

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

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Introduction

Even at the turn of the millennium analysis of the historical development of political institutions is important for understanding the nature of certain mechanisms of modern politics. The outcome of the crisis of democracy in Germany and Austria under the Third Reich (from 1933 in Germany and from 1938 in Austria following the *Anschluss*) marked a sharp change in the political systems in both countries and, in a foreign policy perspective, for all of central Europe. In the mid-1930s Czechoslovakia was the only state left in Central and Eastern Europe that, despite the economic crisis, had preserved its democratic structures. Developments in Germany, however, had fatal consequences for Czechoslovakia, culminating in the Munich Agreement in 1938 and the end of the country's independence. This paper addresses several interrelated questions. What led to the demise of democracy in the Weimar Republic and Austria? What weakened democratic institutions in these two central European states in the early 1930s? Can we find similar or different features in political developments in Germany and Austria? To find answers to these questions we will examine not just constitutional institutions and their weakness but also the forces operating against republican regimes.

The crisis in democracy in the early 1930s is a good example of errors of the past and the lessons that can be drawn from them. In the long-term perspective of 20th-century history we can assess the democratic development in West Germany and Austria after the Second World War as essentially positive. Political relations in Germany and Austria after 1945 are, partly in response to pressure from the victorious powers today interpreted in contrast to the period 1933–1945. Although current constitutional practices in Austria and Germany derive mainly from the democratic period after the Second World War, we can also trace the roots of current development back to the years after the First World War. Looking closely at the lessons to be had from the crisis of democracy in the interwar period helped the re-establishment and re-design of institutions in Germany and Austria towards buttressing a pluralist political system. In 1949 West Germany adopted the 'Basic Law' (*Grundgesetz*), which put the constitutional and political system on new foundations. The Basic Law was influenced by the

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

crisis of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi rise to power in 1933. West Germany began to develop a new identity after the fall of Nazism, one based on the idea of European cooperation¹ and respect for the democratic principles anchored in the Basic Law (*Verfassungspatriotismus*). Immediately after the end of the war in 1945 Austria re-instated its Constitution from 1920 (in the amended reading from 1929), which still applies today and is evidence of the continuity of Austrian constitutional law. After the Second World War, Austria embarked on a gradual path towards its own national identity, distinct from the German nation.² The main political camps in Austria bore in mind the need to avoid a repetition of the civil war of 12 February 1934 between social democrats and the conservative Catholic camp (represented after 1945 by ÖVP) and to seek out cooperation. A positive sign of consensus was the repeat formation of large coalition governments between the Socialist Party of Austria (SPÖ)³ and the Austria People's Party (ÖVP), a coalition that has currently been in power since the elections in 2008.

Both interwar Austria and the Weimar Republic got rid of the republican system at the start of the 1930s. Here we will compare the First Austrian Republic (1918–1934/38) and the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) with respect to their constitutional development, practical policies, and the causes and consequences of steps taken by individual political actors. In Germany the weaknesses and crisis of Weimar served as a typical example of the distortion of the constitutional pluralist system.⁴ The distortion was caused by factors such as political polarisation, the rise of undemocratic parties, the instability of Weimar governments, a presidential office with too much power and an anti-democratic political culture. Those led to authoritarian 'presidential regime' in 1930–1933 and the political rise of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), culminating in the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German chancellor. Finally, the economic crisis that began in 1929 exacerbated social problems and contributed to the assertion of totalitarian solutions and parties. In Austria the situation was more complicated. Conservative forces, which also embarked on an authoritarian path the support of the paramilitary *Heimwehr* movement, managed for a short

¹ W. E. PATERSON, *European Policy-making: Between Associated Sovereignty and Semisovereignty*, in: S. GREEN, W. E. PATERSON (Eds.), *Governance in Contemporary Germany. The Semisovereign State Revisited*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 261–282 (261).

² G. HEISS, *Konsensus a jeho cena. Konstrukce identity v Rakousku po roce 1945*, in: G. HEISS, A. MÍŠKOVÁ, J. PEŠEK et al. (Eds.), *An der Bruchlinie: Österreich und die Tschechoslowakei nach 1945/Na rozhraní: Rakousko a Československo po 1945*, Innsbruck, Wien 1998, pp. 369–388.

³ Since 1991 Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).

⁴ R. ARON, *Demokracie a totalitarismus*, Praha 1993, pp. 99–101.

time to successfully challenge emergent Nazism. Developments in 1933–1934 demonstrate this. In a long-term perspective, however, even Kurt Schuschnigg's Austria in 1934–1938, weakened after the Social Democratic Party was knocked out of political life, was not resistant to the internal pressure of the NSDAP and the foreign policy influence of Hitler's Third Reich.

Constitutional development in Germany and Austria after 1918

Germany

The Weimar Constitution (*Weimarer Reichsverfassung*, WRV)⁵ was the product of compromises between the three main political powers that were behind the republic's creation ("the Weimar coalition") and had obtained an absolute majority in the elections to the National Assembly in January 1919 (78% of the votes). These were the moderate Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Catholic *Zentrum* Party, and liberals from the German Democratic Party (DDP). The Constitution was adopted by the national Assembly on 31 July 1919. The German Reich established itself as a parliamentary republic. Its Constitution was based on the principles of the division of power, popular sovereignty, and contained a catalogue of basic rights. The impression was of a model democracy, but adherence to republican principles and democracy was also dependent on the given political culture and on the application of constitutional principles in practice (see below).⁶

Legislative power in Germany lay with the *Reichstag*, which also exercised control over the executive. The *Reichstag* was elected in direct, secret-ballot, general elections in a system of proportional representation (Art. 17, 22 WRV). In an era of strengthening political polarisation the fact that the Constitution did not define political parties or their internal organisation and contained no proviso that parties had to obtain a minimum number of votes in order to gain entry into Parliament (there were no constitutionally set election threshold) proved to be a problem. This led on the one hand to the fragmentation of the political spectrum (the existence of so-called *Splitterparteien*), instability, and frequent party cleavages, and on the other hand did nothing to prevent radical parties from getting into the *Reichstag* (e.g. the NSDAP with 2.6% of the votes) as early as the 1920s. The government derived its power from trust in the *Reichstag*, to which the government was accountable.⁷ Individual German states within the federation were represented by the *Reichsrat* (2nd chamber of the Parliament),

⁵ Ústava Německé říše (Výmarská ústava). E. VLČEK, *Dokumenty ke studiu moderních dějin státu a práva II*, Brno 1994, pp. 50–85.

⁶ D. MORAVCOVÁ, *Výmarská republika*, Praha 2006, p. 47.

⁷ E. KOLB, *Die Weimarer Republik*, München 1988, p. 19.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

which possessed the right of suspensive veto over bills passed by the *Reichstag*. Here Weimar drew on the federal relations between the Reich and the German states that were created during the German Empire 1871–1918. Moreover, the main counter-power to the *Reichstag* was the President and strong powers of that office. The President was elected directly by the German people for a term of seven years (Articles 41 and 43 WRV). For conservatives, the President was a safeguard against the strength of Parliament, but the left saw elements of direct democracy in this office (e.g. Art. 73 WRV).

According to Article 25 of the Weimar Constitution, the President had the right to dissolve the *Reichstag*. He could intervene in legislation by submitting a law to a referendum for approval (Art. 73 WRV). However, the President had key special powers defined in Article 48 of the Constitution, according to which the President could *de facto* independently declare laws and issue emergency orders with legal force (President Friedrich Ebert issued 42 orders in 1923). However, the potential impact of Article 48 was never adequately and correctly assessed by the parliamentary majority that adopted the Constitution in 1919.⁸ The reading of General Clause No. 48, Par. 2 WRV – “*If public safety and order is disturbed or at risk, the President of the Reich may across the territory of the Reich adopt necessary measures and take proportional action with the aid of the military forces*”⁹ – became, after 1930, when the parliamentary system was further weakened by presidential decisions, the gateway to the rise of a dictatorship. Determining what constituted ‘necessary measures’ was *de facto* left at the discretion of the President.¹⁰ The President was also authorised to temporarily revoke provisions contained in Articles 114 (individual freedom), 117 (the inviolability of the secrecy of letters, post, telegraph and telephone communication), 118 (right to freely express one’s opinions), 123 (freedom of assembly), 124 (freedom to form association) and 153 (right of inheritance). The obligation placed on the President to “*inform the Reichstag immediately of the entire matter*” (Art. 48, Par. 4 WRV) and the need for all presidential orders and measures to be countersigned (Art. 50 WRV) represented two restrictions on the power of the President, but these were gradually undermined.

The increasing instability of governments and the paralysis the *Reichstag* began in spring 1930 after the end of the government of Social Democrat Hermann Müller. The rise of the NSDAP in the September elections in 1930 contributed to the stabilisation of a “presidential regime”,

⁸ Ibidem, p. 19.

⁹ Art. 48 Ústavy Německé říše (Výmarská ústava). VLČEK, p. XX.

¹⁰ K. D. BRACHER, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik*, Düsseldorf 1955, pp. 56–58.

whose central figurehead in 1930–1933 was President Paul von Hindenburg.

We can refer to the Weimar Constitution as a system of political and social compromises that were reached between moderate representatives of the labour movement and the democratic wing of the civic camp.¹¹ In this respect the constitutional situation in Germany much resembled that in Austria. Many basic political decisions were deferred and individual political and social groups were left unsatisfied by the compromise. The nobility, the conservatives, and a section of the civic camp rejected a republic and hoped for a return to the Monarchy, while the radical left and part of the SPD were on the contrary waiting for an inversion of the social order, which they were unable to push through during the changes implemented in 1918/1919.¹² However, to this end, the Social Democrats, headed by F. Ebert, in order to secure the support of the army and the neutrality of heavy industry, reached an agreement with a section of the old elites during the revolution in November 1918.¹³ In doing so they did not take full advantage of the political space that was available to them at the start of the republic to assert their political line.

Austria

The Constitution of the Austrian Republic was adopted after several months of negotiations on 1 October 1920. It was the outcome of a compromise between the two largest Austrian political parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Social Party. Although the government coalition formed by these two parties had collapsed by the summer of 1920, they managed to maintain a consensus in the constitutional subcommittee for several months longer.¹⁴ The document of the Constitution was drafted by the most important Austrian legal theorist Hans Kelsen. It established four basic principles: republicanism, democracy, rule of law, and federalism. Legislative power was represented by the *Nationalrat*, elected in direct elections. The second chamber was the *Bundesrat* comprised of representatives of the regional parliaments (*Landtag*) of the individual Austrian states. The Constitution gave Parliament considerable powers, but there was no countervailing

¹¹ KOLB, p. 20.

¹² For a leftwing view of the social structures in the Weimar Republic, see R. KÜHNLE, *Die Weimarer Republik. Errichtung, Machtstruktur und Zerstörung einer Demokratie*, Reinbek 1985.

¹³ This was based on telephone conversation between F. Ebert and General Groener on 10 November 1918 and an agreement between the head of the trade unions C. Legien and H. Stinnes, representative of heavy industry elites.

¹⁴ R. WALTER, H. MAYER, *Grundriß des österreichischen Bundesverfassungsrechts*, Wien 1996, pp. 25n.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

factor in the form of a strong executive. Political parties, clashing on the floor of Parliament, became the main pillar of the state order. The Austrian Social Democrats saw a strong Parliament as a space for asserting their interests in the social sphere by democratic means. In 1922 Chancellor Ignaz Seipel formed a civic coalition of the Christian Social Party (*Christlich-soziale Partei*) and the Greater German People's Party (*Großdeutsche Volkspartei*), which excluded the Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei*). The Austrian government was moreover forced by the impact of the deteriorating economic situation and rising inflation to apply for a loan to the League of Nations. On 4 October 1922 it signed the Geneva Protocols for the provision of international loans to stabilise Austrian currency. In return Austria was required to maintain its independence and oppose annexation by Germany. The Greater German People's Party abandoned the idea of the *Anschluss* in the common interest of maintaining the political coalition. The position of the Austrian civic camp towards the social democrats further strengthened the alliance between German nationalists and the Christian Social Party. The republican Constitution of 1920 was, like many other decisions, a shaky compromise. The civic camp and many leaders of the *Heimwehr* exerted strong pressure aimed at bringing about changes to the Constitution. Some amendments were made to the Constitutional Act in 1925, but extensive reform of the Constitution became a major theme in the Austrian political scene in 1929 under the government of Chancellor Johannes Schober. Ignaz Seipel, as Chancellor of the coalition of civic parties, wanted to strengthen the position of the ruling coalition and the Christian Social Party by constitutionally strengthening the powers of the executive.¹⁵

In 1929 the system in which Parliament had had the dominant role was turned into a republic with a powerful President.¹⁶ The powers of the President were strengthened, and new powers were added: the right to issue emergency decrees, appoint the government, and under certain circumstances dissolve the *Nationalrat*. The position of the President was further strengthened by the introduction of direct elections of the head of state.¹⁷ Although constitutional reform was not executed in the spirit of the ideology of the *Heimwehr*, which wanted to replace the parliamentary system with an 'estates system' and authoritarian government, it signified a noticeable shift away from the 'radical-parliamentary' republic towards a state in

¹⁵ K. J. SIEGFRIED, *Universalismus und Faschismus. Das Gesellschaftsbild Othmar Spann's. Zur politischen Funktion seiner Gesellschaftslehre und Ständestaatkonzeption*, Wien 1974, p. 82.

¹⁶ W. WILTSCHEGG, *Die Heimwehr. Eine unwiderstehliche Volksbewegung?*, Wien 1985, p. 307.

¹⁷ WALTER, MAYER, p. 27.

which two opposing powers could clash with each other: the legislature (Parliament) and the executive (the Government and the President).¹⁸ Although in terms of the constitutional position of the President Austria resembled the semi-presidential model of the Weimar Republic, the federal President never became a player that in any fundamental way shaped the political system. The authoritarian changes of the Dollfuss Government that followed the so called “self-ousting of Parliament” on 4 March 1933 were introduced by means of Government order, the legal foundation for which was the contentious (but valid) “Wartime Economic Empowerment Act” (*Kriegswirtschaftliches Ermächtigungsgesetz*) of 24 July 1917.¹⁹

A Comparison of Development

The young republican systems in Germany and Austria shared certain problems. The radical right (in Germany, for instance, the NSDAP and in Austria the *Heimwehr* movement) and nationalistic and conservative circles rejected the republican system and the parliamentary system as such and openly lobbied for an authoritarian nationalistic transformation.²⁰ An important role was also played by the opposition to the peace treaties of Versailles (Germany was heavily burdened with reparations) and Saint-Germain-en-Laye (forbidding Austrian annexation to Germany, i.e. the *Anschluss*).²¹ After an initial “revolutionary” phase (1918–1922/23) and the period of relative stabilisation in the second half of the 1920s the constitutional republic was subjected to authoritarian changes in the 1930s. In Austria the situation developed into the elimination of Parliament on 4 March 1933, the civil war in February 1934, and the creation of the “Estates state” (*Ständestaat*), officially established with the introduction of the May Constitution on 1 May 1934.²² In Germany the Weimar Constitution formally remained in effect until 1945. However, the spirit of the Constitution was already being violated by the actions of the ruling presidential cabinets in

¹⁸ U. KLUGE, *Der österreichische Ständestaat 1934–38, Entstehung und Scheitern*, Wien 1984, p. 24.

¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis, see P. HUEMER, *Sektionschef Robert Hecht und die Zerstörung der Demokratie*, in: Österreich. Eine historisch-politische Studie, München 1975.

²⁰ In the case of the Austrian Heimwehr an example is the authoritarian demands of the Korneuburg Oath of 1930.

²¹ For more on German and Austrian foreign policy, see M. JEŘÁBEK, *Konec demokracie v Rakousku 1932–1938. Politické, hospodářské a ideologické příčiny pádu demokracie*, Praha 2004, p. 21.

²² W. BRAUNEDER, F. LACHMAYER, *Österreichische Verfassungsgeschichte*, Wien 1992, pp. 233–234; H. WOHNOUT, *Anatomie einer Kanzlerdiktatur*, in: H. KOPETZ, J. MARKO, K. POIER (Hrsg.), *Soziokultureller Wandel im Verfassungsstaat. Phänomene politischer Transformation*, Wien 2004, pp. 961–974 (965).

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

1930–1932. The toppling of the Prussian Government in July 1932 (the *Preussenschlag*) under Chancellor Franz von Papen was an open violation of the Constitution. In this respect, Hitler's being named Chancellor represented in formal terms a legal change of government, but it resulted in the rapid and definitive destruction of the Weimar system based on rule of law. The Enabling Act (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*), officially passed on 23 March 1933 in the *Reichstag*, transferred *de facto* the right to issue laws to the government and thus also constitutionally strengthened the position of the emerging Nazi dictatorship.²³

The Parliamentary System and Political Polarisation – the Issue of Democratic Stability

A chance existed to create a stable democratic system in interwar Germany and Austria. However, no active advantage was taken of the existing democratic potential or opportunities for cooperation between democratic forces. The political polarisation and growing unwillingness to accept compromises were caused on the one hand by general factors such as post-war instability, social change, economic crisis, inflation, and, last but not least, the financial burden presented by the terms of the peace treaties. Similar problems were experienced by other states, such as Czechoslovakia, where democracy survived until the Munich Agreement in 1938. In Austria and Germany an important role was moreover played by medium-term events and the specific constellation of internal politics that ultimately sapped the strength from democratic and republican forces.

The membership base of the National Workers' Councils (*Rätebewegung*), which emerged from below in the revolution of 1918, was dominated by republicans and moderate Social Democrats.²⁴ The Government of F. Ebert underestimated the *Rätebewegung*'s significance for the stability of the republic in Germany and failed to take advantage of the democratic potential that was in the workers' councils, and on the contrary it unleashed the *Freikorps*, voluntary paramilitary units, to suppress the activities of "extreme" left-wing radicals, such as the Spartacist uprising in January 1919 (*Spartakusbund*). This trend, which became stronger after the so-called Kapp-Putsch²⁵ in March 1920, further added to the political polarisation on

²³ H. MÜLLER et al., *Dějiny Německa*, Praha 1995, pp. 266, 270.

²⁴ KOLB, p. 156.

²⁵ *Kappputsch* was a coup of the part of the former imperial armed forces. On Wolfgang Kapp's right-wing putsch attempt, see J. ERGER, *Der Kapp-Lüttwitz-Putsch. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Innenpolitik 1919/20*, in: Kommission für Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien (Hrsg.), *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien*, Bd. 35, Düsseldorf 1967.

the left, shifting weight more in the direction of the USPD and later the Communists (KPD). The left in Germany was then divided and the SPD grew weak, while on the right, support was growing for the monarchic DNVP. In the elections in June 1920, the moderate Social Democrats and the DDP, the parties that formed the backbone of the “state-building” Weimar coalition, together with the *Zentrum* Party lost their absolute majority, and never regained it for the duration of the Weimar Republic (in the first elections in 1919 the Weimar coalition had almost about 80% of the votes). The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) made do with the parliamentarising of the political system, and from the very start of the republic they party never strove for nor in the given political circumstances was able to assert any major changes, such as introducing strict democratic control over the military. In 1920 the republican parties suffered electoral losses from which they never recovered, and that left the ruling cabinets dependent on the support of the DVP (the part of the party representing heavy industry) or the DNVP (the conservative party supported by the nobility), which de facto represented the opposition in the Weimar system and stood for the interests of large landowners in the eastern part of Germany (*Ostelbien*). This was apparent in the economic measures that were introduced by the ruling civic cabinets during the relatively stable second half of the 1920s.²⁶

There was also a right-wing alliance (the *Freikorps* movement, the *Stahlhelm*, a war veterans’ organisation) that agitated against the republic, was opposed to liberalism, and was critical of the parliamentary system. Anti-democratic ideas also found support among German writers of the so-called conservative revolution (Moeller van der Bruck, Ernst Jünger, Werner Beumelburg). Like anti-democratic thinkers in Austria (Othmar Spann), they saw Marxism as their common enemy and rejected the civic and liberal ideas of the French Revolution of 1789. The political climate in Weimar was also fundamental influenced by the conservatively-minded state bureaucracy and justice system. The republican regime was also undermined by the nationalistic atmosphere and displays of anti-Semitism at the universities. Even before the economic crisis many supporters of the NSDAP were able to obtain prominent positions in student bodies at German universities.²⁷ Anti-liberal potential was firmly established in the Weimar Republic even before the rise of Nazism. Its impact was felt in the weakening of democratic political parties. The gradual demise and disintegration of the political centre (including the DNVP on the right after 1928, see below) in

²⁶ H. MOMMSEN, *Die verspielte Freiheit*, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin 1990, p. 226.

²⁷ For more information see, M. KATER, *Studentenschaft und Rechtsradikalismus in Deutschland, 1918–1933: Eine sozialgeschichtliche Studie zur Bildungskrise in der Weimarer Republik*, Hamburg 1975.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

the Weimar Republic led to the formation of strong protest-voting potential, which from 1929 and then during the economic crisis was usefully mobilised by Hitler's NSDAP to its advantage.

The disintegration of the middle classes, white-collar workers, small business people, and intellectuals partly resulted from the financial insecurity created by the republic's economic problems, the latent economic crisis (the deflationary trend after 1924) even before 1929, and reparations. In 1923 hyperinflation stripped entire social groups (especially employees) of their savings.²⁸ Also, interest groups in heavy industry²⁹ were unhappy with the social order of the Weimar Republic and especially with the introduction of a mandatory employer contribution to unemployment insurance (from 1927). In industrial circles they were convinced that no change in the social order would be possible in the given republican system, only in a regime of "emergency decrees". One way of achieving this in the Weimar Republic was through the use of Article 48 of the Constitution permitting the formation of an authoritarian government by presidential decree. Finally, from the late 1920s the military also had an influence on politics. In contrast to Hans von Seeckt, who asserted an apolitical position for the military, Kurt von Schleicher was a politically active general. In 1930 he was active behind the scenes in helping to bring about the collapse of the grand coalition government of Hermann Müller with the aim of ending the Social Democrats' participation in the government. This helped to pave the way for the emergence of the first presidential cabinet of Chancellor H. Brüning in spring 1930.

In Austria the chances for democracy were slightly greater. After the elections in February 1919 an alliance was formed between the two main political camps, the Social Democrats (SDAP) and the Christian Social Party (CSP). However, the grand coalition government, headed by Social Democratic Karl Renner, only survived until 1920. Disputes over matters ranging from social issues to the economy and to religion and education hit at the very heart of the parties' platforms and the two camps were unable or unwilling to harmonise them to create a united government policy.³⁰ To the end of the First Republic Austria was never again able to return to this model of cooperation in a grand coalition through "proportional democracy" (Gerhard Lehmbuch), which later proved so effective for a long time after the Second World War. The dividing line that cut across Austrian society and politics, with cities on one side and rural areas on the other, was further re-

²⁸ G. D. FELDMAN, *The Great Disorder. Politics, Economics and Society in the Great Inflation 1914–1924*, Oxford 1993.

²⁹ For example, Reichsverband der Deutschen Industrie.

³⁰ K. BERCHTOLD (Hrsg.), *Österreichische Parteiprogramme 1868–1966*, München 1967, pp. 259, 371.

inforced by the Socialists' governmental control over Vienna (*das rote Wien*), which formed a sharp contrast to the conservative and Catholic provinces. The opposition of the old imperial elites, the bourgeoisie and the church to the organised labour movement was fed by the socialist campaign against the Catholic Church, which reached a peak in 1923 and 1927.³¹

After the coalition fell apart in 1920 the Christian Social Party, headed by Ignaz Seipel, tried to form a right-wing 'civic' coalition, which ended up as an alliance between the Christian Social Party and the Greater German People's Party that survived until 1932. The coalition of civic parties aimed to reverse and curtail the "revolutionary drift" that followed 1918–1920 and the *de facto* socialist legislation put through by the SDAP in the grand coalition. The strong Social Democratic Party, which in the parliamentary elections in 1930 won over 41% of the vote, settled permanently into the opposition, but it also defended its parliamentary position in the state. The antagonism between the Social Democrats and the Christian Social Party grew into conflicts in the 1920s. A key turning point in this respect came in 1927, when, after an incident that occurred in Schattendorf in Burgenland, which the Austrian courts dealt with too leniently (and in favour of the right-wing radicals), on 15 July 1927 spontaneous rioting broke out among workers in Vienna. During this mass demonstration the palace of justice was set on fire and the Government presented the event to conservative citizens as an immediate Marxist threat. Within two years, 1927–1928, even before the economic crisis, the *Heimwehr*, an extra-parliamentary movement, became extraordinarily popular (the number of members grew by around 300,000–400,000).³² The civic camp in Austria, represented by the Christian Social Party, viewed the *Heimwehr* as a counterweight to the strong Social Democrats and to the *Schutzbund*, the paramilitary defence league of the SDAP. The *Heimwehr* movement was a militia that emerged after the First World War in the Austrian states (Styria, Carinthia, Tyrol). Geographically dispersed, the branches of the movement were united by their rejection of parliamentarism, their militant conduct, and anti-Marxism. The movement's ideology was a mixture of an archaic "mediaeval" estates doctrine and modern extremism.³³

An example of the authoritarian programme is the Korneuburg Oath of 1930, in which some branches of the *Heimwehr* voiced their objectives: "*We want strong state leadership made up of leading figures of the 'great estates' ... We are battling the decline of our nation that is being ushered in*

³¹ E. HANISCH, *Der lange Schatten des Staates. Österreichische Gesellschaftsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert 1890–1990*, Wien 1994, p. 294.

³² WILTSCHEGG, p. 304.

³³ KLUGE, p. 39.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

by the Marxist class struggle and the liberal democratic system.”³⁴ Despite rising popularity and the election of Prince E. R. Starhemberg in 1930 as the movement’s leader, the *Heimwehr* remained a divided and heterogeneous movement and was unable to have any fundamental influence on parliamentary politics. And this remained so even despite the election of eight of its members to Parliament (*Nationalrat*) in the 1930 elections³⁵ as representatives of the *Heimatblock*, which was the political wing of the *Heimwehr*. Unlike the *Heimwehr* the Austrian NSDAP-*Hitlerbewegung* remained a marginal party until the 1930s. In the parliamentary elections in 1930 it did not obtain the so-called basic mandate and therefore did not gain representation in the *Nationalrat*.

The civic coalition, the alliance between Catholic conservatives (Christian Social Party, CSP) and German nationalism in the form of the Greater German People’s Party, also proved unstable in the long term. Its demise was aided by the economic crisis that was already being felt in Austria in 1930. The government tried to combat the pressure of inflation with a restrictive monetary policy. Investments and government expenditures also decreased. The economic measures of the government and the National Bank led to a decline in exports and domestic demand, an increase in unemployment, and intensified pressure on unions and workers’ organisations.³⁶ However, it was the question of *Anschluss* that was instrumental in the definitive demise of the coalition in the spring of 1932. After the largest Austrian bank the *Österreichische Creditanstalt* collapsed in May 1931, the Austrian state was forced to request financial assistance from the League of Nations (a loan from Lausanne).³⁷ France, which was supposed to provide some of the loan, made financial assistance conditional upon Austria’s confirming that no *Anschluss* would be allowed for the next twenty years. The Greater German People’s Party was opposed to this and left the coalition.

When the civic block in Austria broke up in the spring of 1932 there was a chance for return to the solution that existed at the start of the repub-

³⁴ The full oath is printed in L. KERÉKES, *Abenddämmerung einer Demokratie. Mussolini, Gömbös und die Heimwehr*, Zürich 1966, p. 71.

³⁵ The so called Heimatblock won 6.2% of the vote in the parliamentary elections. *Statistisches Handbuch für die Republik Österreich*. XII. Jg., Wien 1931, p. 210.

³⁶ H. KERNBAUER, F. WEBER, *Von der Inflation zur Depression. Österreichs Wirtschaft 1918–1934*, in: E. TÁLOS (Hrsg.), *Austrofaschismus, Beiträge über Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur 1934–1938*, Wien 1988, pp. 1–31 (p. 20).

³⁷ F. WEBER, *Die Weltwirtschaftskrise und das Ende der Demokratie in Österreich*, in: E. FRÖSCHL, H. ZOITL (Hrsg.), *Der 4. März 1933. Vom Verfassungsbruch zur Diktatur*. Beiträge zum wissenschaftlichen Symposium des Dr.-Karl-Renner-Instituts abgehalten am 28. Februar und 1. März 1984 in Wien, Wien 1984, pp. 37–67 (p. 59).

lic the creation of a grand coalition.³⁸ However, the leaders of the Christian Social Party decided to seek a coalition without the participation of the Social Democrats. Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss therefore joined forces with the agricultural league the *Landbund*, which had nine seats in the federal assembly (*Nationalrat*), and the *Heimatblock* the party wing of the *Heimwehr*. Without their eight MPs, Dollfuss could not on 20 May 1932 have formed a government, but even then in Parliament the majority obtained was very small, with 83 votes, against the 82 votes of the Social Democratic Party and the Greater German People's Party in the opposition.³⁹ After a confrontation in the *Nationalrat* (in a dispute over invalid votes during a round of voting) and the abrupt resignation of three chairmen of the *Nationalrat* on 4 March 1933 the government embarked on a path towards dictatorship, systematically limited the manoeuvring room of the Social Democrats, and strove to transform the Austrian political system into an authoritarian "Estates state".

The End of Democracy 1930–1933: the Constitutional and Political Causes

The end stage of the existence of the Weimar Republic and the First Austrian Republic must be examined complexly to analyse the causes that led to the demise of democracy therein. While it is not the objective of this study to identify and describe all the causes that led to the end of democracy in the Weimar Republic and in Austria, and it is not the author's intention to focus on the subject of foreign policy, it is nonetheless important to understand the European background to domestic political problems and in particular to the fact that in 1918–1919 Germany and Austria were viewed by their own populations as defeated states. The constraints imposed by the treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain (as well as the reparations!) constituted an added long-term burden for the young republican systems and helped to destabilise the Weimar Republic and the First Austrian Republic. Below we look at the key (mainly) domestic political factors that significantly added to the crisis in democracy in 1930–1933. In some aspects Austria and Germany are comparable, in others areas we can find only similarities or even differences.

³⁸ For more on this, see F. SCHAUSBERGER, *Letzte Chance für die Demokratie, die Bildung der Regierung Dollfuss I im Mai 1932. Bruch der österreichischen Proporzdemokratie*, Wien, Köln, Weimar 1993.

³⁹ G. SHEPHERD, *Engelbert Dollfuß*, Graz, Wien, Köln 1961, p. 118.

The Constitutional and Institutional Levels

Article 48 of the Constitution (see above WRV) was the basic legal instrument underpinning the parliamentary system in the Weimar Republic in 1930–1933. In 1919 the Office of the President was conceived as the institution intended to guarantee constitutionality and to check the power of a strong Parliament. The significance of the position of the President in terms of politics and authority and in relation to the military force (*Reichswehr*) was tailored to the figure of Friedrich Ebert. The extraordinary powers available to the President to use (and indeed used by the Social Democrat Ebert in 1923) were granted with a view to the President's role in maintaining stability and protecting democracy and the republic. In 1925, after Ebert's death, Paul von Hindenburg, a Prussian aristocrat and an officer in the imperial military, was elected President in direct elections. Hindenburg saw his role as that of the “defender” of constitutional principles, but *de facto* he represented an authoritarian and ideological union with the conservative elites and the interest groups of east Prussian Junkers, who were strong supporters of the Monarchy. The architects of the Weimar Constitution had no idea that they were creating the conditions for a situation in which the President could be the main factor behind the transformation of the nature of the republican system.⁴⁰

The authoritarian turn that was being prepared through backstage intrigue by General Kurt von Schleicher starting in late 1929 counted on the participation of the “presidential” Chancellor Heinrich Brüning. They made their move on 28 March 1930 after the collapse of the grand coalition of the Social Democrat Chancellor Hermann Müller.⁴¹ In July 1930 the *Reichstag* for the first time rejected the emergency decrees of the Brüning cabinet that had been issued under Article 48 of the Constitution,⁴² which was followed by the dissolution of Parliament by President Hindenburg and the new elections in September 1930. In the elections the NSDAP surprisingly won 18.3% of the votes and 107 seats (compared to 12 seats in 1928) and became the second strongest party in the *Reichstag*.⁴³ President Hindenburg was led to partially block the operations of the Parliament as a result of the unexpected rise of the NSDAP (and also the Communist Party, KPD), despite initial hesitations to use emergency decrees as a “standard method of government”. Proposed laws for which the Government had no chance of obtaining a majority in Parliament were signed directly by the President and

⁴⁰ BRACHER, p. 51.

⁴¹ KOLB, p. 124.

⁴² For a tabular list of emergency decrees from 1930–1932, see MORAVCOVÁ, pp. 193–194.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

in this way they entered into force. In its early stages the *Reichstag* was unable to put together a majority, thanks to the Social Democrats' "tolerance" of the Government, and without it could not effectively oppose presidential decrees. And when it was ultimately able to do so (e.g. in 1930, and again in the summer of 1932), the Parliament was dissolved by the President (according to Article 25 WRV). The mechanism of presidential cabinets (those of Chancellors Brüning, Papen and Schleicher) and the emergency legislation model resulted, in accordance with Article 48, in the weakening of the republic, unconstitutional action (the open violation of the Constitution by Franz von Papen on 20 July 1932 in the form of Government action against Prussia – so called *Preussenschlag*) and gradually significantly contributed to its demise.

In Austria, 4 March 1933 marked the decisive turn towards authoritarianism. Under the Second Austrian Republic, March 1933 was legally regarded as the turning point and end of parliamentary democracy. A formal error, where all three chairs of the *Nationalrat* resigned over a contested vote, helped Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss squeezed Parliament as a power player. The very next day after the elimination of Parliament Dollfuss announced at a meeting of farmers in Villach that "*Parliament had paralysed itself*".⁴⁴ Under the influence of the leaders of the Christian Social Party and with the tacit agreement of President Miklas and the support of the *Heimwehr* movement Dollfuss decided to adopt authoritarian rule.

In Austria the legal instrument employed by the government was not presidential decrees like in Weimar but the 'Wartime Economic Empowerment Act' of 24 July 1917,⁴⁵ which gave the Government the authority to regenerate economic life, remedy economic damages and ensure the provision of supplies for the population throughout the duration of the extraordinary circumstances that existed as a result of the war.⁴⁶ After the First World War the act was incorporated into the Austrian legal system. It was used in 1931 and it was on the basis of this law that in October 1932 a decree was issued to address the request of the Social Democrats to hold the directors of the bankrupt Creditanstalt accountable. The commentary on the act was prepared for the government by Robert Hecht, Dollfuss's advisor: "*The act generally grants the government enactment power, not just for certain, temporary decrees, because the bad times today are still the result*

⁴⁴ For an interpretation of events, see G. BOTZ, *Die Ausschaltung des Nationalrats im Urteil von Zeitgenossen und Historikern*, in: G. BOTZ, *Krisenzonen einer Demokratie. Gewalt, Streik und Konfliktunterdrückung in Österreich seit 1918*, Frankfurt am Main, New York 1987, pp. 119–121.

⁴⁵ Kriegswirtschaftliches Ermächtigungsgesetz.

⁴⁶ HUEMER, p. 139.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

of the war."⁴⁷ The empowerment act not only allowed the government to continue to make dramatic budget cuts but also give it the power to suppress political freedoms in the country. During the next 11 months (from March 1933), the power of social democracy in Austria was weakened "step by step" by means of systematically planned government measures and spontaneous actions by the *Heimwehr*. Then, after the short civil war, on 12 February 1934 the Austrian Social Democratic Party was banned. The transformation of the political system culminated in the introduction of the reactionary May Constitution in 1934. This new, forced Constitution legally consecrated the end of democracy and parliamentarism.

The NSDAP and Its Rise in the Elections in Germany and Austria

A fundamental question connected with Hitler's ascent to the office of Chancellor in Germany and with the crisis and the end of parliamentarism in Austria in 1933 is what influence the rise of the Nazi Party had on the demise of German and Austrian democracy. The fact is that the vote gains to the NSDAP in the German elections that can still be regarded as free (if we do not count the elections in Germany in 1933) would never have been enough for the Nazi Party to form a majority government. Nevertheless, it was the mass popularity of Nazism among the German population that significantly supported and *de facto* enabled the Nazis' rise to power. While conservatives (including President Hindenburg) were initially distrustful of the Nazi movement, it was conservatives in top bureaucratic and military circles that wanted to take advantage of the popularity of the NSDAP, so on 30 January 1933 they condoned the formation of a cabinet headed by Hitler as Chancellor.

Below we will analyse the causes of the rapid and recurrent success of the NSDAP in the German elections in 1930–1933. The voting behaviour of Germans in these elections can only be analysed through a complex examination of the situation. The Nazi Party could have benefited from a number of trends in society and the party system in the second half of the 1920s which paved the way for the Party's success.⁴⁸ Although it clearly benefited from the economic crisis since 1929, unlike the KPD it did not become the party of the 'unemployed'. The structure of the traditional social environment (R. M. Lepsius) was at risk of gradual erosion. Unlike the working-class and Catholic environments, which were relatively stable (the socio-moral environment), the civic Protestant camp became fragmented. From the start of the Weimar Republic it was obvious that traditional ties to political subjects were weakening and new cleavages were emerging that

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 144.

⁴⁸ On the discussion of interpretations, see KOLB, p. 169.

were generated by the war, revolution, hyperinflation, and the economic crisis. Some illustrative examples are the disputes that arose between those who profited from hyperinflation and those who lost, between the older and younger generations, between the working class and other workers, between the employed and the unemployed, and between men and women in the labour market.⁴⁹

The afore-mentioned processes had a fundamental influence on the structure of the party system, political culture, and voter behaviour. The proportional parliamentary electoral system fragmented political groups.⁵⁰ The formation of small centrist parties (*Wirtschaftspartei*, *Landbund*) that gained seats in the Parliament during the 1920s was a sign of the corrosion of the civic centre. Because there was no vote threshold for gaining seats in Parliament, parties got in that were radical or had diverse (even regional) interests and unstable voter support and were not suitable coalition partners for the established parties of the Weimar coalition (SPD, DDP, *Zentrumspartei*).⁵¹ However, what was instrumental for the rise of the NSDAP was the change in orientation of the DNVP (German National People's Party). The DNVP was conservative in orientation and represented Prussian landowners and the nobility. It was usually part of the opposition, but when it was chaired by Count Kuno von Westarp on important votes in Parliament it joined other civic centrist and right-wing parties such as the DDP (the German Democratic Party), the DVP (the German People's Party), *Zentrum* (the Catholic Party) and the BVP (the Bavarian People's Party). In 1928 press magnate Alfred Hugenberg was appointed chair of the DNVP, and his leadership put the DNVP on a more nationalistic and authoritarian course and thus clearly against the principles of a parliamentary republic.⁵² Thus, as the campaign against the Young plan (1929) showed, it became a party that promoted solutions similar to those of the NSDAP, but was perceived by voters as just a copy of the latter.

The parties in the centre and originally the right-wing conservative DNVP systematically lost votes in elections to the *Reichstag* between 1928 and 1932.⁵³ Some of the voters voted for the NSDAP instead of the DNVP. In 1932 the former voters of small centrist parties formed one-third of the

⁴⁹ D. PEUKERT, *Die Weimarer Republik. Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 1987, p. 150.

⁵⁰ MORAVCOVÁ, p. 46.

⁵¹ *Zentrumspartei* (*Zentrum*) was a centrist party with strong ties to the Catholic community and it regularly formed part of democratic coalitions. Towards the end of the 1920s the rightist wing of the party gained in strength and Chancellor H. Brüning became the central figure of the presidential cabinets.

⁵² MOMMSEN, p. 283.

⁵³ E.g., in the elections in 1928 the DNVP won 14.2% of the vote, but in July 1932 just 5.9%.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

increase of voter support for the NSDAP, supporters of liberal and German-nationalist parties more than 10%, and former backers of the SPD 15% of the voters who changed their voting behaviour and chose to support the Nazis.⁵⁴ An analysis of the voting behaviour of Germans in 1930–1932 in relation to their social status confirms that the NSDAP is rightly called the “universal protest party” (*negative Volkspartei*).⁵⁵ Summing up the electoral gains of the NSDAP, especially in the parliamentary elections, we find that the party gained votes repeatedly at the expense of other political parties, and won the votes of non-voters and those who were voting for the first time. The NSDAP was the *Volkspartei* in the sense that it was able in the short term to mobilise voters from almost every social stratum. Although the middle classes were the main “support base” of the NSDAP, in numbers most of its voters were from the working class (almost 28%).⁵⁶ It was a protest party in the sense that it was unable to hold these voters for a long period of time, only for the short or medium term. Voter support for the NSDAP was therefore very unstable. This trend was apparent for instance in the parliamentary elections in November 1932, when the Nazis won “just” 196 seats (a loss of 2 million votes!) compared to the July elections, when the NSDAP won 37,2% of the vote and 230 seats.⁵⁷

Despite its successes in the elections in 1932 the NSDAP was unable to form a majority government. Until January 1933 Hitler was unwilling to enter into any coalition. The fate of democracy in Germany thus to a certain degree depended on what went on with the presidential cabinets, the standpoint of President Hindenburg, and the strategy of the conservative governments of F. von Papen and K. von Schleicher (in alliance with the bureaucracy and the military) and their relationship to the NSDAP.

The drift away from democracy in Austria followed that in the Weimar Republic with a two-year delay in 1933–1934. Features of this shift in Austria included the important role played by conservatives in the dismantling of parliamentarism (a feature it shared with Germany) and above all the confrontation between two extremist groups, Nazism and the *Heimwehr* movement, under the Dollfuss Government. Austrian Nazis only began to be a political factor in the spring of 1932. But from the mid-1920s they had been introducing the mentality, ideology, and the programmes of the German Nazis into Austria as well as their methods of combatting the Weimar Republic. The programme of the Austrian NSDAP-*Hitlerbewegung* offered its supporters in civic circles a number of attractive ideological

⁵⁴ J. W. FALTER, *Hitlers Wähler*, München 1991, pp. 365–366.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 364.

⁵⁶ KOLB, p. 118.

⁵⁷ Table of election results, see *ibidem*, p. 253.

views. Anti-Semitism and German nationalism and a vision of uniting Austria and Germany were especially attractive to those Austrians that favoured the idea of a greater Germany. The middle classes were strongly represented in the ranks of voters and members of the NSDAP and they included employees, members of the free professions, and even small tradesmen, threatened by competition from large businesses. In Austria the Nazis also found support among the minority Protestant voters. State officials formed a separate group, as they did not feel that they were supported by the Greater German People's Party or the Christian Social Party, and had been hit heavily by the austerity measures introduced by successive Austrian governments during the economic crisis.⁵⁸

The Nazi Party tirelessly called for *Anschluss*. Conversely, the conservative Christian Social Party defended Austria's independence and therefore refused to enter into a coalition with the Nazis. Moreover, Dollfuss's Catholicism was irreconcilable with Hitler's irrational political behaviour and the anti-church and totalitarian ideology of the Nazis. In 1930 future minister Dollfuss declared: "*For me the battle against Nazism is not so much a battle against a political party that is trying to attain power, for me it is a battle against an erroneous world view.*"⁵⁹ In 1930 the Nazi did not gain a single seat in the elections to the *Nationalrat* (federal Parliament), so it 1930–1932 could not serve as a potential coalition partner. However, it was successful at the local and regional levels. Before 4 March 1933 Hitler was still hoping that the Austrian NSDAP would be able (following the pattern in Weimar) to accede to power smoothly through parliamentary elections. However, with the elimination of parliament in March 1933 Chancellor Dollfuss deprive the Austrian Nazis of the legal space for its ascent to power that in Germany they had been able to use successfully in the battle against the republic.

The question of the NSDAP's influence in Austria should be viewed in the parallel context of developments in the Third Reich. Some authors, like Dieter Ross, claim⁶⁰ that the electoral victory of the NSDAP in the Reich elections on 5 March 1933 had a fundamental influence on the decision of the Austrian cabinet on 7 March 1933 as to whether to embark on the path towards authoritarianism. At any rate, during the confrontation

⁵⁸ On the views of the Austrian bourgeoisie, see E. BRUCKMÜLLER, *Das österreichische Bürgertum zwischen Monarchie und Republik*, in: *Zeitgeschichte*, Jg. 20, Hf. 3–4, März-April 1993, pp. 60–83.

⁵⁹ G. K. KINDERMANN, *Hitlers Niederlage in Österreich. NS-Putsch, Kanzlermord und Österreichs Abwehrsieg 1934*, Hamburg 1984, appendix with documentation, mainly pp. 227–235.

⁶⁰ D. ROSS, *Hitler und Dollfuß. Die deutsche Österreich-Politik 1933–1934*, Hamburg 1966, pp. 19–21.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

between the Dollfuss regime and the Nazi Third Reich from the spring of 1933 to the failed putsch in July 1934, the Austrian NSDAP-*Hitlerbewegung* was a domestic political force. However, from the time the party was banned in June 1933 and stripped of the seats it had won in the regional assemblies (*Landtag*) the Nazis (especially the SA and the SS) operated as an illegal terrorist movement with massive support from the Third Reich. As democratic structures and social democracy were destroyed (initially the government banned ‘just’ the social democratic *Schutzbund*) Dollfuss’s regime, with the support of the *Heimwehr* and the foreign policy backing of Fascist Italy, waged a successful battle against Nazism in the first stage in 1933–1934.⁶¹ It culminated in the defeat of the Nazi putsch on 25 July 1934, during which, however, Chancellor Dollfuss was killed.

The End of the Republic – A Comparison of the Roles and Goals of the Conservative Forces

Having explained the main factors that drove the acceleration of electoral gains by the NSDAP, we can proceed to examine the conservative elites and their views in Germany and Austria in 1930–1933. We can identify the sequence in timing of three processes that led to the weakening and collapse of democracy in the two countries: the post-war crisis after 1918, the structural changes (latent crisis) during the 1920s (in the economy, politics, the political culture and ideology), and the economic and political crisis of 1930–1933. The economic and social crisis brought on by the First World War was overcome in Germany by means of stabilisation of the currency and politics started in 1924 (under Stresemann era), while in Austria a partial solution was provided by the loan that the country acquired in Geneva in 1922. The republican regimes, while they survived the dramatic years of 1918–1923, suffered a steady loss of legitimacy over the course of the 1920s. Growing problems led the public to take an ever more sceptical view of parliamentarism and democracy. In Austria these feelings to some extent made themselves felt in the demand for *Anschluss* with the German Reich, which, it was supposed, would solve all the country’s economic difficulties. The third stage, when the economic crisis had set in, saw an increase in the activity of traditional conservative elites. The elites of the empire (parts of the middle classes, the bureaucracy, the church, the military, east Prussian Junkers, and industrialists), who had been in charge of the monarchical state in the time of the empire, were weakened by the revolution in 1918, but did not completely lose their position.

⁶¹ JEŘÁBEK, pp. 134–156.

The conservative elites were looking for an authoritarian-reactionary anti-democratic option. In Austria the leadership of the Christian Social Party was inspired in its view by prelate and Chancellor Ignaz Seipel. He, for instance, criticised Parliament in a speech given in Tübingen on 16 July 1929: “*My criticism of pseudo-democracy is not directed against any one party, but against all the parties that have succumbed to democracy.*”⁶² The perception of the role of political parties is the same among those who held power in both Germany and Austria during the first stage in the transformation from democracy to authoritarianism under Engelbert Dollfuss and Heinrich Brüning. Both Chancellors ignored the conditions and limits of political action in modern society and in this regard were intellectually stuck in the era of undeveloped parliamentarism that existed before.⁶³ Regardless of the political motives for their actions, they marginalised the significance of political parties in favour of state bureaucracy and a technocratic government. The frequent government crises, unstable majorities, and the use of the obstructionist potential of political parties served as a logical example of the contrast between ‘party politics’ and a stable state bureaucracy.

The difference between the situation in Germany and in Austria was that the public in the Weimar Republic was much more politicised and radical. The extreme political culture in Weimar made it impossible for the conservatives to implement their proposed solution of a ‘presidential regime’ and to win at least a decisive amount of public support for this system. Heinrich Brüning was a leading figure in the first stage because he was able to negotiate with the Social Democrats and other civic parties to secure tolerance for the system of emergency decrees. The departure from parliamentary solutions instigated by Brüning made the government increasingly dependent on the President, and ultimately in reality on the influential insiders around Paul von Hindenburg.⁶⁴ Brüning thus had a hand in creating a system in which intrigue in presidential circles was the decisive path to power, and in doing so he undermined his own position.

By systematically eliminating the Parliament (later also states’ governments of Social Democracy)⁶⁵ and the exclusion of the unions from decision-making mechanisms H. Brüning and from 1932 F. von Papen created a power vacuum that they were unable to fill with any viable alternative.⁶⁶ In the spring of 1932 the “presidential dictatorship” lost (through its own fault) its power base. The conservative military-bureaucratic group around

⁶² I. SEIPEL, *Der Kampf um die österreichische Verfassung*, Wien, Leipzig 1930, p. 188.

⁶³ KLUGE, p. 53.

⁶⁴ MOMMSEN, p. 366.

⁶⁵ A typical example was the toppling of the Prussian government in July 1932, the so-called *Preussenschlag*.

⁶⁶ PEUKERT, pp. 260–262.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

the President did not have the support of the masses, while Hitler did. The Nazis, however, also had difficulties. Although the NSDAP had demonstrated itself to be a very successful movement, in the summer and autumn of 1932 it exhausted its voter support. It determinedly waited for an opportunity to attain power. In the second half of 1932 the conservative elites, which at that time were in the government, tried to find a way of integrating the totalitarian NSDAP and its support from the masses and including the armed SA units into the anti-parliamentary, authoritarian, and “presidential system”. On 30 January 1933 a group of presidential insiders headed by Papen, Hugenberg and General Blomberg, supported by the military and some high-ranking state bureaucrats, erroneously believed that they would be able to “tame” Hitler’s movement and use it to achieve the objectives of the conservative elites.⁶⁷ The idea that all it would take to check the influence of the Nazi movement would be to surround Hitler within a cabinet majority of conservative ministers (*Einrahmungskonzept*) failed. Nine conservative ministers, headed by Deputy Chancellor Papen and the Minister of the Economy Hugenberg, were not enough to face down just three ministers (inclusive Hitler as Chancellor) of the NSDAP. Hitler’s totalitarian model of power was different; it did not address specific economic problems but instead focused on securing the NSDAP a strong position within the state. For the quick culmination of his assumption of power it was enough for Hitler to attain the position of Chancellor and for NSDAP members to occupy the posts of minister of the interior in the *Reich* (Frick) and in Prussia (Göring) and thus to gain indirect control of the military.⁶⁸

In Austria the fates of the conservative cabinets differed from development in Germany in 1932–1933. With the failure of attempts to reach an agreement between the Social Democrats and Christian Social camps in the spring of 1932 Austria wasted an opportunity to return to the grand coalition that had existed in the early years of the republic.⁶⁹ The right wing of political Catholicism, in an effort to confront the Social Democrats (and later Nazism), forged cooperation with the extremist *Heimwehr* movement. However, the approach of Catholic social doctrine to the economy and social issues represented a “third way” in between materialist bolshevism and the uncompromising fascist authoritarianism promoted by the *Heimwehr*. However, E. Dollfuss and his successor K. von Schuschnigg were able to engage in some skilful manoeuvring within the bureaucratic police system

⁶⁷ The idea of “taming” Hitler (*Zähmungskonzept*, *Einrahmungskonzept*) foundered on the lack of readiness and radicalism of the totalitarian movement, which became fully apparent as soon as the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German Chancellor enabled the party to get a foot hold in the state apparatus.

⁶⁸ BRACHER, pp. 728–730.

⁶⁹ SCHAUSBERGER, p. 138.

and managed to reinforce their own positions and prevent the *Heimwehr* movement from going unchecked. The conservatives came out stronger after two civil wars on 12 February 1934 (against the Social Democrats) and 25 July 1934 (against Nazism). Despite its significance in these conflicts the *Heimwehr* always remained the weaker partner. In Austria the NSDAP was temporarily knocked out after a confrontation in 1933–1934, and it only began gaining strength in 1936–1938 in connection with the altered situation in Europe and Italy and Austria turning their backs on the West. The conservatives thus retained their key position in Austria up until the *Anschluss* in 1938.

The Causes of the Crisis in Democracy in the Weimar Republic and Austria – Conclusion

We began our analysis of the crisis in democracy in Austria and Germany by examining the constitutional instruments that from a formal legal or quasi-legal perspective made it possible for anti-democratic forces to gain ground. In order to understand how democracy came to an end it is important to realise that the constitutional system in the Weimar Republic did not just fall “keel over” but in reality was systematically undermined by authoritarian and nationalist parties and conservative groups. The rise of these political subjects after 1930 was facilitated by the economic crisis and polarised political culture and by deficits in the Weimar Constitution. The absence of any election threshold for gaining entry into Parliament resulted in the disintegration of the party system. The preparation of referenda provided room for the introduction of radical populism (in particular Hitler, Hugenberg). The strong position of the President, equipped with powers under Article 48 of the WRV in the specific constellation of Paul von Hindenburg’s government rife with intrigue by conservative insiders (bureaucrats, Junkers, *Reichswehr*) proved fatal to the republic. In reality, power was passed to Hitler on 30 January 1933 not by legal and parliamentary means, but (purely formally) by a narrow group of extra-constitutional forces representing particular political and economic interests. Political parties (except for the NSDAP) and Parliament were entirely outside the game.⁷⁰

In Austria the elites of the Christian Social Party were convinced of the need to rehabilitate the economy without any compromises with the Social Democrats. They portrayed the government crisis in March 1933 as a crisis of Parliament and set an authoritarian course towards the expulsion of the Social Democrats from political life. Despite short-term victory the Austrian government *de facto* lost half of its political powers which in the longer

⁷⁰ BRACHER, p. 731.

Martin Jeřábek

The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

term of 1934–1938 it could have used to fight Nazism and the Third Reich and defend an independent Austria.

At the institutional level, the authoritarian path followed in Austria led in 1934 to the formal replacement of the republic with an “Estates states”. In Germany, where from February 1933 the situation developed steadily towards Nazi dictatorship, Hitler did not even try to do away with the basic constitutional institutions of the Weimar Republic. However, power was obtained and maintained until 1945 by parallel party and state structures of the Third Reich created by the Nazis.

The second problem was how political parties and voter preferences developed. The instability of the Weimar Republic was, alongside other factors, influenced by the instability of its governments. The strong polarisation in 1919–1920 led to a loss of votes for the parties in the Weimar coalition and made it impossible to form a majority government that could stand clearly behind the republic and would be able to solve social problems and foreign policy issues relating to Germany. The crisis in the system, including the ascent of Hitler in the office of Chancellor, was accompanied by the rise of the Nazi Party. Analysing the success of the NSDAP to date remains a key issue in connection with the demise of the Weimar Republic.

In Austria the situation was more complex. The conservative Christian Social Party, which from 1933 supported Dollfuss’s authoritarian turn, had no aim of becoming a mass fascist party. The newly established Patriotic Front,⁷¹ which was supposed to be an integrative political group of the “Estates state”, never acquired dynamics typical of a totalitarian type of political party. The regime of Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg between 1934 and 1938, instead of moving towards the declared “third way” between parliamentary democracy and fascist dictatorship, leaned towards a “Chancellor monocracy” propped up by state bureaucracy and the military.⁷²

The third factor influencing the political system and political culture of the Weimar Republic and the First Austrian Republic was an extra-parliamentary group. The conservative and often anti-republican state bureaucracy (and in Weimar also the military) managed to retain a strong position in the state, despite the revolutionary changes in 1918–1919. In Germany and Austria the bureaucracy and the military had a fundamental impact on the Parliament, government and the President (Paul von Hindenburg) and contributed to the demise of democracy. On the other hand, it is also necessary to take into account the *bottom up* perspective. The society and

⁷¹ I. BÄRNTHALER, *Die Vaterländische Front. Geschichte und Organisation*, Wien 1971.

⁷² KLUGE, pp. 60–63, 94–95.

political culture of the public were ideologically shaped by paramilitary organisations (*Freikorps* in Weimar, *Heimwehr* in Austria), veterans' unions (*Stahlhelm*), and partly by the literary community led by writers from the so-called conservative revolution (in Germany Ernst Jünger, Moeller van der Bruck; in Austria Othmar Spann).⁷³

The increasing and more intensive use of “military methods” in civilian life and in politics, the glorification of war, and the militarisation of society in a situation of crisis and the culmination of social conflicts created very explosive conditions. This influenced the political culture, the way in which political objectives were asserted, the articulation of national patriotism and finally also political campaigns.⁷⁴ Political violence, in the form of murders, assassination attempts, and attempts at a putsch all occurred in the early stage of the Weimar Republic (1918–1923), and to a weaker extent can also be found in Austria in the interwar period.⁷⁵ In Weimar, violence “for political reasons” (systematically used in particular by the NSDAP and the KPD) reached its peak during the campaigns for the parliament elections in 1932, in Austria during two short civil wars in February and July 1934.

To sum up, there were a number of features in common to the crisis in democracy in interwar Germany and Austria, such as the political polarisation of the right and the left and the very similar concepts for solving the economic crisis (budget and deflation policy) that were embraced by conservative circles in Weimar Germany (Brüning, Papen) and Austria (Dollfuss). A clear difference was the explosiveness and the greater radicalisation of anti-democratic movements in the Weimar Republic, features reflected in the nature of political culture in Weimar from the start of the 1920s and in the rapid weakening of democratic institutions between 1930 and 1932 and the relatively smooth transition to Nazi dictatorship starting in the spring of 1933. Conservative Schuschnigg's Austria, despite the destruction of basic democratic structures there in 1933–1934, was paradoxically the country to which waves of emigrants leaving Nazi Germany headed up until the *Anschluss* in March 1938.

Abstract

The article compares the causes of the crisis in democracy in Austria and Germany between 1930 and 1934, focusing especially on the constitutional and political problems of both countries. The break with the parliamentary

⁷³ MOMMSEN, p. 240.

⁷⁴ K. SONTHEIMER, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik*, München 1962.

⁷⁵ G. BOTZ, *Gewalt in der Politik. Attentate, Zusammenstöße, Putschversuche. Unruhen in Österreich 1918-1934*, München 1976.

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The Question of Democracy between the Two World Wars: The Case of the Constitutional and Political Crisis of the Weimar Republic and the First Republic of Austria

system led in Germany to the emergence of the Nazi regime after Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933 and in Austria to the outbreak of civil war on February 12, 1934 and the formation of the authoritarian regime (the 'Estates state') of Engelbert Dollfuss. Various factors caused the collapse of democracy in Weimar and the First Austrian Republic. Besides long-term processes such as economic instability and the Versailles system (which are not a part of this analysis), decisive mid-short-term factors behind the demise of democratic structures included the weakness of the constitutional system and the political culture. The article concentrates on the following factors analysed: anti-democratic parties (NSDAP) and groups that after 1918 had not completely lost their relative power (the military and industry in Germany; the high-ranking bureaucracy in Austria), and extra-parliamentary groups such as the *Freikorps* and *Heimwehr*. The second part of the article analyses the role of conservative elites in the decisive transformation phase from democracy to dictatorship after 1930 in Germany (presidential regime) and in Austria during the Dollfuss period from 1932 to 1934.

Keywords

Germany, First Austrian Republic, Crisis of Democracy, Nazi Regime