CHAPTER XXVI

Death Agony of a Republic (1929-33)

The last years of the Weimar Republic were tragic in the extreme. They were of course dominated by the world-wide depression which, spreading quickly from the United States, devastated the other advanced nations. It was the most industrially sophisticated countries which suffered worst. Of these Germany was the first to feel the severe impact because her false prosperity of the years before had been based almost completely on short-term loans, which were called in as soon as credit became tight. Within a matter of months, even weeks, after the first New York crash in October 1929, German industrialists were forced to curtail their operations and discharge workers. The process spiraled, moving with ever-increasing velocity, so that by the spring of 1930 Germany was in a worse position than in 1923 because this time the crisis was world-wide and the Germans could not look for succor abroad.

The economic tensions had the result of reopening the political and social wounds which had lain dormant for some years, plastered over by prosperity. The years from 1930 to 1933 are years of naked class warfare with extremism constantly gaining over moderate attitudes. A characteristic of the four Reichstag elections held in these years is that the parties of the extreme right and extreme left gained at the expense of the old ruling parties near the center. As a result, constitutional, parliamentary government became almost impossible and the way was open to invoke Article 48 and to rule by presidential decree. When that was done, the important factors in German developments became the relationships between a number of individuals and the aged and increasingly senile Hindenburg. Thus in this period it is individuals (Brüning, Papen, Schleicher, Hugenberg, and, of course, Hitler), with their deals and their chicanery, who must be analyzed rather than the principles which allegedly guided them. The years remind one of the less savory moments of the Byzantine Empire rather than of a great modern state in the twentieth century.
Germany started to feel the economic pinch even before the Wall Street crash. In early 1929 credit started to become tight and unemployment statistics began to mount. The political reaction was immediate. It took the form of an attack on the unemployment insurance scheme which had been worked out two years before. The problem with this type of insurance is that the moments when it is urgently needed are exactly the moments when credit is most difficult to obtain. The parties of the right, representing the interests of the employers, started to clamor for the lowering of insurance premiums, while the Social Democrats, in control of the government, refused to see the law diluted when it was most needed. The result was a long parliamentary battle lasting through most of 1929 and into 1930 at the same time that the even more bitter conflict over the acceptance of the Young plan was being fought. Stresemann was seriously worried about the insurance struggle because he feared it would raise tension among the parties and endanger his beloved foreign policy, so he spent the last day of his life in a temporarily successful plea to his own party to follow the path of moderation. The result was a stroke the next morning which felled him. Without his influence the problem grew worse and a few months after his death, in March 1930, as soon as the Young plan legislation had finally been passed, Chancellor Müller gave up the battle and resigned.

The next day, March 28, President Hindenburg appointed a new chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, leader of the Center party. Brüning was a new figure in German politics and came from a younger generation. He was the first of the chancellors to have been a front fighter in the war. Deeply Catholic, Brüning was undecided after the war whether to go into politics as a career or to enter the religious life. He elected the former and soon became the Center party expert on financial matters. He climbed the party ladder rapidly and in due course became the chairman. Brüning is a cold, dour man, almost completely devoid of personal charm or magnetism. His appeal was through logic and statistics, never through the emotions. It is difficult to think of anyone less adapted personally to fight against the passionate intensity of Hitler or the deep-seated rancor of Hugenberg. Brüning has been much criticized as the slayer of German democracy because he was willing to rule by presidential decree and to undermine the Reichstag. However, in the circumstances which prevailed after the election of 1930, it seems impossible to imagine how else any kind of government could have been maintained.

Brüning's appointment was not popular on the left because he had been associated with the project to curtail unemployment insurance. Thus on his first appearance before the house as chancellor he was greeted with the phrase "hunger chancellor," which remained with him
during his two years in office. His cabinet included a number of carryovers from Müller's ministry but no Social Democrats, with the result that it was weighted much more heavily on the right. Brüning's program was one of conservative liberalism. He was an orthodox economist who believed that in times of stress the government should retrench and make every possible economy. However, he realized that there were some areas in which this was not possible. In particular, to please the Nationalists he supported the Osthilfe, or subsidy of the marginal large landholders in the east, a subject close to Hindenburg's heart. Brüning held over the Reichstag the threat of dissolution and left little doubt that he and the president were thinking actively of the possibility of ruling by presidential decree if the Reichstag were unco-operative. He won a first vote of confidence. The Social Democrats and the Nazis voted against him, but the Center party and the Nationalists (to the fury of Hitler) supported him.

In the months from April to July 1930 there was a good deal of soul-searching among the parties; Brüning made a number of financial proposals but was never sure of his precarious majority. He had to depend on either the Social Democrats or the Nationalists. The Social Democrats were opposed to him because they felt that his program would harm the working class and that the cuts in the budget should be made elsewhere, especially in the military appropriations. The Nationalists were angry at Brüning for the opposite reasons; they believed that the proposed taxes to balance the budget would fall inequitably on the upper classes of society, and reiterated that Germany's problems stemmed from reparations and from the Young plan. The Communists would have nothing to do with the government, while the Nazis, though small in number in the Reichstag, were becoming more insolent because of gains they had made in local elections. For example, in Thuringia in late 1929 a Nazi leader, Wilhelm Frick, became minister of the interior and started to conduct a violent racist campaign, while in mid-1930 the Nazis became the second largest party in the Saxon parliament. Gangsterism and violence were growing apace in Berlin and the other large cities. The nights were made hideous and dangerous by armed street fighting, fomented by the Nazi strong-arm boys but joined in too by Communists and other dissidents. This became so serious that in June 1930 the Prussian minister of the interior forbade the Nazis to wear uniforms or emblems. In spite of this, the violence continued.

The showdown came in July. On July 15 Brüning went to the Reichstag and demanded that the house show its sense of responsibility by approving his fiscal policy and passing a balanced budget. His threat to rule by presidential decree was thinly veiled. Hindenburg backed up
his chancellor by promising him the use of Article 48 if he didn’t get his way and also by promising a dissolution of the Reichstag. Even in the face of this, however, the opposition parties held their ground. On July 16 a bloc of Communists, Social Democrats, Nationalists, and Nazis defeated several of the government projects. The executive carried out its threat that very evening. The government did not resign but decreed its program as an emergency measure. The Reichstag now, according to the constitution, had an opportunity to approve the decrees or to demand their withdrawal. This was a last chance for agreement. The Social Democrats were very much aggrieved and insisted that the moment had not warranted the drastic action. They declared that not all constitutional possibilities had been explored, particularly the possibility of inviting themselves into counsel since they were still the largest party. The Nationalists weakened a bit, only Hugenberg’s extreme supporters remaining adamantly anti-Brüning. When the votes were counted, enough Nationalists opposed the government that by a majority of only fifteen votes the Reichstag demanded the withdrawal of the presidential edicts. Hindenburg simply signed a decree of dissolution of the Reichstag and set September 14 as the date for new elections. In the interim he decreed a number of other projects developed by Brüning, which called for a deflationary program with increased taxes, a balanced budget, and government economies even in the field of social welfare, especially in unemployment insurance.

From this moment on it can hardly be said that Germany was governed by a parliamentary system. The focus of interest shifts to the strong executive where everything depended on Hindenburg, who alone could ensure the passage of the government’s program. The field marshal was now eighty-three years old and much reduced in vigor, both physical and mental. In particular, his eyesight was affected and he had to depend on his son Oscar, who acted as his secretary, to write out for him in very large letters the matters which Oscar believed the president should see. This, of course, gave Oscar Hindenburg a key position at a moment of emergency. Like many old and senile men, Hindenburg was highly susceptible to the influence of those frequently around him. During this period the man of greatest influence in the president's inner circle was General Kurt von Schleicher.

Schleicher was an extraordinary person, almost comparable to Father Joseph, Cardinal Richelieu’s “gray eminence.” He rose rapidly through the ranks of the officer corps and had very little contact with the fighting troops. From his school days he had been close to the Hindenburg family. During the war he served almost always at headquarters, where he attracted the admiring attention of General Groener. During the
Weimar period he stayed on at the war office, becoming an immediate assistant to Seeckt and, of course, profiting from the appointment of Groener to succeed Gessler as minister. He was shrewd, highly intelligent, a manipulator of men, the perfect political general, a person who wanted to wield power, but always from the background without the responsibility resulting from action in the public limelight. By 1930 he was the key man in the army and had richly improved his friendship with the Hindenbergs, father and son. His political ideas, so far as we know them, were conservative, but not reactionary like Hugenberg's. From 1930 until 1932, when he overreached himself, he was the most important figure in the presidential group; Brüning had to rely upon him for his entrée to the field marshal because the old man did not much like his cold and austere chancellor.

It is difficult to convey an idea of the bitterness and ferocity with which the election campaign of 1930 was fought. The proliferation of parties reached the point of absurdity; in 1930 fifteen offered themselves to the electorate. As might be expected, the Nazis made the most noise. They devoted their efforts, financed by some of the leading west German industrialists, to the middle-class unemployed and to the despairing peasantry. They were rewarded by remarkable success. The Nazis polled almost six and one half million votes, and their representation jumped from a paltry 12 to 107, making them the second largest party in the Reichstag. The Social Democrats maintained their position as the largest party but lost a number of seats; they now had 143. The third party in the nation was now the Communist party, which, like the Nazis batten ing on distress, raised its delegation from 54 to 77. Obviously the losers were the bourgeois parties, including the Nationalists who suffered seriously and the Democrats who had changed their name to State party and almost disappeared from view.

The most important event in the weeks between the election and the assembling of the Reichstag was the decision of the Social Democrats to support Brüning and thus assure him of a majority. Brüning had announced that he was determined to push his program even at the cost of establishing a dictatorship. In view of this the socialists, though there were many parts of the program that were hateful to them, decided to make a sacrifice to preserve some semblance of democratic government.

The new Reichstag met on October 13, 1930, amid tumult. The Nazi deputies marched to their seats in full party uniform and proceeded to make nuisances of themselves by singing, shouting, and unseemly behavior. Not to be outdone, the Communists replied in kind, and these two set the pace for the parody of parliamentary government which was to be enacted in Germany for the next several years. Brüning was greeted
by shouts and boos, but presented his program with extraordinary imperturbability. His address was followed by Hermann Müller speaking for the Social Democrats and stating their grudging willingness to support the chancellor. When a vote of confidence was taken, the government won its majority and the Reichstag adjourned for six weeks during which Hindenburg issued more decrees, including the deflationary and conservative budget for the following year.

Little is gained by retelling the shameful story of the antics of the Reichstag during the early months of 1931. The extremists on both sides continued their policy of obstruction with increasing vigor. Poor Brüning had to put up with every kind of abuse and attack; he comported himself with a calm serenity that showed his conviction that these were just temporary days of chaos and that better times would restore Germany to the democratic pattern in which she belonged. Finally in March the Reichstag admitted its own incompetence and adjourned for the unusually long period of seven months.

Brüning’s hope that conditions would soon improve was not to be fulfilled. The year 1931 started as inauspiciously as possible. Unemployment continued to soar, and all of Europe fell further into the morass of depression. One of the most afflicted countries was the little Austrian republic, which had never been a workable economic unit and was now in a bad way because of the withdrawal of short-term loans. The desire in Austria for a union (Anschluss) with Germany was strong and reciprocated. This was, however, specifically prohibited by the treaties of 1919. Brüning and the Austrian government worked out a plan for a customs union between the two which would not infringe the treaties and which might help to alleviate the serious condition of each. The plan was announced to the world in March 1931 but met with unalterable opposition from France and some of her allies. Germany was required to put the plan before the World Court at The Hague for a decision as to whether it was a breach of the treaties. A few months later the court ruled that it was a breach, so nothing came of the idea.

In May catastrophe loomed. The Kreditanstalt, the largest Austrian bank and one which had close and vital ties throughout Germany and central Europe, declared bankruptcy. The impact on Germany was very serious and for some weeks it looked as if important German banks would follow suit and create a desperate situation.

The American president, Herbert Hoover, came to the rescue with the suggestion that there should be a moratorium for a year of payments both for reparations and for war debts owed to the United States. The French were doubtful about agreeing to this plan but finally did so after they had insisted on several political concessions from Germany.
However, this was not enough. The flight of capital from Germany continued at an alarming rate. At last in the autumn of 1931 Germany’s creditors agreed not to recall any more loans for a period of six months. This so-called “standstill” agreement was later extended for several years and helped Germany to weather the crisis.

Probably the most significant event of late 1931 for Germany’s future was the formation of the Harzburg front. On October 11 in the little town of Harzburg a powerful group convened, including among others Hitler, Hugenberg, Schacht, Fritz Thyssen (head of the giant United Steel Works), and Franz Seldte (head of the Stahlhelm, the Nationalists’ paramilitary organization). Here an alliance was formed which was to have great significance. Even more important was the fact that Hitler was beginning to make himself respectable. He was anxious to push a wedge into the world of business and industry, and therefore he toned down any possible radical implications in the Nazi program. He continued this campaign successfully in January 1932, when on the birthday of William II he was invited to address the Industry Club in Düsseldorf. His speech was largely an invective against Communism, the bugbear which alarmed the industrialists so fearfully. He managed to convince a good part of his powerful audience that not only was Nazism no threat to big business but that on the contrary it would serve the purpose of preventing any radicalism from the left. The leaders of industry grievously misjudged their man because they were so anxious to win to their side the huge following which Hitler had amassed.

In early 1932 Hindenburg’s presidential term was drawing to a close. Many German leaders were appalled at the idea of an election during the severe crisis of the moment and loath to incur the expense. Brünинг in particular was of this opinion and felt that the Reichstag should pass special legislation continuing Hindenburg’s term for a year or two. This would necessitate an amendment to the constitution and a two-thirds vote, but a two-thirds vote would require the Nazi vote. Brünинг had a meeting with Hitler, but Hitler refused to permit the Nazis to vote for the project, saying that it was simply a way for Brünинг to continue his political career.

Hindenburg was at first reluctant to stand for re-election for a term of office which he almost surely would not survive. However, he allowed himself to be persuaded, no doubt by Schleicher, and announced his candidacy in February. All the parties between Nationalist and Communist declared their support of him. These included the parties which had opposed him in 1925. Hindenburg was now the paladin of democracy in this topsy-turvy period. The right-wing parties were angry at Hindenburg for placing himself in the hands of the republicans. A few
days later the Nazis announced that Hitler would be a candidate. He was now eligible because he had at last become a German citizen by being appointed to a government job in Nazi-controlled Brunswick. The nationalists nominated a candidate of their own, Theodor Duesterberg, and the Communists once more ran Ernst Thälmann.

The campaign was a short, sharp one. Hindenburg was obviously too old to do much campaigning for himself. Brüning became his manager and wore himself out for the old man. People who were in Germany at the time recall how Brüning transcended himself during those weeks. His drab and colorless personality took on color and emotion. His efforts were successful. The election took place on March 13. Hindenburg received eighteen and one half million votes; Hitler, eleven million; Duesterberg, two and one half million; and Thälmann, almost five million. Hindenburg missed a majority by less than one per cent. Duesterberg withdrew from the second election, and in it Hindenburg amassed over nineteen million votes while Hitler polled almost thirteen and one half million.

It looked for a few days as if democracy had received a new lease on life. The government immediately issued an order disbanding both the S.A. and the S.S. However, bad news lay ahead. At the end of April Land elections were held throughout Germany, the most important of which was in Prussia. The Nazis became much the largest party in the Prussian parliament, although they did not control a majority. For the time being the old Center-Social Democrat coalition under Otto Braun continued in office.

In spite of his achievements, Brüning's days were numbered. For some months Schleicher had been poisoning the old president's mind against him. Schleicher had decided that the chancellor was a man of too much independence and stubbornness to move Germany into the conservative path that the army wanted. Some of the industrialists, who were now not averse to flirting with Hitler, alleged that Brüning's program of low prices and deflation was bad for business. Schleicher warned Hindenburg that Brüning was becoming socialistic. Hindenburg's democratic veil fell off, and it became apparent that he was still the Prussian militarist allied with the agrarian class.

Brüning was not unaware of the cabal against him. He tried desperately to achieve a victory in foreign affairs, either on reparations or on equality of armaments for Germany at the World Disarmament Conference which had just opened in Geneva. He failed in both attempts. The powers were unwilling to grant to Brüning, the democrat, what they later granted to Papen, the aristocrat, or to Schleicher, the militarist.

The final crisis arose over a project of Brüning's to split up some of
the bankrupt estates in the east to make more jobs. This plan struck Hindenburg where he was most sensitive, since he was a landowner in that part of the country. On May 29, 1932, he simply asked Brüning for his resignation. This was much more the action of a William II than of a constitutional president in a parliamentary state, but the president was now in control. Brüning left the stage of German history and Germany itself after Hitler became chancellor, accepted a post on the faculty of government at Harvard, and did not return to Germany until after 1945.

On the day after Brüning’s resignation, Hindenburg, on the advice of Schleicher, named as chancellor a relative newcomer in politics, Franz von Papen. Papen was a Catholic aristocrat from west Germany, who was trained as an army officer. During the war he served for some months as military attaché in Washington, but his removal was requested by President Wilson because of alleged sabotage of American munitions plants. Later he was placed on active duty on the Turkish front. After the war Papen and his very rich wife, who was connected with powerful industrial interests in the Saar, lived the life of wealthy country gentry at which Papen shone. He was handsome, charming, glib, a first-rate horseman. He played with politics but never let it take up too much of his time. For several years he was a member of the Prussian parliament where he was affiliated with the extreme right wing of the Center party, although he was never very keen on party solidarity. He won his way to the heart of Hindenburg through his ability as a raconteur and entertainer; the old gentleman spoke of him as “Fränzchen” (“little Franz”).

Schleicher’s reason for choosing Papen was to have him serve as the head of a cabinet of experts, nonpolitical in character, which would push Germany in the direction of conservative, aristocratic rule. In fact, he had the slate of names ready when Papen arrived in Berlin. He had even taken the trouble of securing Hitler’s “toleration” of the new regime in return for legalizing the S.A. and the S.S., which Hindenburg wanted too, for it did not seem fair to him to outlaw the Nazi formations and not those of the other parties. There was not even a pretense at forming a government which could command a majority in the Reichstag. It remained to be seen even how much Hitler’s “toleration” would mean.

When the names of the new ministers were published, it was clear that the cabinet of experts was really a cabinet of barons, so large was the proportion of aristocratic names. Schleicher himself became minister of defense, and three men who were to last into the Nazi period were introduced to the world. They were Baron Constantin von Neurath at the foreign office, Count Schwerin-Krosigk at the ministry of finance,
and Franz Gürtner at the ministry of justice. Within a few days the new
government dissolved the Reichstag and called for new elections. As it
turned out, this too was a Nazi demand, for the Nazis were sure that their
following had grown immensely since 1930. Once again the hungry and
impoverished German people were faced with the expense and nuisance
of a political campaign.

Two important events occurred in the interim between the dissolution
of the Reichstag and the new elections, which were held on July 31, 1932.
The first was an international conference held at Lausanne during June
and early July. On its agenda was a final settlement of the reparations
problem. This would have been a fitting climax to Stresemann's and
Brüning's careful preparation, but it was delayed so that the glory be-
came Papen's. The Germans asked for the termination of all reparation
payments, but the French were not willing to go so far so soon. After
several weeks of wrangling a solution was reached by which the Young
plan was abolished, Germany was to make one token contribution to a
fund for general European recovery, and then reparation payments were
to cease. At last this problem, which had so bedeviled the international
scene for thirteen years, was out of the way. It need not be emphasized
to what degree Papen considered this arrangement his own personal
triumph.

The other development, which concerned the government of Prussia,
was much more sinister. After the April elections in Prussia no govern-
ment had been formed. The parties were still jockeying for position and
the Nazis, as usual, were behaving in a completely recalcitrant manner.
The old Social Democratic cabinet headed by Otto Braun and Carl
Severing, which had served during most of the history of the republic
and had governed Prussia so wisely, was still in office as a caretaker
ministry. Papen kept ordering the Prussians to form a new government,
which he knew was impossible at the moment. He hoped to find a pre-
text to intervene by presidential decree, appoint a federal commissioner
to take power, and thus gain control of the largest state in Germany
and in particular of the large and efficient Prussian police force.

It was not hard to find the pretext. Ever since the Nazi armed forma-
tions had been legalized, Germany was in a state approaching civil war.
There was constant fighting in the streets between the Nazi gangsters
and the formations of the other parties. Bloodshed became usual, not
exceptional. Matters reached an apex on July 17 when the Nazis planned
a provocative procession through the streets of Altona, a very left-wing,
impoverished dockyard community across the river from Hamburg but
in Prussian territory. The procession turned into a street brawl, open
firing occurred, and a number of people were killed.
On July 20 Papen summoned Braun and Severing, the Prussian minister of the interior, informed them that the Prussian government was not maintaining peace, and showed them a decree from Hindenburg removing them from office and placing Prussia under the control of the federal chancellor. The Social Democrats denied the accusations and declared that this was an unconstitutional action. Severing returned to his office. Papen declared a state of emergency and sent the local army commander to dislodge the Social Democrats. Finally after a threat of force Severing left his desk. The question was what action the Social Democrats would now take. Would the events of the Kapp Putsch be repeated? In fact the Social Democrats did almost nothing except to protest and take the matter to the German Supreme Court. The trade unions were afraid of a general strike. Papen was left with the spoils and proceeded to replace a large number of Prussian officials with people of his own choosing.

The election campaign was even more tumultuous than usual. The Nazis staged a magnificent show. Hitler and his subordinates took to the air and flew to every village, hamlet, and town to carry the Nazi message. They hoped desperately to achieve an absolute majority so that there could be no question of their control of the government. The keynote was Hitler’s promise to abolish unemployment, which was still increasing frighteningly every day.

The Nazis did not achieve their majority, but they came alarmingly close to it. They more than doubled their representation, receiving now 230 seats, but in fact their popular vote was not much more than the votes Hitler had received in the presidential election in April. This suggested that perhaps the Nazis had reached the apex of their fortunes. The Communists also made gains, increasing their membership to 89, at the expense of the Social Democrats who lost a number of seats. The only two parties that Papen could count on to vote for him were the Nationalists and the People’s party. Together these two mustered only 44 votes.

It had now become mournfully clear that there could be no kind of government in Germany without some participation by the Nazis. Even Papen declared as much in a public statement. Hitler was determined to achieve full power and engaged on a policy of “all or nothing,” which was daring but was considered unsound even by some of the leading Nazis who felt that force could now win the day. Hitler, however, still remembered November 1923. The first two weeks of August were consumed by dickierings and conferences among Hitler, Papen, Schleicher, and later Hindenburg. Papen was willing to offer Hitler the vice-chancellorship but he held out for the chancellorship. Papen assured Hitler
that Hindenburg insisted on maintaining a nonparty, presidential government and would not accept the Nazi leader as chancellor. If Hitler refused to believe Papen, he could have the information from the president himself. On August 13, 1932, Hitler had a meeting with the field marshal, who detested him and spoke of him as the "Bohemian corporal." Hindenburg offered Hitler a position in a cabinet headed by Papen. Hitler refused. Hindenburg then read Hitler a lesson in good manners, chivalry, and patriotism. The interview lasted only a few minutes and was a severe humiliation for Hitler, but it did not change his mind. Hitler continued to play his waiting game. He was having troubles within the party where Gregor Strasser was urging a more elastic attitude and hoping to get support from the more radical Nazi groups. Supported by Goering and Goebbels, Hitler maintained his firm position.

The Reichstag elected in July performed its functions for a few hours only. On September 12 it met with Goering, chairman of the largest party, as presiding officer. Papen arrived armed with a decree of dissolution already signed by Hindenburg. He had decided on a policy of attrition and planned to force election after election in the belief that the Nazis had reached their climax, would now lose votes, and furthermore would not be able to finance the expensive campaigns.

Goering pointedly ignored Papen and called for a vote on a motion of no confidence prepared by the Communists. Papen protested to no avail, so he simply placed the decree of dissolution on Goering's desk and left the hall with his ministers. The voting continued, and the motion was carried by 512 to 42. Goering called upon the government to resign, but Papen announced that the vote was illegal since the Reichstag had already been dissolved. New elections were set for November 6. The episode would have made a hilarious scene in a comic opera had not the stakes been so high.

The usual violent campaign ensued, this time accompanied by a serious strike of transport workers in Berlin. The election results justified to an extent Papen's reasoning, but showed what a long way he had to go. He almost doubled the support for his own government, it is true, but he still commanded a hopeless minority. More important was the fact that the Nazis lost about two million votes and thirty-five seats. It was the first time since the depression started that they had lost ground in an election. On the left the Communists did very well and raised their representation to one hundred, mainly at the expense of the Social Democrats who had lost much prestige after Papen seized the Prussian government from them. The Nazi leaders were seriously discouraged by the returns. They realized that their movement was of the sort that thrives on inertia; once that was lost, they could easily slide downhill. They
realized too that their financial support would diminish with their votes. These were very tense weeks for them.

Papen felt that the election had been a personal triumph, but he now encountered a new obstacle. Schleicher regretted that he had sponsored Papen. Papen was behaving too independently and had won his way too securely into the affections of Hindenburg. Furthermore, Schleicher decided that Papen would never be able to lead some sort of broadly national government and that in fact he seemed to be heading for a personal dictatorship based on army support. Schleicher was prepared to make a deal with the Nazis, especially with their left wing, for he had recently become very friendly with Gregor Strasser. Schleicher had adherents in Papen’s cabinet, and they persuaded Papen to interview the various party leaders in an effort to gain greater support in the Reichstag. Nothing came of these efforts, so on November 17 Papen offered his resignation with the thought that Hindenburg would continue the conversations with the various parties. There seems little doubt that Papen expected the old gentleman to fail and then recall him to the chancellorship.

Hindenburg spent several days in these conversations. On November 21 he summoned Hitler to his office and offered him the chancellorship with several conditions attached. Hitler demanded full powers, which Hindenburg refused, saying quite rightly that this would amount to a party dictatorship. The president now wanted to reappoint Papen, but Schleicher was firmly opposed to this; he persuaded several of the cabinet ministers to announce that they would not serve under Papen, and produced a memorandum from the army stating that Germany did not possess sufficient force to face a possible civil war with Polish intervention if Papen attempted any unconstitutional projects.

Hindenburg and Papen were outmaneuvered by Schleicher, but at a considerable cost; the president was now disgusted with him, and the former favorite was faced with a cold, rancorous old man. Hindenburg demanded that Schleicher assume the chancellorship and try to save the situation. This was the last thing Schleicher wanted, for his talent was to work behind the scenes. However, on December 2 he became chancellor.

During the months of December 1932 and January 1933 the state of naked gangsterism into which the German government had fallen became even more evident. In Berlin Schleicher made desperate efforts to achieve some sort of broad support. He offered the vice-chancellorship to Strasser in an effort to woo the Nazis and perhaps break up their united front under Hitler. Strasser played with the idea, but after a series of conferences with his party leaders decided not to compete with Hitler. He resigned his party offices and soon thereafter left for a vacation in
Italy. He was little heard of again until his murder in 1934. Schleicher had no better success with the other parties. The Social Democrats were suspicious of him, and the Center still remembered how he had treated Brüning. He received an important gift from abroad when the World Disarmament Conference announced it was prepared to accept the principle of equality in armament for Germany, but even this did little good. On December 15 Schleicher announced his new program over the radio. It was devised to placate as many segments of the population as possible, and held out a good deal of bait to the middle parties and even to the left on such matters as taxes, wage cuts, and censorship. Nevertheless, Schleicher won few friends. He was too left for the right, too right for the left.

Decisive events were occurring elsewhere. Papen was furious at his betrayal by Schleicher and ready to make advances to the Nazis. Hitler was desperately worried about lack of money and the dissension in the party symbolized by Strasser. He too was in a more tractable frame of mind. The two were brought together secretly in Cologne on January 4, 1933, at the home of the powerful banker Kurt von Schroeder. Hitler and Papen settled their old feud. In essence, the Harzburg front was re-established and wealthy steel interests started to pour money into the Nazi coffers again. No details were settled at the meeting. Weeks of tangled negotiation were required, but the foundations were laid.

Schleicher concluded that his only hope of dealing with the Reichstag, which was about to reconvene, was to hold over the head of the Nazis the threat of dissolution. So he asked the president to sign a decree. Hindenburg, however, decided not to be helpful and sternly refused the request. Schleicher, seeing that he had lost, resigned on January 28, 1933.

The next hours were sleepless ones filled with urgent bargaining. Papen seems to have been at the center of the web. He managed on the one hand to persuade Hitler to become chancellor in a coalition cabinet, and on the other to persuade Hindenburg that with himself as vice-chancellor Hitler would be restrained from a one-party dictatorship. The decision was made on January 30. Shortly after noon a new government was announced. Hitler was chancellor and Papen vice-chancellor. Only two other Nazis, Goering and Frick, were included. Neurath remained foreign minister, and Alfred Hugenberg became minister of economics and agriculture. General Werner von Blomberg, supposedly sympathetic to the Nazis, was minister of defense. The political deal was effected which later was glorified by the word Machtergreifung ("seizure of power").
That evening a torchlight procession made its way along the Wilhelmstrasse past the aged Prussian field marshal and the more youthful Austrian corporal. A new era of history had opened, the era of the Third Reich. German democracy was now dead.