether. Not only would the balance between these two options constantly shift during the negotiations that preceded the campaign as well as during the campaign itself, but the negotiations themselves would reveal much about the evolution of Hitler's negotiating tactics with respect to the non-Nazi elements of the German Right. What emerges from this analysis is a picture of a Hitler who at the outset seemed quite tentative and indecisive in his relations with the non-Nazi Right but who gained confidence in himself and his sense of mission as the campaign unfolded.

Yet for all their attendant drama and their undeniable impact upon the subsequent course of political development in the last year of the Weimar Republic, the 1932 presidential elections have received only scant attention in the existing body of historical literature on the end of the Weimar and the ultimate triumph of Nazism. To be sure, the Hindenburg

campaign is mentioned in all of the classic Hindenburg biographies by Walter Görlitz, Andreas Dorpalen, and Walther Hubatsch, as well as the Marxist study by the East German historian Wolfgang Ruge.[1] The presidential elections have also been covered in various monographs on the political parties that lined up behind Hindenburg's bid for the Reich presidency, though rarely in sufficient detail to provide a clear picture of what was happening.[2] By the same token, neither Wolfram Pyta's authoritative Hindenburg biography nor the two more specialized Hindenburg studies by Anna von der Goltz and Jesko von Hoegen are sufficiently detailed in their analysis of the 1932 presidential elections or go beyond exploring the mythic dimensions of the Hindenburg candidacy.[3] Aside from Volker Berghahn's pioneering article from 1965 on the Harzburg Front and the 1932 presidential elections,[4] an article I wrote some thirty years later on the dilemma that German conservatives faced in the 1932 presidential campaign,[5] and a more recent article that Anna von der Goltz published under her maiden name Anne Menge on Hindenburg as an icon in the political culture of the Weimar Republic,[6] the strategic calculations that surrounded the Hindenburg candidacy and the political repercussions of the campaign itself have not received the serious scholarly attention they deservedly merit.

The same could also be said of Hitler and the challenge his candidacy posed not just to the conservative moderates who sought to deploy Hindenburg's mythic stature in support of their political agenda but also

[1] For example, see Walter Görlitz, *Hindenburg. Ein Lebensbild* (Bonn, 1953), 353–60; Andreas Dorpalen, *Hindenburg and the Weimar Republic* (Princeton, NJ, 1964), 254–300; Walther Hubatsch, *Hindenburg und der Staat. Aus den Papieren des Generalfeldmarschalls und Reichspräsidenten von 1878 bis 1934* (Göttingen, 1966), 120–30; and Wolfgang Ruge, *Hindenburg. Porträt eines Militaristen* (Berlin, 1974), 327–45.

[2] The one notable exception to this is the detailed study by Ludwig Richter, *Die Deutsche Volkspartei 1918–1933* (Düsseldorf, 2002), 746–59.

[3] In this respect, see Wolfram Pyta, *Hindenburg: Herrschaft zwischen Hohenzollern und Hitler* (Berlin, 2007); 645–84, Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis* (Oxford, 2009), 144–66; and Jesko von Hoegen, *Der Held von Tannenberg: Genese und Funktion des Hindenburg-Mythos* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna, 2007), 345–61.

[4] Volker R. Berghahn, "Die Harzburger Front und die Kandidatur Hindenburgs für die Reichspräsidentenwahlen 1932," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 13 (1965): 64–82.

[5] Larry Eugene Jones, "Hindenburg and the Conservative Dilemma in the 1932 Presidential Elections," *German Studies Review* 20 (1997): 235–59.

[6] Anna Menge, "The *Iron Hindenburg*: A Popular Icon of Weimar Germany," *German History* 26 (2008): 357–82.

to his supposed allies in the so-called national opposition.[7] This lacuna is all the more regrettable in light of the critical role that the 1932 presidential elections would play in the evolution of Hitler's strategy and tactics for dealing with the non-Nazi elements of the German Right in the period leading up to his appointment as chancellor. To be sure, Hitler's Herculean efforts as a candidate for the Reich presidency and his barnstorming cross-country flights to virtually every corner of the Reich have figured prominently in both the standard Hitler biographies from Alan Bullock to Ian Kershaw and the more generalized histories of the Weimar Republic from Erich Eyck to Heinrich August Winkler and Hans Mommsen,[8] though interestingly not in the most recent English-language study of the Weimar Republic by Eric Weitz.[9] Not even Kershaw, in his highly acclaimed two-volume biography of Hitler, goes significantly beyond the all too familiar bromides about the whirlwind of activity that Hitler unfurled in pursuit of the Reich presidency or devotes sufficient attention to the Nazi party leader's negotiations with the non-Nazi Right in the critical months between the Harzburg rally and the fall of the Brüning cabinet. In general, the period between the stunning Nazi victory in the September 1930 Reichstag elections and the dismissal of the Brüning cabinet at the end of May 1932 remains something of a black hole in the scholarly literature on Hitler's rise to power. That this was a critical period in the evolution of the strategy and tactics that Hitler and his immediate entourage would employ in their pursuit of power has largely escaped the attention of even the most astute of serious Hitler scholars.[10]

[7] On the tensions within the national opposition during the 1932 presidential campaign, see Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm – Bund der Frontsoldaten 1918–1935* (Düsseldorf, 1966), 198–219, as well as the recent biography of the nationalist politician Otto Schmidt-Hannover by Maxmilian Terhalle, *Deutschnational in Weimar. Die politische Biographie des Reichstagsabgeordneten Otto Schmidt(-Hannover) 1888–1971* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna, 2009), 293–303. The older study by John A. Leopold, *Alfred Hugenberg: The Radical Nationalist Campaign against the Weimar Republic* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1977), 107–15, is badly outdated but still useful for a general overview of developments.

[8] In this respect, see Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, 2nd edn. (New York, 1962), 199–202, and Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1935: Nemesis* (New York, 2000), 360–65, as well as Erich Eyck, *A History of the Weimar Republic*, vol. 2: *From the Locarno Conference to Hitler's Seizure of Power*, trans. by Harlan P. Hanson and Robert G. L. Waite (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 350–92; Heinrich August Winkler, *Weimar, 1918–1933: Die Geschichte der ersten deutschen Demokratie* (Munich, 1993), 444–54; and Hans Mommsen, *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, trans. by Elbort Forster and Larry Eugene Jones (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), 404–11.

[9] Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), 352–56.

[10] For example, see the brief, though insightful, treatment of the elections in Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York, 2004), 277–83. For a partial

The following study uses the 1932 presidential elections as an optic through which the development of the German Right in the last years of the Weimar Republic may be viewed. What becomes increasingly apparent through the use of this optic is that by the beginning of the 1930s, the German Right had become so fragmented along lines of ideology, interest, and tactics that it was no longer capable of formulating a coherent response to the deepening economic crisis and the paralysis of Weimar democracy. In point of fact, the divisions within the German Right had roots that could be traced back to the late Second Empire and accounted in no small measure for its general ineffectiveness during the Weimar Republic. But it was only with the paralysis of Germany's parliamentary institutions in the early 1930s – a paralysis for which the more radical elements on the German Right were in no small way responsible – and the dramatic swing of the political pendulum to the right in the wake of the world economic crisis that the consequences of these divisions became tragically apparent. At the precise moment that the burden of political responsibility shifted from the parties that had remained loyal to the republican form of government to the forces of the German Right, those forces were so deeply divided that they proved incapable of acting in any sort of coherent or effective fashion. This, in turn, created a vacuum into which the most radical faction on the German Right, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei or NSDAP), insinuated itself with a combination of skill, flair, and ruthlessness. At the center of this process lay the 1932 presidential elections.

The combination of acute economic distress and political paralysis produced a systemic breakdown in which the actions of individual political actors were suddenly invested with a causal immediacy that they otherwise would never have possessed. Here it is useful to recall Harold James's cautionary note from 1990 that the collapse of Weimar democracy and Hitler's installation as chancellor represented "two logically separate processes" that require fundamentally different analytical strategies.[11] While the former may have been a necessary, if not indispensable, precondition for the latter, it does not follow that Hitler's appointment as

corrective to this deficit, see Larry Eugene Jones, "Adolf Hitler and the 1932 Presidential Elections: A Study in Nazi Strategy and Politics," in *Von Freiheit, Solidarität und Subsidiarität – Staat und Gesellschaft der Moderne in Theorie und Praxis. Festschrift für Karsten Ruppert zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Markus Raasch and Tobias Hirschmüller (Berlin, 2013), 550–73.

[11] Harold James, "Economic Reasons for the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," in *Weimar: Why Did German Democracy Fail*, ed. Ian Kershaw (New York, 1990), 30.

chancellor was the only way in which this crisis could been resolved. What this suggests is that in understanding how and why Hitler came to power the structural mode of analysis that has been so useful in explaining the paralysis of Weimar democracy and the impotence of the traditional German Right must give way to a different mode of analysis that focuses more closely on questions of human agency and intentionality. To be sure, this is not to be construed as a plea for resurrecting the great man theory of history with all of its inherent weaknesses and inadequacies as a mode of historical analysis. Nor is this to suggest that suddenly all things were possible. Individual action, after all, was still circumscribed by structurally and culturally determined constraints as to what was and what was not possible. It is, however, to argue that at moments of systemic crisis like the one that gripped Germany at the end of 1932 the actions of specific individuals suddenly acquire a causal immediacy they otherwise would never have possessed. To borrow from Max Weber, they became switchmen, or *Weichensteller*, whose actions determined the tracks along which the long-range forces of historical change would move at a time when those forces had lost the full weight of their causal agency.[12]

One of the major purposes of the following study is to focus on the actions of specific individuals, to understand not merely their hopes and intentions but also on the consequences of what they did or hoped to do. In this respect, it will focus not just on the actions of the two principal protagonists Paul von Hindenburg and Adolf Hitler but also on those of a host of secondary actors, the most important of whom were the chancellor Heinrich Brüning, his Defense Minister Wilhelm Groener, the enigmatic Kurt von Schleicher as the Reichswehr's principal strategist, and various nationalist politicians such as Alfred Hugenberg and the leaders

[12] Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of World Religions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford, 1948), 268. Much of the foregoing argument has been taken from Larry Eugene Jones, "Why Hitler Came to Power: In Defense of a New History of Politics," in *Geschichtswissenschaft vor 2000. Perspektiven der Historiographiegeschichte, Geschichtstheorie, Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte. Festschrift für Georg G. Iggers zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Konrad H. Jarausch, Jörn Rüsen, and Hans Schleier (Hagen, 1991), 256–76, esp. 271–76. For the classic formulation of this position, see Theodor Eschenburg, "The Role of Personality in the Crisis of the Weimar Republic: Hindenburg, Brüning, Groener, Schleicher," in *Republic to Reich: The Making of the Nazi Revolution*, ed. Hajo Holborn (New York, 1972), 3–50. In a similar vein, see the path-breaking study of Karl D. Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. Eine Studie Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie*, 4th edn. (Villingen/Schwarzwald, 1960).

of the paramilitary Right. And occasionally the foibles of lesser players like Hindenburg's son Oskar or the self-serving cupidity of men like the former Reichsbank president Hjalmar Schacht carry much heavier weight than during periods of less dramatic change. But at other times, as we will see, this was not always the case, and individuals acted instead in ways that appeared confused, erratic, or arbitrary, in ways that often left both their contemporaries and the historians who later sought to understand them befuddled and dismayed. None of these men, however, acted in a vacuum. For as much as the systemic breakdown of the late Weimar Republic may have invested their actions with much greater causal efficacy than might otherwise have been the case, they still operated within the framework of a structurally determined range of options that defined what they could and could not do. Within this range of options, however, it was still the action of specific individuals – individuals not always motivated by any grand design but often by petty vanities, jealousies, and antipathies – that determined which of these options was eventually exercised.[13]

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to place an analysis of individual political behavior before, during, and immediately after the 1932 presidential campaign in the larger context of the structures within which these individuals operated. The panorama here will be quite broad, stretching from the working-class parties on the Marxist Left through the plethora of parties large and small that inhabited the political center to the various parties, patriotic associations, and special-interest organizations that constituted the German Right. The primary focus, however, will remain the German Right and to a lesser extent the political center, for it was here that the struggle for the Reich presidency was fought and ultimately decided. A secondary but no less important theme in this study is the role that Germany's conservative elites – with particular emphasis on Germany's agricultural, industrial, and military elites – played not just in the presidential elections but in the more general reshaping of Germany's political landscape in the last years of the Weimar Republic. In the early and middle years of the Weimar Republic, Germany's conservative elites had tried, though with varying degrees of resolve and success, to secure their vital interests by seeking alliances with the leadership of the various nonsocialist parties. Nowhere was this tactic more explicitly embraced than in the case of Carl Duisberg, president of the National

[13] Jones, "Why Hitler Came to Power," 266–70, 274–76.

Federation of German Industry (Reichsverband der Deutschen Industrie or RDI) from 1925 to 1931.[14] A similar trend could be seen in the ascendancy of Martin Schiele within the National Rural League (Reichs-Landbund or RLB), the largest of Germany's agricultural interest organizations and a powerful voice in Germany's conservative establishment.[15] But with the deepening economic crisis of the early 1930s and the effective paralysis of Germany's parliamentary institutions, the leadership of both industry and agriculture abandoned whatever faith they might once have had in working within the framework of the existing political system and, in search of new political options, began to gravitate more and more into the orbit of the radical Right. This coincided with the decisive intervention of Schleicher and the Reichswehr in the spring of 1930 and the experiment in government by presidential decree that began with the formation of the Brüning cabinet. By the end of 1931 even Schleicher had become increasingly skeptical that Brüning was capable of carrying out the far-reaching reform of Germany's political, economic, and fiscal structures that he regarded as essential for Germany's return to great power status and began to explore the possibility of an opening to the antiparliamentary German Right.[16]

All of this came together in the planning, execution, and outcome of the 1932 presidential elections. The urgency of the elections had the effective of intensifying and accelerating the disintegrative forces that were already at work in Weimar political culture. To be sure, Brüning and the presidential entourage hoped that the elections could be avoided through a parliamentary maneuver that would extend Hindenburg's term of office until some undetermined point in the future. But when this fell through, the sheer immediacy of the elections created a state of great uncertainty, if not panic, in almost all of Germany's political parties as

[14] In this respect, see Wolfram Pyta, "Vernunftrepublikanismus in den Spitzenverbänden der Deutschen Industrie," in *Vernunftrepublikanismus in der Weimarer Republik. Politik, Literatur, Wissenschaft*, eds. Andreas Wirsching and Jürgen Eder (Stuttgart, 2008), 87–108.

[15] For further information, see Stephanie Merkenich, *Grüne Front gegen Weimar. Reichs-Landbund und agrarische Lobbyismus 1918–1933* (Düsseldorf, 1998), 195–246.

[16] The literature on Schleicher is quite extensive and by no means in agreement in its assessment of Schleicher and his political objectives. The most reliable treatment of Schleicher and the Reichswehr's role in the last years of the Weimar Republic remains Thilo Vogelsang, *Reichswehr, Staat und NSDAP. Beiträge zur Deutschen Geschichte 1930–1932* (Stuttgart, 1962), while Peter Hayes, "'A Question Mark with Epaulettes'? Kurt von Schleicher and Weimar Politics," *Journal of Modern History* 52 (1980): 35–65, is still the most useful summary of Schleicher's goals and tactics.

they began to grasp just what was at stake. The net effect of this was to greatly exacerbate the tensions both within and between the various nonsocialist parties, but nowhere more so than among the parties, veterans' organizations, and patriotic leagues that constituted the so-called national opposition. Here the campaign for the Reich presidency triggered a bitter conflict between the Nazis and the non-Nazi elements of the national opposition for the leadership of the struggle against the hated Weimar system. At the end of all of this, the outcome was anything but clear. For Hindenburg the sweetness of his victory over Hitler was tempered by the bitter realization that the vast majority of those who had catapulted him to victory in 1925 had deserted him for the Nazi party leader seven years later.[17] For Brüning and those who had embraced Hindenburg's candidacy on the assumption that only his election could hold Hitler at bay, Hindenburg's triumph would quickly prove a Pyrrhic victory as the newly reelected Reich president would dispense with Brüning as Reich chancellor in pursuit of a new government based upon the forces of the national opposition. Even those moderate conservatives who had rallied behind the Reich president's candidacy were unable to translate their willingness to work with each other during the campaign and were reduced to insignificance by the outcome of the state elections that took place in Prussia, Bavaria, Württemberg, and several smaller states just two weeks after the final round of voting in the presidential campaign. In the meantime, the struggle between the Nazis and the non-Nazi elements of the national opposition had taken a severe toll on the latter, leaving them exhausted and in no condition whatsoever to resume the struggle for political supremacy. Only the Nazis stood unscathed at the end of the battle. Hitler and the forces around him were invigorated by the Nazi party leader's performance at the polls, more confident of victory than ever before, and well positioned for whatever the next chapter in the struggle for power might bring.

Existing literature on the late Weimar Republic has generally viewed the 1932 presidential elections as a side show in the series of events that culminated in Hitler's appointment as chancellor. It has consistently failed to recognize the extent to which Weimar electoral politics were transformed by the way in which the contest between Hindenburg and Hitler highlighted the mythic qualities of two men who consciously relied upon their personal charisma to legitimate their respective claims to the

[17] Jürgen W. Falter, "The Two Hindenburg Elections of 1925 and 1932: A Total Reversal of Voter Coalitions," *Central European History* 23 (1990): 225–41.

leadership of the German nation. The net effect of this was to validate charisma as an authentic mode of political legitimation and to reshape the dynamics of German political life in ways that greatly favored Hitler in his struggle with the non-Nazi elements of the national opposition. It was not enough that the elections exacerbated the divisions among those elements on both the moderate and radical Right that opposed Hitler's rise to power to the point where they were unable to formulate any sort of coherent response to the threat that Nazism posed to their political aspirations. But, more importantly, the very manner in which both Hindenburg and Hitler deployed their personal charisma as a way of legitimating their claim to the leadership of the German nation in the eyes of the German electorate accelerated the political delegitimation of the Weimar Republic – based as it was upon the inherently more rational method of representing and reconciling divergent social and economic interests through the mechanisms of a popularly elected legislature – and, in so doing, effectively redefined the dynamics of German political life. The 1932 presidential elections thus constituted a decisive moment in the transformation of Weimar political culture that set the stage for Hitler's appointment as chancellor a scant nine months later in ways that neither the most recent studies of Hindenburg's charisma nor the authoritative Hitler biography by Kershaw, let alone the most recent contribution to the topic of Hitler's charisma by Laurence Rees,[18] have fully appreciated or understood. To be sure, this did not mean that Hitler's accession to power was in any way inevitable. There were still too many variables and too many personal idiosyncrasies to trace a direct line from the elections to Hitler's installation as chancellor. But the events surrounding the 1932 presidential elections and the way in which charisma had effectively displaced more rational modes of political legitimation as the foundation of Germany's national life meant that Hitler's chances of acceding to the chancellorship had greatly improved.

[18] Laurence Rees, *Hitler's Charisma: Leading Millions into the Abyss* (New York, 2012).