

# THE GRAVEDIGGERS

THE LAST WINTER OF  
THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

RÜDIGER BARTH  
AND  
HAUKE FRIEDERICHS

Translated by Caroline Waight

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# THE GRAVEDIGGERS

## **Paul von Hindenburg (\*1847)**

*A legend of the First World War and President of the Reich, Hindenburg despised democracy.*

‘Hindenburg is a granite-faced, bass-voiced Field Marshal with a commanding manner that makes little corporals tremble.’

– Hubert Renfro Knickerbocker, correspondent for the *New York Evening Post*

## **Kurt von Schleicher (\*1882)**

*A power-broking general who suddenly found himself becoming chancellor.*

‘It won’t be easy to strike a deal with Schleicher. He has a clever but sly gaze. I don’t believe he is honest.’

– Adolf Hitler

## **Franz von Papen (\*1879)**

*A risk-taker bent on revenge*

‘[Papen looks] like an ill-tempered billy-goat trying to stand to attention. A character out of *Alice in Wonderland*.’

– Harry Graf Kessler, journalist and bon vivant

## **Adolf Hitler (\*1889)**

*As Führer of the NSDAP, Hitler wanted to create a dictatorship.*

‘When finally I walked into Adolf Hitler’s salon in the Kaiserhof Hotel, I was convinced that I was meeting the future dictator of Germany. In something less than fifty seconds I was quite sure I was not.’

– Dorothy Thompson, American reporter

**Joseph Goebbels (\*1897)**

*Head of Propaganda for the NSDAP*

‘The Führer is playing [...] chess for power. It is an exciting and nerve-racking struggle, yet it also conveys the thrilling sense of being a game in which everything is at stake.’

– Joseph Goebbels

## OPENING CREDITS

# THE LIE OF THE LAND

In November 1932, fourteen years after it was put in place, Germany's first parliamentary democracy found itself mired in its deepest crisis. The election on 6 November – the second that year – proved disastrous for the moderate parties that constituted the Weimar Republic. A full third of the workforce was unemployed, more than five million people in all, and many of those still in work had been hit with punishing wage cuts. The economy was at rock bottom, and political culture had taken a cutthroat turn. On the streets of Germany's cities, the situation frequently erupted into violent conflicts that left hundreds dead. Senior politicians, businessmen and journalists spoke in hushed tones of civil war.

It was only by virtue of President Hindenburg's emergency decrees that Chancellor Franz von Papen was able to govern at all. Emergency decrees had legal authority, but were not passed by elected representatives. Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution granted that power to the head of state, and since 1930 Hindenburg had been making generous use of the privilege.

Parliament could annul the emergency decrees or force the government to step down with a motion of no confidence – the checks and balances of a constitution designed to maintain an even keel. To avert this, the president had already dissolved Parliament twice and called fresh elections. What resulted was the unprecedented paralysis of German politics.

The German electorate had just voted once again. In Parliament, Chancellor Franz von Papen – a committed monarchist – found himself facing a hostile majority; like Papen, they were only too willing to dispense with democracy entirely, but on *their* terms. This majority consisted mainly of Communists and National Socialists, extremists

on the left and right who were united only in their hatred of the system.

The president wanted clarity once and for all, while the chancellor needed allies – but only the German National People’s Party, the DNVP, stayed loyal. They had fifty-one out of 584 representatives, laughably few. Now Papen was counting on the NSDAP to support his policies. Since July of that year, the Nazis had been by far the strongest faction in Parliament. If the worst came to the worst, Papen was even prepared to make their leader, Adolf Hitler, Vice-Chancellor: he hoped that would bring the German Fascists to heel. He had just made another attempt to woo the NSDAP, calling their proposed collaboration the ‘aggregation of all national forces’. Hitler, however, flatly rebuffed him.

The German Reich in November 1932 was in an alarming state. In his book *The German Crisis*, which had been published a few months earlier and had already been reprinted several times, the American reporter Hubert Renfro Knickerbocker wrote that ‘Fifty thousand Bolsheviks made the Russian revolution. Germany has an estimated six million voters for its Communist Party. Five hundred thousand Fascists put Mussolini in power in Italy. Adolf Hitler has a possible twelve million voters behind the National Socialist Party in Germany. How long can the life of the German republic last?’

That was the question. The coming winter would settle the fate of the Weimar Republic.

# THE BRINK

17 NOVEMBER TO 1 DECEMBER 1932



# THURSDAY 17 NOVEMBER

Chancellor on the Brink!

Decision Today

– *Der Angriff*

Papen Offers Resignation

Entire Cabinet to Step Down? – Hindenburg Speech Today

– *Vossische Zeitung*

The German Reich was ruled from the Prussian capital of Berlin. More specifically, power resided in a handful of adjacent buildings in an area referred to by the name of the nearest street: Wilhelmstrasse.

If you walked out of the Reichstag, strolled through the Brandenburg Gate and took a right behind the Hotel Adlon on Pariser Platz, you were already as good as there. Head past the British embassy and the Ministry for Agriculture, and you'd soon catch sight of the palace buildings on your right, with the Chancellery extension, built a year earlier and clad in travertine, sticking out like a sore thumb.

From the street the facades looked forbidding, but behind them stretched old, expansive gardens. Subterranean corridors led from building to building on the western side of Wilhelmstrasse, and a secret passageway was rumoured to weave among the attics. Even the gardens were connected via gates through which a person might slip unseen.

The cabinet meeting that derailed Franz von Papen's career and brought General Kurt von Schleicher out of the shadows took place, as far as we know, in the garden room of the Chancellery. In the brighter months it was flooded with light through west-facing, floor-to-ceiling windows; even on that November morning the room was lit with a mild radiance. It was a fresh and sunny autumn day. Leaves glowed on oaks, elms and lindens, trees that had been ancient in the

days when Frederick the Great walked among them on his morning stroll.

The terracotta eagles of Imperial Prussia still kept watch on the rear wall bordering Friedrich Ebert Strasse, their heads adorned with gilded bronze crowns. Otto von Bismarck, first Chancellor of the German Empire, had lived in this set of buildings for twenty-eight years. According to the children of the staff, who played there often, his faithful mastiff was buried somewhere in the garden, as was the Trakehner stallion that had carried him across the fields of Königgrätz in 1866. An eighteen-year-old Paul von Hindenburg had taken part in the same battle – on foot – as a lieutenant in the Third Prussian Regiment of Guards.

On 17 November Hindenburg was eighty-five years old and the most important man in Germany. During the First World War he had commanded his troops to victory at the Battle of Tannenberg, and was later made head of the Supreme Army Command. He was still living off the reputation he had earned in his glory days. With his impressive moustache, steel-wool hair and the deep grooves around his mouth, in peaceful moments he resembled his own memorial. President of the Reich since 1925, Hindenburg was an elderly man now, but he still had all and sundry vying for his favour – including the ministers and undersecretaries gathered in the garden room that morning.

Abraham Plotkin, an American trade-union functionary, had been meandering through Paris since the day before. He had arrived at Le Havre on a cargo boat from New York, one of five passengers. The frugal crossing, devoid of creature comforts, was his preferred mode of travel – and all his budget allowed. Plotkin, forty years old, had lost his job with the textile union back home, the victim of a financial crisis that left no industry unscathed.

When he was a boy, his family had emigrated to America from Tsarist Russia. Now Plotkin had returned to Europe, bringing little more than the clothes on his back, his walking stick and his typewriter.

Shortly after his arrival he started a diary. Plotkin was inquisitive and eloquent, with an eye for the circumstances of ordinary folk. But

he hadn't come to Europe to stay in France, and within four days he was travelling onwards.

His goal was Germany, where he hoped to witness the struggle of average citizens for their rights. He'd heard that political radicals on the left and right were clashing on the streets of Berlin, that there had been deaths. The capital exerted a magical force: Plotkin had devoured Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Now he wanted to immerse himself in the environment Döblin had so vividly depicted. He wanted whores and shopkeepers, beggars and hoodlums. He wanted to see these National Socialists, the ones everybody was talking about in voices half afraid and half fascinated. Joseph Goebbels' speech at the Berlin Sportpalast, they said, had been unparalleled in its sweeping power. For any other tourist, November – usually the month in which winter unfolds in all its majesty across the city – might not have been the best time to explore Berlin. But Plotkin didn't care. Plotkin had come to learn from the Germans.

Defence Minister Kurt von Schleicher, fifty years old and running to fat, entered the garden room. In photographs he appears ungainly, his smile rigid, although there is generally a flash in his eyes. Most people meeting him for the first time were impressed less by his looks than by his vibrant personality. Bald and short-statured, he was nonetheless a surprise hit with the ladies. Those ill-disposed towards Schleicher told tales about his shifting romantic intrigues. How he sent bouquets of flowers to married women, including the wives of influential men. How he made lifelong enemies in the process.

In Wilhelmstrasse he had acquired a reputation as a confirmed bachelor who knew how to make the most of the unencumbered life; then, in July 1931, he married Elisabeth von Hennigs, the daughter of a general of the cavalry – a woman from a military family.

Kurt von Schleicher had military origins, too. His great-grandfather had died in 1815 during an assault on Napoleon's troops at the Battle of Ligny, two days before Waterloo. Schleicher's father had also been a soldier and eventually a lieutenant-colonel.

Like President Hindenburg, Schleicher had begun his military career in the Third Regiment of Foot Guards, where he befriended Hindenburg's son and adjutant, Oskar, as well as Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord, who in 1932 was head of the German armed forces.

During the First World War, Schleicher rapidly made a name for himself. He served as part of various military staffs, organising, planning, guiding and acquainting himself with generals who appreciated him and furthered his career. Generalmajor Wilhelm Groener became his mentor, a father figure who gave Schleicher extensive latitude, even outside the chain of command. Towards the end of the First World War, Schleicher came to serve under Paul von Hindenburg, then the head of the German General Staff, and they remained close.

From then on, Schleicher worked in the dim hinterlands where politics and military business overlapped. He became head of the Ministerial Office, an important post that afforded ample opportunity for string-pulling. He met all the senior party figures and forged close personal bonds with many, including Friedrich Ebert, a Social Democrat and President of the German Reich. The 'Department of the Wehrmacht', a part of the ministry that he set up personally, was under his direct command: this was where German military politics was brokered and still is today.

Schleicher often worked long into the night, sleeping little; at day-break he would take an hour-long ride through the Tiergarten – and yet he seemed unfazed by his exacting workload. A maestro of the small gathering, he was a forceful speaker, holding forth with charm or chutzpah as the mood took him. No German citizen had ever been given the chance to vote for Kurt von Schleicher in an election, yet it was he who had put forward Papen's name as chancellor to Hindenburg in the summer of 1932. Of that there could be no doubt.

That morning he arrived punctually in the garden room for the cabinet meeting at eleven a.m.

Chancellor Franz von Papen, the gathering's fifty-three-year-old host, entered the room a few minutes later. According to witnesses he sat at

the centre of the table, opposite the high windows, treating himself to a view over the garden. To his left sat Schleicher, the friend who had brokered his remarkable promotion six months earlier. Six months had proved long enough for Papen to usurp Schleicher's place as the president's crony-in-chief – and long enough to turn a friend into an enemy.

Only a few steps away, President Paul von Hindenburg was brooding over paperwork in his office. Bismarck, the great uniter of the German Reich, surely hadn't had as tough a time as this. Germany was a crisis-ridden nation at odds with itself, the parties elected by its citizens were jockeying for power, and the inner unity of the Volk was gravely endangered. No one but Hindenburg could bring together a majority. No one but Paul von Hindenburg could save Germany.

At the beginning of June he had moved out of the presidential palace, which was sorely in need of renovation – the furniture had to be propped up on little blocks, because in many places the wooden flooring sagged alarmingly – and had been working and taking meetings at the Chancellery ever since.

The Reichstag was due to reconvene on 6 December, three weeks' time, and by then the new chancellor had to be in place. But who should Hindenburg appoint? Custom dictated that the individual tasked with forming a government ought to be whoever represented the largest faction in Parliament. That would be Adolf Hitler, Führer of the NSDAP, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), his erstwhile opponent from the presidential election in April. In Parliament, Hermann Göring had already been selected as President of the Reichstag, one of the most senior offices in the Reich. But NSDAP party members were forever heckling and fomenting dissent, upsetting the political process; on one occasion, they had beaten a leftist journalist in the parliamentary restaurant so badly that the man had to be hospitalised – they were an appalling bunch. It seemed scarcely conceivable that the business of state would be in good hands with those two representatives. Hindenburg would have preferred to

retain Franz von Papen as chancellor, a conservative whose perpetually cheery disposition continued to reassure him. Then there was Kurt von Schleicher, a staunch believer in the military. Some people said Schleicher was acid-tongued and devious, but Hindenburg had long relied on his vigilant, resourceful brain.

Politics is tricky, especially for a career soldier like Hindenburg. Compromises don't simply materialise to order, and democracy is the most complicated form of politics. Whatever decision he made, Hindenburg felt compelled to safeguard the German people.

And his own reputation, of course.

Hindenburg's man in the garden room was Otto Meissner, head of the Office of the President since 1920. The son of a postal worker from Alsace, the fifty-two-year-old Meissner spoke fluent French and Russian. He held a doctorate in law and before the First World War had worked for the General Directorate of the Imperial Railways. During the war itself he was promoted to captain, and it was in 1915 that he first met Hindenburg.

Meissner was a pragmatic man. As early as 7 May 1932 he had met with influential National Socialists, including Adolf Hitler, accompanied by General Schleicher and by Hindenburg's son and adjutant, Oskar. The subject of their discussion? How the cabinet, then led by the wilful Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, could be most deftly forced to resign, clearing the ground for a fresh start.

The plan went off without a hitch. Now, only a few months down the line, the slippery Papen was himself under pressure.

Carl von Ossietzky, editor of the left-leaning intellectual journal *Weltbühne* (World Stage), had been sitting in prison for six months on charges of treason and disclosing military secrets. He'd published an article about how the army was clandestinely rearming, entitled 'Windiges aus der Luftfahrt' (The Winds of Aviation). Ossietzky, a pacifist, had long been hated by the military, and now they'd hit back.

‘Traitor to the Fatherland’ was one accusation levelled against Ossietzky, although it was the army that had broken the law. By stealthily rearming, they were undermining the Treaty of Versailles, an issue that had already been raised in Parliament. All the documents quoted in the *Weltbühne* article – all the facts and figures – had previously been made public. Hardly secrets.

Still, a second case being brought against him was quashed. His most important writer, Kurt Tucholsky, had proclaimed in *Weltbühne* that ‘soldiers are murderers’. The military took this as an offence to its honour.

Ossietzky, forty-three years old, was kept in solitary confinement, suffering dreadful rations and forbidden to smoke. Among intellectuals and leftists, he was considered a martyr. In May, when he began serving his sentence, numerous writers accompanied him to Tegel Prison in Berlin, among them Arnold Zweig, Lion Feuchtwanger, Erich Mühsam and Ernst Toller. Ossietzky gave a brief address, announcing that he was going as a deliberate demonstration on behalf of the eight thousand political prisoners ‘who are languishing unknown in the darkness of the prison system’. He would demand no special privileges. He would, Ossietzky insisted, be ‘unreformed’ upon his release.

His release, however, wouldn’t be until 10 November 1933. Nearly one whole year to go.

Nobody had reckoned with Franz von Papen. Installed as chancellor in June 1932 from the right-leaning fringes of the Centre Party, he was in no hurry to relinquish power. Papen had reputedly been chosen as chancellor primarily because Schleicher considered him tractable.

In November 1932 Papen was supposed to be in Mannheim for the official opening of a new bridge across the Rhine, and he was also expected on ‘state visits’ in Württemberg and Baden, as the newspapers crowed. All cancelled. On 16 November, the leader of the conservative Centre Party had informed him that although they ‘fundamentally agreed with the notion of a policy of national aggregation’, Papen wasn’t the right chancellor for such a coalition. Chaos might loom

if he stayed, they hinted, so it would be best for Papen to step down at once. The Social Democrats and National Socialists wouldn't even agree to a meeting.

Papen had taken note of everything. Of course, the Centre Party lot were sulking: he had been one of their own, after all, and now they were feeling betrayed.

During the war, he'd been a faithful officer of the Emperor – as an agent and saboteur in Washington, as a commander on the Western Front and as a major in Turkey. As a Member of Parliament he had tended to favour reactionary, nationalistic positions. And now, as chancellor of an unloved republic, he was governing without a majority. Papen had constitutional reform in mind: paralyse the Reichstag for six months, present the electorate with a new constitution then put it to the vote. In this way he hoped to sweep aside the pesky disadvantages of parliamentarianism.

Papen came from an affluent, aristocratic family. At the age of eighteen he'd been a page at the Imperial Court in Berlin. His wife was the heiress to the ceramics manufacturing company Villeroy & Bosch. Money had never been a concern. Those inclined towards mockery called Papen a 'gentleman jockey', although Berlin was hardly short of equestrians. When Papen went horse riding through the Tiergarten, clad in his rakish cap and bow tie, his skill was evident.

The constitutional reforms he hoped to push through would represent a first step back towards the monarchy – or at least towards an authoritarian government. Papen's dream – if, admittedly, a kind of coup.

Meanwhile, Frederic M. Sackett, the American ambassador in Berlin, was facing a problem. His office was appallingly badly staffed, and there was constant chivvying from the gentlemen in Washington: they weren't receiving enough situation reports, analyses and assessments from Berlin.

Only a few weeks earlier he'd written to the State Department that Hitler was 'one of the biggest show-men since P. T. Barnum',



referring to Joseph Goebbels in the same communication as Hitler's 'silver-tongued lieutenant'. Sackett had arrived in Berlin in 1930, making him an embassy veteran. Hardly any of the diplomats there had lived in Germany long, and fewer still were competent German-speakers. Budgetary cuts had been felt at all levels. Many of his staff were young and inexperienced. Intelligence operations were non-existent. In a word, the US embassy, recently relocated to Bendlerstrasse, was a shambles.

The sixty-three-year-old Sackett felt personally aggrieved. He'd been on excellent terms with Chancellor Brüning, and his whole strategy was based on their close relationship: assisting Brüning's government, stabilising the German economy, supporting the sensible course Brüning was charting against the extremist parties – that had been his credo.

Since June 1932, however, the situation had been turned on its head. Brüning was out. His successor, Franz von Papen, was *persona non grata* to the Americans. During the First World War Papen had been a military attaché in Washington, secretly building up a spy ring for the Germans, although his conduct was so brazen that he was eventually caught and booted out of the country. How, then, could Sackett deal with Papen? Ignoring him was the only option.

In recent weeks Sackett had been in America, wearing himself thin campaigning for his friend, President Herbert C. Hoover – in vain, as it turned out. Now he was back in Berlin, trying to get to grips with the turbulent times. The notion that the Nazis might come to power didn't bear thinking about.

Papen needed support more than ever if he didn't want to be coerced into stepping down. In the garden room, he began to speak.

The President of the Reich, he argued, must turn once again to the party leaders and advocate for a government of 'national aggregation' with himself as chancellor; at the same time, however, the cabinet must avoid giving the impression that they were clinging to power. Surprisingly, Defence Minister Kurt von Schleicher concurred.

Only the resignation of the entire cabinet, he said, could forestall political ‘mudslinging’ in nationalist circles. By mudslinging he meant the rumours that the government was the reason why there was still no consolidated national front.

There were murmurs of agreement from around the table. Theirs was the ‘cabinet of the barons’, as they were popularly known. Most of their surnames were prefaced with ‘von’, indicating that they came from aristocratic families. Yet Papen had selected them for more than their lineage: many were respected experts in their fields.

Fine, said Chancellor Papen.

Evidently he was giving up.

He would inform the president, he said, that his entire cabinet was ready to step down.

There was silence in the room. Outside, in the garden, slanting rays of sunlight caught the foliage. None of his ministers were prepared to argue. Schleicher hid his satisfaction. Papen had long ago revealed himself a dilettante when it came to political manoeuvring, a man incapable of forging broad alliances.

Papen nodded. Was it over? Had the highest office in the land already slipped through his fingers?

Professor Carl Schmitt, a political theorist and expert in constitutional law, was currently advising the government in an immensely complex case known nationwide as the Preussenschlag, or Prussian Coup. In July, President Hindenburg had issued an emergency decree to relieve the Prussian government of their duties and install his confidant, Chancellor Papen, as Commissioner, thereby destroying a bulwark of the Social Democratic Party and the Weimar Republic. His justification? The Social Democrats had failed to prevent Communist violence, and the domestic situation within Prussia was spiralling out of their control. Eighteen people had been killed a few days earlier during a Nazi demonstration in a predominantly Communist area, a clash that came to be known as ‘Altona Bloody Sunday’. Nearly all the dead had been shot by police officers firing indiscriminately during the riots.

The Social Democrats had not responded to Papen's assault with violence: they had not mobilised their paramilitary wing, the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, nor had they called for a general strike, as with the Kapp Putsch of 1920. They continued to support the state – even though that state had turned on them. Instead, they resorted to legal action. As faithful republicans, they believed in the independence of the justice system, and Otto Braun's deposed Prussian government went to the Constitutional Court in Leipzig: Bavaria and Württemberg, too, appealed to the most senior judges in the Republic, fearing they might be next in line.

Had Adolf Hitler's hour arrived?

The Nazi Führer wanted power at last. His most recent communication with Papen had been blunt: 'The only thing that fills me with bitterness is having to stand and watch as, day after day, your cack-handed governance, Herr Chancellor, squanders a national asset that I played a genuine part in creating, as German history will testify.'

Hitler was severing a working relationship that had scarcely begun. They were strong words, one forceful response of many during those weeks. Yet while his determination may not have been faked, his confidence almost certainly was.

In fact, the Nazi party was getting jumpy. For the first time since 1930, they had lost massive numbers of votes – two million! – at the elections on 6 November, and the peak of their public support seemed to be behind them. The party was also dogged by serious financial concerns. The election campaigns had been horrendously expensive, and Hitler had spent weeks on aeroplanes, day after day, darting from one appearance to the next in an attempt to seem omnipresent. Tens of thousands of Sturmabteilung (SA) troops weren't about to march for free: room and board for the SA had cost the party vast sums. The banks weren't giving any more credit, and their industrialist donors were withholding additional funds. Within the organisation itself, Hitler's adversary Gregor Strasser was causing trouble, arguing the case for pragmatism. He'd already got several members of Parliament

and a number of Gauleiter – heads of the regional NSDAP branches – behind him.

The cash-flow situation at the most important regional branch of the NSDAP in Berlin was equally wretched – Joseph Goebbels, its leader, obtained a report on the subject from his staff. ‘Nothing but debts, dues and obligations,’ he subsequently complained in his diary. ‘And the total impossibility of raising any serious amount of money anywhere after this defeat.’

So Goebbels sent the SA back out into the streets with their begging bowls – better visible as beggars than not visible at all. If their bid for power didn’t work this time, the National Socialist movement could easily lose its momentum, its appeal and its credibility over the coming winter. It might, eventually, collapse.