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Letter from Leo T. McCauley to Joseph P. Walshe (Dublin)
(43/31)

BERLIN, 28 February 1933

The following is a continuation of the summary of the political situation in Germany begun in my minute of yesterday.

The uneasiness as to the immediate future expressed in the penultimate paragraph of that minute was confirmed by the burning of the Reichstag building yesterday evening. So far all that is known is that the building was set on fire deliberately in a number of places, and that the interior has been burnt out. The Government newspapers attribute the fire to the Communists, and they state that a Dutch Communist was arrested endeavouring to escape from the building when the firemen were entering it. I have heard a rumour today to the effect that all Communist newspapers have been suspended and that several prominent Communists have been arrested; but this rumour has so far not been confirmed.

The burning of the Reichstag building by a deliberate act of incendiarism is of rather greater significance than the burning, in similar circumstances, of the parliament building in most other countries. The Reichstag occupies a peculiar position in Germany as being the chief link between the different States which constitute the Reich.

It is difficult to say what influence the destruction of the Reichstag building is likely to have on the policy of the Government. Since the resignation of Dr. Brüning and his Cabinet in May last there has been no pretence whatever at parliamentary government; and even before that date the government had been carried on by decree. There has been nothing in the speeches of Hitler and his colleagues to indicate that they are lovers of representative government. The fact, therefore, that the Reichstag can no longer assemble in its ordinary meeting place, which would be nothing more than a serious inconvenience if parliamentary institutions were in favour, may serve to strengthen the case for governing without the assistance of the Reichstag, especially if the elections to be held on the 5th March do not result in a majority for the Government.

By far the most interesting figure in German politics is Adolf Hitler. Even the President takes second place in popular interest, because his principles are known and understood and his actions in any given set of circumstances may be predicted with some confidence. Hitler, on the other hand, is a mystical and mysterious figure: no one knows what his principles and true policy really are, and one can only speculate as to his statesmanship.

I went with great interest some days ago to attend a meeting addressed by Hitler. It was the first public meeting which he was to address after becoming Chancellor. Not only was he to speak in an enormous hall, but his speech was to be transmitted by all the German broadcasting stations, and was to be relayed by microphones and loudspeakers to enormous gatherings of his followers assembled in squares and open spaces. One might anticipate, therefore, an important and interesting utterance. Seats had been reserved near the platform for members of the diplomatic corps, and I had a very good place from which I could see the speaker very easily and could follow everything that he said. I had met him personally some evenings before at the President's dinner, but exchanged only a few formal words with him. At the dinner he looked pale and tired, but at the meeting he looked much better and fresher. His speech was a great disappointment. An impartial observer could only say that it contained nothing resembling reason, logic or policy. The only concrete thing in it was his denunciation of Marxism. He attributed to Marxism all the troubles and disasters that had befallen Germany since the war. Apart from that denunciation there was literally nothing in his speech, although he spoke for an hour. The manner of his speech was remarkable. Although speaking into microphones which would have made an ordinary conversational tone sufficient, he shouted at the top of his voice, becoming almost inarticulate with excitement before each sentence was well begun and frequently being quite incoherent before the sentence was ended. All the foreign observers who were present and with whom I have spoken agreed that he simply raved. Yet his speech was received by the audience with the wildest enthusiasm. It is worth noting that the speech was carefully prepared. Between each paragraph, while he was waiting for the applause to die down, he carefully consulted his notes.

From this experience of Hitler I can only conclude that he must be quite a different person behind the scenes. Otherwise one could not understand how he could have built up the movement which has brought him to the Chancellorship. He therefore remains a mysterious personality. I understand that his immediate advisers and friends make it difficult for even leading personages in his movement to get to know him personally. I have been told by one Nazi officer, who was invited to have tea with Hitler, that other people who were present discouraged him from asking Hitler any questions about the movement. He had been anxious to obtain guidance and advice from Hitler on various matters connected with his work in the movement, but he was made to see that he was expected to remain silent and simply to listen to anything that Hitler might care to say.

It is probable that the Hitler Government will not show its hand until after the results of the forthcoming elections are known. Up to the present its actions have mainly been of a repressive nature, for the purpose of silencing the opposition.

[signed] LEO T. MCCAULEY

