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The Coming of the
Third Reich

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groups in Munich and armed clashes involving French-backed separatists in the Rhineland. In the early 1920s, extreme leftists such as Karl Plättner and Max Hölz carried out campaigns of armed robbery and 'expropriation' that ended only when they were arrested and sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment.¹⁶¹

It was in this atmosphere of national trauma, political extremism, violent conflict and revolutionary upheaval that Nazism was born. Most of the elements that went into its eclectic ideology were already current in Germany before 1914 and had become even more familiar to the public during the war. The dramatic collapse of Germany into political chaos towards the end of 1918, a chaos that endured for several years after the war, provided the spur to translate extreme ideas into violent action. The heady mixture of hatred, fear and ambition that had intoxicated a small number of Pan-German extremists suddenly gained a crucial extra element: the willingness, determination even, to use physical force. National humiliation, the collapse of the Bismarckian Empire, the triumph of Social Democracy, the threat of Communism, all this seemed to some to justify the use of violence and murder to implement the measures which Pan-Germans, antisemites, eugenicists and ultra-nationalists had been advocating since before the turn of the century, if the German nation was ever to recover.

Yet such ideas still remained those of a minority even after 1918, and the use of physical force to put them into effect was still confined to a tiny, extremist fringe. German society and politics were polarized into extremes by the collapse of 1918-19, not converted to a general enthusiasm for extreme nationalism. And, crucially, the centre ground of politics was still occupied by people and parties committed to the creation of a stable, functioning parliamentary democracy, to social reform, to cultural freedom and to economic opportunity for all. The collapse of the Wilhelmine Reich was their chance too, and they seized it willingly. Before ultra-nationalism could break out into the political mainstream, it had to smash the barriers created by Germany's first democracy, the Weimar Republic.

2

THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRACY

THE WEAKNESSES OF WEIMAR

I

Fear and hatred ruled the day in Germany at the end of the First World War. Gun battles, assassinations, riots, massacres and civil unrest denied Germans the stability in which a new democratic order could flourish. Yet somebody had to take over the reins of government after the Kaiser's abdication and the collapse of the Reich created by Bismarck. The Social Democrats stepped into the breach. A group of leading figures in the labour movement emerged in the confusion of early November 1918 to form a revolutionary Council of People's Delegates. Uniting, for a brief period at least, the two wings of the Social Democratic movement (the Majority, who had supported the war, and the Independents, who had opposed it), the Council was led by Friedrich Ebert, a long-time Social Democratic Party functionary. Born in 1871, the son of a tailor, he became a saddler and entered politics through his trade union activities. He worked on the editorial staff of the Social Democratic newspaper in Bremen, then in 1893 opened a pub in the city, which like so many such institutions functioned as a centre for local labour organizations. By 1900 he was active in Bremen's municipal politics, and as leader of the local Social Democrats he did much to improve the party's effectiveness. In 1905 he was elected secretary to the national party's central committee in Berlin, and in 1912 he entered the Reichstag.

Ebert won the respect of his party not as a great orator or charismatic leader, but as a calm, patient and subtle negotiator who always seemed to bring the different factions of the labour movement together. He was a typical pragmatist of the second generation of Social Democratic leaders, accepting the party's Marxist ideology but concentrating his

efforts on the day-to-day improvement of working-class life through his expertise in areas such as labour law and social insurance. It was his hard work that was mainly responsible for the remodelling and improved efficiency of the party's administration and electoral machine before the war, and he took a great deal of the credit for the party's famous victory in the Reichstag elections of 1912. On the death of the party's long-term leader August Bebel in 1913, Ebert was elected joint leader of the party alongside the more radical Hugo Haase. Like many Social Democratic organizers, Ebert put loyalty to the party above almost everything else, and his outrage at the refusal of Haase and other opponents of the war to follow majority decisions in the party was a major factor in persuading him to bring about their expulsion. Led by Haase, the dissidents formed the Independent Social Democrats in 1917 and worked from a variety of points of view to bring about an end to the war. Ebert believed in discipline and order, compromise and reform, and worked hard to bring about a co-operation with the Centre Party and the left-liberals during the war, in order to push the Kaiser's administration towards an acceptance of parliamentarism. His main aim in 1918-19 was formulated by the characteristic concern of the sober administrator: to keep essential services going, to stop the economy from collapsing and to restore law and order. He was converted to the view that the Kaiser should abdicate only by the realization that a social revolution would break out if he did not, and, he added in conversation with the Kaiser's last Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, 'I don't want that, indeed I hate it like sin.'¹

Instead of revolution, Ebert wanted parliamentary democracy. In collaboration with the Centre Party and the left-wing liberals, now renamed the Democrats, Ebert and his associates in the Council of People's Delegates organized nationwide elections to a Constituent Assembly early in 1919, against the opposition of more radical elements who looked to the workers' and soldiers' councils to form the basis of some kind of Soviet-style administration. Many ordinary electors in Germany, whatever their private political views, saw voting for the three democratic parties as the best way to prevent the creation of a German Soviet and ward off the threat of a Bolshevik revolution. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Social Democrats, the left-liberal Democrats and the Centre Party gained an overall majority in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. This met early in 1919 in the central German town of Weimar, long

associated with the life and work of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German poet, novelist and dramatist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.² The constitution which it approved on 31 July 1919 was essentially a modified version of the constitution established by Bismarck for his new Reich nearly half a century before.³ In place of the Kaiser there was a Reich President who was to be elected, like the President of the United States, by popular vote. Not only did this give him independent legitimacy in his dealings with the legislature, it also encouraged his use of the extensive emergency powers which he was granted under the constitution's Article 48. In times of trouble, he could rule by decree and use the army to restore law and order in any federated state if he thought they were under threat.

The power to rule by decree was only intended for exceptional emergencies. But Ebert, as the Republic's first President, made very extensive use of this power, employing it on no fewer than 136 separate occasions. He deposed legitimately elected governments in Saxony and Thuringia when they threatened, in his view, to foment disorder. Even more dangerously, during the 1920 civil war in the Ruhr he issued a backdated decree applying the death penalty to public-order offences and retrospectively legitimizing many of the summary executions that had already been carried out on members of the Red Army by units of the Free Corps and the regular army.⁴ It was significant that on both occasions these powers were used to suppress perceived threats to the Republic from the left, whereas they went virtually unused against what many saw as the far greater threat to it posed by the right. There were virtually no effective safeguards against an abuse of Article 48, since the President could threaten to use the power given him by Article 25 to dissolve the Reichstag should it reject a Presidential decree. Moreover, decrees could in any case be used to create a *fait accompli* or to bring about a situation in which the Reichstag had little option but to approve them (for example, though this was never intended, they could be used to intimidate and suppress opposition to the government in power). In some circumstances, no doubt, there was probably little alternative to some kind of rule by decree. But Article 48 included no proper provisions for the ultimate reassertion of power by the legislature in such an eventuality; and Ebert used it not just for emergencies but also in non-emergency situations where steering legislation through the Reichstag would have been too difficult. In the

end, Ebert's excessive use, and occasional misuse, of the Article widened its application to a point where it became a potential threat to democratic institutions.⁵

Ebert's achievement in steering the Weimar Republic into being was undeniable. Yet he made many hasty compromises that were to return to haunt the Republic in different ways later on. His concern for a smooth transition from war to peace led him to collaborate closely with the army without demanding any changes in its fiercely monarchist and ultra-conservative officer corps, which he was certainly in a position to do in 1918-19. Yet Ebert's willingness to compromise with the old order did not do anything to endear him to those who regretted its passing. Throughout the years of his Presidency, he was subjected to a remorseless campaign of vilification in the right-wing press. For those who thought that the head of state should possess a remote, Olympian dignity far from the ordinariness of everyday life, a widely publicized newspaper photograph of the squat, podgy figure of the Reich President on a seaside holiday with a couple of friends, dressed only in bathing-trunks, exposed him to ridicule and contempt. Other opponents in the muck-raking right-wing press attempted to smear him through associating him with financial scandals. Ebert, perhaps foolishly, responded by firing off no fewer than 173 libel suits at those responsible, without ever once gaining satisfaction.⁶ In a criminal trial held in 1924, in which the accused was charged with calling Ebert a traitor to his country, the court fined the man the token sum of 10 marks because, as it concluded, Ebert had indeed shown himself to be a traitor by maintaining contacts with striking munitions workers in Berlin in the last year of the war (although he had in fact done so in order to bring the strike to a rapid, negotiated end).⁷ The unending wave of hatred poured over Ebert by the extreme right had its effect, not merely in undermining his position but also in wearing him down personally, both mentally and physically. Obsessed with trying to clear his name from all these smears, Ebert neglected a ruptured appendix that could have been dealt with quite easily by the medical science of the time, and he died, aged 54, on 28 February 1925.⁸

The elections to the post of President that followed were a disaster for the democratic prospects of the Weimar Republic. The baleful influence of Weimar's political fragmentation and lack of legitimacy made itself felt here, since in the first round, none of the candidates looked like

winning, so the right drafted in the reluctant figure of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg as a rallying-point for their divided supporters. In the subsequent run-off, if either the Communists or the autonomous Bavarian wing of the Centre Party had voted for Hindenburg's best-supported opponent, the Catholic politician Wilhelm Marx, the Field Marshal might have been defeated. But, thanks to the egotism above all of the Bavarians, he was elected by a clear majority. A symbol par excellence of the old military and Imperial order, Hindenburg was a bulky, physically imposing man whose statuesque appearance, military uniform, war service medals and legendary reputation – mostly undeserved – for winning the great Battle of Tannenberg and for guiding Germany's military destiny thereafter, made him into a much-revered figurehead, above all for the right. Hindenburg's election was greeted by the forces of the right as a symbol of restoration. 'On 12/5,' reported the conservative academic Victor Klemperer (an alarmed and unsympathetic observer) in his diary, 'as *Hindenburg* was sworn in, there were black-white-red flags everywhere. The Reich flag only on official buildings.' Eight out of ten Imperial flags Klemperer observed on this occasion were, he said, the small ones of the kind used by children.⁹ For many, Hindenburg's election was a big step away from Weimar democracy in the direction of a restoration of the old monarchical order. A rumour duly did the rounds that Hindenburg had felt it necessary to ask the ex-Kaiser Wilhelm, now in exile in Holland, for permission before he took up the post of President. It was untrue, but it said a great deal for Hindenburg's reputation that it gained currency.¹⁰

Once in office, and influenced by his strong sense of duty, Hindenburg, to the surprise of many, stuck to the letter of the constitution; but, as his seven-year term of office wore on, and he moved into his eighties, he became ever more impatient with the complexities of political events and ever more susceptible to the influence of his inner circle of advisers, all of whom shared his instinctive belief that the monarchy was the only legitimate sovereign power in the German Reich. Persuaded of the correctness of the use of Presidential emergency powers by the example of his predecessor, Hindenburg began to feel that a conservative dictatorship exercised in his name was the only way out of the crisis into which the Republic fell at the beginning of the 1930s. Whatever influence Hindenburg's election might therefore have had in reconciling opponents

of the Republic to its existence in the short run, in the long run it was an unmitigated disaster for Weimar democracy. By 1930 at the latest, it had become clear that the Presidential power was in the hands of a man who had no faith in democratic institutions and no intention of defending them from their enemies.¹¹

II

Besides the office of Reich President, Weimar's constitution provided for a national legislature, named, as before, the Reichstag, but now elected by all adult women as well as all adult men, and by a more direct form of proportional representation than had been used before 1918. In effect, the electors voted for the party of their choice, and each party was allotted a number of seats in the Reichstag precisely corresponding to the proportion of votes it received in the election. Thus, a party that received 30 per cent of the vote would be allotted 30 per cent of the seats, and, more worryingly, a party that received 1 per cent of the vote would be allotted 1 per cent of the seats. It has often been said that such a system favoured small parties and fringe groups, and this was no doubt true. Yet the fringe parties never achieved a combined vote of more than 15 per cent, so it was in practice seldom necessary for the larger parties to take them into account when forming a government. Where proportional representation did have an effect, it was in evening out the chances of the larger parties in the competition for votes, so that, if a first-past-the-post electoral system had been in operation, the bigger parties would have done better, and more stable coalition governments with a smaller number of coalition partners might have been possible, thus perhaps persuading a greater number of people of the virtues of parliamentarism.¹²

As it was, changes of government in the Weimar Republic were very frequent. Between 13 February 1919 and 30 January 1933 there were no fewer than twenty different cabinets, each lasting on average 239 days, or somewhat less than eight months. Coalition government, it was sometimes said, made for unstable government, as the different parties were constantly squabbling over personalities and policies. It also made for weak government, since all they could settle on was the lowest common denominator and the line of least resistance. However, coalition

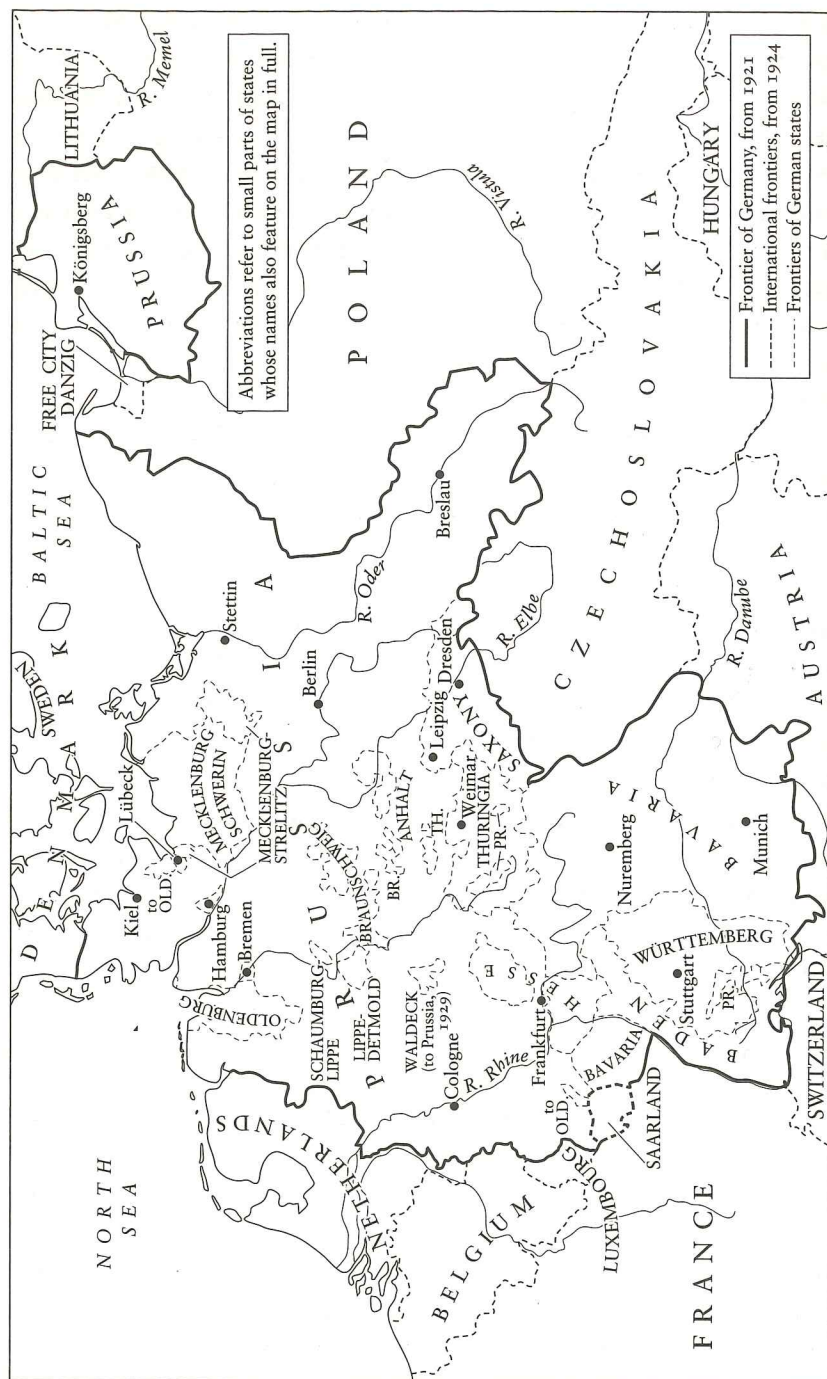
government in Weimar was not just the product of proportional representation. It also arose out of long-standing and deep fissures within the German political system. The parties that had dominated the Imperial scene all survived into the Weimar Republic. The Nationalists were formed by the amalgamation of the old Conservative Party with other, smaller groups. The liberals failed to overcome their differences and remained divided into left (Democrats) and right (People's Party). The Centre Party remained more or less unchanged, though its Bavarian wing split off to form the Bavarian People's Party. On the left, the Social Democrats had to face a new rival in the form of the Communist Party. But none of this was solely or even principally the product of proportional representation. The political milieu out of which these various parties emerged had been in existence since the early days of the Bismarckian Empire.¹³

These milieux, with their party newspapers, clubs and societies, were unusually rigid and homogeneous. Already before 1914 this had resulted in a politicization of whole areas of life that in other societies were much freer from ideological identifications. Thus, if an ordinary German wanted to join a male voice choir, for instance, he had to choose in some areas between a Catholic and a Protestant choir, in others between a socialist and a nationalist choir; the same went for gymnastics clubs, cycling clubs, football clubs and the rest. A member of the Social Democratic Party before the war could have virtually his entire life encompassed by the party and its organizations: he could read a Social Democratic newspaper, go to a Social Democratic pub or bar, belong to a Social Democratic trade union, borrow books from the Social Democratic library, go to Social Democratic festivals and plays, marry a woman who belonged to the Social Democratic women's organization, enrol his children in the Social Democratic youth movement and be buried with the aid of a Social Democratic burial fund.¹⁴ Similar things could be said of the Centre Party (which could rely on the mass organization of supporters in the People's Association for a Catholic Germany, the Catholic Trade Union movement, and Catholic leisure clubs and societies of all kinds) but also to a certain extent of other parties too.¹⁵ These sharply defined political-cultural milieux did not disappear with the advent of the Weimar Republic.¹⁶ But the emergence of commercialized mass leisure, the 'boulevard press', based on sensation and scandal, the cinema, cheap novels,

dance-halls and leisure activities of all kinds began in the 1920s to provide alternative sources of identification for the young, who were thus less tightly bound to political parties than their elders were.¹⁷ The older generation of political activists were too closely tied to their particular political ideology to find compromise and co-operation with other politicians and their parties very easy. In contrast to the situation after 1945, there was no merger of major political parties into larger and more effective units.¹⁸ As in a number of other respects, therefore, the political instability of the 1920s and early 1930s owed more to structural continuities with the politics of the Bismarckian and Wilhelmine eras than to the novel provisions of the Weimar constitution.¹⁹

Proportional representation did not, as some have claimed, encourage political anarchy and thereby facilitate the rise of the extreme right. An electoral system based on a first-past-the-post system, where the candidate who won the most votes in each constituency automatically won the seat, might well have given the Nazi Party even more seats than it eventually obtained in the last elections of the Weimar Republic, though since the parties' electoral tactics would have been different under such a system, and its arguably beneficial effects in the earlier phases of the Republic's existence might have reduced the overall Nazi vote later on, it is impossible to tell for sure.²⁰ Similarly, the destabilizing effect of the constitution's provision for referendums or plebiscites has often been exaggerated; other political systems have existed perfectly happily with such a provision, and in any case the actual number of plebiscites that actually took place was very small. The campaigning they involved certainly helped keep the overheated political atmosphere of the Republic at boiling point. But national plebiscites had little direct political effect, despite the fact that one provincial plebiscite did succeed in overthrowing a democratic government in Oldenburg in 1932.²¹

In any case, the governmental instability of Weimar has itself often been overdrawn, for the frequent changes of government concealed long-term continuities in particular ministries. Some posts, notably the Ministry of Justice, were used as bargaining counters in inter-party coalition negotiations and so saw a succession of many different ministers, no doubt putting more power than usual into the hands of the senior civil servants, who stayed there all through, though their freedom of action was curtailed by the devolution of many functions of judicial



Map 4. The Weimar Republic

administration to the federated states. But others became the virtual perquisite of a particular politician through all the vagaries of coalition-building, thus making it easier to formulate and implement strong and decisive policies. Gustav Stresemann, the leading figure in the People's Party, for instance, was Foreign Minister in nine successive administrations and remained in office for an unbroken period of over six years. Heinrich Brauns, a Centre Party deputy, was Minister of Labour in twelve successive cabinets, from June 1920 up to June 1928. Otto Gessler, a Democrat, was Army Minister in thirteen successive governments, from March 1920 to January 1928. Such ministers were able to develop and implement long-term policies irrespective of the frequent turnover of leadership experienced by the governments they served in. Other ministries were also occupied by the same politicians through two, three or four different governments.²² Not by chance, it was in such areas that the Republic was able to develop its strongest and most consistent policies, above all in the fields of foreign affairs, labour and welfare.

The ability of the Reich government to act firmly and decisively, however, was always compromised by another provision of the constitution, namely its decision to continue the federal structure which Bismarck had imposed on the Reich in 1871 in an effort to sugar the pill of unification for German princes such as the King of Bavaria and the Grand Duke of Baden. The princes had been unceremoniously thrown out in the Revolution of 1918, but their states remained. They were equipped now with democratic, parliamentary institutions, but still retained a good deal of autonomy in key areas of domestic policy. The fact that some of the states, like Bavaria, had a history and an identity going back many centuries, encouraged them to obstruct the policies of the Reich government if they did not like them. On the other hand, direct taxation was now in the hands of the Reich government, and many of the smaller states were dependent on handouts from Berlin when they got into financial difficulties. Attempts at secession from the Reich might seem threatening, especially in the Republic's troubled early years, but in reality they were never strong enough to be taken seriously.²³ Worse problems could be caused by tensions between Prussia and the Reich, since the Prussian state was bigger than all the rest combined; but through the 1920s and early 1930s Prussia was led by moderate, pro-republican governments which constituted an important counterweight to the

extremism and instability of states such as Bavaria. When all these factors are taken into account, therefore, it does not seem that the federal system, for all its unresolved tensions between the Reich and the states, was a major factor in undermining the stability and legitimacy of the Weimar Republic.²⁴

III

All in all, Weimar Germany's constitution was no worse than the constitutions of most other countries in the 1920s, and a good deal more democratic than many. Its more problematical provisions might not have mattered so much had circumstances been different. But the fatal lack of legitimacy from which the Republic suffered magnified the constitution's faults many times over. Three political parties were identified with the new political system – the Social Democrats, the liberal German Democratic Party, and the Centre Party. After gaining a clear majority of 76.2 per cent of the vote in January 1919, these three parties combined won just 48 per cent of the vote in June 1920, 43 per cent of the vote in May 1924, 49.6 per cent in December 1924, 49.9 per cent in 1928 and 43 per cent in September 1930. From 1920 onwards they were thus in a permanent minority in the Reichstag, outnumbered by deputies whose allegiance lay with the Republic's enemies to the right and to the left. And the support of these parties of the 'Weimar coalition' for the Republic was, at best, often more rhetorical than practical, and, at worst, equivocal, compromised or of no political use at all.²⁵

The Social Democrats were considered by many to be the party that had created the Republic, and often said so themselves. Yet they were never very happy as a party of government, took part in only eight out of the twenty Weimar cabinets and only filled the office of Reich Chancellor in four of them.²⁶ They remained locked in the Marxist ideological mould of the prewar years, still expecting capitalism to be overthrown and the bourgeoisie to be replaced as the ruling class by the proletariat. Whatever else it was, Germany in the 1920s was undeniably a capitalist society, and playing a leading role in government seemed to many Social Democrats to sit rather uneasily alongside the verbal radicalism of their ideology. Unused to the experience of government, excluded from polit-

ical participation for two generations before the war, they found the experience of collaborating with 'bourgeois' politicians a painful one. They could not rid themselves of their Marxist ideology without losing a large part of their electoral support in the working class; yet on the other hand a more radical policy, for example of forming a Red Army militia from workers instead of relying on the Free Corps, would surely have made their participation in bourgeois coalition governments impossible and called down upon their heads the wrath of the army.

The main strength of the Social Democrats lay in Prussia, the state that covered over half the territory of the Weimar Republic and contained 57 per cent of its population. Here, in a mainly Protestant area with great cities such as Berlin and industrial areas like the Ruhr, they dominated the government. Their policy was to make Prussia a bastion of Weimar democracy, and, although they did not pursue reforms with any great vigour or consistency, removing them from power in Germany's biggest state became a major objective of Weimar democracy's enemies by the early 1930s.²⁷ In the Reich, however, their position was far less dominant. Their strength at the beginning of the Republic owed a good deal to the support of middle-class voters who considered that a strong Social Democratic Party would offer the best defence against Bolshevism by effecting a quick transition to parliamentary democracy. As the threat receded, so their representation in the Reichstag went down, from 163 seats in 1919 to 102 in 1920. Despite a substantial recovery later on – 153 seats in 1928, and 143 in 1930 – the Social Democrats permanently lost nearly two and a half million votes, and, after receiving 38 per cent of the votes in 1919, they hovered around 25 per cent for the rest of the 1920s and early 1930s. Nevertheless, they remained an enormously powerful and well-organized political movement that claimed the allegiance and devotion of millions of industrial workers across the land. If any one party deserved to be called the bulwark of democracy in the Weimar Republic, it was the Social Democrats.

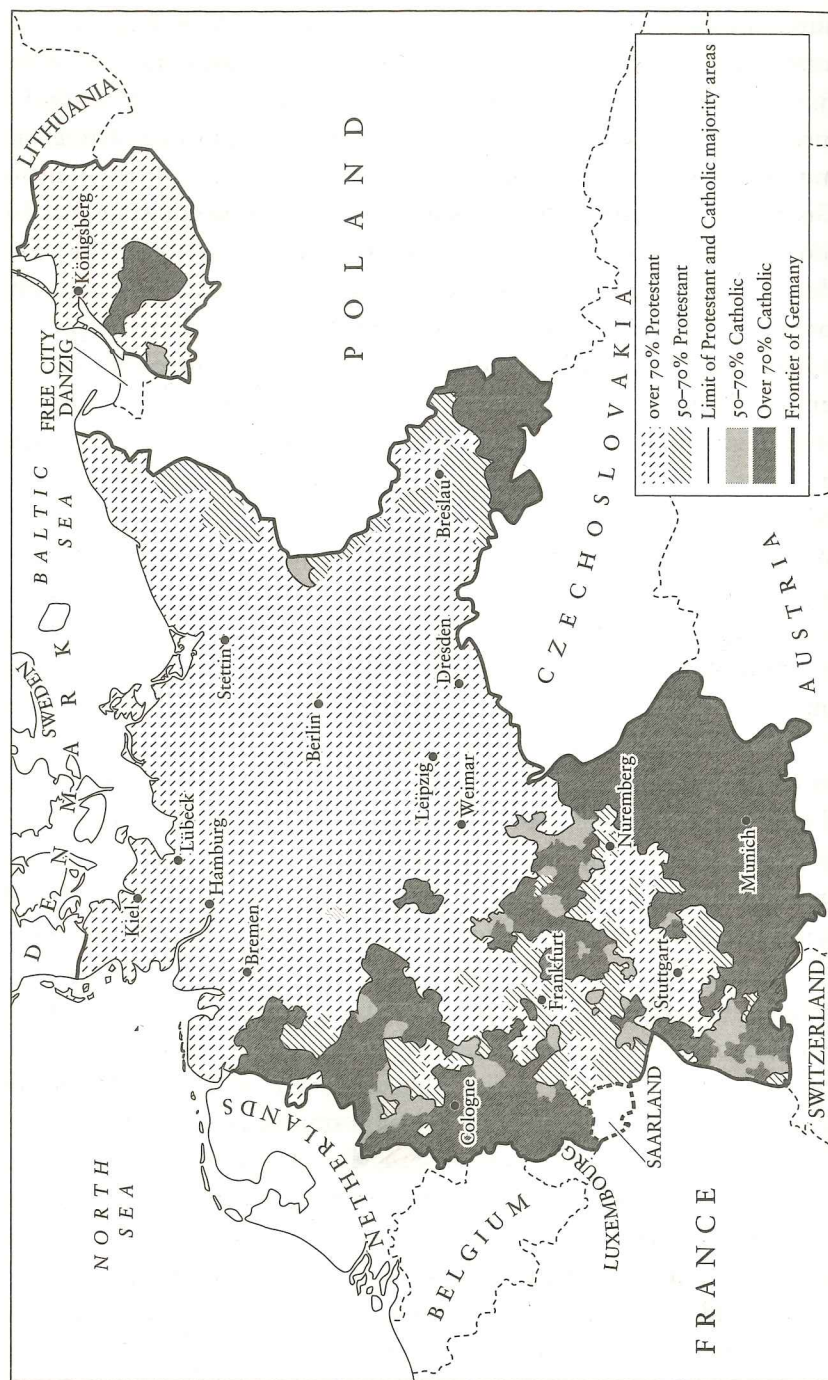
The second arm of the 'Weimar coalition', the German Democratic Party, was a somewhat more enthusiastic participant in government, serving in virtually all the cabinets of the 1920s. It had, after all, been a Democrat, Hugo Preuss, who had been the principal author of the much-maligned Weimar constitution. But although they won 75 seats in the election of January 1919, they lost 36 of them in the next election, in

June 1920, and were down to 28 seats in the election of May 1924. Victims of the rightward drift of middle-class voters, they never recovered.²⁸ Their response to their losses after the elections of 1928 was disastrous. Led by Erich Koch-Weser, leading figures in the party joined in July 1930 with a paramilitary offshoot of the youth movement known as the Young German Order and some individual politicians from other middle-class parties, to transform the Democrats into the State Party. The idea was to create a strong centrist bloc that would stem the flow of bourgeois voters to the Nazis. But the merger had been precipitate, and closed off the possibility of joining together with other, larger political groups in the middle. Some, mostly left-wing Democrats, objected to the move and resigned. On the right, the Young German Order's move lost it support among many of its own members. The electoral fortunes of the new party did not improve, and only 14 deputies represented it in the Reichstag after the elections of September 1930. In practice the merger meant a sharp shift to the right. The Young German Order shared the scepticism of much of the youth movement about the parliamentary system, and its ideology was more than tinged with antisemitism. The new State Party continued to keep the Social Democratic coalition in Prussia afloat until the state elections of April 1932, but its aim, announced by the historian Friedrich Meinecke, was now to achieve a shift in the balance of political power away from the Reichstag and the states and towards a strong, unitary Reich government. Here too, therefore, a steady erosion of support pushed the party to the right; but the only effect of this was to wipe out whatever distinguished it from other, more effective political organizations that were arguing for the same kind of thing. The State Party's convoluted constitutional schemes not only signalled its lack of political realism, but also its weakening commitment to Weimar democracy.²⁹

Of the three parties of the 'Weimar coalition', only the Centre Party maintained its support throughout, at around 5 million votes, or 85 to 90 seats in the Reichstag, including those of the Bavarian People's Party. The Centre Party was also a key part of every coalition government from June 1919 to the very end, and with its strong interest in social legislation probably had as strong a claim to have been the driving force behind the creation of Weimar's welfare state as the Social Democrats did. Socially conservative, it devoted much of its time to fighting pornography, contra-

ception and other evils of the modern world, and to defending Catholic interests in the schools system. Its Achilles heel was the influence inevitably wielded over it by the Papacy in Rome. As head of the Catholic Church, Pope Pius XI was increasingly worried by the advance of atheistic communists and socialists during the 1920s. Together with his Nuncio in Germany, Eugenio Pacelli, who subsequently became Pope Pius XII, he profoundly distrusted the political liberalism of many Catholic politicians and saw a turn to a more authoritarian form of politics as the safest way to preserve the Church's interests from the looming threat of the godless left. This led to his conclusion of a Concordat with Mussolini's Fascist regime in Italy in 1929 and later on to the Church's support for the 'clerico-fascist' dictatorship of Engelbert Dollfuss in the Austrian civil war of 1934, and the Nationalists under General Franco in the Spanish Civil War that began in 1936.³⁰

With such signals emanating from the Vatican even in the 1920s, the prospects for political Catholicism in Germany were not good. They became markedly worse in December 1928, when a close associate of Papal Nuncio Pacelli, Prelate Ludwig Kaas, a priest who was also a deputy in the German Reichstag, succeeded in being elected leader of the Centre Party as a compromise candidate during a struggle between factions of the right and left over the succession to the retiring chairman, Wilhelm Marx. Under Pacelli's influence, however, Kaas veered increasingly towards the right, pulling many Catholic politicians with him. As increasing disorder and instability began to grip the Reich in 1930 and 1931, Kaas, now a frequent visitor to the Vatican, began to work together with Pacelli for a Concordat, along the lines of the agreement recently concluded with Mussolini. Securing the future existence of the Church was paramount in such a situation. Like many other leading Catholic politicians, Kaas considered that this was only really possible in an authoritarian state where police repression stamped out the threat from the left. 'Never', declared Kaas in 1929, 'has the call for leadership on the grand scale echoed more vividly and impatiently through the soul of the German people as in the days when the Fatherland and its culture have been in such peril that the soul of all of us has been oppressed.'³¹ Kaas demanded among other things much greater independence for the executive from the legislature in Germany. Another leading Centre Party politician, Eugen Bolz, Minister-President of Württemberg, put it more



Map 5. The Religious Divide

bluntly when he told his wife early in 1930: 'I have long been of the opinion that the Parliament cannot solve severe domestic political problems. If a dictator for ten years were a possibility – I would want it.'³² Long before 30 January 1933, the Centre Party had ceased to be the bulwark of Weimar democracy that it had once been.³³

Thus, even the major political props of democracy in the Weimar Republic were crumbling by the end of the 1920s. Beyond them, the democratic landscape was even more desolate. No other parties offered serious support to the Republic and its institutions. On the left, the Republic was confronted with the mass phenomenon of the Communists. In the revolutionary period from 1918 to 1921 they were a tightly knit, elite group with little electoral support, but when the Independent Social Democrats, deprived of the unifying factor of opposition to the First World War, fell apart in 1922, a large number of them joined the Communists, who thus became a mass party. Already in 1920 the combined forces of the Independent Social Democrats and the Communists won 88 seats in the Reichstag. In May 1924 the Communists won 62 seats, and, after a small drop later in the year, they were back to 54 in 1928 and 77 in 1930. Three and a quarter million people cast their votes for the party in May 1924 and over four and a half million in September 1930. These were all votes for the destruction of the Weimar Republic.

Through all the twists and turns of its policies during the 1920s, the Communist Party of Germany never deviated from its belief that the Republic was a bourgeois state whose primary purposes were the protection of the capitalist economic order and the exploitation of the working class. Capitalism, they hoped, would inevitably collapse and the 'bourgeois' republic would be replaced by a Soviet state along Russian lines. It was the duty of the Communist Party to bring this about as soon as possible. In the early years of the Republic this meant preparing for an 'October revolution' in Germany by means of an armed revolt. But, after the failure of the January uprising in 1919 and the even more catastrophic collapse of plans for an uprising in 1923, this idea was put on hold. Steered increasingly from Moscow, where the Soviet regime, under the growing influence of Stalin, tightened its financial and ideological grip on Communist parties everywhere in the second half of the 1920s, the German Communist Party had little option but to swing to a more moderate course in the mid-1920s, only to return to a radical, 'leftist'

position at the end of the decade. This meant not only refusing to join with the Social Democrats in the defence of the Republic, but even actively collaborating with the Republic's enemies in order to bring it down.³⁴ Indeed, the party's hostility to the Republic and its institutions even caused it to oppose reforms that might lead the Republic to become more popular among the working class.³⁵

This implacable opposition to the Republic from the left was more than balanced by rabid animosity from the right. The largest and most significant right-wing challenge to Weimar was mounted by the Nationalists, who gained 44 Reichstag seats in January 1919, 71 in June 1920, 95 in May 1924 and 103 in December 1924. This made them larger than any other party with the exception of the Social Democrats. In both elections of 1924 they won around 20 per cent of the vote. One in five people who cast their ballot in these elections thus did so for a party that made it clear from the outset that it regarded the Weimar Republic as utterly illegitimate and called for a restoration of the Bismarckian Reich and the return of the Kaiser. This was expressed in many different ways, from the Nationalists' championing of the old Imperial flag, black, white and red, in place of the new Republican colours of black, red and gold, to their tacit and sometimes explicit condoning of the assassination of key Republican politicians by armed conspiratorial groups allied to the Free Corps. The propaganda and policies of the Nationalists did much to spread radical right-wing ideas across the electorate in the 1920s and prepare the way for Nazism.

During the 1920s, the Nationalists were a partner in two coalition governments, but the experience was not a happy one. They resigned from one government after ten months, and when they came into another cabinet half-way through its term of office, they were forced to make compromises that left many party members deeply dissatisfied. Severe losses in the elections of October 1928, when the Nationalists' representation in the Reichstag fell from 103 seats to 73, convinced the right wing of the party that it was time for a more uncompromising line. The traditionalist party chairman Count Westarp was ousted and replaced by the press baron, industrialist and radical nationalist Alfred Hugenberg, who had been a leading light of the Pan-German movement since its inception in the 1890s. The Nationalist Party programme of 1931, drafted under Hugenberg's influence, was distinctly more right wing than

its predecessors. It demanded among other things the restoration of the Hohenzollern monarchy, compulsory military service, a strong foreign policy directed at the revision of the Treaty of Versailles, the return of the lost overseas colonies and the strengthening of ties with Germans living in other parts of Europe, especially Austria. The Reichstag was to retain only a supervisory role and a 'critical voice' in legislation, and to be joined by 'a representational body structured according to professional rankings in the economic and cultural spheres' along the lines of the corporate state being created at the time in Fascist Italy. And, the programme went on, 'we resist the subversive, un-German spirit in all forms, whether it stems from Jewish or other circles. We are emphatically opposed to the prevalence of Jewdom in the government and in public life, a prevalence that has emerged ever more continuously since the revolution.'³⁶

Under Hugenberg, the Nationalists also moved away from internal party democracy and closer to the 'leadership principle'. The party's new leader made strenuous efforts to make party policy on his own and direct the party's Reichstag delegation in its votes. A number of Reichstag deputies opposed this, and a dozen of them split off from the party in December 1929 and more in June 1930, joining fringe groups of the right in protest. Hugenberg allied the party with the extreme right, in an attempt to get a popular referendum to vote against the Young Plan, an internationally agreed scheme, brokered by the Americans, for the rescheduling of reparations payments, in 1929. The failure of the bitterly fought campaign only convinced Hugenberg of the need for even more extreme opposition to Weimar and its replacement by an authoritarian, nationalist state harking back to the glorious days of the Bismarckian Empire. None of this worked. The Nationalists' snobbery and elitism prevented them from winning a real mass following and rendered their supporters vulnerable to the blandishments of the truly populist demagoguery practised by the Nazis.³⁷

Less extreme, but only marginally less vehemently opposed to the Republic, was the smaller People's Party, the heir of the old pro-Bismarckian National Liberals. It won 65 seats in the 1920 election and stayed around 45 to 50 for the rest of the decade, attracting about 2.7 to 3 million votes. The party's hostility to the Republic was partly masked by the decision of its leading figure, Gustav Stresemann, to recognize

political realities for the moment and accept the legitimacy of the Republic, more out of necessity than conviction. Although he was never fully trusted by his party, Stresemann's powers of persuasion were considerable. Not least thanks to his consummate negotiating skills, the People's Party took part in most of the Republic's cabinets, unlike the Nationalists, who stayed in opposition for the greater part of the 1920s. Yet this meant that the majority of governments formed after the initial phase of the Republic's existence contained at least some ministers who were dubious, to say the least, about its right to exist. Moreover, Stresemann, already in difficulties with his party, fell ill and died in October 1929, thus removing the principal moderating influence from the party's leadership.³⁸ From this point on it, too, gravitated rapidly towards the far right.

Even in the mid-1920s, therefore, the political system was looking extremely fragile. In other circumstances it might have survived. In retrospect, indeed, the period 1924-8 has been described by many as 'Weimar's Golden Years'. But the idea that democracy was on the way to establishing itself in Germany at this time is an illusion created by hindsight. There was in reality no sign that it was becoming more secure; on the contrary, the fact that the two major bourgeois parties, the Centre Party and the Nationalists, soon fell into the hands of avowed enemies of democracy boded ill for the future, even without the shocks to come. That the allegiance of the People's Party to the Republic, such as it was, owed everything to the persistence and intelligent leadership of one man, Gustav Stresemann, was another sign of fragility. Not even in the relatively favourable circumstances of 1928 had the parties of the 'Weimar Coalition' succeeded in gaining a majority in the Reichstag. The widespread feeling after 1923 that the threat of a Bolshevik revolution had receded meant that the bourgeois parties were no longer so willing to compromise with the Social Democrats in the interests of preserving the Republic as a bulwark against Communism.³⁹ And more ominously still, paramilitary organizations such as the Steel Helmets were beginning to extend their struggle from the streets to the hustings in an attempt to win more influence for their anti-Republican views. Meanwhile, political violence, though it fell short of the open civil war that characterized much of the Republic's opening phase, still continued at an alarmingly high level throughout the mid-1920s.⁴⁰ The brutal fact was that, even in 1928, the Republic was as far away from achieving stability and legitimacy as ever.

IV

The Weimar Republic was also weakened by its failure to win the wholehearted support of the army and the civil service, both of which found it extremely difficult to adjust to the transition from the authoritarian Reich to the democratic Republic in 1918. For the army leadership in particular, defeat in 1918 posed an alarming threat. Led by one of its most intelligent and perceptive officers, General Wilhelm Groener, the General Staff agreed with the Majority Social Democrats under Friedrich Ebert that the threat of the revolutionary workers' and soldiers' council would best be warded off if they worked in tandem to secure a stable parliamentary democracy. From Groener's point of view this was an act of expediency, not of faith. It secured the preservation of the old officer corps in the reduced circumstances of the German army after the Treaty of Versailles. The army's numbers were restricted to 100,000, it was banned from using modern technology such as tanks, and a mass conscript military force had to give way to a small professional one. Groener ran into fierce opposition from army diehards for compromising with the Social Democrats, just as his opposite number, the Social Democrats' military specialist Gustav Noske, ran into fierce criticism from his party comrades for allowing the officer corps to remain intact instead of replacing it with a more democratic structure and personnel.⁴¹ But in the desperate circumstances of 1918-19, their line won through in the end.

Within a short space of time, however, the workers' and soldiers' councils had faded from the political scene, and the need for compromise with the forces of democracy seemed to many leading officers to have lost its urgency. This became dramatically clear in March 1920, when Free Corps units, protesting against their impending redundancy, marched on Berlin and overthrew the elected government in a bid to restore an authoritarian regime on the lines of the old monarchy. Led by the Pan-German former civil servant and leading light of the old Fatherland Party, Wolfgang Kapp, the insurrectionists were also supported by elements within the armed forces in a number of areas. When the chief of the army command, General Walther Reinhardt, tried to ensure the forces' loyalty to the government, he was ousted in favour of the more right-wing General Hans von Seeckt. Seeckt promptly banned all army units from

opposing the plotters and turned a blind eye to those which backed them. Subsequently, he ordered the army to co-operate in the bloody suppression of the workers' armed uprising against the putsch in the Ruhr. Seeckt had indeed been hostile to the Republic from the beginning. Aloof, authoritarian and unapproachable, his upper-class credentials advertised by the monocle he wore over his left eye, he epitomized the traditions of the Prussian officer class. But he was also a political realist who saw that the possibilities of overthrowing the Republic by force were limited. He aimed therefore to keep the army united and free from parliamentary control waiting for better times. In this he had the full support of his fellow-officers.⁴²

Under Seeckt's leadership, the army retained in its 'war flag' the old Imperial colours of black, white and red. Seeckt distinguished sharply between the German state, which incorporated the abstract ideal of the Reich, and the Republic, which he regarded as a temporary aberration. General Wilhelm Groener, Seeckt's mentor, described the army in 1928 as the 'only power' and an 'element of power within the state that no one can disregard'.⁴³ Under Seeckt's leadership, the army was far from being a neutral organization, standing aloof from the party-political fray, whatever Seeckt might have claimed.⁴⁴ Seeckt did not hesitate to intervene against the elected government when he believed that it went against the Reich's interests. He even considered taking over the Chancellorship himself on one occasion, with a programme that envisaged the centralization of the Reich and the curbing of Prussian autonomy, the abolition of the trade unions and their replacement by 'occupational chambers' (rather like those later created by Mussolini in Italy), and in general the 'suppression of all tendencies directed against the existence of the Reich and against the legitimate authority of the Reich and the state, through the use of the means of power of the Reich'.⁴⁵ In the end, he succeeded in toppling the government, but did not manage to become Chancellor himself; that was to be left to one of his successors, General Kurt von Schleicher, who belonged to Seeckt's close group of advisers in the years when he ran the army command.

A law unto itself for most of the time, the army did its best during the 1920s to circumvent the restrictions placed upon it by the Treaty of Versailles. Making common cause behind the scenes with another diminished and resentful Great Power, the Soviet Union, the army leadership

arranged for clandestine training sessions in Russia for officers anxious to learn how to use tanks and aeroplanes, and willing to engage in experiments with poison gas.⁴⁶ Secret arrangements were made to train auxiliary troops, in an attempt to get round the limit of 100,000 imposed by the Treaty on the army's strength, and the army was constantly eyeing the paramilitaries as a potential military reserve.⁴⁷ These subterfuges and others, including training with make-believe tanks, made clear that the army had no intention of abiding by the terms of the 1919 Peace Settlement and would break free from it as soon as circumstances allowed. Far from being led exclusively by dyed-in-the-wool Prussian conservatives, these clandestine circumventions of the Treaty were organized above all by modern-minded technicians, impatient with the constraints of democratic politics and international agreements.⁴⁸ The disloyalty of the army, and the repeated intrigues of its leading officers against civilian governments, boded ill for the Republic's continued viability in a real crisis.⁴⁹

If Germany's first democracy could not expect much support from its military servants, then neither could it hope for much support from its civil servants, whom it likewise inherited from the old German Reich. The civil service was of huge importance because it covered a very wide area of society and included not just officials working in the central administration of the Reich but also all those state employees who had secured the tenure, status and emoluments originally designed for senior administrators. They included officials working for the federated states, for state enterprises like the railways and the postal service, and for state institutions such as universities and schools, so that university professors and high-school teachers fell into this category as well. The numbers of civil servants in this broad sense were enormous. Below this relatively exalted level there were millions more state servants living off salaries or wages paid by state institutions. The German state railway was by far the largest single employer in the Weimar Republic, for instance, with 700,000 people working for it at the end of the 1920s; it was followed by the postal service with 380,000. If family members, dependants and pensioners are added on, about 3 million people relied for their support on the railways alone.⁵⁰ Altogether, by the end of the 1920s there were 1.6 million civil servants in Germany, about half of whom worked for the state proper, the other half for public utilities such as the railways.

With such a large number of state employees, it was clear that the state employment sector was politically extremely diverse, with hundreds of thousands of employees belonging to socialist trade unions, liberal political parties or pressure-groups of widely varying political orientation. A million civil servants belonged to the liberal German Civil Servants' League in 1919, though 60,000 split off to form a more right-wing group in 1921 and another 350,000 seceded to form a trade union the following year. Civil servants were in no sense, therefore, uniformly hostile to the Republic at the outset, despite their training and socialization in the years of the *Wilhelmine Reich*.⁵¹

As the leading figure in the transitional revolutionary administration, Friedrich Ebert appealed on 9 November 1918 for all civil servants and state employees to continue working in order to avoid anarchy.⁵² The overwhelming majority stayed on. Civil servants' career structure and duties were unchanged. The Weimar constitution made them irremovable. However it might have appeared in theory, in practice this step made it virtually impossible to dismiss civil servants, given the extreme difficulty of proving in law that they had violated their oath of allegiance.⁵³ As an institution that derived from the authoritarian and bureaucratic states of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, long before the advent of parliaments and political parties, the higher civil service in particular had long been accustomed to regard itself as the true ruling caste, above all in Prussia. Up to 1918, for instance, all government ministers had been civil servants, appointed by the monarch, not by the Reichstag or the legislative assemblies of the federated states. In some Reich ministries, where there was a rapid turnover of ministers under the Republic, the top civil servant could wield enormous power, as with Curt Joël in the Ministry of Justice, who served virtually throughout the Republic, while no fewer than seventeen Justice Ministers came and went, before he finally became Minister himself in 1930. For such men, administrative continuity was the supreme dictate of duty, overriding all political considerations. Whatever they might have thought privately of the Kapp putschists in March 1920, senior civil servants in Berlin, including financial officials, thus carried on with their work in defiance of the putschists' orders for them to stand down.⁵⁴

The neutrality of civil servants on this occasion owed a good deal to their characteristically punctilious insistence on the duties imposed by

their oath of allegiance. Later on, in 1922, the government introduced a new law designed to bind civil servants even more closely to the Republic and impose disciplinary sanctions on those who consorted with its enemies. But this measure was relatively toothless. Only in Prussia was there a serious effort, led by Carl Severing and Albert Grzesinski, successive Social Democratic Ministers of the Interior, to replace old Imperial administrators, above all in the provinces, with Social Democrats and others loyal to the Republic.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, even the Prussian efforts at creating a civil service loyal to the principles of democracy as well as imbued with a sense of duty in serving the government of the day proved insufficient in the end. Because Severing and Grzesinski thought that the parties should be represented in the higher civil service roughly in proportion to their place in the Prussian coalition cabinets, this meant that a good number of important posts were held by men from parties such as the Centre Party, the People's Party and to a degree the State Party, whose allegiance to the Republic was rapidly becoming more tenuous from the end of the 1920s onwards. In the rest of Germany, including the level of the Reich civil service, even this degree of reform was barely even attempted, let alone achieved, and the civil service was far more conservative, even in parts downright hostile to the Republic.⁵⁶

The problem, however, was not so much that the higher civil service was actively helping to undermine Weimar; rather, it was that the Republic did too little to ensure that civil servants at whatever level were actively committed to the democratic political order and would resist any attempt to overthrow it. And those civil servants who were actively hostile to the Republic – probably a minority, considered overall – were able to survive with relative impunity. Thus, for instance, one senior Prussian civil servant, born in 1885, and a member of the Nationalist Party after 1918, founded a variety of fringe groups for civil servants and others, aiming explicitly to combat 'the Reichstag, the red headquarters', to frustrate the policies of the 'treasonous and godless Social Democrats', to oppose the 'imperialist world power' of the Catholic Church and finally to fight against 'all Jews'. His antisemitism, fairly latent before 1918, became explicit after the Revolution. Thereafter, he later recalled, 'whenever a Jew was carrying on impertinently on the elevated [railway] or on the train and would not accept my scolding without further impertinence, I threatened to throw him off the moving train . . . if he did not shut up

immediately'. On one occasion he threatened 'Marxist' workers with a gun. His was an obviously extreme example of a civil servant opposed to the Republic. Yet he was not dismissed, only disciplined twice and denied promotion, despite being tried on one occasion for disturbing the peace. 'I always', he wrote, 'took it to be a weakness of my political enemies in the civil service that they let me get off so easily every time.' The worst that happened to him under the Republic was a blockage of his career prospects.⁵⁷

There can be little doubt that, even in the Republican bastion of Prussia, the vast majority of civil servants had little genuine loyalty to the constitution to which they had sworn their allegiance. Should the Republic be threatened with destruction, very few of them indeed would even think of coming to its aid. Devotion to duty kept them working when the state was challenged, as in the Kapp putsch of 1920, but it would also keep them working when the state was overthrown. Here was another central institution whose loyalty was to an abstract concept of the Reich rather than to the concrete principles of democracy. In this as in other respects, Weimar was weak in political legitimacy from the start.⁵⁸ It was beset by insurmountable problems of political violence, assassination and irreconcilable conflicts about its right to exist. It was unloved and undefended by its servants in the army and bureaucracy. It was blamed by many for the national humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles. And it also had to face enormous economic problems, beginning with the massive monetary inflation that made life so difficult for so many in the years when it was trying to establish itself.

THE GREAT INFLATION

I

Even the most diehard reactionary might eventually have learned to tolerate the Republic if it had provided a reasonable level of economic stability and a decent, solid income for its citizens. But from the start it was beset by economic failures of a dimension unprecedented in German history. As soon as the First World War had begun, the Reich government had started to borrow money to pay for it. From 1916 onwards, expenditure had far exceeded the revenue that the government had been able to raise from loans or indeed from any other source. Naturally enough, it had expected to recoup its losses by annexing rich industrial areas to the west and east, by forcing the defeated nations to pay large financial reparations, and by imposing a new German-dominated economic order on a conquered Europe.⁵⁹ But these expectations were dashed. In the event, it was Germany that was the defeated nation and Germany that had to foot the bill. This made things far worse than before. The government had been printing money without the economic resources to back it. Before the war, the dollar had been worth just over 4 paper marks on the exchange in Berlin. By December 1918 it took nearly twice as many marks to buy a US dollar. The rate continued to decline to just over 12 marks to the dollar in April 1919 and 47 by the end of the year.⁶⁰

Successive governments of the Weimar Republic were caught in a political trap that was at least partly of their own making. The need to export government revenue to other countries in the form of reparations payments meant an additional drain on resources at a time when wartime debts still had to be paid and Germany's economic resources and domestic market had shrunk. Heavily populated industrial areas in Lorraine and

Silesia had been removed under the terms of the Treaty. Industrial production was only 42 per cent in 1919 of what it had been in 1913, and the country was producing less than half the grain it had produced before the war. Massive expenditure was required to fund the adjustment to a peacetime economy, and to provide welfare measures for ex-soldiers seeking jobs, or unable to find them because of war disability. Yet if any government sought to bridge the gap by raising taxes by any more than a small amount, it would immediately be accused by its enemies on the nationalist right of imposing taxes in order to meet Allied reparations bills. It seemed politically more astute to most governments to tell foreign powers instead that Germany's currency problems would only be solved by the abolition of reparations, or at least by rescheduling them to what would be a more acceptable level. The energy and aggressiveness with which various German governments pursued this dangerous policy varied, and during 1920 and 1921 the slide of the mark against the dollar was arrested more than once. Still, by November 1921 Germans who wanted to buy a US dollar had to pay 263 marks for it, and by July 1922 the cost had almost doubled again, to 493 marks.⁶¹

Inflation on this scale had different effects on different players in the economic game. The ability to borrow money to purchase goods, equipment, industrial plant and the like, and pay it back when it was worth a fraction of its original value, helped stimulate industrial recovery after the war. In the period up to the middle of 1922, economic growth rates in Germany were high, and unemployment low. Without this background of virtually full employment, a general strike, such as the one which frustrated the Kapp putsch in March 1920, would have been far more difficult to mount. Real taxation rates were also low enough to stimulate demand. The German economy managed the transition to a peacetime basis more effectively than some European economies where inflation was less marked.⁶²

But the recovery was built on sand. For, despite a few temporary respites in the process, the inflation proved to be unstoppable. It took over 1,000 marks to buy a US dollar in August 1922, 3,000 in October, and 7,000 in December. The process of monetary depreciation was taking on a life of its own. The political consequences were catastrophic. The German government could not make the required reparations payments any longer, since they had to be tendered in gold, whose price on the

international market it could no longer afford to meet. Moreover, by the end of 1922 it had fallen seriously behind in its deliveries of coal to the French, another part of the reparations programme. So French and Belgian troops occupied Germany's leading industrial district, the Ruhr, in January 1923 in order to seize the missing coal and force the Germans to fulfil their obligations under the Treaty. The government in Berlin almost immediately proclaimed a policy of passive resistance and non-cooperation with the French in order to deny the occupiers facilities to garner the fruits of Ruhr industrial production for themselves. The struggle was only called off towards the end of September. Passive resistance made the economic situation worse. Anyone who wanted to buy a dollar in January 1923 had to pay over 17,000 marks for it; in April 24,000; in July 353,000. This was hyperinflation on a truly staggering scale, and the dollar rate in marks for the rest of the year is best expressed in numbers that soon became longer than anything found even in a telephone directory: 4,621,000 in August; 98,860,000 in September; 25,260,000,000 in October; 2,193,600,000,000 in November; 4,200,000,000,000 in December.⁶³ Newspapers soon began informing their readers about the nomenclature of big numbers, which varied confusingly from one country to another. The French, one columnist noted, called a million million a trillion, while 'for us on the other hand, a trillion is equal to a million billion (1,000,000,000,000,000,000), and we must only hope to God that we don't get into these or even higher numerical values with our everyday currency, merely because of the overcrowding of the lunatic asylums that it would cause.'⁶⁴

At its height, the hyperinflation seemed terrifying. Money lost its meaning almost completely. Printing presses were unable to keep up with the need to produce banknotes of ever more astronomical denominations, and municipalities began to print their own emergency money, using one side of the paper only. Employees collected their wages in shopping baskets or wheelbarrows, so numerous were the banknotes needed to make up their pay packets; and immediately rushed to the shops to buy supplies before the continuing plunge in the value of money put them out of reach. The school student Raimund Pretzel later remembered how at the end of every month his father, a senior civil servant, would collect his salary, rush off to buy a season ticket for the railway so that he could get to work for the next month, send off cheques for regular outgoings, take

the entire family for a haircut, then hand over what was left to his wife, who would go with the children to the local wholesale market and buy heaps of non-perishable foodstuffs off which they had to live until the next pay-packet came in. For the rest of the month the family had no money at all. Letters had to be mailed with the latest denomination banknotes stapled to the envelope, since postage stamps of the right value could not be printed fast enough to keep pace with the price rise. The German correspondent of the British *Daily Mail* reported on 29 July 1923: 'In the shops the prices are typewritten and posted hourly. For instance, a gramophone at 10 a.m. was 5,000,000 marks but at 3 p.m. it was 12,000,000 marks. A copy of the *Daily Mail* purchased on the street yesterday cost 35,000 marks but today it cost 60,000 marks.'⁶⁵

The most dramatic and serious effects were on the price of food. A woman sitting down in a café might order a cup of coffee for 5,000 marks and be asked to give the waiter 8,000 for it when she got up to pay an hour later. A kilo of rye bread, that staple of the German daily diet, cost 163 marks on 3 January 1923, more than ten times that amount in July, 9 million marks on 1 October, 78 billion marks on 5 November and 233 billion marks a fortnight later, on 19 November.⁶⁶ At the height of the hyperinflation, over 90 per cent of the expenditure of an average family went on food.⁶⁷ Families on fixed incomes started selling their possessions so that they could have something to eat. Shops began hoarding food in anticipation of immediate price rises.⁶⁸ Unable to afford the most basic necessities, crowds began to riot and to loot food shops. Gunfights broke out between gangs of miners, who sallied forth into the countryside to strip the fields bare, and the farmers who were trying to protect their crops and were at the same time unwilling to sell them for worthless banknotes. The collapse of the mark made it difficult if not impossible to import supplies from abroad. The threat of starvation, particularly in the area occupied by the French, where passive resistance was crippling the transport networks, was very real.⁶⁹ Malnutrition caused an immediate rise in deaths from tuberculosis.⁷⁰

Not untypical was the experience of the academic Victor Klemperer, whose diaries offer a personal insight into the larger sweep of German history in this period. Living very much from hand to mouth on temporary teaching contracts, Klemperer, a war veteran, was pleased to receive a small additional war gratuity in February 1920, but, as he complained,

'what was earlier a small income is now just a tip'.⁷¹ Over the following months, Klemperer's diary was increasingly filled with financial calculations as inflation gathered pace. Already in March 1920 he was encountering 'foragers, little people with rucksacks' on the train outside Munich.⁷² As time went on, Klemperer paid increasingly fantastic bills 'with a kind of dull fatalism'.⁷³ In 1920 he at last gained a permanent appointment at Dresden Technical University. But it did not bring financial security. Each month he received an increasingly astronomical salary with back payments to make up for inflation since the last payment. Despite receiving nearly a million marks' salary at the end of May 1923, he was still unable to pay his gas and tax bills. Everyone he knew was working out how to make money speculating on the Stock Exchange. Even Klemperer had a try, but his first gain, 230,000 marks, paled into insignificance in comparison with that of his colleague Professor Förster, 'one of the worst antisemites, Teutonic agitators and patriots in the university', who was said to be making half a million marks a day playing the markets.⁷⁴

An habitué of cafés, Klemperer paid 12,000 marks for a coffee and cake on 24 July; on 3 August he noted that a coffee and three cakes cost him 104,000 marks.⁷⁵ On Monday, 28 August Klemperer reported that a few weeks previously he had obtained ten tickets for the cinema, one of his main pleasures in life, for 100,000 marks. 'Immediately after that, the price increased immeasurably, and most recently our 10,000-mark seat has already cost 200,000. Yesterday afternoon,' he went on, 'I wanted to buy a new stock. The middle rows of the stalls already cost 300,000 marks', and these were the second cheapest seats in the house; a further price increase had already been announced for the following Thursday, three days later.⁷⁶ By 9 October he was reporting: 'Our visit to the cinema yesterday cost 104 million, including the money for the fare.'⁷⁷ The situation brought him, like many others, to the brink of despair:

Germany is collapsing in an eerie, step-by-step manner . . . The dollar stands at over 800 million, it stands every day at 300 million more than the previous day. All that's not just what you read in the paper, but has an immediate impact on one's own life. How long will we still have something to eat? Where will we next have to tighten our belts?⁷⁸

Klemperer spent more and more of his time scrambling about for money, writing on 2 November:

Yesterday I waited for money in the university cashier's office the whole morning up to almost 2 o'clock and in the end I didn't get a penny, not even what was left from the October payment, since the dollar rose yesterday from 65 to 130 billion, so today I will have to pay my gas bill and other things at twice yesterday's price. In the case of gas that is likely to make a difference of a good 150 billion.⁷⁹

Food riots were breaking out in Dresden, he reported, some of them with an antisemitic tinge, and Klemperer began to fear that his house would be broken into in the frantic search for supplies. Work was impossible. 'Money matters take up a very great deal of time and frazzle one's nerves.'⁸⁰

Germany was grinding to a halt. Businesses and municipalities could no longer afford to pay their workers or buy supplies for public utilities. By 7 September sixty out of the ninety tram routes in Berlin had stopped running.⁸¹ The situation clearly could not continue any longer. The country was brought back from the brink by a combination of astute political moves and clever financial reforms. Beginning his long period of service as Foreign Minister in August 1923, Gustav Stresemann, who combined the office with the Reich Chancellorship for the first few months, initiated a policy of 'fulfilment', negotiating the withdrawal of the French from the Ruhr in September in return for a guarantee that Germany would meet its reparations payments, come what might. As a result, the international community agreed to look again at the reparations system, and a plan drawn up by a committee under the chairmanship of the American financial expert Charles Dawes was negotiated and accepted the following year.

The Dawes Plan did not hold out any prospect of an end to the payments, but at least it put in place a series of arrangements to ensure that paying them was a practical proposition, and for the next five years they were indeed paid without too many problems.⁸² Stresemann's policy did not earn him any plaudits from the nationalist right, who resisted any concession to the principle of reparations. But the extent of the hyperinflation by this time convinced most people that this was the only realistic policy, a view they would most probably not have taken a year or so earlier.⁸³ On the financial front, the Stresemann government appointed

Hjalmar Schacht, an astute financier with strong political connections, to head the central state bank, the Reichsbank, on 22 December 1923. A new currency had already been issued on 15 November, the Rentenmark, whose value was tied to the price of gold.⁸⁴ Schacht put a number of measures in place to defend the Rentenmark from speculation, and as the new currency, soon renamed the Reichsmark, became more widely available, it replaced the old one and achieved general acceptance.⁸⁵ The hyperinflation was over.

Other countries were affected by postwar inflation, but none so badly as Germany. At the height of the hyperinflation, which varied from country to country, prices stood at 14,000 times their prewar level in Austria, 23,000 times in Hungary, 2,500,000 times in Poland and 4,000 million times in Russia, although the inflation here was not strictly comparable to its counterparts elsewhere since the Bolsheviks had largely withdrawn the Soviet economy from the world market. These rates were bad enough. But in Germany, prices had reached a billion times their prewar level, a decline that has entered the annals of economic history as the greatest hyperinflation ever. It was noticeable that all these countries had not fought on the winning side in the war. Each country eventually stabilized its currency, but without much reference to the others. No viable new international financial system emerged in the 1920s to compare with the elaborate set of institutions and agreements that was to govern international finance after the Second World War.⁸⁶

II

The consequences both of the hyperinflation and of the way it came to an end were momentous. Yet its long-term effects on the economic situation of Germany's population are hard to measure. It used to be thought that it destroyed the economic prosperity of the middle class. But the middle class was a very diverse group in economic and financial terms. Anyone who had invested money in war bonds or other loans to the state lost it, but anyone who had borrowed a large sum of money as a mortgage for a house or flat was likely to end up acquiring the property for virtually nothing. Often these two situations were united to one degree or another in the same person. But for those who depended on a fixed

income, the results were ruinous. Creditors were embittered. The economic and social cohesion of the middle class was shattered, as winners and losers confronted one another across new social divides. The result was a growing fragmentation of the middle-class political parties in the second half of the 1920s, rendering them helpless in the face of demagogic assaults from the far right. And, crucially, as the deflationary effects of the stabilization began to bite, all social groups felt the pinch. Popular memory conflated the effects of the inflation, the hyperinflation and the stabilization into a single economic catastrophe in which virtually every group in German society was a loser.⁸⁷ Victor Klemperer was a typical figure in this process. When the stabilization came, the 'fear of sudden monetary devaluation, the mad rush of having to shop' were over, but 'destitution' came in their place, for in the new currency Klemperer had virtually nothing of any value and hardly any money at all. After all his speculation, he concluded gloomily, 'my shares have a value of scarcely 100 marks, my cash reserves at home about the same, and that's all – my life insurance is utterly and completely lost. 150 paper millions are = 0.015 pfennigs.'⁸⁸

As money lost its value, goods became the only thing worth having, and a huge crime wave swept the country. Convictions for theft, which had numbered 115,000 in 1913, peaked at 365,000 in 1923. Seven times more offenders were convicted of handling stolen goods in 1923 than in 1913. So desperate were the poor even in 1921 that a Social Democratic newspaper reported that out of 100 men sent to Berlin's Plötzensee prison, 80 had no socks on, 60 were without shoes and 50 did not even have a shirt on their back.⁸⁹ Pilfering in the Hamburg docks, where workers had traditionally helped themselves to a portion of the cargoes they were paid to load and unload, reached unprecedented levels. Workers were said to be refusing to load some goods on the grounds that they could not use any of them. Trade unions reported that many workers only went to the quayside in order to steal, and that anyone who tried to stop them was beaten up. Coffee, flour, bacon and sugar were favoured booty. In effect, workers were increasingly enforcing payment in kind as money wages declined in value. So widespread did the phenomenon become that some foreign shipping firms began unloading goods elsewhere in 1922–3.⁹⁰ A similar economy of theft and barter began to replace money transactions in other trades and other centres as well.

Violence, or the threat of violence, sometimes made itself evident in spectacular ways. Gangs of up to two hundred heavily armed youths were seen storming barns in the countryside and carrying off the produce. Yet, despite this atmosphere of barely controllable criminality, convictions for wounding fell from 113,000 in 1913 to a mere 35,000 in 1923, and there was a comparable fall in other categories of crime not directly related to theft. Almost everybody seemed to be concentrating on stealing small amounts of food and supplies in order to stay alive. There were reports of girls selling themselves for packets of butter. Bitterness and resentment at this situation were increased by the feeling that some people were making huge profits from it, through illicit currency dealing, cross-border smuggling, profiteering and the illegal moving of goods. The black marketeer and the profiteer had become objects of denunciation by populist demagogues even before galloping inflation became hyperinflation. Now they became popular hate-figures. There was a widespread feeling that profiteers were partying the night away while honest shopkeepers and artisans were having to sell their household furniture to buy a loaf of bread. Traditional moral values appeared to many to be in decline along with traditional monetary values.⁹¹ The descent into chaos – economic, social, political, moral – seemed to be total.⁹²

Money, income, financial solidity, economic order, regularity and predictability had been at the heart of bourgeois values and bourgeois existence before the war. Now all this seemed to have been swept away along with the equally solid-seeming political system of the Wilhelmine Reich. A widespread cynicism began to make itself apparent in Weimar culture, from films like *Dr Mabuse the Gambler* to Thomas Mann's *The Confessions of the Swindler Felix Krull* (written in 1922 though put aside and not completed until more than thirty years later). It was not least as a consequence of the inflation that Weimar culture developed its fascination with criminals, embezzlers, gamblers, manipulators, thieves and crooks of all kinds. Life seemed to be a game of chance, survival a matter of the arbitrary impact of incomprehensible economic forces. In such an atmosphere, conspiracy theories began to abound. Gambling, whether at the card table or on the Stock Exchange, became a metaphor for life. Much of the cynicism that gave Weimar culture its edge in the mid-1920s and made many people eventually long for the return of idealism, self-sacrifice and patriotic dedication, derived from the disorienting effects of

the hyperinflation.⁹³ Hyperinflation became a trauma whose influence affected the behaviour of Germans of all classes long afterwards. It added to the feeling in the more conservative sections of the population of a world turned upside down, first by defeat, then by revolution, and now by economics. It destroyed faith in the neutrality of the law as a social regulator, between debtors and creditors, rich and poor, and undermined notions of the fairness and equity that the law was supposed to maintain. It debased the language of politics, already driven to hyperbolic over-emphasis by the events of 1918–19. It lent new power to stock fantasy-images of evil, not just the criminal and the gambler, but also the speculator and, fatefully, the financially manipulative Jew.⁹⁴

III

Among the groups widely regarded as winners in the economic upheavals of the early 1920s were the big industrialists and financiers, a fact that caused widespread resentment against 'capitalists' and 'profiteers' in many quarters of German society. But German businessmen were not so sure they had gained so much. Many of them looked back to the Wilhelmine Reich with nostalgia, a time when the state, the police and the courts had kept the labour movement at bay and business itself had bent the ear of government in key matters of economic and social policy. Misconceived though this rose-tinted retrovision might have been, the fact remained that big business had indeed held a privileged position before the war despite occasional irritations with state interference in the economy.⁹⁵ The rapidity and scale of Germany's industrialization had not only made the country into mainland Europe's major economic power by 1914, it had also created a business sector that was remarkable for the scale of its enterprises and the public prominence of its managers and entrepreneurs. Men like the arms manufacturer Krupp, the iron and steel magnates Stumm and Thyssen, the shipowner Ballin, the electricity company bosses Rathenau and Siemens, and many more, were household names, rich, powerful and politically influential.

Such men tended, with varying emphases, to resist unionization and reject the idea of collective bargaining. During the war, however, they had softened their antagonism under the impact of growing state inter-

ference in labour relations, and on 15 November 1918 business and the unions, represented respectively by Hugo Stinnes and Carl Legien, signed a pact establishing a new framework of collective bargaining, including recognition of the eight-hour day. Both sides had an interest in warding off the threat of sweeping socialization from the extreme left, and the agreement preserved the existing structure of big business while giving the unions equal representation on a nationwide network of joint bargaining committees. Like other elements of the Wilhelmine establishment, big business accepted the Republic because it seemed the most likely way of warding off something worse.⁹⁶

Things did not, then, seem too bad for business during the early years of the Republic. Once they had cottoned on to the fact that the inflation was going to continue, many industrialists purchased large quantities of machinery with borrowed money that had lost its value by the time they came to pay it back. But this did not mean, as some have claimed, that they drove on the inflation because they saw its advantages for themselves. On the contrary, many of them were confused about what to do, above all during the hyperinflation of 1923, and the gains they made from the whole process were not as spectacular as has often been alleged.⁹⁷ Moreover, the sharp deflation that was the inevitable outcome of currency stabilization brought serious problems for industry, which had in many cases invested in more plant than it needed. Bankruptcies multiplied, the huge industrial and financial empire of Hugo Stinnes collapsed, and major companies sought refuge in a wave of mergers and cartels, most notably the United Steelworks, formed in 1924 from a number of heavy industrial companies, and the massive I.G. Farben, the German Dye Trust, created the same year from the chemical firms of Agfa, BASF, Bayer, Griesheim, Hoechst and Weiler-ter-Meer, to form the largest corporation in Europe and the fourth largest in the world after General Motors, United States Steel and Standard Oil.⁹⁸

Mergers and cartels were designed not only to achieve market dominance but also to cut costs and increase efficiency. The new enterprises set great store by rationalizing their production along the lines of the super-efficient Ford Motor Company in the United States. 'Fordism', as it was known, automated and mechanized production wherever possible in the interests of efficiency. It was accompanied by a drive to reorganize work in accordance with new American time-and-motion studies, known

as 'Taylorism', much debated in Germany during the second half of the 1920s.⁹⁹ Changes along these lines were achieved to a spectacular degree in the coal-mining industry in the Ruhr, where 98 per cent of coal was extracted by manual labour before the war, but only 13 per cent by 1929. The use of pneumatic drills to dig out the coal, and of mechanized conveyor belts to take it to the loading point, combined with a reorganization of working practices to bring about an increase of the annual output of coal per miner from 255 tons in 1925 to 386 tons by 1932. Such efficiency gains enabled the mining companies to reduce the size of their labour force very quickly, from 545,000 in 1922 to 409,000 in 1925 and 353,000 in 1929. Similar processes of rationalization and mechanization happened in other areas of the economy, notably in the rapidly growing automobile industry.¹⁰⁰ Yet in other areas, such as iron and steel production, efficiency gains were achieved not so much by mechanization and modernization as by mergers and monopolies. For all the discussions and debates about 'Fordism', 'Taylorism' and the like, much of German industry still had a very traditional look to it at the end of the 1920s.¹⁰¹

Adjusting to the new economic situation after stabilization in any case meant retrenchment, cost-cutting and job losses. The situation was made worse by the fact that the relatively large birth-cohorts born in the prewar years were now coming onto the job market, more than replacing those killed in the war or by the devastating influenza epidemic that swept the world immediately afterwards. The labour census of 1925 revealed that there were five million more people in the available workforce than in 1907; the next census, held in 1931, showed an additional million or more. By the end of 1925, under the twin impacts of rationalization and generational population growth, unemployment had reached a million; in March 1926, it topped three million.¹⁰² In the new circumstances, business lost its willingness to compromise with the labour unions. Stabilization meant that employers were no longer able to pass on the costs of wage raises by raising their prices. The organized structure of collective bargaining that had been agreed between employers and unions during the First World War fell apart. It was replaced by increasingly acrimonious relations between business and labour, in which labour's room for manoeuvre became ever more restricted. Yet employers continued to feel frustrated in their drive to cut costs and improve productivity by the strength of the unions and the legal and institutional obstacles placed in

their way by the state. The system of arbitration put in place by the Weimar Republic loaded the dice in favour of the unions during labour disputes, or so the employers felt. When a bitter dispute over wages in the iron and steel industry in the Ruhr was settled by compulsory arbitration in 1928, the employers refused to pay the small wage increase that had been awarded, and locked over 200,000 metalworkers out of their plants for four weeks. The workers were not only backed by the Reich government, led by the Social Democrats in a Grand Coalition formed earlier in the year, but also got paid relief by the state. To the employers it began to seem as if the whole structure of the Weimar Republic was ranged against them.¹⁰³

Things were made worse from their point of view by the financial obligations that the state placed on them. In order to try and alleviate the worst consequences of the stabilization for workers, and to prevent the recurrence of the near-collapse of welfare provision that had occurred during the hyperinflation, the government introduced an elaborate scheme of unemployment insurance in stages in the years 1926 and 1927. Designed to cushion some 17 million workers against the effects of job losses, the most substantial of these laws, passed in 1927, required the same contributions from employers as employees, and set up a state fund to cope with major crises when the number of unemployed exceeded the figure with which it was designed to cope. Since this was only 800,000, it was obvious that the scheme would get into serious trouble should numbers go any higher. In fact, they had exceeded the limit even before the scheme came into effect.¹⁰⁴ Not surprisingly, this welfare system represented a growing state intervention in the economy which business disliked. It piled on extra costs by enforcing employers' contributions to workers' benefit schemes, and it imposed an increasing tax burden on business enterprise and indeed on well-off businessmen themselves. Most hostile of all were the heavy industrialists of the Ruhr. Legal restrictions on hours of work prevented them in many cases from utilizing their plant round the clock. Contributions to the unemployment benefit scheme launched in 1927 were seen as crippling. In 1929 the industrialists' national organization announced its view that the country could no longer afford this kind of thing and called for swingeing cuts in state expenditure accompanied by the formal ending of the bargain with labour that had preserved big business at the time of the 1918 Revolution. Claims

that it was the welfare system rather than the state of the international economy that was causing their problems were exaggerated, to say the least; but the new mood of hostility towards the unions and the Social Democrats among many employers in the second half of the 1920s was unmistakable none the less.¹⁰⁵

Big business was thus already disillusioned with the Weimar Republic by the late 1920s. The influence it had enjoyed before 1914, still more during the war and the postwar era of inflation, now seemed to be drastically diminished. Moreover, its public standing, once so high, had suffered badly as a result of financial and other scandals that had surfaced during the inflation. People who lost their fortunes in dubious investments searched for someone to blame. Such scapegoating focused in 1924-5 on the figure of Julius Barmat, a Russian-Jewish entrepreneur who had collaborated with leading Social Democrats in importing food supplies immediately after the war, then invested the credits he obtained from the Prussian State Bank and the Post Office in financial speculation during the inflation. When his business collapsed towards the end of 1924, leaving 10 million Reichsmarks of debts, the far right took the opportunity to run a scurrilous press campaign accusing leading Social Democrats such as the former Chancellor Gustav Bauer of taking bribes. Financial scandals of this kind were exploited more generally by the far right to back up claims that Jewish corruption was exerting undue influence on the Weimar state and causing financial ruin to many ordinary middle-class Germans.¹⁰⁶

What could business do to remedy this situation? Its room for political manoeuvre was limited. From the beginning of the Republic, business sought both to insulate industry from political interference, and to secure political influence, or at least good will, through financial donations to the 'bourgeois' parties, notably the Nationalists and the People's Party. Large concerns often had a financial hold on major newspapers through their investments, but this seldom translated into a direct political input. Where the owner did intervene frequently in editorial policy, as in the case of Alfred Hugenberg (whose press and media empire expanded rapidly during the Weimar Republic), this often had little to do with the specific interests of business itself. By the early 1930s, indeed, leading businessmen were so irritated by Hugenberg's right-wing radicalism that they were plotting to oust him from the leadership of the Nationalist

Party. Far from speaking with one voice on the issues that affected it, business was split from top to bottom not only by politics, as the example of Hugenberg suggests, but by economic interest, too. Thus, while the Ruhr iron, steel and mining companies were furiously opposed to the Weimar welfare state and the Weimar system of collective bargaining, companies like Siemens or I.G. Farben, the giants of the more modern sectors of the economy, were more willing to compromise. Some conflict of interest also existed between export-oriented industries, which did relatively well during the years of stabilization and retrenchment, and industries producing mainly for the home market, which included, once again, the Ruhr iron and steel magnates. Even among the latter, however, there were serious differences of opinion, with Krupp actually opposing the hard-line stance taken by the employers in the 1928 lock-out.¹⁰⁷ By the end of the 1920s, business was divided in its politics and hemmed in by the restrictions placed on it by the Weimar state. It had lost much of the political influence it had enjoyed during the inflation. Its frustration with the Republic was soon to erupt into open hostility on the part of some of its most influential representatives.

CULTURE WARS

I

The conflicts that rent Weimar were more than merely political or economic. Their visceral quality derived much from the fact that they were not just fought out in parliaments and elections, but permeated every aspect of life. Indifference to politics was hardly a characteristic of the German population in the years leading up to the Third Reich. People arguably suffered from an excess of political engagement and political commitment. One indication of this could be found in the extremely high turnout rates at elections – no less than 80 per cent of the electorate in most contests.¹⁰⁸ Elections met with none of the indifference that is allegedly the sign of a mature democracy. On the contrary, during election campaigns in many parts of Germany every spare inch of outside walls and advertising columns seemed to be covered with posters, every window hung with banners, every building festooned with the colours of one political party or another. This went far beyond the sense of duty that was said by some to have driven voters to the polls in prewar years. There seemed to be no area of society or politics that was immune from politicization.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in the press. No fewer than 4,700 newspapers appeared in Germany in the year 1932, 70 per cent of them on a daily basis. Many of them were local, with a small circulation, but some of them, like the liberal *Frankfurt Newspaper* (*Frankfurter Zeitung*), were major broadsheets with an international reputation. Such organs formed only a small part of the politically oriented press, which together made up about a quarter of all newspapers. Nearly three-quarters of the politically oriented papers owed their allegiance to the

Centre Party or its equivalent in the south, the Bavarian People's Party, or to the Social Democrats.¹⁰⁹ The political parties set great store by their daily papers. *Forwards* (*Vorwärts*) for the Social Democrats, and the *Red Flag* (*Rote Fahne*) for the Communists were key parts of their respective parties' propaganda apparatus, and headed up an elaborate structure of weekly magazines, local newspapers, glossy illustrated periodicals and specialist publications. A newspaper propaganda organizer like the Communist press chief Willi Münzenberg could win an almost mythical reputation as a creator and manipulator of the media.¹¹⁰ At the opposite end of the political spectrum, an equally legendary status was occupied by Alfred Hugenberg, who as chairman of the board of the arms manufacturer Krupps had purchased the Scherl newspaper firm in 1916. Two years later, he also acquired a major news agency through which he supplied large sections of the press with stories and leading articles during the Weimar years. By the late 1920s Hugenberg had in addition become owner of the mammoth film production company, the UFA. Hugenberg used his media empire to propagate his own, virulently German nationalist ideas across the land, and to spread the message that it was time for a restoration of the monarchy. Such was his reputation that by the end of the 1920s he was being referred to as the 'uncrowned king' of Germany and 'one of the most powerful men' in the land.¹¹¹

Yet, whatever people thought, media power of this kind did not translate directly into political power. Hugenberg's domination of the media had absolutely no effect in stopping the relentless decline of the Nationalists after 1924. Political papers in general had small circulations: in 1929, for instance, the *Red Flag* sold 28,000 copies a day, *Forwards* 74,000 a day, and Hugenberg's *The Day* (*Der Tag*) just over 70,000. These were not impressive figures by any stretch of the imagination. Moreover, sales of the *Red Flag* dropped to 15,000 just as the Communist vote was beginning to increase in the early 1930s. Overall, the circulation of the overtly political press fell by nearly a third between 1925 and 1932. The up-market liberal quality dailies also lost circulation.¹¹² The *Frankfurt Newspaper*, probably the most prestigious of the liberal quality dailies, slipped from 100,000 in 1915 to 71,000 in 1928. As newspaper editors realized only too well, many readers of the pro-Weimar liberal press voted for parties that were opposed to Weimar. The political power of editors and proprietors seemed limited here, too.¹¹³

What was undermining the political press in the 1920s was, above all, the rise of the so-called 'boulevard papers', cheap, sensational tabloids that were sold on the streets, particularly in the afternoons and evenings, rather than depending on regular subscribers. Heavily illustrated, with massive coverage of sport, cinema, local news, crime, scandal and sensation, these papers placed the emphasis on entertainment rather than information. Yet they, too, could have a political orientation, like Hugenberg's *Night Edition* (*Nachtausgabe*), whose circulation grew from 38,000 in 1925 to 202,000 in 1930, or Münzenberg's *World in the Evening* (*Welt am Abend*), which boosted its sales from 12,000 in 1925 to 220,000 in 1930. By and large, the pro-Weimar press found it hard to keep up with such competition, though the liberal-oriented Ullstein press empire did produce the successful *Tempo* (145,000 in 1930) and *BZ at Midday* (*BZ am Mittag*, 175,000 in the same year). The Social Democrats were unable to compete in this market.¹¹⁴ It was at this level that the politics of the press had a real impact. Scandal-sheets undermined the Republic with their sensational exposure of real or imagined financial wrongdoings on the part of pro-Republic politicians; illustrations could convey the contrast with Imperial days. The massive publicity the popular press gave to murder trials and police investigations created the impression of a society drowning in a wave of violent crime. Out in the provinces, ostensibly unpolitical local papers, often fed by right-wing press agencies, had a similar, if more muted effect. Hugenberg's press empire might not have saved the Nationalists from decline; but its constant harping on the iniquities of the Republic was another factor in weakening Weimar's legitimacy and convincing people that something else was needed in its stead. In the end, therefore, the press did have some effect in swaying the minds of voters, above all in influencing them in a general way against Weimar democracy.¹¹⁵

The emergence of the sensationalist popular press was only one among many new and, for some people, disquieting developments on the media and cultural scene in the 1920s and early 1930s. Experimental literature, the 'concrete poetry' of the Dadaists, the modernist novels of Alfred Döblin, the social-critical plays of Bertolt Brecht, the biting polemical journalism of Kurt Tucholsky and Carl von Ossietzky, all divided readers between a minority who rose to the challenge of the new, and the majority who regarded such work as 'cultural Bolshevism'. Alongside the vibrant

radical literary culture of Berlin there was another literary world, appealing to the conservative nationalist part of the middle classes, rooted in nostalgia for the lost Bismarckian past and prophesying its return with the longed-for collapse of the Weimar Republic. Particularly popular was Oswald Spengler's *The Fall of the West*, which divided human history into natural cycles of spring, summer, autumn and winter, and located early twentieth-century Germany in the winter phase, characterized by 'tendencies of an irreligious and unmetaphysical urban cosmopolitanism', in which art had suffered a 'preponderance of foreign art-forms'.

In politics, according to Spengler, winter was recognizable by the rule of the inorganic, cosmopolitan masses and the collapse of established state forms. Spengler won many adherents with his claim that this heralded the beginning of an imminent transition to a new spring, that would be 'agricultural-intuitive' and ruled by an 'organic structure of political existence', leading to the 'mighty creations of an awakening, dream-laden soul'.¹¹⁶ Other writers gave the coming period of revival a new name that was soon to be taken up with enthusiasm by the radical right: the Third Reich. This concept was popularized by the neo-conservative writer Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, whose book of this title was published in 1923. The ideal of the Reich had arisen, he proclaimed, with Charlemagne and been resurrected under Bismarck: it was the opposite of the government by party that characterized the Weimar Republic. At present, he wrote, the Third Reich was a dream: it would require a nationalist revolution to make it reality. The political parties that divided Germany would then be swept away. When the Third Reich finally came, it would encompass all political and social groupings in a national revival. It would restore the continuity of German history, recreating its medieval glory; it would be the 'final Reich' of all.¹¹⁷ Other writers, such as the jurist Edgar Jung, took up this concept and advocated a 'conservative revolution' that would bring about 'the Third Reich' in the near future.¹¹⁸

Below this level of somewhat rarified abstraction were many other writers who in one way or another glorified the alleged virtues that, in their view, the Weimar Republic negated. The ex-army officer Ernst Jünger propagated the myth of 1914, and in his popular book *Storm of Steel* exalted the image of the front-line troops who had found their true being only in the exercise of violence and the suffering, and inflicting, of pain.¹¹⁹ The Free Corps spawned a whole canon of novels celebrating the

veterans' hatred of revolutionaries, often expressed in blood-curdling terms, portraying murder and mayhem as the ultimate expression of a resentful masculinity in search of revenge for the collapse of 1918 and the coming of revolution and democracy.¹²⁰ In place of the feeble compromises of parliamentary democracy, authors such as these, and many others, proclaimed the need for strong leadership, ruthless, uncompromising, hard, willing to strike down the enemies of the nation without compunction.¹²¹ Others looked back to an idyllic rural world in which the complexities and 'decadence' of modern urban life were wholly absent, as in Adolf Bartels's novel *The Dithmarshers*, which had sold over 200,000 copies by 1928.¹²²

All of this expressed a widespread sense of cultural crisis, and not just among conservative elites. Of course, many aspects of modernist culture and the media had already been in evidence before the war. Avant-garde art had impinged on the public consciousness with the work of Expressionists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, August Macke or Emil Nolde, and abstract painters such as the Russian-born but Munich-based Wassily Kandinsky. Atonal and expressionist music was emanating from the Second Viennese school of Schoenberg, Webern, Berg and Zemlinsky, while sexually explicit drama in the form of plays such as *Spring's Awakening* by Frank Wedekind had already caused a major furore. There had been constant disputes under the Wilhelmine Reich about the limits of propriety in literature and the threat posed by allegedly unpatriotic and subversive, or pornographic and immoral books, many of which were subject to bans imposed by the police.¹²³

The sense of cultural crisis which the emergence of modernist art and culture generated amongst the middle classes after the turn of the century was held in check under the Wilhelmine regime, and in its more extreme forms remained confined to a small minority. After 1918, however, it became far more widespread. The ending, or at least the scaling-down, of the censorship that had been so harsh during the war and always active during the Wilhelmine period, encouraged the media to venture into areas that had previously been taboo. The theatre became the vehicle for radical experimentation and left-wing agitprop.¹²⁴ Cheaper reproduction and printing techniques made it easier to publish inexpensive illustrated papers and magazines for the mass market. Controversy swirled in particular around Weimar's Bauhaus, created by the architect Walter Grop-

ius in a merger of the Weimar Art Academy and the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts. An educational centre that sought to join high art with practical design, its staff included Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee, Theo van Doesberg, and László Moholy-Nagy. Its bohemian students, both male and female, were unpopular with the townspeople, and its radically simple, clean and ultra-modern designs were condemned by local politicians as owing more to the art-forms of primitive races than to anything German. State funding was withdrawn in 1924 and the Bauhaus moved to Dessau, but it continued to be dogged by controversy, especially under its new director, Hannes Meyer, whose Communist sympathies led in 1930 to his replacement by the architect Mies van der Rohe. Mies expelled the Communist students and replaced the Bauhaus's earlier communitarian ethos with a more structured, even authoritarian regime. But the Nazi majority elected to the town council in November 1931 closed it down following an official inspection by Paul Schulze-Naumburg, the ultra-conservative author of a book on *Art and Race*. It then moved to a factory site in Berlin, but from this time on was no more than a shadow of its former self. The fate of the Bauhaus illustrated how difficult it was for avant-garde culture to receive official acceptance even in the culturally relaxed atmosphere of the Weimar Republic.¹²⁵

New means of communication added to the sense of old cultural values under threat. Radio first began to make a real mark as a popular cultural institution during this period: a million listeners had registered by 1926, and another 3 million by 1932, and the airwaves were open to a wide variety of opinion, including the left. Cinemas had already opened in the larger towns before 1914, and by the late 1920s films were attracting mass audiences which increased still further with the coming of the talkies at the end of the decade. A sense of aesthetic disorientation was prompted amongst many cultural conservatives by Expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, with its famously odd-angled sets, and by erotically charged movies like *Pandora's Box*, starring the American actress Louise Brooks. A sharp satire on bourgeois convention such as *The Blue Angel*, based on a book by Heinrich Mann and starring Emil Jannings and Marlene Dietrich, ran into trouble with its production company, Hugenberg's UFA, not least for its portrayal of the cynical and manipulative eroticism of its central female character.¹²⁶ The film of Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* aroused a furious

campaign on the part of ultra-nationalists who thought its pacifist message unpatriotic.¹²⁷

Bourgeois culture had held up bland ideals of beauty, spiritual elevation and artistic purity that seemed mocked by the manifestations of Dada, while the 'New Objectivity' (*Neue Sachlichkeit*, literally 'new matter-of-factness') placed everyday events and objects at the centre in an attempt to aestheticize modern urban life. This was not to everyone's taste. Instead of losing themselves in portentous thoughts inspired by the mythical world of Wagner's *Ring* cycle or the ritual religious music-drama of *Parsifal*, dress-suited bourgeois opera-goers were now confronted with the Kroll Opera's production of Paul Hindemith's *News of the Day*, in which a naked diva sang an aria sitting in a bathtub. Alongside the mellifluous Late Romanticism of Germany's leading establishment composer, Richard Strauss, formerly an *enfant terrible* but now the composer of slight and emotionally undemanding operas such as *Intermezzo* and *The Egyptian Helena*, audiences were now treated to Alban Berg's Expressionist masterpiece *Wozzeck*, set among the poor and downtrodden of the early nineteenth century and incorporating atonal music and everyday speech patterns. The conservative composer Hans Pfitzner struck a chord when he denounced such tendencies as symptoms of national degeneracy, and ascribed them to Jewish influences and cultural Bolshevism. The German musical tradition, he thundered, had to be protected from such threats, which were made more acute by the Prussian government's appointment in 1925 of the Austrian-Jewish atonalist Arnold Schoenberg to teach composition at the state music academy in Berlin. Musical life was central to bourgeois identity in Germany, more, probably, than in any other European country: such developments struck at its very core.¹²⁸

An even greater threat, in this view, was posed by the American influence of jazz, which found its way into works such as *The Threepenny Opera*, with music by Kurt Weill and lyrics by Bertolt Brecht. A caustic denunciation of exploitation set in a world of thieves and criminals, it sent shock waves through the cultural world on its first performance in 1928; a similar effect was produced by Ernst Krenek's *Jonny Strikes Up*, which was premiered in February 1927 and featured a black musician as its protagonist. Many modernist composers found jazz a stimulus to renewing their art. It was, of course, principally a popular art form,

played in various styles at myriad night-clubs and bars, above all in Berlin, shading off into dance-halls, revue theatres and hotels. Visiting big bands and chorus lines such as the Tiller Girls enlivened the Berlin scene, while the more daring could spend an evening at a club such as the Eldorado, 'a supermarket of eroticism', as the popular composer Friedrich Hollaender called it, and watch Anita Berber perform pornographic dances with names such as 'Cocaine' and 'Morphium' to an audience liberally sprinkled with transvestites and homosexuals, until her early death in 1928 from drug abuse. Cabaret shows added to all this an element of biting, anti-authoritarian political satire and aroused pompous conservatives to anger with their jokes about the 'nationalist and religious sentiments and practices of Christians and Germans', as one of them angrily complained. The wrath of conventional moralists was aroused by dances such as the tango, the foxtrot and the charleston, while racist rhetoric was directed against black musicians (though there were very few of them and most were employed mainly as drummers or dancers, to lend a flavour of the exotic to the performance).

The leading music critic Alfred Einstein called jazz 'the most disgusting treason against all occidental civilized music', while Hans Pfitzner, in a vitriolic attack on the Frankfurt Conservatory for including jazz on its curriculum, railed against its supposed primitivism as a product of what he called 'nigger blood', the 'musical expression of Americanism'.¹²⁹ Jazz and swing seemed to be the crest of a wave of cultural Americanization, in which such widely differing phenomena as Charlie Chaplin films and the modern industrial methods of 'Fordism' and 'Taylorism' were viewed by some as a threat to Germany's supposedly historic identity. Mass production held out the prospect of mass consumption, with the great department stores offering an astonishing variety of international goods, while foreign-owned chain-stores such as Woolworth's put at least some of them within the grasp of the ordinary working-class family. Mass housing schemes and designs for modern living challenged the conservative ideal of folk-based style and aroused fierce debate. For cultural critics on the right, the influence of America, symbol par excellence of modernity, signified a pressing need to resurrect the German way of living, German traditions, German ties to blood and soil.¹³⁰

Older Germans in particular felt alienated, not least by the new atmosphere of cultural and sexual freedom that followed the end of

official censorship and police controls in 1918 and was epitomized for many by the nightclubs of Berlin. One army officer, born in 1878, later recalled:

Returning home, we no longer found an honest German people, but a mob stirred up by its lowest instincts. Whatever virtues were once found among the Germans seemed to have sunk once and for all into the muddy flood . . . Promiscuity, shamelessness and corruption ruled supreme. German women seemed to have forgotten their German ways. German men seemed to have forgotten their sense of honour and honesty. Jewish writers and the Jewish press could 'go to town' with impunity, dragging everything into the dirt.¹³¹

The feeling that order and discipline had been swept away by the Revolution, and that moral and sexual degeneracy were taking over society, was to be found on the left as well as on the right. Social Democrats and Communists often took a rather puritanical view of personal relationships, putting political commitment and self-sacrifice above personal fulfilment, and many were shocked by the openly hedonistic culture of many young people in Berlin and elsewhere during the 'Roaring Twenties'. The commercialization of leisure, in the cinema, the tabloid press, the dance-hall and the radio, was alienating many young people from the sterner, more traditional values of labour movement culture.¹³²

The sexual freedom evidently enjoyed by the young in the big cities was a particular source of disapproval in the older generation. Here, too, there had been harbingers before the war. The rise of a large and vociferous feminist movement had accustomed the public and the press to women speaking out on all kinds of issues, occupying at least some positions of responsibility, and making their own way in the world. On 'International Proletarian Women's Day', 8 March, the bigger cities saw annual demonstrations in the streets for women's suffrage from 1910 onwards, with even middle-class feminists staging a procession, albeit in carriages, in 1912. Alongside the eventually successful campaign for female suffrage came, if only from a minority of feminists, demands for sexual fulfilment, equal rights for unmarried mothers and the provision of free contraceptive advice. The ideas of Freud, with their tendency to ascribe sexual motives to human actions and desires, were already being discussed before the war.¹³³ Berlin in particular, as it grew rapidly to the size and status of a cosmopolitan metropolis, had already become the

centre for a variety of social and sexual subcultures, including a thriving gay and lesbian scene.¹³⁴

Critics linked these trends to what they saw as the looming decline of the family, caused principally by the growing economic independence of women. The rapid emergence of a service sector in the economy, with its new employment possibilities for women, from sales positions in the great department stores to secretarial work in the booming office world (driven by the powerful feminizing influence of the typewriter), created new forms of exploitation but also gave increasing numbers of young, unmarried women a financial and social independence they had not enjoyed before. This became even more marked after 1918, when there were 11.5 million women at work, making up 36 per cent of the working population. Although this was by no means a dramatic change from the situation before the war, many of them were now in publicly conspicuous jobs such as tram-conducting, serving in department stores, or, even if it was only a handful, in the legal, university and medical professions.¹³⁵ Increased female competition for male jobs, and a more general fear among nationalists that Germany's strength was being sapped by the birth rate decline that set in around the turn of the century, merged with wider cultural anxieties to produce a backlash that was already becoming evident before 1914.¹³⁶ There was a discernible crisis of masculinity in Germany before the war, as nationalists and Pan-Germans began to clamour for women's return to home and family in order to fulfil their destiny of producing and educating more children for the nation. The sharpness of the reaction to the feminist challenge meant that the feminists were forced onto the defensive, began to marginalize their more radical supporters and increasingly stressed their impeccably nationalist credentials and their desire not to go too far with their demands for change.¹³⁷

After 1918, women were enfranchised and able to vote and stand for election at every level from local councils up to the Reichstag. They were formally given the right to enter the major professions, and the part they played in public life was far more prominent than it had been before the war. Correspondingly, the hostility of those male supremacists who believed that women's place was in the home now won a much wider hearing. Their disapproval was reinforced by the far more open display of sexuality than before the war in the liberated atmosphere of the big cities. Even more shocking to conservatives was the public campaigning

for gay rights by individuals such as Magnus Hirschfeld, founder of the harmless-sounding Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, in 1897. In fact, Hirschfeld was openly homosexual, and in numerous publications propagated the controversial idea that homosexuals were a 'third sex' whose orientation was the product of congenital rather than environmental factors. His Committee was dedicated to the abolition of Paragraph 175 of the Reich Criminal Code, which outlawed 'indecent activity' between adult males. What aroused the wrath of conservatives was the fact that in 1919 the Social Democratic state government of Prussia gave Hirschfeld a large grant to convert his informal Committee into a state-funded Institute for Sexual Science, with its premises in the grand Tiergarten district in the centre of the capital city. The Institute offered sex counselling, held popular question-and-answer sessions on topics like 'what is the best way to have sex without making a baby?' and campaigned for the reform of all the laws regulating sexual behaviour. Hirschfeld quickly built up a wide range of international contacts, organized in the World League for Sexual Reform, of which his Institute was the effective headquarters in the 1920s. He was the driving force behind the spread of public and private birth control and sex counselling clinics in the Weimar Republic. Not surprisingly, he was repeatedly vilified by the Nationalists and the Nazis, whose attempt to tighten up the law still further, with the support of the Centre Party, was narrowly defeated by the votes of the Communists, Social Democrats and Democrats on the Criminal Law Reform Committee of the Reichstag in 1929.¹³⁸

Nationalist hostility was driven by more than crude moral conservatism. Germany had lost 2 million men in the war, and yet the birth rate was still in rapid decline. Between 1900 and 1925, live births per thousand married women under the age of 45 fell very sharply indeed, from 280 to 146. Laws restricting the sale of condoms were eased in 1927, and by the early 1930s there were more than 1,600 vending machines in public places, with one Berlin firm alone producing 25 million condoms a year. Sex counselling centres were opened, offering contraceptive advice, and many of these, like Hirschfeld's Institute, were funded or in some cases actually operated by the Prussian and other regional governments, to the outrage of moral conservatives. Abortion was far more controversial, not least because of the serious medical risks it entailed, but here, too, the law was relaxed, and the offence reduced in 1927 from a felony to a

misdemeanour. The thundering denunciation of birth control by the Papal Encyclical *Casti Connubii* in December 1930 added fuel to the flames of debate, and in 1931 some 1,500 rallies and demonstrations were held in a massive Communist campaign against the evils of backstreet abortions.¹³⁹

To many people, such campaigns seemed part of a deliberate plot to destroy the fertility and fecundity of the German race. Was it not, conservatives and radical nationalists asked, all the consequence of female emancipation and the morally subversive advocacy of sexuality untrammelled by any desire to procreate? To nationalists, the feminists seemed to be little better than national traitors for encouraging women to work outside the home. Yet the feminists themselves were scarcely less alarmed by the new atmosphere of sexual liberation. Most of them had castigated the double standard of sexual morality – freedom for men, purity for women – before the war, and advocated instead a single standard of sexual restraint for both sexes. Their puritanism, expressed in campaigns against pornographic books and sexually explicit films and paintings, and in denunciations of young women who preferred dance-halls to reading-groups, seemed ridiculous to many women amongst the younger generation, and by the late 1920s the traditional feminist organizations, already deprived of their principal cause by the achievement of female suffrage, were complaining of an ageing membership and a failing appeal to the young.¹⁴⁰ Feminism was on the defensive, and the middle-class women who were the mainstay of its support were deserting their traditional liberal milieu for parties of the right. The feminist movement felt the need to defend itself against charges of undermining the German race by insisting on its support for nationalist revision of the Treaty of Versailles, for rearmament, for family values and for sexual self-restraint. As time was to show, the appeal of right-wing extremism to women proved no less potent than it was to men.¹⁴¹

II

Young people, and especially adolescent boys, were already developing a distinctive cultural style of their own before the First World War. A key role in this was played by the 'youth movement', a disparate but rapidly growing collection of informal clubs and societies that focused on activities such as hiking, communing with nature and singing folk songs and patriotic verses while sitting around camp fires. Of course, all the political parties attempted to recruit young people, particularly after 1918, by providing them with their own organizations – the Bismarck Youth for the Nationalists, for example – or the Windthorst League for the Centre Party – but what was striking about the youth movement in general was its independence from formal political institutions, often combined with a contempt for what its leading figures saw as the moral compromises and dishonesties of adult political life. The movement fostered a distrust of modern culture, city life and formal political institutions. Many if not most youth groups wore paramilitary uniforms along the lines of the Boy Scouts, and were more than tinged with antisemitism, often refusing to admit Jews to their ranks. Some underlined the need for moral purity, and rejected smoking, drinking or liaisons with girls. Others, as we have seen, were male supremacist. Even if the responsibility of the youth movement for paving the way for Nazism has been exaggerated by historians, the overwhelming majority of the independent youth organizations were still hostile to the Republic and its politicians, nationalist in outlook and militaristic in character and aspirations.¹⁴²

The influence of the youth movement, which was at its strongest in the Protestant middle class, was scarcely countered by the impact of the educational system on young Germans. 'The whole lot of high school pupils are nationalistic,' reported Victor Klemperer in 1925. 'They learn it thus from the teachers.'¹⁴³ But the situation was perhaps a little more complicated than he imagined. Under the Wilhelmine Reich, the Kaiser's personal influence was exercised in favour of displacing liberal traditions of German education, based on classical models, with patriotic lessons focusing on German history and the German language. By 1914 many teachers were nationalist, conservative and monarchist in outlook, while textbooks and lessons pursued very much the same kind of political line.

But a sizeable minority also held to a variety of opinions on the liberal centre and left. In the 1920s, moreover, states dominated by the Social Democrats, notably Prussia, made strenuous efforts to persuade the schools to educate their pupils as model citizens loyal to the new Republic's democratic institutions, and the atmosphere in the school system changed accordingly. Millions of young people emerged from their schooling as convinced Communists or Social Democrats, or gave their allegiance to the Centre Party, besides the other millions who adhered to conservative views or the politics of the radical right. In the end, neither those teachers who were liberal or Social Democratic nor those who were conservative and monarchist seem to have exercised much influence on the political views of their pupils, and many of their political ideas were dismissed by their charges as lacking in any relevance to what they perceived as the daily realities of life under the Weimar Republic. For young men who subsequently became Nazis, the beginnings of political commitment often lay more in political rebellion against the rigidities of the school system than in the inspiration of Nazi or proto-Nazi teachers. One nationalist school student, born in 1908, remembered that he was always clashing with his teachers 'because from childhood I have hated slavish submissiveness'; he admitted being politicized by a nationalist teacher, but commented at the same time that his idol's teaching 'formed a strong contrast to everything else that was taught in school'; another nursed a long-term grudge against his former school, which had repeatedly punished him for insulting Jewish fellow-students.¹⁴⁴

Where the political allegiance of the young to the far right was at its most obvious was in Germany's universities, many of them famous centres of learning with traditions going back to the Middle Ages. Some leftish professors did manage to secure appointments under the Weimar Republic, but they were few in number. Universities were still elite institutions after the war, and drew almost all their students from the middle classes. Particularly powerful were the student duelling corps, conservative, monarchist and nationalist to a man. Some of them played an active role in the violence that attended the suppression of the revolutionary outbreaks that took place in 1919–21. To neutralize their influence, students in all universities established democratic representative institutions of a sort appropriate to the new Republic early in 1919, the General Student Unions. All students had to belong to these,

and were entitled to vote for representatives on their governing bodies.¹⁴⁵

The Student Unions formed a national association and began to have some influence in areas such as student welfare and university reform. But they too fell under the influence of the far right. Under the impact of political events, from the final acceptance of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 to the French invasion of the Ruhr in 1923, fresh generations of students streamed into nationalist associations, and flocked to the colours of the traditional student corps. Soon, right-wing slates of candidates were being elected to all the Student Unions, while students' disillusion with Germany's new democracy grew as inflation rendered their incomes worthless and overcrowding made conditions in the universities ever more unbearable. Student numbers grew rapidly, from 60,000 in 1914 to 104,000 in 1931, not least under the impact of demographic change. Governments poured money into widening access, and universities became a significant route to upward social mobility for the sons of lower civil servants, small businessmen and even to some extent manual labourers. The financial problems of the Republic forced many students to work their way through university, creating further resentment. Already in 1924, however, the chances of the swelling numbers of graduates finding a place in the job market began to decline; from 1930 they were almost non-existent.¹⁴⁶

The vast majority of professors, as their collective public declarations of support for German war aims in 1914-18 had shown, were also strongly nationalist. Many contributed to the right-wing intellectual atmosphere with their lectures denouncing the Peace Settlement of 1919. They added to this with administrative resolutions and decisions attacking what they saw as the threat of 'racially alien' Jewish students coming to the university from the east. Many wrote in alarmist terms about the looming prospect (which existed largely in their own imaginations) of whole subject areas in the universities being dominated by Jewish professors, and framed their hiring policy accordingly. In 1923 a massive wave of nationalist outrage swept through German universities when the French occupied the Ruhr, and student groups took an active part in stirring up resistance. Well before the end of the 1920s, the universities had become political hotbeds of the extreme right. A generation of graduates was being created that thought of itself as an elite, as graduates still did in a society where only a very small proportion of the population

ever managed to get into university; but an elite that in the wake of the First World War put action above thought, and national pride above abstract learning; an elite to which racism, antisemitism and ideas of German superiority were almost second nature; an elite that was determined to combat the feeble compromises of an over-tolerant liberal democracy with the same toughness that their elders had shown in the First World War.¹⁴⁷ For such young men, violence seemed a rational response to the disasters that had overtaken Germany. To the most intelligent and highly educated, the older generation of ex-soldiers seemed too emotionally scarred, too disorderly: what was needed was sobriety, planning and utter ruthlessness in the cause of national regeneration.¹⁴⁸

All these influences were in the end secondary as far as the majority of these students' contemporaries were concerned. Far more important to them was the overriding experience of political dislocation, economic privation, war, destruction, civil strife, inflation, national defeat and partial occupation by foreign powers, an experience shared by young people born in the decade or so leading up to the First World War. A young clerk, born in 1911, later wrote:

We were not spared anything. We knew and felt the worries in the house. The shadow of necessity never left our table and made us silent. *We were rudely pushed out of our childhood and not shown the right path.* The struggle for life got to us early. Misery, shame, hatred, lies, and civil war imprinted themselves on our souls and made us mature early.¹⁴⁹

The generation born between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the First World War was indeed a generation of the unconditional, ready for anything; in more than one respect, it was to play a fateful role in the Third Reich.

III

Weimar's radically modernist culture was obsessed, to what many middle-class people must have felt was an unhealthy degree, by deviance, murder, atrocity and crime. The graphic drawings of an artist like George Grosz were full of violent scenes of rape and serial sex killers, a theme found in the work of other artists of the day as well. Murderers were central figures

in films such as Fritz Lang's *M*, plays like Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* and novels such as Alfred Döblin's modernist masterpiece, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The trials of real serial killers like Fritz Haarmann or Peter Kürten, 'the Düsseldorf vampire', were nationwide media sensations, with graphic reporting in the press catering to a mass readership that followed every twist and turn of events. Corruption became a central theme even of novels about Berlin written by foreign visitors, as in Christopher Isherwood's *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. The criminal became an object of fascination as well as fear, fuelling respectable anxieties about social order and adding to middle-class distaste at the inversion of values that seemed to be at the centre of modernist culture. The huge publicity given to serial killers convinced many, not only that the death penalty had to be rigorously enforced against such 'bestial' individuals, but also that censorship needed to be reintroduced to stop their celebration in popular culture and the daily boulevard press.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile the inflation and disorder of the postwar years had seen the emergence of organized crime on a scale almost rivalling that of contemporary Chicago, particularly in Berlin, where the 'ring associations' of the burgeoning criminal underworld were celebrated in films like *M*.¹⁵¹

The feeling that crime was out of control was widely shared among those whose job it was to maintain the law and order that so many people thought was now under threat. The entire judicial system of the Wilhelmine period was transported unchanged to the Weimar era; the Civil and Criminal Law Codes were almost entirely unamended, and attempts to liberalize them, for example by abolishing the death penalty, ran into the sands.¹⁵² As before, the judiciary was a body of men trained for the judge's role from the beginning, not (as in England for example) appointed to the judiciary after a relatively long career at the bar. Many judges in office during the 1920s had thus been members of the judiciary for decades, and had imbibed their fundamental values and attitudes in the age of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Their position was strengthened under the Republic, since it was a basic political principle of the new democracy, like others, that the judiciary should be independent of political control, a principle quickly and uncontroversially anchored in Articles 102 and 104 of the constitution. Rather like the army, therefore, the judiciary was able to operate for long stretches of time without any real political interference.¹⁵³

The judges were all the more independent because the vast majority of them regarded laws promulgated by legislative assemblies rather than by a divinely ordained monarch as no longer neutral but, as the chairman of the German Judges' Confederation (which represented eight out of the roughly ten thousand German judges) put it, 'party, class and bastard law... a law of lies'. 'Where several parties exercise rule,' he complained, 'the result is compromise laws. These constitute mishmash laws, they express the cross-purposes of the ruling parties, they make bastard law. All majesty is fallen. The majesty of the law, too.'¹⁵⁴ There was some justification, perhaps, in the complaint that the political parties were exploiting the judicial system for their own purposes and creating new laws with a specific political bias. The extreme right- and left-wing parties maintained specific departments devoted to the cynical business of making political capital out of trials, and kept a staff of political lawyers who developed a battery of highly sophisticated and utterly unscrupulous techniques for turning court proceedings into political sensations.¹⁵⁵ No doubt this further contributed to discrediting Weimar justice in the eyes of many. Yet the judges themselves, in the altered context of the advent of a parliamentary democracy, could be regarded as exploiting trials for their own political purposes, too. After years, indeed decades, of treating Social Democratic and left-liberal critics of the Kaiser's government as criminals, judges were unwilling to readjust their attitudes when the political situation changed. Their loyalty was given, not to the new Republic, but to the same abstract ideal of the Reich which their counterparts in the officer corps continued to serve; an ideal built largely on memories of the authoritarian system of the Bismarckian Reich.¹⁵⁶ Inevitably, perhaps, in the numerous political trials which arose from the deep political conflicts of the Weimar years, they sided overwhelmingly with those right-wing offenders who claimed also to be acting in the name of this ideal, and cheered on the prosecution of those on the left who did not.

In the mid-1920s the left-wing statistician Emil Julius Gumbel published figures showing that the 22 political murders committed by left-wing offenders from late 1919 to mid-1922 led to 38 convictions, including 10 executions and prison sentences averaging 15 years apiece. By contrast, the 354 political murders which Gumbel reckoned to have been committed by right-wing offenders in the same period led to 24

convictions, no executions at all, and prison sentences averaging a mere 4 months apiece; 23 right-wing murderers who confessed to their crimes were actually acquitted by the courts.¹⁵⁷ Of course, these statistics may not have been entirely accurate. And there were frequent amnesties of 'political prisoners' agreed on by the extreme parties in the Reichstag with enough support from other political groupings to get them through, so that many political offenders were released only after serving a relatively short time in gaol. But what mattered about the behaviour of the judges was the message it sent to the public, a message bolstered by numerous prosecutions of pacifists, Communists and other people on the left for treason throughout the Weimar years. According to Gumbel, while only 32 people had been condemned for treason in the last three peacetime decades of the Bismarckian Reich, over 10,000 warrants were issued for treason in the four – also relatively peaceful – years from the beginning of 1924 to the end of 1927, resulting in 1,071 convictions.¹⁵⁸

A substantial number of court cases dealt with people brave enough to expose the secret armaments and manoeuvres of the army in the press. Perhaps the most famous instance was that of the pacifist and left-wing editor Carl von Ossietzky, who was condemned in 1931 to eighteen months' imprisonment for publishing in his magazine *The World Stage* (*Die Weltbühne*) an article revealing that the German army was training with combat aircraft in Soviet Russia, an act that was illegal according to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁵⁹ Another, equally celebrated case involved the left-wing journalist Felix Fechenbach. His offence, committed in 1919, was to have published Bavarian files from 1914 relating to the outbreak of the First World War, because this had – in the opinion of the court – damaged the interests of Germany in the peace negotiations by suggesting an element of German responsibility. Fechenbach was sentenced to eleven years' imprisonment in Munich by a so-called People's Court, an emergency body set up to dispense summary justice on looters and murderers during the Bavarian Revolution of 1918.¹⁶⁰ These had been adapted to deal with 'treason' cases during the counter-revolution of the following year. They were not wound up until 1924 despite their outlawing by the Weimar constitution five years previously. The creation of these courts, with their bypassing of the normal legal system, including the absence of any right of appeal against their verdicts, and their implicit ascription of justice to 'the people' rather than

to the law, set an ominous precedent for the future, and was to be taken up again by the Nazis in 1933.¹⁶¹

In order to try and counter these influences, the Social Democrats managed to push through a Law for the Protection of the Republic in 1922; the resulting State Court was intended to remove the trial of right-wing political offenders from an all-too-sympathetic judiciary and place it in the hands of appointees of the Reich President. The judiciary soon managed to neutralize it, and it had little effect on the overall pattern of verdicts.¹⁶² Friedrich Ebert and the Social Democrats, although supposedly committed to opposing the death penalty as a matter of political principle, inserted it into the Law for the Protection of the Republic and gave retrospective approval to summary executions carried out in the civil disorders of the immediate postwar period. In doing so, they made it easier for a future government to introduce similarly draconian laws for the protection of the state, and to confound a central principle of justice – that no punishments should be applied retrospectively to offences which did not carry them at the time they were committed.¹⁶³ This, too, was a dangerous precedent for the future.

The regular courts had little time for the principles enunciated in the Law for the Protection of the Republic. Judges almost invariably showed leniency towards an accused man if he claimed to have been acting out of patriotic motives, whatever his crime.¹⁶⁴ The Kapp putsch of 1920, for instance, led to the condemnation of only one of the participants in this armed attempt to overthrow the legitimately elected government, and even he was sentenced to no more than a brief period of confinement in a fortress because the judges counted his 'selfless patriotism' as a mitigating factor.¹⁶⁵ In 1923 four men won their appeal to the Reich Court, the old-established supreme judicial authority in the land, against a sentence of three months' imprisonment each for shouting at a meeting of the Young German Order, a right-wing youth group, in Gotha, the words: 'We don't need a Jew-republic, boo to the Jew-republic!' In its judgment the Reich Court declared somewhat unconvincingly that the meaning of these words was unclear:

They could mean the new legal and social order in Germany, in whose establishment the participation of German and foreign Jews was outstanding. They could also mean the excessive power and the excessive influence that a number of Jews

that is small in relation to the total population exercises in reality in the view of large sections of the people . . . It has not even been explicitly established that the accused shouted abuse at the constitutionally anchored form of state of the Reich, only that they shouted abuse at the present form of state of the Reich. The possibility of a legal error is thereby not excluded.¹⁶⁶

The distinction the Reich Court made between the two kinds of state, and the hint that the Weimar Republic was merely some kind of temporary aberration which was not 'constitutionally anchored', demonstrated only too clearly where the judges' real allegiance lay. Such verdicts could not fail to have an effect. Political and indeed other trials were major events in the Weimar Republic, attended by large numbers of people in the public galleries, reported at length and in parts verbatim in the press, and debated passionately in legislative assemblies, clubs and societies. Verdicts such as these could only give comfort to the far-right opponents of the Republic and help to undermine its legitimacy.

The right-wing and anti-Republican bias of the judiciary was shared by state prosecutors as well. In considering what charges to bring against right-wing offenders, in dealing with pleas, in examining witnesses, even in framing their opening and closing speeches, prosecutors routinely treated nationalist beliefs and intentions as mitigating factors. In these various ways, judges and prosecutors, police, prison governors and warders, legal administrators and law enforcement agents of all kinds undermined the legitimacy of the Republic through their bias in favour of its enemies. Even if they did not deliberately set out to sabotage the new democracy, even if they accepted it for the time being as an unavoidable necessity, the effect of their conduct was to spread the assumption that in some way it did not represent the true essence of the German Reich. Few of them seem to have been convinced democrats or committed to trying to make the Republic work. Where the law and its administrators were against it, what chance did it have?

THE FIT AND THE UNFIT

I

If there was one achievement through which the Weimar Republic could claim the loyalty and gratitude of the masses, it was the creation of a new welfare state. Of course, Germany did not lack welfare institutions before 1914, particularly since Bismarck had pioneered such things as health insurance, accident insurance and old age pensions in an attempt to wean the working classes away from Social Democracy. Bismarck's schemes, which were elaborated and extended in the years following his departure from office, were pioneering in their day, and cannot be dismissed simply as fig-leaves for governmental authoritarianism. Some of them, notably the health insurance system, covered millions of workers by 1914 and incorporated a substantial element of self-governance that gave many workers the chance of electoral participation. Yet none of these schemes reached anywhere near the bottom of the social scale, where police-administered poor relief, bringing with it the deprivation of civil rights including the right to vote, was the norm right to the end of the Wilhelmine period. Still, even here, the operation of the system had been reformed and standardized by 1914, and the new profession of social work that had emerged on the back of the Bismarckian reforms was busy assessing and regulating the poor, the unemployed and the destitute as well as the ordinary worker.¹⁶⁷

On the basis of this modern version of Prussian bureaucratic paternalism, however, the Weimar Republic erected a far more elaborate and comprehensive structure, combining, not without tension, the twin influences of social Catholicism and Protestant philanthropy on the one hand, and Social Democratic egalitarianism on the other.¹⁶⁸ The Weimar

constitution itself was full of far-reaching declarations of principle about the importance of family life and the need for the state to support it, the government's duty to protect young people from harm, the citizen's right to work, and the nation's obligation to provide everybody with a decent home.¹⁶⁹ On the basis of such principles, a whole raft of legislation was steered through the Reichstag, from laws dealing with youth welfare (1922) and juvenile courts (1923) to regulations providing relief and job training for the war disabled (1920), decrees replacing poor relief with public welfare (1924) and above all, as we have seen, the statutory provision of unemployment benefits in 1927. Existing schemes of health insurance, pensions and the like were further elaborated and extended to all. Massive housing schemes, many of them socially innovative, were initiated, with over 300,000 new or renovated homes being provided between 1927 and 1930 alone. The number of hospital beds increased by 50 per cent from prewar days, and the medical profession also expanded accordingly to keep pace. Infectious diseases declined sharply, and a network of clinics and social welfare institutions now supported socially vulnerable individuals, from single mothers to youths who got into trouble with the police.¹⁷⁰

The creation of a free and comprehensive welfare system as the entitlement of all its citizens was one of the major achievements of the Weimar Republic, perhaps in retrospect its most important. But for all its elaboration, it failed in the end to live up to the grandiose promises made in the 1919 constitution; and the gap between promise and delivery ended by having a major effect on the legitimacy of the Republic in the eyes of many of its citizens. First, the economic difficulties that the Republic experienced almost from the outset placed a burden on its welfare system that it was simply unable to sustain. There were very large numbers of people who required support as a result of the war. Some 13 million German men served in the armed forces between 1914 and 1918. Over two million of them were killed. According to one estimate, this was the equivalent of one death for every 35 inhabitants of the Reich. This was nearly twice the proportion of war deaths in the United Kingdom, where one soldier died for every 66 inhabitants, and almost three times that of Russia, where there was one war death for every 111 inhabitants. By the end of the war, over half a million German women were left as war widows and a million German children were without

fathers. About 2.7 million men came back from the war with wounds, amputations and disabilities, to form a permanent source of discontent as the politicians' promised rewards for their service to the nation failed to materialize to anyone's satisfaction.

The government increased taxes on the better-off to try and cope, until the real tax burden virtually doubled as a percentage of real national income, from 9 per cent in 1913 to 17 per cent in 1925, according to one admittedly biased estimate.¹⁷¹ Yet this was in no way enough to cover expenditure, and governments dared not go any further for fear of being accused of raising tax revenues to pay reparations and alienating even further those who paid the most taxes. Not only did the economy have to bear the burden of unemployment insurance after 1927, it was in 1926 still paying pensions to nearly 800,000 disabled former soldiers and 360,000 war widows, and supporting over 900,000 fatherless children and orphans, and all this on top of an existing system of state support for the elderly. The payment of pensions took up a higher proportion of state expenditure than anything apart from reparations.¹⁷² Finally, the welfare system boosted an already swollen bureaucracy in the Reich and the federated states, which increased in size by 40 per cent between 1914 and 1923, almost doubling the cost of public administration per head of the German population in the process.¹⁷³ Such massive expenditure might have been feasible in a booming economy, but in the crisis-racked economic situation of the Weimar Republic it was simply not possible without printing money and fuelling inflation, as happened between 1919 and 1923, or, from 1924, by cutting back on payments, reducing the staffing levels of state welfare institutions and imposing ever more stringent means-testing on claimants.

Many claimants thus quickly realized that the welfare system was not paying them as much as they needed. Local administrators were particularly stingy, since local authorities bore a sizeable proportion of the financial burden of welfare payments. They frequently demanded that claimants should hand over their savings or their property as a condition of receiving support. Welfare snoopers reported on hidden sources of income and encouraged neighbours to send in denunciations of those who refused to reveal them. Moreover, welfare agencies, lacking the staff necessary to process a large number of claims rapidly, caused endless delays in responding to applications for support as they

corresponded with other agencies to see if claimants had received benefits previously, or tried to shift the burden of supporting them elsewhere. Thus, the Weimar welfare administration quickly became an instrument of discrimination and control, as officials made it clear to claimants that they would only receive the minimum due to them, and enquired intrusively into their personal circumstances to ensure that this was the case.

None of this endeared the Republic to those whom it was intended to help. Complaints, rows, fisticuffs, even demonstrations were far from uncommon inside and outside welfare offices. A sharp insight into the kind of problems which the welfare system was confronting, and the way it went about dealing with them, is provided by the example of a saddler and upholsterer, Adolf G.¹⁷⁴ Born in 1892, Adolf had fought in the 1914-18 war and sustained a serious injury – not in a heroic battle against the enemy, however, but from a kick in his stomach by a horse. It required no fewer than six intestinal operations in the early 1920s. An old industrial accident and a family with six children put him into further categories of welfare entitlement apart from war injury. Unable to find a job after the war, he devoted himself to campaigning for state support instead. But the local authorities in Stuttgart demanded as a condition of continuing his accident benefits after 1921 that he surrender his radio receiver and aerial, since these were banned from the municipal housing in which he lived. When he refused to do this, he was evicted with his family, a move to which he responded with a vigorous campaign of letter-writing to the authorities, including the Labour Ministry in Berlin. He acquired a typewriter to make his letters more legible and tried to acquire other kinds of benefits reflecting his situation as a war invalid and a father of a large family. The conflict escalated. In 1924 he was imprisoned for a month and a half for assisting an attempted abortion, presumably because he and his wife thought that in the circumstances six children were enough; in 1927 he was fined for insulting behaviour; in 1930 his benefits were cut and restricted to certain purposes such as the purchase of clothes, while his housing allowance was paid direct to his landlord; he was charged in 1931 with welfare fraud because he had been trying to make a little money on the side as a rag-and-bone man, and again in 1933 for busking. He approached political organizations of the right and left in order to get help. An attempt to persuade the authorities that he needed

three times more food than the average man because his stomach injury left him unable to digest most of what he ate was rebuffed with stony formality. In 1931, at the end of his tether, he wrote to the Labour Ministry in Berlin comparing the Stuttgart welfare officials to robber barons of the Middle Ages.¹⁷⁵

What angered the somewhat obsessive Adolf G. was not just the poverty in which he and his family were condemned to live, but still more the insults done to his honour and standing even in the lower reaches of German society by a welfare apparatus that seemed determined to question his motives and his entitlements in seeking the support that he felt he deserved. The anonymous, rule-bound welfare bureaucracy insulted his individuality. Such feelings were far from uncommon among welfare claimants, particularly where their claim for support resulted from the sacrifices they had made during the war. The huge gulf between the Weimar Republic's very public promises of a genuinely universal welfare system based on need and entitlement, and the harsh reality of petty discrimination, intrusion and insult to which many claimants were exposed on the part of the welfare agencies, did nothing to strengthen the legitimacy of the constitution in which these promises were enshrined.¹⁷⁶

More ominous by far, however, was the fact that health and welfare agencies, determined to create rational and scientifically informed ways of dealing with social deprivation, deviance and crime, with the ultimate aim of eliminating them from German society in generations to come, encouraged new policies that began to eat away at the civil liberties of the poor and the handicapped. As the social welfare administration mushroomed into a huge bureaucracy, so the doctrines of racial hygiene and social biology, already widespread among welfare professionals before the war, began to acquire more influence. The belief that heredity played some part in many kinds of social deviance, including not only mental deficiency and physical disability but also chronic alcoholism, persistent petty criminality and even 'moral idiocy' in groups such as prostitutes (many of whom were in fact forced into sex work by economic circumstances), hardened into a dogma. Medical scientists and social administrators began to compile elaborate card-indexes of the 'asocial', as such deviants were now commonly called. Liberal penal reformers argued that, while some inmates in state prisons could be reclaimed for society by the right sort of educational programmes, a great many of

them were completely incorrigible, largely because of the inherited degeneracy of their character.¹⁷⁷ The police played their part, too, identifying a large number of 'professional criminals' and 'habitual offenders' to place under intensive surveillance. This frequently became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as surveillance and identification left released prisoners no chance of engaging in an honest trade. In Berlin alone, the police fingerprint collection numbered over half a million ten-finger cards by 1930.¹⁷⁸

The spread of such ideas through the professional worlds of medicine, law enforcement, penal administration and social work had very real consequences. Psychologists asked to assess the mental health of convicted criminals began to use biological criteria, as in the case of an unemployed vagrant, Florian Huber, convicted of armed robbery and murder in Bavaria in 1922: 'Huber', concluded a psychological assessment of the young man, who had suffered severe injuries in war action, earning him the award of the Iron Cross,

although in other respects he cannot be proven to be hereditarily damaged, demonstrated some physical evidence of degeneracy: the structure of his physiognomy is asymmetrical to the extent that the right eye is situated markedly lower than the left, he has a tendency towards full-throatedness, his earlobes are elongated, and above all he has been a stutterer since youth.¹⁷⁹

This was taken as evidence, not that he was unfit to stand trial, but that he was incorrigible and should therefore be executed, which indeed he was. Legal officials in many parts of Germany now made liberal use of terms such as 'vermin' or 'pest' to describe criminals, denoting a new, biological way of conceptualizing the social order as a kind of body, from which harmful parasites and alien micro-organisms had to be removed if it was to flourish. In the search for more precise and comprehensive ways of defining and applying such concepts, a medical expert, Theodor Viernstein, founded a 'Criminal-Biological Information Centre' in Bavaria in 1923, to gather information about all known criminal offenders, their families and their background, and thereby to identify hereditary chains of deviance. By the end of the decade Viernstein and his collaborators had collected a vast index of cases and were well on the way to realizing their dream. Soon, similar centres had been founded in Thuringia, Württemberg and Prussia as well. Many experts thought that

once such dynasties of 'inferior' human beings had been mapped out, compulsory sterilization was the only way to prevent them reproducing themselves further.¹⁸⁰

In 1920 two such experts, the lawyer Karl Binding and the forensic psychiatrist Alfred Hoche, went one crucial step beyond this and argued, in a short book in which they coined the phrase 'a life unworthy of life', that what they called 'ballast existences', people who were nothing but a burden on the community, should simply be killed. The incurably ill and the mentally retarded were costing millions of marks and taking up thousands of much-needed hospital beds, they argued. So doctors should be allowed to put them to death. This was an ominous new development in the debate over what to do with the mentally ill, the handicapped, the criminal and the deviant. In the Weimar Republic it still met with impassioned hostility on the part of most medical men. The Republic's fundamental insistence on the rights of the individual prevented even the doctrine of compulsory sterilization from gaining any kind of official approval, and many doctors and welfare officers still doubted the ethical legitimacy or social effectiveness of such a policy. The very considerable influence of the Catholic Church and its welfare agencies was also directed firmly against such policies. As long as economic circumstances made it possible to imagine that the Republic's social aspirations could one day be realized, the continuing debate on compulsory sterilization and involuntary 'euthanasia' remained unresolved.¹⁸¹

II

Middle-class Germans reacted to the 1918 Revolution and the Weimar Republic in a wide variety of ways. Perhaps the most detailed account we have of one man's response is from the diaries of Victor Klemperer, whose experience of the inflation we have already noted. Klemperer was in many ways typical of the educated middle-class German who just wanted to get on with his life, and relegated politics to a relatively small part of it, though he voted at elections and always took an interest in what was going on in the political world. His career was neither entirely conventional nor outstandingly successful. After making a living as a newspaper writer, Klemperer had turned to the university world,

qualifying shortly before the war with the obligatory two theses, the first on German, the second on French literature. As a relative newcomer and outsider, he was obliged to start his academic career in a post at the University of Naples, from where he observed the deterioration of the international situation before 1914 with concern. He supported the German declaration of war in 1914 and considered the German cause a just one. He returned to Germany and joined up, served on the Western Front and was invalided out in 1916, working in the army censorship office up to the end of the war.

Like other middle-class Germans, Klemperer saw his hopes for a stable career dashed with the defeat of Germany. For such a man, only a return to orderly and political circumstances could provide the basis for a steady income and a permanent job in a German academic institution.¹⁸² The events of the last two months of 1918 were upsetting to him in more than one respect. He wrote in his diary:

The newspaper now brings so much shame, disaster, collapse, things previously considered impossible, that I, filled to bursting with it, just dully accept it, hardly read any more . . . After all I see and hear, I am of the opinion that the whole of Germany will go to the Devil if this Soldiers' and Workers' *Un-Council*, this dictatorship of senselessness and ignorance, is not swept out soon. My hopes are pinned on any general of the army that is returning from the field.¹⁸³

Working temporarily in Munich, he was alarmed by the antics of the revolutionary government early in 1919 – 'they talk enthusiastically of freedom and their tyranny gets ever worse' – and recorded hours spent in libraries trying to do his academic work while the bullets of the invading Free Corps whizzed past outside.¹⁸⁴ Normality and stability were what Klemperer wanted; yet they were not to be had. In 1920, as we have seen, he managed to obtain a professorship at Dresden Technical University, where he taught French literature, researched and wrote, edited a journal and became increasingly frustrated as he saw younger men obtain senior positions at better institutions. In many ways he was a typical moderate conservative of his time, patriotic, bourgeois, German through and through in his cultural attitudes and identity, and a believer in the notion of national character, which he expressed at length in his historical work on eighteenth-century French literature.

Yet in one crucial respect he was different. For Victor Klemperer was

Jewish. The son of a preacher in the extremely liberal Reform Synagogue in Berlin, he had been baptized as a Protestant, one of a growing number of German Jews who acculturated in this way. This was more a social than a religious decision, since he does not seem to have had a very strong religious faith of any kind. In 1906 he provided further evidence of his acculturation by marrying a non-Jewish German woman, the pianist Eva Schlemmer, with whom he came to share many intellectual and cultural interests, above all, perhaps, an enthusiasm for the cinema. The couple remained childless. Yet, through all the vicissitudes of the 1920s, it was his marriage that gave stability to his life, despite the couple's increasingly frequent bouts of ill-health, exaggerated perhaps by growing hypochondria.¹⁸⁵ Throughout the 1920s he lived a stable, if less than completely contented life, disturbed early on by fears of civil war, although this never materialized and looked less likely after 1923.¹⁸⁶ He filled his diary with reports of his work, his holidays, his amusements, his relationships with his family, friends and colleagues, and other aspects of the daily routine. 'I often ask myself', he wrote on 10 September 1927, 'why I write such an extensive diary', a question to which he had no real answer: it was simply a compulsion – 'I can't leave it alone.'¹⁸⁷ Publication was dubious. So what was his purpose? 'Just collect life. Always collect. Impressions, knowledge, reading, events, everything. And don't ask why or what for.'¹⁸⁸

Klemperer occasionally let slip that he felt his career blocked by the fact that he was Jewish. Despite his increasing output of scholarly works on French literary history, he was stuck in Dresden's Technical University with no prospect of moving to a post in a major university institution. 'There are reactionary and liberal universities,' he noted on 26 December 1926: 'The reactionaries don't take any Jews, the liberal ones always have two Jews already and don't take a third.'¹⁸⁹ The growth of antisemitism in the Weimar Republic also posed problems for Klemperer's political position. 'It's gradually becoming clear to me', he wrote in September 1919, 'how new and insurmountable a hindrance antisemitism means for me. And I volunteered for the war! Now I am sitting, baptized and nationalistic, between all stools.'¹⁹⁰ Klemperer was rather unusual amongst middle-class Jewish professionals in his conservative political views. The increasingly rabid antisemitism of the German Nationalists, with whose general political line he rather sympathized, made it impossible for him to support them, despite all his nostalgia for the prewar

days of the Bismarckian and Wilhelmine Reich. Like many Germans, Klemperer found himself 'apathetic and indifferent' when he contemplated the violent party-political conflicts of the Weimar Republic.¹⁹¹ Instinctively hostile to the left, Klemperer was none the less obliged to record in March 1920, as he heard the news of the Kapp putsch in Berlin:

My inclination to the right has suffered greatly . . . as a result of permanent antisemitism. I would dearly like to see the current putschists put up against a wall, I truly cannot work up any enthusiasm for the oath-breaking army, and really not at all for the immature and disorderly students – but neither can I for the 'legal' Ebert government either and less still for the radical left. I find them all off-putting.

'What an agonizing tragicomedy', he wrote, 'that 5,000–8,000 soldiers can overthrow the whole German Reich.'¹⁹²

Surprisingly, perhaps, for a man who devoted his working life to the study of French literature, he was very much in favour of waging another war against the French – perhaps as a result of his experiences on the Western Front during the war, still more as a result of his evident outrage at the Treaty of Versailles. But this hardly seemed possible under the Weimar Republic. On 20 April 1921 he wrote:

The monarchy is my banner, I long for the old German power, I want all the time to strike once again against France. But what kind of disgusting company one keeps with the German racists! It will be even more disgusting if Austria joins us. And everything we now feel was felt with more or less justification by the French after 70. And I would not have become a professor under Wilhelm II, and yet . . .¹⁹³

Already in 1925 he was regarding the election of Hindenburg as President as a potential disaster, comparable to the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. 'Fascism everywhere. The terrors of the war have been forgotten, the Russian terror is driving Europe into reaction.'¹⁹⁴ As time went on, Klemperer grew weary of the constant political excitement. In August 1932, as the Weimar Republic entered its final turbulent phase, he wrote:

Moreover: I don't need to write the history of my times. And the information I provide is dull, I am half repelled, half full of a fear to which I don't want to

surrender myself, completely without enthusiasm for any party. The whole thing is meaningless, undignified, miserable – nobody plays a part for himself, everyone's a puppet . . . Hitler before the gates – or who else? And what will become of me, the Jewish professor?

He preferred instead to write about the small black kitten that had wandered into their house, and instantly became their pet.¹⁹⁵ Under the influence not only of the threatening political situation, but also of his wife's serious, clinical depression and frequent illnesses, Klemperer wrote less and less, and seemed by the end of 1932 on the verge of abandoning his diary altogether.

Klemperer's political pessimism owed a lot to the personal troubles he was experiencing. Yet his attitude was shared by many patriotic, liberal-conservative German Jews who felt ill at ease amidst the conflicts of the Weimar Republic. Beyond that, his distaste for the extremes of politics and his disquiet at the violence and fanaticism that surrounded him was surely characteristic of many middle-class Germans, whatever their background. His Jewish ethnicity not only caused him to suffer some adverse discrimination, but it also gave him a sharp and sardonic eye for political developments that were ominous for the future, as he rightly guessed. Yet he did not suffer unduly from antisemitism, he did not experience any violence, indeed, he did not record a single instance of a personal insult in his diary at this time. In formal terms, Jews such as Klemperer enjoyed far more freedom and equality under the Weimar Republic than they had ever done before. The Republic opened up new opportunities for Jews in the civil service, politics and the professions as well as in government: a Jewish Foreign Minister like Walther Rathenau would have been unthinkable under the Wilhelmine Reich, for instance. The Jewish-owned parts of the press, particularly the newspapers controlled by the two liberal Jewish firms of Mosse and Ullstein, which together produced over half the newspapers sold in Berlin in the 1920s, strongly supported the liberal institutions of the Republic. The arts' new-found freedom from censorship and official disapproval brought many Jewish writers, painters and musicians to prominence as apostles of modernist culture, where they mingled easily with non-Jewish figures like the composer Paul Hindemith, the poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht, or the artists Max Beckmann and George Grosz. Jews signalled

their support for the Republic by voting particularly for the Democrats, and to a lesser extent for the parties of the left.¹⁹⁶

On the other hand, partly in reaction to these developments, the 1920s also witnessed a broadening and deepening of the currents of antisemitism in German politics and society. Even before the war, the Pan-Germans and others on the right had pumped out propaganda accusing the Jews of undermining the German nation. This kind of racist conspiracy theory was more than shared by military leaders such as Ludendorff. It found notorious expression during the war in the so-called Jewish census of October 1916, ordered by senior army officers who hoped it would give them support in refusing Jews admission to the officer corps once the war was over. The aim was to reveal the cowardly and disloyal nature of the Jews by showing statistically that Jews were under-represented in the army, and that those who had joined up were over-represented in desk-jobs. In fact, it showed the reverse: many Jewish Germans, like Victor Klemperer, were nationalist to the core, and identified strongly with the Reich. German Jews were over- rather than under-represented in the armed forces and at the front. Confounding the expectations of anti-semitic officers to such a degree, the results of the census were suppressed. But the knowledge that it had been ordered caused a great deal of anger among German Jews, even if the attitudes it revealed were not shared by the majority of rank-and-file troops.¹⁹⁷

After the war, the widespread belief on the right that the German army had been 'stabbed in the back' by revolutionaries in 1918 translated easily into antisemitic demagoguery. It was, men like Ludendorff evidently believed, 'the Jews' who had done the stabbing, who led subversive institutions like the Communist Party, who agreed to the Treaty of Versailles, who set up the Weimar Republic. In fact, of course, the German army was defeated militarily in 1918. There was, as we have seen, no stab-in-the-back. Leading politicians who signed the Treaty, like Matthias Erzberger, were not Jewish at all. If Jews like Rosa Luxemburg were over-represented in the Communist Party leadership, or, like Eugen Leviné in the revolutionary upheavals in Munich early in 1919, they were not acting as Jews but as revolutionaries, alongside many non-Jews (such as Karl Liebknecht, whom many right-wingers thought instinctively must be Jewish because of his ultra-left political views). Most Jewish Germans supported the solid liberal parties of the centre, or to a lesser extent

the Social Democrats, rather than the revolutionary left, whose violent activism shocked and appalled a respectable citizen like Klemperer. Nevertheless, the events of 1918-19 gave a boost to antisemitism on the right, convincing many waverers that racist conspiracy theories about the Jews were correct after all.¹⁹⁸

Alongside extreme right-wing propaganda scapegoating Jews for the catastrophes of 1918-19, there also emerged a more popular form of antisemitism, directed particularly at war profiteers and the small number of financiers who managed to get rich quick in the throes of the inflation. Antisemitism had always surged at times of economic crisis, and the economic crises of the Weimar Republic dwarfed anything that Germany had witnessed before. A fresh source of conflict arose in the gathering pace of immigration on the part of impoverished Jewish refugees fleeing antisemitic violence and civil war in Russia. There were perhaps 80,000 'Eastern Jews' in Germany before the First World War, and their arrival, along with that of a much larger number of immigrant workers from Poland and elsewhere, had led the Reich government to introduce a virtually unique kind of citizenship law in 1913, allowing only those who could show German ancestry to claim German nationality.¹⁹⁹ After the war there was a renewed influx, as the Bolshevik Revolution swept across Russia, prompting antisemitic pogroms and murders on a huge scale by the Revolution's Tsarist opponents. Although the immigrants acculturated quickly, and were relatively few in number, they nevertheless formed an easy target for popular resentments. At the height of the hyperinflation, on 6 November 1923, a newspaper reporter observed serious disturbances in a district of Berlin with a high proportion of Jewish immigrants from the East:

Everywhere in the side-streets a howling mob. Looting takes place under cover of darkness. A shoe-shop at the corner of Dragoon Street is ransacked, the shards of the window-panes are lying around on the street. Suddenly a whistle sounds. In a long human chain, covering the entire width of the street, a police cordon advances. 'Clear the street!' an officer cries. 'Go into your houses!' The crowd slowly moves on. Everywhere with the same shouts: 'Beat the Jews to death!' Demagogues have manipulated the starving people for so long that they fall upon the wretched creatures who pursue a miserable goods trade in the Dragoon Street cellar . . . it is inflamed racial hatred, not hunger, that is driving them to loot.

Young lads immediately follow every passer-by with a Jewish appearance, in order to fall upon him when the moment is right.²⁰⁰

Such a public outburst of violence was symptomatic of the new preparedness of antisemites, like so many other groups on the fringes of German politics, to stir up or actively employ violence and terror to gain their ends, rather than remaining content, as they mostly had been before 1914, with mere words. A wave of still imperfectly documented incidents of personal violence against Jews and their property, attacks on synagogues, acts of desecration carried out in Jewish cemeteries, was the result.²⁰¹

It was not just an unprecedented willingness to translate vehement prejudice into violent action that broadly distinguished post-1918 antisemitism from its prewar counterpart. While the overwhelming majority of Germans still rejected the use of physical force against Jews during the Weimar Republic, the language of antisemitism became embedded in mainstream political discourse as never before. The 'stab-in-the-back', the 'November traitors', the 'Jewish Republic', the 'Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy' to undermine Germany – all these and many similar demagogic slogans could be regularly read in the papers, whether as expressions of editorial opinion or in reporting of political incidents, speeches and trials. They could be heard day after day in legislative assemblies, where the rhetoric of the Nationalists, the second largest party after the Social Democrats during the middle years of the Republic, was shot through with antisemitic phrases. These were more extreme and more frequently employed than they had been by the Conservatives before the war, and were amplified by splinter groups of the right that collectively enjoyed much more support than the antisemitic parties of Ahlwardt, Böckel and their ilk. Closely allied to many of these groups was the German Protestant Church, deeply conservative and nationalist by conviction and also prone to outbursts of antisemitism; but Catholic antisemitism also took on new vigour in the 1920s, animated by fear of the challenge of Bolshevism, which had already launched violent attacks on Christianity in Hungary and Russia at the end of the war. There were large swathes of the German electorate on the right and in the centre that fervently desired a rebirth of German national pride and glory after 1918. They were to a greater or lesser degree convinced as a result that this had

to be achieved by overcoming the spirit of 'Jewish' subversion that had supposedly brought Germany to its knees at the end of the war.²⁰² The sensibility of many Germans was so blunted by this tide of antisemitic rhetoric that they failed to recognize that there was anything exceptional about a new political movement that emerged after the end of the war to put antisemitism at the very core of its fanatically held beliefs: the Nazi Party.

basis on the streets. The Nazi movement despised the law, and made no secret of its belief that might was right. It had also evolved a way of diverting legal responsibility from the Party leadership for acts of violence and lawlessness committed by brownshirts and other elements within the movement. For Hitler, Goebbels, the Regional Leaders and the rest only gave orders couched in rhetoric that, while violent, was also vague: their subordinates would understand clearly what was being hinted at and go into action straight away. This tactic helped persuade a growing number of middle- and even some upper-class Germans that Hitler and his immediate subordinates were not really responsible for the blood shed by the brownshirts on the streets, in bar-room brawls and in rowdy meetings, an impression strengthened by the repeated insistence of the brownshirt leaders that they were acting independently of the Nazi Party bosses. By 1929 Hitler had attracted the support, sympathy and to some extent even the financial backing of some well-connected people, especially in Bavaria. And his movement had extended its operations across the whole country, attracting significant electoral support, above all among crisis-racked small farmers in Protestant areas of north Germany and Franconia.

None of this could disguise the fact, however, that in the autumn of 1929, the Nazi Party was still very much on the fringes of politics. With only a handful of deputies in the Reichstag, it had to compete with a number of other fringe organizations of the right, some of which, for example the self-styled Economy Party, were larger and better supported than it was itself; and all of these still paled into insignificance in comparison to mainstream organizations of the right such as the Nationalist Party and the Steel Helmets. Moreover, although they did not command the support of a majority of the electorate any more, the three parties that were the mainstay of Weimar democracy, the Social Democrats, the Centre Party and the Democrats, were still in government, in a 'Grand Coalition' that also included the party of Germany's long-serving, moderate and highly successful Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann. The Republic seemed to have weathered the storms of the early 1920s – the inflation, the French occupation, the armed conflicts, the social dislocation – and to have entered calmer waters. It would need a catastrophe of major dimensions if an extremist party like the Nazis was to gain mass support. In 1929, with the sudden collapse of the economy in the wake of the Stock Exchange crash in New York, it came.

4

TOWARDS THE SEIZURE
OF POWER

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

I

'After long, planless wanderings from city to city,' an unemployed 21-year-old printer from Essen wrote in the autumn of 1932, 'my path took me to the port of Hamburg. But what a disappointment! Here was yet more misery, more unemployment than I had expected, and my hopes of getting work here were dashed. What should I do? Without relatives here, I had no desire to become a vagabond.' The young man was not in the end forced to join the ever-growing hordes of homeless men living on the streets and roads of Germany's towns and cities – anything between 200,000 and half a million of them, according to official estimates; he eventually found support in a voluntary labour scheme run by the Church.¹ But many more had no such luck. Unemployment destroyed people's self-respect and undermined their status, especially that of men, in a society where men's prestige, recognition, even identity itself derived above all from the job they did. Throughout the early 1930s, men could be seen on street corners, with placards round their necks: 'Looking for work of any kind'. Schoolchildren, when asked for their opinion on the matter by sociologists, often replied that the unemployed became socially degraded,

for the longer they are without work, the lazier they get, and they feel more and more humiliated, because they are always seeing other people who are decently dressed and they get annoyed because they want that too, and they become criminals . . . They still want to live! Older people often don't want that any more at all.²

Children were observed playing 'signing on' games, and when some of

them were asked by an investigator in December 1932 to write short autobiographical essays, unemployment featured here too: 'My father has now been unemployed for over three years,' wrote one 14-year-old schoolgirl: 'We still used to believe earlier on that father would get a job again some time, but now even we children have abandoned all hope.'³

Prolonged unemployment varied in its impact on the individual. The young could be more optimistic about finding a job than the middle-aged. Despondency got worse the longer people went without a job. Interviews carried out in the summer of 1932 revealed far gloomier attitudes than surveys conducted eighteen months before. People put off marriage plans, married couples put off having children. Young men roamed the streets aimlessly, sat listlessly at home, spent the day playing cards, wandering through public parks, or riding endlessly round and round on the electric trains of Berlin's Circle Line.⁴ In this situation, action often seemed better than inaction; boredom turned to frustration. Many unemployed men, even young boys and girls, tried to make a meagre living by hawking, busking, house-cleaning, street trading or any one of a number of traditional makeshifts of the economically marginal. Groups of children haunted Berlin's fashionable nightspots offering to 'look after' wealthy people's cars, a primitive form of protection racket practised in other, less innocuous forms by grown-ups, too. Informal hiking clubs and working-class youth groups easily became so-called 'wild cliques', gangs of young people who met in disused buildings, scavenged food, stole to make a living, fought with rival gangs, and frequently clashed with the police. Crime rates as such did not climb as spectacularly as they had done during the inflation, but there was a 24 per cent increase in arrests for theft in Berlin between 1929 and 1932 none the less. Prostitution, male and female, became more noticeable and more widespread, the product of Weimar's sexual tolerance as much as of its economic failure, shocking the respectable classes by its openness. At its lower end, hawking and street-selling shaded off into begging.⁵ German society seemed to be descending into a morass of misery and criminality. In this situation, people began to grasp at political straws: anything, however extreme, seemed better than the hopeless mess they appeared to be in now.

How had this situation come about? Unemployment had already been high following the economic reforms that had brought the great inflation to an end in 1923. But by the early 1930s the situation had worsened

immeasurably. The German economy's recovery after the inflation had been financed not least by heavy investment from the world's largest economy, the United States. German interest rates were high, and capital flowed in; but, crucially, reinvestment mainly took the form of short-term loans. German industry came to depend heavily on such funds in its drive to rationalize and mechanize. Firms such as Krupps and the United Steelworks borrowed very large sums of money. American enterprises invested directly in Germany, with Ford automobiles owning factories in Berlin and Cologne, and General Motors buying up the Opel car factory in Rüsselsheim, near Frankfurt, in 1929. German banks took out foreign loans to finance their own investments in German business.⁶ This was an inherently precarious situation for German industry and banking, and at the end of the decade it turned to catastrophe.

In the course of 1928, all leading industrialized countries began to impose monetary restrictions in the face of a looming recession. The United States began cutting its foreign lending. Such measures were necessary to preserve gold reserves, the basis of financial stability in the era of the Gold Standard, when currency values everywhere were tied to the value of gold, as they had been in Germany since the stabilization had come into effect. As individual countries started drawing up the monetary drawbridges, industry began to suffer. There was virtually no growth in industrial production in Germany in 1928-9 and by the end of that winter unemployment had already reached nearly two and a half million. Investment slowed down sharply, possibly because companies were spending too much on wages and welfare payments, but more likely because there was simply a shortage of capital. The German government found it difficult to raise money by issuing bonds because investors knew what inflation had done to the bonds issued during the war. International markets had very little confidence in the German state to deal with the economic problems of the day. It soon became clear that their lack of faith was entirely justified.⁷

On 24 October 1929, 'Black Thursday', the unmistakable signs of a business crisis in the United States caused a sudden outburst of panic selling on the New York Stock Exchange. Share prices, already overvalued in the eyes of some, began to plummet. Early the following week, on 29 October, 'Black Tuesday', panic selling set in again, worse by far than before; 16.4 million shares were sold, a record unsurpassed for the next

four decades.⁸ As frantic traders scrambled to sell before stocks fell even further in value, there were scenes of pandemonium on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. But these dramatic days of disaster were only the most visible aspects of what turned out to be a prolonged and seemingly inexorable decline over the next three years. The *New York Times* index fell from a high of 452 points in September 1929 to 58 points by July 1932. On 29 October, ten billion dollars were wiped off the value of the major American companies, twice the amount of all money in circulation in the United States at the time and almost as much as America had spent on financing its part in the Great War. Company after company went bust. American demand for imports collapsed. Banks plunged into crisis as their investments disappeared. And as American banks saw their losses mount, they started calling in the short-term loans with which so much of German industry had been financing itself for the past five years.⁹

American banks began withdrawing their funds from Germany at the worst possible moment, precisely when the already flagging German economy needed a sharp stimulus to revive it. As they lost funds, German banks and businesses tried to redress the balance by taking out more short-term loans. The faster this happened, the less stable the economy began to look, and the more foreign and domestic asset-holders began to transfer capital outside the country.¹⁰ Unable to finance production, firms began to cut back drastically. Industrial production, already stagnant, now began to fall with breathtaking speed. By 1932, it had dropped in value by 40 per cent of its 1929 level, a collapse matched only by Austria and Poland among European economies in its severity. Elsewhere, the fall was no more than a quarter; in Britain it was 11 per cent. With the withdrawal of funds and the collapse of businesses, banks began to get into difficulties. After a number of small banks failed in 1929-30, the two biggest Austrian banks went under and then, in July 1931, the big German banks began to come under pressure.¹¹ Business failures multiplied. An attempt to create a larger internal market by forging a customs union between Germany and Austria was squashed by international intervention, for the political motivation behind it – a step in the direction of the political union between the two countries that had been banned by the Treaty of Versailles – was obvious to everyone. Thrown back onto its own resources, the German economy plunged into

deep depression. Unemployment rates now rose almost exponentially. With millions of people in the great cities unemployed, less money was available to spend on food, the already severe agricultural crisis deepened dramatically, and farmers were unable to escape foreclosure and bankruptcy as the banks called in the loans on which so many of them depended. Agricultural workers were thrown out of work as farms and estates went under, spreading unemployment to the countryside as well as the towns.¹²

By 1932, roughly one worker in three in Germany was registered as unemployed, with rates even higher in some heavy industrial areas such as Silesia or the Ruhr. This dwarfed all previous unemployment rates, even during the worst period of the stabilization cutbacks. Between 1928 and 1932, unemployment rose from 133,000 to 600,000 in Germany's biggest industrial centre, Berlin, from 32,000 to 135,000 in the trading city and seaport of Hamburg, and from 12,000 to 65,000 in the industrial town of Dortmund, in the Rhine-Ruhr area. Industry was obviously hardest hit; but white-collar workers lost their jobs, too, with over half a million out of work by 1932.¹³ The rise was frighteningly swift. By the winter of 1930-31 there were already over five million unemployed, little more than a year after the onset of the Depression; the number rose to six million a year later. At the beginning of 1932, it was reported that the unemployed and their dependants made up about a fifth of the entire population of Germany, nearly thirteen million people, all told.¹⁴ The true figure may have been even higher, since women who lost their jobs often failed to register themselves as unemployed.¹⁵

These terrifying figures told only part of the story. To begin with, many millions more workers only stayed in their jobs at a reduced rate, since employers cut hours and introduced short-time work in an attempt to adjust to the collapse in demand. Then many trained workers or apprentices had to accept menial and unskilled jobs because the jobs they were qualified for had disappeared. These were still the lucky ones. For what caused the real misery and desperation was the lengthy duration of the crisis, starting – at a time when unemployment was already fairly high – in October 1929 and showing no signs of abating for the next three years. Yet the benefits system, introduced a few years before, was designed only to cope with a far lower level of unemployment – a maximum of 800,000 compared to the six million who were without a job by 1932 – and

provided relief only for a few months at most, not for three whole years and more. Things were made worse by the fact that the drastic fall in people's income caused a collapse in tax revenues. Many local authorities had also got into trouble because they had financed their own welfare and other schemes by taking out American loans themselves, and these were now being called in, too. Yet under the unemployment benefit system, the burden of supporting the long-term jobless after their period of insurance cover had run out shifted first to central government in the form of 'crisis benefits' then, after a further period of time, devolved onto local authorities in the form of 'welfare unemployment support'. Central government was unwilling to take the unpopular measures that would be required to bridge the gap. Employers felt that they could not increase contributions when their businesses were in trouble. Unions and workers did not want to see benefits cut. The problem seemed insoluble. And those who suffered were the unemployed, who saw their benefits repeatedly cut, or terminated altogether.¹⁶

II

As the Depression bit deeper, groups of men and gangs of boys could be seen haunting the streets, squares and parks of German towns and cities, lounging (so it seemed to the bourgeois man or woman unaccustomed to such a sight) threateningly about, a hint of potential violence and criminality always in the air. Even more menacing were the attempts, often successful, by the Communists to mobilize the unemployed for their own political ends. Communism was the party of the unemployed par excellence. Communist agitators recruited the young semi-criminals of the 'wild cliques'; they organized rent strikes in working-class districts where people were barely able to pay the rent anyway; they proclaimed 'red districts' like the Berlin proletarian quarter of Wedding, inspiring fear into non-Communists who dared to venture there, sometimes beating them up or threatening them with guns if they knew them to be associated with the brownshirts; they marked down certain pubs and bars as their own; they proselytized among children in working-class schools, politicized parents' associations and aroused the alarm of middle-class teachers, even those with left-wing convictions. For the Communists, the

class struggle passed from the workplace to the street and the neighbourhood as more and more people lost their jobs. Defending a proletarian stronghold, by violent means if necessary, became a high priority of the Communist paramilitary organization, the Red Front-Fighters' League.¹⁷

The Communists were frightening to the middle classes, not merely because they made politically explicit the social threat posed by the unemployed on the streets, but also because they grew rapidly in numbers throughout the early 1930s. Their national membership shot up from 117,000 in 1929 to 360,000 in 1932 and their voting strength increased from election to election. By 1932, in an area such as the north-west German littoral, including Hamburg and its adjacent Prussian port of Altona, fewer than 10 per cent of party members had a job. Roughly three-quarters of the people who joined the party in October 1932 were jobless.¹⁸ Founding 'committees of the unemployed', the party staged parades, demonstrations, 'hunger marches' and other street-based events on an almost daily basis, often ending in prolonged clashes with the police. No opportunity was lost to raise the political temperature in what the party leaders increasingly thought was a terminal crisis of the capitalist system.¹⁹

These developments drove an ever-deeper cleft between the Communists and the Social Democrats in the final years of the Republic. There was already a legacy of bitterness and hatred bequeathed by the events of 1918-19, when members of the Free Corps in the service of the Social Democratic minister Gustav Noske had murdered prominent Communist leaders, most notably Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. The murders were publicly recalled at every ceremony that the Communist Party staged in their memory. To this was now added the divisive influence of unemployment, as jobless Communists railed against Social Democrats and trade unionists still in work, and Social Democrats grew increasingly alarmed at the violent and disorderly elements who seemed to be flocking to join the Communists. Further resentment was added by the habit of Social Democratic union bosses of identifying Communists to employers for redundancy, and the practice of employers sacking young, unmarried workers before older, married ones, which again in many cases meant members of the Communist Party losing their jobs. Rank-and-file Communists' ambivalence about the Social Democratic roots of the labour movement led to a love-hate relationship with the party's 'older brother',

in which it was always desirable to make common cause, but only on the Communists' own terms.²⁰

The roots of Communist extremism ran deep. Radical young workers, especially, felt betrayed by the Social Democrats, their hopes for a thoroughgoing revolution – stoked up by the older generation of Social Democratic activists – dashed just when they seemed on the point of being realized. The growing influence of the Russian model of a close-knit, conspiratorial organization helped cement a spirit of solidarity and ceaseless activity amongst the most committed. A graphic account of the life of the committed Communist activist during the Weimar Republic was later provided by the memoirs of Richard Krebs, a sailor born in Bremen in 1904 into the family of a Social Democratic seafaring man. Krebs was present as an adolescent in the 1918-19 Revolution in his home town and witnessed the brutality of its suppression by the Free Corps. In Hamburg, Krebs fought in food riots and fell into the company of some Communists on the waterfront. Clashes with the police strengthened his hatred of them, and their bosses, the Social Democratic rulers of the city. Krebs later described how committed Communists would attend street demonstrations with pieces of lead piping in their belts and stones in their pockets, ready to pelt the police with. When mounted police charged, young activists in the Red Front-Fighters' League plunged their knives into the horses' legs, causing them to bolt. In this atmosphere of conflict and violence, a young tough like Krebs could feel himself at home, and he joined the Communist Party in May 1923, leafleting sailors on the waterfront during the day and attending basic political education courses in the evenings.²¹

His grasp of Marxist-Leninist theory was minimal, however:

I was class-conscious because class-consciousness had been a family tradition. I was proud to be a worker and I despised the bourgeois. My attitude to conventional respectability was a derisive one. I had a keen one-sided sense of justice which carried me away into an insane hatred of those I thought responsible for mass suffering and oppression. Policemen were enemies. God was a lie, invented by the rich to make the poor be content with their yoke, and only cowards resorted to prayer. Every employer was a hyena in human form, malevolent, eternally gluttonous, disloyal and pitiless. I believed that a man who fought alone could never win; men must stand together and fight together and make life better

for all engaged in useful work. They must struggle with every means at their disposal, shying at no lawless deed as long as it would further the cause, giving no quarter until the revolution had triumphed.²²

Imbued with this spirit of fiery commitment, Krebs led an armed detachment of Red Front-Fighters in the abortive Hamburg Revolution of October 1923, as Communists stormed a police station and erected barricades.²³ Not surprisingly, he felt it necessary to flee the scene after the failure of the uprising, and resumed his seafaring life. Escaping to Holland, then Belgium, he made contact with the local Communists. In no time his knowledge of English had led him to be commissioned by one of the Soviet secret agents who were present in many branches of the party – though probably not in so many as he later claimed – to spread Communist propaganda in California. Here he was ordered by the local party agents to kill a renegade who they believed had betrayed the party. Botching the attempt – deliberately, he claimed – Krebs was arrested and imprisoned in St Quentin. When he was released in the early 1930s, Krebs became a paid official of the seamen's section of the Comintern, the international organization of Communist parties across the world, directed from Moscow, and began acting as a courier for the party, taking money, leaflets and much else from one country to another, and then from one part of Germany to another.²⁴

Richard Krebs's memoirs, which read like a thriller, portrayed a Communist Party bound together by iron ties of discipline and commitment, its every move dictated by the Soviet secret police agents from the GPU, successor to the Cheka, who ran every national organization from behind the scenes. The feeling that the Comintern was behind strikes, demonstrations and attempts at revolution in many parts of the world struck fear into many middle-class Germans, even though these activities were almost uniformly unsuccessful. The conspiratorial structure of the Comintern, and the undoubted presence of Soviet agents in the German party from the days of Karl Radek onwards, undoubtedly fuelled bourgeois anxieties. Yet Krebs painted too smooth a picture of the workings of the Comintern. In reality, strikes, labour unrest, even fights and riots often owed more to the temper of the 'Red Front-Fighters' on the ground than to any plans laid by Moscow and its agents. And men like Krebs were unusual. The turnover in Communist Party membership was more than

50 per cent in 1932 alone, meaning that hundreds of thousands of the unemployed had been close enough to the party to belong, at least for a while, but also that the party was often unable to hold the allegiance of most of its members for more than a few months at a time. Long-term members like Krebs constituted a hard and disciplined but relatively small core of activists, and the Red Front-Fighters' League became an increasingly professionalized force.²⁵ Words counted for a lot in such circumstances. Communist rhetoric had become a good deal more violent since the inauguration of the 'third period' by the Comintern leadership in Moscow in 1928. From this point onwards, the party directed its venom principally against the Social Democrats. Every German government in its eyes was 'fascist'; fascism was the political expression of capitalism; and the Social Democrats were 'social fascists' because they were the main supporters of capitalism, taking workers away from revolutionary commitment and reconciling them to Weimar's 'fascist' political system. Anyone in the leadership who tried to question this line was dismissed from his party post. Anything that would help overthrow the 'fascist' state and its Social Democratic supporters was welcome.²⁶

The leader of the Communist Party of Germany at this time was the Hamburg trade union functionary Ernst Thälmann. There could be no doubt about his working-class credentials. Born in 1886, he had taken a variety of short-term jobs, including working in a fishmeal plant and driving wagons for a laundry, before being called up and serving on the Western Front in the First World War. A Social Democrat since 1903, Thälmann gravitated to the left wing of the party during the war and threw himself into political activity during the revolution of 1918, joining the 'revolutionary shop stewards' and becoming the leader of the Independent Social Democrats in Hamburg in 1919. Elected to the city parliament the same year, he joined the Communists when the Independents split up in 1922, and became a member of the national Central Committee. During this time he continued to work as a manual labourer, in tough trades such as ship-breaking. Uneducated, brawny, an instinctive revolutionary, Thälmann incorporated the Communist ideal of the revolutionary worker. He was anything but an intellectual; he won the sympathy of his proletarian audiences not least through his obvious struggles with complicated Marxist terminology; his speeches were passionate rather than carefully argued, but his audiences felt this showed his honesty

and his sincerity. As a party leader and a professional politician in the mid- and late 1920s and early 1930s, Thälmann was often obliged to dress in collar and tie; but it became a set feature of his speeches that at some point he would take them off, to general and enthusiastic applause, and become a simple worker once more. His hatred of the generals and the bosses was palpable, his distrust of the Social Democrats obvious.

Like many rank-and-file Communists, Thälmann followed the party line laid down by the Comintern in Moscow as it changed this way and that, often in response to Stalin's tactical needs in his struggle to marginalize his intra-party rivals at home. Thälmann's faith in the revolution was absolute, and in consequence so too was his faith in the only revolutionary state in the world, the Soviet Union. Others in the party leadership may have been more subtle, more ruthless and more intelligent, like the Berlin party chief Walter Ulbricht; and the Politbureau and Central Committee, together with the Comintern in Moscow, may have been the arbiters of party policy and strategy; but Thälmann's personal standing and rhetorical gifts made him an indispensable asset to the party, which twice put him forward as its candidate in the elections for the post of Reich President, in 1925 and 1932. By the early 1930s, therefore, he was one of the best-known – and, to the middle and upper classes, one of the most feared – politicians in the land. He was more than a mere figurehead but less than a genuine leader, perhaps. But he remained the personal incorporation of German Communism in all its intransigence and ambition, driving the party towards the foundation of a 'Soviet Germany'.²⁷

Led by a man such as Thälmann, the Communist Party thus seemed a looming threat of unparalleled dimensions to many middle-class Germans in the early 1930s. A Communist revolution seemed far from impossible. Even a sober and intelligent, conservative moderate like Victor Klemperer could ask himself in July 1931: 'Is the government going to fall? Is Hitler going to follow, or Communism?'²⁸ In many ways, however, Communist power was an illusion. The party's ideological animus against the Social Democrats doomed it to impotence. Its hostility to the Weimar Republic, based on its extremist condemnation of all its governments, even the 'Grand Coalition' led by Hermann Müller, as 'fascist', blinded it completely to the threat posed by Nazism to the Weimar political system. Its optimism about an imminent total and final collapse of capitalism had

some plausibility in the dire economic circumstances of 1932. But in retrospect it was completely unfounded. Moreover, a party consisting largely of the unemployed was inevitably short of resources and weakened by the poverty and inconstancy of its members. So strapped for cash were Communist Party members that one Communist pub or bar after another had to close during the Depression, or passed into the hands of the Nazis. Between 1929 and 1933, per capita consumption of beer in Germany fell by 43 per cent, and in these circumstances the better-funded brownshirts moved in. What one historian has called a 'quasi-guerrilla warfare' was being conducted in the poorer quarters of Germany's big cities, and the Communists were slowly being beaten back into their heartlands in the slums and tenement districts by the continual brutal pressure of brownshirt violence. In this conflict, bourgeois sympathies were generally on the side of the Nazis, who, after all, were not threatening to destroy capitalism or create a 'Soviet Germany' if they came to power.²⁹

III

Although unemployment was above all a working-class phenomenon, economic difficulties had been wearing down the morale of other social groups as well. Well before the onset of the Depression, for instance, the drive to reduce government expenditure in the retrenchment that had to underpin the currency stabilization after 1923 led to a wave of dismissals in the state sector. Between 1 October 1923 and 31 March 1924, 135,000 out of 826,000 civil servants, mostly in the state railway system, the post, telegraph and Reich printing services, had been sacked, along with 30,000 out of 61,000 white-collar workers and 232,000 out of 706,000 state-employed manual labourers.³⁰ A further wave of cuts came after 1929, with a cumulative reduction in civil service salaries of between 19 and 23 per cent between December 1930 and December 1932. Many civil servants at all levels were dismayed at the inability of their trade union representatives to stop the cuts. Their hostility to the government was obvious. Some drifted into the Nazi Party; many others were put off by the Nazis' open threat to purge the civil service if they came to power. Nevertheless, anxiety and disillusion with the Republic became widespread in the civil service as a result of the cuts.³¹

Many other middle-class occupations felt their economic and social position was under threat during the Weimar Republic. White-collar workers lost their jobs, or feared that they might, as banks and finance houses got into difficulties. Tourist agents, restaurants, retailing, mail-order firms, a huge variety of employers in the service sector ran into trouble as people's purchasing power declined. The Nazi Party, now equipped with its elaborate structure of specialist subdivisions, saw this, and began to direct its appeal to the professional and propertied middle classes. All of this was anathema to those Nazis who, like Otto Strasser, brother of the Party organizer Gregor, continued to emphasize the 'socialist' aspect of National Socialism and felt that Hitler was betraying their ideals. Angered by the support given by Otto Strasser and his publishing house to left-wing causes such as strikes, Hitler summoned the leading men in the Party to a meeting in April 1930 and ranted against Strasser's views. As a way of trying to neutralize Otto Strasser's influence, he now appointed Goebbels Reich Propaganda Leader of the Party. But, to Goebbels's annoyance, Hitler repeatedly postponed decisive action, hoping that Otto Strasser's propaganda apparatus would still be of some use in the regional elections that took place in June 1930. Only after this, and Strasser's publication of an unflattering account of his row with Hitler earlier in the year, did he decide to purge the party of Otto Strasser and his supporters, who pre-empted this move by resigning on 4 July 1930. The split was a serious one. Observers held their breath to see if the Party would survive this exodus of its left wing. But things had changed markedly from the days when Goebbels and his friends had revived the Party in the Ruhr with socialist slogans. The dissidents' departure revealed that Strasser and his ideas had little support within the Party; even his brother Gregor disowned him. Otto Strasser vanished from serious politics, to spend the rest of his life in Germany, and, later, in exile, dreaming up small, sectarian organizations to propagate his views to tiny audiences of the like-minded.³²

Having shed the last vestiges of 'socialism', Hitler now moved to build more bridges to the conservative right. In the autumn of 1931 he joined with the Nationalists in the so-called 'Harzburg Front', producing a joint declaration with Hugenberg at Bad Harzburg on 11 October stating their readiness to join together in ruling Prussia and the Reich. Though the Nazis emphasized their continued independence – Hitler, for example,

refusing to review a march-past of the Steel Helmets – this marked a significant extension of the collaboration that had first taken place in the campaign against the Young Plan in 1929. At the same time, Hitler took serious steps to persuade industrialists that his Party posed no threat to them. His address to some 650 businessmen at the Industry Club in Düsseldorf in January 1932 appealed to his audience by denouncing Marxism as the source of Germany's ills – he did not refer to the Jews in the speech even once – and by emphasizing his belief in the importance of private property, hard work and proper rewards for the able and the enterprising. However, the solution to the economic woes of the moment, he said, was mainly political. Idealism, patriotism and national unity would create the basis for economic revival. These would be provided by the National Socialist movement, whose members sacrificed their time and money, and risked their lives day and night, in the struggle against the Communist threat.³³

Delivered in a two-and-a-half-hour oration, these remarks were extremely general, and offered nothing concrete in the way of economic policies at all. They revealed Hitler's Social Darwinist view of the economy, in which struggle was the way to success. This cannot have impressed his knowledgeable audience very much. The senior industrialists were disappointed. The Nazis later declared that Hitler had won over big business at last. But there was little concrete evidence to show this was the case. Neither Hitler nor anyone else followed up the occasion with a fund-raising campaign amongst the captains of industry. Indeed, parts of the Nazi press continued to attack trusts and monopolies after the event, while other Nazis attempted to win votes in another quarter by championing workers' rights. When the Communist Party's newspapers portrayed the meeting in conspiratorial terms, as a demonstration of the fact that Nazism was the creature of big business, the Nazis went out of their way to deny this, printing sections of the speech as proof of Hitler's independence from capital.

The result of all this was that business proved not much more willing to finance the Nazi Party than it had been before. True, one or two individuals like Fritz Thyssen were enthusiastic, and provided funds to subsidize the extravagant tastes of leading Nazis such as Hermann Göring and Gregor Strasser. And, in broad terms, the speech was reassuring. When the time came, it made it that much easier for big business to come

round to the support of the Nazi Party. But in January 1932 this still lay some way in the future. For the time being, the Nazi Party continued, as before, to finance its activities mainly through the voluntary contributions of its members, through entry fees to its meetings, through the income from its press and publications and through donations from small firms and businesses rather than large ones. The antisemitism which Hitler had so conspicuously forgotten to mention when talking to representatives of large industrial firms was far more likely to have an appeal in quarters such as these.³⁴ Nevertheless, Nazism now had a respectable face as well as a rough one, and was winning friends among the conservative and nationalist elites. As Germany plunged deeper into the Depression, growing numbers of middle-class citizens began to see in the youthful dynamism of the Nazi Party a possible way out of the situation. All would depend on whether the Weimar Republic's fragile democratic structures held up under the strain, and whether the Reich government could produce the right policies to stop them from collapsing altogether.

THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

I

The Depression's first political victim was the Grand Coalition cabinet led by the Social Democrat Hermann Müller, one of the Republic's most stable and durable governments, in office since the elections of 1928. The Grand Coalition was a rare attempt to compromise between the ideological and social interests of the Social Democrats and the 'bourgeois' parties left of the Nationalists. It was held together mainly by its common effort to secure the Young Plan, an effort made in the teeth of bitter opposition from the Nationalists and the extreme right. Once the plan was agreed towards the end of 1929, there was little left to bind the parties to one another. Following the onset of the Depression in October 1929, the coalition's constituent parties failed to agree on how to tackle the rapidly worsening unemployment problem. Deprived of the moderating influence of its former leader Gustav Stresemann, who died in October 1929, the People's Party broke with the coalition over the Social Democrats' refusal to cut unemployment benefits, and the government was forced to tender its resignation on 27 March 1930.³⁵

Although few realized it at the time, this marked the beginning of the end of Weimar democracy. From this point on, no government ruled with the support of a parliamentary majority in the Reichstag. Indeed, those who had President Hindenburg's ear saw the fall of the Grand Coalition as a chance to establish an authoritarian regime through the use of the Presidential power of rule by decree. Particularly influential in this respect was the German army, represented by the Minister of Defence, General Wilhelm Groener. His appointment in January 1928 to replace the Democrat politician Otto Gessler had signalled the liberation of the army from

any kind of political control, and was cemented by the right of the army chief to report directly to the President instead of going through the cabinet. Despite the limitations placed by the Treaty of Versailles on its numbers and equipment, the army remained by a long way the most powerful, most disciplined and most heavily armed force in Germany. While civilian institutions of one kind and another, from the political parties to the legislature itself, crumbled, the army remained united. For most of the 1920s, since the debacle of the Kapp putsch, it had stayed quiet, focusing its attention on building up illegal equipment and manpower, but in the crisis of the early 1930s it saw its opportunity. Rearmament and the rebuilding of Germany as a great power could, in the view of men like Groener's political adviser, Colonel, later General Kurt von Schleicher, now be grasped by freeing the state from the shackles of parliamentary coalitions. And the more Germany descended into political chaos and extremist violence, the more pivotal the position of the army became. Already in the autumn of 1930 Groener was telling officers: 'Not a brick can be moved any more in the political process in Germany without the word of the army being thrown decisively onto the scales.'³⁶

The army threw its weight into the political process initially in order to protect itself from budgetary cutbacks, which it successfully did. While all around it state institutions were having their budgets slashed, the army's stayed intact. But it still remained generally aloof from the Nazi Party. Older officers, schooled in the stern traditions of Prussian monarchism, were generally resistant to the populist appeal of radical nationalist politics. Even here, however, there were some who openly favoured the Nazis, like Colonel Ludwig Beck.³⁷ And younger officers were much more susceptible to Nazi propaganda. Already in 1929 a number of junior officers were engaging in discussions with the Nazis and debating the prospects for a 'national revolution'. The army leadership under Groener and Schleicher combated these tendencies vigorously, engaging in counter-propaganda and having the three ringleaders in the discussions arrested and put on trial in 1930 for preparing an act of high treason. The trial outraged other young officers, even those who were not inclined to collaborate with the Nazis. The army leadership, wrote one of them, had caved in to the 'Novemberists' and tried men whose only motivation was 'unselfish love of the fatherland'. Ninety per cent of the officers, he added, thought the same way.³⁸

The trial was the occasion for a widely publicized speech delivered by Hitler from the witness box, where he was summoned by Hans Frank, the Nazi lawyer who was acting for one of the defendants. The Nazi Party, he declared, had no intention of committing high treason or subverting the army from within. Its intention was to come to power by legal means, and he had expelled those, like Otto Strasser, who had urged it to carry out a revolution. The Party would win a majority in an election and form a legitimately constituted government. At that point, he said, to cheers from the public benches, the real traitors, the 'November criminals' of 1918, would be put on trial, and 'heads will roll'. But until then, the Party would stay within the law. The court made Hitler swear to the veracity of his testimony on oath. 'Now we are strictly legal', Goebbels is reported to have said. Putzi Hanfstaengl, recently put in charge of Hitler's foreign press relations, made sure that the speech was reported around the world. He sold three articles by Hitler outlining the Nazi Party's aims and methods, in suitably bowdlerized form, to William Randolph Hearst, the American press baron, for 1,000 Reichsmarks each. The money enabled Hitler to use the Kaiserhof Hotel in the centre of Berlin as his headquarters whenever he stayed in the capital from then on. In Germany itself, Hitler's reassurances dispelled the fears of many middle-class Germans about the Nazi Party's intentions.³⁹

The court was not impressed by Hitler, whom it reprimanded for abusing his position as a witness, and sentenced the young officers to eighteen months' imprisonment, cashiering two of them from the army.⁴⁰ The conservatism of the judiciary was almost bound to put the court on the side of the army. Still, the sentences did nothing to stop young army officers from continuing their flirtation with Nazism. Schleicher's attempts to counter such ideas, curb the radicalism of the younger officers and restore political discipline in the army, were less than effective, not least because he admitted openly to the officer corps that he sympathized with the 'national part' of the Nazis' programme, and particularly with 'the wave of indignation brought forth by the National Socialist movement against Bolshevism, treason, filth etc. Here', he said, 'the National Socialist campaign undoubtedly has extremely stirring effects.'⁴¹ Sympathy with the Nazis meant co-operating with them, but such was the arrogance and self-importance of the army leaders that they still thought they could bend the Nazis to their will and enlist them as military and

political auxiliaries, much as they had done with other paramilitary groups in the early 1920s. Time was to show how misguided this policy really was.

The newly prominent political position of the army found expression in the appointment by Hindenburg, acting above all on the advice of senior officers, including Schleicher, of Müller's successor as Chancellor. From the outset there was no attempt to appoint a government that would rest on the democratic support of the parties represented in the Reichstag. Instead, a 'cabinet of experts' would be put in place, with the intention of bypassing the Reichstag through the use of Hindenburg's power to rule by emergency decree. Of course, the scope of rule by decree was limited, and many measures, above all the budget, still had to be approved by the Reichstag. Steps were taken to ensure that this did not appear as the inauguration of an authoritarian regime. The new cabinet included such well-known Reichstag politicians as Josef Wirth, a former Reich Chancellor, for the Centre Party, Hermann Dietrich, for the Democrats (renamed the State Party in July 1930), Martin Schiele, for the Nationalists, Julius Curtius, for the People's Party, and Viktor Brecht, for the small Economy Party. But it did not include the Social Democrats, to whom Hindenburg and his advisers were unwilling to entrust the power of ruling by decree. Without the Social Democrats it had no parliamentary majority. But this did not seem to matter any more.

The new government was led by a man whose appointment as Reich Chancellor proved in retrospect to be a fatal choice. Superficially, the President's nomination of Heinrich Brüning, born in 1885, as Reich Chancellor was defensible in democratic terms. As floor leader of the Centre Party's deputies in the Reichstag, he represented the political force that more than any other had been the mainstay of parliamentary democracy in the Weimar Republic. But already by the time of his appointment the Centre, under the influence of its new leader Prelate Ludwig Kaas, was moving towards a more authoritarian position, more narrowly concerned with defending the interests of the Catholic Church. Moreover, Brüning himself was at best a fair-weather friend of Weimar democracy. A former army officer, he had been shocked by the November Revolution, and remained a staunch monarchist all his life. In his memoirs, indeed, he portrayed the restoration of the monarchy as his main purpose after becoming Chancellor. Yet in doing so he was probably

lending retrospective coherence to a political career that was dominated, like that of so many politicians, by short-term imperatives.⁴² Despite his inner conviction that a return to the Bismarckian system would be best for all, he had no detailed plan to restore the monarchy, let alone bring back the Kaiser. Nevertheless, his instincts were authoritarian at heart.⁴³ He planned to reform the constitution by reducing the power of the Reichstag and combining the offices of Reich Chancellor and Prussian Minister-President in his own person, thus removing the Social Democrats from their dominance of Germany's largest state. Brüning did not have sufficient backing from Hindenburg to put this idea into effect, but it remained on the table, ready for anyone to use who did. Brüning also began to restrict democratic rights and civil liberties.⁴⁴ In March 1931, for instance, he introduced sharp curbs on the freedom of the press, especially when it published criticisms of his own policies. By mid-July the liberal *Berlin Daily News-Sheet* (*Berliner Tageblatt*) was estimating that up to a hundred newspaper editions were being banned every month across the country. By 1932 the Communist newspaper *The Red Flag* was being banned on more than one day in three. Press freedom was seriously compromised long before the Nazis came to power.⁴⁵

In effect, Brüning thus began the dismantling of democratic and civil freedoms that was to be pursued with such vigour under the Nazis. Some, indeed, have argued that his much-criticized economic policy during the crisis was in part designed to weaken the trade unions and the Social Democrats, two of the main forces that kept Weimar democracy afloat.⁴⁶ To be sure, Brüning was not a dictator and his appointment did not mark the end of Weimar democracy. Brüning had not reached his position in the Centre Party without becoming adept at political calculation and manoeuvre, or skilled in constructing political coalitions and alliances. He had won himself a considerable reputation as a specialist on finance and taxation, and a man who knew his way around in these often rather technical areas was clearly needed at the helm in 1930. But the room for manoeuvre was becoming rapidly narrower after 1930, not least because of his own catastrophic political miscalculations. And even his staunchest defenders have never maintained that he was a charismatic or inspiring leader. Austere in appearance, secretive, inscrutable, given to taking decisions without sufficient consultation, denied the gift of rhetoric, Brüning was not the man to win mass support from an electorate

increasingly appalled at the economic chaos and political violence that were plunging the country into a crisis whose dimensions beggared even those of 1923.⁴⁷

II

Brüning's major task was to deal with the rapidly deteriorating economic situation. He chose to do this by radically deflationary measures, above all by cutting government expenditure. Government revenues were sinking fast, and the possibilities of borrowing to meet the state's obligations were virtually non-existent. Moreover, while Germany's currency had been stabilized after the great inflation of 1923 by tying it to the value of gold, it was by no means clear that it had been stabilized at the right level. The values arrived at were regarded as sacrosanct, however, so that the only way of dealing with a currency that became overvalued, because its reserves were being drained by a balance of payments deficit, was to cut prices and wages and raise interest rates at home.⁴⁸ Finally, reparations still loomed over the German economic scene, even though they had been rescheduled and in effect substantially reduced by the Young Plan in the summer of 1930. Brüning hoped to cut German domestic prices by reducing demand, and so make exports more competitive on the international market, a policy by no means unwelcome to the export manufacturers who were among his strongest supporters.⁴⁹ This was not a very realistic policy at a time when world demand had slumped to an unprecedented degree.

Cuts in government expenditure came first. A series of measures, culminating in emergency decrees promulgated on 5 June and 6 October 1931, reduced unemployment benefits in a variety of ways, restricted the period for which they could be claimed, and imposed means-testing in an increasing number of cases. The long-term unemployed thus saw their standard of living being steadily reduced as they went from unemployment insurance pay onto state-financed crisis benefits, then local authority welfare support and finally no support at all. By late 1932 there were only 618,000 people left on unemployment insurance pay, 1,230,000 on crisis benefits, 2,500,000 on welfare support and over a million whose period of joblessness had run through the time-limits now set on all of

these and so lacked any kind of regular income.⁵⁰ Whatever Brüning's wider aims might have been, growing poverty made the economic situation worse. People who were barely in a situation to supply themselves and their families with the basic necessities of life were hardly going to spend enough money to stimulate industry and the service sector into recovery. Moreover, fear of inflation was such that even without the international agreements (such as the Young Plan) that depended on maintaining the value of the Reichsmark, devaluation (the quickest way to boost exports) would have been politically extremely hazardous. In any case, Brüning refused to devalue, because he wanted to demonstrate to the international community that reparations were causing real misery and suffering in Germany.⁵¹

In the summer of 1931, however, the situation changed. A fresh crisis hit the economy as the flight of capital reached new heights, leading to the collapse of the Darmstadt and National (or Danat) Bank, heavily dependent on foreign loans, on 13 July, and threatening a collapse of credit more generally.⁵² The impossibility of bailing out the German government with foreign loans had become starkly clear in any case: one calculation estimated that the amount required to cover the budgetary deficit in Germany would be greater than the entire gold reserves of the United States. International financial co-operation had been made effectively impossible by the rigidities imposed by the Gold Standard. Brüning and his advisers saw no alternative but to put a stop on the convertibility of the Reichsmark, a step they had been so far reluctant to take because of their fear that it would cause inflation. From this point onwards, therefore, the Reichsmark could no longer be exchanged for foreign currency.⁵³

This rendered the Gold Standard meaningless as far as Germany was concerned, allowing a more flexible approach to monetary policy, and permitting an expansion of the currency supply that could, theoretically at least, ease the government's financial situation and allow it to begin reflation the economy through job-creation schemes.⁵⁴ Fatally, however, Brüning refused to take such a step, because he was nervous that printing money that was not tied to the value of gold would cause inflation. Of all the long-term effects of the German inflation, this was probably the most disastrous. But it was not the only reason why Brüning persisted with his deflationary policies long after feasible alternatives had become

available. For, crucially, he also hoped to use the continuing high unemployment rate to complete his dismantling of the Weimar welfare state, reduce the influence of labour and thus weaken the opposition to the plans he was now concocting to reform the constitution in an authoritarian, restorationist direction.⁵⁵

The bank crisis put into Brüning's hands another card that he was unwilling to use. In view of the flight of foreign funds from the German economy in the spring and early summer of 1931, reparations payments, along with other international capital movements, were suspended by the Hoover Moratorium, issued on 20 June 1931. This removed another political constraint on the freedom of manoeuvre of the German government. Up to now, almost any economic policy it had undertaken – such as increasing taxes, or boosting government revenue in some other way – had run the risk of being accused by the far right of contributing to the hated reparations payments. This was now no longer the case. Yet for Brüning this was not enough. It was still possible, he thought, that once the crisis was over the Moratorium would be lifted and demands for reparations payments would resume.⁵⁶ So he did nothing, even though the means of escape were now there and voices were already being raised in public in favour of stimulating demand through government-funded job-creation schemes.⁵⁷

Brüning's deflationary stance could not be shaken. The events of 1931 made the Depression even worse than before. And it showed no signs of ending. Brüning himself told people that he expected it to last until 1935. This was a prospect that many, and not just amongst the unemployed and the destitute, found too appalling to contemplate.⁵⁸ Soon Brüning, who issued another emergency decree on 8 December requiring wages to be reduced to their 1927 level and ordering a reduction of various prices, was being called 'the Hunger Chancellor'.⁵⁹ Satirists compared him to the mass-murderer of the early 1920s, Fritz Haarmann, whose habit of chopping up the bodies of his victims was the occasion of a nursery-rhyme used to frighten small children and still repeated in Germany today:

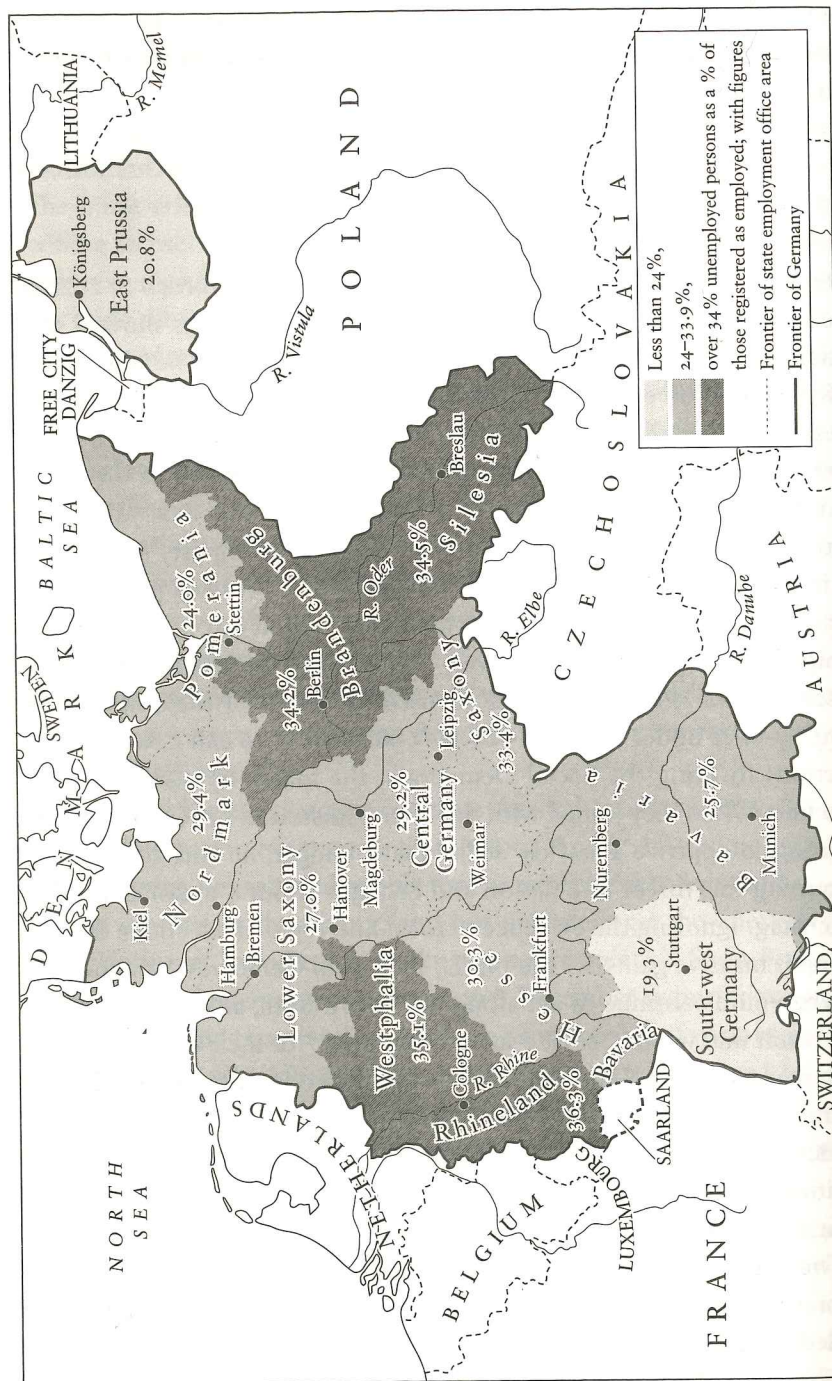
Wait a while and just you'll see,
And Brüning will come up to you
With the ninth emergency decree
And make mincemeat out of you.⁶⁰

There never was a ninth emergency decree; but even after promulgating only four of them, Brüning found himself the most unpopular Chancellor there had yet been in the Weimar Republic.⁶¹

III

Like many traditional conservatives, Brüning wanted to curb or emasculate the rabid radicalism of the extreme right, and at times showed some courage in attempting to do so. Like them, however, he also underestimated its power and influence. His adherence to what he regarded as Prussian virtues of piety, objectivity, non-partisanship and selfless service to the state derived not least from the patriotic traditions of the Centre Party since Bismarck's attack on the supposed national disloyalty of the Catholics in the 1870s. It gave him a lasting distrust of party politics, and an instinctive faith in the political reliability of a Prussian political icon such as President Hindenburg – a faith that turned out in the end to be completely misplaced.⁶² Moreover, this was not Brüning's only fateful miscalculation. From the outset, he used the threat of wielding Hindenburg's power under Article 25 of the constitution to call new Reichstag elections to bring the Social Democrats, the major oppositional force, into line. When they joined with the Nationalists and the Communists in refusing to approve a starkly deflationary budget, he had no hesitation in putting this threat into action and brought about a dissolution of the Reichstag. Ignoring the evidence of local and regional elections that had brought massive gains for the Nazis, the Social Democrats assumed that voters would continue to act along well-worn lines, and had every hope of a result that would provide sufficient support for their way of thinking. Like many Germans, Brüning and his political opponents on the left still found it impossible to take the Nazis' extremist rhetoric and bullying tactics on the street as anything other than evidence of their inevitable political marginality. They did not conform to the accepted rules of politics, so they could not expect to be successful.⁶³

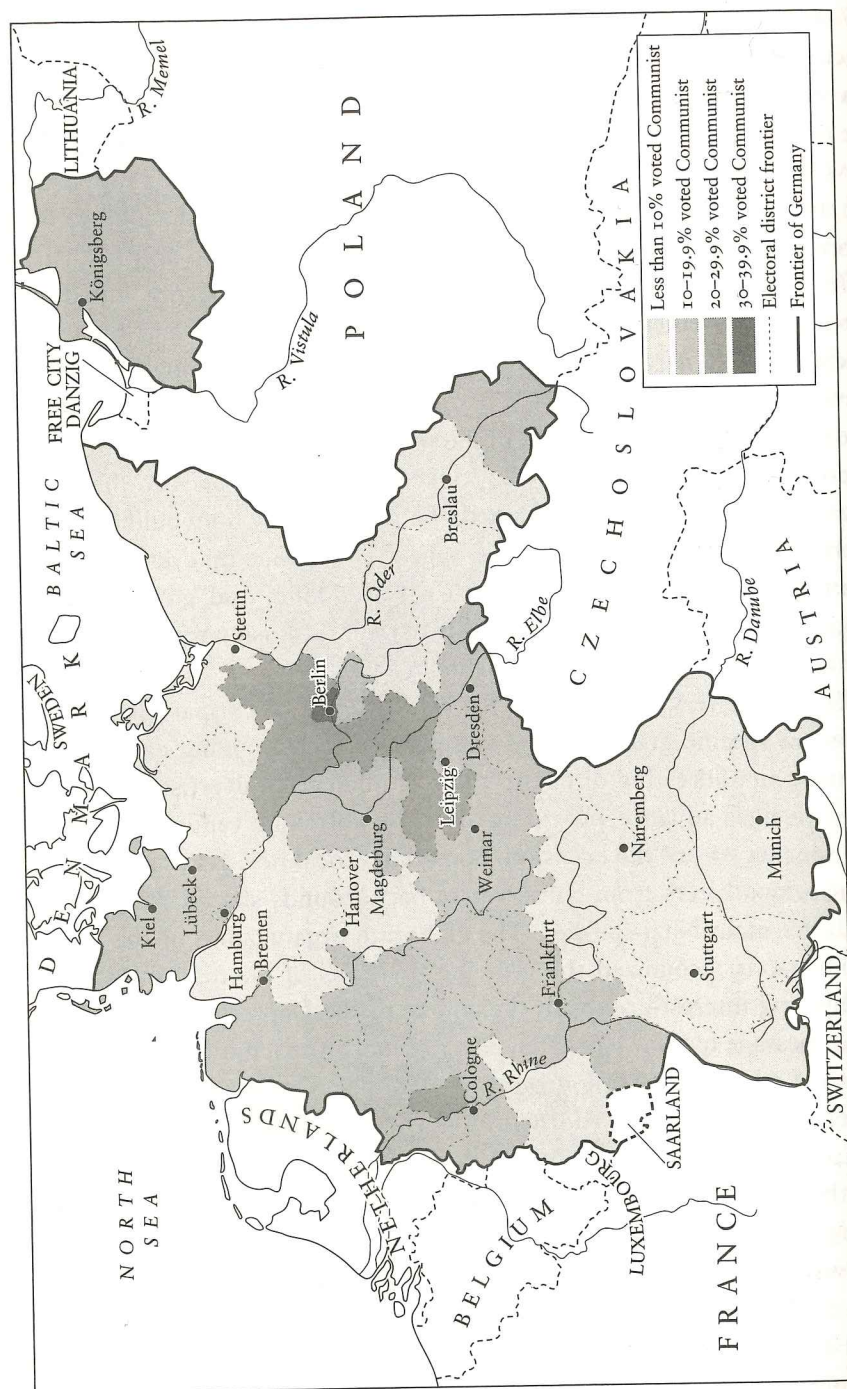
The election campaign was fought in an atmosphere of feverish, unprecedented excitement. Goebbels and the Nazi Party organization pulled out all the stops. In speech after speech, attended by crowds of up to 20,000 in the larger cities, Hitler ranted against the iniquities of the



Map 9. Unemployment in 1932

Weimar Republic, its fatal internal divisions, its multiplicity of warring factions and self-interested parties, its economic failure, its delivery of national humiliation. In place of all this, he shouted, democracy would be overcome, the authority of the individual personality reasserted. The revolutionaries of 1918, the profiteers of 1923, the traitorous supporters of the Young Plan, the Social Democratic placemen in the civil service ('revolutionary parasites') would all be purged. Hitler and his Party offered a vague but powerful rhetorical vision of a Germany united and strong, a movement that transcended social boundaries and overcame social conflict, a racial community of all Germans working together, a new Reich that would rebuild Germany's economic strength and restore the nation to its rightful place in the world. This was a message that had a powerful appeal to many who looked nostalgically back to the Reich created by Bismarck, and dreamed of a new leader who would resurrect Germany's lost glory. It was a message that summed up everything that many people felt was wrong with the Republic, and gave them the opportunity to register the profundity of their disillusion with it by voting for a movement that was its opposite in every respect.

Below this very general level, the Nazi propaganda apparatus skilfully targeted specific groups in the German electorate, giving campaigners training in addressing different kinds of audience, advertising meetings extensively in advance, providing topics for particular venues and picking the speaker to suit the occasion. Sometimes local non-Nazis and prominent sympathizers from conservative backgrounds shared the platform with the main Nazi speaker. The elaborate organization of the Party's subdivisions recognized the growing divisions of German society into competing interest-groups in the course of the Depression and tailored their message to their particular constituency. Antisemitic slogans would be used when addressing groups to whom they might have an appeal; where they were clearly not working, they were abandoned. The Nazis adapted according to the response they received; they paid close attention to their audiences, producing a whole range of posters and leaflets designed to win over different parts of the electorate. They put on film shows, rallies, songs, brass bands, demonstrations and parades. The campaign was masterminded by the Reich Propaganda Leader, Joseph Goebbels. His propaganda headquarters in Munich sent out a constant stream of directives to local and regional Party sections, often providing

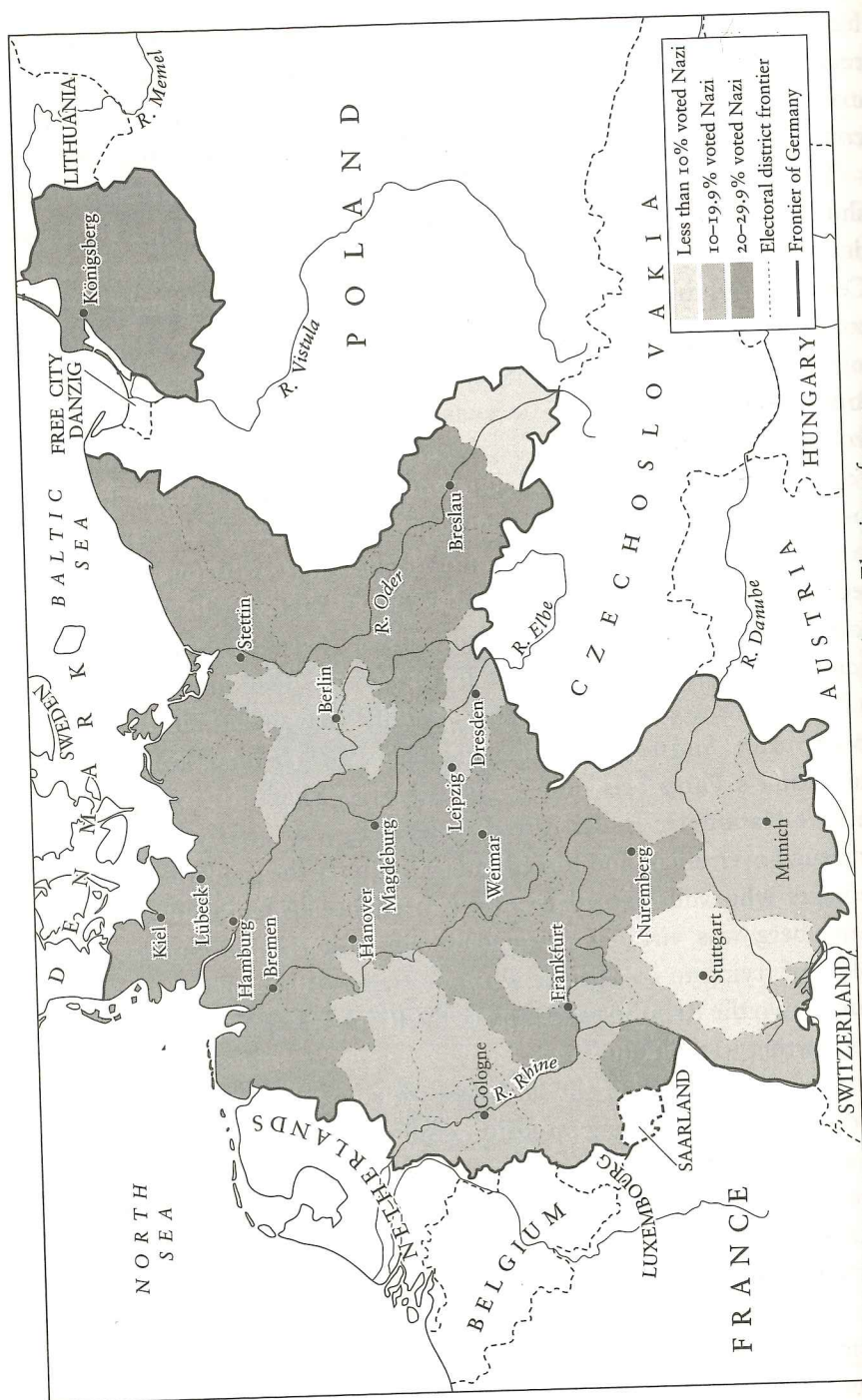


Map 10. The Communists in the Reichstag Election of 1930

fresh slogans and fresh material for the campaign. As the campaign reached its climax, the Nazis, driven by a degree of commitment that exceeded even that of the Communists, outdid all other parties in their constant, frenetic activism and the intensity of their propaganda effort.⁶⁴

The results of the Reichstag elections of September 1930 came as a shock to almost everyone, and delivered a seismic and in many ways decisive blow to the political system of the Weimar Republic. True, the Centre Party, the major electoral force behind the Brüning government, could feel moderately pleased at boosting its vote from 3.7 million to 4.1 million, thereby increasing its seats in the Reichstag from 62 to 68. Brüning's main opponents, the Social Democrats, lost ten seats, declining from 153 to 143, but still remained the largest party in the legislature. To this extent the election gave a very mild fillip to Brüning. However, the centrist and right-wing parties on which Brüning might possibly hope to build his government suffered catastrophic losses, with the Nationalists declining from 73 seats to 41, the People's Party from 45 to 31, the Economy Party (a recently founded middle-class special-interest group) from 31 to 23, and the State Party from 25 to 20. The parties represented in Brüning's first cabinet thus lost 53 out of 236 seats, bringing their total down to 183. And not even all of these were solidly behind the Chancellor: the People's Party was deeply divided over whether to support him, and the Nationalist leader Alfred Hugenberg was bitterly critical of the Brüning government and forced out of his party the moderate Reichstag deputies who still wanted to give it a chance. After September 1930 Hugenberg was virtually unopposed amongst the Nationalists in his policy of trying to co-operate with the National Socialists in a drive to bring down the Republic and replace the Reich Chancellor with someone even further to the right.⁶⁵

As this suggests, the political forces which could be expected to offer incessant and unrelenting opposition to the Brüning government and all its works, in the belief that this would hasten the Republic's demise, received a substantial boost from the 1930 elections. The Communists, buoyed up by their popularity among the unemployed, increased their mandate from 54 seats to 77. But the biggest shock was the increase in the Nazi vote. Only 0.8 million people had supported the National Socialists in the Reichstag election of 1928, giving the party a mere 12 seats in the national legislature. Now, in September 1930, their votes



Map 11. The Nazis in the Reichstag Election of 1930

increased to 6.4 million, and no fewer than 107 Nazi deputies took up their seats in the Reichstag. 'Fantastic,' gloated Joseph Goebbels in his diary on 15 September 1930, '... an unbelievable advance ... I hadn't expected that.'⁶⁶ Sympathetic newspapers registered the result as a 'world sensation' that announced a new phase of Germany's history. Only the Communists dismissed it as a flash in the pan ('what's coming next can only be decline and fall').⁶⁷

Yet the Nazis' gains reflected deep-seated anxieties in many parts of the electorate. In some rural constituencies in the north the Nazi vote amounted to a landslide: 68 per cent in Wiefelstede in the Weser-Ems constituency, 57 per cent in Brünen in the Düsseldorf West constituency, 62 per cent in Schwesing in Schleswig-Holstein.⁶⁸ To some extent, Brüning might have seen this coming, since elections for state legislatures and town councils all over Germany had been registering strong gains for the Nazis since 1928. His chances of getting what he wanted from the elections of 1930 were therefore very small even before the campaign started. Yet the triumph of the Nazis in the Reichstag election was much greater than anyone had anticipated. In many places, indeed, it far outran the impact of Nazi propaganda, and the Party scored votes of 25 to 28 per cent in remote rural areas of the Protestant north to which its organizational effort had barely penetrated.⁶⁹

How can this dramatic success be explained? The Nazis were seen, particularly by Marxists of various hues, as the representatives of the lower middle classes, but in this election they had clearly burst the bounds of this particular constituency and succeeded in winning the support not only of white-collar workers, shopkeepers, small businessmen, farmers and the like, but also of many voters further up the social scale, in the professional, mercantile and industrial bourgeoisie.⁷⁰ It was above all the Nazis who profited from the increasingly overheated political atmosphere of the early 1930s, as more and more people who had not previously voted began to flock to the polls. Roughly a quarter of those who voted Nazi in 1930 had not voted before. Many of these were young, first-time voters, who belonged to the large birth-cohorts of the pre-1914 years. Yet these electors do not seem to have voted disproportionately for the Nazis; the Party's appeal, in fact, was particularly strong amongst the older generation, who evidently no longer considered the Nationalists vigorous enough to destroy the hated Republic. Roughly a third of the

Nationalist voters of 1928 voted for the Nazis in 1930, a quarter of the Democratic and People's Party voters, and even a tenth of Social Democratic voters.⁷¹

The Nazis did particularly well among women, whose previous tendency to stay away from the polls sharply diminished in 1930, an important change since there were many more female voters than male as a result both of military casualties in the First World War and of the growing tendency of women to live longer than men. In the city of Cologne, for instance, the percentage poll amongst women jumped from an average of 53 per cent in 1924 to 69 per cent in 1930; in the East Prussian commune of Ragnitz, from 62 per cent to 73 per cent. Their previous avoidance of radical parties such as the Nazis disappeared, though their over-proportional support for the Centre largely remained. For all the speculation of contemporaries, and some later historians, about the special reasons why women might have voted Nazi – ranging from their supposed greater susceptibility to the emotional appeal of the Party's propaganda to their alleged disillusion with the Republic for failing to bring them equality – the fact is that there is no indication that they cast their votes for any different reasons than those which led men to support the Party. But cast them they now did.⁷²

Whether its voters were men or women, young or old, the Nazi Party did particularly well in Protestant north Germany, east of the Elbe, and much less well in the Catholic south and west. It attracted voters in the countryside but not to the same degree in urban-industrial areas. In some parts of Schleswig-Holstein and Oldenburg, deeply rural areas in the Protestant north, it won over 50 per cent of the vote. Yet, contrary to a widespread contemporary view, the Nazis did not do any better in small towns than in large ones overall; the effects of religious allegiance, which meant that a Protestant voter was twice as likely to support the Nazis as a Catholic one, were far more important in rural areas, perhaps because the influence of the clergy was greater in the countryside and secularization had made greater progress in the towns, whatever their size. Some Catholics did vote Nazi, but the great majority stayed loyal to the Centre Party in 1930, locked into its cultural milieu and insulated against the appeal of the radical right by its patent hostility by this time to democracy, the Jews and the modern world.⁷³

The Social Democrats, too, as we have seen, together with the Com-

munists, proved relatively resilient in the face of the Nazis' electoral challenge in 1930. But this does not mean that the Nazis completely failed to win any working-class votes. Wage-earning manual labourers and their spouses made up nearly half the electorate in Germany, one of the world's most advanced industrial societies, while the two working-class parties combined regularly secured just under a third of the vote in Weimar elections, so a significant number of workers and their spouses must have voted for other parties on a regular basis. In such a large and varied social group, these included many Catholic workers, workers in small, often paternalistically managed firms, manual labourers in the state sector (the railways, the postal service and so on) and employees who were not unionized (including especially female manual workers). Rural labourers in Protestant areas with a relatively small proportion of manual labourers proved particularly susceptible to the Nazi appeal, though workers on the great landed estates tended to stick with the Social Democrats. The Nazi propaganda effort, indeed, was directed in particular at workers, borrowing images and slogans from the Social Democrats, attacking 'reaction' as well as 'Marxism', and presenting the Party as heir to Germany's socialist tradition. It failed to make much more than a small dent in the Social Democratic and Communist vote, but still exerted a sufficiently strong appeal to previously non-committed workers to ensure that some 27 per cent of Nazi voters in September 1930 were manual labourers.⁷⁴

Since, as we have seen, the working class constituted nearly half the electorate, and the Nazi Party obtained just over 18 per cent of the vote, this still meant that the Party was less attractive to workers than to members of other social classes, and left the great majority of working-class electors voting for other parties. Where the Social Democratic or Communist tradition was strong, unionization high, and labour-movement culture active and well supported, the cohesive power of the socialist milieu generally proved resistant to the Nazis' appeal.⁷⁵ The Nazis, in other words, reached parts of the working class that the traditional left-wing parties failed to reach.⁷⁶ Social and cultural factors accounted for their appeal, rather than economic ones; for the unemployed voted Communist, not Nazi. Workers who were still in jobs in September 1930 were fearful of the future, and if they were not insulated by a strong labour movement milieu, they frequently turned to

the Nazis to defend themselves against the looming threat of the Communist Party.⁷⁷

While the Nazis directed their propaganda particularly at workers, they were surprisingly neglectful of white-collar employees, who may well have resented Nazi attacks on many of the institutions for which they worked, from finance houses to department stores. Many female employees in low-paid jobs belonged to the working-class political milieu by origin or marriage and so voted Social Democrat, like a good proportion of male white-collar workers, and not just those who were employed by the unions and other labour movement institutions. White-collar workers in the private sector were also one of the groups least affected by the Depression. Despite a widespread contemporary belief to the contrary, therefore, white-collar workers, like manual labourers, were somewhat under-represented among the ranks of Nazi voters in 1930. By contrast, civil servants were over-represented, perhaps reflecting the fact that government cutbacks had put hundreds of thousands of them out of work and reduced the income of many more to the level of a skilled manual labourer or below. The Nazis' appeal to the self-employed, particularly in Protestant rural areas, was even greater; many of these, of course, were small farmers.⁷⁸

The Nazi Party had established itself with startling suddenness in September 1930 as a catch-all party of social protest, appealing to a greater or lesser degree to virtually every social group in the land. Even more than the Centre Party, it succeeded in transcending social boundaries and uniting highly disparate social groups on the basis of a common ideology, above all but not exclusively within the Protestant majority community, as no other party in Germany had managed to do before. Already weakened in the aftermath of the inflation, the bourgeois parties, liberal and conservative, proved unable to retain their support in the face of the economic catastrophe that had broken over Germany towards the end of 1929. Middle-class voters, still repelled by the Nazis' violence and extremism, turned to splinter-groups of the right in even greater numbers than they had already done in 1924 and 1928, increasing their representation in the Reichstag from 20 seats to 55, but substantial numbers also flocked to the Nazi banner in September 1930, joining with members of other social groups, including farmers, various kinds of workers, civil servants, first-time voters (including many women) and voters from older

age groups, to expand the Nazi vote massively in a powerful expression of their dissatisfaction, resentment and fear.⁷⁹

In the increasingly desperate situation of 1930, the Nazis managed to project an image of strong, decisive action, dynamism, energy and youth that wholly eluded the propaganda efforts of the other political parties, with the partial exception of the Communists. The cult of leadership which they created around Hitler could not be matched by comparable efforts by other parties to project their leaders as the Bismarcks of the future. All this was achieved through powerful, simple slogans and images, frenetic, manic activity, marches, rallies, demonstrations, speeches, posters, placards and the like, which underlined the Nazis' claim to be far more than a political party: they were a *movement*, sweeping up the German people and carrying them unstoppably to a better future. What the Nazis did not offer, however, were concrete solutions to Germany's problems, least of all in the area where they were most needed, in economy and society. More strikingly still, the public disorder which loomed so large in the minds of the respectable middle classes in 1930, and which the Nazis promised to end through the creation of a tough, authoritarian state, was to a considerable extent of their own making. Many people evidently failed to realize this, blaming the Communists instead, and seeing in the violence of the brown-uniformed Nazi stormtroopers on the streets a justified, or at least understandable reaction to the violence and aggression of the Red Front-Fighters' League.

Voters were not really looking for anything very concrete from the Nazi Party in 1930. They were, instead, protesting against the failure of the Weimar Republic. Many of them, too, particularly in rural areas, small towns, small workshops, culturally conservative families, older age groups, or the middle-class nationalist political milieu, may have been registering their alienation from the cultural and political modernity for which the Republic stood, despite the modern image which the Nazis projected in many respects. The vagueness of the Nazi programme, its symbolic mixture of old and new, its eclectic, often inconsistent character, to a large extent allowed people to read into it what they wanted to and edit out anything they might have found disturbing. Many middle-class voters coped with Nazi violence and thuggery on the streets by writing it off as the product of excessive youthful ardour and energy. But it was far more than that, as they were soon to discover for themselves.⁸⁰

THE VICTORY OF VIOLENCE

I

The young brownshirt activist Horst Wessel had made himself thoroughly hated by Berlin's Communist paramilitaries by 1930. Idealistic, intelligent and well educated, he had caught the attention of Joseph Goebbels, who had sent him to study the well-organized Nazi youth movement in Vienna in the first half of 1928. Back in Berlin, Wessel had quickly risen to a position of local prominence in the brownshirt organization in the Friedrichshain district, where he led a 'storm' or branch of the Nazi paramilitaries. He proceeded to unleash a particularly energetic and provocative campaign on the streets, including a brownshirt attack on the local Communist Party headquarters, in which four Communist workers were seriously injured. Heinz Neumann, known as the Goebbels of the Communist Party, and Berlin editor of the Communist daily, *The Red Flag*, responded with a new slogan issued to party cadres: 'Beat the fascists wherever you find them!'⁸¹

It was in this atmosphere that Wessel's landlady, the widow of a Communist, went to a tavern in the area on 14 January 1930 to ask for help in dealing with her tenant, who, she said, had not only refused to pay rent for his live-in girlfriend but had also responded to the landlady's demands by threatening her with violence. Whether or not this was true was another matter, for there was evidence that the real cause of the dispute was her attempt to raise Wessel's rent. The landlady was also afraid that, if the girlfriend did not move out, she would lose her legal right to the flat, which she did not own, but rented herself, not least because the girlfriend was a prostitute (whether or not she was still working subsequently became the subject of heated and somewhat pruri-

ent debate). The key factor here was the widow's connection to the Communist Party. Despite their disapproval of the landlady's insistence at the time of her husband's death on giving him a church funeral, the Communists decided to help her deal with her tenant. Only the previous day, they claimed, a local Communist had been shot in a fight with the brownshirts. The dispute offered an ideal opportunity to get even. Conscious of the likelihood that Wessel would be armed, they sent to a nearby tavern for a well-known local tough, Ali Höhler, who was known to possess a gun, to provide the muscle in a punitive expedition to Wessel's flat. Höhler was not only a member of the neighbouring branch of the Red Front-Fighters' League, but also had convictions for petty crimes, perjury and pimping. A member of one of Berlin's organized crime syndicates, he illustrated the connections between Communism and criminality that were likely to be forged at a time when the party based itself in the poor districts and 'criminal quarters' of Germany's big cities. Together with the Communist Erwin Rückert, Höhler climbed the stairs to Wessel's flat, while the others stood watch outside. As Wessel opened the door, Höhler opened fire. Wessel fell, badly wounded in the head, and lingered on in hospital for a few weeks before he finally died from his injury on 23 February.⁸²

When the Communists mounted a hurried propaganda campaign to depict Wessel as a pimp and Höhler's deed as part of an underworld dispute unconnected with the Red Front-Fighters' League, Goebbels went into overdrive to present him as a political martyr. He interviewed Wessel's mother, and extracted from her a portrait of her son as an idealist who had rescued his girlfriend from a life of prostitution and sacrificed himself out of missionary zeal for the cause of the Fatherland. The Communists, by contrast, Goebbels trumpeted, had shown their true colours by enrolling a common criminal like Höhler in their ranks. Wessel was hardly cold in his grave before Goebbels began work on blowing his memory up into a full-scale cult. Innumerable articles in the Nazi press all over the country praised him as a 'martyr for the Third Reich'. A solemn funeral procession was staged – it would have been much bigger but for police restrictions on its size – and watched, so Goebbels claimed, by up to 30,000 people lining the streets on the way to the church. Chants, attacks and attempts at disruption by the Red Front-Fighters' League led to wild and violent scenes on the fringes of the ceremony. At the graveside,

while Göring, Prince August Wilhelm of Prussia and various other dignitaries looked on, Goebbels praised Wessel in terms that deliberately recalled Christ's sacrifice for humankind – 'Through sacrifice to redemption'. 'Wherever Germany is,' he declared, 'you are there too, Horst Wessel!' Then a choir of stormtroopers sang some verses that Wessel himself had written a few months earlier:

The flag's held high! The ranks are tightly closed!
SA men march with firm courageous tread.
Together with us, marching in our ranks in spirit, are those
Comrades Red Front and Reaction shot dead!

Clear the streets for the brown battalions,
Clear the streets for the Storm Division man!
The swastika's already gazed on full of hope by millions.
The day for freedom and bread is at hand!

The last time now there sounds the call to meet!
For struggle we are standing all prepared at last!
Soon Hitler flags will flutter over every street.
Our servitude will very soon be past!⁸³

The song had already gained some currency in the movement, but Goebbels now publicized it far and wide, prophesying that it would soon be sung by schoolchildren, workers, soldiers, everyone. He was right. Before the year was over, it had been published, issued on a gramophone record and turned into the official anthem of the Nazi Party. After 1933 it became in effect the national battle hymn of the Third Reich, alongside the old-established *Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles* ('Germany, Germany before all').⁸⁴ Wessel became the object of something like a secular religious cult propagated by the Nazis, celebrated in film, and commemorated in countless ceremonies, memorials and sites of pilgrimage.

That such an open celebration of brutal physical force could become the battle hymn of the Nazi Party speaks volumes for the central role that violence played in its quest for power. Cynically exploited for publicity purposes by manipulative propagandists like Goebbels, it became a way of life for the ordinary young brownshirt like Wessel, as it was for the

young unemployed workers of the Red Front-Fighters' League. Other songs were more explicit still, such as the popular 'Song of the Storm Columns', which was chanted by marching brownshirts on the streets of Berlin from 1928 onwards:

We are the Storm Columns, we put ourselves about,
We are the foremost ranks, courageous in a fight.
With sweating brows from work, our stomachs without food!
Our calloused, sooty hands our rifles firmly hold.

So stand the Storm Columns, for racial fight prepared.
Only when Jews bleed, are we liberated.
No more negotiation; it's no help, not even slight:
Beside our Adolf Hitler we're courageous in a fight.

Long live our Adolf Hitler! We're already marching on.
We're storming in the name of German revolution.
Leap onto the barricades! Defeat us only death can.
We're Storm Columns of Hitler's dictatorship of one man.⁸⁵

This kind of aggression found its outlet in constant clashes with rival paramilitaries on the streets. In the middle period of the Republic, beginning in 1924, all sides did indeed draw back from political violence on the scale of the January uprising of 1919, the Ruhr civil war of 1920 or the multiple conflicts of 1923, but if they put away their machine guns, it was only to replace them with rubber truncheons and knuckledusters. Even in the relatively stable years of 1924–9, it was claimed that 29 Nazi activists had been killed by Communists, while the Communists themselves reported that 92 'workers' had been killed in clashes with 'fascists' from 1924 to 1930. Twenty-six members of the Steel Helmets were said to have fallen in the fight against Communism and 18 members of the Reichsbanner in various incidents of political violence from 1924 to 1928.⁸⁶ These were only the most serious consequences of the continual fighting between rival paramilitary groups; the same sources counted injuries sustained in the battles in the thousands, many of them more serious than mere bruises or broken bones.

In 1930 the figures rose dramatically, with the Nazis claiming to have suffered 17 deaths, rising to 42 in 1931 and 84 in 1932. In 1932, too, the Nazis reported that nearly ten thousand of their rank-and-file had

been wounded in clashes with their opponents. The Communists reported 44 deaths in fights with the Nazis in 1930, 52 in 1931 and 75 in the first six months of 1932 alone, while over 50 Reichsbanner men died in battles with the Nazis on the streets from 1929 to 1933.⁸⁷ Official sources broadly corroborated these claims, with one estimate in the Reichstag, not disputed by anybody, putting the number of dead in the year to March 1931 at no fewer than 300.⁸⁸ The Communists played their part with as much vigour as the Nazis. When the sailor Richard Krebs, leader of a detachment of a hundred members of the Red Front-Fighters' League, was instructed to break up a Nazi meeting in Bremen addressed by Hermann Göring, for instance, he made sure that 'each man was armed with a blackjack or brass knuckles'. When he rose to speak, Göring ordered him to be thrown out after he had said only a few words; the brownshirts lining the hall rushed to the centre, and:

A terrifying mêlée followed. Blackjacks, brass knuckles, clubs, heavy buckled belts, glasses and bottles were the weapons used. Pieces of glass and chairs hurtled over the heads of the audience. Men from both sides broke off chair legs and used them as bludgeons. Women fainted in the crash and scream of battle. Already dozens of heads and faces were bleeding, clothes were torn as the fighters dodged about amid masses of terrified but helpless spectators. The troopers fought like lions. Systematically they pressed us towards the main exit. The band struck up a martial tune. Hermann Göring stood calmly on the stage, his fists on his hips.⁸⁹

Scenes like this were being played out all over Germany in the early 1930s. Violence was particularly severe at election-time; of the 155 killed in political clashes in Prussia in the course of 1932, no fewer than 105 died in the election months of June and July, and the police counted 461 political riots with 400 injuries and 82 deaths in the first seven weeks of the campaign.⁹⁰ The task of curbing political violence was not helped by the fact that the political parties most heavily implicated got together at intervals and agreed on an amnesty for political prisoners, thus releasing them from prison to engage in a fresh round of beatings and killings. The last such amnesty came into effect on 20 January 1933.⁹¹

II

Facing this situation of rapidly mounting disorder was a police force that was distinctly shaky in its allegiance to Weimar democracy. Unlike the army, it continued to be decentralized after 1918. The Social Democrat-dominated Prussian government in Berlin, however, failed to seize the opportunity to create a new public-order force which would be the loyal servant of Republican law enforcement. The force was inevitably recruited from the ranks of ex-soldiers, since a high proportion of the relevant age group had been conscripted during the war. The new force found itself run by ex-officers, former professional soldiers and Free Corps fighters. They set a military tone from the outset and were hardly enthusiastic supporters of the new political order.⁹² They were backed up by the political police, which had a long tradition in Prussia, as in other German and European states, of concentrating its efforts on the monitoring, detection and at times suppression of socialists and revolutionaries.⁹³ Its officers, like those of other police departments, considered themselves above party politics. Rather like the army, they were serving an abstract notion of 'the state' or the Reich, rather than the specific democratic institutions of the newly founded Republic. Not surprisingly, therefore, they continued to mount surveillance operations not only over the political extremes but also over the Social Democrats, the party of government in Prussia and, in a sense, their employers. The old tradition of seeking subversives primarily on the left wing of the political spectrum thus lived on.⁹⁴

The bias of the police and the judiciary was particularly apparent in the case of a Social Democrat like the Reichstag deputy Otto Buchwitz in Silesia, who recalled later with considerable bitterness how stormtroopers began to disrupt his speeches from December 1931 onwards. Brownshirts occupied the seats at his meetings, shouted insults at him, and on one occasion fired a shot at him, causing mass panic amongst his listeners and leading to a brawl in which more shots were fired by both stormtroopers and Reichsbanner men. Several Nazis and Social Democrats had to be taken to hospital, and not a single table or chair in the hall was left intact. After this, gangs of eight to ten Nazi stormtroopers harassed Buchwitz outside his house when he left for work in the morning, twenty

or more crowded round him when he came back to his office after lunch, and between one and two hundred hassled him on the way home, singing a specially composed song with the words 'When the revolvers are shot, Buchwitz'll cop the lot!' Nazi demonstrations always halted outside his house, chanting 'Death to Buchwitz!' Not only did his complaints to the police and requests for protection go completely unheeded, but when he lost his parliamentary immunity with the dissolution of the Reichstag in 1932, he was hauled before the courts for illegal possession of a weapon at the December 1931 brawl and sentenced to three months in prison. Not one Nazi among those involved in the affair was prosecuted. After his release, Buchwitz was refused permission to carry a gun, but always had one on him anyway, and demonstratively released the safety catch if the brownshirts got too close. His complaint to the Social Democratic Interior Minister of Prussia, Carl Severing, met with the response that he should not have got involved in a shooting-match in the first place. Buchwitz's feeling of betrayal by the Social Democratic leadership was only strengthened when a large contingent of rank-and-file Communist activists came up to him before a speech he was due to give at the funeral of a Reichsbanner man shot by the Nazis, and explained that they were there to protect him from a planned assassination attempt by the brownshirts. Neither the police nor the Reichsbanner were anywhere to be seen.⁹⁵

The police for their part regarded the Red Front-Fighters' League as criminals. This not only followed a long police tradition of conflating crime and revolution, but also reflected the fact that Communist strongholds tended to be based in poor, slum areas that were the centres of organized crime. As far as the police were concerned, the Red Front-Fighters were thugs, out for material gain. For the Communists, the police were the iron fist of the capitalist order, which had to be smashed, and they frequently targeted policemen in acts of physical aggression all the way up to murder. This meant that in clashes with the Communists, a tired, nervous and apprehensive police force was only too prone to make use of the pistols with which it was customarily armed. Prolonged fighting in Berlin in 1929 achieved fame as 'Blood-May', when 31 people, including innocent passers-by, were killed, mostly by police gunshots; over two hundred were wounded, and more than a thousand were arrested in the course of Communist demonstrations in the working-class district of

Wedding. Stories that newspaper reporters covering the events were beaten up by the police only made press comment more critical, while the police themselves reacted with barely concealed contempt for a democratic political order that had failed to defend them from injury and insult.⁹⁶

Alienated from the Republic by continual Communist polemics and by Social Democratic attempts to curb their powers, the police were also troubled by the slowness of promotion, and many younger policemen felt their careers blocked.⁹⁷ Professionalization had made great strides amongst detective forces in Germany, as in other countries, with fingerprinting, photography and forensic science prized as new and startlingly effective aids to detection. Individual detectives such as the famous Ernst Gennat, head of the Berlin murder squad, became celebrated in their own right, and the force claimed some impressive detection rates of serious crimes in the mid-1920s. Yet the police attracted massively hostile comment in the press and news media for failing to arrest serial killers, like Fritz Haarmann in Hanover, or Peter Kürten in Düsseldorf, before they had claimed a whole series of victims. The police in their turn felt that the rampant political violence and disorder of the era were forcing them to divert precious resources from fighting crimes such as these.⁹⁸ Not surprisingly, therefore, policemen began to sympathize with the Nazis' attacks on the Weimar Republic. In 1935, a report claimed that 700 uniformed policemen had been members of the party before 1933, while in Hamburg 27 officers out of 240 had joined by 1932.⁹⁹

Reich Chancellor Brüning decided to use the police, however, to curb political violence on the right as well as the left, because the chaos on the streets was deterring foreign banks from issuing loans to Germany.¹⁰⁰ His resolve was strengthened by two serious incidents that occurred in 1931. In April, the brownshirt leader in north-eastern Germany, Walther Stennes, got into a dispute with Party headquarters and briefly occupied the Nazis' central offices in Berlin, beating up the SS guards stationed there and forcing Goebbels to flee to Munich. Stennes denounced the extravagance of the Party bosses and their betrayal of socialist principles. But, although he undoubtedly articulated the feelings of some storm-troopers, he had little real support. Indeed there is some indication that he was secretly subsidized by Brüning's government in order to create divisions within the movement. Hitler fired the brownshirt leader Franz

Pfeffer von Salomon, who had failed to prevent this debacle, recalled Ernst Röhm from his Bolivian exile to take over the organization, and forced all the brownshirts to swear a personal oath of allegiance to him. Stennes was expelled, with the incidental consequence that many conservative businessmen and military leaders now became convinced that the Nazi movement had lost much of its subversive drive.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, there remained very real tensions between the ceaseless activism of the stormtroopers and the political calculation of the Party leaders, which were to surface repeatedly in the future.¹⁰² More seriously, the Stennes revolt indicated that many brownshirts were keen to unleash revolutionary violence on a considerable scale, a lesson that was not lost on the nervous Reich government.

These suspicions were confirmed with the discovery of the so-called Boxheim documents in November 1931. Nazi papers seized by the police in Hesse showed that the SA was planning a violent putsch, to be followed by food rationing, the abolition of money, compulsory labour for all, and the death penalty for disobeying the authorities. The reality fell some way short of the police's claims, since the Boxheim documents were in fact only of regional significance, and had been devised without the knowledge of his superiors by a young Party official in Hesse, Werner Best, to guide Party policy in the event of an attempted Communist uprising in Hesse. Hitler quickly distanced himself from the affair and all SA commanders were ordered to desist from making any more contingency plans of this kind. Criminal proceedings were eventually dropped for lack of clear evidence of treason against Best.¹⁰³ But the damage had been done. Brüning obtained a decree on 7 December banning the wearing of political uniforms and backed it with a strongly worded attack on Nazi illegality. Referring to Hitler's constantly reiterated assurances that he intended to come to power legally, Brüning said: 'If one declares that, having come to power by legal means, one will then break the bounds of the law, that is not legality.'¹⁰⁴

The ban on uniforms had little effect, since the brownshirts carried on marching, only dressed in white shirts instead, and violence continued during the winter. Rumours of an impending Communist insurrection, coupled with pressure from Schleicher, stayed Brüning's hand during this period, but Communist electoral setbacks in Hamburg, Hesse and Oldenburg convinced him in the spring of 1932 that the moment had

come to ban the brownshirts altogether. Under heavy pressure from the other political parties, particularly the Social Democrats, and with the support of the worried military, Brüning and General Groener (whom he had appointed Interior Minister in October 1931 in addition to his existing responsibilities as Minister of Defence) persuaded a reluctant Hindenburg to issue a decree outlawing the stormtroopers on 13 April 1932. The police raided brownshirt premises all over Germany, confiscating military equipment and insignia. Hitler was beside himself with rage but impotent to act. Yet despite the ban, clandestine membership of the stormtroopers continued to grow in many areas. In Upper and Lower Silesia, for instance, there were 17,500 stormtroopers in December 1931, and no fewer than 34,500 by the following July. The outlawing of the brownshirts had only a slightly dampening effect on levels of political violence, and the presence of Nazi sympathizers in the lower ranks of the police allowed the Nazi paramilitaries a fair degree of latitude in continuing their operations.¹⁰⁵ Claims that the Nazi Party and their paramilitary wing would have virtually ceased to exist had the ban been continued for a year or more were thus very wide of the mark.¹⁰⁶

The new situation after the Nazis' electoral breakthrough not only sharply escalated the level of violence on the streets, it also radically altered the nature of proceedings in the Reichstag. Rowdy and chaotic enough even before September 1930, it now became virtually unmanageable, as 107 brown-shirted and uniformed Nazi deputies joined 77 disciplined and well-organized Communists in raising incessant points of order, chanting, shouting, interrupting and demonstrating their total contempt for the legislature at every juncture. Power drained from the Reichstag with frightening rapidity, as almost every session ended in uproar and the idea of calling it together for a meeting came to seem ever more pointless. From September 1930 only negative majorities were possible in the Reichstag. In February 1931, recognizing the impossibility of carrying on, it adjourned itself for six months as the parties of the extreme right and left demonstratively walked out of a debate after amendments to the parliamentary rule book made it more difficult for them to obstruct business. The deputies did not return until October.¹⁰⁷ The Reichstag sat on average a hundred days a year from 1920 to 1930. It was in session for fifty days between October 1930 and March 1931; after that, it only met on twenty-four further days up to the elections of

July 1932. From July 1932 to February 1933 it convened for a mere three days in six months.¹⁰⁸

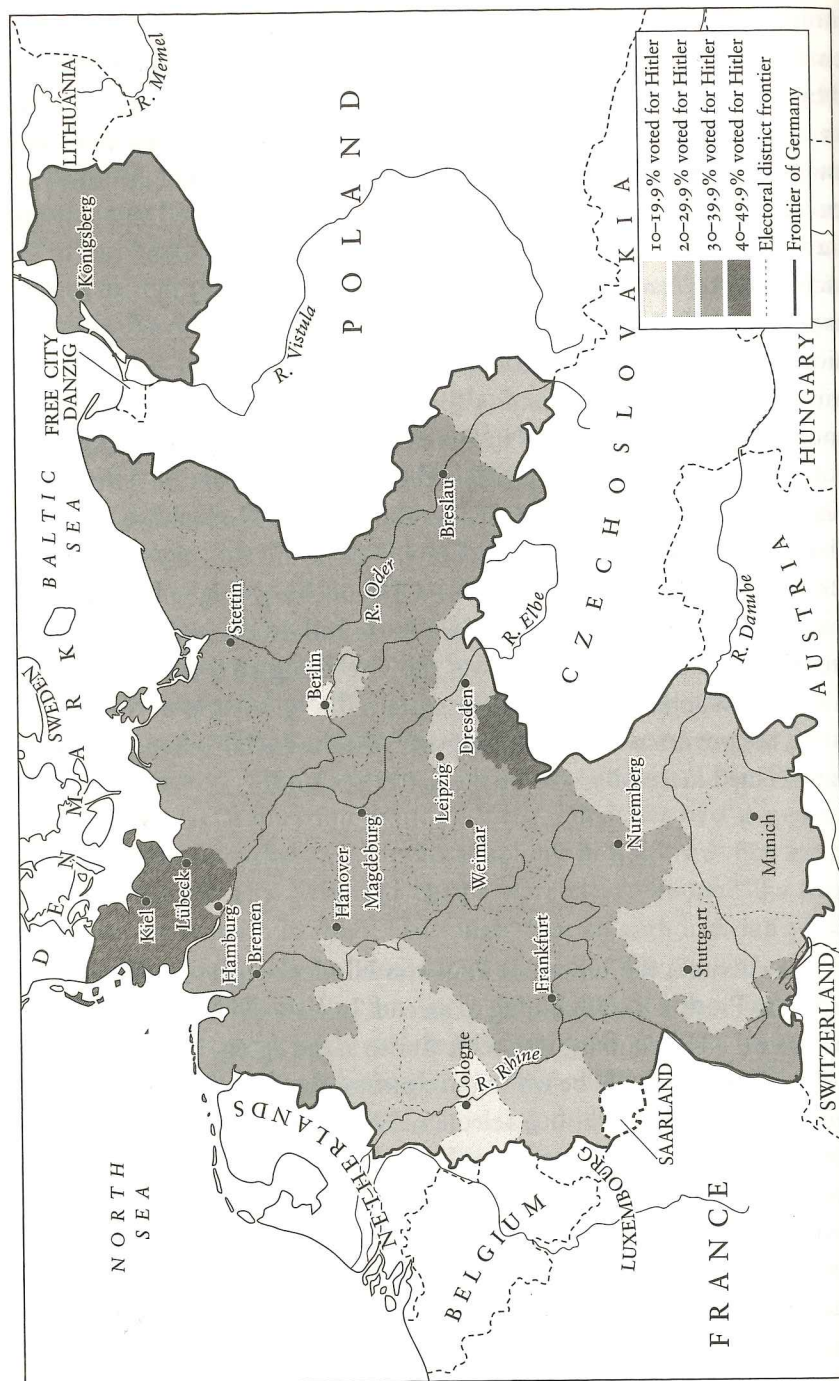
By 1931, therefore, decisions were no longer really being made by the Reichstag. Political power had moved elsewhere – to the circle around Hindenburg, with whom the right to sign decrees and the right to appoint governments lay, and to the streets, where violence continued to escalate, and where growing poverty, misery and disorder confronted the state with an increasingly urgent need for action. Both these processes greatly enhanced the influence of the army. Only in such circumstances could someone like its most important political representative, General Kurt von Schleicher, become one of the key players in the drama that followed. Ambitious, quick-witted, talkative and rather too fond of political intrigue for his own good, Schleicher was a relatively unknown figure before he suddenly shot to prominence in 1929, when a new office was created for him, the 'Ministerial Office', which had the function of representing the armed forces in their relations with the government. A close collaborator of Groener for many years, and a disciple of the leading general of the early 1920s, Hans von Seeckt, Schleicher had forged many political connections through running a variety of offices at the interface of military and political affairs, most recently the army section of the Defence Ministry. The dissident Russian Communist Leon Trotsky described him as 'a question mark with the epaulettes of a general'; a contemporary journalist saw him as a 'sphinx in uniform'. But for the most part Schleicher's aims and beliefs were clear enough: like many German conservatives in 1932, he thought that an authoritarian regime could be given legitimacy by harnessing and taming the popular might of the National Socialists. In this way, the German army, for which Schleicher spoke, and with which he continued to have very close contacts, would get what it wanted in the way of rearmament.¹⁰⁹

Brüning's government ran into increasing difficulties with Schleicher and the circle around President Hindenburg after the elections of September 1930. With the Communists and the Nazis baying for his blood, the Nationalists trying to oust him, and far-right fringe groups divided over whether to support him or not, Brüning had no option but to rely on the Social Democrats. For their part, the leaders of what was still the largest party in the Reichstag were sufficiently shocked by the election results to promise that they would not repeat their earlier rejection of the budget.

Brüning's dependence on the tacit toleration of his policies by the Social Democrats won him no credit at all among the circle around Hindenburg, led by his son Oskar and his State Secretary Meißner, who regarded this as a shameful concession to the left.¹¹⁰ The Chancellor's main priorities now lay in the field of foreign policy, where he made some headway in securing the end of reparations – abrogated by the Hoover Moratorium on 20 June 1931 and effectively ended by the Lausanne Conference, for which Brüning had laid much of the groundwork, in July 1932. And although he failed to achieve the creation of an Austro-German Customs Union, he did conduct successful negotiations in Geneva for the international recognition of German equality in questions of disarmament, a principle eventually conceded in December 1932. However, none of this did anything to strengthen the Chancellor's political position. After many months in office, he had still failed to win over the Nationalists and was still dependent on the Social Democrats. This meant that any plans either Brüning himself or the circle around Hindenburg might have had to amend the constitution decisively in a more authoritarian direction were effectively stymied, since this was the one thing to which the Social Democrats would never give their assent. To men such as Schleicher, shifting the government's mass support from the Social Democrats to the Nazis seemed increasingly to be the better option.¹¹¹

III

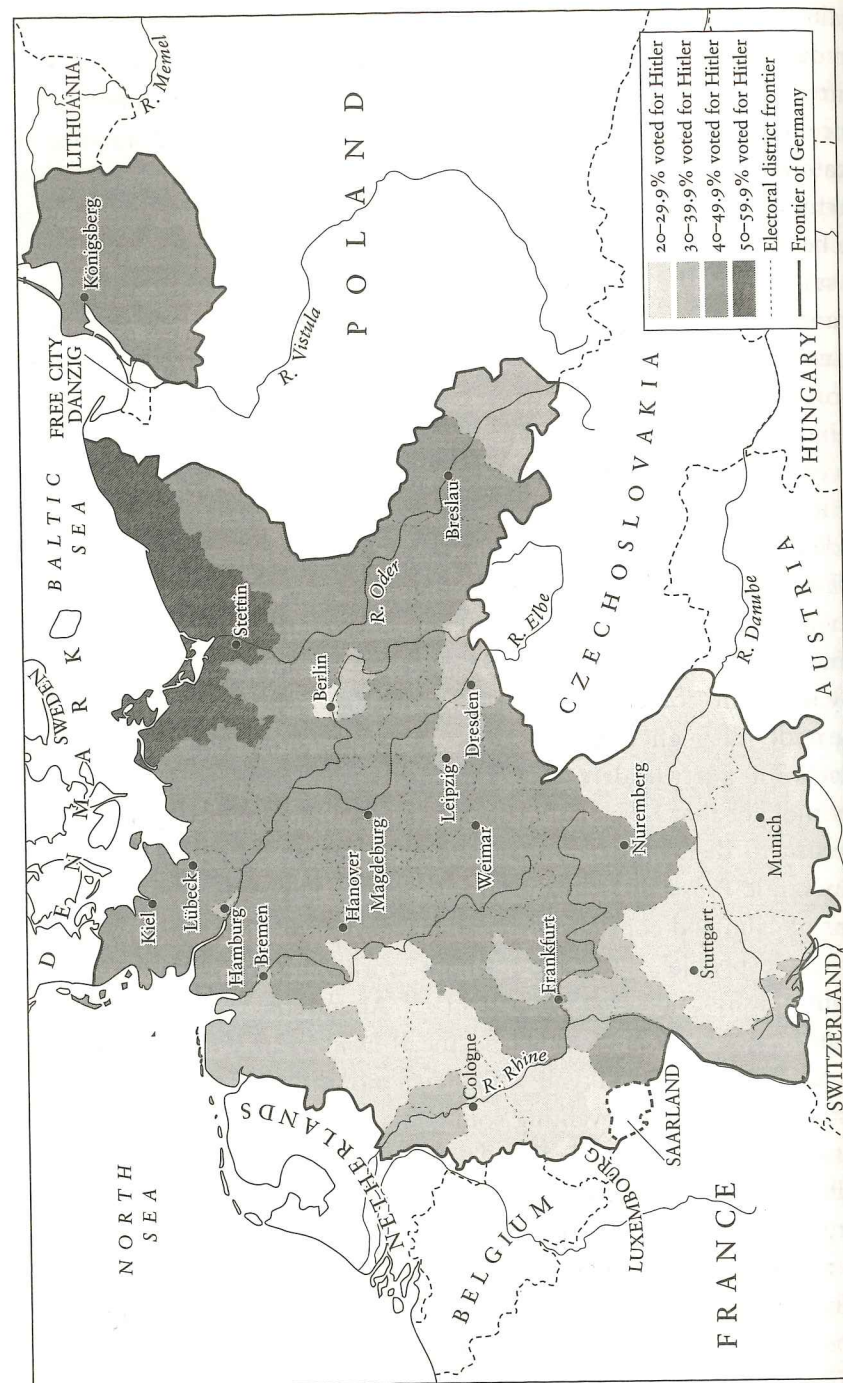
As 1932 dawned, the venerable Paul von Hindenburg's seven-year term of office as President was coming to an end. In view of his advanced years – he was 84 – Hindenburg was reluctant to stand again, but he had let it be known that he would be willing to continue in office if his tenure could simply be prolonged without an election. Negotiations over automatically renewing Hindenburg's Presidency foundered on the refusal of the Nazis to vote in the Reichstag for the necessary constitutional change without the simultaneous dismissal of Brüning and the calling of a fresh general election in which, of course, they expected to make further huge gains.¹¹² Hindenburg was thus forced to undergo the indignity of presenting himself to the electorate once more. But this time things were very different from the first time round, in 1925. Of course, Thälmann stood



Map 12. The Presidential Election of 1932. First Round

again for the Communists. But in the meantime Hindenburg had been far outflanked on the right; indeed, the entire political spectrum had shifted rightwards since the Nazi electoral landslide of September 1930. Once the election was announced, Hitler could hardly avoid standing as a candidate himself. Several weeks passed while he dithered, however, fearful of the consequences of running against such a nationalist icon as the hero of Tannenberg. Moreover, technically he was not even allowed to stand since he had not yet acquired German citizenship. Hurried arrangements were made for him to be appointed as a civil servant in Braunschweig, a measure that automatically gave him the status of a German citizen, confirmed when he took the oath of allegiance (to the Weimar constitution, as all civil servants had to) on 26 February 1932.¹¹³ His candidacy transformed the election into a contest between right and left in which Hitler was unarguably the candidate for the right, which made Hindenburg, extraordinarily, incredibly, the candidate for the left.

The Centre and the liberals backed Hindenburg, but what was particularly astonishing was the degree of support he received from the Social Democrats. This was not merely because the party considered him the only man who could stop Hitler – a point the party's propaganda made repeatedly throughout the election campaign – but for positive reasons as well. The party leaders were desperate to re-elect Hindenburg because they thought that he would keep Brüning in office as the last chance of a return to democratic normality.¹¹⁴ Hindenburg, declared the Social Democratic Prussian Minister-President Otto Braun, was the 'embodiment of calm and constancy, of manly loyalty and devotion to duty for the whole people', a 'man on whose work one can build, as a man of pure desire and serene judgment'.¹¹⁵ Already at this time, as these astonishing sentences showed, the Social Democrats were beginning to lose touch with political reality. Eighteen months of tolerating Brüning's cuts in the name of preventing something worse had relegated them to the sidelines of politics and robbed them of the power of decision. Despite disillusionment and defections amongst their members, their disciplined party machine duly delivered more than 8 million votes to the man who was to dismantle the Republic from above, in an effort to keep in office a Chancellor whom Hindenburg actually disliked and distrusted, and whose policies had been lowering the living standards and destroying the jobs of the very people the Social Democrats represented.¹¹⁶



Map 13. The Presidential Election of 1932. Second Round

The threat of a Nazi victory was real enough. The Goebbels propaganda machine found a way of combating Hindenburg without insulting him: he had done great service to the nation, but now was the time for him finally to step aside in favour of a younger man, otherwise the drift into economic chaos and political anarchy would continue. The Nazis unleashed a massive campaign of rallies, marches, parades and meetings, backed by posters, flysheets and ceaseless exhortations in the press. But it was not enough. In the first ballot, Hitler only managed to win 30 per cent of the vote. Yet despite the efforts of the Social Democrats and the electoral strength of the Centre Party, Hindenburg did not quite manage to obtain the overall majority required. He gained only 49.6 per cent of the vote, tantalizingly short of what he needed. On the left, Thälmann offered another alternative. On the right, Hindenburg had been outflanked not only by Hitler but also by Theodor Duesterberg, the candidate put up by the Steel Helmets, who received 6.8 per cent of the vote in the first ballot, which would have been more than enough to have pushed Hindenburg over the winning margin.¹¹⁷

For the run-off, between Hitler, Hindenburg and Thälmann, the Nazis pulled out all the stops. Hitler rented an aeroplane and flew across Germany from town to town, delivering 46 speeches the length and breadth of the land. The effect of this unprecedented move, billed as Hitler's 'flight over Germany', was electrifying. The effort paid off. Thälmann was reduced to a marginal 10 per cent, but Hitler boosted his vote massively to 37 per cent with over 13 million votes cast in his favour. Hindenburg, with the combined might of all the major parties behind him apart from the Communists and the Nazis, only managed to increase his support to 53 per cent. Of course, despite the hiccup of the first ballot, his re-election had been foreseeable from the start. What really mattered was the triumphant forward march of the Nazis. Hitler had not been elected, but his party had won more votes than ever before. It was beginning to look unstoppable.¹¹⁸ In 1932, better organized and better financed than in 1930, the Nazi Party had run an American-style Presidential campaign focusing on the person of Hitler as the representative of the whole of Germany. It had concentrated its efforts not so much on winning over the workers, where its campaign of 1930 had largely failed, but in garnering the middle-class votes that had previously gone to the splinter-parties and the parties of the liberal and conservative Protestant

electorate. Eighteen months of worsening unemployment and economic crisis had further radicalized these voters in their disillusion with the Weimar Republic, over which, after all, Hindenburg had been presiding for the past seven years. Goebbels's propaganda apparatus targeted specific groups of voters with greater precision than ever before, above all women. In the Protestant countryside, rural discontent had deepened to the point where Hitler actually defeated Hindenburg in the second round in Pomerania, Schleswig-Holstein and Eastern Hanover.¹¹⁹ And the Nazi movement's new status as Germany's most popular political party was underlined by further victories in the state elections held later in the spring – 36.3 per cent in Prussia, 32.5 per cent in Bavaria, 31.2 per cent in Hamburg, 26.4 per cent in Württemberg, and, above all, 40.9 per cent in Saxony-Anhalt, a result that gave them the right to form a state government. Once more, Hitler had taken to the air, delivering 25 speeches in quick succession. Once more, the Nazi propaganda machine had proved its efficiency and its dynamism.

Brüning's attempts to curb the Nazi Party's rise had obviously failed to make any kind of impact. The time seemed to many in President Hindenburg's entourage to be ripe for a different tactic. Despite his election victory, Hindenburg was far from satisfied with the result. The fact that he had run into such serious opposition was highly displeasing to a man who was increasingly treating his position like that of the unelected Kaiser he had once served. Brüning's cardinal sin was to have failed to persuade the Nationalists to support Hindenburg's re-election. When it became clear that they were backing Hitler, Brüning's days were numbered. Despite the Reich Chancellor's tireless campaigning on his behalf, the old Field-Marshal, who embodied for many the Prussian traditions of monarchism and Protestant conservatism, was deeply resentful at his dependence on the votes of the Social Democrats and the Centre Party, which made him look like the candidate of the left and the clericals, as, indeed, in the end, he was. Moreover, the army was becoming impatient with the crippling effects of Brüning's economic policies on the arms industry, and considered that his ban on the brownshirts got in the way of recruiting them as auxiliary troops, a prospect that became more enticing the more members they acquired. Finally, Hindenburg's attention was drawn to a moderate measure of land reform being proposed by the government in the east, in which bankrupt estates would be broken

up and provided as smallholdings to the unemployed. As a representative of the landed interest himself, with an estate of his own, Hindenburg was persuaded that this smacked of socialism.¹²⁰ In an atmosphere heavy with behind-the-scenes intrigue, with Schleicher undermining Groener's standing with the army and Hitler promising to tolerate a new government if it lifted the ban on the brownshirts and called new elections to the Reichstag, Brüning rapidly became more isolated. When Groener was forced to resign on 11 May 1932, Brüning's position was left completely exposed. Continually undermined by intrigues in Hindenburg's entourage, he saw no alternative but to tender his resignation, which he did on 30 May 1932.¹²¹

IV

The man whom Hindenburg appointed as the new Reich Chancellor was an old personal friend, Franz von Papen. A landed aristocrat whose position in the Centre Party, for which he had sat as an obscure and not very active deputy in the Prussian Parliament, Papen was even further to the right than Brüning himself. During the First World War he had been expelled from the United States, where he was military attaché at the German Embassy, for spying, or 'activities incompatible with his status', as the conventional diplomatic phrase went, and joined the German General Staff. During the 1920s he used the wealth brought him by a marriage to the daughter of a rich industrialist to buy a majority share in the Centre Party's newspaper, *Germania*. Papen thus had close contacts with some of the key social and political forces in the Weimar Republic, including the landed aristocracy, the Foreign Office, the army, the industrialists, the Catholic Church and the press. Indeed, he had been recommended to Hindenburg by Schleicher as someone who would be sympathetic to the army's interests. Even more than Brüning, he represented a form of Catholic political authoritarianism common throughout Europe in the early 1930s. Papen had long been at odds with his party, and he had openly championed Hindenburg against the Centre candidate Marx in the 1925 Presidential election. The Centre disowned Papen, who in his turn handed in his party membership card, proclaiming that he sought a 'synthesis of all truly nationalistic forces – from whatever

camp they may come – not as a party man, but as a German'.¹²² Now the break was complete.¹²³

These events marked, explicitly as well as in retrospect, the end of parliamentary democracy in Germany. Most members of the new cabinet were without party affiliation, apart from a couple who were, nominally at least, members of the Nationalist Party. Papen and his fellow-ideologues, including Schleicher, saw themselves as creating a 'New State', above parties, indeed opposed to the very principle of a multi-party system, with the powers of elected assemblies even more limited than they had been in Brüning's more modest vision. The kind of state they were thinking of was indicated by Papen's Interior Minister, Wilhelm Freiherr von Gayl, who had helped create a racist, authoritarian, military state in the area ceded to Germany by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918.¹²⁴ Among Gayl's proposals were the restriction of voting rights to a minority and the drastic reduction of parliamentary powers.¹²⁵ Papen's self-appointed task was to roll back history, not just Weimar democracy but everything that had happened in European politics since the French Revolution, and re-create in the place of modern class conflict the hierarchical basis of *ancien régime* society.¹²⁶ As a small but potent symbol of this intention, he abolished the use of that classic symbol of the French Revolution, the guillotine, for executions in parts of Prussia where it had been introduced in the nineteenth century, and replaced it with the traditional Prussian instrument of the hand-held axe.¹²⁷ Meanwhile, in a more immediately practical way, Papen's government began extending the curbs imposed by its predecessor on the radical press to democratic newspapers as well, banning popular left-liberal publications like the Social Democratic daily paper *Forwards* twice within a few weeks, proscribing popular left-liberal papers like the *Berlin People's Paper* (*Berliner Volkszeitung*) on two separate occasions, and convincing liberal commentators that press freedom had finally been abolished.¹²⁸

Papen's utopian conservatism did scant justice to the political realities of 1932. Papen's cabinet was made up of men with relatively little experience. So many of them were unknown aristocrats that it was widely known as the 'cabinet of barons'. In the discussions that preceded Brüning's resignation, Papen and Schleicher had agreed that they needed to win over the Nazis to provide mass support for the anti-democratic policies of the new government. They secured Hindenburg's agreement

to dissolve the Reichstag and call fresh elections, which Hitler had been demanding in the expectation that they would lead to a further increase in the Nazi vote. The elections were set for the end of July 1932. In addition, they also conceded Hitler's demand for a lifting of the ban on the brownshirts. This would, thought Schleicher, tame Nazi extremism and among other things persuade the brownshirts to act as an auxiliary army with which the limitations on the strength of the German armed forces imposed by the Treaty of Versailles could be decisively circumvented.¹²⁹ But it proved another disastrous miscalculation. Masses of stormtroopers flooded triumphantly back onto the streets, and beatings, pitched battles, woundings and killings, never entirely absent even during the period of the ban since the previous April, quickly reached record new levels. Even so, public opinion was shocked when, on 17 July 1932, a march staged by thousands of Nazi stormtroopers through the Communist stronghold of Altona, a working-class municipality on the Prussian side of the state border of Hamburg, ran into violent resistance from thousands of heavily armed Red Front-Fighters. Richard Krebs, in charge of 800 Communist sailors and dockers ready to drive the Nazis from the waterfront, reported later how the Red Front-Fighters were under orders to attack the stormtroopers in the streets. Stones, rubbish and all kinds of missiles were hurled at the passing marchers. According to some reports, there were Communist sharpshooters on the roofs, ready to massacre the stormtroopers below. Someone, nobody was sure who, fired a shot. Immediately, the police panicked and opened fire with everything they had, spraying the locality with bullets and causing panic flight in all directions. The Communists were driven away along with the rest. Their attempt to stop the brownshirt march through their territory had been an abject failure.¹³⁰ Eighteen people were killed and more than a hundred injured. Most of the deaths were caused, as autopsy reports revealed, by bullets fired from police revolvers. The depths of violence to which German political confrontations had now sunk clearly demanded action by the government.¹³¹

Far from banning the paramilitaries again, however, Papen seized on the events of 'Bloody Sunday' in Altona to depose the state government of Prussia, which was led by the Social Democrats Otto Braun and Carl Severing, on the grounds that it was no longer capable of maintaining law and order. This was the decisive blow against the Social Democrats

which he had been put into office to achieve. Papen had a sort of precedent in Ebert's deposition of the Saxon and Thuringian state governments in 1923, but Prussia, covering more than half the territory of the Reich, with a population greater than that of France, was a far more significant target. The central position of the army in the strife-torn political situation of 1932 was graphically illustrated as heavily armed combat troops took to the streets of Berlin, and a military state of emergency was declared throughout the capital city. The Social Democrat-controlled police force was simply pushed aside; any attempt by the Prussian government to use it as a means of resisting the armed strength of the military would only have led to confusion. Its manpower was too small, and the senior and middle-ranking officers were either disillusioned with the Republic, sympathized with Papen, or had been won over by the Nazis.¹³²

If Papen and Schleicher feared a workers' uprising, they were wrong. Many rank-and-file members of the Reichsbanner were ready to take up arms, and machine guns, pistols and carbines had been assembled to defend the party headquarters in the event of a putsch until the police, who, the party assumed – wrongly, as it turned out – would resist any attempt to overthrow the Republic, arrived on the scene. A recent increase in numbers had brought the strength of the Reichsbanner's Republican Defence Units up to more than 200,000. But they were heavily outnumbered by the combined forces of some three-quarters of a million brownshirts and Steel Helmets, who would certainly have mobilized against them had they staged an uprising. They were poorly trained and ill prepared. And they would have been no match for the well-equipped forces of the German army. The Communists, who had better reserves of arms, were certainly not going to take them up to defend the Social Democrats.¹³³

In the situation of July 1932, when Hindenburg, the military leadership and the conservatives were all extremely anxious to avoid provoking a civil war in Germany, an armed uprising by the Reichsbanner might have forced a climbdown by Papen, or an intervention by the Reich President. One can never know. The call to resist never came. The law-abiding traditions of the Social Democrats compelled them to put a ban on any armed resistance to an act that was sanctioned by the head of state and the legally constituted government, backed by the armed forces and not opposed by the police.¹³⁴ All that remained as an option for Braun and

Severing were rhetorical protests and lawsuits brought against Papen on the ground that he had breached the constitution. On 10 October 1932, the State Court ruled in part at least in favour of the Braun cabinet, which therefore continued to be a thorn in the Reich government's flesh by representing Prussia in the Reich Council, the upper chamber of the national legislature.¹³⁵ Meanwhile, Papen secured from the President his own appointment as Reich Commissioner to carry out the business of government in Prussia, while punctilious civil servants dithered and suspended business until the legal position was resolved.¹³⁶

Papen's coup dealt a mortal blow to the Weimar Republic. It destroyed the federal principle and opened the way to the wholesale centralization of the state. Whatever happened now, it was unlikely to be a full restoration of parliamentary democracy. After 20 July 1932 the only realistic alternatives were a Nazi dictatorship or a conservative, authoritarian regime backed by the army. The absence of any serious resistance on the part of the Social Democrats, the principal remaining defenders of democracy, was decisive. It convinced both conservatives and National Socialists that the destruction of democratic institutions could be achieved without any serious opposition. The Social Democrats had received plenty of advance warning of the coup. Yet they had done nothing. They were paralysed not only by the backing given to the coup by the man they had so recently supported in the Presidential election campaign, Paul von Hindenburg, but also by their catastrophic defeat in the Prussian parliamentary elections of April 1932. While the Nazis had increased their representation in the Prussian legislature from 9 seats to 162, and the Communists from 48 to 57, the Social Democrats had lost a third of their mandates, falling from 137 to 94. No party now had a majority, and the existing administration, led by Braun and Severing, carried on as a minority government with a correspondingly weakened political legitimacy. Beyond this, too, a sense of impotence had spread throughout the party leadership during the long months of passive toleration of Brüning's savage policy of cuts. The trade unions were powerless to do anything against the coup because the massive unemployment made a general strike impossible; millions of desperate, jobless people would have had little choice but to take on work as strikebreakers, and they knew it. A repeat of the united labour movement stand that had defeated the Kapp putsch in 1920 was thus out of the question. The Nazis were

jubilant. 'You only have to bare your teeth at the reds and they knuckle under', wrote the Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels in his diary for 20 July: the Social Democrats and trade unions, he observed with satisfaction, 'aren't lifting a finger'. 'The reds', he noted not long after, 'have missed their big chance. It's never going to come again.'¹³⁷

FATEFUL DECISIONS

I

The Papen coup took place in the midst of Germany's most frenetic and most violent election campaign yet, fought in an atmosphere even less rational and more vicious than that of two years before. Hitler once more flew across Germany from venue to venue, speaking before huge crowds at more than fifty major meetings, denouncing the divisions, humiliations and failures of Weimar and offering a vague but potent promise of a better, more united nation in the future. Meanwhile, the Communists preached revolution and announced the imminent collapse of the capitalist order, the Social Democrats called on the electors to rise up against the threat of fascism, and the bourgeois parties advocated a restorative unity they were patently unable to deliver.¹³⁸ The decay of parliamentary politics was graphically illustrated by the increasingly emotive propaganda style of the parties, including even the Social Democrats. Surrounded by increasingly violent street clashes and demonstrations, the political struggle became reduced to what the Social Democrats called – without the slightest hint of criticism – a war of symbols. Engaging a psychologist – Sergei Chakhotin, a radical Russian pupil of Pavlov, the discoverer of the conditioned response – to help them fight elections in the course of 1931, the Social Democrats realized that an appeal to reason was not enough. 'We have to work on feelings, souls and emotions so that reason wins the victory.' In practice, reason got left far behind. In the elections of July 1932 the Social Democrats ordered all their local groups to ensure that party members wore a party badge, used the clenched-fist greeting when encountering each other, and shouted the slogan 'Freedom!' at appropriate opportunities. In the same spirit,

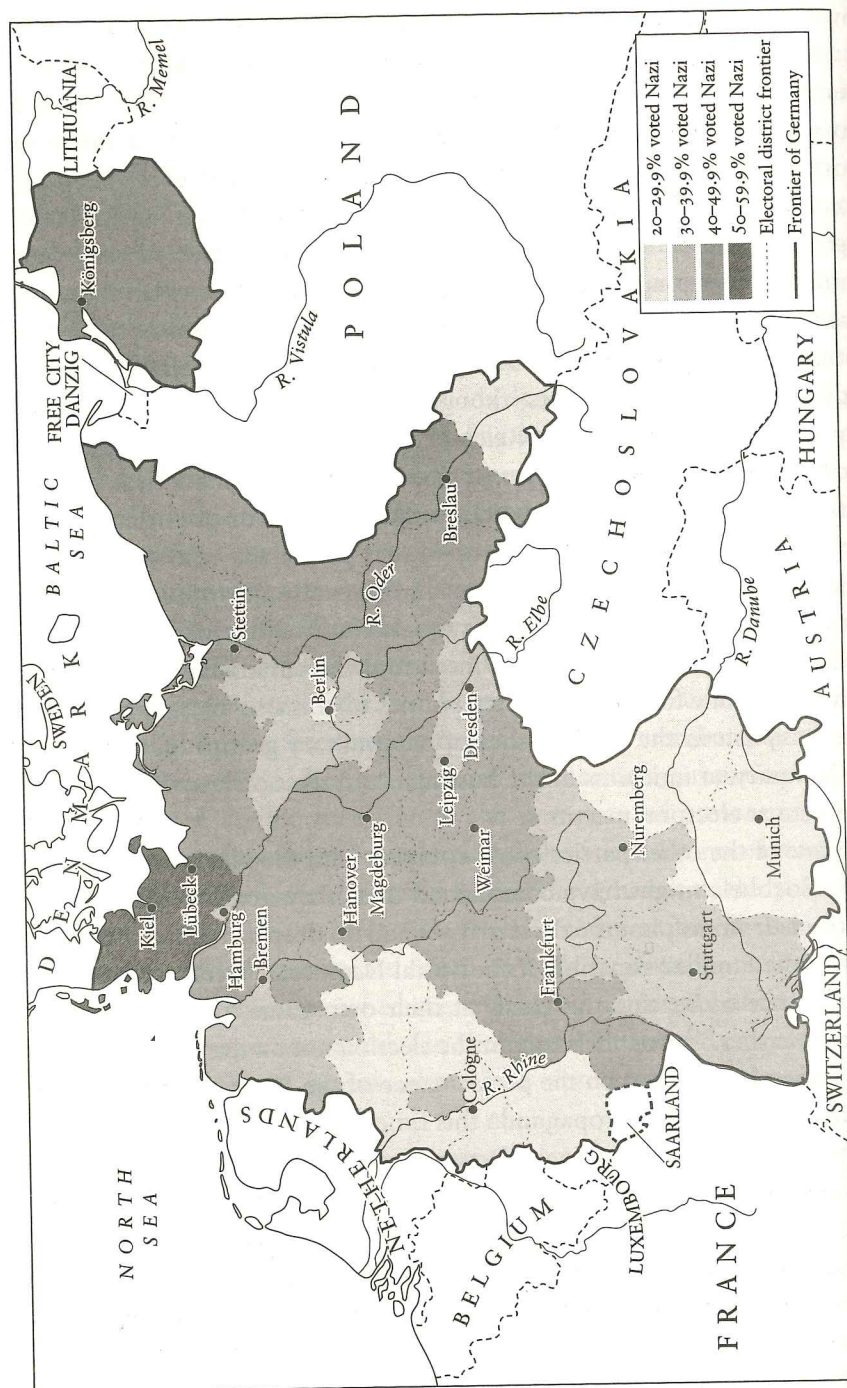
the Communists had long since been using the symbol of the hammer and sickle and a variety of slogans and greetings. In adopting this style, the parties were placing themselves on the same ground as the Nazis, with whose swastika symbol, 'Hail Hitler!' greeting and simple, powerful slogans they found it very difficult to compete.¹³⁹

Seeking for an image that would be dynamic enough to counter the appeal of the Nazis, the Social Democrats, the Reichsbanner, the trade unions, and a number of other working-class organizations connected with the socialists came together on 16 December 1931 to form the 'Iron Front' to fight the 'fascist' menace. The new movement borrowed heavily from the arsenal of propaganda methods developed by the Communists and the National Socialists. Long, boring speeches were to be replaced by short, sharp slogans. The labour movement's traditional emphasis on education, reason and science was to yield to a new stress on the rousing of mass emotions through street processions, uniformed marches and collective demonstrations of will. The new propaganda style of the Social Democrats even extended to the invention of a symbol to counter that of the swastika and the hammer and sickle: three parallel arrows, expressing the three major arms of the Iron Front. None of this did much to help the traditional labour movement, many of whose members, not least those who occupied leading positions in the Reichstag, remained sceptical, or proved unable to adapt to the new way of presenting their policies. The new propaganda style placed the Social Democrats on the same ground as the Nazis; but they lacked the dynamism, the youthful vigour or the extremism to offer them effective competition. The symbols, the marches and the uniforms failed to rally new supporters to the Iron Front, since the entrenched organizational apparatus of the Social Democrats remained in control. On the other hand, it did not allay the fears of middle-class voters about the intentions of the labour movement.¹⁴⁰

Even more revealing were the election posters used by the parties in the campaigns of the early 1930s. A common feature to almost all of them was their domination by the figure of a giant, half-naked worker who had come by the late 1920s to symbolize the German people, replacing the ironically modest little figure of the 'German Michel' in his sleeping-cap or the more rarified female personification of *Germania* that had previously stood for the nation. Nazi posters showed the giant worker

towering above a bank labelled 'International High Finance', destroying it with massive blows from a swastika-bedaubed compressor; the Social Democrats' posters portrayed the giant worker elbowing aside Nazis and Communists; the Centre Party's posters carried a cartoon of the giant worker, less scantily clad perhaps, but still with his sleeves rolled up, forcibly removing tiny Nazis and Communists from the parliament building; the People's Party depicted the giant worker, dressed only in a loincloth, sweeping aside the soberly dressed politicians of all the other warring factions in July 1932, in an almost exact reversal of what was actually to happen in the elections; even the staid Nationalist Party used a giant worker in its posters, though only to wave the black-white-red flag of the old Bismarckian Reich.¹⁴¹ All over Germany, electors were confronted with violent images of giant workers smashing their opponents to pieces, kicking them aside, yanking them out of parliament, or looming over frock-coated and top-hatted politicians who were almost universally portrayed as insignificant and quarrelsome pygmies. Rampant masculinity was sweeping aside the squabbling, ineffective and feminized political factions. Whatever the intention, the subliminal message was that it was time for parliamentary politics to come to an end: a message made explicit in the daily clashes of paramilitary groups on the streets, the ubiquity of uniforms at the hustings, and the non-stop violence and mayhem at electoral meetings.

None of the other parties could compete with the Nazis on this territory. Goebbels might have complained that 'they are now stealing our methods from us', but the three arrows had no deep symbolic resonance, unlike the familiar swastika. If the Social Democrats were to have stood any chance of beating the Nazis at their own game, they should have started earlier.¹⁴² Goebbels fought the election not on the performance of the Papen cabinet but on the performance of the Weimar Republic. The main objects of Nazi propaganda this time, therefore, were the voters of the Centre Party and the Social Democrats. In apocalyptic terms, a flood of posters, placards, leaflets, films and speeches delivered to vast open-air assemblies, purveyed a drastic picture of the 'red civil war over Germany' in which voters were confronted with a stark choice: either the old forces of betrayal and corruption, or a national rebirth to a glorious future. Goebbels and his propaganda team aimed to overwhelm the electorate with an unremitting barrage of assaults on their senses. Saturation



Map 14. The Nazis in the Reichstag Election of July 1932

coverage was to be achieved not only by mass publicity but also by a concerted campaign of door-knocking and leafleting. Microphones and loudspeakers blasted out Nazi speeches over every public space that could be found. Visual images, purveyed not only through posters and magazine illustrations but also through mass demonstrations and marches in the streets, drove out rational discourse and verbal argument in favour of easily assimilated stereotypes that mobilized a whole range of feelings, from resentment and aggression to the need for security and redemption. The marching columns of the brownshirts, the stiff salutes and military poses of the Nazi leaders conveyed order and dependability as well as ruthless determination. Banners and flags projected the impression of ceaseless activism and idealism. The aggressive language of Nazi propaganda created endlessly repeated stereotypical images of their opponents – the ‘November criminals’, the ‘red bosses’, the ‘Jewish wire-pullers’, the ‘red murder-pack’. Yet, given the Nazis’ need to reassure the middle classes, the giant worker was now in some instances portrayed in a benevolent pose, no longer wild and aggressive, but wearing a shirt and handing tools of work to the unemployed instead of wielding them as weapons to destroy his opponents; the Nazis were prepared for responsible government.¹⁴³

This unprecedentedly intense electoral propaganda soon brought its desired results. On 31 July 1932, the Reichstag election revealed the folly of Papen’s tactics. Far from rendering Hitler and the Nazis more amenable, the election brought them a further massive boost in power, more than doubling their vote from 6.4 million to 13.1 million and making them by far the largest party in the Reichstag, with 230 seats, nearly a hundred more than the next biggest group, the Social Democrats, who managed to limit their losses to 10 more seats and sent 133 deputies to the new legislature. The 18.3 per cent of the vote the Nazis had obtained in September 1930 was also more than doubled, to 37.4 per cent. The continued polarization of the political scene was marked by another increase for the Communists, who now sent 89 deputies to the Reichstag instead of 77. And while the Centre Party also managed to increase its vote and gain 75 mandates in the new parliament, its highest ever number, the Nationalists registered further losses, going down from 41 seats to 37, reducing them almost to the status of a fringe party. Most striking of all, however, was the almost total annihilation of the parties

of the centre. The People's Party lost 24 out of its 31 seats, the Economy Party 21 out of its 23, and the State Party, formerly the Democrats, 16 out of its 20. The congeries of far-right splinter-groups that had attracted such strong middle-class support in 1930 now also collapsed, retaining only 9 out of their previous 55 mandates. Left and right now faced each other in the Reichstag across a centre shrunk to insignificance: a combined Social Democrat/Communist vote of 13.4 million confronted a Nazi vote of 13.8 million, with all the other parties combined picking up a mere 9.8 million of the votes cast.¹⁴⁴

The reasons for the Nazis' success at the polls in July 1932 were much the same as they had been in September 1930; nearly two more years of sharply deepening crisis in society, politics and the economy had rendered these factors even more powerful than they had been before. The election confirmed the Nazis' status as a rainbow coalition of the discontented, with, this time, a greatly increased appeal to the middle classes, who had evidently overcome the hesitation they had displayed two years earlier, when they had turned to the splinter-groups of the right. Electors from the middle-class parties had by now almost all found their way into the ranks of Nazi Party voters. One in two voters who had supported the splinter-parties in September 1930 now switched to the Nazis, and one in three of those who had voted for the Nationalists, the People's Party and the State Party in the previous Reichstag election. One previous non-voter in five now went to the polls to cast his or (especially) her vote for the Nazis. Even one in seven of those who had previously voted Social Democrat now voted Nazi. Thirty per cent of the Party's gains came from the splinter-parties. These voters included many who had supported the Nationalists in 1924 and 1928. Even a few Communist and Catholic Centre Party voters switched, though this was roughly balanced out by those who switched back the other way. The Nazi Party continued to be attractive mainly to Protestants, with only 14 per cent of Catholic voters supporting it as against 40 per cent of non-Catholics. Sixty per cent of Nazi voters on this occasion were from the middle classes, broadly defined; 40 per cent were wage-earning manual workers and their dependants, though, as before, these were overwhelmingly workers whose connection with the labour movement, for a variety of reasons, had always been weak. The negative correlation between the size of the Nazi vote in any constituency, and the level of unemployment, was as strong as ever.

The Nazis continued to be a catch-all party of social protest, with particularly strong support from the middle classes, and relatively weak support in the traditional industrial working class and the Catholic community, above all where there was a strong economic and institutional underpinning of the labour movement or Catholic voluntary associations.¹⁴⁵

Yet while July 1932 gave the Nazi Party a massive boost in the Reichstag, it was none the less something of a disappointment to its leaders. For them, the key factor in the result was not that they had improved on the previous Reichstag poll, but that they had not improved on their performance in the second round of the Presidential elections the previous March or the Prussian elections the previous April. There was a feeling, therefore, that the Nazi vote had finally peaked. In particular, despite a massive effort, the Party had only enjoyed limited success in its primary objective of breaking into the Social Democratic and Centre Party vote. So there was no repeat of the jubilation with which the Nazis had greeted their election victory of September 1930. Goebbels confided to his diary his feeling that 'we have won a tiny bit', no more. 'We won't get to an absolute majority this way,' he concluded. The election therefore lent a fresh sense of urgency to the feeling that, as Goebbels put it, 'something must happen. The time for opposition is over. Now deeds!'¹⁴⁶ The moment to grasp for power had arrived, he added the following day, and he noted that Hitler agreed with his view. Otherwise, if they stuck to the parliamentary route to power, the stagnation of their voting strength suggested that the situation might start to slip out of their grasp. Yet Hitler ruled out entering a coalition government led by another party, as indeed he was entitled to do, given the fact that his own Party now held by far the largest number of seats in the national legislature. Immediately after the election, therefore, Hitler insisted that he would only enter a government as Reich Chancellor. This was the only position that would preserve the mystique of his charisma amongst his followers. Unlike a subordinate cabinet position, it would also give him a good chance of turning dominance of the cabinet into a national dictatorship by using the full forces of the state that would then be at his disposal.

II

How those forces might be employed was graphically illustrated by an incident that occurred early in August 1932. In an attempt to master the situation, Papen had imposed a ban on public political meetings on 29 July. This merely had the effect of depriving activists of legitimate political outlets for their inflamed political passions. So it fuelled the violence on the streets still further. On 9 August, therefore, he promulgated another emergency Presidential decree imposing the death penalty on anyone who killed an opponent in the political struggle out of rage or hatred. He intended this to apply above all to the Communists. But in the small hours of the following morning, a group of drunken brownshirts, armed with rubber truncheons, pistols and broken-off billiard cues, broke into a farm in the Upper Silesian village of Potempa and attacked one of the inhabitants, a Communist sympathizer, Konrad Pietzuch. The brownshirts struck him across the face with a billiard cue, beat him senseless, laid into him with their boots as he lay on the ground, and finished him off with a revolver. Pietzuch was Polish, making this into a racial as well as a political incident, and some of the brownshirts had a personal grudge against him. Nevertheless, it was clearly a political murder under the terms of the decree, and five of the brownshirts were arrested, tried and sentenced to death in the nearby town of Beuthen. As soon as the verdict was announced, brownshirted Nazi stormtroopers rampaged through the streets of Beuthen, wrecking Jewish shops and trashing the offices of liberal and left-wing newspapers. Hitler personally and publicly condemned the injustice of 'this monstrous blood-verdict', and Hermann Göring sent an open message of solidarity to the condemned 'in boundless bitterness and outrage at the terror-judgment that has been served on you.'¹⁴⁷

The murder now became an issue in the negotiations between Hitler, Papen and Hindenburg over Nazi participation in the government. Ironically, President Hindenburg was in any case reluctant to accept Hitler as Chancellor because appointing a government led by the leader of the party that had won the elections would now look too much like going back to a parliamentary system of rule. Now he was dismayed by the Potempa murder, too. 'I have had no doubts about your love for the

Fatherland,' he told Hitler patronizingly on 13 August 1933. 'Against possible acts of terror and violence,' he added, however, 'as have, regrettably, also been committed by members of the SA divisions, I shall intervene with all possible severity.' Papen, too, was unwilling to allow Hitler to lead the cabinet. After negotiations had broken down, Hitler declared:

German racial comrades! Anyone amongst you who possesses any feeling for the struggle for the nation's honour and freedom will understand why I am refusing to enter this government. Herr von Papen's justice will in the end condemn perhaps thousands of National Socialists to death. Did anyone think they could put my name as well to this blindly aggressive action, this challenge to the entire people? The gentlemen are mistaken! Herr von Papen, now I know what your bloodstained 'objectivity' is! I want victory for a nationalistic Germany, and annihilation for its Marxist destroyers and corrupters. I am not suited to be the hangman of nationalist freedom fighters of the German people!¹⁴⁸

Hitler's support for the brutal violence of the stormtroopers could not have been clearer. It was enough to intimidate Papen, who had never intended his decree to apply to the Nazis, into commuting the condemned men's sentences to life imprisonment on 2 September, in the hope of placating the leading Nazis.¹⁴⁹ Shortly after the incident, Hitler had sent the brownshirts on leave for a fortnight, fearing another ban. He need not have bothered.¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the Nazis, who had scented power after the July poll, were bitterly disappointed at the leadership's failure to join the cabinet. The breakdown of negotiations with Hitler also left Papen and Hindenburg with the problem of gaining popular legitimacy. The moment for destroying the parliamentary system seemed to have arrived, but how were they to do it? Papen, with Hindenburg's backing, determined to dissolve the new Reichstag as soon as it met. He would then use – or rather, abuse – the President's power to rule by decree to declare that there would be no more elections. However, when the Reichstag finally met in September, amidst chaotic scenes, Hermann Göring, presiding over the session, according to tradition, as the representative of the largest party, deliberately ignored Papen's attempts to declare a dissolution and allowed a Communist motion of no-confidence in the government to go ahead. The motion won the support of 512 deputies, with only 42 voting

against and 5 abstentions. The vote was so humiliating, and demonstrated Papen's lack of support in the country so graphically, that the plan to abolish elections was abandoned. Instead, the government saw little alternative but to follow the constitution and call a fresh Reichstag election for November.¹⁵¹

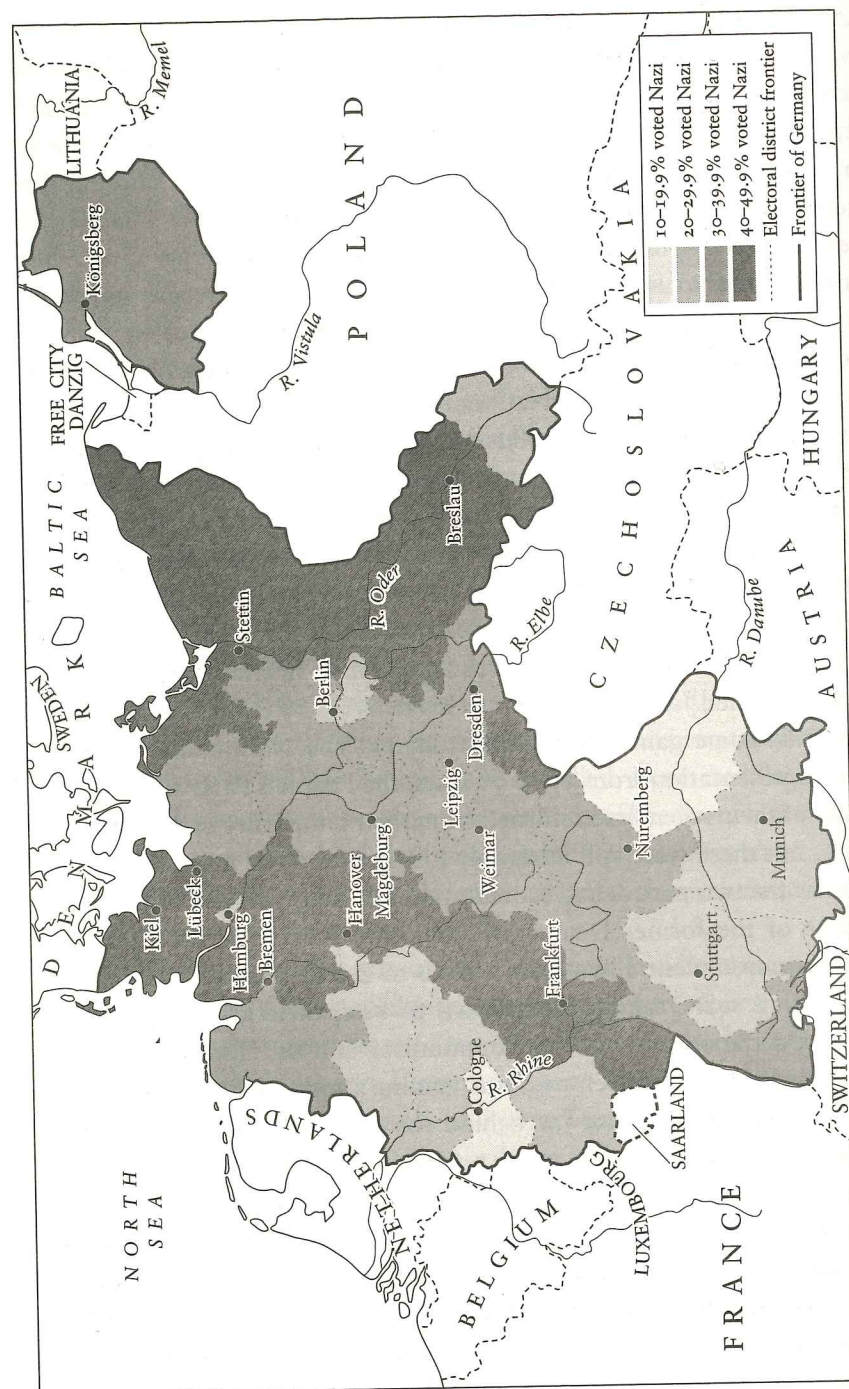
The new election campaign saw Hitler, enraged at Papen's tactics, launch a furious attack on the government. A cabinet of aristocratic reactionaries would never win the collaboration of a man of the people such as himself, he proclaimed. The Nazi press trumpeted yet another triumphant swing by 'the Leader' through the German states; but all its boasts of a massive turnout and wild enthusiasm for Hitler's oratory could not disguise, from the Party leadership at least, the fact that many of the meeting-halls where Hitler spoke were now half-empty, and that the many campaigns of the year had left the Party in no financial condition to sustain its propaganda effort at the level of the previous election. Moreover, Hitler's populist attacks on Papen frightened off middle-class voters, who thought they saw the Nazis' 'socialist' character coming out again. Participation in a bitter transport workers' strike in Berlin alongside the Communists in the run-up to the election did not help the Party's image in the Berlin proletariat, although this had been Goebbels' aim, and it also put off rural voters and repelled some middle-class electors, too. The once-novel propaganda methods of the Party had now become familiar to all. Goebbels had nothing left up his sleeve to startle the electorate with. Nazi leaders gloomily resigned themselves to the prospect of severe losses on polling day.¹⁵²

The mood amongst large parts of the Protestant middle classes was captured in the diary of Louise Solmitz, a former schoolteacher living in Hamburg. Born in 1899, and married to an ex-officer, she had long been an admirer of Hindenburg and Hugenberg, saw Brüning with typical Protestant disdain as a 'petty Jesuit', and complained frequently in her diary about Nazi violence.¹⁵³ But in April 1932 she had gone to hear Hitler speak at a mass meeting in a Hamburg suburb and had been filled with enthusiasm by the atmosphere and the public, drawn from all walks of life, as much as by the speech.¹⁵⁴ 'The Hitler spirit carries you away,' she wrote, 'is German, and right.'¹⁵⁵ All her family's middle-class friends were supporting Hitler before long, and there was little doubt that they voted for him in July. But they were repelled both by Göring's cavalier

treatment of the Reichstag when it met, and by what they saw as the Nazis' move to the left in the November election campaign. They now inclined more towards Papen, though never with much enthusiasm because he was a Catholic. 'I've voted for Hitler twice,' said an old friend, an ex-soldier, 'but not any more.' 'It's sad about Hitler,' said another acquaintance: 'I can't go along with him any more.' Hitler's backing of the Berlin transport workers' strike, Louise Solmitz thought, cost him thousands of votes. He was not interested in Germany, she concluded pessimistically, only in power. 'Why has Hitler abandoned us, after he showed us a future which one could say yes to?' she asked. In November the Solmitzes voted for the Nationalists.¹⁵⁶

Faced with this kind of disillusion, it was not surprising that the Nazis did badly. The election, on a much lower turnout than in July, registered a sharp fall in the Party's vote, from 13.7 million to 11.7, reducing its representation in the Reichstag from 230 seats to 196. The Nazis were still by a very long way the largest party. But now they had fewer seats than the combined total of the two 'Marxist' parties.¹⁵⁷ 'Hitler in Decline', the Social Democratic *Forwards* proclaimed.¹⁵⁸ 'We have suffered a setback,' confided Joseph Goebbels to his diary.¹⁵⁹ By contrast, the election registered some gains for the government. The Nationalists improved their representation from 37 to 51 seats, the People's Party from 7 to 11. Many of their voters had returned from their temporary exile in the Nazi Party. But these were still miserably low figures, little more than a third of what the two parties had scored in their heyday in 1924. The pathetic decline of the former Democrats, the State Party, continued, as their representation went down from 4 seats to 2. The Social Democrats lost another 12 seats, taking them down to 121, their lowest figure since 1924. On the other hand the Communists, still the third largest party, continued to improve their position, gaining another 11 seats, which gave them a total of 100, not far behind the Social Democrats. For many middle-class Germans, this was a terrifyingly effective performance that threatened the prospect of a Communist revolution in the not-too-distant future. The Centre Party also saw a small decline, down from 75 seats to 70, with some of these votes going to the Nazis, as with their Bavarian wing, the Bavarian People's Party.¹⁶⁰

Overall, the Reichstag was even less manageable than before. One hundred Communists now confronted 196 Nazis across the chamber,



Map 15. The Nazis in the Reichstag Election of November 1932

both intent on destroying a parliamentary system they hated and despised. As a result of the government's rhetorical assault on them during the campaign, the Centre and the Social Democrats were more hostile to Papen than ever. Papen had completely failed to reverse his humiliation in the Reichstag on 12 September. He still faced an overwhelming majority against his cabinet in the new legislature. Papen considered cutting the Gordian knot by banning both Nazis and Communists and using the army to enforce a Presidential regime, bypassing the Reichstag altogether. But this was not a practical possibility, for by this point, fatally, he had lost the confidence of the army and its leading officers, too. Earlier in the year, the army hierarchy had pushed out the Minister of Defence, General Wilhelm Groener, finding his willingness to compromise with the Weimar Republic and its institutions no longer appropriate in the new circumstances. He was replaced by Schleicher, whose views were now more in tune with those of the leading officers. For his part, Schleicher was annoyed that the Chancellor had had the nerve to develop his own ideas and plans for an authoritarian regime instead of following the instructions of the man who had done so much to put him into power in the first place, that is, himself. Papen had also signally failed to deliver the parliamentary majority, made up principally of the Nazis and the Centre Party, that Schleicher and the army had been looking for. It was time for a new initiative. Schleicher quietly informed Papen that the army was unwilling to risk a civil war and would no longer give him its support. The cabinet agreed, and Papen, faced with uncontrollable violence on the streets and lacking any means of preventing its further escalation, was forced to announce his intention to resign.¹⁶¹

III

Two weeks of complicated negotiations now followed, led by Hindenburg and his entourage. By this time, the constitution had in effect reverted to what it had been in the Bismarckian Reich, with governments being appointed by the head of state, without reference to parliamentary majorities or legislatures. The Reichstag had been pushed completely to the margins as a political factor. It was, in effect, no longer needed, not even to pass laws. Yet the problem remained that any government which

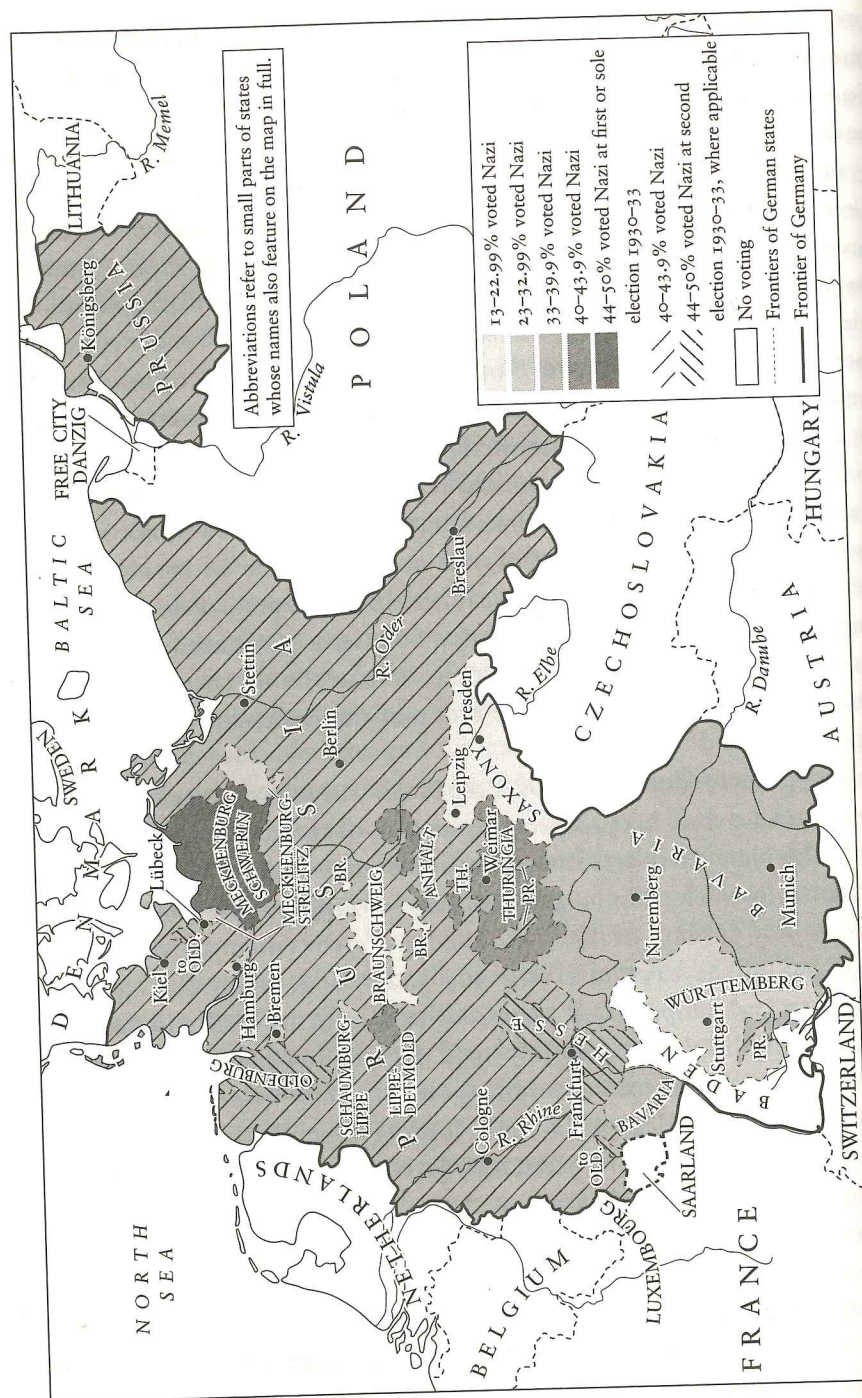
tried to change the constitution in an authoritarian direction without the legitimacy afforded by the backing of a majority in the legislature would run a serious risk of starting a civil war. So the search for parliamentary backing continued. Since the Nazis would not play ball, Schleicher was forced to take on the Chancellorship himself on 3 December. His ministry was doomed from the start. Hindenburg resented his overthrow of Papen, whom he liked and trusted, and many of whose ideas he shared. For a few weeks, Schleicher, less hated by the Centre Party and the Social Democrats than Papen had been, earned a respite by avoiding any repetition of Papen's authoritarian rhetoric. He continued to hope that the Nazis might come round. They had been weakened by the November elections and were divided over what to do next. Moreover, early in December, in local elections held in Thuringia, their vote plummeted by some 40 per cent from the previous July's national high. A year of strenuous electioneering had also left the Party virtually bankrupt. Things seemed to be playing into Schleicher's hands.¹⁶²

Within the Nazi Party, voices now began to be raised criticizing Hitler for his refusal to join a coalition government except at its head. Chief among these was the Party's Organization Leader, Gregor Strasser, who was only too conscious of the parlous state to which, as he increasingly thought, Hitler had reduced the Party organization so painstakingly built up over the previous years. Strasser began to cultivate both big business, with a view to replenishing Party funds, and trade unions, which he sought to win over to the idea of participating in a broad-based national coalition. Aware of his views, however, his enemies in the Nazi leadership, chief among them Joseph Goebbels, started to intrigue behind his back and to accuse him of trying to sabotage the Party's drive for power.¹⁶³ Matters came to a head when Schleicher, seeking to put pressure on Hitler to join the cabinet, began separate negotiations with Strasser about a possible post in the government. Hitler, however, was adamant that the Nazis should not join any government of which he was not the head. At a fraught meeting with Hitler, Strasser pleaded in vain for his point of view. Rebuffed once more, he resigned all his Party posts on 8 December in a fit of wounded pride.

Hitler moved swiftly to prevent a Party split, firing known supporters of his former second-in-command and appealing in person to waverers. In a brief, whirlwind tour across the country, Hitler addressed group

after group of Party functionaries and convinced them of the rightness of his position, by casting Strasser in the role of traitor, rather as Stalin was casting Trotsky in the role of traitor in the Soviet Union at around the same time. The danger of a split had been real; Hitler and Goebbels certainly took it extremely seriously. But it was based on tactical considerations, not on matters of principle. In no sense did Strasser represent an alternative vision of the future to Hitler's; his ideological position was very similar to his leader's, and he had fully supported the expulsion in 1930 of his brother Otto, whose opinions had indeed been well to the left of the Party mainstream. Nor did Gregor Strasser put up any kind of a fight in December 1932. Had he campaigned for his point of view he might well have taken a substantial portion of the Party with him, leaving it fatally damaged. Instead, he did nothing. He went off on holiday in Italy immediately after his resignation, and although he was not actually expelled from the Party, he played no further role in its affairs and effectively withdrew from political life. Hitler appointed himself Party Organization Leader and dismantled Strasser's centralized structure of Party management just in case someone else should take it over. The crisis in the Party had passed. Hitler and the leadership could breathe again.¹⁶⁴

Schleicher's failure to win over the Nazis was to prove decisive. Superficially, to be sure, his prospects at the turn of the year did not seem too bad. The Nazi Party was in decline, and even its successful performance in the regional election in the small state of Lippe on 15 January, when it won 39.5 per cent of the vote, failed to convince many, given that the total size of the electorate was only 100,000. A massive propaganda effort and a campaign of unprecedented intensity had still failed to improve on the Nazi vote of July 1932. Hitler and Goebbels were able to revive flagging Nazi spirits and strengthen the Party's resolve by trumpeting the result as a triumph, but most leading figures in the political world knew better.¹⁶⁵ In other respects, too, the Nazis seemed to be on the wane. Their share of the vote in student union elections, for instance, declined from 48 per cent in 1932 to 43 per cent at the beginning of 1933.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the world economic situation was at last beginning to look up, the Depression seemed to be bottoming out, and Schleicher, recognizing the possibilities offered by Germany's departure from the Gold Standard eighteen months before, was preparing a massive job-creation



Map 16. Regional Elections, 1931-1933

programme to relieve unemployment through the state provision of public works. This boded ill for the Nazis, whose rise to electoral predominance had been the product above all of the Depression. They had peaked in regional elections, too, and everyone knew it.

But the decline of the Nazis and the revival of the economy were only likely to become important factors over a number of months or even years. Schleicher did not have months or years to play with, only weeks. For Hindenburg and his advisers, above all, his son Oskar, State Secretary Meissner, and ex-Chancellor Franz von Papen, it seemed more urgent than ever at this point to tame the Nazis by bringing them into government. The Nazis' recent losses and divisions seemed to have put them in a position where it would be easier to do this. But if their decline continued, then in the foreseeable future, with an economic upswing on the way, it seemed possible that the old political parties might recover and parliamentary government return, possibly even involving the Social Democrats. Alfred Hugenberg was equally alarmed at such a prospect. Some of Schleicher's economic schemes, which included a possible nationalization of the steel industry and his repeal, carried out in December, of Papen's wage and benefit cuts imposed the previous September, also caused concern among elements in the business world whose interests Papen, Hindenburg and Hugenberg took seriously. As the owner of a landed estate, Hindenburg was further alienated by Schleicher's proposals for land reform in East Elbia, distributing bankrupt Junker estates to the peasantry. A coalition of conservative forces began to form around Hindenburg with the aim of getting rid of Schleicher, whose announcement that he favoured neither capitalism nor socialism they found extremely worrying.¹⁶⁷

The conspirators secured the backing of the Steel Helmets and their leaders Franz Seldte and Theodor Duesterberg, for a plan to oust Schleicher and replace him with a Reich Chancellor whom they would find more acceptable. Half a million strong, the Steel Helmets were a potentially formidable fighting force. However, they were deeply divided, their leaders Seldte and Duesterberg were at daggers drawn, and they were chronically unable to decide whether or not to throw in their lot with the Nazis or with the conservatives. Their commitment to be 'above parties' was a constant source of internal dispute instead of the unifying slogan it was supposed to be. In this situation, many senior figures in the veterans'

organization pressed with some success for its return to welfare activities, military training, the 'protection' of Germany's eastern borders through a strong paramilitary presence, and similar practical tasks. The Steel Helmets thought of themselves above all as a reserve army, to be called upon if necessary to augment the official military forces, whose numbers were little more than a fifth of their own, thanks to the restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. Duesterberg's disastrous showing in the Presidential elections had convinced many that a withdrawal from the political battlefield was advisable. His background as a Prussian officer caused him to mistrust the Nazis and to consider them too vulgar and disorderly to be worthy partners. But Duesterberg's own position had been weakened by the revelation, shocking to many Steel Helmets, that he had Jewish ancestry. It was Seldte, therefore, who lent the Steel Helmets' name to the conspiracy to oust Schleicher early in 1933.¹⁶⁸

Papen himself, though in the thick of the conspiracy, was clearly out of the running for the Chancellorship, since he had alienated almost everyone outside Hindenburg's entourage over the previous few months and had no popular backing in the country. Frantic negotiations finally led to a plan to put Hitler in as Chancellor, with a majority of conservative cabinet colleagues to keep him in check. The scheme was lent urgency by rumours that Schleicher, in collaboration with the chief of the army command, General Kurt von Hammerstein, was preparing a counter-coup. He apparently intended to establish an authoritarian corporate state, to eliminate the Reichstag by Presidential decree, to put the army in control, and to suppress the Nazis altogether, as well as the Communists. 'If a new government is not formed by 11 o'clock,' Papen told Hugenberg and the Steel Helmets' leaders on 30 January, 'the army will march. A military dictatorship under Schleicher and Hammerstein is looming.'¹⁶⁹

The rumour did the rounds because it was known in political circles that Schleicher's failure to secure parliamentary support left him no option but to ask the President for wide-ranging, effectively extra-constitutional powers to overcome the crisis. When he went to Hindenburg with this request, the aged President and his entourage saw this as their chance to rid themselves of this irritating and untrustworthy intriguer, and refused. After he was rebuffed, some expected Schleicher and the army to take matters into their own hands and seize the powers

they wanted anyway. But Schleicher and the army only ever considered a putsch for the eventuality of Papen returning to the Reich Chancellery, and this was only because they thought that Papen's appointment might well lead to the outbreak of civil war. Keen to avoid this situation arising, however, Schleicher now saw a Hitler Chancellorship as a welcome solution, as far as the army was concerned. 'If Hitler wants to establish a dictatorship in the Reich,' he said confidently, 'then the army will be the dictatorship within the dictatorship.'¹⁷⁰ Refused permission by the President to govern unconstitutionally, Schleicher had no option but to tender his resignation. Negotiations had already been in progress for some time in the circle around Hindenburg with a view to appointing Hitler in his stead. Finally, at about half past eleven on the morning of 30 January 1933, Hitler was sworn in as Reich Chancellor. The government of which he was head was dominated numerically by Papen and his fellow conservatives. The radical wing of the much-shrunken Nationalist Party entered the government, with Alfred Hugenberg taking over the Economics Ministry and the Ministry of Food. Konstantin Freiherr von Neurath, already Foreign Minister in the Papen and Schleicher governments, continued in office, as did Lutz Graf Schwerin von Krosigk in the Finance Ministry and, a little later, Franz Gürtner, for the Nationalists, in the Ministry of Justice. The army ministry was taken over by Werner von Blomberg. Franz Seldte, representing the Steel Helmets, moved into the Ministry of Labour.

Only two major offices of state went to the Nazis, but both of them were key positions on which Hitler had insisted as a condition of the deal: the Ministry of the Interior, occupied by Wilhelm Frick, and the Reich Chancellery itself, occupied by Hitler. Hermann Göring was appointed Reich Minister Without Portfolio and Acting Prussian Minister of the Interior, which gave him direct control over the police in the greater part of Germany. The Nazis could thus manipulate the whole domestic law-and-order situation to their advantage. If they moved even with only a modicum of skill, the way would soon be free for the brownshirts to unleash a whole new level of violence against their opponents on the streets. Franz von Papen became Vice-Chancellor and continued to rule Prussia as Reich Commissioner, nominally Göring's superior. Surrounded by friends of Papen, who had the all-important ear of Reich President Hindenburg, Hitler and the Nazis – vulgar, uneducated,

inexperienced in government – would surely be easy enough to control. ‘You are wrong,’ Papen haughtily told a sceptical associate who had voiced his alarm: ‘We’ve engaged him for ourselves.’¹⁷¹ ‘Within two months,’ Papen confidently told a worried conservative acquaintance, ‘we will have pushed Hitler so far into a corner that he’ll squeak.’¹⁷²

5

CREATING THE
THIRD REICH