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#### **Second Prize: Isabelle Chaize**

for her translation of an excerpt from Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (German History in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) (C.H. Beck, 2014, ISBN 978-3-406-66051-1)

#### 7. The Dynamics of Violence

“The seizure of power”

Just a year after Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor of the Reich, the French ambassador in Berlin, André François-Poncet, wrote about the situation in Germany: ‘At the end of 1933, National Socialist Germany has come into being complete with its customs, its institutions, its vocabulary, its new salute, its slogans, its fashion, its art, its laws and festivals. Nothing is missing. The Nuremberg Rally, the ‘Rally of Victory’ at the beginning of September, shows Germany ready, perfected, triumphant.’ Admittedly, the ambassador’s insights were limited to political events at the highest levels of state and party, and the fascination of mass rallies and the propaganda of the new regime certainly also played a part. But François-Poncet, a national liberal of the old school, was a rational observer with good contacts in all the German capital’s political factions. He did not fail to notice the ‘violence of the government towards the Church and the Jews’ or the ‘excesses of the militias’, even if such excesses did not surprise him, given the virulence of the political shifts taking place in Germany. Because ‘the astonishing thing about this revolution is the speed with which it progressed, the ease with which it occurred everywhere, and the negligible resistance with which it met.’

The fact that, in less than a year, Hitler’s new regime had managed to carry out a complete transformation of the system, with all the elements of revolution, and that this policy was apparently viewed by an overwhelming majority of the public as exceptionally successful – this was an occurrence of such enormous magnitude and emotional intensity that it was already perceived by those who lived through it, in and outside Germany, as a profound break, an epochal rupture. The central concept around which Hitler’s new government had set out its program on 1 February 1933 was Volksgemeinschaft, the ‘people’s community’. Beyond the political sphere, the term itself had become something of a buzzword among critics of modernity during the previous fifty years. It combined criticism of the community-eroding class system inherent in industrialized society, and of division between religious denominations, with a rejection of political parties and of the parliamentary system, which was seen as being founded upon disunity and conflicts of interests. The famous words of Wilhelm II on 1 August 1914, ‘Henceforth I know no parties or denominations, for we are all German brothers today,’ had given voice to this criticism and to the longing for unity behind it. It was not a specifically German phenomenon. All over Europe social unrest had increased sharply after the war. Strikes and revolutionary uprisings on the one hand, and conflicts between ethnic groups in newly created nation states on the other, had given rise to authoritarian regimes in Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia, as well as in Greece and Bulgaria. These regimes proclaimed the overcoming of internal divisions and the creation of national unity, and promised to use force if necessary to achieve these goals. There, as in the great cities of the Western democracies, internal conflict between the classes was denounced as an unnatural condition, and even in the utopias of the

radical left people called for a revolution that would end class warfare and usher in a state of conflict-free equality. In Germany, however, these lines of conflict were particularly sharply drawn, and defeat in World War I served to intensify national and social contradictions still further.

This situation was the starting point for the National Socialists' agitation. In his proclamation to the German nation, Hitler started with a reckoning of the democratic era. The previous governments, which he called 'November parties' in reference to their involvement in the November Revolution, had driven the nation into the ground, leaving nothing but a expanse of ruins; devastated the 'peasantry'; created an army of millions of unemployed people; and contributed towards 'spiritual, political and cultural nihilism'. The government's foremost task, therefore, was 'to restore the spiritual and volitional unity of our people [...] above and beyond status and class'. Hitler declared that the most important political tasks were to overcome mass unemployment and the agrarian crisis; to reform the relationships between the Reich, the Länder and the municipalities; to further social policies; and to reestablish Germany's equality of status on the international stage. But before these tasks could be achieved, the 'communist corrosion [...]' and with it the illusion of class and class warfare' had to be defeated.

This program, though shrouded in the emotive and religiously heightened language of the time, remained firmly within the tradition of previous government programs. Schleicher and von Papen had also announced the 'reform of the Reich', the abolition of the party system and of parliamentary democracy, the fight against the Communists, the restoration of Germany's international status, rearmament and the end of the economic crisis. When not in public, Hitler expressed his objectives much more clearly and brutally, as in his speech to the leaders of the Reichswehr on 3 February: 'Complete overturn of the current domestic political situation in G.'; 'utter eradication of Marxism'; 'anyone who refuses to convert must be bent into shape'; 'enforcement of the will of the army by any means possible'; 'the strictest authoritarian state leadership. Elimination of the canker of democracy!'; 'strengthening the Wehrmacht the most important prerequisite for achieving the goal: restoration of pol. power.' The defeat of internal enemies, the establishment of an authoritarian regime, rearmament and winning back power on the international stage, with the option of an imminent war - these were the fundamental objectives as revealed by Hitler in this speech. But even between these and the publicly proclaimed goals of the national conservative Reich reformers, the difference was at most one of style.

The decisive difference between Hitler's regime and the previous government was rather that Hitler's policies were sustained and impelled by a mass movement that was as radical as it was eager for action, and which saw in Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of the Reich not simply the beginning of another presidential term, but the 'seizure of power' by the National Socialist party and its Führer. In the preceding years, the dynamic of the relationship between the Führer and his followers had already made the manifest differences between the NS movement and other radical right-wing groups clear. It now continued to develop at the level of governmental power, and ensured that the political upheaval became ever swifter and less limited in its reach.