



German History in Documents and Images

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Otto Meissner, State Secretary in the Office of the Reich President, on the Developments Leading to Hitler's Appointment (Retrospective Account, November 28, 1945)

Over the course of January 1933, Reich Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher became – politically speaking – increasingly boxed in. Schleicher had previously pursued a *Querfront* strategy, attempting to bring together trade unions and the worker-oriented National Socialists led by Gregor Strasser into a cross-party alliance under his leadership. But Strasser's resignation from all party offices on December 8, 1932, essentially put an end to this strategy. Additionally, Schleicher lost the backing of Reich President Paul von Hindenburg, not only because of complaints by the Nazi-infiltrated Reich Agrarian League about Schleicher's agricultural policy, but also because of the Eastern Aid scandal over the misappropriation of subsidies by Junkers in East Elbia. In January 1933, Franz von Papen held several rounds of negotiations with the National Socialists about a possible coalition under his leadership; on January 9, 1933, he began informing the Reich president of his progress. In the end, Papen and the remaining coterie around Hindenburg – above all Hindenburg's son Oskar and State Secretary Otto Meissner – along with a few wealthy bankers and industrialists, accepted Hitler as Reich chancellor in a cabinet dominated by conservatives.

[. . .]

Papen was dismissed because he wanted to fight the National Socialists and did not find in the Reichswehr the necessary support for such a policy, and [. . .] Schleicher came to power because he believed he could form a government which would have the support of the National Socialists. When it became clear that Hitler was not willing to enter Schleicher's cabinet and that Schleicher on his part was unable to split the National Socialist Party, as he had hoped to do with the help of Gregor Strasser, the policy for which Schleicher had been appointed Chancellor was shipwrecked. Schleicher was aware that Hitler was particularly embittered against him because of his attempt to break up the Party, and would never agree to cooperate with him. So he now changed his mind and decided to fight against the Nazis—which meant that he now wanted to pursue the policy which he had sharply opposed when Papen had suggested it a few weeks before. Schleicher came to Hindenburg therefore with a demand for emergency powers as a prerequisite of action against the Nazis. Furthermore, he believed it to be necessary to dissolve, and even temporarily eliminate, the Reichstag, and this was to be done by Presidential decrees on the basis of Article 48—the transformation of his government into a military dictatorship, and government to be carried on generally on the basis of Article 48.

Schleicher first made these suggestions to Hindenburg in the middle of January 1933, but Hindenburg at once evinced grave doubts as to its constitutionality. In the meantime Papen had returned to Berlin, and by an arrangement with Hindenburg's son had had several interviews with the President. When Schleicher renewed his demand for emergency powers, Hindenburg declared that he was unable to give him such a blank check and must reserve to himself decisions on every individual case. Schleicher for his part said that under these circumstances he was unable to stay in office and tendered his resignation on 28 January.

In the middle of January, when Schleicher was first asking for emergency powers, Hindenburg was not aware of the contact between Papen and Hitler—particularly, of the meeting which had taken place in the house of the Cologne banker, Kurt von Schroeder. In the second part of January, Papen played an increasingly important role in the house of the Reich President, but despite Papen's persuasions, Hindenburg was extremely hesitant, until the end of January, to make Hitler Chancellor. He wanted to have Papen again as Chancellor. Papen finally won him over to Hitler with the argument that the representatives of the other right-wing parties which would belong to the Government would restrict Hitler's freedom of action. In addition Papen expressed his misgivings that, if the present opportunity were again missed, a revolt of the National Socialists and civil war were likely.

Many of Hindenburg's personal friends, such as Oldenburg-Januschau, worked in the same direction as Papen, also General von Blomberg. The President's son and adjutant, Oskar von Hindenburg, was opposed to the Nazis up to the last moment. The turning-point at which his views changed came at the end of January. At Papen's suggestion, a meeting had been arranged between Hitler and Oskar von Hindenburg in the house of Ribbentrop. Oskar von Hindenburg asked me to accompany him; we took a taxi, in order to keep the appointment secret, and drove out to Ribbentrop's home. On our arrival we found a large company assembled; among those present were Göring and Frick.

Oskar von Hindenburg was told that Hitler wanted to talk to him *tête à tête*; as Hindenburg had asked me to accompany him, I was somewhat surprised at his accepting this suggestion and vanishing into another room for a talk which lasted quite a while—about an hour. What Hitler and Oskar von Hindenburg discussed during this talk I do not know.

In the taxi on the way back Oskar von Hindenburg was very silent; the only remark he made was that there was no help for it, the Nazis had to be taken into the Government. My impression was that Hitler had succeeded in getting him under his spell. [. . .]

Source: Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919-1945*, Vol. 1, *The Rise to Power 1919-1934*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998, pp. 117-18; from *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof. Nürnberg 14. November 1945 - 1. Oktober 1946*. Volume XXXI, Amtlicher Text – Deutsche Ausgabe,

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