



German History in Documents and Images

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Arnold Brecht on Paul von Hindenburg, Franz von Papen, and Kurt von Schleicher
(Retrospective Account, 1967)

The conservatives aimed to “tame” the National Socialists politically by incorporating the “valuable elements” of the Nazi movement into a conservative authoritarian state. Kurt von Schleicher was a major proponent of this idea.

Defense policy considerations played an important role in this strategy. The Reichswehr – which had become an important domestic player under former field marshal Hindenburg’s presidential regime – viewed the SA primarily from the viewpoint of recruitment potential. After arms equality was re-attained, the conservatives wanted to incorporate the SA into national defense units and an expanded Reichswehr (e.g., through the creation of a new militia). For this reason, they avoided direct confrontation with the Nazi movement. Franz von Papen, who adopted this “taming” concept, believed that with the help of conservative ministers he would be able to control Hitler. In the end, elitism and hubris led the conservatives to seriously underestimate the upstart “corporal” Hitler and his political skills.

Criticism of Hindenburg, Papen, and Schleicher cannot, therefore, be justly based on the accusation that they intentionally brought Hitler to total power, but it must be limited to the charge that their dilettante methods resulted in bringing about precisely what they had wanted to avoid. It is not evil intent but political folly that they may be reproached for—the imprudence of political dilettantes let loose on Germany at Germany’s expense, combined with breach of the Constitution, with weakness of character in critical situations, and with a more than average self-confidence, in Papen’s case based on a strange mixture of piety and personal vanity.

The idea of taking the wind out of the National Socialist sails by a swing to the Right was in itself neither stupid nor rash. That was what to some extent Brüning, too, had wanted. But Papen and Schleicher thought—in a manner common enough among military politicians (Papen was still the elegant cavalry officer of whom Briand is said to have remarked that the longer he looked at him the more he admired his horse)—that the right thing to do was to attack the whole problem with a strategically simple plan. That, of course, pleased the old general. Toleration of the National Socialists up to a conceded agreement with them on their reciprocal toleration of Papen’s Cabinet; suspension of frontal attacks on them—instead, directing frontal attacks against the Left alone, and there not only against the Communists but against the Social Democrats as well; bold neglect of constitutional misgivings, whenever they stood in the way of these plans—Papen and Schleicher thought these the best methods of overcoming Hitler.

Many a German reader may ask himself even today: why not? These seemed to be good plans in the opinions of many millions of Germans. From the democratic point of view they were of course bad, but from the point of view of an opponent of democratic “equalization ideas” they were good. Whether good or bad—this cannot be decided by the writer. And as far as the Constitution is concerned, you yourself, Arnold Brecht, have said that friends of democracy must, when the majority proves to be anti-democratic, try to change the democratic form of government into the next best thing in good time, as long as they are in a position to do so (Chapter 30). Why, then, shouldn’t opponents of democracy be permitted to do likewise?

My answer is that, even if Papen’s and Schleicher’s policy in the spring and summer of 1932 is not rejected on principal grounds from the very beginning, the possibility for a beneficent judgment dwindles when one turns to the actual performance and notices that it brought about precisely what it wanted to avoid: total power of the National Socialists.

Source of English translation: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884-1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 342-43.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Mit der Kraft des Geistes: Lebenserinnerungen 1927-1967*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1967, pp. 167-68.