Hi-story lessons.

7

30.01.1933

30 January: President of the Reich, Paul von Hindenburg appoints Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany

As a former Commander-in-Chief of the Supreme Army Command (OHL), and as the Held von Tannenberg (Hero of Tannenberg), Paul von Hindenburg was an old school military-man. As a young officer, he was present in the Hall of Mirrors at the Versailles Palace on 18 January 1871, for the proclamation of the German Empire, and he is considered to be a committed monarchist. Nevertheless, he places himself at the service of the young republic in 1925 following the sudden and unexpected death of the Social Democratic President of Germany, Friedrich Ebert, succeeding Ebert in this role. After the loss of their actual monarch, Hindenburg comes to be perceived almost as a substitute emperor for many Germans, especially given his grandfatherly-like demeanour and, even at 78 years of age, his marked military presence. When the seven-year presidential term was coming to an end in 1932, Hindenburg was reluctantly persuaded to run for re-election, with the strong support of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), even though he did not personally support their goals. With the support of all the democratic parties, Hindenburg was re-elected, on the basis that this was the only way that the election of his opponent, The Nazi Party candidate, Hitler, could be prevented. In his first years in office, Hindenburg had abided by the constitution, despite his personal, generally negative attitude towards democracy, and in this way, he helped the fledgling state achieve a fragile stability in difficult times. However, from 1930, he adopted Article 48 from the Weimar Republic's Constitution. This emergency decree allows the President to sidestep parliamentary control and sign bills into law without the consent of the Reichstag. It is not clear and, in fact, quite controversial as to whether Hindenburg actually aims to reduce the political problems of his time with authoritarian measures, or if he wants to establish an anti-democratic form of government in the long term. When the coalition government collapses once again in March 1930, Hindenburg invokes Article 48, and appoints a Chancellor according to the requirements he deems essential. And so the period of the so-called Presidential Cabinet begins, which needs to deal with the consequences and fallout from the 1929 ongoing economic crisis and the process of political radicalisation. In June 1930, Hindenburg dissolves the Reichstag parliament and calls for a new election. The Reichstag's rejection of the government's emergency decree under Chancellor Heinrich Brüning is given as the cause and justification for this decision. From a modern viewpoint, the dissolution of the Reichstag is Hindenburg's fatal mistake. The democratic parties no longer have a majority in the newly elected Reichstag following an election campaign marked by riots and turmoil on the streets, which had primarily been led by the Nazis and the Communists. The worldwide economic crisis has radicalised the general population. The Communist Party (KPD) has 77 seats at its command; the Nazi Party has over 107 seats in the Reichstag. Only the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has more seats, with a count

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Neither the Presidential cabinet nor Hindenburg's authoritarian course can or want to prevent the erosion of the republic any longer. Led by the Chancellor of Germany, Franz von Papen (a centrist, and not aligned to a party at this time), who had also been appointed by Hindenburg, talks are organised in 1932 between the Nazi Party, Hindenburg and the government. Von Papen, who is fundamentally authoritarian-reactionary, plans to create a neuen Staat (new state), with the intention of suspending the parliamentary democracy and founding a presidential system. Hitler pledges his support to von Papen's cabinet, but prescribes conditions: Speedy new elections and a lifting of the ban on the Sturmabteilung (SA, or Storm Troopers) paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party. Hindenburg and von Papen agree to these demands. In the Reichstag elections due to be held in July 1932, the Nazi Party becomes the strongest parliamentary party with 230 representatives. When combined with the KPD and its 89 representatives, as well as the 37 elected parliamentarians from the German National People's Party (DNVP), which was equally antagonistic towards the republic, subversive fractions held a majority of 356 of the 608 seats. The heated political climate is stoked by rabble-rousing agitation and street battles between the "brown" and "red" groups of political thugs. After only one sitting, the Reichstag is dissolved once again, and new elections are held in November 1932, in which the Nazi Party sustains a loss of 4.2 percent. For a short moment it would appear that the rise of party-organised anti-Semitism, nationalism, racism and militarism has been stopped. And yet, in spite of this, the anti-parliamentary parties still retain the majority, holding 348 of the 584 seats. Once again, von Papen demands a dissolution of the Reichstag and a delaying of new elections, which would represent the de facto implementation of a dictatorship. Hindenburg rejects this proposal. In this context, von Papen approaches Hitler and forges a coalition of the Nazi Party and the DNVP under the leadership of the Nazi agitator. Hindenburg, who had prevented Hitler becoming President of the German Reich in 1932, agrees to the plan. On 30 January 1933, Hindenburg appoints Hitler as Chancellor, even though the Nazi Party had been forced to accept losses in the last election. Von Papen is appointed Vice-Chancellor.

To this day, speculation continues to be rife regarding Hindenburg's motives. Why would Hindenburg make a man Chancellor that he personally repudiated for his absolute radicalism, his petty bourgeois mentality and, not least of all, his low military rank? Following the line of the most recent research, Hindenburg made a conscious decision in favour of a man from whom he could most easily imagine the implementation of common goals: the elimination of all left-wing movements, and the creation of an authoritarian presidential system. In contrast to what is often stated, Hindenburg is neither mentally unfit as a consequence of his age at this point in time, nor completely subservient to extraneous whisperings. Barely in office, Hitler reshapes the state without Hindenburg trying to tie his hands in any way. Hitler immediately utilises the Reichstag fire in February 1933, and the new

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Reichstag elections in March 1933, still being held despite the suspension of most fundamental rights and civil liberties, to enforce numerous laws to abolish the democracy and establish a dictatorship. Following Hindenburg's death in 1934, Hitler assumes his office and henceforth calls himself Führer und Reichskanzler (Leader and Reich Chancellor).

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