prostitution. Already in 1917, 27 per cent of all convictions for offences were of 14–18-year-olds, and youth crime continued to account for a sizeable minority of convictions into the 1920s. The other major problem was a steady rise in youth unemployment. Regular jobs were hard to come by after the war, as demobilised soldiers returned to civilian life. Furthermore, because there had been such a big rise in population before 1914, more young people than ever before were looking for work in the 1920s, and the potential work force was swelled by large numbers of young women seeking job opportunities. By 1925, it was estimated that some 200,000 young people under 21 were unemployed; in January 1928, the under-21 age group accounted for 13.4 per cent of the total registered unemployed. The difficulties of finding work in a very competitive and overcrowded labour market undoubtedly had the effect of embittering many young people who were looking to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new modern age.

As the 1920s progressed, young people also became bored and disillusioned with the political system of the new republic. Political parties were dominated by the prewar generation, who provided the leadership and the candidates. The SPD and the Catholic Centre Party had great difficulty in integrating young members and in accommodating their calls for immediate social change. By 1930, less than 8 per cent of the membership of the SPD were under 25, and fewer than half were under 40. Instead, young people were attracted by the socialist programme of the KPD, or were captivated by the nationalist appeal of parties on the right. By 1928, young people who wished to take an active part in politics were to be increasingly found either in the KPD or in the Nazi Party. Goebbels' contemptuous description of Weimar as an 'old men's republic' struck a chord with growing numbers of young people. They fervently believed that the brave new world which the 1920s had ushered in should consist not of petty political compromises and of deals struck in back rooms but of heroic striving towards national greatness or a socialist society based on strong community values which rose above sectional interests.

Similar sentiments were shared by writers, poets and musicians who flourished in Weimar's liberating environment. While they produced exciting and innovative modes of expression in art, literature, music and architecture, they regarded the republic with considerable contempt. Those on the left felt that the SPD and their Weimar allies had betrayed socialism and crushed all revolutionary

aspirations in 1918–19. Since that time so-called progressive parties had been further compromised by coalitions with bourgois nationalist parties. While the democratic system was tolerated by left-wing cultural elites it evoked no strong enthusiasm. On the right, the experimentation and new 'modernism' of Weimar culture aroused fierce criticism and often outrage from traditionalists who associated such 'cultural Bolshevism' with the 'Marxist' government in Berlin. Their fears that the foundations of Germany's strength were being fatally undermined by a decline in morals and in standards of public and artistic life were reinforced by the work of writers such as Spengler. His *Decline of the West* (first published in 1918) painted a gloomy view of the impact of democracy and of capitalism and argued that only a new 'elite of heroes' could save Germany.

The spectre of 'national decline' obsessed writers and artists on the right, and was a fear shared by large numbers of former soldiers and members of nationalist organisations. They believed that the Weimar Republic was hastening Germany's decline as a strong power by promoting political divisions, internationalism and class war. What was required to stop the decay was national unity, a strengthening of authority at the top symbolised by a more powerful President, and an ideology of struggle, discipline and solidarity. For people holding such beliefs, war, far from being a destructive force, had been an exhilarating and uplifting experience which had unified the nation. They felt that some sort of struggle was becoming ever more necessary in order to pull the country out of its lethargy and direct it once more to heroic exploits.

Clearly such views were totally at odds with the existence of a democratic republic. In 1928, they commanded a wide audience and had great appeal for many young people. Nevertheless, the nationalist right was not yet strong enough to end the parliamentary system, though its network of organisations and spokesmen was very successful in using the democratic apparatus to put across its anti-democratic message. The Weimar Republic was still firmly in place in 1928, and it was still able to put together a working coalition, as a result of the election of that year.

But it was becoming clear that the foundation of support on which it rested was becoming significantly weaker. The series of compromises which had brought it into being were beginning to break down. Industrialists were becoming increasingly unwilling to honour the agreements they had reached with workers in 1918–19. The middle classes resented the rising costs and increased taxes of a

welfare state. Army leaders feared that the pacifism of the SPD would prevent them from exploiting opportunities for rearmament offered by Germany's improving diplomatic position. And the more nationalistic bourgeois parties shared their view that the price of Weimar democracy – weak governments and incessant compromises with the socialist SPD – had become unacceptably high. Significantly, compromises which had seemed so necessary in the turbulent winter of 1918–19 in order to avoid revolution were deemed no longer acceptable now that Germany's economic and international standing had been restored.

It has often been asserted that by 1928, the Weimar Republic was putting down roots and was gaining in acceptability and in support. But the evidence now available suggests that this was not in fact the case, and that strong opposition to the regime was becoming widespread. The very achievements which the republic had recorded in the social and economic sphere were being turned against it in a broad nationalist campaign designed to discredit it and to replace it by a more authoritarian political system. And while the sentiments of those who gave their support to Weimar were often couched in grudging and less than enthusiastic terms, the appeals of the enemies of the republic were fervent, uncompromising and ardently patriotic. Thus even before the full force of the depression hit Germany, the fate of the republic was balanced on a knife-edge, and the odds on the continuation of parliamentary democracy were too close to call.

4
The collapse of Weimar

The onset of the depression, 1928–30

Both inside and outside Germany, the result of the Reichstag election of May 1928, was hailed as a victory for democracy. Appearances, however, were deceptive. The reality was that the recovery by the SPD of its former levels of support, and the success of so many small splinter parties, fuelled the flames of nationalist revolt. There was a greater determination than ever amongst the right wing of the DNVP to mount a challenge to the political system by working closely with right-wing elements in the DVP and with the Nazi Party. This hardening of attitude was symbolised by the election in late 1928 of Alfred Hugenberg as chairman of the DNVP. Hugenburg had been managing director of Krupps steel works before the war, and was now a wealthy press baron, with a string of newspapers and news agencies, as well as interests in film companies across Germany. He was an abrasive and intransigent nationalist, described as 'opinionated and confrontational'. He believed in the exercise of 'dynamic force through principled confrontation' and made it his mission to harry the new government relentlessly, and to organise anti-republican propaganda of an increasingly hysterical kind. As we shall see, his willingness to join forces with other racist and nationalist parties gave Hitler a national platform which he was not slow to exploit.

This change in the attitude of the DNVP had an impact on the

DVP, many of whose members were unwilling to participate in a government alongside members of the SPD. Stresemann did agree to serve in the new cabinet, but only on the basis that it was a 'cabinet of personalities' from various parties who would constitute a grand coalition. On this rather fragile political foundation – of a cabinet not necessarily representing the views or being able to count on the support of its rank-and-file party members – Müller, of the SPD, agreed to form a government. The very broad span of its composition – stretching from the SPD to the DVP and Democrat Party, and embracing the Catholic Centre Party and Bavarian People's Party – made agreement on political issues exceedingly difficult to achieve, particularly from the end of 1928, when the leadership of the Catholic Centre Party passed from Marx to the more right-wing cleric Ludwig Kaas. And as the economic problems facing the new government increased dramatically in scale, more and more deputies withdrew their support and voted against the compromise packages painfully constructed by their party leaders in the cabinet.

What kept the government together until the spring of 1930 was the negotiation of a new reparations agreement under the chairmanship of an American banker, Owen Young. The battle to conclude and to ratify the Young plan, which was devised as a more permanent replacement for the Dawes plan, dominated German politics for over a year. The government held together until the plan had been ratified by the Reichstag and duly signed by Hindenburg, but the force of the nationalist opposition which erupted in the course of 1929 dealt a serious blow not just to Müller's government but to the whole system of parliamentary democracy.

There were three factors which led the government to seek a revision of the Dawes plan by the end of 1928. Under the scheme, German payments had by this time reached their peak of 2,500 million marks per year, and German financial experts were adamant that this sum far exceeded Germany's ability to pay, and needed to be substantially reduced. Political leaders were also keen to remove the external controls on German financial policy and the presence of the reparations agent in Germany. But more important than either of these factors was the French government's insistence that reparations issues had to be definitively settled before it would agree to discuss the early evacuation of the second and third occupation zones in the Rhineland.

Anxious to make progress on the lifting of the Rhineland occupation, the German government accordingly accepted a reparations

package negotiated with the allied governments under Young's chairmanship. While it entailed somewhat smaller annual payments over the next few years, and the ending of international controls, the Young plan required Germany to pay a total of 112,000 million marks to the allied governments over a period of nearly sixty years. Such terms were bound to provoke the fury of nationalists throughout Germany, and to serve as a reminder of the hated 'tribute payments' of the Versailles settlement and the 'war guilt lie' on which they rested. Hugenburg was able to use his media empire to protest furiously at what he denounced as the government's weak-kneed acceptance of allied demands and of the proposed enslavement of the children of Germany, and their children in turn, for the next sixty years, as they all laboured under 'the yoke of Young's bondage'.

In the summer of 1929, right-wing racist and nationalist groups came together to set up a 'Reich Committee for a German Referendum' in a bid to challenge the government's acceptance of the Young plan by referring it to the electorate. Taking his place at the table alongside Hugenburg and other right-wing leaders was Adolf Hitler, whose Nazi Party at this stage had only a dozen seats in the Reichstag, and a popular vote of around 800,000. The campaign now unleashed against the Young plan gave Hitler not only a prominent national platform for the first time but also access to many industrial and commercial leaders and their electoral funds. The message which he and his fellow campaigners directed at the German electorate was direct and uncompromising: acceptance of the Young plan entailed acceptance of the war guilt lie. The government should instead be called upon to abrogate article 231, and if ministers and others insisted on ratifying the Young plan, they should be prosecuted for treason and subject to imprisonment or forced labour.

Under the Weimar constitution, 10 per cent of the electorate now had to petition for a referendum on the nationalists' proposals, and for the latter to be considered by the Reichstag. Though 10.02 per cent of voters was secured for the first part of the procedure, the proposals were heavily defeated in the Reichstag in November, and DNVP deputies were divided over the fourth clause demanding prison sentences for those who signed the Young plan. Furthermore, Hindenburg refused to associate himself with the protests, and expressly condemned the fourth clause. A referendum held on 22 December required 21 million votes to bring the proposals into effect; instead it secured only 5.8 million votes. The following March,

despite increasingly desperate attempts by the nationalists to delay the agreement, the Young plan was passed by the Reichstag and signed by Hindenburg 'with a heavy, but also a resolute heart'. There was precious little sympathy for the President, however, in nationalist circles. The German veterans' association, the *Stahlhelm*, solemnly debated whether their honorary member should now be expelled from their ranks, and the Nazi Party newspaper carried headlines proclaiming 'Hindenburg's Farewell to Germany'.

Though the Müller coalition had successfully overcome the furious nationalist challenge to the Young plan, the effort involved had brought the government close to breaking point. In October 1929 Stresemann died, leaving his party to drift to the right. His loss was a great blow to the coalition, and it came at a time when the economic crisis facing the country was beginning to escalate as levels of unemployment climbed relentlessly upwards. Over the winter of 1929–30 it became increasingly difficult for the government to balance the budget and to gain agreement on the taxes to be increased or the economy measures to be introduced. Ironically, it was one of the major welfare achievements of the Weimar Republic, the Unemployment Insurance Act, passed in 1927, which now threatened to engulf the government in a major financial crisis.

The Act provided for modest payments to around 17 million workers if they became unemployed through no fault of their own, had worked for at least fifty-two weeks and had paid a specified number of contributions into the national insurance fund. Both workers and employers were to pay equal contributions of around 3 per cent of the average industrial wage per year. It was estimated that the fund would be able to cover a maximum of 800,000 unemployed workers on average per year – a not unreasonable provision in 1927, when unemployment had fallen to around 4.5 per cent of workers in trade unions. However, over the winter of 1927–8, levels of unemployment rose, putting the scheme under considerable pressure and forcing the government to provide additional funding. By December 1928 unemployment stood at 16.7 per cent and two months later it was at 22.3 per cent, a total of 3 million workers. Again, the government had to step in to provide a loan to keep the scheme afloat. In mid 1929, it was estimated that 1.5 million Germans were drawing on unemployment insurance, and over 10 per cent of the state budget was being consumed by support for the unemployment and social insurance fund.

As a result, employers stepped up their vehement protests against

the high taxes which they claimed were necessary to keep the scheme going, and which allegedly prevented them from ploughing profits back into their businesses. Heavy industry in particular singled out high wages and heavy social costs as the root cause of their problems. Hugenberg argued already in 1928 that 'the workers are the only group better off now than in 1913', and that they benefited particularly from compulsory arbitration settlements. As the German economy showed signs of serious contraction, his fellow industrialists demanded an end to 'coercive interference in wage policies, a reduction in intolerable social levies and taxation and a corresponding fiscal reform of the national and municipal governments'. More ominously, many of them subscribed to the view that 'we can only advance in Germany if the parties are in future excluded from negotiations on the formation of governments. So much reform is needed that we cannot think of allowing the parties to have any sort of power in Prussia or the Reich.'

Employers' concerns were increased by the steady worsening of the agrarian situation. Between 1928 and mid-1930, thirteen separate acts were passed in an increasingly desperate bid to protect the grain producers in the east. However, most of the financial assistance went to pay off debts on the larger estates, while owners of small or middling farms saw their narrow profit margins destroyed by a price collapse which became particularly severe after 1928. At the same time, evidence mounted that loans from America were drying up. In the course of 1929, the export of American capital to Germany dropped sharply, from 1,000 million dollars to 200 million, leading to declining share prices on the German stock exchange and to an increased number of bankruptcies. Export markets in Europe and overseas began to disappear behind tariffs hastily erected by anxious governments, and on 24 October 1929 the Wall Street stock market collapsed. As the economic outlook changed from gloomy to distinctly stormy, the financial pressures facing the government grew, placing enormous strains on party unity and on the scope for compromise. As the unemployment insurance fund deficit mounted, the employers' party, the DVP demanded that the level of benefits paid to workers should be cut. Not surprisingly the workers' deputies in the SPD pressed for an increase in contributions. It became more and more difficult for the government to put together a financial package that would secure the agreement of all coalition partners and be sufficient to address the scale of the crisis. On 27 March 1930, Müller resigned. By this stage, a substantial proportion of the

electorate, including most of the traditional, administrative and industrial elites, had come to the conclusion that a system of parliamentary democracy could no longer deal effectively with the problems facing the country.

In addition to calls for a move to stronger 'presidential style' government, there was a growing desire amongst the bourgeois parties and the interest groups they represented to exclude the SPD from political power. This objective was fully shared by influential army leaders, in particular the Minister of Defence, Groener, and the head of the army's political office, Kurt von Schleicher. Since the formation of Müller's government, they had worked to ensure that spending on the army and the modernisation of its armaments, much of it conducted in great secrecy, was able to continue without any interference. They were extremely successful – in 1930, Germany was spending 60 per cent more on armaments than in 1913, despite the vastly reduced size of the post-Versailles army. None the less, they resented the need for endless discussions and compromises with the 'pacifist' SPD and strongly supported the prospect of a more presidential-style government. They also favoured moves to reorientate the government coalition further to the right. By the end of the 1920s, army leaders were anxious to exploit the improving international situation, and calculated that if restrictions on the numbers of troops Germany was allowed were to be lifted by negotiations at Geneva, they might need to draw on right-wing para-military formations such as Hitler's SA. Rather than a coalition with the SPD, they believed that the army's interests would be best served by a government which established closer links with patriotic nationalists on the right.

Thus by the end of March 1930, there was a powerful current of opinion in Germany demanding a more authoritarian, anti-Marxist government. Beleaguered by their opponents, and stung by charges of financial incompetence levied in particular by Schacht, the President of the Reichsbank at the end of 1929, the SPD retreated almost thankfully into opposition. Even their closest political allies, the Catholic Centre Party, were by this stage talking about the possibility of government by emergency decree or a dissolution of the Reichstag if the political parties could not reach agreement on measures to tackle the economic and industrial crisis. In the event, the government formed by Müller's replacement, the Reichstag leader of the Centre Party, Brüning, showed little change, other than the absence of SPD members. But it soon became apparent that

Brüning's conception of his role was somewhat different from that of previous Chancellors, and that he was willing to work with Hindenburg to bring about a fundamental shift in power from parliamentary government to a more executive presidential-style government.

Many historians now pinpoint the assumption of power by Brüning as the moment in time when Weimar democracy died. It is obviously easier to come to this conclusion with the benefit of hindsight. At the time, large sections of the German population certainly saw Brüning's 'cabinet of front-line soldiers' as the only possible answer to the crisis facing their country. However, how extensive the support was in 1930 for a permanent replacement of the democratic republic by a more authoritarian regime is more difficult to assess. What is certainly true is that by 1932, after two years of escalating economic crisis and depression on a hitherto unimaginable scale, Weimar democracy was dead in all but name. The only live issue by this stage was what sort of regime would replace it.

Brüning and the great depression, 1930–2

Like its predecessor, Brüning's cabinet was a 'cabinet of personalities', and it faced similar problems of mounting budget deficits and bitter disagreements over how additional revenues could be raised. The political parties were totally unable to reach any sort of compromise over spending cuts or tax increases, and it was therefore impossible for the Minister of Finance to secure Reichstag agreement for his budgetary proposals. He resigned in June 1930, only to see his successor's proposals run into similar difficulties. Despite Brüning's threat to resort to emergency action by invoking article 48, on 16 July the Reichstag voted against a proposal to tax civil servants' earnings by 256 votes to 193. Brüning's response was to use the emergency powers of article 48 to pass the entire finance bill, including the disputed measure, into law.

On 18 July, the SPD moved for a suspension of the emergency decree and they linked this motion with a vote of no confidence. With the support of the Communists, Nazis and a large section of Hugenburg's Nationalists, the motion was passed. At this point, Brüning, stretching the constitution to its limits, dissolved the Reichstag and appealed to the electorate for support for a more authoritarian government in the forthcoming elections. It was a fateful dissolution, which benefited neither the SPD nor Brüning

himself. Instead, the great gainer was the bitterest enemy of both sides, the extreme racist and nationalist Nazi Party.

In the first half of 1930, the Nazi Party had been making significant electoral gains in regional elections, in Thuringia, in Baden and then in Saxony. In the Thuringian government, a Nazi member, Frick, was given the office of minister for the interior and for education. The party's popularity amongst university students and amongst junior officers in the Reichswehr was spreading rapidly. Of its 130,000 members in 1930, nearly 70 per cent were under 40 and 37 per cent were under 30. It had expanded its national network through an impressive 1,378 local branches. Yet despite such signals, the surge in support for the Nazi Party in the elections of September, 1930, came as an enormous shock to large numbers of Germans. As Feuchtwanger has noted, 'the Nazi breakthrough was not only sensational, it finally destroyed a party system' which had survived 'the traumatic events of defeat and revolution'. The Nazis increased their vote from 2.6 per cent in 1928 to 18.3 per cent, representing an eight-fold rise in the numbers of voters from 812,000 to 6.4 million. While some Germans contemptuously attributed their startling success to an 'uprising of stupidity', hundreds of thousands of Protestant farmers in northern Germany, craftsmen and small businessmen and their families and unskilled workers in smaller communities, civil servants, women and above all young people responded to the Nazi appeal to turn their backs on the weak parliamentary system, the Treaty of Versailles and the Young plan, and to support a dynamic nationalist party dedicated to the regeneration of Germany.

While the SPD remained the largest single Reichstag party with 143 seats, the Nazis were now the second largest with 107 deputies, who ostentatiously wore their party uniform, with its swastika emblems, and declared their intention of working to abolish all parliamentary institutions. In this objective, they were joined by 77 Communists, who had also seen their party's vote rise by some 2.5 per cent. The Catholic Centre Party's 68 seats was a gain of 7 since 1928, and the Bavarian People's Party also gained a modest 2 to reach 19. Both the DVP and the DNVP lost significant numbers of voters to the Nazis and saw their numbers of deputies decline dramatically, by a third in the case of the DVP and by almost a half in the case of the DNVP.

The situation which Brüning now faced in the Reichstag in the wake of the election was more intractable than ever. The

Communists and Nazis, together totalling about a third of the deputies in the Reichstag, were completely opposed to the Weimar constitution and indeed to any system of parliamentary government.

The weakened nationalist parties, the DVP and DNVP, and the Catholic Centre Party, who had campaigned together to rally electoral support for a 'Hindenburg bloc' so as to relieve them of the necessity of governing with the SPD found themselves in a complete political impasse. They were resolutely opposed to any working arrangement with the largest Reichstag party, the SPD, but the political logic of this was that Brüning was condemned to continuing minority support in the Reichstag, though he could count on the tacit acquiescence in his policies of the SPD. While SPD leaders were not willing to risk further electoral losses to the KPD by giving active support to Brüning's increasingly unpopular economic measures, they now recognised the immense threat posed by the Nazi Party. If they were not able to keep Brüning in office, they feared that his replacement might well be the loud-mouthed, tub-thumping, crude but undeniably charismatic Adolf Hitler.

The impossible situation that he faced in the Reichstag strengthened Brüning's strongly held conviction that only a more authoritarian government was capable of carrying through the unpopular measures necessary to save Germany from economic disaster. The result was that the Reichstag was increasingly by-passed, as Hindenburg used his presidential powers to authorise more and more emergency decrees under article 48 of the constitution. The Reichstag was in session for ninety-four days in 1930, for forty-one days in 1931 and for a mere thirteen days in 1932. While it passed ninety-eight laws in 1930, with only five emergency decrees being authorised, in 1932 it passed only five laws, with a hefty sixty-six emergency decrees deemed necessary. Quite clearly, by 1932 Germany had ceased to operate in any meaningful sense as a parliamentary democracy.

This outcome reflected Brüning's belief that he had no option but to rule by decree, to avoid damaging political compromises and the pressure of vested interest groups. He drew a sharp distinction between the interests of the state, which he saw as being well-served by disciplined and selfless government servants, and 'party political interests' which had made Germany ungovernable in the selfish pursuit of narrow party gain. After the election of 1930, Brüning increasingly relied on the support of the government's administrative machinery and on non-political 'experts' to help him in framing and

carrying through his policies. Ministerial positions became administrative appointments above the party political system, and power became concentrated in a small circle of powerful state secretaries. The basis of his political support narrowed considerably, as he bypassed political colleagues and worked through secretive discussions with chosen officials.

In his *Memoirs*, Brüning suggests that he was deliberately aiming to lay the foundations for a return to constitutional monarchy, for a reduction in the federal powers of the regional states, and for a reduced role for directly elected bodies. We do not know the extent to which his objectives were fully formed already in 1930, but there is no doubt that he saw the shift from a parliamentary republic to a more authoritarian regime as not just a temporary measure, to deal with the economic crisis, but as a permanent change. What he had not reckoned with, however, was the progressive demoralisation and radicalisation which his deflationary policies brought about among the German electorate. Their effect was to increase support not for the return of the monarchy or for a reinforced presidential system but for the radical programme put forward by the Nazis.

As well as seeking political and constitutional reforms, Brüning's main objectives were to 'restructure' Germany's economic and financial systems and to end Germany's reparations payments. While he was facing an economic crisis of unprecedented magnitude, there is general agreement that his desire to exploit it to achieve domestic and foreign-policy aims compounded the disastrous situation facing Germany. As the German economy contracted, national income fell sharply, and in 1932 was 39 per cent less in real terms than it had been in 1929. Unemployment spiralled from 3 million to its peak of 6 million registered unemployed in 1932: the real figure of those then out of work, counting temporary female workers and summer labourers, was probably nearer to 9 million, with millions more on reduced hours or fearing the closure of their workshops and factories.

Brüning's reponse was to reduce price and wage levels substantially throughout the German economy, except in the agricultural sector. He was unwavering in his insistence that the crisis could only be overcome by cutting public and welfare expenditure and by imposing the strictest financial discipline on the German people. Reductions in the pensions of wounded war veterans, widows and orphans created great bitterness, as did massive salary cuts and reductions in benefits for unskilled workers and for the lower ranks of the civil service. More senior civil servants saw their income cut by over

20 per cent. At the same time, taxes were increased – there were surcharges on high incomes, taxes on single people and civil servants, a citizens' tax, and increased taxes on tobacco and beer. Even the unpopular turnover tax was increased in the course of 1931, and the level of contributions for unemployment insurance had leapt from 3½ per cent to 6½ per cent. At the same time, Germany's foreign debts had increased from 1 billion Reichsmarks to 3.3 billion.

All these measures contributed to the growing alienation and profound disaffection of the electorate. Unemployed workers who had exhausted their entitlement to state benefits were thrown on to the mercy of their local councils, and had to beg for food and clothing for their families. The single unemployed roamed the streets; large numbers were recruited by the Communist Party and were increasingly involved in street fights with Nazi thugs. Those still in work worried about their future prospects; working women came under strong social pressure to give up their jobs to men whose positions as heads of families cast them, and not their wives or daughters, as the chief bread winners.

Many commentators, at the time and since, have argued that there were alternatives to Brüning's deflationary policies, that measures could have been introduced to stimulate credit formation and to create comprehensive job-creation programmes. But such alternatives would have undermined Brüning's main objectives, to use the crisis to end Germany's reparation payments, to dismantle Weimar's comprehensive and elaborate system of welfare provisions and to reduce Germany's manufacturing costs in order to make her industry more competitive than that of her European neighbours.

Throughout 1930 and 1931, Brüning's policy was aimed at persuading the allies that Germany could no longer afford to make reparation payments. He told a meeting of the Centre Party's Reichstag group in August 1931, that 'only deflation could convince the world that Germany could not afford to pay reparations'. Any sign of economic recovery would undermine Germany's campaign to secure allied recognition of her near-bankruptcy. In June 1931, President Hoover of the United States did indeed agree to a moratorium on reparations payments. But by this time, the failure of the *Kreditanstalt*, the largest bank in Austria, following on from a disastrously ill-judged proposal from the Austrian and German governments for a customs union in March 1931, had triggered off a banking crisis in Germany itself. Within days of an agreement being reached with France over the moratorium, Germany's largest bank,

the Danatbank, collapsed. Another bank, the Dresdener, was also in difficulties, as more and more local authorities and municipal councils faced insolvency.

In the face of such unprecedented financial disasters, trade unions had no hope of holding on to their hard-won rights and welfare provisions. Every downward spiral in the prevailing economic situation was utilised by Brüning to force down costs and wages in a vain endeavour to drive Germany through the crisis and to enable her to emerge in a stronger and more competitive position, while her erstwhile enemies were still engulfed in depression. He told Hitler at one of their first meetings in 1930 that 'the first country to implement all the unpopular domestic measures necessary will rise to the top'. Thus Brüning shared with the Nazis a desire to use the crisis to bring an end to the Versailles shackles and to restore Germany to a position of political and economic dominance in Europe. But while he worked to bring about revision under the leadership of the traditional German elites – the army, large landowners, and senior government officials, and to pave the way for the restoration of the monarchy, the Nazis worked to harness the misery and despair of the German masses for a far more radical political programme.

As Nazi support in local elections increased dramatically in the course of 1931, Brüning found his own position challenged by increasing hostility from industrialists, from the army, and from large landowners in the east. In October 1931 there was a great anti-Marxist rally of right-wing national opposition groups at Bad Harzburg, masterminded by Hugenberg. The Nazis used the occasion to demonstrate the strength of their support and to pose as dedicated, if impatient, patriots. Hitler had already emphasised his intention to work against the republic by legitimate means rather than through violence at a trial of three army officers the previous year, thereby enhancing his nationalist appeal and political legitimacy. In January 1932, Groener told fellow army leaders that Hitler was a 'modest, decent individual, with best intentions. In appearance the keen, self-taught type. . . . Intentions and aims of Hitler are good, but he is an enthusiast, ardent, diffuse. . . . The Nazis have to be justly treated, only excesses to be fought not the movement as such.'

Meanwhile, Schacht, no longer at the head of the Reichsbank but still a very influential financier, threw his weight behind the nationalist opposition and against Brüning, referring to the mark as 'a currency which no longer serves the normal exchange of goods, but has the sole purpose of hiding the illiquidity of our financial institutions and of the public purse'. In the army, von Schleicher was weighing up the possibilities of broadening the government by bringing in the Nazis, in an effort to 'tame them', and effecting a transition to a permanent authoritarian regime based on a strong President and backed by the army. However, the first meeting in October 1931 between Hindenburg and Hitler, who was accompanied by Goering, did not go well. The 84-year-old Field Marshall took an instant dislike to Hitler, regarding him as an uneducated social upstart and referring to him afterwards with contempt as the 'Bohemian corporal'.

Hindenburg's patience with Brüning was also reaching its limits by 1932. There were several reasons for the old man's disillusionment with his former protégé. In the first place, Brüning's economic cuts had alienated and driven into opposition not just socialist-inclined workers and their families, but respectable and well-connected civil servants and government officials. Secondly, Hindenburg's son Oskar and his military and aristocratic confidants were increasingly attracted by the radical programme of national reconstruction put forward by the Nazis, just as they were strongly opposed to Brüning's support for a ban on the public activities of the Nazi SA and SS. This ban was finally agreed to extremely reluctantly by Hindenburg in April 1932, despite the Crown Prince's protest against the disbanding of 'this magnificent body of men', but caused great anger in military circles. Thirdly, Brüning had failed to extend the President's term of office, due to expire in early 1932, by parliamentary means, and Hindenburg found himself facing the disagreeable prospect of a presidential election.

Nothing highlights the change which had taken place in the German political landscape since the late 1920s more vividly than this election campaign. Hindenburg found it exceedingly difficult to secure the support of right-wing nationalist parties. The veterans' organisation, the *Stahlhelm*, and Hugenberg's Nationalists refused to support him. When the former emperor forbade his son, the Crown Prince, to stand as a candidate, Goebbels announced that Hitler would stand. Even in the *Junker* heartlands of East Prussia, strong support was forthcoming for the 'Bohemian corporal'. The majority of the East Prussian Chamber of Agriculture requested Hindenburg to resign in favour of Hitler! Hindenburg was put in the humiliating position of having to woo the despised Socialists and the Catholic Centre Party, while Hitler was the favoured candidate of the nationalist parties. In the first ballot, on 13 March 1932, Hindenburg

secured over 18.5 million votes as against Hitler's 11.3 million, but narrowly failed to win an overall majority. He was thus forced to a second round, and though he won fairly comfortably, Hitler still received an extremely respectable vote of almost 37 per cent.

The final straw for Brüning came with landed opposition to a state scheme designed to broaden the 'Eastern Relief' programme. While great landowners had to some extent escaped the drastic economies imposed on the rest of the population and had required generous state subsidies and tariff protection, special treatment had not been sufficient to save all estates from bankruptcy. However, plans whereby the state would acquire some of this land, by compulsory purchase if necessary, and resettle landless labourers on it, aroused the deep anger of Prussian *Junkers*. They expressed their total opposition to such 'agrarian Bolshevism' to their fellow estate-owner, Hindenburg, in very explicit terms. Indeed, the Director of the East Prussian Agricultural Society warned of the dire effects such measures would have on men who had 'hitherto been the bearers of the national will to resist Poland by force of arms'.

As a result of all these factors, Hindenburg felt that he could no longer keep Brüning in office. With the decline in influence of the Reichstag, and government now proceeding by means of a series of emergency decrees, Brüning could stay in power only if Hindenburg remained willing to continue granting the decrees. By the end of May 1932, he was no longer prepared to do so. A month before the final cancellation of all reparations payments was declared at Lausanne, Brüning's cabinet resigned, on 30 May 1932. As he later expressed it, he fell '100 metres from his goal'. It was left to others to reap the benefits of all his efforts.

Presidential rule to Nazi rule: June 1932–January 1933

Brüning was replaced as Chancellor by a man few Germans had heard of, Franz von Papen. Though he was a member of the Catholic Centre Party, his political experience had been largely confined to the Prussian *Landtag*. Far from being a typical Weimar deputy, he was a wealthy aristocrat and retired cavalry major who believed that government should revert to being the preserve of gentlemen, reserve officers, barons and great landowners. His cabinet therefore did not contain a single member of the middle class, let alone a working man, and none of its members was a Reichstag deputy. All ministers

ostentatiously renounced their party memberships on taking office to emphasise that their appointments transcended party politics and that their power derived from the President and from the state, not from the people. Von Papen's elevation owed much to the recommendation of his former General Staff classmate, Kurt von Schleicher, and both Hindenburg and von Schleicher hoped that Hitler and the Nazi Party could be prevailed upon to support him, without the need for an incessant stream of emergency decrees.

One of von Papen's first measures was to lift the ban on the SA and the SS. This was followed by a bold measure to remove the local and regional powers of the state of Prussia, an area in which the SPD had exercised strong political influence, and to place the state directly under the control of a Reich Commissioner. The move was allegedly aimed against the threat of a communist uprising which the state government had not taken any action to suppress. Despite the far-reaching political implications of the move, 'not a hand was raised . . . to defend the strongest surviving stronghold of the Republic'. With widespread unemployment continuing, and the struggle to exist from day to day consuming the attention of the population – even of trade union and SPD activists – no-one had the stomach for a political confrontation, and a run-in with Nazi opponents. Thus another bastion of Weimar democracy had fallen.

Flushed with triumph, von Papen confidently awaited the results of fresh elections, which had been declared for the end of July. But it was already clear from huge increases in support for Hitler and the Nazi Party in state elections, that once again Hitler would be the principal beneficiary of the never-ending economic crisis. With nearly 6 million workers now officially registered as out of work, the Nazi vote rocketed once again, with support from nearly 14 million Germans, resulting in an increase from 110 seats to 230. The Communists also increased their seats, from 78 to 89. While the SPD experienced slight losses, and the Catholic Centre Party made modest gains, the liberal and conservative parties suffered severely, retaining only 22 of their previous 122 seats. Even Hugenberg's Nationalists lost 5 seats. With 37 per cent of the vote, the Nazis had gained support across the political spectrum, but particularly from the other nationalist parties and special interest and single-issue parties.

With their modern campaigning slogans and strong nationalist image, the impact of the Nazis on the electorate, and particularly the charismatic appeal of Hitler, was undeniable. With 319 seats out of a total of 608, the Nazis and Communists now commanded an abso-

lute majority in the Reichstag. Surely it would only be a matter of time before Hitler and some of his fellow Nazis took office in a new government.

The negotiations and 'backstairs intrigues' which now began revolved not around whether or not Hitler should be given a government post – this could hardly be denied him, given the size of the Nazi vote – but around the terms on which he should be brought into power. Von Papen was willing to agree to Hitler's becoming Vice-Chancellor in his government, and to allow his fellow Nazis a number of ministerial posts, but no more. Von Schleicher, however, thought that Hitler's strong showing in the election justified his appointment as Chancellor, and tried to bring Hindenburg round to this point of view. The President remained obdurately unimpressed with Hitler, and when Hitler told him at a meeting on 13 August that he would not co-operate with the new government unless appointed as Chancellor, the President responded that he could not accept that responsibility 'before God, his conscience and the Fatherland'.

However, Hitler had many ways in which he could continue to press his claims. If Hindenburg would not let him become Chancellor, then he could work to construct a majority coalition in the Reichstag. To this end, he entered into negotiations with the Catholic Centre and Bavarian People's parties. An alliance between 'the black' (the clerical Catholic Centre Party) and 'the brown' (Nazi Party) had already operated successfully in some regional parliaments, on a common programme of anti-Marxism. Now Hitler sought to use it to further his ambitions to gain the Chancellorship. Von Papen could not allow the Reichstag to be mobilised against him in this way, as a 'black and brown' coalition could easily vote him out of power. Both Hindenburg and von Papen regarded this assertion of Reichstag power as an affront to Presidential power, and as a consequence von Papen was given the authorisation to dissolve the Reichstag and to call fresh elections. The Reichstag's response was to pass a vote of 'no confidence' in von Papen's government by the overwhelming margin of 512 votes to 42, but attempts to argue against such an early dissolution on the grounds that it was unconstitutional were nevertheless unsuccessful.

The second Reichstag election of 1932 was held on 6 November and in the intervening period from mid September von Papen's government tried to alleviate economic distress by a programme which included measures designed to create new jobs, as well as

proposals to simplify the social services and further cut costs. The Voluntary Labour Service, which the government introduced, provided the foundation for more ambitious schemes to put unemployed people back to work introduced by the Nazis the following year. To appease the agricultural lobby, von Papen's government granted a land tax remission of 40 per cent, banned the auctioning of defaulted estates and instituted quotas on dairy and livestock imports.

By the time of the election, the economic crisis had certainly passed its peak, though voters were still suffering from the consequences. Furthermore, political parties, and in particular the Nazi Party, had expended a considerable part of their funds on the earlier election campaign, and now had to cut back somewhat on their electioneering. None the less, the Nazi Party remained popular, with 11.7 million voters supporting it, as against 13.7 million in July, and a total of 196 seats. There was an increase in support for the Nationalists, from 14 to 51 seats, and modest losses for the Catholic Centre and the Bavarian People's Party. But on the left, the clear gainers were the German Communists, whose number of seats rose from 89 seats to 100. They were now almost as strong as the SPD, whose support had fallen, and who now held only 121 seats.

Commentators at the time and since have made much of the fact that the Nazi Party had suffered a serious setback, receiving the support of only 33 per cent of the electorate, as against over 37 per cent in July. Is this a clear sign that their support had peaked and that they were now declining rapidly as a as a political force? If this was a possibility, it was one which worried many Catholic Centre and right-wing leaders as they witnessed the continuing rise of the 'Bolshevik peril'. Around one-sixth of the electorate had supported the Communist Party, whose vote was heavily concentrated in the major industrial areas and in Berlin. To counter this subversive political force, party leaders from the Centre Party across to the right of the political spectrum were agreed that Hitler had to be given a prominent role in any new government. But the difficulty lay in agreeing on what that role should be. Was it finally to be the Chancellorship, or would Hitler now accept something less?

In prolonged negotiations with von Papen and then with Hindenburg, Hitler stuck to his insistence on the Chancellorship or nothing. He justified this stance by arguing that if Nazism as a movement collapsed 'then Germany will be in the greatest danger, then there will be 18 million Marxists and among them perhaps 14 or 15 million Communists. It is therefore entirely in the national interest

that my movement should survive and this presupposes that my movement will have the lead.' Still von Papen and Hindenburg refused to accede to Hitler's demand. But increasing numbers of important interest groups – amongst industrialists, in the army, even in Hindenburg's own family circle – were arguing that Hitler should be brought in to power at the head of a new government, and that there was no other way to break the deadlock with the Reichstag and to combat the menace of Communism. The Chairman of the Catholic Centre Party, Kaas, told Hindenburg in late November 1932, 'There are 12 million Germans in the right opposition (Nazi Party) and 13.5 in the left (KPD 6 million, SPD 7.3 million) with the communists growing stronger daily. The left could unify at any time and it is going to be a long, cold winter. The NSDAP must be brought . . . into government now.'

Von Papen instead toyed with the idea of a 'New State', a state without political parties, trade unions or a popularly elected Reichstag but with an authoritarian style of government backed by the army and police. But at a cabinet meeting on 2 December, von Papen could find few backers for such a prospect, particularly when army representatives demurred at the challenge of trying to keep order in the streets against mass demonstrations of Nazis and Communists, while at the same time defending the country's frontiers. Von Papen, accordingly, offered his resignation, and von Schleicher now came out of the shadows to see if he as the new Chancellor could strike a deal with the Nazis.

Von Schleicher's strategy rested on two main aims: to try to negotiate with a more amenable Nazi leader than Hitler, thus splitting the Nazi Party, and to solicit the support of workers and their unions by repealing some of von Papen's more reactionary economic measures. He failed comprehensively on both counts. His attempts to bring the Nazis into government under Gregor Strasser as his Vice-Chancellor came to an abrupt end as Strasser pulled out of negotiations, resigned all his party posts, and took off for an Italian holiday. Hitler had managed to hold the Nazi Party firm and united behind his own uncompromising political demands despite considerable unrest at the failure to secure tangible rewards for their recent electoral successes. Von Schleicher's negotiations with union leaders were no more successful, as the SPD condemned his advances and pressed for contacts to be broken off.

Von Schleicher's attempt to break the political stalemate by making overtures to the unions was roundly condemned in nationalist and presidential circles and by leading industrialists. As Hugenburg graphically observed, 'Schleicher is wooing and messing around with the rotten Red Masses. His cabinet only appears presidential; in truth he is making himself dependent on parties.' The hapless new Chancellor had succeeded only in arousing against him the united opposition of employers and powerful rural interests, who feared that he was reviving some of Brüning's policies. And, perhaps even more significantly, he had incurred the wrath of von Papen.

By early January 1933, it had become very clear that neither von Schleicher nor von Papen could form an effective government, which took some account of popular feelings, without Hitler. It seemed that all possible alternative avenues had been explored, with a singular lack of success. Therefore it became a contest between the two leaders as to which would be the first to strike a deal with Hitler which he would be willing to accept. With von Schleicher unable to muster support in the Reichstag, and Hindenburg unwilling to contemplate yet another dissolution, the way was clear for von Papen to try to construct a 'government of national concentration' with Hitler at its head. The main obstacle to this was the President himself, who still remained unwilling to see Hitler appointed to the office of Chancellor. But in a series of further negotiations with von Papen, which by 22 January were involving the President's son Oskar, Hitler was extremely modest in his political demands, seeking only a few ministerial posts for fellow Nazis apart from his own appointment as Chancellor. At the same time, von Schleicher's attempts to win support from Nationalists and from other Reichstag parties had come to nothing, and he resigned on 28 January. Now von Papen and Oskar von Hindenburg stepped up their attempts to persuade the President that Hitler could do little damage as Chancellor of a nationalist government, with von Papen as his Vice-Chancellor. He would be 'framed in' by respectable nationalists; indeed, within two months, he would be 'squeezed . . . into a corner until he squeaks'. Meanwhile, the new government would have the support of the Reichstag and of the public at large, it would work with Hitler to change the political constitution by passing an enabling act, and then in due course it could dispense with Hitler's services.

Hindenburg proved to be a more astute political judge of character than those around him. He did not share von Papen's extremely optimistic prediction of the future course of events but by the end of January 1933 he accepted that he had run out of alternative options. He finally agreed to appoint Hitler as Chancellor, and to grant him

the measure which he had refused to von Schleicher, a dissolution of the Reichstag should it prove to be necessary. And within an exceedingly short space of time, von Papen's vision of the future had evaporated, Hindenburg's fears had proved to be well-founded, and the Weimar Republic had been brutally replaced by the Third Reich.

5
Weimar in retrospect

Books and articles on the Weimar Republic have inevitably been coloured by the atrocities of the Nazi regime which replaced it. Weimar democracy patently failed to prevent Hitler from coming to power and establishing a Nazi dictatorship, and thus for the most part studies have been concerned with identifying the reasons for this failure. Different factors have been singled out for blame: the mistaken tactics of the German Communist Party or of the Social Democrats, the enduring strength of traditional social and economic elites, backstairs intrigue in the crucial winter months of 1932–3 or the failure to establish a strong foundation for democracy at the outset. There has been an ongoing and vigorous debate on all these alleged weaknesses of Weimar democracy, but in recent years historians have also attempted to look at Weimar Germany from a longer-term perspective, as a crucial stage in the complex evolution over the past 100 years of a modern and highly industrialised central European state.

This final chapter will focus on a number of major themes which have been at the centre of historical debate since the second world war. Was the regime really 'doomed from the outset' as many historians have argued, or was its eventual failure based rather on the escalating crises of the late 1920s and in particular the impact of the depression? To help us to arrive at a considered overall conclusion, we need to take account of the limited nature of the German revolution and the problems facing those political parties who were faced