

The Weimar Republic (1918–33)

On the 9th November 1918, amidst naval mutinies and worker and soldier uprisings, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany abdicated his throne and fled Germany to the Netherlands.

On the next day (10th November) the Socialist leader Friedrich Ebert became the new leader of the German Weimar

Republic. He immediately signed an armistice with the Allies. The Great War was over.

In January 1919, free elections took place in Germany for the first time ever and Ebert became the President of the new Weimar Republic (so called because the government first met in the small town of Weimar — due to the fact that the capital, Berlin, was considered to be too violent and open to revolution). Philipp Scheidemann — President Ebert's colleague in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) — became the chancellor of the new Republic.

Before we examine the problems which faced the Weimar government in 1919, we need to be aware of the nature of the Weimar Constitution.

The Weimar Constitution

The following points need to be understood if we are to make sense of the history of Germany between 1919–1933.

- Before the Great War Germany was not a real democracy. The Kaiser was a virtual dictator.
- The Weimar Constitution introduced democracy to Germany.
- All Germans (both men and women) aged 20 and over could vote in elections (universal suffrage).
- Elections were contested under the principle of Proportional Representation. If a particular party gained 10 per cent of the popular vote they received 10 per cent of the seats in the Reichstag (Parliament).
- The Chancellor (similar to a Prime Minister in the British system) was responsible for day-to-day government. Chancellors were appointed and dismissed by the President.
- The Head of State was the President (elected every seven years). He stayed out of day-to-day government, but in times of crisis (if a government could not be formed, for example), he could rule the country by decree, without reference to the Reichstag (under Article 48 of the Constitution).

The Weaknesses of the Weimar Constitution & Republic

The Weimar Constitution and Republic – which was (in theory) as democratic as one could hope to be in many respects – had many weaknesses in other respects:

- From the outset, the Weimar Constitution, and the Republican system which formulated it, were associated in people's minds with defeat in the Great War, the hated 'diktat' of Versailles and the crippling burden of reparations. The myth grew in the minds of German nationalists that the Fatherland had been 'stabbed in the back' by a gang of 'November Criminals' (Communists, Socialists and Jews) who betrayed Germany for their own political ends.
- The Weimar Republican system of government would have to be implemented over time by some men who were neither democrats nor republicans. Many people in Germany were distrustful of democracy and some yearned for a return of strong monarchical government.
- The moderately-socialist first Weimar government coalition (headed by the Social Democrats) was hated by Germans on the extreme left– and on the extreme right– wings of German politics. The extreme left wanted a Communist republic similar to that which came into power in Russia in October 1917 under Lenin and the Bolshevik Party. The far right, on the other hand, wanted either a return to monarchical rule or else, like the Nazis, a nationalist republic. Such feelings were to lead to an attempted Communist coup d'état by the Spartacus League in 1919, an attempted right-wing coup – the Kapp Putsch – in 1920, and an abortive 'Beer Hall Putsch', led by Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazis, in November 1923.
- The system of proportional representation meant that no single party would ever hold a majority of seats in the Reichstag in the period 1919 to 1933. Due to the multiplicity of political parties in Germany at this time, coalition government (made up of a collection of several parties) would be the norm throughout the period. Whilst coalition governments often operated successfully when times were good, they usually split apart in times of crisis.
- Article 48 of the Constitution, which allowed the President to rule by decree (without the Reichstag) in times of emergency, made the Republic appear to be undemocratic. This argument would be used against the Republic by its enemies (as Hitler did from the summer of 1932 when the Nazi Party became the largest party in the Reichstag, but the President still refused to make him Chancellor and let him try to form a government). Article 48 appeared to be saying that even the makers of the constitution had little faith in democracy and that in times of emergency it was best that Germany should return to the rule of a strong individual.
- The Weimar Government was burdened by severe economic problems caused by the heavy reparations debt. The need to pay reparations put a heavy strain on the German economy which was struggling anyway to recover from the cost Great War.

Early Political Problems (1919–23)

The Weimar government was faced with a great deal of hatred, resentment and hostility in 1919. The far left wanted a communist republic and many on the right wanted a return to authoritarian government. There were frequent political assassinations and several uprisings during this period.

Political Assassinations

According to the GCSE textbook *Modern World History* (Cambridge University Press), there were 22 political murders committed by the extreme left and 354 committed by members of the extreme right. Of these, 10 left-wing murderers were executed against none on the extreme right.

Several important leaders of the Weimar government were assassinated in its early years.

Matthias Erzberger, for example, the delegate who had signed the German surrender in 1918 was shot and killed in 1921 whilst walking in the Black Forest.

Walter Rathenau, the Republic's Jewish Foreign Minister, was assassinated in the street, in Berlin, by nationalist, anti-semitic youths in June 1922.

The Spartacist Revolt (January 1919)

The moderately socialist Weimar government (led by Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the Social Democratic Party SPD) was loathed by extremists on both the far Left and far Right of German politics. The extreme Right regarded the Weimar government as traitors to the Fatherland; a gang of 'November Criminals'. The extreme Left wanted the Weimar Republic to be replaced with a Communist republic similar to that which came to power in October 1917 in Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution.

On the night of 5th January 1919, the Spartacus League, led by the Communist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, attempted to seize power and create a Communist Germany.

The Spartacists captured the telegraph bureau and the government's newspaper offices in Berlin but failed to take any other buildings. The uprising was badly planned and did not receive the support of other left-wing groups. The Spartacist leaders only supported the uprising once it had already started.

Ebert had few troops with which to crush the revolt, but was helped by the Freikorps ('Free Corps'); a Right-wing paramilitary group of volunteer soldiers (many of them veterans of the Great War).

The Freikorps, of course, was no lover of Ebert's socialist government, but it hated the Communists even more. As Ben Walsh tells us:

"Early in 1919 the Spartacists launched their bid for power. Joined by rebel soldiers and sailors they set up soviets [councils] in many towns. Not all soldiers were on the side of the Spartacists, however. Some anti-Communist ex-soldiers had formed themselves into vigilante groups called 'Freikorps'. Ebert made an agreement with the leaders of the army and the Freikorps to put down the rebellion. Bitter street fighting followed between the Spartacists and the Freikorps. Both sides were heavily armed. Casualties were high. The Freikorps won. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were murdered."

[Ben Walsh, GCSE Modern World History, p. 140]

Luxemburg and Liebknecht were abducted in separate cars as they left their Berlin headquarters. Liebknecht was forced out of the car as it passed through the Tiergarten (a Berlin park) and shot for 'trying to escape'. Luxemburg was shot and her body was dumped in a canal (where it remained undiscovered until May).

Just four days after the Spartacist uprising was crushed a general election was held for the new National Assembly. The Social Democrats were the largest party and Ebert became the first president of the Weimar Republic. The Spartacist uprising had attempted to prevent this election from taking place.

The Kapp Putsch (March 1920)

By early 1920, the Allies had become concerned over the numbers of men in Germany serving in unofficial paramilitary groups such as the Freikorps. The Allies put pressure on the German government to disband them in order to comply with the limits placed on armed forces by the Treaty of Versailles.

In March 1920, when Ebert's government attempted to disband the Freikorps, units led by the right-wing Freikorps leader Dr. Wolfgang Kapp marched into Berlin and declared a new national government.

The army refused to fire on the Freikorps and the government fled Berlin. But, as Nigel Kelly and Greg Lacey inform us:

"Kapp was not popular with the people, who obeyed a government request for a general strike. Soon gas, water and electricity were cut off and Berlin came to a halt. Kapp was forced to flee to Sweden, the government returned and the Freikorps was disbanded."

[Kelly and Lacey, Modern World History, p. 102]

The general strike was so successful that the Kapp Putsch collapsed within days. However, those who had participated in the revolt were never punished. Without the support of the army Ebert's government could do little against them.

The Munich 'Beer Hall' Putsch (November 1923)

In November 1923 the Weimar government faced yet another revolt against it this time at the hands of the National Socialist Party, led by Adolf Hitler.

Nigel Kelly and Greg Lacey tell us why:

“By 1923 the German economy had been reduced to ruins by hyperinflation and the French occupation of the Ruhr. The leader of the Nazi Party, Adolf Hitler, believed that the Republic was on the verge of collapse and decided to try to seize power. On 8th November 1923, Hitler and his supporters broke up a meeting in a Munich beer-hall at which leaders of the Bavarian state government were speaking. He forced leaders to agree to take part in a putsch (rebellion) against the government. But he allowed them to leave the meeting, and, once free, they quickly changed their minds.

On 9th November, 3000 Nazis, led by Hitler and General Ludendorff, the First World War army hero, marched on Munich. Hitler thought the police and army would join his revolution. Instead the police opened fire on the marchers and sixteen Nazis were killed. Hitler and Ludendorff were arrested for conspiracy.

Hitler used his trial to make long speeches criticising the government and setting out his plans for the future of Germany. The publicity he received turned him into a national figure. At the end of the trial, Hitler was sentenced to just five months in prison and he was released after nine months. Ludendorff was found not guilty. There were two other important outcomes of the trial. First, Hitler now realised that power could best be achieved in Germany through the ballot box rather than an armed uprising. Secondly, during Hitler's time in prison he began work on his book 'Mein Kampf' ('My Struggle'). This book set out Hitler's main beliefs, although few people at the time could have thought that he would ever get the chance to put them into practice”.

[Kelly and Lacey, Modern World History, p. 102]

The Economic Crisis of Hyperinflation (1923)

The German government paid its debts during the Great War of 1914–18 by simply printing more banknotes and the

Weimar government continued to do the same after the war.

This led to a sharp rise in prices as workers demanded more wages to meet the rising cost of living.

The knowledge that the future prosperity of Germany would be sucked dry by heavy reparations payments (mostly to France and Belgium) as laid down in the Treaty of Versailles led to a loss of confidence in the German currency.

Towards the end of 1922, Germany failed to make its reparations payment and French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr valley – the industrial heartland of Germany.

The French occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923 led to hyperinflation. The German government recommended a policy of 'passive resistance' to the German industrial workers in the Ruhr. Passive resistance cost the German government huge amounts of money (as they had to support the striking workers) and they had lost the valuable industrial resources of the Ruhr in the bargain. The Weimar government simply printed more money to meet its bills and massive inflation ensued. Inflation, of course, is caused by too much money chasing too few goods. As prices rose beyond all belief, the government simply printed more money to meet the rising wages that employers were forced to pay.

As Lacey and Shephard inform us:

“The real losers of the Great Inflation were not the poor who had little to lose anyway, or the rich who found ways to protect their wealth [they owned land, valuable possessions and foreign currency]. The real losers were the middle classes who saw their savings and businesses destroyed.”

[Lacey and Shephard, Germany 1918–1945, p. 24]

The economic crisis of 1923 deepened the hatred felt by many Germans towards the 'November Criminals' of 1918. In September 1923 the German Chancellor, Gustav Stresemann, ended the policy of passive resistance in the Ruhr.

This was seen as a betrayal by many Right-wing extremists and in November 1923 the Nazis launched the Beer Hall Putsch.

Political Problems (1918–29)

The political system in Germany (elections based on proportional representation) caused much instability in Germany between 1918 and 1933.

As Lacey and Shephard inform us:

“During the years of the Weimar Republic no single party ever won a majority of seats in the Reichstag. Up to 1930 the Social Democrats always won the most votes, but never enough to govern on their own. So governments had to be formed from coalitions of parties working together. Sometimes these coalitions did not work well, and the governments were therefore unstable. There were twenty-five separate governments in fourteen years. Some governments only lasted a few weeks. Stresemann hoped that successes in foreign policy [Locarno in 1925 and the German entry to the League of Nations in 1926] would make it easier for the political parties to work together. This did not happen.

Many nationalists opposed Stresemann's policies as being too cautious. They wanted to reject the Versailles Treaty completely, not just have it revised. All the centre and right-wing parties were suspicious of the Social Democrats. Parties such as the Communists and the Nazis made no secret of their wish to overthrow the Weimar Republic entirely.

In 1925 Hindenburg was elected President. He had been one of Germany's war leaders under the Kaiser and was a prominent critic of the Weimar Republic. This showed how weak support for the Republic was amongst the German people. Hindenburg represented old Germany. Before he took up the post of President, he actually asked the permission of the ex-Kaiser Wilhelm!"

[Lacey and Shephard, Germany 1918-1945, pp. 26-27]

The period 1924-29 saw more stable governments than had been the norm between 1918-23 (due to Stresemann's stabilisation of the German currency) but the Wall Street Crash of 1929 brought a return to instability as unemployment reached 6 million by 1932.

The Depression

(1929-33)

The Wall Street Crash of October 1929 resulted in the United States recalling all of their short-term foreign loans in order to protect their own economy. The US government also imposed punitive trade tariffs to protect their domestic market.

This led to the collapse of German industry which had been propped-up between 1924-29 by loans from the United

States of America. Mass unemployment was the result.

Whilst the Nazi vote had been weak during the era of Stresemann prosperity, the Depression was to change matters completely.

In the general election of 1928, for example, the Nazis won just 12 seats in the Reichstag and were only the eighth largest party. By 1930, however, they had won 107 Reichstag seats (the largest party in the history of the Weimar Republic).

Political Crisis

(1930-33)

The collapse of the US stock market in October 1929 led to a world-wide Depression which severely destabilised politics in Germany.

As Kelly and Lacey inform us:

“In 1929 the government was a coalition led by Hermann Müller of the Social Democratic Party. His coalition could not agree on how to deal with the effects of the Depression and in March 1930 he resigned as Chancellor. Müller was succeeded by Heinrich Brüning of the Centre Party. He did not have a majority in the Reichstag and

had to rely on President Hindenburg, using Article 48 of the constitution to get his measures adopted [i.e. by decree]. Between 1930 and 1932 the Reichstag met less and less frequently, and Hindenburg issued over a hundred presidential decrees.”
[Kelly and Lacey, *Modern World History*, p. 110]