

## Bruning: Potential Saviour or Destroyer of Weimar Democracy?

Although there were personal and strategic disagreements between Schleicher, Papen and Hindenburg, most historians agree that they all favoured replacing the Weimar system of parliamentary democracy and played a crucial role in its death. There has, however, been considerable debate about Bruning's motives and role. Was he the last defender of Weimar Democracy or its enemy?

Supporters of Bruning would argue that he was trying to defend the Weimar Parliamentary regime in adverse circumstances. They would say that he was near to succeeding when he was forced to resign. Critics of Bruning say he was planning to establish a more authoritarian, non-parliamentary system. Furthermore, they say there were alternatives to his deflationary policies which could have been tried if he had wanted democracy to survive. What do you think? For Bruning? Against Bruning?



### Bruning's Chancellorship, March 1930 - May 1932

In March 1930, Bruning's Cabinet contained most of Muller's ministers, except those from the SPD. In July, when the Reichstag rejected some of his austerity measures, Bruning began using Article 48 of the constitution to govern by presidential decree. He dissolved the Reichstag and held new elections, in the hope that the new assembly would support his policies. However, this turned out to be a major mistake. In the September elections both the Communists and the Nazis increased their representation, making it far harder for Bruning to gain the co-operation of the Reichstag. Instead he had increasingly to rely on presidential decrees.

### Bruning's Economic Policy

Bruning was prepared to worsen the effects of the Depression to achieve his aim of ending reparations. He told a meeting of Centre Party Reichstag deputies in August 1931 that 'only deflation would convince the world that Germany could not afford to pay reparations'. He also tried to use the Depression to reverse earlier Weimar governments' interventionist welfare policies and to create a leaner, more competitive economy. As he told Hitler in October 1930: 'The first country prepared to implement all the unpopular domestic measures necessary will rise to the top.'

Bruning rejected inflationary policies financed by large-scale borrowing. Instead, he opted for deflationary policies, which included government expenditure cuts, especially targeting civil servants' wages, and tax increases. Bruning cut the government deficit drastically (it was 38 per cent lower in 1932 than in 1928). He lowered prices to help exports, but since other countries' prices were also falling and protectionism was widespread he achieved little. Real incomes fell. These harsh measures earned him the nickname 'Hunger Chancellor'. Bruning has been greatly blamed for Hitler's eventual appointment as Chancellor. Firstly, Bruning's decision to call unscheduled elections in 1930 gave the Nazis an opportunity to break into the political mainstream, and his deflationary policies 1930-32 drove millions to vote Nazi. Late in 1932, after reparations had been suspended, he embarked on a programme of public works and the economy began to improve.

### Foreign Policy

With the backing of Hindenburg and the army, there was an overall shift under Bruning from Stresemann's conciliatory approach to a more assertive one. Bruning hoped to improve the economy, and then use Germany's economic might to get the Treaty of Versailles overturned. He had several foreign policy successes.

- In June 1930 the last Allied troops left the Rhineland (as had been agreed in 1929).
- Bruning took a strong line on reparations: partly as a result of the Depression, reparations were suspended in July 1931 under the Hoover moratorium (a temporary legal suspension of debt repayment). Reparations were finally cancelled a month after Bruning lost office.
- Bruning pressed for equal treatment for Germany over disarmament, as laid down by the Treaty of Versailles. The Disarmament Conference finally met at Geneva in February 1932. In December 1932, seven

months after Brüning had resigned, parity (equality) was declared, though no action by the other powers was forthcoming.

### **Brüning's Fall**

On 30<sup>th</sup> May 1932 Brüning was forced to resign. His proposal for land reform had upset the agrarian elite. Hindenburg, himself an eastern landowner, considered it Bolshevik and withdrew his support. Brüning lost office not through a vote of no confidence by the Reichstag, but because he had lost President Hindenburg's support. Brüning felt he had been brought down 'a hundred metres before reaching the goal.'

### **Historian's Assessments**

There are various interpretations of Brüning's chancellorship, all of which can be supported by reference to his policies. The terms of the debate were significantly changed with the posthumous (after his death) publication in the 1970s of his memoirs. Here he claimed he had been trying to restore the monarchy. Some historians, however, argue that this was a retrospective (after the event) attempt to give greater coherence to his chancellorship than it deserves. The picture of him as a desperate improviser, who might yet have helped some form of parliamentary system to survive, still retains support.

**SOURCE 1** – E. Feuchtwanger, *From Weimar to Hitler*, 1995, p. 277

*Brüning was the last chancellor to govern with any kind of constitutional legitimacy. His personal integrity, intelligence and devotion to duty have never been doubted by men of goodwill. He was also secretive and sometimes paranoid. The debate about his place in history is focused on two main issues. The first question is whether his method of government by decree can be regarded as a last attempt to preserve a non-dictatorial political system or should be seen as a stepping stone to dictatorship. The second question is whether there were any realistic alternatives to Brüning's policies.*

**SOURCE 2** – H. Mommsen, *Weimar to Auschwitz*, 1991, pp. 125, 140

*He deliberately intended his policies to deepen the economic crisis as he hoped this would enable Germany to get over the worst of the crisis before other comparable states...*

*Breaking the spirit of the constitution, and replacing it with formal legalisms [strict conformity to the letter of the law] was his doing. This contributed to the final destruction of the Weimar Republic just as surely as the systematic escalation of the economic crisis, which he deliberately engineered, produced the atmosphere of utter hopelessness... which Hitler could exploit more effectively than any other.*

**SOURCE 3** – R. Henig, *The Weimar Republic 1919-33*, 1998, p. 67

*Many commentators, at the time and since, have argued that there were alternatives to Brüning's deflationary policies, that measures could have been introduced to stimulate credit formation and to create comprehensive job-creation schemes. But such alternatives would have undermined Brüning's main objectives, to use the crisis to end Germany's reparations payments, to dismantle Weimar's comprehensive and elaborate system of welfare provision and to reduce Germany's manufacturing costs in order to make her industry more competitive than that of her European neighbours.*

**SOURCE 4** – K. Bracher, quoted in Kolb, *Weimar Republic*, 1988, p. 182  
*[Brüning] was not... the last chancellor before the break-up of the Weimar Republic, but the first chancellor in the process of destroying German democracy.*

### **ACTIVITY**

1. 'In the circumstances, Brüning's policies were well judged and could have helped the Weimar regime survive.' Do you agree?
2. Read the historians' assessments in Sources 1-4. Do they agree with you?
3. What are the dangers of adopting a strategy of relying on matters to get worse in order to achieve one's aims?