

THE GRAVEDIGGERS: THE LAST WINTER OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

(RÜDIGER BARTH AND HAUKE FRIEDERICHS)

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In the demonology of the West, for nearly a hundred years the rise to power of Adolf Hitler has played a leading part. Nearly everyone knows, or thinks he knows, though he is wrong, that “the Germans elected Hitler,” with the apparent lesson that a people can go bad and democracy must never be allowed to repeat such an error. Few, however, actually know the nuts and bolts of how Hitler came to power. This fascinating book fills that gap, by offering a day-by-day account of the national politics of the Weimar Republic from November, 1932 until the end of January, 1933. And it is certainly true that lessons are strewn everywhere in this story, though they have nothing to with reinforcing our own fake democracy.

The authors, two German journalists, Rüdiger Barth and Hauke Friederichs, write a present-tense narrative covering each day, based on daily newspapers, as well as on other in-the-moment documents such as diaries and letters, along with secondary sources. Each day’s entry is headed by excerpts from the mainstream papers of the time, usually with wildly divergent presentations and calls to action (a phenomenon strange to us, of which more later). The authors do a good job of sketching the personalities of everyone involved, and of making clear what can be known and what must be surmised from the evidence. It sounds like such a narrative would be choppy, but the result is actually quite compelling, if not analytically deep.

The Weimar Republic was the parliamentary system set up by the Germans in 1919 in the chaos after World War I, which had included not only losing the war, but several violent revolutions by Left factions. The constitution of the Republic had various interesting (and problematic) characteristics, but at its core it was a parliamentary system. The government was headed by a Chancellor (essentially what the English call the prime minister), with considerable power, but in practice he shared power with an extremely strong President, directly elected by universal suffrage. Not only did the President appoint the Chancellor at his sole discretion, which meant he could appoint a Chancellor and his

cabinet not backed by a majority in Parliament (a “presidential cabinet”), he could dismiss the Chancellor at will, even without a parliamentary vote of no confidence. Still more notable, the President could effectively rule by decree, ignoring the Chancellor, using the famous Article 48 (something closely analyzed by Carl Schmitt, who plays a background role in this book). Theoretically, Parliament could overrule an emergency decree, but in practice found it impossible to do, and the President since 1925, aging war hero Paul Hindenburg, repeatedly dissolved parliament if he thought this might change.

In 1932, Germany was doing poorly. After the immediate post-war chaos, and the 1924 hyperinflation, it had managed to stabilize somewhat. The last half of the 1920s were a time of a more stable economy, but only relatively, and there was much cultural decay, such as the rise, especially in Berlin, of publicly-celebrated degradation and perversion, now retconned by our modern versions of their perverts into the “Golden Twenties,” which they certainly were for degenerates and perverts. The authors note, for example, that the British homosexual writer Christopher Isherwood loved the Berlin of the time, because “the international nightlife was incomparably risqué.” No doubt it was for him, though the non-pervert native Berliner who couldn’t feed his family did not find that relevant. The Great Depression, beginning in 1929, had hit hard. Unemployment in 1932 was more than thirty percent, and even those working were struggling to get by. The populace was getting mighty tired of bad times, and everyone was looking for a solution.

A fundamental procedural problem was that Parliament for some time had had a “negative majority”—there were enough votes to obtain a vote of no confidence against any Chancellor, as enemies cooperated for that limited purpose, but not enough votes to form a majority that could stand behind a Chancellor. The most recent elections for the Reichstag (the main, lower house) had been held on November 6, 1932. A third of the seats were obtained by the National Socialists (NSDAP). Twenty percent and sixteen percent were held by the Social Democrats (SPD) and Communists (KPD) respectively—both parties of the extreme Left, but violent enemies, because the Moscow-directed KPD had been instructed that the slightly-more-centrist SPD was just as much the enemy as the NSDAP. The only other two parties of note were the centrist Centre Party, a Catholic (largely Bavarian) party, at

twelve percent, and the conservative German National People's Party (DNVP), led by the powerful media baron Alfred Hugenberg.

Americans are used not only to an allegedly two-party system, but also to much more monolithic political activity. They are not accustomed to anything like the fractured atmosphere of late Weimar Germany, where many interests aggressively competed—not just political parties, but also powerful independent forces such as trade unions and the National Rural League (representing landowners), which were not aligned with a specific party. For decades in America, the Left has acted in unison, cooperatively crafting and rolling out a program which is then broadcast by Regime media to create the Narrative, then implemented and enforced by every powerful “independent” group in the country. In and through this process, every element of the Left coalition is rewarded and continually supports the collective line (though the recent wars in Israel have caused some cracks in this cozy setup, for the first time). The pretend opposition of the Republican Party cooperates with the Left's program in exchange for social and material rewards. As a result, today the American system is close to a one-party state. We therefore find it hard to grasp the chaos that a system like Weimar embodied.

The KPD openly called for the destruction of the German political and social system, calling for Communist revolution. The NSDAP more mutedly threatened the Republic, but everyone knew, despite their half-hearted protestations, that they posed a very high risk of simply overthrowing the Weimar constitution if they got power. (What to do, constitutionally, given the problem of the Communists and the National Socialists and their threats to the constitution, was a besetting preoccupation of Carl Schmitt at this time.) At the end of 1932, the Chancellor was, and had been since June, Franz von Papen, a member of the Centre Party (though at odds with his own party, which withdrew support from him because he was regarded as disloyal). Papen was a monarchist and old-school conservative, and therefore the type of man with whom Hindenburg resonated.

We begin on November 17, the day Papen resigned as Chancellor, when it became clear his cabinet refused to continue to support him. Papen was a protégé of the Defense Minister, Kurt von Schleicher, who had also turned against him, in part hoping to become Chancellor himself. The past six months had been uneasy months; among other crises,

Hindenburg had dissolved the government of Prussia, the largest and most important state, and effectively administered Prussia by decree, the legality of which was winding its way through the courts. The question of the hour was how a new government could be formed that had any strong degree of support. A government of the Left was out of the question—not only because the Left parties did not cooperate with each other, and even collectively did not have anything approaching a majority, but because such a thing was unthinkable to Hindenburg and pretty much everyone else in the ruling classes.

The obvious play was some combination of the National Socialists, the DNVP, and the Centre Party, who agreed on quite a bit. But the National Socialists were not playing nice with the government. They had no cabinet seats, as a result, and no direct access to federal power. Hitler had already rejected a proposal to make him Vice-Chancellor or give the NSDAP some minor cabinet posts. He regarded any attempt to bring the NSDAP into the government that did not include him as Chancellor as a non-starter, a mere attempt to coopt the National Socialists into working for a government that opposed their interests. His analysis was correct, of course—nobody in power actually wanted the NSDAP to have any real say in government. None of the men in charge liked the National Socialists, whom they regarded as vulgar upstarts, prone to gutter street fighting and openly contemptuous of the very existence of the Republic. The NSDAP, however, was behind the eight ball—they needed money (men of the SA, the *Sturmabteilung*, the National Socialist paramilitary force, with collection boxes, begging on behalf of the Party, were ubiquitous in the streets), and votes for the NSDAP had dropped significantly in the November election. Moreover, they were wracked by internal struggles, notably between Hitler and Gregor Strasser, who wanted more focus on socialist/distributive economics and other “third position” policies.

Papen’s resignation meant that Hindenburg had to form a new government—but he wanted one that still excluded the NSDAP, and he certainly wasn’t going to include the Communists, or the Social Democrats, so forming any government was a challenge. The only way to pass something in Parliament was for either the Communists or National Socialists to vote for it, usually not because they favored a proposal, but because it harmed their opponents. (The Communists

expected if the NSDAP came to power that they would gain, not lose, power themselves. Conversely, and a fact buried nowadays, most observers expected, if the NSDAP collapsed, that many of its members would move to the Communists.) Hindenburg met with all the key political players, including Hitler, as well as non-political players, such as leading industrialists and landowners. In fact, much of this book is the description of meetings between men of power—some private, some not, some meant to be private and made public by one mechanism or another. He tried repeatedly to get some powerful politician, any powerful politician other than Hitler or someone on the Left, to try to form a coalition government. All refused, or quickly failed in their attempts.

The entire city of Berlin was on edge. (Not much is said in this book about any area outside of Berlin, except in the context of some regional elections. It's opaque what, for example, provincial newspapers said, or provincial people thought, or even people in other urban centers. But one book can't cover everything.) There was low-level political violence—meaning many fights and some murders, five in the first few days of January. Both the KPD and NSDAP nakedly used these killings to whip up their faithful, and both stockpiled guns and explosives. It is startling how short sentences were for political violence (of both the Right and the Left), and how often mass amnesties for any politically-related crime cut short even those sentences. But there are also repeated instances mentioned of how the government issued decrees against “political terror” and then used them *ex post facto* against opponents, in a way very similar to how our own Regime repurposes laws against its Trumpist opponents.

As always in such situations, rumors were everywhere. A few facts were undisputed. First, that Hitler wanted the job of Chancellor. One might even say he needed it; there was a real question if the NSDAP would survive further months in the political wilderness. Many National Socialists were very tired of years on the outside, slaving away and taking risks while never tasting the benefits of power, tangible and intangible. Quite a few thought half a cookie was better than none, and Strasser was prominent in this group. Joseph Goebbels, propaganda king, and Hermann Göring, that very strange yet powerful man, on the other hand, stuck with the all-or-none plan—Hitler inspired loyalty to a degree no other German politician did, one of his hidden weapons.

Second, that Schleicher, who had never been elected to any office but had always only been a military man (he held the rank of general), also wanted the job, and that he was meddling in internal NSDAP politics to achieve this goal (not that he was an NSDAP member himself). Third, that Hindenburg despised and disliked this whole process, not only because of the poor choices offered him, but because he didn't really like republican government at all.

The Ministry of Defense spent much time wargaming whether the military could put down an alliance between the Communists and the NSDAP to permanently overthrow the Republic through a general strike. That may seem like an odd fear, but the two parties had cooperated in smaller-scale actions of this type before. Moreover, in the European context, this kind of general strike is more-or-less a euphemism for civil war, given that the aims of a general strike are massive and permanent governmental change, and that the instigators assume that violence will accompany a general strike. How likely any of this was is anyone's guess, but the focus on it (and Schleicher's involvement in it) show the pressure on Hindenburg to form a stable government that could avert this kind of outcome.

Hindenburg, pressed, offered Hitler the chance to rule—but only under a coalition government, having “a stable, working majority in the Reichstag with a clear, consolidated agenda,” and with his powers as Chancellor sharply circumscribed. Hindenburg explicitly wanted to avoid a “party dictatorship” that would “exacerbate the rifts within the German people.” But Hitler could not get a majority—nobody could get a majority, so this was not really an offer in good faith. And he was not interested in being limited by coalition partners, who would have different interests and dilute his power, and therefore his appeal. He would be just another politician, and he was smart, and cunning, enough to know that was never going to work for him. He was even less interested in another idea floated by Hindenburg, a presidential cabinet headed by Schleicher but with significant NSDAP presence, and Hitler as Vice-Chancellor. At the same time all this was going on, a regional election campaign was also ongoing, in Thuringia. The NSDAP lost ground there, despite intense effort by their leaders, who had crisscrossed the province, further increasing pressure on Hitler.

On December 2, Hindenburg appointed Schleicher as Chancellor, basically because he could think of nothing else to do, and Schleicher had been angling hard for the job (including by sabotaging a reappointment of Papen)—though he insisted Hindenburg grant him the power to dissolve Parliament, and he also continued as Defense Minister. The cabinet itself did not change much. Parliament reconvened; there were brawls in the cloakroom between the KPD and the NSDAP members. Schleicher hoped that at least some of the parties, perhaps the Centre party or even the NSDAP, would come out in support of the new cabinet, firming up his position. He was disappointed. Still, he tried to govern, which meant primarily various initiatives to relieve the suffering of the people, both urban and rural, lower-class and middle-class. These ranged from direct handouts of food; to price controls on coal, meat, bread, and milk; to various efforts at job creation. All cost money the government did not have. Suicide was becoming common; one father, the day before Christmas, strangled his son and hanged himself, unable to feed his family, and this was not the only such tragedy. Yet the stock market had gone up thirty percent in the past nine months; it is not only in 2024 America that one can proclaim good news for the investment and finance class while the majority of the citizenry is ignored and immiserated.

On December 8, Hitler's main internal competition, Strasser, resigned and retired from politics, even leaving the country for a time, enabling Hitler to fully consolidate his power over the party. He took advantage of the opportunity, requiring loyalty oaths and purging Strasserites, as well as going on a charm offensive. Hitler consolidating control wasn't Strasser's intention; he actually hoped the party would collapse when he "departed." (Strasser would be killed in 1934, in the Night of the Long Knives; he was still viewed as a threat.) The NSDAP, however, along with its armed wing, the SA, was losing members and was unable to pay its bills, including reimbursement of expenses advanced by members.

Meanwhile, Schleicher, whom Hindenburg now forbade to dismiss Parliament despite his earlier pledge, was desperately searching for allies, and finding none, resorted to floating lies that the head of the DNVP, Hugenberg, would join the cabinet, along with Strasser. He also proposed an extended, unconstitutional period of rule without calling a new election. Papen simultaneously machinated with Hindenburg (he

was close to both Hindenburg and Hindenburg's powerful son Oskar), both men hoping that they could perhaps get Hitler to join a coalition of some type. Hitler was willing to talk to Papen, seeing that through him he might get Hindenburg to make him Chancellor, if he promised to throw Papen some bones. News of their meetings leaked; it was seen, accurately, as the beginning of an effort to remove Schleicher. The latter responded by meeting with Strasser and trying (unsuccessfully) to curry favor with the SPD.

On January 3, the emergency decree that forbade rallies and demonstrations ended. The NSDAP, keen to reverse its electoral slide, focused on another, smaller regional campaign, in Lippe, the smallest Weimar state, where there were 100,000 registered voters. The Communists also focused on Lippe; between the two parties, they held more than three hundred rallies. On January 15, the NSDAP did fairly well, but not spectacularly well.

On January 18, Hitler and Papen met again. (As with most of the meetings which did not involve Hindenburg, politicians met clandestinely, at private homes, in this case at the home of Joachim von Ribbentrop, though news of the meetings almost invariably leaked.) On January 20, Hindenburg agreed to meet with Hitler, in the context of possibly removing Schleicher. On January 22, Hitler and his lieutenants met with Oskar Hindenburg and other men close to Hindenburg, along with Papen, who now openly floated Hitler becoming Chancellor. The next day, Papen tried to convince the Hindenburgs that Hitler should be made Chancellor, leading a coalition of right-wing parties (the "national front"). They were not yet ready for this, but they were softening fast.

Schleicher, who ran an extensive network of informants, quickly learned of the machinations against him, but he could do nothing. Everyone knew his days were numbered, but nobody knew what would come next, and one fly in the ointment was that the military strongly supported Schleicher—but the military had no political role. On January 28, he tried one last time to get Hindenburg to give him the authority to dissolve Parliament and grant him "emergency powers." Hindenburg sourly rejected the idea, and Schleicher resigned.

Papen then continued his project of assembling an NSDAP-led presidential cabinet with Hitler as Chancellor. Hitler, however, continued to refuse any coalition, including a national front. He did send

Göring to Hindenburg, to (falsely) reassure the old man that the National Socialists would rule constitutionally. Further negotiations on January 29 hammered out that Papen would be Vice-Chancellor, and that the Reichstag would be dissolved and new elections called, with a view to trying to pass an “enabling act,” which would have to pass with a two-thirds majority, allowing Hitler to rule largely by decree. Hugenberg was given the posts both of Agriculture and Economy, and told that he and the DNVP (who together with the NSDAP had 248 of the 560 votes in the Reichstag, though they hoped to get a majority by bringing on board the Centre Party, as unlikely as that was), along with Papen, could help “box Hitler in,” thus catering to Hugenberg’s vanity to bring him on board. Various high military officers made veiled threats, perhaps with Schleicher behind them, but nothing was done, then or later, though coup rumors ran rampant, and the threat of a coup perhaps made Hindenburg move faster to put a Hitler government in power.

On January 30, Hindenburg made it all official. The Communists, and even more the SPD (with its allied societal groups such as trade unions, collectively the so-called Iron Front) blustered, and did nothing. Their leaders, and many others, assumed Hitler would be a miserable failure, because he would be unable to fix the economy, and would be tossed out of office. That was a reasonable assumption, though it proved completely wrong on every level. But that is another story.

Reading all this, you get the feeling of watching a whirring hamster wheel, all these men running in place and getting nowhere. That they were smart and serious men did not prevent them from ending up in a situation that they all (except Hitler and his allies) were trying to avoid. It is not surprising; history offers many examples of disasters not avoided, despite the best efforts of competent, educated, far-seeing men. As always, there was no grand plan by some group behind the scenes; there never is, as much as many like to believe in such fantasies. Everything that happened emerged from the obvious, mostly public, efforts of many men both to advantage themselves and to do what they thought right for the Germans. That is just as true for 2024 America, omitting the part about doing right for the country.

But what history does not offer is any example of a society such as ours, where the ruling classes are utterly dominated by the exact opposite of those in the Germany of 1932—rather we have incompetent,

uneducated, stupid men and women, dominated by the latter, with the former being feminized, in thought and manner, in a way that would boggle the mind of any decisionmaker in Weimar. Thus, we don't have the cushion that existed in Weimar, which still fell into disaster. Therefore, we can be sure that when crisis arrives here, the ground will come up even faster to meet us as we fall, not because there is nobody at the helm, but because of something worse—those at the helm are incapable, from a combination of malice and ineptitude, on every level.

All those involved in the twilight of Weimar were very well aware that the people were desperate. They wanted to solve the people's desperation, through their preferred method, but they also saw that the people's desperation meant opportunity, the more so the more radical the proposed solutions, and therefore the less likely such solutions were to be tried in more normal times. As the head of the largest trade union group in Germany said, "Anyone who comes to [the people] and promises them something to eat will carry them as the wind carries pollen. How else can you explain the enormous vote that the Communists and the Hitlerites have been getting? It is because the masses think that through some miracle these two groups can bring food to them."

So what? This was all long ago. But it matters, because we pretend desperation is not also our reality. True, at this moment, it is perhaps not our reality to the same extent as Weimar, where unemployment was thirty percent, and many did not know where their next meal was coming from. But at least Germany was a high-trust, homogenous society with an economy based on producing actual value, whereas we are—not. Certainly, huge swathes of our country are suffering quietly, unable to have any part of what used to be the standard American life. They are instead pumped full of, and killed with government approval by, Chinese and Mexican fentanyl, while they survive on handouts and gig jobs. They are sedated and kept quiet by government checks, weed, and the internet, games and porn, combined with threats and punishments for anyone who dares fight back or act like a man should. Without these suppressants, America would long since have exploded, and rightly so.

Someday, and I suspect soon, the reality of American desperation and rage, every bit of it just, will tear through what has muffled it, and become the crucial matter for all politics, as it was in Weimar. This is especially true because the social fabric, most of all trust between citizens, is far

more torn here than it was in Weimar. Moreover, Americans have many more specific and legitimate complaints against the Regime than did the citizens of Weimar, from the unpunished rape of our daughters by migrants to theft from Americans to fund myriad wars of no benefit whatsoever to the American people. No, when the desperation can no longer be tamped down, but rather burns hot as thermite, Weimar will seem like a peaceful, calm society.

Nonetheless, other key differences, of uncertain impact, also exist between Weimar and today's America (even if quite a few have, largely accurately, nicknamed our present times "Weimar America"). For example, Germans received their news from several different newspapers with large circulation. Very commonly the authors offer epigraphs from the KPD newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne* (*The Red Star*), as well as the *Völkischer Beobachter* (the *Völkisch Observer*), the official NSDAP paper. Others include the supposedly neutral *Tägliche Rundschau* (*Daily Review*) and the center-left *Vossische Zeitung* (*Voss's Newspaper*). No doubt many people only read news that confirmed their political position, but what Weimar society totally lacked was the Narrative that our own Regime feeds to the populace, telling us what we must talk about and how we must talk about it, as well as ignoring that which we are not to talk about. To be fair, this ubiquitous propaganda works in part because most Americans prefer not to know; they would rather stick their heads in the sand, again largely a result of the fragile apparent comfort many Americans enjoy, if that is the right word. In any case, the control exercised by the Regime in America was impossible in Weimar (though it came about soon enough when the National Socialists came to power); if it had been, Weimar might have lasted longer. It is hard to say how this will play out here.

We often hear that our times are a pale imitation of the past, a variation on Nietzsche's Last Man. Where are the crowds in the street, baying for their preferred political solution? Where are the brawls between competing factions? Where are the political assassinations? No doubt every time is different, and we seem a desiccated society. But I suspect, for both good and bad, we are not desiccated at all—merely asleep, artificially tranquilized. When that spell is broken, something new will emerge. Let's hope it's something good.