

The righteous path of least resistance: Hermann Rauschning's warning to the world

by

David Patrick Leach

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Brent Maner

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Abstract

This report focuses on the life and career of Hermann Rauschning, who as a conservative, sought to enact political and economic reforms in his adopted home of Danzig during the tumultuous years of the early 1930s. When the German National Peoples' Party (DNVP) could not adapt to the radicalization of German politics during the Weimar Republic, the party's leadership and other members engaged with the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) hoping to gain the necessary support to maintain relevance. As the National Socialists rose to power, those in the DNVP saw their political influence waning. Hermann Rauschning switched political affiliations out of convenience instead of ideology by joining the Nazis because, with their ascendancy, he saw an opportunity to enact the reforms his constituents, neighbors, and friends in Danzig needed to survive. However, the revolutionary machinery within Nazism proved too dangerous and nihilistic for Rauschning. He could no longer govern effectively because of Nazi interventions in Danzig. He felt forced to resign his post as President of the Senate of Danzig when he was ignored after asking for economic assistance and berated for refusing to arrest what local Nazi officials referred to as dissidents of the party. He fled through Europe and eventually to the United States where he settled on a farm outside Portland, Oregon for the remainder of his life. As a Nazi émigré, Rauschning authored eleven books and numerous articles where he warned the world of the dangers that Adolf Hitler and National Socialism posed to Western ideas of democracy.

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Dedication

In the years when I was in graduate school, I went through a lot of ups and downs, especially during the writing of this report. This is dedicated to the people who made me believe I could get through anything: Mom, Dad, Jim, Heather, and Jo. No matter what may have transpired, I couldn't have gotten to this moment without each and every one of you. Thank you for everything. Rest easy, Pop.

Chapter One: Introduction

Nazi Germany has fascinated generations of historians, journalists, psychologists, and politicians. In the United States, it has become common for political pundits to invoke Hitler and the Holocaust when seeking salacious headlines. But what happens when insight is offered by somebody who has a unique and contemporary knowledge of the events that are generalized by the public? Does the conjecture morph into a substantive dialogue, or is his perspective manipulated to form whatever narrative might fit well with the crowd? That question applies to the subject of this report, Hermann Rauschning, who sought to warn the world about the dangers of National Socialism. His writings contain rarely seen insights because he was a man on the inside. He tried to warn the Western world of the Nazis' ambitions and aggression. Many of his predictions came to pass in the Second World War. He explained the way in which Germany's interwar climate proved amenable to a radical ideology like National Socialism. His writings therefore can help the public understand the Third Reich from its beginning to its end, and they should serve as valuable sources for historians.

After the war, many politicians, generals, and staffers under the National Socialist banner published their memoirs detailing how the Third Reich affected their lives and what they did to survive. These postwar reflections contained a large element of rationalization. These authors did this either to portray themselves as victims or to show the way that they exhibited a more robust moral bearing than the vast network of monsters around them. Rauschning sought to engage the world with his personal insights into Nazism. His writings diverged from other former Nazi officials because he was hostile to Nazism, at least nominally, during a time when nobody else wrote about it. He admitted he joined the NSDAP for opportunistic reasons despite knowing the dangers associated with the revolutionary movement, but he joined it because it was

his best opportunity to make his visions for Germany come true. It is noteworthy that he abandoned the Nazi regime very early and criticized it before and during the war, unlike many other Nazi memoir-writers.

Coming from a quiet farmstead in East Prussia, Rauschning rose through the ranks of the German National People's Party (DNVP), and became President of the Senate of Danzig. He joined the burgeoning National Socialist Party in 1931, and saw firsthand the moral turpitude which would eventually precipitate his exile from the Third Reich—all within a period of fifteen years. Hermann Rauschning sought to legitimize Danzig—an international zone under the jurisdiction of the League of Nations after World War One—both in Germany and on the world stage. Once the Danzig senate received his resignation in Berlin in November 1934, Rauschning embarked on a journey of self-discovery and reflection in Western Europe and eventually the United States, where he settled down. As the author of eleven books and numerous articles until his death in 1982, he spent the rest of his life rationalizing his experiences and decisions under the auspices of the swastika. Is he to be grouped in with other leaders of the party because he was also a high-ranking Nazi official who crossed paths with Hitler on more than one occasion? Not necessarily, because he left the party in 1934, long before the Reich's worst atrocities occurred. However, his career path does show how an alleged man of the people rose to a high leadership position in an environment at odds with the legal and political doctrine by which he supposedly abided.

Hermann Rauschning ardently desired to improve Germany's and Danzig's positions after World War One. He came from a conservative and nationalist background and came to see National Socialism a strong force that could deliver change. He hoped, especially as an administrator in Danzig, that an alliance with the Nazis would help him achieve the reforms he

envisioned. This union was one of convenience rather than ideology. As he interacted with the Berlin regime, he became alarmed by the process of coordination and disgusted by the treatment he received at the hands of Nazis in Danzig. By going against the ideological line of the party, he was rewarded with attacks on his credibility and threats against him and his family. His membership in the NSDAP should therefore be considered a matter of political utility, not full ideological commitment. As he witnessed the operation of the Nazi regime, he first became a voice of dissent within the NSDAP and then an exile from the Party. In exile, he became a voice of warning to the rest of the world with publications such as *The Revolution of Nihilism: A Warning to the West* (1939) and he spent the rest of his life trying to make sense of the political conditions that gave rise to National Socialism. In his view, revolution became a way for the Nazis to exercise and maintain power. Instead of reforming the political order, they sought to abolish it. Instead of engaging the German people, they sought to manipulate them into an amorphous mass.¹ The account he provides in his major books is complicated and idiosyncratic, but it foreshadows some of the recent historiography that highlights the populist potency of National Socialism.

The role of conservative elites has long been a crucial issue in explaining National Socialism's path to power in 1932 and early 1933. In a recent work on the collapse of the Weimar Republic, Benjamin Carter Hett explains the way in which conservative elites in the DNVP and the National Socialists shared a hostility toward Weimar democracy and all that it stood for. Hett describes that after World War One:

The German people were bitterly divided along every conceivable line. Rural people disliked the big cities for breaking with traditions of religion and sexual identity and

¹ Hermann Rauschnig, *The Revolution of Nihilism: A Warning to the West* (New York: Kissinger Publishing, LLC, 1939), 29.

morality...Few members of Weimar's insurgent groups wanted a lawless and barbaric dictatorship ruled over by someone like Hitler. They simply wanted the fastest and easiest solutions to their own particular problems, and they were deeply unwilling to compromise with their opponents.²

The main idea was that elites thought they could use Nazism to maintain their power and that they could box Hitler in. For instance, Edgar Jung, a hardline conservative in the DNVP, despised the Nazi party, but sought to harness its star power for the sake of German conservatism. His goal was to bring the Nazis into power while subordinating them to a larger conservative agenda and coalition that would dampen their dictatorial rhetoric and “unbridled enthusiasm” for Adolf Hitler.³ Political actors like Franz von Papen, Edgar Jung, and Kurt von Schleicher got outmaneuvered when National Socialism was able to garner widespread support while the conservative elites could not. Hett fully shows the political maneuverings of von Papen and von Schleicher. Von Papen reluctantly continued working with the National Socialist regime. Von Schleicher was killed in the Night of the Long Knives. Rauschnig proved to be another case of an elite conservative who latched onto the National Socialist movement for political reasons. He was no great friend of democracy, and he shared the idea that the energy of this movement was needed to master Germany's situation after World War One. Rauschnig's political career offers insights into how elites gained support for National Socialism. Instead of taking place in the center of power in Berlin, Rauschnig describes the way that it played out in Danzig. Furthermore, Rauschnig's career took a different path after 1934, when he left the movement.

² Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2018), 234.

³ Larry Eugene Jones, *Reform, Reaction and Resistance: Studies in the History of German Conservatism from 1789 to 1945* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, Inc, 1993), 474.

Rauschning's rationalizations for his contributions into the Nazi party, which will be discussed later in the report, may have fallen on deaf ears, especially after the war, as some people who became familiar with him believed that he was only capitalizing on his experience for financial gain and celebrity. Coming to the United States from Great Britain in the late 1930s, he had difficulty selling his monographs to American publishers and dabbled in screenwriting to pay the bills. In his monumental biography of Rauschning, historian Albrecht Hagemann details Rauschning's financial struggles and his frustration that *Men of Chaos* (1942), his fourth book, received "unfair" reviews. Rauschning received a meager thousand dollars as an advance for this title. It is noteworthy that with inflation, a thousand dollars in 1942 equates to \$17,500 in 2022, which is not necessarily a tiny sum. From 1942 to 1944, Rauschning acted as a screenwriting consultant in Hollywood for *Hitler's Madman* (1943) which was based on the bestselling biography of Reinhard Heydrich.⁴ Adding to his supposed financial woes in America, Rauschning's credibility had been called into question since the publication of his seminal volume *Hitler Speaks*. This book shook the world because it was the first insider's account of the Third Reich. The book is divided into three parts, each part dedicated to a year from 1932 to 1934. It related conversations with Hitler concerning his thoughts on World War One to his implementation of foreign policy, which is particularly illuminating due to its foreshadowing of future events. *Hitler Speaks* quickly gained notoriety because it was believed that Rauschning took liberties with the dialogue. Rauschning addresses this:

Critics have questioned the authenticity of my talks with Hitler. Certainly, none of the following conversations took place exactly in the words here given. Talks of which notes are afterwards taken are always abbreviations. Nevertheless they are not invented conversations. They contain essential passages, extracted perhaps from long and tiring debates, of which many were concerned with quite other matters, troubles of the moment,

⁴ Albrecht Hagemann, *Hermann Rauschning: Ein Deutsches Leben zwischen NS-Ruhm und Exil* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2018), 318.

and questions of detail, but in which outstanding things were said that may be well worth placing on record. I can affirm that my conversations, reconstructed from notes and from recollections, are true records in the fullest sense. Internal evidence must bear witness to the truth of these reports of personal meetings, just as for the Hitler talks.⁵

Noted historians have disputed Rauschning's claims in *Hitler Speaks* precisely because of the potential difficulty in establishing a credible assessment of the Führer. Ian Kershaw, one of the foremost experts on Hitler and writer of the biographical volumes *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* and *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, justified the reasons as to why he did not include the work in the preface of *Hitler Hubris*. He said that "I have on no single occasion cited Hermann Rauschning's *Hitler Speaks*, a work now regarded to have so little authenticity that it best to disregard it altogether."⁶ Kershaw may be on the cautionary side of the historical debate when alluding to the reliability of Rauschning's work, but he does not say whether he considers Rauschning's other volumes as credible primary sources. In Rauschning's publications, one can find a blueprint for one of the most damning periods of human history written from the perspective of somebody who was directly involved. To exclude such a valuable testimony for a lack of trust in Rauschning's reporting when the only objections include skepticism surrounding the memory of the event and syntax posed by Rauschning after the fact seems at least unfair and at most unjust.⁷

One notable historian who sided with Rauschning was Hugh Trevor-Roper, who edited and wrote the preface to *Hitler's Table Talk* in 1953. In the preface, he says: "Hitler's table-talk

⁵ Rauschning, *Men of Chaos* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), ix.

⁶ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), xiv.

⁷ Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks Hitler Speaks: A Series of Political Conversations with Adolf Hitler on his Real Aims* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1939) *Hitler Speaks* entered public discussions again during the SS Trials after World War Two. The prosecution and defense teams wrangled over whether Hitler's general pronouncements about German Jews and the destruction of peoples during wartime could be viewed as early evidence of a plan for the destruction of the Jews of Europe.

in the crucial years of the *Machtergreifung* (1932-34), as briefly recorded by Hermann Rauschning, so startled the world (which could not even in 1939 credit him with either such ruthlessness or such ambitions) that it was for long regarded as spurious. It is now, I think, accepted. In 1934 he [Rauschning] detached himself from the Juggernaut whose maniacal driver he had thus overheard and fled abroad. Thus the window into Hitler's mind which Rauschning soon afterward opened to the West (but how few looked into it or believed what they there saw!).”⁸ This is a carefully worded and subtle, albeit substantive, defense of Rauschning. Here, Trevor-Roper suggests Rauschning's rare perspective in the Third Reich was valuable, even if he had his own bias. It is noteworthy that Trevor-Roper revised his defense of Rauschning and stance on the authenticity of *Hitler Speaks* in the third edition of *Hitler's Table Talks*, written in 2000. He writes: “I would not now endorse so cheerfully the authority of Hermann Rauschning which has been dented by Wolfgang Hänel, but I would not reject it altogether. Rauschning may have yielded at times to journalistic temptations, but he had opportunities to record Hitler's conversations and the general tenor of his record too exactly foretells Hitler's later utterances to be dismissed as fabrication.”⁹

Previous research on Rauschning by historians, biographers, journalists, and graduate students suggest that he sought to publish his experience with National Socialism for a combination of personal ambition, financial gain, and intellectual understanding. Albrecht Hagemann wrote *Hermann Rauschning: Ein Deutsches Leben zwischen NS-Ruhm und Exil*

⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Secret Conversations: His Private Thoughts and Plans in His Own Words, 1941-1944*, 2nd ed, edited by Hugh Trevor-Roper, trans. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1953), x.

⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941-1944: His Private Conversations*, trans. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (New York: Enigma Books, 2008), xix-xx.

(*Hermann Rauschning: A German Life between Nazi Renown and Exile*) in 2018. Hagemann's portrayal revolves around Rauschning's life after World War Two and evaluates Rauschning's political experience as a conservative through the lens of *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West* and *Hitler Speaks*. Hagemann asserts that Rauschning joined the National Socialist Party in Danzig because doing so was the only viable option to alleviate the economic hardship of the Free City. He finds Rauschning credible in his study as a witness to the political machinery of Nazism, but claims that his political stance of Germany after World War Two was out of touch. Marek Andrzejewski published an article titled "Hermann Rauschning: Biographische Skizze" (*Hermann Rauschning: Biographical Sketch*) in *Deutsch-polnische Begegnung zu Wissenschaft und Kultur* in 2001. Andrzejewski provides a different portrait of Rauschning than Hagemann. In his article, Andrzejewski asserts that Rauschning saw an opportunity to satisfy his political ambitions in Danzig by joining the Nazis and took it. Andrzejewski paints a colder view of Rauschning than Hagemann, who defends Rauschning's political calculation as necessary for helping those in Danzig, while Andrzejewski claims Rauschning did so as a political maneuver.

Master's student Nima Lane wrote "What We Expected from National Socialism: Hermann Rauschning and Danzig's Interwar Radical Right (1918-1942)" as his thesis at Eastern Illinois University in 2019. Lane's goal was to contextualize Rauschning's career within the history of the German conservative movement from the *Kaiserreich* through the end of World War Two. Departing from other historians who claim that Rauschning was unique, Lane argues that Rauschning was representative of the German conservative movement during his political career following World War One, and his thesis seeks to link the political with the intellectual parts of his life. Herbert Levine's *Hitler's Free City: A History of the Nazi Party in Danzig*,

1925-39 (1972) places Rauschning among the overall narrative surrounding Nazism's rise in Danzig during the interwar period. Levine's coverage of Rauschning provides the necessary context for understanding the political history of Danzig after World War One and the way in which Nazism overtook other political parties during the 1920s. He devotes a chapter to narrate Rauschning's political career in Danzig titled "The Rauschning Period" to answer why he was well-suited for the Nazis' ambitions. Levine argues that Rauschning's contempt for the DNVP in Danzig caused him to reevaluate his political choices. Like Hagemann, Levine says that Nazism provided Rauschning the opportunity to satisfy the needs of those in Danzig in a way that the DNVP could not.

The goal of this report is to modify the positions held by these scholars, in hopes to better understand Rauschning's role as a political figure and author. In agreement with Hagemann and Levine, I argue that Rauschning engaged with National Socialism out of necessity because doing so provided him the chance to realize his visions for Danzig. This stance modifies Andrzejewski's position in "Biographische Skizze." I factor in Rauschning's ambitions, but disagree with Andrzejewski's claims that Rauschning's desire to join the Nazis was solely motivated by personal desires. Lane's focus on connecting Rauschning's intellectual stance to the understanding of the German right is incorporated into my research. However, I provide more context into understanding Rauschning's conceptions of traditional conservatism and how it precipitated his ideological break with Nazism. In doing this, I will limit my scope to Rauschning's *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West* and *The Conservative Revolution*, hoping to show show the way in which Rauschning's life and career led to his unique place in world history.

Chapter Two: Early Life and Political Career

Hermann Rauschnig was born in 1887 to an officer in the German Imperial Army in the West Prussian town of Thorn (now Toruń in Poland). He spent the most of his childhood attending Prussian cadet academies at his father's behest. As a consequence of suffering from scarlet fever in 1903, he developed severe pericarditis and other chronic health issues that forced him to remain alone in his room instead of socializing with his cadet classmates.¹⁰ During this time he became engrossed in the cultural classics from music to history, and this led to his decision to pursue the arts instead of a military career like his father. He devoted himself to the study of music and earned a doctorate at Berlin's Friedrich-Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University) in 1911.¹¹ His thesis, *Geschichte der Musik und Musikpflege in Danzig (The History of Music and its Cultivation in Danzig)*, focused on the expression of musical history and its correlation to German nationalism in the later nineteenth century, a period for which he remained nostalgic. As Rauschnig explained in his thesis, the idea of connecting a nation's identity and ideology through culture and music permeated Europe at this time as political parties catered to the interests and cultural tastes of different regional areas within any given country on the continent.

As with most other Europeans, war upended Rauschnig's life in 1914. At the age of twenty-six, he enlisted in the army, and later he offered his own take on the origins of the conflict. He and many other Germans lined up to fight to defend what they saw as a foreign invasion into their territory in 1914, although he fails to expand on where a supposed invasion

¹⁰ Hagemann, *Hermann Rauschnig*, 16

¹¹ Herbert S. Levine, *Hitler's Free City: A History of the Nazi Party in Danzig, 1925-39* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 48.

was taking place. He says: “It was the fear of one another, of growing power and armor of others; the worry that a long wait would change the situation and would aggravate the fact that the real, most favorable moment, to put the opponent in his place, has already been missed.”¹² Here, Rauschnig refers to the exchange of escalations between Britain, the world’s reigning empire, and an up-and-coming German Reich. He continues: “On the one side stood at the center of the continent an economically vigorous Germany and the Habsburg monarchy and on the other hand France and England, both of which sought to prevent the ripening of the same central European concentration of power.”¹³ Albrecht Hagemann’s biography includes Rauschnig’s reflections on his call to serve: “Like other young men in that situation, the war freed me before fate to become one of those of a problematic nature who could not be satisfied with anything. From then on, the war gave me the feeling of community of fate and of a nation which challenged a political consciousness that up until then had been completely absent in myself.”¹⁴ This quotation illustrates how Rauschnig’s conservative worldview originated in the political aftermath of the war and why nationalism played a part in motivating him both on the front lines and in the parliament halls.

Serving under his father as a lieutenant in the 8th Infantry Regiment of the German Imperial Army as an infantry officer, he suffered a near-fatal head wound and had to leave the front in October 1914. He returned to Thorn and married Anna Schwartz in a small ceremony in the village of Krumhübel (now Karpacz in Poland). He would later be stationed in Tilsit,

¹² Hagemann, *Hermann Rauschnig*, 23. Here, Hagemann is referring to a collection of passages by Rauschnig that was covered in an earlier biography titled *Hermann Rauschnig: Materialien und Beiträge zu einer politischen Biographie* by Jürgen Hensel and Pia Nordblom published in 2003.

¹³ Hagemann, *Hermann Rauschnig*, 23.

¹⁴ Hagemann, *Hermann Rauschnig*, 19.

Lithuania for the final years of the war.¹⁵ The couple had met in a musical conservatory in Berlin and their shared interest in music and agriculture brought them closer together during the war as they kept close correspondence.

An ardent conservative of the old German monarchic order, Hermann Rauschning held strong convictions regarding Germany's path forward after World War One. Following the armistice in November 1918, Rauschning enlisted in the paramilitary organization known as the *Freikorps* (Free Corps) as a border guard in West Prussia. The ranks of the *Freikorps* consisted of disillusioned former soldiers from the war who despised the mandates of the Treaty of Versailles and who wished to counter uprisings by nascent communist groups. The *Freikorps* became outraged the most at the Allies' "demands for a reduction of Reichswehr forces...since many rightists feared that fulfillment of this demand might expose Germany's eastern provinces to Bolshevik invasion."¹⁶ Rauschning viewed the *Freikorps* as a force that would protect its German way of life in West Prussia.

The combination of Germany's loss in the war and Danzig's precarious status radicalized the local populace, and it was not surprising that many joined political organizations that sought to overturn Germany's defeat. People sought avenues to vent their concerns, understand their frustrations, and find ways to elevate Germany to its pre-war status. Those who aligned with the DNVP desired a restoration of the monarchy and a complete transformation of the Treaty of Versailles. Hermann Beck's *The Fateful Alliance: German Conservatives and Nazis in 1933* gives a suitable summary of the DNVP, the party which Rauschning aligned with the most.

The DNVP was founded in November 1918 as a confluence of all prewar conservative political parties. Never before in German history since the founding of the first

¹⁵ Anna Rauschning, *No Retreat* (The Bobbs-Merrill Co, 1942), 74.

¹⁶ Hermann Beck, *The Fateful Alliance: German Conservatives and Nazis in 1933—The Machtergreifung in a new Light* (New York: Bergahn Books, 2008), 58.

conservative organizations in Prussia in the 1830s had conservatism, both as an ideology and a political organization, become more completely discredited than in the autumn of 1918, when the seemingly well-entrenched monarchical order that it represented collapsed without fanfare or resistance. All the groups that gathered under the roof of the new party were keenly aware of the painful fact that they were in opposition to the prevailing postwar *Zeitgeist*. Given that they had supported the old order, they were considered at least partially responsible for the unexpected military and political catastrophe of November 1918.¹⁷

Due to this undercurrent of blame foisted on the conservatives after the war, a period of fear, manipulation, and fiery rhetoric took hold in Weimar-era Germany. Initially, the DNVP was divided “between principled opposition to the Weimar Republic, on the one hand, and the desire for practical cooperation and participation in government coalitions on the other.”¹⁸ Because of this dichotomy, it was difficult for a reconciliation to occur between the DNVP and the supporters of the Weimar constitution. These feelings of resentment and betrayal were the foundation of what made the German conservatives seek alternative means of governance and increased cooperation with other political parties. In Danzig and the surrounding areas, this political radicalization combined with economic problems and frustration with the international arrangements related to the territory Germany lost after the war. In his study of Danzig, Herbert Levine notes that: “...the economy of the Free City had never been particularly healthy. It was dependent on the unstable Polish economy and vulnerable to discriminatory Polish economic policies, which were themselves the natural result of Danzig’s own efforts to retain its German character at whatever economic cost.”¹⁹ Unemployment was chronic in the free city and

¹⁷ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 31.

¹⁸ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 54.

¹⁹ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 37.

“considerable economic stress” was constant, making it a breeding ground for “anti-Polish German nationalism.”²⁰

Although Rauschning’s convictions regarding the fate of ethnic Germans in Prussia would not go away, he would have to find other avenues for change because the *Freikorps* officially disbanded in 1920. In 1920, he got a job at the library of the German minority in the former Prussian provinces of Posen and West Prussia. Posen and West Prussia were transferred to Poland as Poznan and Pomorze after the war. He used his job as a librarian and his work as an editor for the monthly German newspaper *Deutsche Blätter in Polen* to preserve a sense of heritage and cultural unity among the ethnic German population within Poland’s postwar borders. His occupation as a librarian helped him financially, but he started to nurture his own political ambitions. He saw his position as a librarian to be a temporary remedy to a longer-term problem that needed to be addressed: the economic fate of ethnic Germans in Poland.²¹

Although Germany’s renegotiation of the Dawes Plan in 1924 stabilized the German economy regarding reparations payments, ethnic Germans like Rauschning still faced many issues.

Rauschning’s passion irked the political leadership of the German minority in Posen as he frequently pursued revisionist propaganda “of an anti-Polish nature.”²² He decided to use that time to his advantage by fulfilling a long-held dream of becoming a farmer after settling on a small patch of land outside Danzig. After spending two years at his first farm, which he

²⁰ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 37.

²¹ Marek Andrzejewski “Hermann Rauschning: Biographische Skizze,” *Deutsch-polnische Begegnung zu Wissenschaft und Kultur, Schriftenreihe der Danziger Naturforschenden Gesellschaft*, xx, Vol. 10, 2001, pg. 2.

²² Andrzejewski, “Biographische Skizze,” 3.

considered a successful venture, he acquired a larger farm, Warnau, in the district Grosses Werder within Danzig's territory and managed it until 1929.²³

Economic woes afflicted the majority of the residents of the international area of Danzig even before World War One. Historian Herbert Levine explains that:

Rauschnig came into politics from the agrarian side. The farms of the Danzig area were known for their high quality of stock and dairy products, but even before 1914 the average indebtedness of Danzig farms was higher than anywhere else in Prussia. The dislocations caused by the creation of the free city, which forced Danzig farmers to compete with cheaper Polish products, depressed the area's agriculture beyond recovery, despite Reich efforts to find a remedy.²⁴

Based on Woodrow Wilson's Thirteenth Point, the Free City of Danzig was created after World War One at the Paris Peace Conference. The point stipulates that: "An independent Polish State should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant."²⁵ Poland's access to the sea was contingent on its acquisition of Danzig and other Prussian territories. The annexation of these territories made it difficult to adhere to the point's intention for the corridor to be "indisputably Polish," which only worsened feelings of discontent among everybody involved.

German conservatives fomented discontent with this situation by spreading misinformation and propaganda regarding the legitimacy of Versailles and Poland's generous acquisitions. Rauschnig, who was at this time garnering support among ethnic Germans in the recently reassigned district of Poznan, attempted to use that discontent to highlight Germany's

²³ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 47.

²⁴ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 48.

²⁵ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 9.

future conservative path. The League's refusal to allow Danzig's transfer to Poland satisfied David Lloyd George, Great Britain's Prime Minister, and Woodrow Wilson. They both agreed that Germany would never accept such a "flagrant violation" to the Fourteen Points on the grounds that border revisions affected Germans who had gone from living in Prussian to Polish territory.²⁶ As a compromise to the Polish and German delegations at the Paris Peace Conference, Danzig was to be an autonomous city supervised by the League of Nations.

Danzig, although an international entity by decree, continued to remain in the middle of disputes between Poland, Germany, and the League of Nations. To Germany, according to Herbert Levine, "the creation of the free city was part of a hypocritical dictated peace that ignored the principle of national self-determination whenever it might lead to advantages for Germany."²⁷ The Germans refused to acknowledge the declaration of the Polish corridor because they deemed it "economically and politically insupportable," especially if it involved the annexation of West Prussia, a heavily German area.²⁸ According to the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations fulfilled three functions in this area: "It was the guarantor of Danzig's constitution, the arbiter between Danzig and Poland, and the military protector of Danzig."²⁹ These three functions acted as a restraint to aggressive actions taken by other powers. The constitution was a hollow obstacle for those who sought to circumvent it. The League of Nations High Commissioner was in charge of mediating disputes from the League, Poland, Germany, as

²⁶ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 10.

²⁷ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 10.

²⁸ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 10-11.

²⁹ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 13.

well as Danzig and he had difficulties fully satisfying all parties most of the time. Rauschning and the high commissioner had that in common.

Rauschning had a busy year in 1931. He ran for elected office in the Agricultural League (*Landbund*) in his district of Grosses Werder, where the League advocated “ a program of liberalized trade regulations and increased exports.”³⁰ This made him popular among struggling farmers who needed his help selling their goods in regional and international markets. Due to the DNVP’s inability to solve the rural credit crises facing Danzig’s farmers, not to mention Rauschning’s distaste for fellow DNVP member Ernst Ziehm—then President of the Senate of Danzig—he joined the NSDAP as both a member and agricultural technical adviser in Danzig’s local Gau, an administrative district or region for the Nazis. Danzigers could not find a politically expedient path to alleviate their agricultural concerns completely, but the anti-Polish position that the NSDAP adopted attracted their attention. This signaled a major victory for the Nazis in Danzig, as they were able to garner much-needed support from farmers’ votes in the peripheral districts. Rauschning adhered to an organizational plan laid out by the Nazis’ chief agricultural specialist, Walther Darré.³¹ Darré sought to centralize the actions of the Gau’s technical advisors in Prussia to take over majority support of the rural vote. Rauschning’s popularity with the locals provided the National Socialists with an opportunity to nationalize the Agricultural League in February 1932 when he became its chairman in Danzig.

Danzig’s constitution mirrored that of the German city-state of Lübeck in particular and that of the Weimar Republic in general where the Volkstag (Popular Assembly) acted as the representative and legislative body. According to the constitution, the Volkstag chose the Senate

³⁰ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 48.

³¹ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 51.

which served as the executive branch of the government where there was a head of the government, but no head of state.³² However, the Danzig Volkstag had to go through the Polish government in every matter because Poland was responsible for approving acts of legislation. Still, Germany was able to circumvent Poland and cultivate a close relationship with Danzig's politicians, much to their annoyance.³³ One of the people responsible for maintaining close ties with politicians, regardless their political maneuverings, was Ernst Ziehm.

Ernst Ziehm was born in West Prussia in 1867. He resided in Danzig and served as administrator in the judicial office from 1905 until 1914 when he was appointed as the administrative director of the courts. After World War One, he resigned from his court posting and joined the DNVP. He then served as President of the Senate from 1931 to 1933 as the Nazis' power was solidifying in the region. Known as the Ziehm Senate, suggesting his substantial and influential role in the Free City's politics, he formed a coalition of the DNVP, the German Center Party, and the SPD because no party had a majority in the Senate. The coalition was not well received by the NSDAP in the Volkstag, but they did not have the votes at this time to contest it. Because of this, Ziehm's relationship with the local Nazis was strained and volatile, particularly with Albert Forster, the Nazis' Gauleiter in Danzig. Forster was twenty-three years old when he first joined the National Socialists in 1923. He climbed the Nazi ranks during the 1920s and he was known for his "fanaticism...his strong personal attachment to Hitler and his ability as a speaker."³⁴ After he visited Danzig in October 1930, Hermann Göring personally

³² Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 14.

³³ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 55.

³⁴ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 55. Forster was most notably known from working under the tutelage of Julius Streicher, who was then Gauleiter in Nuremberg. There, Forster "made himself especially useful in promoting the sale of Streicher's pornographic, anti-Semitic publication, *Der Stürmer*."

recommended to Hitler that Forster be appointed there to reorganize the Gau. This was the moment that Nazi propaganda labeled “‘the turning point’ in the history of the local party.”³⁵

Ziehm attempted to deport Forster, the Nazis’ front man in Danzig, accusing the publisher of the *Vorposten* of libel. National Socialist contingents tried to calm the situation down by advocating a coalition between the DNVP and NSDAP while quietly accusing Ziehm of collusion with Poland. Nazi officials wanted to acquire leading posts in the Danzig senate, but Ziehm’s administration strongly opposed to such an action. As a compromise, Ziehm sought to call for Volkstag elections on 28 May 1933 to allow for potential National Socialist senate seats while he could remain president.³⁶ The split between conservatives and Nazis, although they shared the same agenda in political goals, was apparent in the spectrum of radicalism, as seen among Ziehm, Rauschnig, and Forster. Ziehm was an old-guard conservative who was forced to cooperate with other parties to maintain relevance; Rauschnig was the moderate voice who sought to use Nazi mechanisms of power for realizing traditional conservative values in Danzig; and Forster served as the radical operator who needed a power base from traditional conservatives in order to usurp it for the Nazis’ revolutionary ends. Forster chose Rauschnig to be the Nazis’ representative because of his traction among rural voters and rather unproblematic history. This choice accomplished a few things. Firstly, it worked in Berlin’s favor because Rauschnig opposed any coalition with the DNVP in Danzig because of his relationship with Ziehm, with whom he had not gotten along since leaving the party in 1931. The animosity between the two only got worse because “‘the two men so disliked each other that they could not

³⁵ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 33.

³⁶ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 55.

even cooperate in 1935 when both belonged to the anti-Nazi opposition.”³⁷ Second, the Nazi backing of Rauschning validated the feelings of the German majority in the area to keep Danzig German while also reassuring those abroad that somebody reasonable was in control. Levine says: “Despite his history of activity on behalf of the German minority in Poland, Rauschning was able to make himself acceptable to Warsaw as a reasonable, sincere advocate of German-Polish understanding... he impressed the British with his manner and reminded them of ‘an old-fashioned English squire’ rather than a Nazi.”³⁸

Rauschning was in essence the perfect window dressing for the Nazi party in Danzig because he exhibited the characteristics of a leading party official who could be neutral when the situation called for it, much to the chagrin of Forster and Hitler. This would later prove to be Rauschning’s downfall. Levine notes: “Just as Rauschning acted as a front for Hitler, so he acted for Forster. When it was necessary to take unpopular steps toward cooperation with Poland, Rauschning assumed most of the responsibility, in effect shielding his Gauleiter from the righteous anger of disillusioned party members. In attempts to soften the edges of how Nazis were perceived abroad, it was Rauschning’s job to “meet the ideological program halfway” while “at the same time distorting it in a more moderate and less harmful direction.”³⁹ Rauschning catered to the moderate center while Forster took care of the radicalized elements who were not afraid of challenging the status quo. During the elections of 28 May 1933, the National Socialist vote won thirty-eight seats in the Danzig Volkstag, and 107,331 out of 214,128 votes cast, which accounted for a 50.03% majority.⁴⁰ Compared to the elections of 1930, the Nazis took home

³⁷ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 48.

³⁸ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 52.

³⁹ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 51.

⁴⁰ Levine, *Hitler’s Free City*, 54.

74,874 more votes, most of which came from those who broke ranks with the DNVP on ideological lines.⁴¹

After the 1933 electoral success, Hitler and Gauleiter Forster personally chose Rauschning to be the President of Free City of Danzig. Even though Danzig's foreign policy was administered through the Polish government, Berlin maintained close ties to the Free City through the German consul-general's office. Either through "open or hidden German subsidies," all of Danzig's foreign and domestic policy decisions remained in concert with the desires of those back in Berlin.⁴² This was readily apparent as the Volkstag frequently passed almost identical legislation as to what went through the Reichstag.

In his biographical portrait of Rauschning, Andrzejewski attributes his unique qualities as a political leader compared to his more narrowly focused colleagues Greiser and Forster. He says: "With his field of vision and his education he surpassed the later *Reichsstatthalter* (Reich Governor) and *Gauleiter*. He was not the stereotypical provincial politician who only carried out orders from above but saw the problems of Danzig in a broad context and surpassed many in his insight into political events."⁴³ His skills as mediator are apparent in one of Rauschning's premier accomplishments as President of the Senate of Danzig, forging an agreement between Danzig and Polish authorities on the use of the Danzig port. Supplementary benefits from the provisional agreement settled the treatment of Polish citizens within the city of Danzig, a major feat for the time, considering the tense relationship between both parties. "Nonetheless, he still ultimately served the best interest of Germany while some Poles saw benefit from his services,

⁴¹ Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 55.

⁴² Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, 15.

⁴³ Andrzejewski, "Hermann Rauschning: Biographische Skizze," 19.

speaking to his vaunted skill as mediator. Andrzejewski goes on: “It is true that he naturally treated these problems with special consideration of German interests, and in reality his aim was not a compromise with Poland but the subordination of its interests to the interests of the Third Reich.”⁴⁴

Rauschning sought to rise above Germany’s harsh rhetoric towards Jews in order to enhance Danzig’s economic interests by making the city seem a haven of moderation. Andrzejewski says: “Rauschning was not in favor of the ‘hard line’ against the Jewish population. He justified his position with the possibility of economic sanctions on the part of the Jewish trading spheres and was convinced that it was in the economic interests of the Free City of Danzig to inhibit anti-Semitic measures.”⁴⁵ This stand against Berlin regarding its policy on Jewish persecution showed that Rauschning’s rationale, although economically reasonable, would only alienate him from his party further. Hitler and the National Socialists did not need or want a reasonable policy platform aimed at legitimate reform with an educated elite advocating on their behalf. They needed someone who would fall in line, which they discovered Rauschning would not do.

Those within the Nazi hierarchy held various intellectual stances regarding the danger posed by Hitler and his henchmen. “Franz von Papen,” as Benjamin Carter Hett observes in *The Death of Democracy*, “had no line of his own and no actual goal because he simply assumed that the Nazis would eventually tone down their violence and that he and Hindenburg would continue to exert a moderating influence.”⁴⁶ Rauschning did not have this luxury. As the President of the

⁴⁴ Andrzejewski, “Hermann Rauschning: Biographische Skizze,” 22.

⁴⁵ Andrzejewski, “Hermann Rauschning: Biographische Skizze,” 24.

⁴⁶ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 214.

Senate in Danzig, he witnessed firsthand the misconduct exhibited by his party members when faced with economic issues that would eventually lead to his resignation and exile.

Precipitation of Exile, 1933-1934

Rauschning knew about and appreciated of the Nazis' desire to achieve *Gleichschaltung* in Danzig in 1933 and 1934. Because of the Free City's unique international position, Rauschning and League of Nations High Commissioner Sean Lester both believed that what the National Socialists desired to replace the government with a Nazi Party-led regime "was not possible in Danzig."⁴⁷ Lester pleaded with Rauschning in a series of confidential letters to continue governing through legitimate legal and administrative channels that conformed to the constitution.

Various memos written by Rauschning that may be found in *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945* show his misgivings with the Reich's indifference to Danzig's economic plight. The majority of the memos quoted below focus on the years 1933 and 1934. Fearing that "without a transfer of foreign currency from Germany and without assistance," Rauschning believed, "it would not be possible to balance the Danzig budget or maintain Danzig's economy and currency."⁴⁸ Rauschning strongly advocated the linkage of the Danzig Gulden to the British pound as a way to prop up the currency, but he knew that time was running out and Germany did not want to commit to the idea. If he were to avoid an economic crisis, he had to engage in subtle political maneuvering with multiple entities, including the League of Nations, Poland, and the Reich Chancellery.

⁴⁷ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945: Series C, The Third Reich First Phase—Volume III (June 14, 1934–March 31, 1935)*, from the Archives of the German Foreign Ministry. Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1959, No. 202.

⁴⁸ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*: No. 230.

Hitler and the Nazis chose to wait out Danzig's political and economic situation until the Nazis in Danzig gained a larger majority to amend the constitution. If the Nazis interfered too much, it would undermine their ultimate goal of installing a loyal puppet state to them and the last thing the Nazis wanted was to play into the League of Nations' hands.⁴⁹ In a memorandum in September 1934, Rauschnig explained that: "The balancing of the budget is not the only aspect in Danzig which should be considered, this could be achieved by measures of the economy, but there is also the lack of foreign exchange which used to reach Danzig from the Reich and which served as cover for the Danzig currency. The cover, which has already fallen from 93 percent to 68 percent, must automatically fall further if foreign exchange is not obtained from other quarters."⁵⁰ He warned that: "The threat to Danzig's currency is all the greater because the measures for providing employment are now affecting the foreign exchange situation. Danzig can only remain independent if her economy, especially her exports and her trade with third parties, become prosperous again. This is the third factor in Danzig's critical situation."⁵¹ The last measure that Rauschnig would accept to implement the saving of Danzig from international insolvency was to reduce the wages of workers, which could only be considered a temporary solution to a longer-term economic problem. He stated that "it would be

⁴⁹ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 224. According to this memo, intervention by the League of Nations "in some questions of the most vital importance," greatly relieved Danzig's situation and Germany did not want this. The demands of the Nazi party in Danzig was to carry out the aims of the Reich, specifically for an authoritarian state. This clashed sharply with the League of Nations High Commissioner, who sought to maintain the constitution as it was written. The memo goes further: "An amendment of the Constitution is theoretically possible by a two-thirds majority. Apart from the fact that such a majority could not be achieved by fresh elections at present, the League of Nations would in no circumstances give its approval to the amendment of the Constitution on National Socialist lines at the present time. It is possible that this may, at a later date, allow Danzig's policy to be steered in a new direction."

⁵⁰ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 224.

⁵¹ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 224.

very difficult to control the situation in Danzig if a decision were not made in good time.”⁵² One of the first suggestions he offered to Hitler and Foreign Minister Neurath included “subsidies from the German Reich, economies by Danzig, and, as a final point to be undertaken later, a devaluation of the Gulden by linking it with the [British] pound.”⁵³

However, Rauschning’s calls for aid went unheeded: “As a result of irresponsible talk and through careless remarks at a foreign exchange office from the Gauleiter—panic broke out in Danzig and led to considerable withdrawals of foreign currency and compelled both the Foreign Exchange Bank and the Government to deny in the strongest terms that any devaluation was contemplated.”⁵⁴ With this, the shallow faith in the Danzig Gulden evaporated along with the hopes of linkage to the pound, thus cementing the Free City’s economic circumstances. After disavowing devaluation, the only option to ease Danzig’s pain was to reduce wages and salaries. Germany’s indifference to the crisis and the League of Nations’ negligence directly contributed to Rauschning’s resignation. Rauschning’s frustrations come to the surface in a memo, dated September 29, 1934:

It is necessary to point out that conditions in Danzig are not comparable with those in any similar town in the Reich. It is utterly intolerable both for the Constitution and for the safe execution of policy that elements having no authority whatsoever under constitutional law should, in fact, dictatorially determine policy, whilst another person, with no other resources than that of appeals to reason, must bear the whole responsibility for its enforcement. Any discussion of the above-mentioned problems must obviously exclude the idea that the Party and the National Socialist Government could possibly represent different political aims. It is quite conceivable that, up to a point, several cooks should share in making the broth.⁵⁵

⁵² *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, No. 225.

⁵³ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, No. 225.

⁵⁴ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, No. 225.

⁵⁵ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, No. 224.

The “elements having no authority” referred to Germany as it played a balancing act with Danzig’s situation. Although he had no authority to intervene, Hitler placed faith in Forster to manipulate Rauschning concerning those who dissented against the Reich’s policies. Rauschning does not go into detail here on what he referred to as dictatorial policy decisions, but based on corroborating sources, Forster told Rauschning to arrest Catholic priests for subversion.⁵⁶ He was dealing with a sympathetic, yet distanced, international community from which he repeatedly unsuccessfully appealed for economic assistance. Mr. Macdonald’s government in Great Britain offered little more than platitudes while Danzig’s government suffered from outside meddling to the point of manipulation. Rauschning offers more in the same memo:

In Danzig, on the other hand, the Gauleitung, having abandoned the programme laid down in July, have created such a confusion of wishful thinking and alarmist rumors, as a result of their constant and irresponsible gossip on the most confidential questions, that an absolutely clear and binding statement concerning policy on the most pressing of Danzig’s problems, that is its economic existence, is not necessary and, in fact, extremely urgent. Danzig is faced with the problem of selling her agricultural produce on the world market instead of in the Reich, a problem which becomes daily more difficult to solve.⁵⁷

Such remarks make it safe to assume that Rauschning’s political tenure was nearing its end. Elected by his constituents, he stayed in his post to serve their needs at the expense of his reputation in Nazi circles. His fall from office proved to be more and more imminent as Rauschning’s calls for aid went unanswered by both the League of Nations and Berlin. Tensions seem to have reached a boiling point by September 29, 1934. Rauschning wrote to German Foreign Minister Neurath, who forwarded Rauschning’s words to the Führer:

⁵⁶ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 21. Danzig’s economic situation prompted Rauschning’s recommendation that “other parties share in responsibility,” but this was not met well by Forster. Instead, he demanded that Rauschning violate Danzig’s constitution by using “the powers of the state in the suppression of the remaining parties.”

⁵⁷ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 225.

Altogether there is such a lack of direction and, in consequence, such utter confusion here, especially as to whose leadership in economic and general policy is to be followed, that the most serious convulsion must be expected. A continuation of these chaotic conditions resulting from undefined powers, added to a policy of improvisation and vague hopes, must not only put the very survival of Danzig in doubt, but must also destroy the National Socialist Movement in Danzig, which may at any time have to stand the test of an election ordered by the Council of the League of Nations.⁵⁸

Rauschning's chief complaints were that German interference and League indifference meant he could not solve Danzig's economic crisis; and that the National Socialist hierarchy refused to effect reforms that could have provided economic stability in the Free City. Instead, the office of Gauleiter Forster, which was considered by Rauschning, Poland, and the League of Nations as illegal, bullied local leaders and officials into committing acts of violence against Catholic priests and Jews.⁵⁹

Rauschning later claimed that Forster had demanded of me the open infringement of the statute by arresting certain Catholic priests, interning a Jewish journalist whose newspaper had been prohibited in violation of the statute, and breaking up and prohibiting the Social Democratic party [in Danzig].⁶⁰ Aside from the commission of such acts, Forster and the local party leaders continued to impress upon Rauschning and the Senate ideological instead of practicable goals for the maintenance of Danzig "in an entirely baseless policy of hope."⁶¹ The policy to which Rauschning refers revolves around the need for Danzig to compete with the sterling bloc because it would positively affect the city's wage rates. Instead, Forster and his officials made "public statements which were completely incompatible with this view" and chose to do nothing.⁶² Such

⁵⁸ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, No 224.

⁵⁹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 19.

⁶⁰ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 25.

⁶¹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 34.

⁶² Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 19.

hollow promises based on ideology only made matters worse as the time for Rauschning's resignation drew nearer.

The overall tone displayed in these messages illustrated Rauschning's desperation, and the Reich's dismissive stance towards any aid packages precipitated his resignation. In *The Conservative Revolution*, he speaks of the "personal tragedies and inner conflicts" some men experienced when faced with enacting Nazi policy.⁶³ In the following passage, he says: "Men have been waiting, drawn and tense, for eight years [the time between his resignation and his writing *The Conservative Revolution*] for the moment when they will be able to fill their posts more worthily than in that long period. I am not so sure today as I was six years ago that I was right in resigning. It was, indeed, that conflict of loyalties that led me to demand a formal vote of censure from the party and not to resign of my own accord."⁶⁴

Rauschning's memoranda and books contain a resigned sense of duty in the face of oppression. The time from Rauschning's pleas for economic help to his resignation proved to be brief. The correspondence suggests that it took only four to five months. While in contact with the Reich's Foreign Minister Neurath and Gauleiter Forster, Rauschning sent an official letter to Hitler, asking for assistance. He wrote:

My Führer: On October 5, the Gauleiter of Danzig, Herr Staatsrat Forster demanded, through the Deputy Gauleiter and Vice President of the Senate Greiser, that I resign forthwith my post as President of the Senate in Danzig. In the interests of the party he desired a solution through my voluntary retirement on grounds of ill-health...I consider it to be my duty, however, in view of Danzig's difficult position with regard to both foreign policy and domestic affairs and the inevitable loss of confidence which my resignation would cause...Consequently I cannot announce my resignation without your explicit approval...In view of the circumstances, your decision might be of quite exceptional

⁶³ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 10.

⁶⁴ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 10.

importance not merely for the settlement of a clash of personalities but also for the survival of Danzig.⁶⁵

Back in Berlin, Hitler dragged his feet because of the complicated geopolitical ramifications which would arise directly from the decisions he made regarding Danzig. As stated in a memorandum from Foreign Minister Neurath to Rauschning dated October 11, 1934, Hitler's response was predictable given the situation: "He [Hitler] refused to take the decision requested by Rauschning as to whether or not he should continue in his office of President of the Senate. If he were to do so, he would be guilty of intervention in sovereign territory not under his control."⁶⁶ This is an ironic decision made by the Führer regarding the illegal intervention into a sovereign territory considering the build-up of military materiel in the Free City he had overseen for years.

A memorandum by the Consul General in Danzig dated November 7, 1934 provided a positive appraisal of Rauschning's abilities from High Commissioner Lester. He says: "He [Lester] had observed with special satisfaction that President Rauschning possessed a very subtle understanding for Danzig's particularly difficult situation, which he—the High Commissioner—himself in no way failed to appreciate. Thanks to Rauschning's cooperation, it had always been possible for him, up to the present, to smooth out complaints concerning alleged violations of the Constitution, so that it had not been necessary to invoke the Council of the League of Nations."⁶⁷ At the least, Lester's claim regarding the alleged violations of the constitution is problematic because of the overt sovereignty violations by the Nazis over the years. Rauschning did play a large part in assuring that these violations did not turn into international scandals. However, that

⁶⁵ Rauschning to Hitler, October 8, 1934, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, No 236.

⁶⁶ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 243.

⁶⁷ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 308.

should not excuse the allied policies of appeasement. Had a more aggressive stance been taken by the League of Nations in Danzig, especially regarding the military build-up, Rauschning's role as the mediator would not have been so crucial.

Neurath, Hitler's Foreign Minister, reminded the Führer of the matter's delicacy. Neurath said: "I pointed out to the Führer that if a vote of no-confidence against Rauschning were passed by his own party, this would present a grotesque picture and would also detract from the position of the future President of the Senate if he were a National Socialist."⁶⁸ Reiterating this decision, albeit, in a more subdued tone, Hitler requested that Neurath inform Rauschning that even though "he neither could nor would keep him...he wished the matter to be settled without any scandal."⁶⁹ Throughout the exchange of memoranda, Rauschning made no effort to hide his contempt for Hitler but still chose to exercise caution when addressing his Nazi colleagues. No matter how precarious the geopolitics of Danzig, Lester observed, Rauschning's ability to maintain the status quo and avoid catastrophe was commendable. However, Rauschning was fighting a losing battle with little hope of winning in the long run. He needed a financial bailout to avoid economic conditions that would adversely affect those who had elected him. Still, the League of Nations, Poland, and the Nazi bureaucracy all refused to act for fear of provoking an international incident. In a memo dated November 22, 1934, thirty-eight members of parliament approved of ousting Rauschning by effecting his formal removal rather than just requesting that he resign. The message reads: "To Herr Dr. Rauschning—The assembly fraction of the NSDAP as the statutorily competent corporate body of the party, expresses to the President of the Senate, Dr. Rauschning, its lack of confidence because the fraction regards the

⁶⁸ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 243.

⁶⁹ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 243.

continuance of Dr. Rauschning in the Senate as insupportable for the good of the Free State.”⁷⁰

Rauschning responded to this cold letter: “I acknowledge the receipt of your communication of 23. XI. Thereupon I have today declared my resignation. I enclose a copy of the communication sent to the Assembly.”⁷¹ However flawed his logic may have been or however verbose his defense of joining the Nazis, this much is clear: what was suitable for the people of Danzig was never anything less than a top priority in his mind. His press release to the public detailing his resignation makes this apparent, dated 23 November 1934:

Special considerations have led me to lay down my office as President of the Free State of Danzig, as from today. In bidding farewell to the population of Danzig, I appeal to the population, in the spirit in which I tried to conduct my office, that everyone may realize his joining responsibility for the great community and may set the petty individual interest in the background. I express firm confidence that Danzig’s population will come together in the State of Danzig more and more in an indissoluble community of destiny. My departure will alter nothing in our great aims.⁷²

Once Rauschning resigned, word spread to the non-Nazi bureaucrats in Berlin, who also censured him, but for different reasons. Speaking on this in *The Conservative Revolution*, Rauschning writes:

They condemned it as a sort of desertion of the colors. Everybody, they argued, who had any intelligence and ability was duty bound to remain at his post. The time was coming when everything would depend on the actual man at each particular post. That time would come when Nazism had played itself out and leadership was needed in a rational and really constructive German policy. No one was entitled to think of himself, his honor, or her personal conscience. The whole future of that nation depended on as many key positions as possible being in the hands, not of party creatures, but of men of independence.⁷³

⁷⁰ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 28.

⁷¹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 28.

⁷² Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 30-1.

⁷³ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 11.

Such actors were unfortunately rare and failed to engage in any meaningful activity which would have slowed the advance of the Nazis, even though they vocally reprimanded Rauschning. The “large section of officials,” Rauschning believed, feared they would fall out of favor with the party, and, as consequence, their squeamishness “has led to toadyism, servility, and lack of character.”⁷⁴ As a result, Rauschning should receive at least some credit for choosing to leave such a government when a majority of the party feared doing so and when a minority understood his motivations, but still censured him for it.

⁷⁴ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 13.

Chapter Three: Voice of Warning

Rauschning spent a great deal of energy in attempting to warn the world about National Socialist aggression. He took part, at least peripherally, in Nazism's rise and saw firsthand the violence, chaos, and planning behind 1933. Rauschning needed to show that Hitler was manipulating an entire country, but that would be difficult considering the lengths to which Europe and the United States would go to ignore or appease him. Isolationism and appeasement trickled through the halls of government throughout Western Europe during the 1930s as public officials witnessed the trajectory of National Socialism. Rauschning proved to those who read his books that his warnings of specific plans by Hitler were coming true years after he wrote them. In *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West* Rauschning tried to warn Western Europe and the United States against heeding the voice of Hitler and the Nazis. In the book's preface, he argued that events were proving his predictions correct: "That [the book's] prognosis was well-founded is shown by the fact that, though it was written mainly in the winter of 1937-38, and published shortly after the annexation of the Sudeten territory, it has not been contradicted by subsequent events in a single point. The pogroms of the winter of 1938 took place as forecast; the developments in foreign policy up to the occupation of Prague are along the lines anticipated in these pages."⁷⁵

Rauschning witnessed firsthand that Danzig was violating international agreements by mobilizing an illegal military which was sponsored by Hitler. He wrote for *The Spectator* in 1939:

Danzig, which under its statute, can have no army, merely a police force, is at present in possession of everything in the way of arms and ammunition that can be utilized for the

⁷⁵ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, viii.

purposes of military defense or for a *Putsch*—tanks, shells, heavy artillery, flame-throwers, infantry and other artillery. For years the National Socialist Senate of Danzig, pursuing its action under the very eyes of the League of Nations Commissioner in Danzig, has compelled the young people of the City, in defiance of the Constitution, to perform their military service in Germany.⁷⁶

Rauschning's observations confirm that he saw Hitler as improperly intervening in Danzig because he never recognized the legitimacy of the Free City's international agreements. "The eyes of the world," Rauschning wrote, "are fixed upon Danzig, but the population of this State is not authorized to raise its voice."⁷⁷ In the article in *The Spectator*, Rauschning makes clear his contempt for the situation: "It [Danzig] has to tolerate the circumstance that a country bumpkin of obscure origin can dare to issue proclamations in its name which it does not approve."⁷⁸ The League of Nations High Commissioner Sean Lester, whom Rauschning called a good friend, knew of the violations and the Sisyphean battle which the President of the Free City was fighting with Berlin.

In an article in for *Foreign Affairs* in 1939, Rauschning warned his readers about the aimless, yet destructive path that Hitler was taking Germany. He argued that many public officials had stayed in place as a breakwater of sorts instead of resigning on principle. However, much like he himself, their presence did not stop the political machinery of the Nazi elite. He had stayed in his post in Danzig long enough to try to stop the Nazi machinery, but not long enough to show that his effort was not likely to succeed. That is why he wanted to warn the world. He said:

Many important holders of public office felt, of course, that it was impossible to reconcile the Party's unscrupulous conduct with their individual consciences and that it was their

⁷⁶ Hermann Rauschning, "The Danger at Danzig," *The Spectator*, May 26, 1939, 893.

⁷⁷ Rauschning, "The Danger at Danzig," 894.

⁷⁸ Rauschning, "The Danger at Danzig," 894.

duty to resign. They were reminded that to do so would only strengthen the new movement and intensify its extremist character. They were told that rather it was their duty to hold their positions as long as possible, in order to gradually weed out the ‘catastrophe makers,’ or, at the worst, to serve as brakes on ‘the plunge into catastrophe.’⁷⁹

That, he claimed, was why he chose to stay in his position of authority in Danzig during a time when he was getting sidestepped by Forster, Neurath and Hitler. Doing so gave him a higher chance to mitigate the risks associated with Berlin’s aims for the Free City. However, he had come to realize that, as he wrote in almost all of his works about the dangers of Nazism, nothing could stand in the way of the Germany’s revolution. Rauschning’s ultimate work was *Hitler Speaks*, detailing Hitler’s private conversations with the author from 1932 through 1934. Rauschning had gone from Danzig to Berlin to discuss issues pertaining to the Free City, and he was treated to Hitler’s ruminations about how he would return Germany to its rightful place on the world stage. The chronology here is vital because it connects what Hitler discussed privately with Rauschning in 1934 about issues that were currently going on five years later in 1939. Czechoslovakia had just been dismembered before Rauschning published *Hitler Speaks* and during the moment when Germany had invaded Poland. Events in the late 1930s corresponded to the content of the diatribes Rauschning claimed Hitler would subject him to while he, “paced the room in great excitement.”⁸⁰

A review of *Hitler Speaks (The Voice of Destruction)* in the *New York Times*, captured the prescience of Rauschning’s warning:

If his former book [*The Revolution of Nihilism*] was frightening, this one is hair-raising. It has all the stabbing terror of a nightmare. Dark shapes and evil ideas stalk through its pages; and it is more than a bad dream, for much of it has come true in blood and tears. Hitler talked to Rauschning of colonizing Bohemia and Moravia with German peasants

⁷⁹ Hermann Rauschning, “Hitler Could Not Stop,” *Foreign Affairs* 18, no. 1 (October 1939): 3.

⁸⁰ Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks*, 128.

and transporting the Czechs to Russia; they are being transported from their homeland now...Hitler told his incredulous guest...“If I can send the flower of the German nation into the hell of war without the smallest pity, then surely I have the right to remove millions of an inferior race that breeds like vermin.” The depopulation of Poland, by murder and mass separation, is going on before our eyes.⁸¹

After the invasion of the Soviet Union, Rauschning described to a Western audience Hitler’s ambitions as limitless. He declared: “Yes, it is true that Hitler means to rule the world, to lift all Germans to be superior to all other peoples. It is for that the Germans fight. But at the same time he would make the Germans superior he sees them and all men as no more than beasts, requiring over them the strong hand, the control, that is required for beasts.”⁸²

Rauschning claimed that it was not about seeking revenge for getting shunned from the party as a pariah. Events of which he warned the world directly affected the legacy he attempted to leave behind for his family, friends, and constituents back in Danzig. It was about taking the façade off what people thought National Socialism to be and showing what it really was: a power-hungry machine bent on railroading the good intentions of those who sought meaningful change for Germany after World War One and the consequences of allowing their rise. Those outside Germany did not and could not know the full picture, which is why Rauschning’s voice of warning mattered so much. It cost him his reputation among his small circle of émigrés, nearly bankrupted him, and put his life in danger to get the word out on the perils that Nazism presented to the world. But the cost of not warning the public was even greater.

⁸¹ Ferdinand Kuhn Jr., “Hermann Rauschning’s Talks with Hitler,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1940.

⁸² Robert van Gelder, “An Interview with Dr. Hermann Rauschning: The Author of ‘*The Voice of Destruction*’ Talks of Hitler and His Aides,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1941, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1941/11/09/105407350.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0 (accessed 14 January 2022).

Chapter Four: Theoretician of Conservatism and Nazism

Rauschning's works serves as an entry into the historiography focused on Nazism. He exemplified members of the conservative elites who tried associating themselves with the rising party to attain influence and hold onto that power as long as possible. He believed that German conservatism had been losing in power and status since the 1890s after Bismarck had been removed from power. Following World War One, political competition during the Weimar Republic caused the conservatives' position to become even more precarious. Rauschning saw the DNVP's influence diminishing and turned to Nazism for its nationalist energy in hopes that it could revive his idea of conservatism. Ultimately, this failed. Conservatives lacked the creativity and willpower to effectively counter the power of the National Socialist machinery. Rauschning defended his joining the Nazis in 1931 because it made strategic sense to do so at the time. However, Rauschning soon realized that the NSDAP was not interested in working with him on governing the people of Danzig and by 1934, he had been in their way long enough.

What was wrong with conservatism from the 1890s to the 1920s?

Rauschning's goal was to show how those with the best intentions for Germany, especially the conservative elite, attempted in vain to create a country stronger than it had been in the last war. He shows his readers what happened instead, showing his own concern over the perils of Nazism that he learned too late. In *The Conservative Revolution*, he explained why he and many other conservatives joined the National Socialists and why, in hindsight, he still felt the reasons for joining had been just. He makes it clear that working with the NSDAP was a necessity when it came to realizing post-war visions of a united conservative Germany. The events of 1928-30 in Germany made matters more problematic when the SPD formed a majority

coalition government. Conservative political rhetoric adopted dire tones, and violent clashes among protesters and “criminals,” a loose term, mainly referring to Communists, became commonplace. In short, during this time, bitter divisions tore German society apart.⁸³

Rauschning was embroiled in the DNVP’s desperate effort to create political alliances that would return it to power and relevance. Danzig’s economic situation continued to get worse throughout the last third of the 1920s. Members of the DNVP were losing parliamentary seats to the National Socialists. Hitler's party also required the cooperation of the DNVP in 1931 to ensure a majority was met in Berlin. Because of this conundrum, leaders in both political camps believed that they had more power than they did, particularly those within the conservative hierarchy. Rauschning's rationalizations in *The Conservative Revolution* spoke for quite a few people who experienced this issue. He claimed: “It is not true that we wanted to get rid of the democratic basis of our political life. What we wanted was to discover a form of democratic existence that met our needs...Never did the overwhelming majority of us envisage anything but, at worst, a temporary period of interim dictatorship until a new constitutional state could be set up.”⁸⁴ However, Rauschning saw the suspension of law and order become permanent. This was the impetus for his publications on the perils of Nazi power in attempts to warn the world of its dangerous implications, even though he went along with such conditions in the meantime. Germany’s defeat caused a fracture among conservative groups which needed to be repaired, but doing so was almost impossible in the Weimar era. Conservative infighting undermined existing groups and many desperate conservatives.

⁸³ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 65.

⁸⁴ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, xiii.

The crisis did not limit itself to politics, as the “re-Christianization” of Germany exacted a similar toll in the Weimar era.⁸⁵ Rauschnig and other conservatives asserted that the church had too much power, especially when church officials preached for a separation of religious and political spheres of influence. He spoke of his and other conservatives’ idea for religious reform in a post-war society inspired not by traditional Christian motives, but by a concern about a “lack of an ethical basis” in the state.⁸⁶ The relationship between Protestants and the church during Weimar became a strong focal point in German historiography concerning the DNVP’s decision to form a coalition with the Nazis. Jones’ *The German Right* goes into this: “German Protestants, like most conservatives, were both ‘shocked’ and devastated by the outcome of the war. They had invested themselves so heavily in the conflict and its outcome, identifying ‘the German cause with the will of God’ to the point that ‘a German victory was made to seem virtually the fulfilment of divine righteousness.’”⁸⁷ After the war, politicians sought to keep voters attracted so that they would not transfer to other parties. Most Protestants were in the middle class, and they tended to take a nationalist and conservative line, making it clear to the Socialists that votes could not be secured on that front. This reflects what Hett describes as “political confessionalization.”⁸⁸ He expanded on this term: “...people are often conditioned into voting as they do by the influence of their social surroundings: by their neighbors, colleagues, churches, clubs, newspapers, and other media. Once political confessionalization has taken hold, voters are deeply resistant to changing their preferences.”⁸⁹ The Protestant camp of

⁸⁵ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 257.

⁸⁶ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 257.

⁸⁷ Jones, *The German Right*, 249.

⁸⁸ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 66.

⁸⁹ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 66.

voters represented the biggest opportunity for the conservative party to regain traction in the late 1920s because, as Hett describes it in *The Death of Democracy*, most Germans stuck to a general political camp. Because most Protestants also had conservative values that matched those of the DNVP, it was the most efficient way to garner support. Hett expands on confessionalization, saying that German voting patterns mainly existed in three camps: "...the socialist camp (basically made up of the Social Democrats and the Communists), the Catholic camp (the Center Party and its Bavarian sister, the Bavarian People's Party); and the Protestant middle-class camp (consisting of the conservative German Nationals, the liberal German Democratic Party, and various fringe groups like the Small Business Party.)"⁹⁰

To Rauschning and other traditionalists, Christian society, particularly the Evangelical Church, could not be reconciled with the laws of the state because they conflicted with each other. He said: "The state, we were told, is essentially evil. It obeys its own laws. It can never be Christian... We must never try to combine the two. If we do we shall arrive at the absolute confusion amid which man goes to his fall."⁹¹ This position of the church made it clear to Rauschning that his calls for religious reform while Hitler was in power was justified.⁹² He explained that: "This division of the indivisible life seemed to us absurd and one of the sources of nihilism. How could there be any rebirth of our society and civilization without the all-important help of the Christian element?"⁹³

⁹⁰ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 67.

⁹¹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 257-8.

⁹² Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 257.

⁹³ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 258.

It is interesting that Rauschning called out religious institutions in Germany as at least partially responsible for the disarray in Weimar because it illustrates how even divergent the church and state had become. The rebirth he mentions to a rebirth of Weimar society in which a renewal of commitment to Christianity could enable conservatives to reconcile church and state and ensure their coexistence. Most German Christians were Protestant and aligned with conservative ideals, making Nazi ideology more palatable.⁹⁴ Because of this, the Protestants within the National Socialist movement shared a common goal. Protestants and Nazis shared a distaste for Weimar, a hatred for Versailles, and a desire for more authoritarian rule. However, the break between these two groups was caused by the Nazis' aggressive policies, racist attitude towards Jews, and the Nazis' expectation of the overall subservience of the Church to the state. As a politician, Rauschning represented both camps as a God-fearing man and as an elected representative. He believed that: "Re-Christianization cannot be enforced, either outwardly or inwardly—not even outwardly, because this, with no inner reality, would be the deepest of all perdition. Thus there is one element in the Nazi despotism that I welcome as providential—its anti-Christian persecutions."⁹⁵ Given Rauschning's Protestant background, these are especially powerful words. He saw how restrictive institutional religion was in Germany, and he condoned attacks on it as a sort of necessary divine intervention for a return to proper Christianity. This also shows what was at stake for Rauschning and other conservatives after World War One and what they were willing to do to change the status quo. He and the conservatives agreed with the average German Protestant on the dangers posed to Germany by Versailles and Weimar. Their

⁹⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, "German Churches and the Nazi State," 2022. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-german-churches-and-the-nazi-state>. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, two-thirds of all German Christians in 1933 were Protestants, or forty million members. One-third were Catholic, totaling twenty million members.

⁹⁵ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 254.

problem lay with the institution of religion. Because of that, they saw a chance to persuade their conservative ideology by riding on the coattails of Nazism's popularity. By doing so, they would have the freedom to reform and restructure German Evangelicalism in Germany, a problem deemed just as dire to the fate of the country as the Weimar government's failures. Religious institutions wanted parishioners to stay out of political matters to lead a reformed life, but those same parishioners felt the same resentment towards Weimar and Versailles as the conservatives did.

Rauschnig struck a pensive tone as he described how the conservatives lost all chances of salvaging the political situation in Weimar when they left his goal behind them completely. Instead, they were concerned only with countering the effects of radical left-wingers, which was accomplished with, as Rauschnig would describe it, a "nihilist" revolution brought forth by the National Socialists. The elites who subordinated their own ideologies for the sake of backing the Nazis could never regain the power that they had traditionally enjoyed. When the conservatives figured out that the Nazis wanted the government to be centralized in structure and authoritarian in rule, those in the German right attempted to prevent the Nazi elite from becoming the only elite in Germany.⁹⁶ National Socialists quashed the German Right's expectations of cooperation, but that did not stop them from joining the party's ranks to exact their political revolution. They overlooked their menial role as the party's scapegoat in the hope of returning attention back toward their broader conservative goals. Rauschnig explains most German conservatives of the DNVP who allied with Nazism wanted: "Tradition instead of radicalism, continuity instead of a rationally worked-out fresh start. Evolution instead of revolution."⁹⁷ They hoped for a society

⁹⁶ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 196.

⁹⁷ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 197.

based on: “Personal initiative instead of tutelage. The individual instead of the collective. Property instead of independence on incomes drawn from the state. A Christian basis instead of that of the 'enlightenment' of rationalism.”⁹⁸

Rauschning's chief concern revolved around free enterprise and limited government interference in Danzig, so it makes sense that his beliefs correlated with those espoused by the DNVP. However, as the political polarization of Weimar worsened, it was apparent to Rauschning, and to other notables in the party that the nihilist ideology espoused by the Nazis would supersede theirs. Because of this, they acquiesced to the demands of the National Socialists. However, none of this should shift accountability solely to the rising power of the Nazi party. “Many Conservatives,” Rauschning wrote in *The Revolution of Nihilism*, “who had become spiritually homeless found their way into the ranks of National Socialism, from the very best of motives and in perfect good faith. They certainly did not do so for the sake of its program, which was all too plainly a mixture of inconsistencies and simple nonsense.”⁹⁹ Considering the ambitious desires of those on the conservative right, including Rauschning, one can more easily understand that it was easier for those who wanted power to attain it while aligned with the Nazis.

Rauschning's Analysis of Conservatism and National Socialism

Most political parties took on a nationalist undertone including the conservatives with whom Rauschning aligned after World War One. He idolized the conservative Germany that was created under the iron and rye concepts during Bismarck's tenure as chancellor and sought

⁹⁸ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 197.

⁹⁹ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 112.

to return the fatherland to its glory. However, he said that “German conservatism had been decaying and degenerating since the middle of the nineteenth century” and to come back from that, conservatives would require reform.¹⁰⁰ The conservatives’ shift in thinking embraced industry and agriculture through various movements while seeking to limit the more liberal agendas of a bourgeois system. Distinguished historian Fritz Stern explains the thinking of the German right at this time: “[The German right’s] followers sought to destroy the despised present [1919] in order to recapture an idealized past in an imaginary future.”¹⁰¹

Rauschning’s idea of conservatism revolved around a decentralized government where private interests could use their discretion rather than be subjected to a more centralized oversight. He gave further details:

We must hold to the things that have made up our Western civilization. Our solution will therefore remain within the lines of our tradition. This implies among other things the retention of private ownership and of the economic system based on private profit. Politically it implies the retention of the nation’s individualist standards, not their abolition. The most that it implies is a limitation of their scope. It implies a social order that has not been purchased at the price of the abandonment of each individual’s freedom or of his sphere of private existence.¹⁰²

He sought to implement traditional forms of conservative democracy into post-war Danzig. His core beliefs surrounding conservatism seemed antiquated in Weimar as he approached policy with a civility not seen much anymore. As with most other conservatives inside the DNVP, he believed that joining forces with the Nazis would give the conservatives popular support while also tempering their rhetoric. With Danzig in mind specifically, he had

¹⁰⁰ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 100.

¹⁰¹ Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 8.

¹⁰² Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 37.

three problems that he wished to solve using his form of conservatism: “The ending of unemployment and the provision of security from want. That means a new social order; The prevention of economic crises. That means changes in the existing economic order; The overcoming of national rivalries and the provision of security from wars. That means a new supernational political order.”¹⁰³ Rauschning’s role as a conservative in Danzig was a unique one due to the city’s international status governed by the League of Nations. His policies focused on a more internationalist perspective, which was more typical of someone aligned with the left. On the other hand, a majority of conservatives and National Socialists tended to resist the kind of globalization Rauschning dealt with in Danzig.¹⁰⁴ Rauschning enlisted Great Britain, the Soviet Union and Poland for economic assistance. However, no country wanted to disrupt Danzig’s constitution that had been established by the League of Nations. As the political situation worsened throughout the 1920s, Nazism provided Rauschning another option, and he took it.

Following the First World War, it was common for German political parties to engage the public using heated and emotional rhetoric. As early as 1918, Germany’s loss in the war caused left-wing, right-wing, and independent parties to use the model of the Russian revolution to revolutionize their own bases. One group that pressed a more radical agenda was the “A Greater Berlin Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council” who overtook the SPD’s coalition on a more Bolshevik platform, much to the traditional party leadership’s ire.¹⁰⁵ Voters on the conservative side of the political spectrum became angry at their political associates whom they believed were losing

¹⁰³ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 35.

¹⁰⁴ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 114.

¹⁰⁵ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 23.

ground politically and culturally.¹⁰⁶ At the time, this was common among members of the German intellectual right, who actively sought means to limit the effects of what they saw as a betrayal in the Treaty of Versailles and the rise of bolshevism. Rauschnig and those in his party recognized that they represented an outdated ideology in the postwar period and sought ways to maintain relevance. The party of the masses had now arrived where emotions superseded reason. He noted: “We are all revolutionaries when we are young. The young are won by speaking a language that articulates great emotions, movement, passion, sacrifice, and great ideas... There are hundreds of thousands full of good will, of passionate devotion. That is political capital that must not be squandered, it must be got into the right hands.”¹⁰⁷ Here Rauschnig asserted that the traditional conservative order in Germany was hanging on by a thread.

The relationship between the conservative party and government disillusioned many among the rank and file of the DNVP. Hermann Beck’s *The Fateful Alliance: German Conservatives and Nazis in 1933* identifies three distinct phases in the relationship between party and government. The first phase revolved around an “uncompromising opposition” to Weimar before 1924 with “tentative signs” of reluctant cooperation.¹⁰⁸ Beck’s second phase detailed the DNVP’s participation in coalition governments during their “most politically successful period” between 1924 and 1928.¹⁰⁹ The final phase concluded with the DNVP’s rising contempt toward the Weimar Republic after Alfred Hugenberg rose to power in 1928.¹¹⁰ It was typical for German conservatives, alienated by postwar feelings of political isolation, to seek practical

¹⁰⁶ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 28.

¹⁰⁷ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 39.

¹⁰⁸ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 55.

¹⁰⁹ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 55.

¹¹⁰ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 55.

change through the use of coalitions. However, the radicalization of politics throughout the Weimar era forced the traditionalists' hand; in essence, they had to go along with the changes or step aside. Rauschnig contended:

A Conservative leadership of really outstanding quality, not merely one of tactical shrewdness, might have discovered lines of a bold constructive policy. Men capable of such leadership were available...From the earliest days of the Weimar Republic, the actual leadership of the German National Party had abandoned true constructive conservatism for a reactionary determination to carry out a *coup d'état*, as the only radically effective resource."¹¹¹

In Beck's framework, this could be characterized as phase one of the DNVP's relationship between party and government. Although their implicit backing of coups dated back to the early 1920s, politicians within the party as well as Rauschnig recognized the necessity to which radicalism afforded their cause and reluctantly went along with it. Of course, this rationalization of violence and revolution as a justifiable means to an end might seem arbitrary and overly simplistic. Feeling compelled to act in a certain way solely because the method of that action seems like the only option does not mean that standing one's political ground would not work either. This lack of faith in legitimate governance instead of propagandistic coups, not to mention lack of patience with it, all but illustrated the writing on the wall for the rise of radicalism in Germany. Rauschnig continued:

The Conservative leaders lacked the one thing that should characterize all conservative policy—patience. Thus they fell into the temptation of the period to resort to conspiracy. That substitute for a constructive policy was readily available in the existing turbulent conditions of permanent petty revolution. This had produced in almost all ranks of the German Right-wing an assumption that the resort to violence was a natural political expedient and that political gangsterdom was essential to success.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Rauschnig, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 108.

¹¹² Rauschnig, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 109.

After the war, it was difficult for German conservatives to gain the momentum they had lost after the fall of the monarchy due to the privileges they had. Radical forces then began to play a more dominant part in politics, most notably in what became known as the Kapp Putsch. Wolfgang Kapp attempted to overthrow the German government through a military coup following Allied demands for a “reduction of Reichswehr forces and the dissolution of the *Freikorps*” in 1920.¹¹³ This attempted coup did not succeed, but it did sow seeds of division among the hardliners and moderates of the DNVP, and it inspired Adolf Hitler’s Beer Hall Putsch in 1923.¹¹⁴ Rauschnig offered this insight: “The Kapp putsch, it is true, found little support from the political leaders of the German Nationalists, but the much more dangerous tendencies to enter into secret ‘intrigues,’ concealed or open terrorism, and finally a policy of naked violence, established themselves as a new style of political realism.”¹¹⁵ In 1923, Germany was experiencing hyperinflation and German conservatives felt inflamed that they and the country were put into such a position. Revolutionaries in the party gained ground over more moderate voters as the inflation worsened in 1921 and 1922 as the *völkisch* wing began to consolidate with the influx of “impoverished craftsmen, farmers, white-collar employees, and a growing academic proletariat.”¹¹⁶ To stand out among voters, Rauschnig had to balance the needs of his party with the rise in radicalism during a period where moderate stances did not mean as much. He says:

Democracy on the Continent has been living up to now in an age that no longer exists. It was backward-looking in its ideas and its political methods. It was living in the

¹¹³ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 58.

¹¹⁴ Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), 48.

¹¹⁵ Rauschnig, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 108.

¹¹⁶ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 59.

nineteenth century. Its very language had been learned from the nineteenth century and was a relic, with its rhetoric and its emotionality, of a period of rule by men of social eminence which has long passed away. It was juggling with effete phrases and faded sentiments. But everything that has given our twentieth century its new vitality, its new and cruel but very effectual qualities, was ignored; left to vibrate only in the brutal speeches of a new type of opposition from the extreme left or extreme Right. The democracy of notabilities tried to take no notice of it as it would ignore the social slips of an upstart.¹¹⁷

Rauschning's rich quotes illustrates the grave situation that his party was in after World War One. They held on to past ideals and tried to keep their grip on power but were failing. The "rule by men of social eminence" refers to Germany's post-1871 democracy that was dominated by upper-class elites loyal to the monarchy and Prussian military ideology. Rauschning longed for the conservative ideology espoused during Germany's imperialist exploits under Bismarck's rule, but that world did not exist anymore. It was an era marked by a sense of respectability and decorum, dominated by monarchical rule and a "democracy of notabilities." It was not possible to revive so bygone a conservative outlook in a radicalized society that had been ravaged by war. Rauschning wanted to act on the conservative values that he saw in the previous century, but he believed that to be a doomed venture in the post-war democratic age and sought out National Socialism as a solution.

What did the Nazis seem to offer for the democratic age?

German conservatives' power had declined in the Weimar Republic and they sought to remedy that, but with the rise in radicalism and increase in the masses' ability to influence politics, their methods were not working. The elites in control of the DNVP held no attraction to the younger crowds who grew angry after the war. It seemed that the National Socialists could remedy the conservatives' problem. The older elites saw in Nazism an acceptable ideology that

¹¹⁷ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 85.

was similar to conservatism in that it adhered to nationalist and conservative ideas. It was the conservative elites' hope that by garnering the Nazis' support, they could harness that power for themselves. Rauschning was among the dissatisfied farmers during the height of inflation. It was among these farmers where he took his opportunity to voice his concerns and political ambitions, eventually leading him to join the Agricultural League and elected office. He embodied a deeply rooted spirit of nationalism which fit well under the auspices of the German conservatives. However, when the DNVP started to lose traction among German voters to the NSDAP, Rauschning saw an opportunity and took it. In the late 1920s, feelings of hostility grew between Rauschning and what he saw as a failing party, which is why he believed it was necessary to look elsewhere to effect reforms in Danzig. Marek Andrzejewski wrote that self-serving political ambitions factored into Rauschning's decision to join the Nazis in 1931 just as much as, if not more than, helping his constituents in Danzig.¹¹⁸ Andrzejewski asserts that Rauschning's reasons for joining the National Socialists was mainly motivated by personal gain but does not go into further detail on where he arrives at that conclusion. He claims that because Rauschning was in close proximity to "Hitler's Party" during Nazism's rise in Danzig, his interests were self-serving. However, Rauschning himself told a different story:

When I joined the Nazi party in the summer of 1931, the majority of my Conservative fellow-agriculturists approved. They regarded it as a temporary seconding to a friendly unit. That was not my idea of it. For there was further consideration. There was no conservatism left in Germany. What was regarded as conservatism was reaction, mere representation of the interests of property. It was necessary to create a great and genuine Conservative movement by the union of all the great constituent traditions of this Western civilization...What was needed was to wrest conservatism from its encystment in the interests of the propertied class and to make it the great party that could with justification claim to represent also the propertiless masses.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Andrzejewski, "Hermann Rauschning: Biographische Skizze," 4.

¹¹⁹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 40.

This speaks volumes to his intentions in joining the National Socialist ranks in 1931. However, his quotation requires further scrutiny. Rauschning wrote *The Conservative Revolution* in 1941, which gave him a decade to separate and rationalize his decision to join the Nazis. Additionally, he targeted his justifications of joining the party to an American audience because he had settled down in the United States. Joining the Nazis, as he described to American readers, was the only option he saw to liberate Danzigers from economic hardship. He felt that his conservative party had transformed from a body united in traditional values to one that was bankrupt and failed to speak to the times. In Rauschning's eyes, this is what caused the break among the ruling classes during the 1920s and allowed for the emotional rhetoric of the Nazis to resonate so well. He said: "Faith in traditions had been fading, faith in machinery and devices and materialism had been growing, among the traditional ruling classes, and had turned them from opponents into allies of National Socialism."¹²⁰ A sharp divide between the classes was growing still larger in the Weimar Republic. Those who came from a rural life saw Berlin as "Galician filth," out of touch with reality, and they resented the government for sending their boys to the front in World War One for slaughter in disproportionate numbers.¹²¹ Rauschning and the DNVP represented these constituents, disillusioned with the direction in which Germany was headed. Emotions overtook reason after World War One and contributed to the rise in radicalism.

According to Rauschning, "reason cannot provide a basis for a social order or a political system."¹²² This is why "revolutionary direct action has won the day against the responsible,

¹²⁰ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 100.

¹²¹ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 70.

¹²² Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 28.

non-revolutionary Socialism of the working class, just as it has violently eliminated the middle class itself as the ruling class."¹²³ Here Rauschning asserted that revolution served as the only form of control available to the public against aging regimes that lacked the stomach for reciprocating acts of violence. He said: "This hostility to intellect, to individualism and personality, to pure science and art, is not the arbitrary invention of a particularly vicious system of racial philosophy, but the logical outcome of the political system of revolutionary direct action with violence as its one and only historic motor."¹²⁴ Although he refers to the characteristics of National Socialism, other political movements attempted to ride the proverbial revolutionary wave of anti-intellectual fervor. But "the Nazis made the conservative Prussian past serviceable to their need for political legitimation to an extent hitherto unprecedented."¹²⁵ In other words, the National Socialists were able to harness nationalism better than the nationalists of the DNVP did to suit their own needs.

Rauschning believed that aligning with the Nazis could solve the DNVP's disunity. A central issue lay between the idea of autonomous corporate interests having too much power in a pluralist society and how the Nazis saw those corporations as a machinery of state function, claiming that power as their own. As he understood conservatism, Rauschning believed there should be organic and independent intermediary governing bodies between the individual and the state. He expanded:

But I should like to enter into some aspects of the autonomous body and what I have described as a pluralist community, in order to show you from this side also that we had serious reasons for our attempts to work with Nazism. The great French Revolution and liberalism tried to remove all the intermediate authorities between the individual and the

¹²³ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 28.

¹²⁴ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 29.

¹²⁵ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 377.

state. The creation of such intermediate elements seemed to us to be the very thing that was needed for the ending of the individualist chaos. That meant the ending of freedom of association in the nineteenth-century sense and of the uncontrolled freedom of industry under economic liberalism. But it did not mean the end of an ordered personal liberty and of all private initiative in industry.”¹²⁶

This departed from conservative norms, but it was what he believed Germany needed and Nazism provided the power and opportunity for that to happen. However, it was Nazism’s very power that concerned him because he thought the Nazis would engulf and centralize the bodies Rauschnig wanted to work independently from the government.

These decisions to put the interests of the country before those of the party splintered the DNVP into various factions, making it harder to present a unified voting bloc that could effectively compete against other parties. The German Nationalists needed a unified front to compete against the other political parties, and working with the National Socialists provided them with an opportunity. However, neither Hugenberg nor Hitler had any interest in one another’s the needs or desires. Hett explains: “The idea was to show that these elements had come together in a truly unified and effective bloc. But this was Hugenberg’s dream, not Hitler’s. Hitler and the Nazis wanted to make as much use as they could of the publicity and legitimacy they got by working with Hugenberg without in fact conceding anything.”¹²⁷

To prevent massive throngs of voters from going back and forth between parties throughout the 1920s, radicalization began to spread throughout the country that manifested as riots and coups. The Social Democrats, Communists, and Conservatives all spoke to the people, the most common message of which was the normalization of revolutionary tactics to achieve one's ends. This revolution was a litmus test for what would and would not work when assessing

¹²⁶ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 247.

¹²⁷ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 129.

the government's staying power. Rauschning attributed the violence associated with postwar political movements to the anti-intellectual attitude of dynamism. "Dynamism," he said, was "not [the] mere chance but the necessary outcome of an entire absence of standards."¹²⁸

Dynamism was a perfect ideology for the Nazis because it allowed them to use the masses to their advantage. He continued: "Dynamism is kept alive in the masses only in the form of permanent pugnacity. The masses tend all the time to grow slack and need constant stimulating. Nothing is of more importance to National Socialism than the possession of 'enemies,' objects on which this pugnacity can sharpen its claws."¹²⁹ Conservative elites constrained themselves by failing to adopt such an effective strategy for riling up the populace. After the war, attitudes of culpability, fear of the unknown, and willingness to abandon a government that people thought had forsaken them combined to create a pressure for something to change. Rauschning went on: "Man, it holds, is not a logical being, not a creature guided by reason or intelligence, but a creature following his instincts and impulses, like any other animal."¹³⁰ In other words, logic was no longer required to effect what the people thought of as meaningful change in the government. Out of everything Rauschning wrote, this base act of dynamism was the spark that lit the fuse of what was to become the National Socialist revolution in the coming years.

Here it is important to distinguish between what Rauschning calls dynamism and other forms of revolution overtaking Germany throughout the 1920s. Revolution took on many forms within the political parties of postwar Germany that sought to undermine the Treaty of Versailles. As a consequence, radicalization took hold as each voice tried to drown out the

¹²⁸ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 28.

¹²⁹ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 53.

¹³⁰ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 28.

others. Rauschning spoke of why revolution was necessary when referring to the deficiencies of Weimar in *The Conservative Revolution*:

There is not the slightest need for any profound investigation concerning the weaknesses of the German democracy. The weak point lies here. Our democratic constitution was certainly a well-constructed legal edifice. Our political life recognized the democratic doctrine. But the practice of all the parties was undemocratic because they were under the pressure of a new revolutionary life that took firmer hold of us in our defeat, and in the shocks of the economic and social disintegration of the inflation periods, than of any other nation.¹³¹

The parties employed a long-term strategy to achieve and maintain a strong political base in Germany, but the conservatives underestimated the unscrupulousness of the Nazis, slowly cementing their rise in power. Rauschning seemed to distance himself ideologically from Hugenberg and others in the conservative party who got swept up in the movement of “dynamism” in pursuit of power and security. He wanted to make clear at every juncture that his union with the National Socialists, while politically sound, was morally lacking. As he saw it, this difference separated him from the other reactionaries. He went on: “In our day there is a sort of international understanding between reactionaries. All are proceeding along the same fatal course of self-destruction. By their abandonment of the principles on which their whole existence depends, they are destroying the basis of their existence more thoroughly and more rapidly than the extremest of their political opponents could have done.”¹³² Rauschning referred to free enterprise, individual liberty, and political morality. In other words, the damage done to the country was not solely at the hands of the rising Nazi power, but also at the hands of those who chose self-interest over ideology.

¹³¹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 157.

¹³² Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 110.

Larry Eugene Jones, a prominent historian of Weimar Germany and the rise of National Socialism, expressed a view that echoed Rauschning's in the beginning of his work *The German Right in the Weimar Republic*: "...the disunity of the Right was every bit as important as a prerequisite for the establishment of the Third Reich as the schism on the socialist Left or the fragmentation of the political middle."¹³³ Rauschning saw the turbulent environment growing even more tense throughout the 1920s, but he knew that the DNVP's options were limited without forming a coalition. In *The Conservative Revolution*, he says: "The nationalists had too high an opinion of their own qualities and too low an opinion of those of their lower middle-class partner, with the result that they entered the deal for a coup totally unprepared, while the National Socialists were armed and equipped down to the last detail."¹³⁴ Much of Rauschning's writing identified the dysfunction and self-interest of the DNVP as a major contributing factor for the rise of Nazism. He asserted that he and other conservatives aligned with the National Socialists out of a necessity to ensure a prosperous future for Germany. This may seem like a hollow rationalization considering the destruction wrought by the Nazis. However, Rauschning explained in his books that his attempts to work within the declining system of German democracy were ineffective at stopping the nihilist revolution. After all, as Rauschning has shown, this revolution was exactly what the Nazi elite wanted.

The reality of working with the Nazis/Rauschning's criticisms of Nazism

Rauschning soon realized that the Nazis would not give him what he needed to effectively govern. Instead of working with Rauschning and providing economic aid to the Free

¹³³ Jones, *The German Right in the Weimar Republic*, 2.

¹³⁴ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 101.

City, Gauleiter Forster, Hitler, and other Nazi officials strongarmed him into toeing the party line. He sought inspiration for political reform in the bygone era of Bismarck and traditional German conservatism, but others in his camp did so for more selfish reasons. In both cases, however, it was the only sound decision they could make. In Rauschning's view, conservatives constrained themselves after World War One by fracturing into disparate interest groups who sought influence over governance. Hett describes the difficulties that German political parties faced when trying to overcome the effects of what they believed to be a harsh peace settlement: "Certainly, almost all Germans perceived the treaty to be unjust, which didn't necessarily make it so. What matters is that Germans were divided on how to respond to it: should they try to overcome it by resistance, including armed resistance, or by patient diplomacy?"¹³⁵ But this was not solely a conservative issue. Rauschning says: "In the last years, before the Nazi seizure of power, groups of younger men, with no party affiliation, came to the fore. They seemed capable of serving in the rejuvenation of political life. The political groups at the head of affairs seemed to be at the end of their usefulness."¹³⁶ Numbers never swelled much in any one of these interest groups because so many popped up with young men thirsty for a revolution. In Rauschning's words, newcomers needed to "get away from [the] obsolete issues that brought new elements to the front."¹³⁷ In essence, political gridlock on all sides existed because party elites chose not to fix what they thought was not broken. New blood in the political system after the war sparked change, which is what Rauschning's conservatives needed. He continued: "At first these elements were not Nazis at all but men of independence, who saw the inadequacy and

¹³⁵ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 29.

¹³⁶ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 55.

¹³⁷ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 54.

unsatisfactoriness of existing party groups and were in search of new ones. It was capable, however, also of producing a rejuvenation of *all* parties, if these were wise enough to admit the new elements, not simply in order to corrupt and muzzle them with the gift of party or official posts, but to give them a real opportunity of influence and activity.”¹³⁸ It was entirely possible that these newcomers could have introduced a vital energy into political life that the current DNVP could not muster, but the old elements of the party would not allow that. Rauschnig observed:

Here the normal struggle between the generations was accentuated behind the scenes. More was involved than the mere determination of the old party placeholders to abandon none of their influence to younger elements. What was at issue was the complete change of all political life rendered necessary by the entry on the scene of the new features of a changed world. It was not a question of persons, of ambitious groups, but of the necessity of recognizing the truly vital issues and of seeking a solution for them... The result was that many men of ideas and energy went over to Nazism, seeing in it the only possible field of active usefulness.¹³⁹

With the rise in radicalism that came with the competition for votes among the parties, he still saw an opportunity to provide for Danzig by joining with Hitler. The old order was fighting for its place among the younger generation and he realized that something would need to give if he was to be successful as a politician. Hett describes the political landscape in the later Weimar years which pushed the idea of a conservative alliance with the Nazis onto everybody’s minds. He says: “...In 1928, the [DNVP’s] vote fell by 6 percentage points. This setback stimulated Alfred Hugenberg’s rise to the party leadership and prompted him to think about making an ally of the dynamic new Nazi movement as a possible path to power.”¹⁴⁰ Joining with the more radical party was risky, but worth it. Younger people in Germany, not only conservatives,

¹³⁸ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 55.

¹³⁹ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 56.

¹⁴⁰ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 80.

believed that old party elites continued to steer the country in the wrong direction because they lacked the willingness to change for the good of the country. Rauschning echoed a similar sentiment when speaking of Hugenberg's failure to correct Germany's course after World War One by solely aligning with "the narrowest economic interests of property," which brought "many of the younger Conservatives with me into National Socialism."¹⁴¹ Rauschning's exhibited hostile feelings toward Hugenberg because he believed Hugenberg was only interested in increasing his political power. He said: "It was amid these developments that Hugenberg, an entirely un-Conservative politician, permeated with the ideas of the pan-Germans, came to the head of the reactionary parties, and gave them the character that made the deal of 1933 inevitable."¹⁴²

Although he and the ruling members of the DNVP sought to take advantage of the Nazis' ability to engage the masses using the "expedient of mass propaganda," his intentions remained practical in purpose.¹⁴³ Rauschning asserted that the National Socialists had overtaken the old ruling class and had become the new master of the nationalist masses, but that was not what Rauschning intended to occur. He went on: "With the coming of this new elite, the plebiscitary mass-democracy has been ousting the old ruling class of the parliamentary democracies. This happened in due course in Germany as it had done already in Russia and Italy; and it was just this that we were out to prevent, this complete ousting of the former elements of democratic political life by a new group of persons and by new political methods."¹⁴⁴ He wrote *The*

¹⁴¹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 41.

¹⁴² Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 109.

¹⁴³ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 43.

¹⁴⁴ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 43.

Conservative Revolution in 1941 after having seen the October Revolution and the rise of fascism in Italy, knowing firsthand how violent political transfers of power and the masses could be. Rauschning asserted:

It would not have helped us in any way to take advantage of the new expedient of mass propaganda or the ‘engagement’ of a popular mass leader, such as Hitler then was in our eyes, to bring part of the masses over to the support of the bourgeois parties of the Right. The problem was a much more difficult one. If the peril latent in the modern rise of the masses was really to be removed, means must be sought for, so to say, ‘de-massing’ the masses.¹⁴⁵

The National Socialist rule that imposed dynamism onto the masses scared the conservatives. Rauschning’s criticized dynamism because he saw it as an eternal cycle of revolution with the sole purpose of keeping the masses stimulated. He sought to prevent that, but Rauschning realized it too late. He noted that once dynamism was adopted by the Nazi regime, a return to normal life was impossible. He wrote: “Call it what you will—Bolshevization, State Socialism, a universal army-State: the theories hung round it are merely decoration, the dangerous element in it is the gnawing away of national elements of production to the length of total exhaustion. In no sphere of life will the new phase of the German revolution involve a relaxation of the pressure of the dictatorship or a return to any sort of constitutionalism.” Rauschning believed in a temporary abeyance of democracy if it meant that the rule of law could still be reestablished by rational actors who had the best interest of the country in mind. The Nazis made it clear that they sought a complete and absolutist society that they fully controlled. Rauschning explained: “The nihilist revolution of National Socialism sets out to destroy everything that it cannot itself take over and convert to its own pattern. This explains its *Gleichschaltung* or forcing into conformity of all elements of society and of every

¹⁴⁵ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 42.

independent activity, or else their total suppression.¹⁴⁶ The conservatives believed that they had the tools necessary to guide the people in the direction they needed. By merely trying to “articulate the masses, lead them into natural associative forms of existence,” the conservatives “produced just the opposite of what we had intended.”¹⁴⁷ Joining served a political purpose to achieve “a revival of old forms of self-government” where modern “self-governing bodies” could be developed.¹⁴⁸ Rauschnig went on: “It is clear that self-governing bodies cannot be ‘organized.’ They cannot be artificially created. They must grow. They are elements of an order only when they have a genuine life of their own. They are not such elements when they are simply decreed into existence. It is possible to build upon existing corporations, to reorganize them, to grant them extended functions. But the moment the state decrees their existence they become machinery of the state.”¹⁴⁹ Here, Rauschnig expressed his belief in limited forms of a centralized government in which autonomous “bodies,” as he calls them, administer certain tasks rather than have organs of the state do so. He believed that political functions of the state and social services existed in a symbiotic relationship with each other, but it was not necessary for the state to take control of those social services. He continued: “Spheres of economic planning are no less necessary for the avoidance of crises with the unemployment they bring than are the directing elements of social services as the instruments of a juster system and of protection of want. But in order to achieve these aims it is not necessary that the organs for securing them should become organs of the power of the state and means of domination. The great institutions

¹⁴⁶ Rauschnig, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 87.

¹⁴⁷ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 45.

¹⁴⁸ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 45.

¹⁴⁹ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 248-9.

for social services have their models in century-old corporations for mutual aid.”¹⁵⁰ This relationship between business and state was not new and Rauschning’s desire to return Germany to an idyllic past where a moderate stance and cooperation meant more than it did in Weimar. He advocated for economic bodies to perform tasks instead of the state doing so as a way for the states to ensure cooperation and preserve a peaceful order. He explained further: “This does not mean the abolition of the state, but it is certainly true that such a form of state will not be in a position to pursue aims of imperialist expansion. Federations are always systems of maintenance and defense, not unions for aggression.”¹⁵¹ At this time, Rauschning was chiefly concerned with the Danzig’s economic situation, specifically the poor performance of the Gulden in regional markets, which negatively affected its farmers. He was continually ignored whenever he asked for help from other countries. This was due to the free city’s geopolitical limbo in which the League of Nations assigned it after the Treaty of Versailles.

Rauschning’s desire to keep the peace by maintaining a moderate posture pleased some state officials in Germany and Poland, and annoyed others, especially during his time in Danzig. The church chose not to cooperate with the state and did not recognize the state’s authority, creating a divide between conservative voters. The Nazis wished to centralize autonomous corporate interests to maintain a firmer grip on power, which solidified their dictatorship. Rauschning acted as a go-between among these competing interests, making it difficult to maintain a political coherence necessary for what he wished to accomplish. At this juncture, leaving the National Socialists was not an option, and he believed that he could still achieve beneficial reforms in Danzig with their rising clout. Constantly acting as a middleman stretched

¹⁵⁰ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 249.

¹⁵¹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 250.

him thin between acting through his own reforms while toeing the party line of both the conservatives and Nazis. When the National Socialist stock rose among lower-middle class Germans, Rauschning and other conservatives were once again pulled from several directions. They had to choose whether their idea of democracy could be compromised for the sake of achieving the means to implement that idea by allying with the Nazis. Once in the National Socialist camp, however, it was apparent that power would be centralized among a small group of elites who sought to control corporate interests under the machinery of the Nazi banner. What the conservatives got wrong was assuming they had the wherewithal to wrangle the Nazi coalition into cooperating with their agenda of maintaining limited state overreach. “The conservative elements,” Rauschning said, “have delivered themselves up to destruction, and so have destroyed their right of existence in their present shape.”¹⁵²

This is why Rauschning and others in the DNVP relied on attracting lower and middle-class voters who already had ideologies similar to their own. Harnessing that voting power is exactly what Rauschning needed, but the political infighting was too much for the DNVP to handle alone. Even with the number of political parties in Germany, it was common for most voters to live within one of these three camps, making options limited and negotiations hostile in the government. Rauschning still formed a coalition government in Danzig with the Catholic-majority Center Party after the Nazis had gained enough power to deem cooperation unnecessary. He addressed this in *The Conservative Revolution*:

When I took office as president, I secured binding agreements from the leader of the Danzig National Socialists. I was to be given a free hand by the party in the conduct of official business, and the party bound itself to observe the constitution. Moreover, at the very outset I formed a coalition government, against the wish of the Nazis: a coalition with the Center party, although we had, under the constitution, a majority without this

¹⁵² Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 117.

party. Both agreements were broken immediately after I started my duties, and my whole term of office was thus one long struggle against the party.¹⁵³

This passage suggests much about the political context in which Germany's conservatives were forced to work. It was not just about attaining power for him because he unnecessarily sought political cooperation with the SPD in Danzig when the Nazis had a majority. It was about doing what was right for his friends, neighbors, constituents, and to give Germany a chance for a better future. Putting himself at the mercy of an unscrupulous and nihilist force was the cost of doing business. To extricate Danzig from the economic depths would require that he be taken as a leader of the people and one who could bridge political divides in an era marked by divisiveness. As his career in Danzig became more precarious because of his continued commitment to his beliefs and his unwillingness to toe the Nazi party line, the chance to bridge divides was slim. This is something that he wrote about in almost all of his books because he wanted his intentions for Danzig to be clear. His task and that of his fellow conservatives became a numbers game in the short term—an effort to win votes and to wield a majority in the Reichstag while maintaining power and influence long enough to achieve their own particular ends.

German conservatives attempted to use the popularity of the National Socialists to win power for themselves, and it backfired, as Rauschnig showed. He said: "The political elite, the monarchists, proceeding from a different starting point, had developed much the same ideas as those underlying the National Socialist enterprise of creating a new upper class as an instrument of dominance. Some of the monarchist groups expected themselves to become the new upper class of the National Socialist mass movement, and their anticipation helped in no small degree

¹⁵³ Rauschnig, *The Conservative Revolution*, 6.

to bring into existence the 'combination' of 1933."¹⁵⁴ Dominance and subjugation of those who thought differently became commonplace, especially for Rauschning's DNVP, eventually coinciding with its degeneration. Traditional conservatives, according to Rauschning, were still available and eager to be leaders, but they "were viciously attacked and driven off as ideologists and dreamers."¹⁵⁵ According to Hermann Beck, the Nazis knowingly used the German conservative right's political clout to undermine the credibility of the conservatives and to enhance their own. As it turns out, Beck's interpretation of Nazism is almost identical to what Rauschning observed in his analysis of dynamism decades before. Beck says:

The social revolutionary overtones of Nazi attacks against conservatives were complemented by their political instrumentality. Nazis needed to break the strongholds of conservative power in local politics and gain control of the state apparatus to facilitate the *Gleichschaltung*. Once the position of German Nationals and their supporters in the conservative *Bürgertum* had been successfully undermined, their organizations broken, and—what Nazis perceived as—their outmoded values scorned and ridiculed, the new masters could turn once again to establishing closer cooperation with a now-chastened establishment.¹⁵⁶

Rauschning's relationship with Forster in Danzig proved Beck's analysis correct. The Gauleiter sought to undermine Rauschning's role as Senate President by going directly to Hitler on the needs of the party in the Free City. These runarounds wasted valuable time and resources for Rauschning, who saw through the charade and was punished for calling attention to it in memoranda with Foreign Minister Neurath and Hitler. In a memorandum dated September 29, 1934, Neurath wrote to Hitler regarding the relationship between Rauschning and Forster: "In view of the difficult position of the City of Danzig, it appears to me necessary to put an end to the dualism between the Party leadership and the National Socialist Government of Danzig, and I

¹⁵⁴ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 30.

¹⁵⁵ Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, 107.

¹⁵⁶ Beck, *The Fateful Alliance*, 23.

would therefore propose that, as has moreover already been done once before, you should give Gauleiter Forster instructions to refrain from interfering with the executive.”¹⁵⁷ Hitler ignored Neurath’s suggestion, and the relationship only got more tenuous over the next two months, culminating in Rauschning’s resignation in November. As an agricultural technical advisor to the local Gau in 1931, Rauschning wrote to anybody who would listen, begging for economic aid, willing to bridge political divides if it meant Danzigers could make a living selling their produce. Backroom deals with powers who were both rising and falling from prominence for the sake of democratic continuity is exactly what Rauschning is referring. He was bullied by everyone during his brief tenure as a Nazi in Danzig, and he took the brunt of it for as long as he could. He expanded on this in *The Conservative Revolution*, as he writes to an unnamed confidant:

In the matter of sensitiveness I must admit to you that in my view there are limits beyond which personal attacks should not be ignored. When, in the election campaign, my former friends of the German Nationalist party displayed placards describing me as a “bankrupt farmer and neurasthenic writer on music,” it was possible to be merely amused. When, three years later, my former Nazi party comrades put up a notice on the road to my farm, in letters a yard high, that “Rauschning, traitor to the people, lives here,” that was less innocent: it was an invitation to acts of terrorism against my family and my farm.¹⁵⁸

He was seen as a traitor and outsider to both political parties that he had joined because of his vision and desire to improve the lives of Danzigers. He spoke of his former colleagues with contempt and he endured it because his goal was to revive conservatism and change Danzig for the better. Rauschning’s experience with National Socialism let him see that the form of democracy he envisioned, contrary to what he saw as a form of absolutism, was extremely fragile and to be protected. For instance, wrote about democracy in the Weimar Republic in *The*

¹⁵⁷ *Documents of German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, No. 224.

¹⁵⁸ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 226.

Conservative Revolution: “Democracy is not a political doctrine but an ethical attitude. The political doctrine of democracy and a democratic constitution are but gossamers that can be destroyed with a breath if their basis is not an ethical agreement to exclude or to use certain expedients in the political struggle.”¹⁵⁹ The ethical attitude to which Rauschning refers only occurs when those who serve in government place foundational checks on those who seek power to limit the existence of democracy. Personal ambition and the quest for unchecked power during a time where democracy in Germany had become fragile contributed to the Nazis’ revolution of nihilism.

¹⁵⁹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 157.

Conclusion

Rauschning spent a great deal of time in his books detailing why Germany descended into a darkness caused by World War One and how it affected his ability to govern the people of Danzig. He offered cogent predictions of Germany's path of nihilism. He showed how the spark of revolution and the ideology behind it led to Germany's reckoning. , Rauschning contended, "there developed the chaotic conditions of a progressive disintegration."¹⁶⁰ This disintegration completely negated the humanism and liberty that he believed pre-war Germany stood for. It was this "delusion," as Rauschning called it, that began to turn men away from reality and start on the path towards revolution.¹⁶¹ He understood why those on the outside did not understand the intricacies of how Germans navigated towards revolution and did his best to explain it. In *The Conservative Revolution*, he said:

I do not want to give the impression that I regard the revolutionary path as fated to be ours in Germany. I do not believe in fate; I believe in man's freedom to control his destiny. What happened in Germany was certainly...not a genuine revolution but an artificial diversion of revolutionary forces—a true abortion, preventing a natural birth. But no one can deny that Germany was pregnant with true revolutionary life. At the back of the determination not to allow revolution to break out was the very thing which was uncredited to us: the desire to steer along the course of reform and of gradual, organic evolution.¹⁶²

Rauschning's rich comment shows several things. It shows that he and other Germans sought to legitimately and to permanently pursue evolution for the sake of Germany's future through revolutionary means. He perhaps could have seen revolution as necessary but knew the negative connotations associated with it or that he truly believed in Germany's cause, but not the

¹⁶⁰ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 162.

¹⁶¹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 162.

¹⁶² Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 102.

radical ways to achieve it. These are important distinctions for a man caught up in a whirlwind of political activity in which his love of country and loyalty to those around him dictated his future. Throughout the course of his life, he regretted some specific actions he took, but not the purpose for which the reasons he chose those took place. In other words, from his perspective as he wrote them years after they had happened, he did the wrong thing for the right reasons. He explained this phenomenon:

All these men who brought democracy to manifest and universal collapse were certainly not lacking in good will. What they lacked was foresight and the recognition that the *institutional safeguards* of freedom change with the times. There is no unique and final form of democratic freedom. Each age must seek the suitable institutions for the protection of that freedom. But a good proportion of those democrats who make such a show of loyalty to the cause of freedom have long abandoned it in their minds as a lost cause. These are the half-hearted and the skeptical defenders of democracy: those who already have one foot in the camp of the new absolutism of the collectivist state and who have done more harm to the cause of freedom than all those who discussed the authoritarian regime and corporations or attacked liberalism as a sort of scapegoat for everything that went wrong.¹⁶³

Rauschning later said that the absolutism envisioned by the Nazis is a complete departure from what he and the other conservatives in his party had intended. He believed that absolutism was “a temporary condition in which the constitutional rights of the citizen are in abeyance,” making it a permissible and “inevitable expedient of the democratic order.”¹⁶⁴ The Nazis had never intended to adhere to beliefs in an interim dictatorship for the benefit of democracy in the long run. He continued: “I have never met anyone who regarded such absolutism as the new and final form of German political existence. In that development, such people as my friends and I, at all events, had no part.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 86.

¹⁶⁴ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 5.

¹⁶⁵ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 5.

Rauschning wanted to see Germany's rightful return to the world stage, but only if the means to make that possible were legal and realistic. Whether this was a manipulative postwar copout to his share of the blame—*The Conservative Revolution* was written in 1941 on his Oregon farm and mainly for an American audience—or if he believed the situation was out of his control, is up for debate. The main overall point of his writings, most of them written before and during the war, revolved around his subtle complicity while he seldom accepted responsibility. One of the exceptions lies in the preface of his third book, *Men of Chaos*:

I have set out, not to explain, but to enable the reader to see for himself how a whole nation which, taken all in all, was no worse than other nations of Europe, a nation of hardworking, capable people, was precipitated into this chaos. I have no desire to expose and denounce the nation in whose error and responsibility I have had my share. My purpose has been to supply material for the understanding of what has happened.¹⁶⁶

Germany's post-war environment changed how Rauschning and other conservatives could effectively engage their constituents. Revolutionaries took to the streets *en masse* and wanted to see Germany's return to global power, and the conservatives knew they needed to change their tactics to maintain relevance in the Weimar Republic. Rauschning saw this political shift while he was still aligned with the DNVP. Their status continued to decline, even after joining forces with the National Socialists in hopes of harnessing their power. Rauschning left the DNVP for the NSDAP out of necessity in 1931, hoping this would help him to achieve his goals for Danzig. Does that make him ambitious or naïve? Or did he genuinely believe that what he wanted to do would be possible if he joined the Nazis? Historian Marek Andrzejewski sees a combination of political vision and personal goals at play: "One can assume that Rauschning saw the dynamic Nazi movement not only as an opportunity to realize his national conceptions but

¹⁶⁶ Rauschning, *Men of Chaos*, ix.

also as an opportunity to satisfy his ambitions."¹⁶⁷ Ambitious or not, Rauschning, by initiation into the Nazi hierarchy, exposed the disparities between his vision and Berlin's. Andrzejewski expands on this point: "Rauschning was the opposite of the typical Nazi party members, as those who were trained in the Munich Period, especially compared to his representative in Danzig, Gauleiter Forster. He cannot be called a typical representative of the Nazi leaders because he had the qualities of a classic German conservative from the turn of the century...his traditionalist nationalism resulted in his reluctance to face the radical tendencies of the National Socialists."¹⁶⁸ Rauschning longed for a Bismarckian sense of national community that remained unified against efforts of foreign meddling, not the reckless expansionism of National Socialism.

Rauschning's defensive feelings came to the surface to show his audience for which he was writing the complexities that caused him to both join and leave the National Socialist Party. This tone finds its way into all his publications. It is a balance between rationalizations for joining the Nazis and contempt for going into exile. Over a brief period of only three years, he joined the National Socialists because of the chance that they might ease Danzig's economic hardship. However, over that period, he began to defy Hitler and his henchmen for their unwillingness to help Danzigers because doing so was not politically expedient for them. His feelings towards his leader and party became so inflamed to the point of calling Hitler a country bumpkin and opposing National Socialism as a form of absolutism. This radical shift in thinking should not be overlooked. However, that does not mean that he should be considered blameless. He and other conservatives thought they could manipulate the rising power of the Nazis to suit their own ends, and, when that failed, they joined the ranks of power instead of bowing out. The

¹⁶⁷ Andrzejewski, "Hermann Rauschning: Biographische Skizze," 20.

¹⁶⁸ Andrzejewski, "Hermann Rauschning: Biographische Skizze," 21.

various memoranda and secondary source literature convey a different, albeit valid, perspective than the one Rauschning gives in his published works. In the interdepartmental memorandums between Rauschning and other state actors, he lays out the need for Danzig to receive economic assistance from anybody who chooses to listen and resigns against his wishes when that objective no longer seems tenable. In his books, he offers a more inflammatory and reflective portrait about the evils of the Nazi party. He only perfunctorily goes into his own experiences, usually in abstractions.

Rauschning saw Nazism as a means to an end instead of a baseless ideology to follow like so many of the other radicals with whom he became guilty of associating. He spent the rest of his life defending his actions, claiming that he just joined the Nazis as a way of helping others. Rauschning accepted his fate of ridicule from fellow émigrés, exile from his homeland, and skepticism from those who remained conflicted on the truth of his claims. Near the end of *The Conservative Revolution*, Rauschning said: “Because we did not comfort ourselves with the thought that we should soon get rid of Nazism but considered it our duty to try to get rid of its evils from within, we remained Nazis.”¹⁶⁹ Hermann Rauschning’s desire to effect changes that stemmed from ensuring Germany never again approached the perils of Versailles had consequences. Rauschning had underestimated just how bad National Socialism was and how focused they were on their own way of thinking instead of cooperating with conservatives. He and other conservatives assumed that they could wield power over the Nazis to effect change. He did not realize that he had underestimated the power of National Socialism until it was too late. However, Rauschning stayed in the party to serve his constituents of Danzig and protect his

¹⁶⁹ Rauschning, *The Conservative Revolution*, 228.

vision of a conservative Fatherland. When staying was no longer safe for him or effective for Danzig, he left Nazism behind. Rauschning spent his time in exile warning the world of the perils of National Socialism based on his experiences in the inside.

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