

Why was Hitler appointed Chancellor in January 1933?

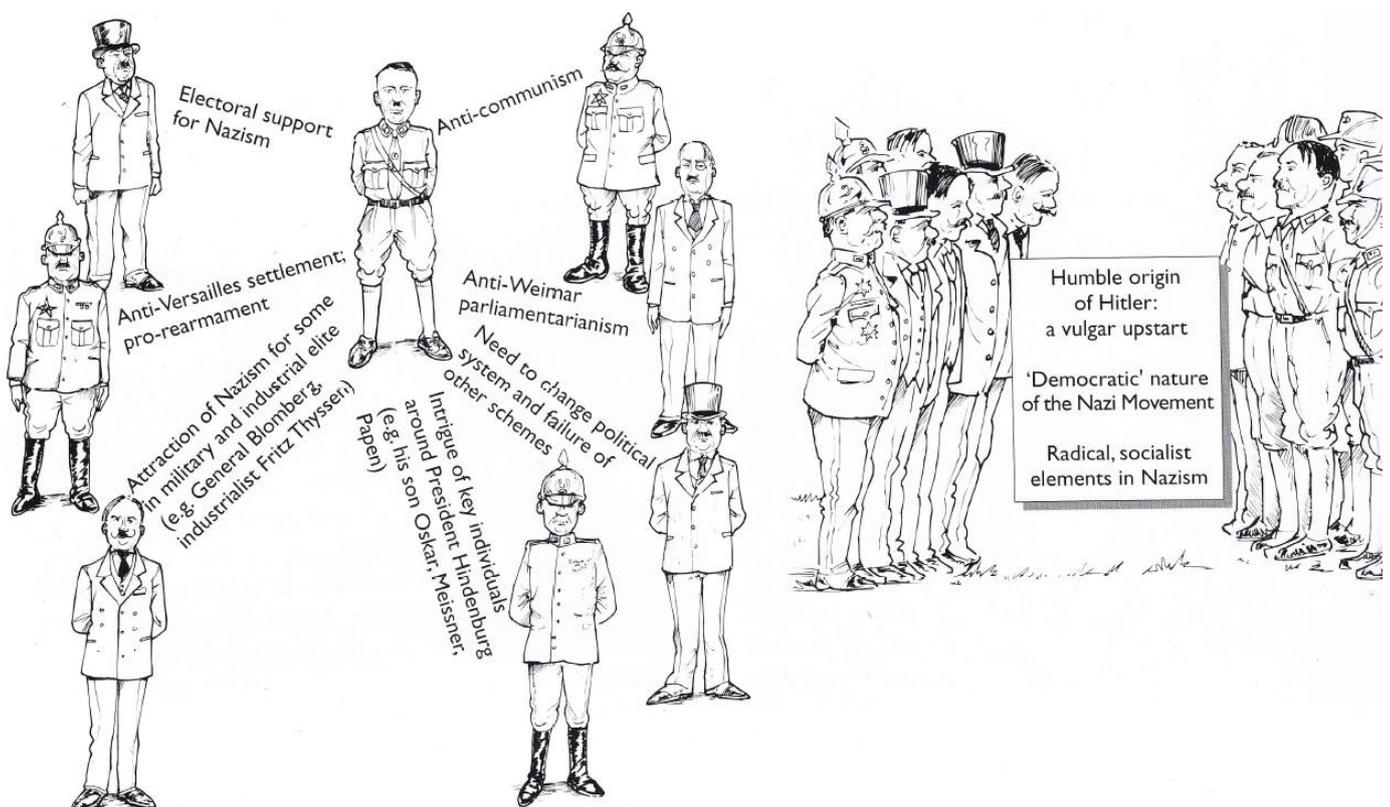
On 30th January 1933 President Hindenburg summoned Adolf Hitler to Berlin and appointed him Chancellor. In many ways this was a surprising development. Hindenburg disliked Hitler. In August 1932 he had refused to appoint him Chancellor after the Nazis' great electoral success. Since then Nazi support had declined and the movement had been torn by divisions. Many in the elite were also wary of the radicalism and the generally vulgar nature of the Nazi Movement.

Despite this, in January 1933, members of the elite persuaded Hindenburg to appoint Hitler Chancellor. By 1932, key industrialists and landowners were very concerned about the lack of effective government. They had never been committed to parliamentary democracy and now believed their fears were confirmed. Some saw the possibility of using the Nazis' popular support to channel the political system in a more authoritarian direction. The Junkers were also upset by Brüning's and later Schleicher's reform proposals to buy up bankrupt estates to resettle poor farmers. This was seen by landowners as 'agrarian Bolshevism', and contributed to the intrigue that persuaded Hindenburg to dismiss both Brüning and Schleicher.

Members of the elite used a number of tactics in what has been called their 'taming strategy' for the Nazi Party.

1. The first tactic was to make Hitler Vice-Chancellor under Papen; this was put forward in August 1932, but Hitler rejected it, demanding to be Chancellor. Hitler's rejection was risky, since he did not get the chancellorship, and it was seen as a great defeat by many Nazis.
2. The second tactic was used in December 1932. Schleicher, hoping to split the Nazis, proposed the idea of himself as Chancellor, with the Nazi Gregor Strasser as Vice-Chancellor. This failed, and Strasser left the Nazi Party.
3. The final tactic (arranged by a Cologne Banker, Kurt von Schroder, members of the Reich Agrarian League, industrialists and Oskar von Hindenburg) was to put Hitler in office as Chancellor, but surrounded by Papen as Vice-Chancellor and other conservatives. The Nazis' current difficulties would make them easier to control. Hindenburg agreed, against his own judgement. Papen commented to a friend, 'We've hired him', but he was fatally wrong.

Factors bringing the elite and the Nazis together – and factors that kept them apart



Hindenburg – a personal motive?

Some historians argue that Hindenburg's decision to appoint Hitler as Chancellor was partly as selfish move.

In the late 1920s, German agriculture suffered from low prices for farm products. Large landowners in the east used their influence on governments to get financial help. This resulted in the *Osthilfe* (Help for the East) programme. Funds were allocated to large landowners to help them stay afloat. Hindenburg had been given back his family's formerly bankrupt estate at Neudeck in East Prussia in 1927 as an eightieth birthday present. This was intended, successfully, to tie him close to Junker (rich landowner) interests. However, in 1932 a Reichstag committee investigating the misuse of *Osthilfe* funds for gambling, supporting mistresses, etc. implicated the Neudeck estate in the scandal. This may have influenced Hindenburg's decision to appoint Hitler in the hope that the investigation would be ended.

Source A – Industrialists' letter to Hindenburg, November 1932

Your Excellency! Like you, we are imbued [filled] with an impassioned love of the German people and the Fatherland... together with Your Excellency, we agree that it is necessary to create a government independent of the parliamentary parties...

The outcome of the Reichstag elections of 6th November has demonstrated that the present cabinet, whose honest intentions no one among the German people would doubt, has failed to find sufficient support among the German people for its actual policies.

... It is quite apparent that another dissolution of parliament, leading to yet another general election with its inevitable frenzied party-political struggles, would be inimicable [harmful] to political as well as economic peace and stability. But it is also apparent that any constitutional change that does not have widespread popular support would have even greater negative economic, political and moral effects.

We therefore consider it to be our duty, Your Excellency, to humbly beg you to consider reconstituting the cabinet in a manner which would guarantee it with the greatest possible popular support.

We declare ourselves to be free from any specific party-political interests. But we recognise in the nationalist movement, which is sweeping through our people, the auspicious beginning of an era of rebirth for the German economy which can only be achieved by the surmounting of class conflict. We know that the rebirth will demand great sacrifices. We believe that these sacrifices will only be made willingly when the greater part of this nationalist movement plays a leading role in the government.

The transfer of responsibility for leading a Presidential cabinet to the leader of the largest nationalist group would remove the waste and slag that inevitably clings to any mass movement. As a result millions of people who at present still stand on the sidelines would be swept into active participation.

Fully trusting in Your Excellency's wisdom and Your Excellency's feeling for the unity of his people.

*We greet Your Excellency with the greatest respect,
Bosch, Schacht, Thyssen, Krupp [and 20 other industrialists]*

Source B – An account by Otto Meissner, State Secretary in Hindenburg's office, made to the Nuremberg Tribunal after the Second World War

Despite Papen's persuasions, Hindenburg was extremely hesitant, until the end of January, to make Hitler Chancellor. He wanted to have Papen again as Chancellor. Papen finally won him over to Hitler with the argument that the representatives of the other right-wing parties which would belong to the government would restrict Hitler's freedom of action. In addition Papen expressed his misgivings that, if the present opportunity were missed, a revolt of the national socialists and civil war were likely.

ACTIVITY

1. Why do the industrialists in Source A favour a government led by Hitler?
2. According to Meissner (Source B), why was Hindenburg persuaded to appoint Hitler as Chancellor?
3. With reference to the origins and content of Sources A and B, how valuable are they in explaining Hitler's appointment?
4. Explain the reasons why key members of the elite eventually favoured the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor.