

## Weimar Germany – 1918-1933 GERMANY IN THE INTER-WAR YEARS

### Foundation of the Weimar Republic

- Kaiser William II abdicated and went into exile in Holland as part of the Allied conditions for German surrender.
- A republic was proclaimed, with the Socialist leader Frederich Ebert as chancellor.
  - First act was to sign the armistice and acknowledge defeat.
- The situation in Germany:
  - 2.5 million Germans died in the war, 4 million wounded.
  - Economic problems – rising prices, unemployment, shortage of food.
  - Left wing unhappy – wanted a communist revolution.
  - Right wing unhappy – disagreed with the surrender, saw it as treason (called men who agreed to it **November Criminals**), disloyal to new republic.
  - The treaty being negotiated was harsh.
- Spartacus Revolt:
  - Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg led the Communist Spartacus League – seemed as if worldwide revolution predicted by Lenin had begun.
  - Crushed by the Weimar government, using the army and the Freikorps (volunteer militia).
  - Liebknecht and Luxemburg were shot.
- New constitution – Weimar Republic coming properly into power:
  - Majority of Germans voted for parties that favoured the new democratic republic.
  - Parliament met at Weimar to draw up new constitution.
  - They hoped that a peaceful republic would mean that the Allies would go easier on them.
  - The constitution:
    - Germany would be a federal country (like US).
    - Reichstag (parliament) would be elected by both men and women over the age of 20.
    - Head of government (chancellor) would be appointed by the president.
    - President (head of state) would be elected every 7 years
      - Ebert was the first president
      - Article 48 stated that the president could declare a state of emergency and allow the chancellor to rule by decree.
  - It was impossible for one party to gain an overall majority – this led to coalition governments.
  - Parties in favour of new republic:
    - Social Democrats – most popular party until 1932.
    - German Democratic Party – strong support in middle classes.
    - German People's Party – backed by business men.
    - Centre Party – represented Catholics.
  - Parties against new republic:
    - Communist Party (KPD) – formed from Spartacus League.
    - German National People's Party – wanted a return of the monarchy.
    - National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazis) – extreme nationalists, racists.

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### Hyperinflation – Causes

- Treaty of Versailles (called the **Diktat** – the dictated peace)
  - Terms:
    - Lost a lot of territory – to Poland, Belgium, Denmark, France, Lithuania.
    - Forbidden to place troops near the River Rhine (**demilitarised zone**).
    - Germany and Austria forbidden to unite.
    - Army reduced to 100,000 men, conscription banned, navy limited to six battleships, not allowed an air force, tanks, or submarines.
    - **War Guilt Clause** – had to pay £6.6 billion in reparations.
    - Colonies taken.
  - Condemned by virtually all sections of political opinion.
- Political violence:
  - Kapp led a revolution backed by the Freikorps, which the army refused to crush.
    - Government fled to Stuttgart.
    - The putsch (revolt) collapsed when trade unions called a general strike.
  - Communist revolt in the Ruhr.
  - Right-wing assassinations killed over 200.
- French Occupation of the Ruhr:
  - German government couldn't afford to pay the reparations, and they defaulted.
  - French and Belgian troops occupied the industrial centre of Germany, the Ruhr, to seize the coal and goods produced there as compensation.
  - German government began a policy of **passive resistance** and called a general strike.
    - It agreed to pay workers on strike, and printed more money to do this.
- Impact of these problems:
  - Loss of production of the Ruhr led to factories all over Germany closing – unemployment rose from 2 percent to 23 percent.
  - Government printed money.
  - **Hyperinflation** resulted in 1923 – prices soared to 1 billion times their initial value in less than a year.

### Hyperinflation – Effects

- Saved money was now worthless.
- People carried money in shopping baskets or wheelbarrows as so many banknotes were needed.
- Highest value note printed: 500 trillion – worth less than a pre-war 1,00 mark note.
- Prices changed hugely hourly.
- Germany came to a halt as the government could no longer pay employees.
- Over 90 percent of a family's expenditure was just on food.

### Everything's great again (but only for a little while)

- New chancellor – **Gustav Stresemann**, his government only lasted 100 days, but he remained as foreign minister in successive coalitions until his death in 1929. He ended hyperinflation, and improved Germany's economy drastically.

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- He ceased financial support for the general strike in the Ruhr.
- He introduced a new and stable currency, the Rentenmark (soon renamed the Reichsmark) – this ended hyperinflation.
- He agreed to end reparations, in return for the Allies making the payments more reasonable under the **Dawes Plan**. The French also ended the occupation of the Ruhr.
- A loan of \$800 million was raised in America.
- Golden Era
  - Economy boomed with American loans pouring into Germany.
  - Germany home to some of the biggest corporations in Europe – Siemens electrical company, Deutsche Bank, Mercedes-Benz.
  - Famous for writers, architects, composers, film industry (Hollywood of Europe).
  - Some of the best universities in the world.
  - The **Young Plan** reduced total cost of reparations to £2 billion over 59 years.

### The Collapse of the Weimar Republic

- Wall Street Crash, 1929:
  - Germany depended heavily on American loans for everything (government, corporations, banks)
  - Over one week, \$30 billion was wiped off values of shares.
  - American businesses collapsed, demand for imports fell, American banks called in their loans from Germany and wouldn't lend any more.
  - Effects on Germany:
    - Industrial production fell quickly.
    - Banks went out of business.
    - Unemployment rose – one in three workers was unemployed.
    - Tax revenues collapsed – government could no longer afford to pay benefits.
    - Crime and suicide rates rose sharply.
    - **People deserted democratic parties and turned to Communists or Nazis.**
- Rise of the Nazis:
  - Adolf Hitler became head of the NSDAP after being sent to spy on it.
    - He had a gift for oratory and he attacked Versailles, November Criminals, Jews, and Socialists.
    - The newspaper The People's Observer spread their message.
    - The **Sturmabteilung**, or **SA**, was run by Ernst Rohm and it protected party meetings and attacked opponents. They were known as the Brownshirts.
    - The **Schutzstaffel (SA)**, was later formed to be Hitler's personal guard.
    - Influenced by fascism in Italy, he took the title of Der Fuhrer.
  - Party aims:
    - Tear up the Treaty of Versailles.
    - Unite all German speakers in one country.
    - Destroy communism and socialism.
    - Replace democracy with a dictatorship.
    - Destroy the Jews, who they saw as enemies of the 'master race' (Germans).

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- The Beer Hall Putsch
  - Hitler attempted to march on Berlin and take over – it seemed like a good time, because of the economic disaster in 1923.
  - Police in Munich opened fire and killed 16 Nazis.
  - Hitler sentenced to 5 years in jail – only served 9 months, in which he wrote **Mein Kampf**.
  - Hitler decided that he had to take power by legal means – but support for Nazis was low because of the prospering economy.
- Nazis became more popular after the Wall Street crash.
- End of democracy:
  - Government seen as failing to deal with economic situation.
  - Heinrich Brüning – such a failure he was called the Hunger Chancellor
    - Cut spending to reduce inflation and keep exports cheap.
    - Raised taxes, lowered salaries, reduced benefits.
    - This worsened the situation, and unemployment increased.
    - He relied on Article 48 to pass laws, and he ignored the parliament.
  - **Franz von Papen** became chancellor and called an election.
    - **Goebbels** was in charge of propaganda for the election campaign.
    - Mass meetings, marches, posters, Hitler flew around Germany, party's more extreme views were toned down.
    - Election was a victory for the Nazis – they won 230 seats and were the biggest party.
    - Moderate parties were completely annihilated.
    - Political violence increased – 12 were killed on the day of the polls.
  - Who voted for the Nazis?
    - People fearful of growth of communism.
    - People who lost faith in the Weimar Republic.
    - Conservative older voters who believed he would restore traditional German values, e.g. order, morality, discipline.
    - Hitler's nationalist views appealed to the many voters who hated the Treaty of Versailles and blamed it for all of Germany's problems.
    - Working class, though not as much.
    - The young and women. ¼ who voted for the Nazis had not voted before.
    - Stronger Protestant support than Catholic
  - Some advisors to the president wanted to bypass the Reichstag and bring in a right-wing authoritarian government with the Nazis.
    - Negotiations began between President Hindenburg and Hitler – Hitler refused any coalition unless he was appointed chancellor.
    - Hindenburg disliked Hitler and talks broke down.
  - At the next election, Nazi vote fell. The party also had serious financial difficulties.
  - Hitler appointed chancellor:
    - Von Papen had little popular support and no support from the army.
    - **General Kurt von Schleicher** replaced von Papen as chancellor.
    - Von Papen plotted to get back into power – he convinced Hindenburg to let Hitler be chancellor in a coalition government. Von Papen, vice-chancellor.

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### Why did the Weimar Republic fail?

- It was a republic born out of defeat.
  - Many people therefore disliked it and blamed it for accepting the Treaty.
  - People felt little loyalty to it.
- It was politically chaotic, with 20 different coalitions in 14 years.
  - People lost faith in democracy.
- **Economic problems.**
  - Because of these, many Germans thought that a dictatorship was required to deal with these problems.