



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

Reel
176

Box
64

Folder
329

Hitler's victory may bring doom, 1933.

Hitler's Victory May Bring Doom

Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, who is on a year's sabbatical leave from his Cleveland charge and is making an extensive tour of Europe, was in Berlin just before and during the excitement when Hitler was proclaimed chancellor, and watched the political scene unfold. In the following article he gives his impressions of those tense days.

BY DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

BERLIN.—I arrived here at the beginning of what has turned out to be the most exciting fortnight in the political history of Germany since 1918. Momentous events have transpired so swiftly



RABBI A. H. SILVER

and the political scene has shifted so often and so unexpectedly during the past two weeks that the natives here, not to speak of the foreign visitors, have been left fairly bewildered. This country has witnessed some very tense political dramas in the past years, but nothing comparable with the feverish intensity and startling climaxes of recent weeks.

I arrived on Sunday, Jan. 22, and I found Berlin on edge. The Nazis were staging one of their quasi-military demonstrations. This time it was in honor of their murdered party poet, Horst Wessel. They had arranged their line of march in such a way that it would take them into the Buelow Platz past the Karl Liebknecht Haus, the national headquarters of the Communist Party. This was regarded by the Communists as a provocation and a challenge. Everybody anticipated a bloody clash. The police took extreme precautions. The 16,000 Nazi marchers were flanked by the police, and the procession was patrolled all the way. Machine guns and army tanks were on hand. Police were posted on the roofs of all buildings adjoining the square.

Only three men were shot that day and a few dozen wounded. The Berliners heaved a sigh of relief and were glad that everything went off so quietly.

Three days later, in spite of bitter cold weather, 50,000 Communists staged a counter-demonstration. "Berlin is ours," they cried, and hurled jibes at their Nazi enemies who, they said, could only march in Berlin when protected by a steel fence of policemen.

On the following Sunday, 100,000 Social Democrats, with bands playing and banners flying—the banners of the "Eiserne Front"—marched into the great Lustgarten Square, shouting "Berlin bleibt rot!" (Berlin remains red). They sang the "Internationale," and they listened to the battle cry of their leader Franz Kuenstler, who summoned them to war upon the reactionaries of the Reich and to the defense of the Republic. Again the police were everywhere, on foot, on horse, on motorcycles, in trucks, and on the steps and roofs of the neighboring public buildings.

Political Pot Boils.

In the meantime, the political pot was boiling and spilling over. Von Schleicher's brief regime of less than two months seemed to be coming to an end. A small powerful clique headed by von Papen had maneuvered his downfall. He had lost the confidence of Hindenburg. The Reichstag would refuse him a vote of confidence. He wanted to govern without the Reichstag, as chancellor of a presidential cabinet, independent of political parties. But Hindenburg alone had the power to grant him his wish, and Hindenburg, it appeared certain, would refuse. What would Gen. von Schleicher do? Would he use the Reichswehr, the German Army, whose loyalty he could command, to seize power and set up a military dictatorship, or would he resign?

On Jan. 28 he resigned. Forty-eight hours of terrific suspense now followed. Who would succeed von Schleicher? No party had a majority in the Reichstag. No logical party coalition was in sight which could muster such a majority. Would an attempt now be made by a minority coalition, presumably that of the Nationalist Right, to establish itself in power over the heads of the majority of the Reichstag? Von Schleicher himself as well as the Catholic Centre Party, not to speak of the Socialists, warned in the most solemn terms against such a course.

Hindenburg now called upon the former Chancellor Franz von Papen to negotiate with the political party leaders for the formation of a new cabinet "within the framework of the Constitution, and in agreement with the Reichstag." No dictatorship! Who then would be the new chancellor and what possible hope was there that his cabinet would have the backing of a majority in the Reichstag?

There were rumors of von Papen's return to the post of chancellor from which he had been forced less than two months before. Hindenburg likes von Papen, but the people do not. He is generally discredited. His own cabinet had deserted him and had brought about his downfall. Would Hitler be the new chancellor? Hitler, the firebrand, the agitator, the super-patriot, who had promised his followers that heads would roll in the dust once he came into power. But Hindenburg had twice refused him the chancellorship.

Hitler's Triumph Stuns City.

And then suddenly, with the force and speed of a thunderbolt, came the announcement that a new cabinet had been formed and that Hitler was made chancellor. Berlin was stunned. The Nazis were delirious with joy. Their long-hoped-for day of triumph had finally come. The news was made public at noon on Monday, Jan. 30.

Almost immediately, the Nazi newspaper, Der Angriff, appeared with screaming headlines: "Reichskanzler Hitler!" "Deutsches Berlin, Fahnen heraus!" (German Berlin, hang the flags out). A huge torchlight procession was held in the evening. From the Grosse Stern through the Brandenburger Tor, down Unter den Linden and Wilhelm Strasse, the governmental quarter, marched thousands upon thousands

of Hitler's shock troops (the S. A.—Sturmabteilung) and Steel Helmets (the shock troops of the German Nationalists), carrying torches and flags, shouting "Heil Hitler!" and singing "Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles." Past the president's palace they marched, where the 85-year-old field-marshal greeted them, and past the chancellery where the erstwhile insignificant army-corporal but now chancellor of the German reich, Hitler, received their homage. Round them surged huge masses of people, some frantically cheering the marchers, others calmly looking on, still others glowering and hostile. Only two were killed that night.

The parade was a success, but the city of Berlin remained strangely unresponsive to the jubilant note of triumph and the holiday mood which the Nazis had hoped their victory would evoke. The city did not blossom forth in flags or burst forth in song. The city waited apprehensively for Hitler's next move.

In order to allay the fears of the people the new minister of the interior, Wilhelm Frick, addressed the representatives of the press that very evening and stated that no changes in the Constitution were contemplated, no state of emergency would be declared, the Communist party would not be suppressed and the freedom of the press would not be abrogated. It was also officially announced that the Reichstag would without fail meet, but instead of assembling on Jan. 31 as heretofore planned, it would meet on Feb. 7 without fail.

The next day the Nazi press announced that in view of the two murders which had taken place on the previous night drastic repressive measures would be taken against the Communists. The following day the Reichstag was dissolved. The Center party had asked for guarantees from the new government with reference to the preservation of the Constitution and the safeguarding of the prerogatives of the Reichstag before it would give its support. Without its support the new government could have no authority in the Reichstag. The new government would give no such guarantees and called upon President Hindenburg to dissolve the Reichstag and to order new elections for March 5.

Communists Are Curbed.

The next day all Communist processions were prohibited. The open-air demonstration planned by the Social Democrats for the following Sunday in the Lustgarten was also prohibited. The Rote Fahne, the Communist newspaper, was suppressed for a week. A day later the Vorwaerts, the great newspaper of the Social-Democrats, was also suppressed as a punitive measure for publishing certain statements in criticism of the government. Two days later the government made public its first emergency order which effectively muzzles the press and restricts the right of free speech and free assembly. The government also demanded that the Prussian Diet, der Landtag, should dissolve. The Landtag promptly refused.

And now Berlin and Germany are girding themselves for what promises to be the most bitter and hard-fought political campaign in their history. This, by the way, will be the third national election within a year. Hitler's government is proceeding deliberately and systematically to cripple and dismantle the campaign apparatus of the opposition parties by censoring their press and suppressing as frequently as possible their public meetings, while he himself can now use freely not only the political machinery of his own party but the entire propaganda apparatus of the government.

Hitler is confident of victory in the next election. With the slogan "With Hindenburg and Hitler for a New Germany," he feels he can sweep the country. If his party wins an absolute majority in the next Reichstag, Hitler will be master of Germany for at least four years—the duration of the Reichstag. But this seems hardly likely. The Nazis hold in the present Reichstag 196 seats out of a total of 584. It does not seem likely that Hitler would draw away a sufficient number of voters from the other parties to give him a clear-cut majority, for party membership and loyalty in Germany are far stronger and more constant than in the United States. He can win only in coalition with the German-Nationalists. Together they now

control 248 seats. They will need some 45 additional seats to give them a majority. They may get it. In that case the present government of Hitler, Hugenberg, von Papen and Seldte will continue in office.

But Hitler will not be the master of this new government. His powerful Nationalist allies, Hugenberg and von Papen, seem likely to be the dominant forces in the new government. They represent the large landowners and the big industrialists of Germany, and they hope to exploit Hitler for their own purposes. They will surely not permit Hitler to experiment with any of those quasi-socialistic schemes and rather vague, grandiose economic reforms which he has dangled before the hungry eyes of his followers these fourteen years. The new coalition government will be an extremely reactionary government of big business and the Junker feudal barons. The impoverished middle classes, the professional classes and the peasantry from which Hitler has drawn his largest following, stand to be terribly disillusioned.

Civil War Possible.

Should even the coalition fail to obtain a majority in the next election, it seems likely that it will resort to one of two courses. It might outlaw the Communist Party and thus achieve a technical majority in the Reichstag, or it might declare a state of national emergency, refuse to convoke the Reichstag, scrap the Constitution, and rule Germany as a dictatorship. This may lead to civil war.

In any event, Hitler's victory, with or without the German Nationalists, may prove his undoing. He has promised so much and to so many groups. When he came into power, the tenant would pay lower rent and the landlord would have larger rentals, the consumer would pay lower prices and the merchant would have bigger profits. The farmer would get more for his produce but food would be cheaper. Private capitalism would not be interfered with, but the State would control the economic life of the country.

Above all he has promised work for everybody. He must now make good these promises.

Furthermore, Hitler has no constructive economic program. His first campaign appeal to the German electorate a few days ago contained not a single positive economic proposal. It was one of his well-known potpourri of highly-spiced slogans and catchwords with which the agitator has fed the emotions of his followers up to now—national and intellectual (!) unity, discipline, Germany's great past, the curse of Marxism, the protection of the Christian idea and the family, etc. But all this is no food for hungry stomachs nor work for the jobless.

Advocates Compulsory Labor.

On one point only was Hitler positive. He strongly advocated compulsory labor service which in Germany does not mean a job for everybody, but is a euphemism for compulsory military service, prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles. The program of the Nationalist Right is completely to remilitarize Germany by building up a huge potential army under one disguise or another, to supplement the Reichswehr, the professional army of 100,000, which the peace treaty allows Germany.

Dark days are ahead for the German people, days of struggle, civil strife and bloodshed. As I write these lines there lies before me the morning paper of Monday, Feb. 6, reporting riots and bloodshed in Berlin, Munich, Chemnitz, Breslau and Stassfurt. For the time at least, all free thought will be ruthlessly suppressed in Germany.

War on the Jews.

The Jews of Germany, too, are likely to be severely tried. For years now Hitler and his fellow agitators, Goebbels, Strasser, Goering, etc., have sowed violent hatred against the Jews among the German people and especially among the German youth. They were blamed for every misfortune that has befallen the German people, for the loss of the World War and for the economic collapse which followed. "Der Jude ist schuld" (the Jew is to blame). This was the sop thrown to the hurt pride of a defeated people. The monarchists were told that the Jews were responsible for the overthrow of the

monarchy and the establishment of the hated republic. The millions of unemployed, as well as the impoverished small merchants and tradespeople were taught to believe that at the root of all their troubles lies a sinister Jewish conspiracy to destroy them.

Jewish history is no stranger to anti-Jewish propaganda. Nevertheless, the records even of the dark Middle Ages fail to reveal any anti-Semitism comparable with the persistent and venomous vilifications through pamphlets, books, newspapers and the spoken word of these men. And these men are now the rulers of Germany.

It is possible, and perhaps likely, that the Nazi leaders, now shouldered with political responsibility, will be sobered by their own responsibilities and will not attempt to carry out any of their fantastic schemes against the Jewish citizens of Germany. There is a German saying, "Nichts so heiss gegessen als gekocht." (One does not eat its soup as hot as it is cooked.) Furthermore, the really influential men in Hitler's cabinet, von Papen and Hugenberg, have in the past shown no anti-Semitic leanings, and they, backed by Hindenburg, are not likely to permit any interference with the rights of Germany Jewry.

Nevertheless, the position of the 600,000 Jews in Germany cannot but be seriously affected, at least for a time, by a government whose chief is avowedly and fanatically hostile to them, and whose party platform has made anti-Semitism a dogma. Attempts will be made to force them out of public offices, out of faculties of schools and universities, to restrict their professional opportunities and generally to undermine their economic position in the country. In all this, indirect rather than direct methods will be employed.

German Jewry today is greatly concerned about its future. It is not, however, demoralized. It has been schooled in patience. It has leaders of sound judgment and political competence. It is preparing itself for a storm which it is confident will sooner or later blow over.