



Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19–1933

Arnold Brecht on Paul von Hindenburg as Reich President (Retrospective Account, 1966)

In the second round of the Reich presidential race on April 26, 1925, former field marshal Paul von Hindenburg was elected with 48.3 percent of the vote. He owed his victory primarily to the Bavarian People's Party, which supported him over former chancellor Wilhelm Marx (Center Party). Although Hindenburg complied with the provisions of the constitution, his monarchic, authoritarian cast made him deeply distrustful of parliamentary democracy. Hindenburg's personal preferences and antipathies had a direct impact on national politics during the succession of presidential governments that were formed after the failure of the Grand Coalition on March 27, 1930. For instance, he issued guidelines that proposed permanently barring the SPD from participating in the government. In addition, his administration increasingly undermined the parliamentary system and made the chancellor dependent on the president's support. Finally, the coterie surrounding Hindenburg – comprised of Prussian Junkers, Reichswehr officers, and a few wealthy bankers and industrialists – had a disproportionately large influence on political decisions.

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The real surprise was not Hindenburg's victory, which in view of the lack of pro-democratic majorities was quite logical, in case the Communists abstained. The real surprise came later. It was the unexpected fact that Hindenburg subjected himself quite loyally to the Weimar Constitution and maintained this attitude unhesitatingly during his first term in office. Both sides had expected his support for right-wing attempts to restore the monarchy, to abolish the colors of the democratic republic in favor of the former black-white-red, to reduce the rights of the working classes, to reintroduce more patriarchal conditions. The great surprise—disappointment on the one side, relief on the other—was that he did *not* do any of this. During the election campaign he said that now he had read the Constitution for the first time and had found it quite good. "If duty requires that I act as President on the basis of the Constitution, without regard to party, person, or origin, I shall not fail." Campaign promises are often mere sedatives; no one trusts them. But the Field Marshall kept his for seven years. He swore an oath to the Constitution before the Reichstag. He had the black-red-gold standard fly above his palace and on his car and made no attempt to show the black-white-red colors instead. He made no step toward a monarchistic restoration. He performed his presidential functions conscientiously in the manner prescribed by the Constitution. During the first five years, he did not even once make use of the President's emergency power under article 48, as Ebert, much to Hindenburg's annoyance, had done repeatedly, and then did so only at Chancellor Brüning's request. For seven years he dismissed and appointed chancellors in strict accordance with the Constitution without regard to his personal preferences; the Social Democrat Hermann Müller was chancellor under him for two years (1928–1930). He signed all acts passed by the Reichstag, whether or

not he liked them, even the first extension of the Act for the Protection of the Republic in 1927, though with a little grumble about the paragraph on the further exile of former royal families, the “Kaiser-Paragraph.”

Source of English translation: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884-1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 258.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Aus nächster Nähe, Lebenserinnerungen 1884-1927*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966, pp. 455-56.