

## Module 04: The End of Optimism? The Great Depression in Europe

### Evidence 22: Diplomatic Reports on Germany, 1931-1932

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#### Documents

British Diplomatic Report

Sir H. Rumbold (Berlin) to Mr. A. Henderson

Berlin, January 16, 1931

The economic situation naturally has a direct bearing on the political situation, and bad economic conditions play straight into the hands of the extreme elements of the State, whether they are National Socialists or Communists. Herr Solf, who has recently been giving a series of lectures on Japan in different parts of Germany, returned to Berlin greatly impressed by the number of 'Nazis' whom he had met everywhere. He affirmed that, in some cases, 80 per cent. of his audience were Nazis. Can the German Government at the present moment honestly hold out any prospect of alleviation in the economic field, or of success in matters of external policy of vital interest to Germany? The reply would seem to be in the negative. There is no question of a fresh appeal to the electorate, for elections held in present circumstances would certainly result in an accession of strength to the Nazi party. One is, therefore, driven to speculate as to the immediate future of the National Socialist movement. A party of negation, which advocates the tearing up of treaties and the repudiation of international obligations, cannot exist for an indefinite period. It must show results, and, in a time of distress, it must show, or at least promise, those results quickly. But, so far, there has been no indication as to how the National Socialist leaders propose to execute their programme. The question, then, is, at what moment the period of disillusionment will begin and what the disillusioned will do.

It has been suggested that considerable numbers of the disappointed Hitlerites or 'Nazis' will join the Communists, and this is by no means improbable, since their programme touches the Communist programme at several points. I have found general agreement amongst my colleagues that a 'Putsch' has no chance of success so long as President Hindenburg is at the head of affairs and Dr. Brüning and Dr. Braun are in power. The

Reichswehr can be counted on to support the Government. There remains, therefore, the possibility that the National Socialists, who are an irresponsible party and cannot be entrusted with the Government, may, possibly with the help of the 'Stahlhelm,' provoke disorders and engage on an increasing scale in clashes with the Communist and Reichsbanner organisations.

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British Diplomatic Report

Sir H. Rumbold (Berlin) to Mr. A. Henderson

Berlin, March 4, 1931

The present development of events in this country is the product of two main factors: first, the unprecedented economic distress from which the whole world is suffering; second, a political agitation, but also arising from the outburst of a nationalism suppressed or distorted by the events of the last twelve years. This double impulse is made obvious by the very name of the party which links together nationalism and socialism. But the economic crisis and the political agitation are transformed, by their very magnitude and intensity, into unknown quantities, which continually act and react upon one another. In attempting to appreciate possible developments in Germany under such conditions of strain one must remember that the situation can alter very rapidly. . . . Meanwhile, the economic problems confronting Dr. Brüning's Government are severe in the extreme, and I see no reason to hope that they will disappear so long as the present world crisis continues. Nevertheless, unless world conditions take a decisive turn for the worse, which would undoubtedly have disagreeable reactions in Germany, I see equally little reason to expect in the immediate future any serious deterioration of conditions in this country. The climate of Germany is such that activity in certain important industries (including building and agriculture) decreases sharply during the winter months, and may almost be brought to a standstill by a really severe winter. The present winter, which now is almost over, has been providentially mild, and the physical suffering caused by unemployment has been correspondingly reduced. It may be hoped, moreover, that seasonal unemployment has already reached its peak. There is, on the other hand, no definite evidence as yet of a recovery of activity in industry, although the Stock Exchange, which so often forecasts industrial conditions, has, in recent weeks, shown

considerable firmness. . . In these spheres, therefore, there is a justified feeling of relief that a difficult period has passed, and that, if no unforeseen trouble intervenes, some recovery may be anticipated. But the foundations are none too solid, and, although employment is expected to improve, there are at the moment nearly 5 million unemployed, taxation is high, capital is scarce, and very many businesses are doing no more than keeping afloat. Accordingly (apart from political affairs), the slowly growing feeling of confidence could be easily shattered by such possibilities as withdrawals of foreign credits, a series of bankruptcies, or a major strike on the wages question.

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U.S. Diplomatic Report

The Ambassador in Germany (Sackett) to the Secretary of State

Berlin, August 9, 1932

SIR:

With reference to my despatch No. 1854 of August 2, 1932, particularly to that portion concerning political clashes in Germany and the activities of the Nazis in connection therewith, I have the honor to report that since the Reichstag elections of July 31, members of the National Socialist Party have perpetrated acts of atrocious violence at various places throughout the Reich from East Prussia to Bavaria. These political disorders have been of daily occurrence and are too numerous for accurate compilation, but the semi-official Wolff's Telegraphisches Bureau reported, between August 1 and August 8, nineteen instances of terrorism resulting in deaths and serious damage to property.

The worst outbreak occurred at Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia where, early on August 1, a few hours after the results of the elections had been made known and almost immediately following the initiation of the Government's ten days' political truce (from August 1 to August 11 – Constitution Day), the Nazis produced a veritable reign of terror. Excited to partisan fury, apparently by their failure to obtain a parliamentary majority in the elections, and incensed by the murder of one of their members on the eve of the elections, persons now known to have been members of the

SA and SS (Nazi offensive and defensive organizations) stoned shop-windows, burned gasoline stations after ringing false alarms to divert the fire brigades from these fires, attempting to destroy democratic or socialist newspaper offices by fire and sought out prominent members of the Socialist and Communist parties who were murdered or assaulted in their dwellings, some whilst they were in bed. In this manner the local Communist leader and Town Councillor was assassinated; the former head of the administrative district, Dr. von Bahrfelt, a member of the People's Party who was known to have incurred the enmity of the Nazis and was in consequence recently relieved of this office by the Chancellor was shot, as was the editor-in-chief of the socialist Koenigsberger Volkszeitung, and a leader of the Jewish community at Königsberg was attacked. Shots were fired into the house of a Communist Reichstag deputy, one of them wounding a little girl.

Disorders were reported at other places in East Prussia as well as elsewhere throughout the Reich, and although at first they might have been thought to be sporadic incidents, as fuller details became known, they established the fact that the same methods were being followed everywhere, and make it clear that a premeditated plan of terrorism of last week, with its incendiary bombs and well planned personal attacks on individuals, has little in common with the former seemingly spontaneous street brawls.

While in the majority of instances the perpetrators of these acts of violence have evaded arrest, the fact that the persons involved in the outrages in East Prussia and Schleswig-Holstein were Nazis, and the similarity of the various occurrences – invariably perpetrated against persons of Left political thought or Jews – strongly implicated the Nazis. Also, reports from places where Nazis were arrested or their premises searched after minor disturbances, as well as from those places where serious occurrence have taken place, are to the effect that these persons generally were armed, and stores of arms and ammunitions, including machine guns, have been found. At Hofgeismar, near Cassel, the police discovered a Nazi truck converted into a military armored car.

It is difficult to see how this present course of terrorism can be stemmed save by most energetic measures on the part of the Government which is now virtually obliged to show whether it can maintain order impartially over all political factions or if it again must make concessions to Herr Hitler.

Since the appointment of a Reich commissioner for Prussia (see dispatch No. 1841 of July 25) a number of police and civil officers are reported to have been relieved simply because they were objectionable to the Nazis. Although urged by all elements in the country, except the extreme Right, to take vigorous measures to check the wave of terrorism, the Cabinet has been loath to take concrete steps, and this has increased popular uneasiness and given rise to the easily comprehensible suspicion that the Government would go to great lengths to avoid action which would lead to direct collision with the Nazis.

Source:

Diplomatic Reports on Germany, 1931-1932.