

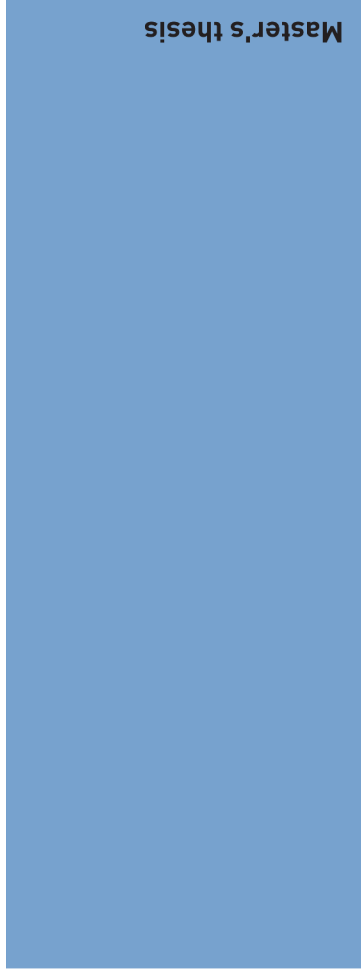
Lars Christian Bergstad

"This is ominous"

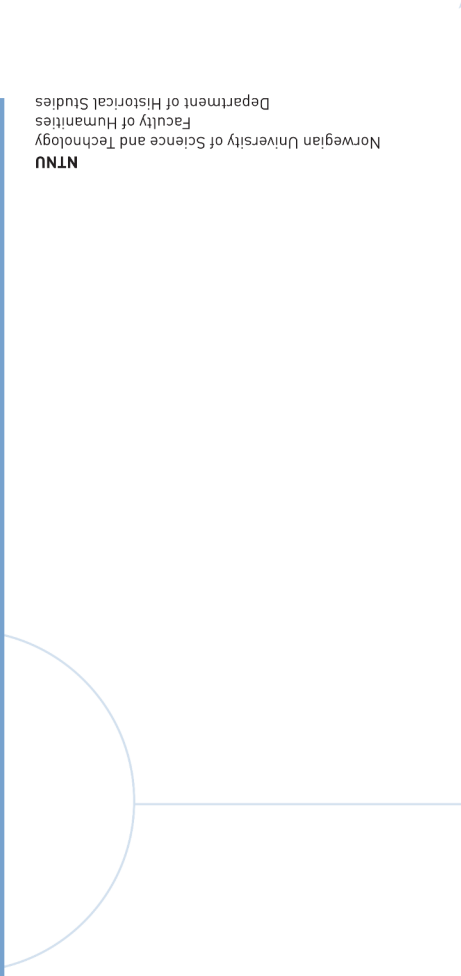
A British view on the rise of Nazism, 1929-1933

Master's thesis in History

Trondheim, May 2015



NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Historical Studies



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Foreword

It is with joy that I can say that my journey is finally over. When I set out to write this thesis, 20 months ago now, I did not envision what it would involve. I am proud of what I have produced, and what I can present to the world now. I believe it is a worthwhile contribution to the study of the inter-war period. I was not always so confident. There was a time I was convinced that I could not do it. I was on the brink of giving up. To help me get through my period of doubt, and push me over the finish line, there are several people I want to thank.

First of all I want to thank my supervisor, Tore Tingvold Petersen. You helped me realise that the only thing standing in the way of completion was myself. You helped me push through that barrier, and for that I am truly grateful.

To my family: My father, Jan-Erik, whose belief in me has never wavered. My mother, Eli, who has always supported me, through ups and downs. My older brother, Jonas, for providing comedic relief, and someone to talk to about things not related to history. My younger brother, Runar, who's work-ethic and discipline constantly shames me into action.

To my friends and cohabitants of study room 6392, in alphabetical order so as to not indicate preference: Kristian, who suddenly had done more than me, forcing me to up my game. Lars Jørgen, for always providing good(ish) discussion. Ole Martin, for sending me hilarious things on Facebook. Torfinn, for having to the sense to watch good sports. Torstein, for always being optimistic and encouraging. Special mention to Julie, whose belief in my work was greatly appreciated.

I would like to wrap up my time as a student with the words of Major Sidney Freeman of the 4077 MASH:

“Ladies and gentlemen, take my advice – pull down your pants and slide on the ice.”

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1 Introduction

*“Those who, like myself, listened to the Chancellor's speech in the Reichstag and witnessed the unmannerly interruptions and the really insolent behaviour of the Nazis could not, indeed, help wondering how Germany would fare if her destinies were entrusted to such representatives.”*¹

These words were written by Sir Horace Rumbold, the British Ambassador to Germany, on the 4th of March 1932, to the British Foreign Minister, John Simon. Less than a year would pass before the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the Nazis, indeed, ascended to power. Following a shocking influx of supporters around the time of the Reichstag election of 1930, the Nazis would, for the next two and a half years shape the internal political struggle of the Weimar Republic. In that time Germany would see two more Reichstag elections, a presidential election and 3 different Chancellors. The events of this period would eventually culminate in the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany on the 30th of January 1933.

What had happened in this period to lead to such skepticism from the British Ambassador? What had the Nazis done to create this bad impression? By analysing the communication between the Embassy and the British Foreign Office (FO), including communication between other informants and the FO, I seek to understand what transpired during these fateful years, and what impressions this left with the chief foreign policy makers of the British Empire.

1.1 Historiography and background

There has not been published any works specifically about the British view on or relationship with the Nazis *prior* to 1933. Most works on the relationship between Great Britain and Germany during the period in question has little to say about Hitler prior to his Chancellorship. Those who do I will discuss. Aside from these, there are some other themes that are relevant to this thesis that I will also give an account for.

Martin Gilbert's biography of Horace Rumbold is the book that delves deepest into the subject

¹ Rumbold to Simon, 4. Mar. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 1750

matter at hand.² He writes quite a lot about Rumbold's view of Hitler and Nazism in his period as Ambassador. For most of the period the Ambassador seems skeptical, but not entirely dismissive of the Nazis and their prospects as leaders of the nation. After Hitler becomes Chancellor, however, his view quickly deteriorates. The book presents the views of Rumbold, but does not discuss them. It does not offer any analysis on how Rumbold has come to his conclusions, or what he may have disregarded. Neither does it give much insight into what Rumbold reported to the FO.

Stephanie Salzmann argues that the FO at the time did not understand the impact made by the Nazi ideology on their plans for foreign and domestic policy.³ Further she argues that they discounted the importance of Hitler in the party, and were more impressed by people like Strasser and Goering. Lastly she states that Rumbold placed too much emphasis on anti-semitism, and disregarded other, more important, aspects of the Nazi movement. None of these points are discussed very far, but give a starting point for potential points of discussion in the source material.

The biographies and autobiographies of several important people connected to the FO during the period pay very little regard to Hitler and the Nazis prior to 1933. These people include Anthony Eden⁴, who was the Political Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs from 1931 – 1934 and Hugh Dalton, his predecessor.⁵ These instead focus on the bigger question regarding their policy towards Germany, mainly disarmament. The same can be said about the biographies on Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary.⁶ These also give the impression that Vansittart was generally skeptical of Hitler, and opposed to a Nazi government. This does not seem to have resulted in any specific actions taken, as the most direct opposition manifests itself after Hitler is made Chancellor. Gilbert's biography of Winston Churchill describes some of the internal struggles in Germany in 1932, but it too focuses mostly on the issues of disarmament, and Churchill's opposition to the policy followed by the government.⁷

2 Martin Gilbert, *Sir Horace Rumbold – Portrait of a Diplomat 1869-1941*, (London: Heinemann, 1973)

3 Stephanie C. Salzmann, *Great Britain, Germany and the Soviet Union – Rapallo and after, 1922 – 1934* (London: The Boydell Press, 2003)

4 Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs – Facing the Dictators*, (London: Cassell, 1962)

5 Ben Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985)

6 Norman Rose, *Vansittart – Study of a Diplomat*, (London: Heinemann, 1978) and Ian Colvin, *Vansittart in Office*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1965)

7 Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill. Volume V – 1922-1939*, (London: Heinemann, 1976), 406

Since this paper focuses on the Foreign Office, I have also examined literature regarding its work and political importance. Brian McKercher argues that from 1930 through 1933 the power and continuity in British foreign policy lay with the professional diplomats of the Foreign Office.⁸ He also claims that Vansittart was the main advisor to Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald (1929 – 1935), and while the PM dictated the direction of the foreign policy, Vansittart was often the one who formulated the strategy. McKercher was, however, speaking generally, and not about the German situation in particular. Martin Gilbert has written more specifically on the British policy towards Germany.⁹ He examines how Vansittart and senior FO personnel, like Orme Sargent, favoured a different approach to Germany than the government eventually chose. The FO wanted to take a harder stance against France, and attempt to pull Germany closer towards equality with the rest of Europe through some revision of the Versailles Treaty. The government instead chose to focus on disarmament, and a policy that conformed more with the principles of the League of Nations.

Some works focus on other interesting perspectives on the subject, such as the writings of the press¹⁰ and the quotes of people in and outside of politics¹¹. Barnes and Barnes write the history of *Mein Kampf* in Britain and the West.¹² They establish the fact that *Mein Kampf* had barely been read by the members of the FO. The one copy they had even went missing for a time. It did not garner much attention until Rumbolds lengthy despatch on it from the 26th of March 1933. The first version in English was also severely redacted, with several of the more contentious parts missing. The first full English translation was not published until 1939.

A general trend in the secondary literature is that Hitler first becomes important when he becomes Chancellor. This is the case both in works about British and German relations¹³, and British foreign policy in general.¹⁴ They mostly focus on the British policy regarding

8 Brian McKercher, "Old Diplomacy and new: the Foreign Office and foreign policy, 1919-1939" in *Diplomacy and World Power – Studies in British foreign policy, 1890-1950*, ed. Michael Dockrill and Brian McKercher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) See also Brian McKercher, "The Foreign Office, 1930-39: Strategy, Permanent Interests and National Security" in *The Foreign Office and British Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*. ed. Gaynor Johnson. London: Routledge, 2005.

9 Martin Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966)

10 Brigitte Granzow, *A Mirror of Nazism: British opinion and the emergence of Hitler*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964)

11 Martin Gilbert, *Britain and Germany Between the Wars*, (London: Longmans, 1964)

12 James J. Barnes and Patience P. Barnes, *Hitler's Mein Kampf in Britain and America: A Publishing History 1930-39*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980)

13 Such as F.L. Carsten, *Britain and the Weimar Republic: The British Documents*, (London: Batsford, 1984)

14 Such as David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled – British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*, second

disarmament. Hitler, before 1933, had no direct influence over Germany's foreign policy and military policy, disarmament included, and was thus not as important.

A lot happened after the first world war and in the early 1920's that would contribute to the eventual success of the Nazis. The Versailles Treaty caused much of what concerned the German people towards the end of the 1920's and the early 1930's. The Treaty established the guilt of Germany, and required them to pay large sums of money in reparations. Furthermore it forced the disbanding of most of the army, and prohibited the keeping of an air force, tanks, armoured cars and submarines. Finally, it stripped Germany of their colonies, and created the "Polish Corridor", separating East Prussia from the rest of Germany.¹⁵ These points would be central themes in Germany in the years 1929-1933.

The establishment of the Weimar Republic also introduces some weaknesses that would later contribute to its demise. Article 48 of the constitution allowed the President to rule by decree in the event of a national emergency, so long as his measures were not opposed by a majority of the Reichstag. This allowed the different parties to leave it to the President to make difficult decisions during difficult times. The governments during the period from 1930-1933 ruled through the authority of the President, not the Reichstag.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Weimar Republic had little support among the politicians that made up the Republic. Most parties favoured a more authoritarian system. The Social Democrats, the proclaimed "founders" of the Republic, were not happy with having to work closely with other, less Socialist, parties. The Centre Party, by many considered the protectors of the democracy, started to move away from this line of thought towards the end of the 1920's.¹⁷

The Nazi Party could have easily disappeared from the German political scene after 1923. The failed "putsch" in Munich had landed Hitler in jail, and caused great disruption within the party. It was during his stay in prison that Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*. While the book offered no policy, it described what Hitler referred to as his "world-view".¹⁸ While Hitler was in prison, the Nazi party did not have an official leader. It fell upon individuals to guide the party

edition, (London: Pearson Education, 2000)

15 See Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History 1919-1939*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. 15-80 for a comprehensive review of the Treaty.

16 A.J. Nicholls, *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler, fourth edition*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) 37

17 Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004) 88-102

18 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, (London: Penguin Books, 2009) 149

forwards. Chief among these was Gregor Strasser, who successfully established the party in north Germany. After Hitler's release, tensions built between Strasser and Hitler. It eventually culminated with Strasser deferring to Hitler's rule. From this point on Hitler was the undisputed ruler of the Party.¹⁹

Perhaps the most important reason for the growth of Nazism was the troubled economic situation in Germany, and the rest of the world, particularly following the Wall Street crash in 1929.²⁰ The economic depression helped drive people towards the extreme messages of the Nazis, and their anti-capitalistic, anti-republican rhetoric.²¹

1.2 Research Question and sources

How did the British Foreign Office perceive and react to Hitler and the Nazi movement prior to 1933?

It is my objective in this thesis to establish how the FO reacted to Hitler and his movement, what they thought about it, and what they believed them capable of doing, both in and outside of power. What information had the Embassy, and the other sources of the FO, supplied them with? By analysing this information, and the accompanying comments made by the members of the FO, I hope to discover if they were prepared for the rapid change in German politics that followed Hitler's appointment to Chancellor.

The British Embassy in Berlin were in a prime position to view the transition of the Nazi Party from a small bunch of unruly demagogues and rabble rousers, to a formidable movement on top of German politics. What had they observed to help the FO understand this new and extreme movement?

19 See Kershaw, *Hitler*, 160-195. Nicholls also talks briefly of this in *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler*, 144-147

20 See in particular Patricia Calvin, *The Great Depression in Europe, 1929-1939*, (New York: Macmillan Press, 2000) 88-109. Calvin argues that the German slide into depression started already in 1928, and was contributed to by domestic causes.

21 Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 349. These issues are also discussed at length in the works in footnotes 15-20

I must place some limitations on the research question, to help keep it at reasonable proportions. My empirical analysis starts with a despatch sent from Harold Nicolson at the Embassy on the 22nd of November 1929. In it he informed the FO of the most noteworthy development in the local elections in Germany: the apparent growth of the Nazi Party. As the end point I have chosen the appointment of Kurt von Schleicher as Chancellor. It may seem counter-intuitive not to extend the thesis to include the appointment of Hitler himself as Chancellor, but I will explain my reasoning. My aim is to shed light on the FO's perception of Hitler prior to him attaining power. The period between von Papen and von Schleicher's appointments involved considerable growth and change in the political scene. It is my contention, however, that between von Schleicher and Hitler's appointment not enough happened to change the views of the FO. It is much more important, and interesting, to see what happened before it was evident that Hitler would end up with the Chancellorship.

Furthermore I will contain the relevant personnel to those connected either to the Embassy, or to the FO. The Nazis were not important enough in German foreign policy to involve the Prime Minister or, for the most part, the Foreign Minister. They did not have the detailed information that the members of the FO had. The people outside of the FO, although they may have had keen insight in the internal political scene in Germany, did not have the power to influence the foreign policy of the British Empire.

To find the information to answer the questions I asked, I visited The National Archives in London in March 2014. Here I analysed all communication sent from the Embassy and others to the FO in the period in question. Accompanying each entry was the minutes, the comments and observations, of the FO members. Some reports I was not able to find. These were secret reports from S.I.S. sources that were not printed in the files I had, and I was not able to locate them elsewhere. However, by looking at the communication between the FO and the Ambassador, discussing these reports I was able to get a good idea of what they contained. In the end I do not believe that they added much that the sources I had access to did not.

1.3 Structure

In this paper I have chosen to place the historiographical discussion and the relevant background information in my introductory chapter. I believe that these together form the basis from which I have drawn my research question. I want to cover them before I delve deeper into the questions at hand.

My second chapter covers the initial period of Nazi growth. In this timeframe the Nazis went from a small party with 12 seats in the Reichstag, to the second largest party in the country. In this time the first impressions of this new player in German politics were established.

My third chapter is where the most important points of this thesis lies. In this period, from January 1931 to May 1932, most of what shaped the FO's view of the Nazis occurred. This includes the political antics as well as the non-political controversies. I also attempt to piece together what they knew of Nazi policies and aims. This chapter includes the only British attempts at keeping the Nazis from power, if indirectly, by their policy of helping Brüning stay as Chancellor. Lastly I look at how Hitler battled Hindenburg in the Presidential elections, and the eventual fall from grace of Brüning.

My fourth chapter traces the last period of the Weimar Republic. Between von Papen's appointment in June, and von Schleichers appointment in December, the Nazis both became the largest party in the country, and encountered their first experience with regress.

Finally I will give an epilogue of the next few months in Germany. This ends with a brief recap of the so-called "Mein Kampf" despatch, sent by Rumbold in late April 1933. In it he gives a summary of the first few months under Nazi rule, and his gloomy prediction of the future. At the end of the chapter I give my concluding thoughts on the thesis, and a summary of my findings.

2 The Nazi Emergence

This chapter will cover the period between 1929 and the start of 1931. In this period the Nazi party went from a largely irrelevant political movement, to the party with the second largest representation in the Reichstag. The basis for information that the Embassy could gather on the party was rather small, as the Nazis had been largely irrelevant on a national scale prior to this. The result of the Reichstag election in September 1930 came as quite a surprise, as the Nazis gained more votes than anyone had anticipated. This changed the political scene in Germany quite a bit, by introducing such an aggressive party as the Nazis in large numbers.

In this chapter I want to focus on three things. First I want to see how the party was viewed prior to their impressive election results. This would form the basis for which the perception of the Nazis was built. The second thing I want to look at is the reaction of the FO to the election results. How did it affect their view on both the Nazis and the political scene in general. The third thing I will focus on is the immediate aftermath of the election. Both in terms of how it changed the composition of the Reichstag and the government, but also how the Nazis was perceived in this early transitional period.

2.1 Early perceptions of Nazism

Towards the end of 1929, local elections in some states, Prussia among them, showed the first signs of the coming Nazi electoral success. It was very modest compared to what they would later achieve, exemplified by their 6 % share of the votes in Berlin. Their emergence was nonetheless the 'outstanding feature of these elections,' as put by Chargé d'affaires at the British Embassy in Berlin, Harold Nicolson.²² He called them 'dangerous people ... red Fascists, or left-wing jingoes²³.' More than once he referred to the 'younger' National Socialists, as opposed to the Nationalist Party, who were implied to be the older one. Their inexperience was further implied by his presentation of their 'vigorous, if Utopian' programme. This cursory introduction labeled them as anti-Monarchists who believed 'in a central dictatorship on extreme Socialist and aggressive lines.' It further concentrated on their objection to the

²² Nicolson to Henderson, 22. Nov. 1929, (N)ational (A)rchives, FO 371/13631/C 8889

²³ Jingoism: Extreme nationalism, or patriotism carried out through aggressive foreign policy rather than peaceful relations.

Versailles Treaty, and their proposed abolishment of the Jew. Which, in all fairness, were their most prominent appeals to the nation. Nicolson finished the despatch with the following, tentative prediction:

'The refreshing vigour of the young National Socialist party is certain to make an increasing appeal to German youth, who are always impressed by extreme idealism. It will form a further disturbing element in an internal situation which, below an apparently healthy surface, shows symptoms of septic inflammation. It may, however, awake the *bourgeois* parties from their apparent apathy.'²⁴

This despatch from Nicolson introduces some of the common themes that would often be associated with the Nazis, such as their nationalistic foundations, their attractiveness to the youthful part of the population, and their electoral zeal.

More local and regional elections showed a continuation of the trend: The Nazi party was gaining ground at the expense of every other established party, the Communist party included. Their continued success puzzled not only the British, but also the Germans themselves, and put them at some level of unease. Even more so when the public outside of Bavaria and the South realised that this was the party of Adolf Hitler. His name was mostly known in connection to the failed 'Putsch' in Munich in 1923. That he was the leader of the Nazi party came as quite the surprise to the Prussian public. However, in the words of Horace Rumbold, the British Ambassador to Germany, their successes had not as of yet 'been so extensive as to justify any alarm.'²⁵ Rumbold saw them getting at least 24 seats in the 1930 Reichstag election, which would be double what they had received two years prior (which then amounted to 2,5 % of the votes). The reason for their importance was their ability to gain voters from across the political spectrum. Also 'any new and purposeful movement in this country deserves notice.' Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Robert Vansittart, found Hitler a 'half-mad and ridiculously dangerous demagogue,' but agreed with Rumbold in that their success was 'noteworthy, but not to be exaggerated.'²⁶ Other officials at the FO found Hitler and his personality to be the only driving force behind the Nazi party, 'and it does not seem to rest on much else.'²⁷

24 Nicolson to Henderson, 22. Nov. 1929, NA, FO, 371/13631/C 8889

25 Rumbold to Henderson, 23. Dec. 1929, NA, FO 371/13631/C 9916

26 Vansittart memo, 1. May 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 3358

27 (F)oreign (O)ffice minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 23. Dec. 1929, NA, FO 371/13631/C 9916.

Rumbold credits the speaking ban placed on Hitler in Prussia²⁸ as one of the main reasons for the party's growth in the state. 'Diverted from his favourite occupation of wrecking Social Democratic meetings and preaching sedition, Hitler had to devote himself to organization in Prussia.' Another significant factor was their inclusion in the proposal for a referendum opposing the Young Plan, put together by Alfred Hugenberg²⁹. The funding they received from Hugenberg, as well as access to the Hugenberg press greatly increased their exposure and ability to reach as large a portion of the population as possible. Incidentally the Nazis gained more followers from Hugenberg's Nationalist party than anyone else. Yet the two factors can not fully account for the success of the Nazis, according to Rumbold, hence the unease among German politicians. The main reason for their success, in Rumbold's opinion, was their propagandist activity and their ruthless programme, combined with their ability to appeal to the young people of Germany.

'Their language is unbridled. It is addressed to youth; and to German youth, eager, progressive, curious, conscious of its vigour, but deprived of opportunity, the National Socialists make a definite appeal. They denounce pacifism and extol personal courage. They reject tolerance and extol bigotry. They denounce internationalism and extol xenophobia. They preach against the rule of the majority, against democratic government, and extol the virtues of individuality and personality. They rave against Poland and denounce Italy, but they respect Pilsudski and revere Mussolini. In a country where landlords and tenants alike are groaning under an intolerable burden of debt, they preach war against capitalism, against interest, against the tyranny of the mortgage banks and, above all, against usury, profiteering and the Jews.'³⁰

Rumbold described the German political scene as confounding, with 12 parties in the Reichstag, as well as several others without representation, ranging from the widest Left to the furthest Right. The Nazis were the most confusing one of them all. Their attempt at combining two political poles was 'something more bewildering than ever,' and according to one member of the Foreign Office 'This sinister link between extreme Right and extreme Left is forged out of pure lunacy.'³¹

See also FO minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 19. May 1930, NA, FO 371/14362/C 3872

28 The ban was placed in 1925, and was followed by similar rulings in several other states, Bavaria included. Apart from Prussia, these were all rescinded in 1927.

29 Alfred Hugenberg, leader of the Nationalist Party and the leading media proprietor in Germany at the time.

30 Rumbold to Henderson, 23. Dec. 1929, NA, FO 371/13631/C 9916

31 FO minute, 23. Dec. 1929, NA, FO 371/13631/C 9916

Elections in Saxony in June 1930 showed even further growth for the National Socialist party. Tripling their tally of votes, they were now the second largest party in the state assembly (Landtag). To the British FO this looked like an indication of the result of the coming Reichstag election. 'Gains by the party of the national socialists would be unfortunate as they would render the passing of reasonable measures much more difficult.'³² Vansittart simply wrote: 'this is ominous.'³³ Rumbold concluded that fresh elections could only favour the Nazis.³⁴ He did not believe they would as much as triple their vote in a national election, but said he had heard one well informed person estimate the Nazis might win 60 seats.³⁵

2.2 Reichstag election and Nazi success

In the weeks leading up to the Reichstag election in September, Rumbold reported that the two outstanding features of the electoral campaign were the fervor of the Nazi campaigning, and the apparent political apathy among the people.³⁶ As the reason for this apathy he named the common belief that the election would produce no definite result, and that yet another election would have to be held later in the year. Despite their 'original and often ingenious' electoral methods, he believed the Nazis own estimates of around 3 million votes (between 50 and 60 seats) to be too high. He believed that their level of activity, compared to the general apathy of the electorate would lead to their numbers in the election being out of proportion to their actual strength relative to the other parties. Similarly, Nichols at the FO wondered if their numbers could be maintained without a constructive programme, with the National Socialist programme being especially destructive.³⁷

As it turned out, even the most liberal estimates Rumbold ever reported were dwarfed by the reality of the election results. The National Socialists gained 107 seats, nearly double what they themselves had estimated.

32 FO minute, Rumbold to Henderson 23. Jun. 1930, NA, FO 371/14362/C 5004 see also FO minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 30. Jun. 1930, NA, FO 371/14362/C 5194

33 Vansittart minute, 23. Jun. 1930, NA, FO 371/14362/C 5004

34 Rumbold to Henderson, 23. Jun. 1930, NA, FO 371/14362/C 5194

35 For reference, the largest party in the 1928 elections won 153 seats. 60 would have been fourth most.

36 Rumbold to Henderson, 8. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 6855

37 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 8. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 6855

Political party	# of seats (1928)
Social Democrats	143 (153)
National Socialists	107 (12)
Communists	77 (54)
Centre Party	68 (62)
German Nationalists	41 (73)
German People's party	30 (45)
Economic Party	23 (23)
German State party	20 (25)
Bavarian People's party	19 (16)
German «Landvolk» party	18 (13)
Smaller parties	31 (11)
Total	577 (491)

Results of the September 1930 Reichstag election.³⁸

The results made a new election unlikely to Rumbold, with the fear of further Nazi gains the obvious reason.³⁹ A quick analysis revealed that in Thuringen, the only place where the Nazis had been in government, their growth was lower than the average. Furthermore, in the areas with the most dire economic conditions, their gains were well above the mean.

In analysing the success of the National Socialists, Rumbold concludes that the programme of the party is not their defining factor.

'In an election held at a time of serious economic depression in which internal affairs played the chief part, they succeeded more than any other party in taking advantage of the unrest and dissatisfaction prevailing throughout the country. Their youthfulness and vigour captured the bulk of new 20-year-old voters, and the flappers, typists and shop-girls flocked to them with frank enthusiasm. Many a perplexed citizen, too, weary with the political wrangles of the *bourgeois* parties, and shaken out of his apathy or his indecision by the vigour of the campaign, must have also voted National Socialist because he did not know what to do.¹⁴⁰

To the young Nazi voter the “movement”, and its instinctive nature, was of more importance than the reflectiveness of a programme. Its contrarian and disrespectful nature was enough. 'In fact, the National Socialist success may be regarded to a considerable extent as the revolt of

38 Rumbold to Henderson, 22. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 7157

39 Rumbold to Henderson, 16. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 7052

40 Rumbold to Henderson, 22. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 7157

impertinent youth against impudent old men.' The idea that 'the movement and not the programme is the most important thing,' did nothing to help the FO understand what the aims of the party were going forward.

2.3 Aftermath of the election

The allocation of seats in the Reichstag seemed to inevitably lead to a Centre-Social Democrat coalition, with support from the smaller, moderate parties. Rumbold expected such a coalition to struggle with coming to an agreement on internal and financial reform.⁴¹ Cooperation with the Nazis was not in question. It had been suggested in some circles, but the price demanded was deemed too high, as the Nazis wanted the Ministries of both the Interior and Defence, as well as the post as Chief of Police in Berlin.

Shortly after the elections, some commentators in the British Press speculated on the possibility of a Nazi “putsch”. Rumbold felt it necessary to inform the FO that in his estimation no “putsch” was forthcoming, a view with which the FO agreed.⁴² The Ambassador gave two primary reasons for his conclusion. First, the Nazis were not prepared for the level of their success, and needed to first organize the party to handle this new level of responsibility. The Air Attaché at the Embassy also quotes sources that believed the Nazis had their hands full with finding 100 suitable members to take seats in the Reichstag without creating internal feuds.⁴³ Secondly Rumbold believed that their newfound success had given the National Socialists a feeling of responsibility. The Nazis wanted to enter government, and the current climate favored the democratic approach over a forceful one, which in Rumbold's estimates would have had little chance of success anyway.⁴⁴ If there were to be any trouble, he thought it would rather come when the Nazis were left out of government. As to what form this trouble might take he would not speculate. In connection to the fear of a “putsch”, the Military Attaché at the Embassy gave his view on the stance of the Army. According to him control of the Army lay solely in the hands of President Hindenburg. As long as he remained in power the status quo would continue. Should the old Field-Marshal fall from power, through age most likely, the situation would become too unclear to prophesy.

41 Rumbold to Henderson, 16. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 7052

42 Rumbold to Henderson (including minutes), 29. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 7341

43 Christie to Yencken, 26. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 7287

44 Rumbold to Henderson (including minutes), 29. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 7341

During their electoral campaign the programme of the Nazis had functioned more as a tool to drum up the people than as a serious political document, according to Rumbold.⁴⁵ With the Nazis being prominent in the Reichstag, the programme came under increasing scrutiny. The Ambassador used this opportunity to send the programme to the FO, and to give a closer inspection of it and its contents. He determined that the aim of the movement was 'a "greater Germany," to achieve which the programme demands the consolidation of all Germans into one great state, equal rights for the German people with other nations, the abolition of the Treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain, and space and colonies to feed the nation and absorb the surplus population.' Further it declared the Jew not of German blood, and thus not German. All non-German immigration was to cease, and all non-Germans who had entered since 1914 should be forced to leave the country. He presents their, mostly socialist, views on economic and social questions. In spite of rumours of trouble within the party, and of a split, one conclusion Rumbold felt safe in making: 'All that is clear at the present moment is that, whether the National Socialist party succeeds in holding together in its present form, or whether it splits up, the revival of nationalism in Germany has come to stay.'

In December of 1930 the Danish Foreign Minister had claimed that primers issued after the war had instilled xenophobia in German school children, and in part caused the growth of the National Socialist movement. Rumbold felt it necessary to challenge these claims to the FO, and at the same time give some analysis of the growth of the Nazi Party. Regarding the primers, he admitted that they did not hold Germany responsible for war, but rather Russia and Serbia.⁴⁶ But he did not agree that they encouraged xenophobia. And in any case, most teachers belonged to the parties on the left side of politics, and had no reason to preach hatred of foreigners to their pupils. Rumbold also didn't agree that xenophobia had been a large factor in the success of the Nazi movement. First of all, their growth was very recent, and Rumbold credited the economic crisis with giving Hitler the opportunity to shine. Furthermore, the Nazis were not particularly xenophobic. The chief reason for their growth was, in Rumbold's eyes, 'undoubtedly the inflation, which either wiped out peoples' savings or passed them into the pockets of the Jews, and the recent severe increase in internal economic difficulties.'

45 Rumbold to Henderson, 3. Nov. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 8128

46 Rumbold to Henderson, 15. Dec. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 9152

Going in to 1931, the situation in Germany was one of transition. The success of the Nazis had shaken the entire political system, and put pressure on the sitting government. A conversation Rumbold had with the German Foreign Minister, Julius Curtius, showed that the government were ready to be more forward with their foreign policy.⁴⁷ In general it was uncertain how long the government would be able to stay in power, and how the Nazis would act upon joining the Reichstag in larger numbers.

⁴⁷ Rumbold to Henderson, 3. Nov. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 8115

3 The Nazi Experience

The period between the beginning of 1931 and Brüning's resignation as Chancellor in the end of May 1932, was one of transition for the Nazis. The 1930 election had placed them squarely in the midst of German politics, and they needed to define themselves as a party. From just 12 members in the Reichstag, they suddenly numbered more than a hundred strong. In many ways German politics at this time revolved around the President and Chancellor Brüning on one side, and the Nazis on the other. "The Nazi Experience" refers to how the Nazis, when finally in the spotlight, created an impression in both Germany, and in Britain.

In the first subsection I will look at how the Nazis conformed to the Reichstag. This was the first opportunity for the Embassy and the FO to see how the sudden increase in size would impact the Nazis. Through their behaviour in parliament, the Nazis would create lasting impressions. It was often predicted during this time that the Party would split. Especially the FO held this view for a long time. I will also look at how Hitler was viewed. The secondary literature shows how Hitler was the undisputed leader of the Party, and that his mastery of the party was complete. I will show how the Ambassador did not give himself the best possible basis for which to create an opinion on the Führer of the Nazi party. This in turn contributed to both him and the FO not realising the position of Hitler in the Party.

The second subsection is mainly about Heinrich Brüning. The FO made it a point of policy to do what they could to keep him as Chancellor. He was regarded as the last reasonable man in German politics, and a bulwark against Nazism. Their efforts culminated in the visit of Brüning to London in the middle of 1931.

When recounting the history of the Nazi movement in this period, one can not only focus on the political side. In the streets of Berlin, and all other parts of Germany, there was constant fighting between followers of the Nazis and the Communists. I will look at the role of the SA, the para-military organisation of the Nazis, in this. I will also look at the rumours of armed revolution that would at times surface around the Nazis and the SA.

The fourth subsection I have dedicated to the policy of the Nazi Party. The Party had done a

remarkable job of never quite committing to any form of policy. It was hard to define what views they held on economy and, more importantly, foreign policy. The most important document in helping establish their views on these things, was the memorandum compiled by Group Captain Christie. Through analysis of their programme, as well as through consultations with sources in Germany in general, and the Nazi Party in particular, he established the most comprehensive review of the policies of the party.

Lastly I will look at the battle for the Presidency between Hindenburg and Hitler. The victory of Hindenburg was not entirely a setback for the Nazis. First of all it showed that Hitler had a large amount of support of the nation. More importantly, however, it led to the demise of the Brüning government.

3.1 The Nazis in the Reichstag

The reason for the success of the Nazi movement was their ability to rally the youth of the nation to their cause by creating the illusion of “us versus them”. “Them” being the Jews, the Allies who created the Versailles Treaty, the “traitors” who imposed the Weimar system on them, and the Communists. They could get away with this since they had no power, and thus no expectation of action. Their electoral success changed this by adding accountability towards their followers. When you have power, even of a limited kind, you are expected to make good on your words. Within the FO the expectation was that the inclusion of the Nazis in the democratic system should have a tempering effect.⁴⁸ The problem with this line of thinking was that continued Nazi success was very much reliant on momentum. After promising to break the system they were now a part of, they could not very well “settle down” and become just another parliamentary party. Even Rumbold himself touched on this when he wrote that 'as there is little or no chance of their being able to fulfil the promises which they made to the electorate, they may well lose considerably at the next election.' Initially they did not show any signs of conforming to the constraints of parliament. In most of Rumbold's despatches mentions of Nazi behaviour in the Reichstag was usually accompanied by the word “rowdyism”. Initially Rumbold thought this “rowdyism” to be mostly theatrical, but he eventually had to correct himself: 'There was some slight hope that, after the National

48 Rumbold to Henderson, 27. Oct. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 7996

Socialists had blown off steam and recovered from the elation of their unexpectedly great success at the polls, the increase in their responsibilities resulting from the growth of their numbers would have a sobering effect. So far there has been little evidence of such a development.¹⁴⁹ In January in 1931 he was still not convinced of their longevity.

'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 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.'¹⁵⁰

They did not contribute constructively to the proceedings of the Reichstag, neither through proposals nor debate. Indeed, one of the first notable actions the party took in the Reichstag, was to leave it. In February of 1931 Reichstag removed the parliamentary immunity extended to those members who were also newspaper editors. This had especially benefited Nazi editors, as they could print slander on their rivals, without fear of repercussions. Claiming it unconstitutional, the Nazis left the House. The move was seen primarily as a tactical decision to keep the momentum of the movement going. The constraints mentioned above had begun to stunt their growth, the FO believed. For this reason they had 'seized a suitable opportunity to withdraw to the country, where they are still increasing their strength, in order probably to open a campaign of destructive criticism.'¹⁵¹

Popular opinion at the FO in late 1930 and early 1931 was that the Nazis were heading for troubling times. Because of its seemingly dichotomous nature, 'the Nazis are, I think, the sort of party that will split pretty easily,' claimed one member, a view shared by most others as well.¹⁵² While the Nazis had largely played on nationalistic ideals in their campaign, they were also socialists. In his summary of the Nazi programme Rumbold had concluded that 'the programme is indeed "Nationalist" in all its striving for a greater, better, cleaner and less

49 Rumbold to Henderson, 1. Dec. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 8804

50 Rumbold to Henderson, 19. Jan. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 402

51 FO minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 17. Feb 1931, FO 371/15213/C 1045

52 FO minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 27. Oct. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 7997

corrupt Germany. But it is also “Socialist”, and in parts almost Communist, and something must be done to satisfy the Left wing, to honour the implications of the programme.⁵³ The members of the FO did not see how both the moderate members and the most leftist members of the party could be satisfied. Any gesture to appease the left side of the party would also be at odds with the views of funders of the party, many of them right-leaning industrialists. The foremost signs of split were said to be the unruliness of Otto Strasser, editor of the “Nationaler Sozialist” and brother of Gregor Strasser, as well as the growing ambition and defiance of Joseph Goebbels. Interestingly, Rumbold reported on a meeting of the officials in the Ministeries of Interior for the Reich and for Prussia, debating just this.

A member of my staff was informed by an official of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs who attended the meeting, that its considered view was that there were no indications yet of a real split in the party, that Dr. Goebbels' defiance must not be taken too seriously, and that Otto Strasser was more likely to lose his paper and his editorial position, as well as being excluded from the party than to be able to lead any successful revolt. Hitler, in fact, they were agreed, was still able, apparently whenever he wished, to exercise a remarkable influence over the whole party.⁵⁴

For some reason the FO didn't share this view on the situation, finding it 'more than probable that the moderates and extremists will divide,' without offering further analysis.⁵⁵ No mention was made of the fact that Otto Strasser had left the party (or been expelled, depending on who told the story) already in July 1930, and the FO had known since at least September.

The proposed split in the party never occurred, and was most likely never close. Strasser had taken with him his closest followers when leaving, but otherwise his departure didn't spark any large-scale defection. One can certainly see the logic behind the FO's reasoning. A party that can attract support from rich industrialists, as well as poor workers and farmers, must necessarily contain some conflicting elements. The way in which the Nazis circumvented this was by never committing to specifics. It is very possible that the FO would have been right when predicting the party to split, if the Nazis had ever been forced to defend their policies. If

53 Rumbold to Henderson, 3. Nov. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 8128

54 Rumbold to Henderson, 3. Nov. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 8128

55 FO minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 3. Nov. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 8128.

challenged on their Socialist economic policies, they would perhaps have lost followers who favoured capitalism, but had been attracted by their nationalistic world-view. But thanks to the mess that was the German political scene, this didn't come to fruition. When they had been a part of the Reichstag, they did not contribute, and now they had left it. The conviction that the Nazi Party would eventually split was, nonetheless, a constant in the FO minutes, all the way up close to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor.

Another thing the FO did not fully account for, was the role and status of Hitler. He was the chief ideologist of the party, but he didn't take part in day-to-day politics. He didn't have a seat in the Reichstag. He couldn't, he wasn't German yet. Neither was he involved in the administrative organisation of the party. As such more visible characters, like Goebbels and Strasser, were thought to have the power to potentially challenge his rule. In actuality, Hitler was the clear ruler of the Party. He staked the course, and others followed. His leadership was undisputed, and his mastery of the Party complete. And while his subordinates, such as Goebbels, would at times make statements seemingly at odds with those of Hitler, his orders were absolute. Rumbold began to realise the reality of this only in December 1931:

'Rumours have been rife for some time that all was not well within the party. There would seem to be already a moderate and an extremist section. Too much importance need not be attached to the discrepancies between Hitler's statements and those of his auxiliaries. For the moment the Nazi movement holds its followers in a grip resembling that of a religious revival. The hypnotic effect of and order from the Brown House is admitted by Hitler's enemies to be even more alarming than heretofore. Whatever his followers may say or do, the Nazi leader has only to issue a command to ensure instant obedience. He does not hesitate to contradict his lieutenants or reduce them to ridicule without in any way seeming to undermine party loyalty.'⁵⁶

The main reason for their underestimation of Hitler might be attributed to the fact that no one connected to the Embassy or the FO had ever met him. While it was customary for the Ambassador to have some form of social contact with the leaders of the opposition, Hitler was an exception.⁵⁷ While the reason for this is not further explained, the explanation given to the

⁵⁶ Rumbold to Simon, 21. Dec. 1931, NA, FO 371/15217/C 9535

⁵⁷ FO minutes, Rumbold to Simon, 8. Dec. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 9116

Ambassador to Rome when he reported on his invitation to meet Hitler (who was to visit Rome), was that such a meeting would too easily be 'misrepresented'.⁵⁸ From this it can be inferred that they feared the signals such a meeting would send, and how it would be interpreted by Brüning et al. as well as in the press. As a result of this, their impressions of Hitler was entirely based on his public persona, and through second-hand sources. In fact, the first time Rumbold ever witnessed a Hitler speech was in february of 1933.⁵⁹ Another source of miscalculation was the fact that no one in the FO, aside from Vansittart, had read Hitler's book "Mein Kampf". The book is rarely even mentioned in any communication between the Embassy and the FO, leading to the conclusion that the Ambassador may not have placed too much importance on it. Not until March 1933 did he give the FO a comprehensive review of the contents of the book. This underlines the failure to connect the ideology and direction of the party to Hitler. They tried to view party in the context of a regular political party, when in fact it's structure resembled that of a dictatorship much more than a democracy. The underestimation of Hitler, and the corresponding overestimation of Goebbles and Strasser might have diluted the FO's view of the party's ultimate goals and aims.

3.2 Dr. Brüning – The best option

At the start of 1931 Brüning's position as Chancellor was far from certain. Germany was in economic crisis, and the pressure from the extremist parties was clearly felt. It was generally agreed that if a new election was called, it would mean even more success for the Nazis. For the FO it became a point of policy to try to keep Brüning in power. He was, Nichols stated, 'the best government we can hope for Germany in present circumstances.'⁶⁰ He added, however, that 'if it is to survive ... it may be necessary that we should try and give the Chancellor some kind of support.'

Ever since Stresemann died Germany had been lacking a strong hand to guide them. Or as Vansittart put it, 'to educate public opinion and exercise a controlling influence over foreign policy.'⁶¹ Brüning was the closest they could come. 'A politician of no mean skill' according to Vansittart, his elevation was also partly due to the lack of competition in British eyes. 'So long

58 FO minutes, Graham to Simon, 1. Dec. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 8943

59 Gilbert, *Rumbold*, 368

60 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 19. Jan. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 402

61 Vansittart memo, May 1931, NA, CAB 24/225/17

as depression continues tub-thumpers, and all those with whom moral courage is indistinguishable from self-advertisement, will have eager audiences,' the Permanent Under-Secretary wrote. Nevertheless, '[the FO] are all agreed that the Brüning govt. is the best we can hope for.'⁶² This view was not new. Already in October of 1930, when Rumbold reported on the different parties' stance on the Young Plan, Sargent had concluded that if the Young plan was to be kept intact, the Brüning government must be kept in power.⁶³ The maintenance of the Brüning government was a matter of European importance, 'and anything we and the French can do to strengthen his position ought to be done.'

Another way in which Brüning had distinguished himself was that 'of all the many utterances of German politicians holding out promises of revision of every kind, his have been easily the most guarded and the most moderate in tone.'⁶⁴ In Brüning they saw a potential bulwark against the Nazis.

'If Dr. Brüning now succeeds in establishing himself as a trusted leader and in exorcising the spirit of hopelessness [among the German people], there is a chance that the Nazi policy of "chaos" may begin to lose its attractions. In that case it may be reasonably hoped that the Germans' innate respect for order and stability and their stolid qualities of perseverance and endurance will reassert themselves sufficiently to enable the political machine to stand the strain which the economic crisis is undoubtedly going to put upon it during the coming months.'⁶⁵

The ills ailing the Brüning government were primarily economic, and the remedy for such must necessarily be economic in nature. The root cause was the war debts owed to France and USA, about which Great Britain could do little. An economic conference was a possible solution, with which Vansittart agreed.⁶⁶ They could however do little else than sound the French on the possibility. And Vansittart pointed out that 'if they will not budge, we can do nothing.' Even if that succeeded, he feared that the USA would not agree to it. 'But we should

62 Rumbold to Henderson, 19. Jan. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 402

63 Sargent minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 13. Oct. 1930, NA, FO 371/14364/C 7653

64 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 8. Jan. 1931, NA, FO 371/15215/C 149

65 Sargent minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 30. Jan. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 669

66 Vansittart minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 19. Jan. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 402

have done all we could to tide over these next few months.' It seems however, that after consulting with economic advisor to the Government, Frederick Leith-Ross, the idea was postponed. He believed that neither the French nor the Americans were interested at the current time, and until that changed, any attempt to gather a conference were useless.⁶⁷

With the Nazis withdrawing from the Reichstag, and Brüning proving himself in the eyes of the German people to be a capable leader, the immediate pressure on the government seemed to subside. Indeed, Rumbold predicted, if unwillingly, that the government might be safe, at least until the fall.⁶⁸ In a letter to Henderson on the 6th of March he again reiterated that he believed the Brüning government was safe until autumn. He also suggested that the best way for the British to help increase Brüning's prestige in Germany, was by inviting him to come visit England.⁶⁹ In this he also had Vansittart's support.⁷⁰ Such a visit was indeed decided upon, and were to take place sometime after the meeting at the League of Nations in early May.⁷¹

Results of elections in Oldenburg showed that even if Brüning was growing in prestige, the Nazis were still growing in numbers. The FO had thought earlier elections in Brunswick proved that the Nazis were on a downswing, but had to reevaluate their beliefs.⁷²

On the 4th of June Rumbold reported that the prospects of the trip to England, and the meeting at Chequers had indeed proved useful for Brüning. Under it's shelter, the Chancellor was introducing unpopular cuts in social expenditure. 'And while the press is urging [the] Chancellor to concentrate on reparations during his stay in England, public are being made acquainted with new financial measures in driblets.'⁷³ But while the meeting had been useful prior to it happening, it may not have lasting effects, feared the Ambassador. '... once Chequers has receded into the past, the future may seem lacking in possibilities from which

67 Leith-Ross to Sargent, 11. Feb. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 945

68 Rumbold to Henderson, 4. Mar. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 1506

69 Rumbold to Henderson, 6. Mar. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 1705

70 Vansittart minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 9. Mar. 1931, NA, FO 371/15213/C 1506. Minute written March 13.

71 Rumbold to Henderson, 18. Mar. 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 1907

72 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 21. May. 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 3534

73 Rumbold to Henderson, 4. Jun. 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 3863

relief could be expected.'

In the days leading up to the visit, a feeling of 'hopelessness', as Rumbold put it, had taken a hold of the German public.⁷⁴ People had little money, unemployment ran high, and any hope of reprieve from their misery seemed bleak. 'It is the lack of any hope that makes the situation seem to them so depressing and makes it difficult for Brüning to keep them in hand.' Nichols pointed out how hard it was for the British to supply this hope. Of the three main subjects at the meeting, the Customs Union with Austria, disarmament, and reparations, the British could do very little to help the Germans.⁷⁵

The meeting offered a stand-still in German politics, but after a few weeks it returned to its usual state. Or as Rumbold reported: 'The parties on the Right, after some weeks of tranquility, are now evincing a disposition to renew their political activities.'⁷⁶ A meeting between Hitler and Hugenberg produced a common statement, saying that 'the National Opposition will now enter upon a decisive fight for the overthrow of the present system.' The fight for power in Germany was back on.

The build-up to the referendum in Prussia for dissolving the Landtag, suggests that the Nazis were perhaps not yet ready to bring about the fall of the Brüning government. It was assumed that the dissolution of the Prussian Landtag could eventually lead to Brüning's demise, but the Nazis did not actively campaign for it. B.C. Newton, for the Ambassador, reported that 'it is to be doubted whether the responsible leaders, when the time came, were really anxious that the referendum should succeed.'⁷⁷ They feared that its success would lead to a fresh financial crisis, and that it would not be worth it. The referendum in the end failed to dissolve the Landtag. While they had not done their utmost to bring down the government in Prussia, the Nazis were not prepared to give Brüning respite in any other areas, however. Newton summarised Hitler's manifesto from before the referendum as follows:

74 Rumbold to Vansittart, 10. Jun 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 3974

75 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Vansittart, 10. Jun 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 3974

76 Rumbold to Henderson, 17. Jul. 1931, NA, FO 371/15215/C 5343

77 Rumbold to Henderson, 17. Aug. 1931, NA, FO 371/15215/C 6383

'... the Hitlerites intend to emphasise the failure of successive Governments to save Germany, and they regard opposition to the Young plan, and indeed to reparation or “tribute” payment as the best political card to play for some time to come. Indeed, since the advent of the financial crisis the National Socialist press has, in fact, redoubled its campaign against the Young plan and against the the resumption of tribute payments in any form at a future date.'

After a period of relative stability for Brüning, it seemed like things were getting difficult again in October. Per Rumbold, the Chancellor was having trouble in reconstructing the Cabinet, and that his prestige was at an all time low.⁷⁸ Nichols laid the blame for this loss of favour at the failure of the proposal for a German-Austrian customs union.⁷⁹ The Union had been attempted established in March 1931, but in the face of stark opposition, especially from France, it had been left to the League to decide its fate. The British had been on the fence on the issue, and had not involved themselves too much. In any case, its failure now seemingly came back to haunt Brüning. His falling prospects aside, Sargent was still inclined 'to back Brüning against the rest.'⁸⁰ Brüning's main problems politically was his inability, and unwillingness, to cooperate with the extremist parties, and the waning support of the Social Democrats. 'Dr. Brüning's best card is the fact that there is no one to succeed him. Meanwhile the outlook is extremely gloomy,' is how Nichols put it.⁸¹ In spite of all this, Brüning was able to retain a small majority of support for his government in the meeting of the Reichstag on the 16th of October. After that, Brüning was to remain seemingly safe in his chair, at least until the Presidential election in April 1932.

3.3 Controversies and legality of the Nazi Party

Every now and then rumours of a possible Nazi “putsch” would appear. It had been this way ever since the election in 1930. To their credit, neither Rumbold or the FO ever seemed to put much stock in it. The reason they kept occurring had three main reasons: The volatile rhetoric of the Nazi leaders, the existence of their para-military organisation, the SA, and the fact that Hitler had, indeed, attempted a “putsch” in Munich in 1923.

78 Rumbold to Henderson, 10. Oct. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 7593

79 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 10. Oct. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 7593

80 Sargent minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 10. Oct. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 7593

81 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 13. Oct. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 7668

Immediately after the 1930 election, Hitler started to put emphasis on the legality of his, and his party's, aims. On the 22nd of September, he had been called as a witness for one of the defendants in a trial in Leipzig, in which three officers were accused of trying to form Nazi cells within the Army. Hitler was there to testify that the National Socialists only pursued their ends through legal means. Any opportunity to speak in public, was another opportunity for Hitler to give a propaganda speech. He stated that any talk of revolution, only meant a political revolution.⁸² After obtaining power through legal means, they would lead the national revolution to end the Weimar Republic, and bring about a new Germany. Anyone who had ideas of an illegal revolution would be expelled, such as Otto Strasser had been. The FO certainly seemed convinced, with Nichols stating that '[Hitler's] avowed object seems to be to obtain power by constitutional means.'⁸³

Regardless of the statements of their leader, controversies always followed the Nazis. Their followers were in a constant battle with Communist and Social Democrat followers, leading to street brawls, often resulting in death. In late March of 1931 Rumbold reported that in the last 12 months, 300 people had lost their lives in these fights.⁸⁴ Nichols said that he had been told that the fighting acted as a safety valve for the aggressive feelings among some of the German public. 'But 300 violent deaths in the last 12 months seems a pretty stiff price to pay.'⁸⁵

Attacks on Jewish people, and on the Jewish community also occurred at times. One example is the, so-called, "Kurfürstendamm pogrom" on the 12th of September 1931. On this date, more than a thousand Nazis converged on the Kurfürstendamm boulevard in Berlin, attacking everyone who looked Jewish. They also broke the windows of a café known to be frequented by Jews, and threaten its patrons with violence. The bouts of violence, such as this pogrom, didn't seem to impact the views held in the FO of the Nazis. Other than acknowledging that they happened, and a general negativity towards the anti-semitism and loss of life, they were not much commented on. It must be said that the fighting mostly occurred between "willing" parties, and the Nazis were not always the aggressor. Furthermore, they were not, strictly

82 Rumbold to Henderson, 29. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14372/C 7342

83 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 29. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14372/C 7342

84 Rumbold to Henderson, 26. Mar. 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 1947

85 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 26. Mar. 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 1947

speaking, politically relevant. The party can not always be held accountable for the actions of their followers. Rather than instilling in their followers a fighting spirit, it can be argued that, by their nature, the Nazis attracted followers who already possessed it.

A constant source of disruptions and controversy was the SA. The “Sturmabteilung” was not the only military organisation in Germany at the time. The most notable ones were the Stahlhelm, the veterans' organisation who were close to the Nationalist Party and the Reichsbanner, the organisation of the Social Democrats. There were also organisations of a para-military character with allegiance to the Communists. These organisations were often connected to the street brawlings. The SA was often the reason that the legality of the Nazis was questioned. At times revolutionary in character, it was often more extreme than the political arm of the party. One example is the revolt of their Berlin commander, Stennes. In 1930 he had revolted against the party, fearing that they would become too moderate and too close to the “capitalists”.⁸⁶ It eventually led to Hitler assuming direct control of the organisation, and giving its members certain privileges, such as a lower membership fee, and more say in the party. Interestingly, Rumbold says that Hitler had to agree to cover legal fees for members, resulting from the political fighting. 'It is significant that these concessions had to be given because the storm detachments persistently asserted that the various acts of rowdiness ... were committed on the orders of the party leaders.' This point does not seem to be followed up on in this, or later, despatches or minutes. It seems like the FO did not place particular importance on the acts of the SA. To further this point, Rumbold several times mentions that he believed Hitler viewed the SA as a necessary evil, to defend public Nazi meetings from Communists and others, but often deliberated dissolution of the organisation. He mentions it first in connection with the Stennes revolt, and brings it up again when Stennes is expelled from his position in April 1931. 'Their indiscipline, their tendency to intrigue against the political leaders and their attempts to bully the more peaceable elements are a constant source of anxiety to Hitler and the more moderate section of the party.'⁸⁷ In May Hitler was again called to stand as witness in a criminal trial, this time in the case against SA members who were accused of attacking, and wounding, Communists. Once again he used the opportunity to reassure everyone that his party were to adhere to the Constitution, and obtain

86 Rumbold to Henderson, 8. Sep. 1930, NA, FO 371/14363/C 6855

87 Rumbold to Henderson, 10. Apr. 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 2350

power through legal means. When asked whether he had promised Brüning that he would disband the SA in the event that his party were to enter government, Hitler denied it. He would never consider it, as the organisation was 'the backbone of the party,' and its disbandment would 'spell suicide to the whole National Socialist movement.'⁸⁸ The SA was forbidden by presidential decree on the 14th of April 1932. Hitler put up little resistance, leading Rumbold to believe that he did, perhaps, not mind it too much.⁸⁹

The most serious challenge to the Nazi claims of legality was perhaps the “Boxheim document”. The document was procured by raiding the headquarters of the Nazi party in Hesse. The document was created by six of the regional Nazi leaders, and contained the first orders of business after a Nazi takeover in the country. The document was revolutionary in character, and caused considerable outrage in the press. The leaders of the Party immediately claimed foul play. Among their suggestions were both forgery, and it being planted by Communist spies. Should it in fact be real, it did not contain the views of the party, and its creators would lose their membership in the party. 'Insistence is laid by Captain Goering on the determination of the party to use none but constitutional means to attain their ends, and he has assured the Reich Minister of the Interior, at Hitler's behest, that the Nazi authorities knew nothing of the Boxheim affair.'⁹⁰ Nichols believed the leaders in this, and had no doubt that the document contained 'the views and opinions of a small minority of the Nazis.'⁹¹

In general both the FO and the Ambassador trusted that the Nazis would follow their promises of only reaching for power through legal means. As such the fightings in the streets, and the controversies of the para-military organisations were held separate from the conduct of the political side of the party. No comment was given as to what would happen to the Communists, Social Democrats and the Jewish population in general, should a Nazi government actually occur.

88 Rumbold to Henderson, 18. May. 1931, NA, FO 371/15214/C 3415

89 Rumbold to Simon, 20. Apr. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 3168

90 Rumbold to Henderson, 1. Dec. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 8920

91 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 1. Dec. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 8920

3.4 The aims and policy of the NSDAP

As mentioned, the Nazis had been very careful to not get bogged down in specifics. As such, finding the policy of the party proved a challenge. More than a year after the election, B.C. Newton at the Embassy wrote the following in a despatch:

... in view of the steadily increasing growth of the National Socialist movement, many people recently, including both officials and various foreign correspondents in Berlin, have been seeking to find in the speeches of the party leaders some definite indication as to what the policy of the party is. So far these enquiries appear to have met with little success.⁹²

Nichols believed that they had found so little 'for the very good reason that no constructive, thought-out programme exists.'⁹³ What little had been found was mostly well known. The Nazis were against the payment of tribute, and the Young Plan in general. In connection, they also demanded revision of the Versailles Treaty. They also wanted the Polish corridor, separating East Prussia from the rest of Germany, abolished. Little definite had been found on economy, but Strasser had mentioned that no 'currency experiments' were to be undertaken. Newton summarises the problem himself:

'Probably the leaders of the National Socialist movement have not felt it necessary or desirable to commit themselves too definitely, and no real programme yet exists. The movement is battenning well enough on discontent and promises, and more and more people are now realising that by directing the attention of discontented youth to national ideals National Socialism is serving as an invaluable lightning conductor to the sparks of communism with which otherwise the atmosphere might be dangerously charged.'

The Nazis didn't have a policy, because they didn't need one. By being both Nationalist and Socialist, they could reach far and wide. Committing could only narrow, and was thus avoided.

A problem for the British, was that by them refusing to commit to policy, predicting what a nazi government would produce was difficult. On the possibility of a Hitler coalition,

⁹² Newton to Simon, 24. Nov. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 8716

⁹³ Nichols minute, Newton to Simon, 24. Nov. 1931, NA, FO 371/15216/C 8716

Rumbold wrote the following to Henderson:

'In your despatch under reference the German Ambassador states that a Hitlerite coalition, presumably in the Reich, "would not be a fundamental change involving the withdrawal of Dr. Brüning." So far as one can judge by developments during the past twelve months, it is difficult to see Dr. Brüning running in harness with Hitler. If anyone is to compromise it will have to be Hitler, but Dr. Brüning might prefer to withdraw and await developments.'⁹⁴

Nichols followed up by concluding that 'the Nazis, if they do gain power, are unlikely to bite as loudly as they have barked.'⁹⁵ Through their actions the Nazis had shown their unwillingness to be resolute, so it is perhaps no wonder the FO were uncertain of their assertiveness in a potential coalition.

One who gave prediction a comprehensive try was Group Captain Malcolm Christie. Christie was a former Air Attaché at the Berlin Embassy, who had good contacts in Germany, and would on occasion provide the FO with valuable information. On the 22nd of December he sent the FO 'the most comprehensive report we have received for a long time on the Nazi movement.'⁹⁶ The memo based itself on the original party statutes, but Christie offered analysis in a contemporary context. He briefly presented the origin of the party, as well as the main internal aims of the party. These he categorised as "destructive" or "constructive". The destructive policies were the destruction of the Marxist Parties (Communist and Social Democrat), disempowerment of the Jew, downfall of the existing parliamentary system and abolition of atheistic materialism. These were all well known. Less known were the "constructive" aims of the party. On the subject of a Hitler government, Christie wrote:

'Constitutionally, the internal policy aims at setting up a Central government with absolute authority over the whole Reich and the formation of corporative organisations to see that the laws are enforced in the individual states. On the other hand the programme asserts that the individual States shall be granted a considerable measure of independence as regards their domestic affairs.'

94 Rumbold to Henderson, 21. Dec. 1931, NA. FO 371/15217/C 9535

95 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Henderson, 21. Dec. 1931, NA. FO 371/15217/C 9535

96 Christie memo, 22. Dec. 1931, NA, FO 371/15217/C 9664

So, in essence, the Nazis saw themselves having full power within Germany. Militarily 'the Party programme embodies the formation of a national army, with conscription of every able-bodied male citizen.'

Regarding economics, Christie cited five demands from the original statutes, but added that 'it is impossible to forecast how many of these demands, and to what degree they would be enforced by a Nazi Government in power in the early future. It is unlikely that the leaders themselves have yet decided.' This is in line with what has been mentioned above, on the unwillingness to commit to policy. This is, of course, most relevant on the subject of economic policy, since this was where the largest ideological gap within the Nazi ranks existed. Christie went on to list the financial aims as well, but added that 'one has very great doubts as to whether these financial proposals are still seriously entertained by the leaders of the NSDAP.'

In terms of foreign policy, the Nazis wanted to unite all those of German origin into a Greater Germany, abolish the Treaty and obtain room for the surplus population, i.e. colonies. Most of these points were not any further embellished. A more forceful representation of German interests in foreign countries was demanded. Regarding the League of Nations, nothing was written, but references made by party leaders would suggest a resentful attitude. 'It is doubtful whether a Nazi Government would remain in the League under present conditions for any length of time.'

On the current development of the party, as well as the possibility of a Hitler government, Christie wrote:

'One gains the impression that the NSDAP is developing more and more in the direction of pure Fascism. Since, however, the Party does not yet hold a clear majority in the country, and by abstaining itself from the Reichstag, avoids any concrete confession of its true political creed, it is impossible to forecast what the general policy would be if it should take over the government.'

While not wishing to under-rate the strong current of commendable idealism that imbues a large proportion of the Party and its leaders, however exaggerated and fantastic some of their aims may appear to the more sober British mind, one wonders as to the extent to which Hitler has been employing the successful methods of Mussolini in the development of his movement, i.e. making his programme promising and palatable to practically all classes by means of skilful and varied representations, with the hidden intention of introducing a forceful Dictatorship to the benefit of the NSDAP in the event of his taking over the reins of Government.'

All of the above was based on Christies interpretation of the Nazi programme, as well as their actions and words in public. To delve further into the matter of the Nazis, he also gained the impressions on his notes by his sources in Germany, specifically "X", one of Hitler's 'most trusted henchmen.' The nature of the source makes one consider the trustworthiness of the information, or if it was engineered specifically to appease the British minds. However, it went further in explaining the current aims of the Nazis than anything else the FO had received. He explained how the 25 statutes 'are still the ultimate ideals, but would have to be adapted to the immediate abnormal circumstances.' There could, however, 'be no compromise with any other political party.' Rumbold had, as previously noted, suggested that in case of a coalition between Brüning and Hitler, the latter would have to be the one to compromise. This seemed to suggest that this would be impossible. If the Nazis were to gain a clear majority on their own, which "X" was certain they would, 'some form of dictatorship must be set up.' Christie surmised that this would be along the lines of the Fascist system in Italy, 'but it is unlikely that Hitler will ever achieve such individual power as Mussolini has vested in himself by the "Capo del Governo" law.'

On foreign policy "X" didn't have much to say, but he left Christie with the impression that it would be 'very much less aggressive than that preached by the leaders up to a few months ago.' It was presumably in the best interest of "X" to appease the British, so it is uncertain how much value could be placed on this.

In general it is difficult to see any significant impact made by Christies memorandum. The minutes to the despatch contain little, other than praise of its comprehensiveness. Especially the idea that the Nazis were unwilling to compromise with other parties never seems to have

resonated with the FO. That the Nazis wanted to create a central government, or a dictatorship, might have been believable, but not seemed like practical policy. The Nazis were, however, not a party of practicality.

3.5 Presidential election, and the downfall of Brüning

Heading in to 1932 the main point on the political agenda was the presidential election. Hindenburg's term was set to expire on the 26th of April, and an election, or another solution, must happen before that date. Brüning hoped that the President's term could be extended by the Reichstag, and propositioned Hitler to agree. 'In view of the moderation of Nazi official utterances ... and in view of Hitler's recent statements that he himself would not stand as candidate, the Government presumably felt justified in approaching him, despite the fact that, in doing so, they are bound to enhance his prestige.'⁹⁷ In spite of this, Hitler refused to take part. This effectively forced an election to be held before the end of April. On the news that Hindenburg would, in spite of his advanced age, stand was met in a Hankey minute with a simple: 'Good.'⁹⁸ Should Hitler decide to stand, Nichols believed there could be 'little doubt about the success of the Field Marshal.'⁹⁹

Hitler did eventually decide to stand, but was not left much hope by the FO. Rumbold declined to give a forecast, but simply passed what estimates he had heard from informed sources. According to these, Hindenburg would most likely win, but he might perhaps need a second ballot (a candidate needed more than 50 % of the votes to win).¹⁰⁰ 'The Field Marshal has my money,' Nichols stated.¹⁰¹ It is interesting to note that the Consul General in Munich, Bosanquet, reported the following:

'As regards Herr Hitler's candidature, a person who has fairly wide sources of information stated in conversation that his information was that Herr Hitler was induced by several influential members of the National Socialist party (Messrs.

97 Rumbold to Simon, 12. Jan. 1932, NA, FO 317/15942/C 294

98 Hankey minute, Rumbold telegram, 15. Feb. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 1329

99 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Simon, 17. Feb. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 1367

100 Rumbold to Simon, 4. Mar. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 1750

101 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Simon, 4. Mar. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 1750

G. Strasser, Goebbels and Fritsch) to accept his present official post, and to stand for the Presidency, in the hope that his prestige might be damaged and that he could be superseded. This item of election-intelligence is repeated for what it is worth. It appears that Herr Strasser, though now he keeps much in the background, is a man of great ability and energy, while Herr Hitler is thought to be easily influenced, as evidence by his alleged promise to Brüning that his party would vote for Hindenburg – a promise that, if ever made, he must afterwards retract under pressure from members of his party.¹¹⁰²

Nichols confirmed that he as well had heard similar things.¹⁰³ The idea that Hitler could be “easily influenced” had not been expressed before. Another person who had heard similar things was Group Captain Christie:

'Adolf Hitler is still proclaimed as the Party Leader (Der Führer), but I gather from several quarters that a camarilla consisting of Roehm, Goebbels, Wagener, probably also Rosenberg and Gregor Strasser, is making great efforts to manoeuvre him into the position of a Constitutional Monarch within the Party, and thus to gain control of the political reins for itself.¹¹⁰⁴

This was obviously a view held by several people in Germany. The fact that Rumbold never mentioned it, might suggest, however, that it was not a consensus view. We also have no guarantee that the sources of Christie, Bosanquet and Nichols do not overlap. This does not change the fact that the view of Hitler as someone who could be controlled did spread to several members of the FO and its informants.

On the 24th of March, just after the first ballot of voting had concluded, Rumbold reported the following on Hitler's candidature:

'In conversation the Berlin leaders [of the Nazi Party] do not deny that Hitler's candidature for the presidency was largely tactical, and based on the consideration that the movement had reached a stage where it could not afford to stand still. Neither Hitler nor any of his immediate entourage expected a

102 Rumbold to Simon, 10. Mar. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 1900

103 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Simon, 10. Mar. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 1900

104 Christie memo, 21. Apr. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 3174

victory, but the Nazis could not stand aside and allow other parties, particularly the Communists, to conduct an active campaign throughout the country.¹⁰⁵

The results of the first ballot necessitated a second one. Hindenburg had come close to obtaining a clear majority, but his 49,6 % of the votes fell just short. Hitler had disappointed slightly, coming in with only 30 % of the votes. In the second ballot, Hindenburg reached 53 %, enough for the victory. Through a herculean effort in campaigning, Hitler had managed to increase his tally to 37 %.

Brüning's help in securing Hindenburg's victory did not prove enough to keep him in his own job. The president resented the fact that he had to rely on support from the left and centre, and he distrusted the Chancellor. Proposed land reforms, which would have impacted Hindenburg and his friends, did not please the old man either. After the Minister of Defence, Wilhelm Groener was forced to resign on the 11th of May 1932, Brüning saw the writing on the wall. On the 30th of May, he resigned from his post as Chancellor of Germany.

In the end there was not much for the FO to say. They had, in their own eyes, at least, done their best. It is tough to see what they could have done different. What eventually caused the defeat of the Chancellor was mainly internal affairs. The President and his entourage did not trust Brüning, and his policies walked far too close to socialism to their liking.

105 Rumbold to Simon, 29. Mar. 1932, NA, FO 371/15943/C 2374

4 The Nazi Ascension

In the few months between the appointments of von Papen and von Schleicher as Chancellors, the Nazi Party became the largest party in Germany. Many expected the Nazis to take part in the government in some capacity, and prove themselves either worthy or, as most believed, unworthy of power. While the election in July resulted in the Nazis being the largest party by far, the one in November led many to believe that their peak had been passed, and their decline had begun.

4.1 A new government, a new election.

After Brüning resigned, there was no clear main man left in German politics, save perhaps from Hitler. The appointment of Franz von Papen as the new Chancellor only underlined this fact. Von Papen was a member of the Centre party, but not the leader, and broke with the party when accepting the Chancellorship. His appointment came solely as a result of his friendship with Hindenburg. Having not been a prominent politician on a national scale, the FO hardly knew anything about him. Based on what little they did know, their prediction was bleak:

'Clearly von Papen is not a man of sufficient attainments to fill the post of Chancellor with success or even dignity, nor do the cabinet foreshadowed ... instil confidence of any kind. How, in fact, they can keep in office, mistrusted as they will be by all the parties except those on the right, is hard to understand, unless, indeed, it is suggested that constitutional government in Germany is replaced by a quasi-military dictatorship ...'¹⁰⁶

The FO had invested in Brüning, and it had failed. Perhaps this is one reason why they were so negative to von Papen. In the same minute where Sargent says that 'Von Papen's appointment looks very much like the final bankruptcy of German politicians and the establishment of a semi-military dictatorship ...' he also admits that they have 'practically no material on which to form an opinion as to von Papen's mentality or policy.'¹⁰⁷ The main reason for their negative outlook was of course that von Papen was appointed by the President without the backing of the Reichstag. Where Brüning struggled to find support from a

106 Nichols minute, Newton to Simon, 1 Jun. 1932, NA, FO 371/15944/C 4380

107 Sargent minute, Newton to Simon, 1 Jun. 1932, NA, FO 371/15944/C 4380

majority, von Papen struggled to find any support at all. Only the Nationalist Party were on his side, and a party with only 41 seats could hardly offer much on which a government could rely. In an attempt to increase his backing, von Papen called a new national election, for July.

Brüning had avoided new elections, mainly because the Nazis were expected to make big gains. For von Papen this was not seen as too problematic, as he was open to bringing the Nazis in to the government. The results of the election were reported by Rumbold on August 3.

Political Party	# of seats (1930)
National Socialists	230 (107)
Social Democrats	133 (153)
Communists	89 (77)
Centre Party	75 (68)
German Nationalists	37 (41)
Bavarian People's Party	22 (19)
Smaller parties (less than 8 seats each)	22 (112)
Total	608 (577)

Results of the July 1932 Reichstag election.¹⁰⁸

As expected the Nazis were the biggest party, with 37,3 % of the votes. This was more than double what they had achieved in 1930, and seemingly a big success. Rumbold, however, was not certain it was as monumental as it seemed. He considered their momentum to be slowly fading. He explained this with the decreasing factor of increase. While the jump from 18,3 % in 1930, to 37,3 % in 1932 was a big one, between them Hitler gained 30 % in the first Presidential ballot, and the Nazis received 36,3 % of the votes in the Prussian election in late April. 'So far from obtaining the 51 per cent for which his followers hoped, Hitler seems now to have exhausted his reserves.'¹⁰⁹ By this he meant that the Nazis were running out of places to find more votes. They had swallowed most of the small parties in the middle and on the right, and Rumbold saw 'no indication that [they] will be able to effect a breach in the Centre, Communist or Socialist parties.'

With the Nazis and the Communists having a majority of the seats between them, any

¹⁰⁸ Rumbold to Simon, 3. Aug. 1932, NA, FO 371/15945/C 6692

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

majority government without them was, of course, impossible. Any coalition including the Communists were deemed unlikely, which in practical terms meant that any road to a government with support from a majority of the Reichstag went through the Nazis. The Nazis would never enter into government with either the Communists or the Social Democrats, leaving the Centre party as the only realistic partner. Rumbold mentioned that the Centre Party, through opposition, could force new elections. However, he saw little benefit in it yet. In time, though, he believed that Hitler's followers would grow disillusioned, and the party would take a step back. Either way, the FO expected Hitler to accept more responsibility, and that this would eventually lead to a split in the party.¹¹⁰ This line of thinking from the FO had been fairly constant for almost two years, and at this point seemed more like wishful thinking than anything else. The Nazis had time and again managed to avoid responsibility, and thus avoided the intra-party conflicts that the FO expected.

Von Papen did indeed start negotiations with the Nazis, with the aim of gaining their support and cooperation in government. His proposal was that he himself would remain Chancellor, with two or three Nazis joining him in the Cabinet. Chief among these would be Gregor Strasser, who would be Vice-Chancellor. Interestingly, Rumbold reported that there was a possibility of Hitler himself creating the government, if he were able to get the support of the Reichstag.¹¹¹ Hitler could not find this support. Interestingly Rumbold also claimed that Hitler was unwilling to become Chancellor. This claim the FO had not heard before. Rumbold did not expand any further on his sources for this claim. Indeed, the very same day he reported that Hitler had refused to include his party in a von Papen government, instead demanding the Nazis govern alone.¹¹² The President 'felt unable to entrust the National Socialists with complete control and appealed to Hitler to conduct his opposition in an honourable and responsible manner.' The decision seemingly caused somewhat of a crisis at the top of the party. A meeting including all party members with a seat in the Reichstag was postponed until a common ground could be established among the leaders. Could the Nazis afford to stay outside the government yet again? The FO certainly did not believe so. 'The Nazis have almost certainly reached the zenith of their vote raising powers,' Nichols believed, and

110 FO minute, Rumbold to Simon, 11. Aug. 1932, NA, FO 371/15945/C 6848

111 Rumbold to Simon, 15. Aug. 1932, NA, FO 371/15945/C 6938

112 Rumbold to Simon, 15. Aug. 1932, NA, FO 371/15945/C 6939

continued that they had 'got to deliver the goods.'¹¹³

The possibility of creating a parliamentary government seemed small. After a meeting with the Chancellor, Rumbold was of the opinion that even if the Nazis were able to find a majority, presumably with the Centre party, the President was unwilling to grant Hitler power.¹¹⁴ Suggestions had been made that the Nazis might try to gain the power by force.¹¹⁵ Hitler, however, categorically refused this: 'Why should I march on Berlin? I am already there.'¹¹⁶ Hankey at the FO wondered if the Nazis in any case were able to lead any sort of revolution 'in the teeth of serious opposition. On the other hand failure to bite must in the end surely discredit him who barks.' The clear opinion of the FO seemed to be that if the Nazi were to continue their success, they not only had to gain the power in the Reich, but they also had to produce results.

At the opening of the Reichstag on August 30, the Nazis were for once on their best behaviour. This was 'obviously due to tactical reasons,' according to Rumbold.¹¹⁷ They did not want to give the government the opportunity to claim that the Reichstag was incapable of working together. In the event of such incapability, von Papen had received a note from the President, with which he could dissolve the Reichstag. Furthermore they hoped to make Göring President of the Reichstag, and did not wish to alienate the Centre. 'They behaved, in fact, for the first time in the Reichstag as if they meant themselves to be taken seriously.' The Nazi-Centre cooperation proved successful, and most of the posts in the Präsidium was filled by members of the two parties. As a result Göring claimed that the Reichstag had shown the capability to create a majority.

Under quite confusing circumstances the Reichstag was dissolved on 12th of September. The Communists called for a vote of no confidence in the government. Not prepared for this, von Papen had to send for the decree of dissolution. While he managed to present it to Göring

113 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Simon, 17. Aug. 1932, NA, FO371/15945/C 6994

114 Rumbold to Simon, 26. Aug. 1932, NA, FO 371/15946/C 7252

115 See Sargent minute, Rumbold to Simon, Nichols minute, Rumbold to Simon, 17. Aug. 1932, NA, FO371/15945/C 6994. Also Hankey minute, Rumbold to Simon, 26. Aug. 1932, NA, FO 371/15946/C 7254

116 Rumbold to Simon, 26. Aug. 1932, NA, FO 371/15946/C 7254

117 Rumbold to Simon, 6. Sep. 1932, NA, FO 371/15946/C 7490

prior to the result of the vote, the Reichstag President ignored him, and announced the result. By 517 votes to 32, with 50 abstentions, the vote passed. Thereupon Göring read the decree of dissolution, but claiming it invalid, since the government had been overthrown. Hankey noted the obvious irony of the situation: 'The change of face of the Nazis, who now play politics in the "system" which they formerly condemned, is really rather comical.'¹¹⁸ Göring would later accept the fact that the decree of dissolution overrode the vote of no confidence, but the result remained the same: For the second time in less than half a year there would be another Reichstag election.

4.2 The ebbing of the Nazi tide?

While new elections had, since 1930, always been presumed to be in favour of the Nazis, the feeling had now turned. Having chosen the route of parliamentary opposition to the government, and attempting to overthrow it through political gamesmanship, they had starting conforming to the rules of politics that they had previously avoided. 'The National Socialists have been forced to uphold the Parliamentary system, and it is now the Nationalists who condemn it. Presumably the change of front will cost the Nazis dear, and von Papen will find more support.'¹¹⁹ Finally the Nazis had been forced to take a stance, something the FO had awaited for a long time. Outside of the predicted set-back of the Nazis, neither Rumbold nor the FO were willing to predict the results.

On the 7th of November Mr. Newton at the Embassy reported to results of the elections. The Nazis had lost even more than expected. They ended up with 196 seats, down from 230, and received 33,1 % of the votes, as opposed to 37,2 % earlier in the year. The Communists and the Nationalists received the largest increases, with 2,5 % and 2,4 % respectively.

118 Hankey minute, Rumbold to Simon, 13. Sep. 1932, NA, FO 371/15946/C 7675

119 Hankey minute, Rumbold to Simon, 22. Sep. 1932, NA, FO 371/15946/C 7992

Political Party	# of seats (July 1932)
National Socialists	196 (230)
Social Democrats	121 (133)
Communists	100 (89)
Centre Party	70 (75)
Nationalists	51 (37)
Bavarian People's Party	21 (22)
Smaller parties	25 (8)
Total	584 (608)

Results of the November 1932 Reichstag election.¹²⁰

The result of the election was that a Reichstag majority would be even harder to create. Nichols notes in his minute that 'the von Papen government won't give the Nazis and the Centre the chance to form a Coalition.'¹²¹ Either way, the two parties were a combined 29 seats short of a majority. The government were thought to be satisfied with the result, having brought on the “defeat” of the Hitler movement, and broken the Nazi-Centre majority.

In spite of the favourable election result, von Papen was forced to resign from the position of Chancellor on the 18th of November. According to Rumbold, the cause of the resignation was the 'refusal of the Centre Party to cooperate with von Papen himself coupled with attitude of National Socialists who were only prepared to negotiate by letter and on fixed conditions.'¹²² Sargent noted that 'the resignation of the Government was so unexpected that it would be unsafe to prophesy what the outcome of the crisis is likely to be.'¹²³ Indeed, among the possibilities suggested was a Nazi-Centre coalition, and even some form of cooperation between the Nazis, Communists and Social Democrats. The latter one seems especially far-fetched, but Sargent evidently placed some value on it, noting that this policy, 'if pursued very far, is almost bound to produce a split from top to bottom in the Nazi Party.' While the idea of a Nazi-Communist seemed crazy, the two parties had indeed cooperated during a recent strike by transport workers in Berlin. It is, however, quite a leap from joining forces in a single

¹²⁰ Newton to Simon, 7. Nov. 1932, NA, FO 371/15947/C 9236

¹²¹ Nichols minute, Newton to Simon, 7. Nov. 1932, NA, FO 371/15947/C 9236

¹²² Rumbold to Simon, 18. Nov. 1932, NA, FO 371/15947/C 9577

¹²³ Sargent minute, Rumbold to Simon, 18. Nov. 1932, NA, FO 371/15947/C 9577

common cause, to creating a government with two parties whose followers had, literally, killed each other in the streets.

Following von Papens resignation, Rumbold wrote a lengthy despatch on the Chancellors time in office. It was a chronicle of failure. He described von Papen as a 'light-weight gentleman rider in his youth ... not only did he take every political fence at a gallop, but he seemed to go out of his way to find fences which were not in his course.'¹²⁴ An FO member summarised it as follows in his minute:

'Sir H. Rumbold remarks in particular that [the von Papen government] did little to solve the unemployment problem, that its economic programme was hampered by the decision to promote agricultural "autarchy", that the methods of its foreign policy are freely criticised, that its internal record was one of turmoil, that its greatest achievement, the defeat of the Nazi movement, was carried out unintentionally, and that it seriously antagonized the federal states.'¹²⁵

The idea that the Hitler movement was defeated is interesting. It is not clear exactly what constitutes a "defeat". Presumably Rumbold means the fact that the momentum of the Nazis was stopped, that they had not obtained an absolute majority in the Reichstag, and that they had, in fact, lost votes. They were still comfortably the largest party. The way in which von Papen, unwittingly, brought about this supposed defeat was through forcing Hitler to take stances. Previously Hitler had avoided alienating either side of his party by not openly supporting specific policies. This was how he had avoided the split so often expected by the FO. Von Papens attack on the systems of the welfare states did not sit well with the more than 5 million unemployed people of the Republic. Hitler had to oppose. 'He had no choice but to recant and subscribe to certain democratic principles which he had hitherto attacked unremittingly.' It is not clear what "defeat" means in practical terms. It is possible that the Ambassador interpreted the results of the recent elections as the start of a steady decline for the Nazis. It might also simply mean that von Papen had succeeded in forcing Hitler in to the parliamentary system, where he previously had refused to conform. A Nazi government had been avoided, as they could not rule by themselves, but with von Papen out of office, a Hitler-

124 Rumbold to Simon, 19. Nov. 1932, NA, FO 371/15947/C 9793

125 FO minute, Rumbold to Simon, 19. Nov. 1932, NA, FO 371/15947/C 9793

led government did not seem less likely than any other government. It would be hard for any Chancellor to gain a majority in the Reichstag without the Nazis on his side. So the country was headed for yet another period of negotiations.

The feared Nazi-Communist coalition does not seem to ever have been likely, if even considered by the parties themselves. The Nazi-Centre one was more likely, with the Centre Party being willing to be a part of a Nazi government. Their motives were less than pure, if we are to believe Nichols:

'German party politics are as much twisted and backbiting in character as usual. According to these reports the Centre are prepared to take part in a Coalition government with the Nazis, with Hitler as Chancellor, "in the hope that the latter will discredit himself and his movement". This is ends justifying means with a vengeance. Meanwhile it would be futile to attempt to prophesy the outcome of these negotiations.'¹²⁶

On the 2nd of December, former Minister of Defence, General Kurt von Schleicher was appointed Chancellor. The events leading up to his appointment was not much reported by Rumbold, who instead summarized the days leading up to it in a longer despatch of December 13th.¹²⁷ Hitler was received by the President on the 19th of November. There he was invited to sound the other parties, to see if he was able to create a constitutional government with a majority in the Reichstag. The President didn't promise any mandate, but did so on the 21st, when Hitler demanded it. Instead of sounding the other party leaders, however, Hitler asked for the possibility of creating a presidential government. When denied this, he refused to make any other attempts at creating a government. If the President was forced to create a presidential government, he would rather just entrust this to von Papen, whom he trusted. Other possibilities of a constitutional government were sought, but eventually dismissed. Von Schleicher attempted to create a government that would be "tolerated" by the Reichstag, but he was unable. In the end it seemed like the President would re-appoint von Papen, but when even von Papen's own Cabinet refused to serve under him, the President had no choice. What was left for him was to appoint a presidential government under von Schleicher.

126 Nichols minute, Rumbold to Simon, 22. Nov. 1932, NA, FO 371/15947/C 9659
127 Rumbold to Simon, 13. Dec. 1932, NA, FO 371/15947/C 10364

5 Final Assessments

5.1 Epilogue

The von Schleicher government never had the chance to become a success. He could not find support in the Reichstag, and Hindenburg resented the fact that he had been forced to push von Papen out of the Chancellorship.¹²⁸ His efforts to ally himself with the Nazis also failed. He tried to convince Strasser, and Strasser tried to convince Hitler. When his efforts failed, instead of joining the cabinet, Strasser retired from his all his party posts on the 8th of December. Strasser had been instrumental in the growth of the party, and him leaving produced the first real possibility of a party split.¹²⁹ After predicting a split in the party for over two years, the Foreign Office doesn't seem to have been aware of the magnitude of this crisis at all. After failing to secure the help of the Nazis, von Schleicher was forced to resign.

On the 30th of January, Hitler was sworn in as the new Chancellor. He led a government in which von Papen was Vice-Chancellor, and he had only two Nazis with him. Wilhelm Frick held the position as Minister of the Interior, and Göring joined the cabinet as a Minister without portfolio. Von Papen had convinced himself, and the President, that Hitler could be controlled.' Within two months we will have pushed Hitler so far into a corner that he'll squeak.'¹³⁰ Winston Churchill later wrote in his book, "Great Contemporaries", that 'there is a defense for all this, and it must be made on behalf of President Hindenburg. He had become senile. He did not understand what he was doing.'¹³¹ Even Rumbold declared, in a letter to his son: 'The Hitler experiment had to be made sometime or other, and we shall now see what it will bring forth.'¹³² Interestingly, he had never made any such comment to the FO.

Within a week Hitler showed that he had no intention of being controlled. In that time he had managed to set aside a Supreme Court verdict, dismissed the the Prussian Prime Minister, taken over the national broadcasting company, given himself the right to surpress any

128 Evans, *The coming of the Third Reich*, 302

129 Kershaw, *Hitler*, 248. See also Evans, *The coming of the Third Reich*, 303

130 Quoted in Evans, *The coming of Hitler*, 308

131 Winston Churchill, *Great Contemporaries*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1937) 100

132 Gilbert, *Rumbold*, 367

newspaper or book, and persuaded Hindenburg to dissolve the Reichstag. He further increased his powers following the Reichstag fire on the 27th of February. Convinced that the Communist were responsible, Hitler put the nation in a state of emergency. The decree “For the Protection of People and State” suspended freedom of speech, of association, of the press, and the privacy of postal and telephone communications. The autonomy of the Länder was also overridden. The Reich government now had complete control of the country.

The last free election in Germany for well over a decade was held on the 5th of March. In it the Nazis obtained 44 %. While still not in the majority on their own, this would prove to be the straw that broke the camel's back. Within days all Communist members were expelled from the Reichstag. On the 21th of March, the “Enabling Bill” was passed. This suspended the Weimar constitution, and allowed the government to pass any legislation it wanted, without a majority in the Reichstag. Suppression of the Jewish population also started. Jewish businesses were boycotted, and people were sent to concentration camps.

Such was the state of affairs when Rumbold sent his “Mein Kampf despatch”, as it came to be known within the FO, to the Foreign Minister. 'Now that Hitler has acquired absolute control, at any rate till the 1st April 1937, it may be advisable to consider the uses to which he may put his unlimited opportunities during the next four years.'¹³³ Through Hitler's ultimate faith in propaganda, he attempts to entrench his power. Rumbold begrudgingly gives his respect to him and Goebbles, and their skill and success at this game.

'The experiment which Dr. Goebbles is now conducting at the Ministry for Propaganda is one of the most interesting in political history and will in due course provide the answer [to if there's a saturation point for propaganda]. Dr. Goebbles is singularly well fitted to conduct the new Ministry. His pioneer work during the last five years has been wholly admirable, and he appears to be a man of infinite resource and invention.'

The most important part of the despatch is Rumbold's summary of the contents of Hitler's book “Mein Kampf”. He presents the basis for Hitler's world view, the idea of man as a

133 Rumbold to Simon, 26. Apr. 1933, NA, FO 371/13631/C 3990

“fighting animal”, and the need for racial struggle. This was why they had to fight the Jews: to prevent racial dilution in Germany. This informed their view on the military: 'An army is indispensable not merely to regain the lost freedom, but to ensure the maintenance and expansion of the race.' The outlook on Europe was, perhaps, even more disquieting:

'There must be no sentimentality, he asserts, about Germany's foreign policy. To attack France for purely sentimental reasons would be foolish. What Germany needs is an increase in territory in Europe. Hitler even argues that Germany's pre-war colonial policy must be abandoned, and that the new Germany must look for expansion to Russia and especially to the Baltic States. He condemns the alliance with Russia against the West would be criminal, especially as the aim of the Soviets is the triumph of international Judaism.'

Rumbold concludes that the principals of Hitler's book are unbreakable. Where the 25-point programme had been modified, and some points even abandoned, to fit with the current day situation, these could not be. The campaign against the Jews proved this, and that Hitler would only yield to the most energetic opposition, on even the most unimportant points of policy. 'The brutal harshness with which he has overwhelmed his opponents of the Left and the ruthlessness with which he has muzzled the press are disquieting signs.'

On foreign policy, and the League of Nations, Rumbold was even more concerned. The actions of the government directly contradicted what the League stood for. Pacifism was illegal, and so was preaching of international understanding as well. What Hitler has said of foreign policy in his speeches, while not always in line with his book, was no less concerning. 'Even when allowance is made for the exaggerations attendant upon a political campaign, enough remains to make it highly probable that rearmament and not disarmament is the aim of the new Germany.' The suppression of the Left had made the road to conscription far easier. Likewise it, along with the abolishment of the free press, made the production of war material without detection much easier. Despite Hitler's attempts at caution, stating that he was anxious that peace should be maintained for a ten-year period, Rumbold was distrustful of his motives. 'What he probably means can be more accurately expressed by the formula: Germany needs peace until she has recovered such strength that no country can challenge her without serious

and irksome preparations.' The conclusion Rumbold drew was ominous:

'I do not, of course rule out the contingency that there may be a revulsion of feeling in this country, and that saner counsels may prevail when the new régime has had time to take stock of the European and world situation. But the spirit of the moment is definitely disquieting, and the Government of this country, for the first time since the war, are giving State sanctions and encouragement to an attitude of mind, as well as to the various forms of military training, which can only end one way. I, therefore, feel that Germany's neighbours have reason to be vigilant, and that it may be necessary for them to determine their attitude towards coming developments in this country sooner than they may have contemplated. I foresee that as time elapses it will be increasingly difficult to ascertain what is actually taking pace in this country and to gauge the real intentions of the German Government.'

In his minute to the despatch, Vansittart goes even further in his conclusions: '... the present regime in Germany will, on past and present form, loose off another European war just so soon as it feels strong enough ... Their only fear is that they may be attacked before they are strong enough.'¹³⁴ He noted that it was possible they would change their minds, but did not think it likely. 'Men are not likely to change their ideas when they enjoy a complete monopoly of power, and are surrounded by nothing but yes-men.' In the end he was proven to be right.

5.2 Concluding thoughts

As of writing these words, the 70th anniversary of Germany's surrender has just passed. 70 years have passed since the end of the atrocities that forever cemented Hitler's place in history as one of the most evil men to have walked the earth. It is the reason this study was written. As such, it can at times be difficult to disconnect the events of 1929 – 1932 from all that which would not happen for years still. In my mind I may snort at the notion that Hitler could be controlled, or laugh at the proposition that he may compromise his ideals. "How can they not see what is so plainly there," I think. But I am graced with knowledge that they were not. They could only draw their conclusions on what was presented to them. It is the difficulty of doing a study such as this, and it makes it hard to draw conclusions on the judgement of the Ambassador and the Foreign Office. I will, however, still give it a try.

¹³⁴ Vansittart minute, Rumbold to Simon, 26. Apr. 1933, NA, FO 371/13631/C 3990

In this thesis I sought to establish how the FO perceived and reacted to Hitler and the Nazi movement prior to 1933. I believe that I have shown that their perceptions were largely understated, and inaccurate. First of all, I think it is safe to state that they had an insufficient understanding of Hitler. Not only of his personal aims and ideas, but also of his standing in both the Party and the Nation. As I have shown, they didn't give it their full effort either. The logic behind not meeting with Hitler may perhaps be sound, but it placed them at a disadvantage in regards to information and knowledge of the man. Why the contents of *Mein Kampf* were not well known and used I do not understand. Hitler had given them a map to his motivations, beliefs and political thoughts, and they chose not to follow it. With that in mind it is perhaps no wonder that they continued to misjudge him. While Rumbold eventually began to understand the power Hitler had over his movement, the practical implications of it wasn't considered. They continuously placed Hitler and his movement within the rules and confines of the parliamentary structure, when every action they took was aimed at staying outside of it.

It could also be argued that more than just Hitler, the British also underestimated the rest of the German political sphere as well. From Nicolson's first despatch on the Nazis, through Christie's comprehensive review, the knowledge that the Nazis wanted to create a dictatorship was there. It just doesn't seem like they ever really believed it could happen. Their efforts to keep Brüning in power were made, in part, to stem the tide of the Nazi movement, but when it failed no other efforts were made. One at times gets the sense that the FO hoped the situation would resolve itself. They constantly predicted that the party would split, and the movement disintegrate. After a while it must have been as much hope as it was prediction rooted in reality. The Christie memo showed the FO, at least in part, what to expect in the event of a Nazi government. It is very notable that neither the Ambassador, nor anyone in the FO, writes a single word about what they think a Hitler-led government will do. No predictive analysis is made. In the cases where the possibility of a Nazi government is mentioned, it is either discounted as unlikely, thought to end with a split in the party, or just not commented further on at all. It is as if the FO hoped that by never addressing it, it would never happen.

It seems that after Brüning had visited London, and when the realities of German politics started to catch up with him, the FO placed their faith in hope. Hope that German politics

would somehow resolve itself, and keep the Nazis out of power. They placed their trust in a parliamentary system that had failed, and was mostly kept alive by an old President, who was slowly losing his battle with senility.

It took only three months from Hitler being appointed to Chancellor before Rumbold sent his “Mein Kampf” despatch. Much happened in this period to give the Ambassador such a grave outlook on the future, and Vansittart to predict war. None of what had happened should have come as a surprise. The Nazis had been open with what they wanted to do. Both Rumbold and the FO had known this. It is, of course, impossible to predict the future. Rumbold in particular was always reluctant to try. The rapidity with which the Nazis turned Germany into an effective dictatorship was also hard to envision. But I will contend that they had the information at hand to imagine it.

Appendix

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