

Why did the Weimar Republic Fail?

What led the German people to become disillusioned with their 'perfect' Weimar constitution and turn instead to the Communist and Nazi parties?

The Weimar Republic takes its name from a small town in central Germany, famous for its cultural and literary associations. It was the meeting place of the Constituent Assembly elected in January 1919 to draft a republican, democratic constitution after the fall of the German Empire in November 1918. The Weimar period came to an end with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor on 30 January 1933.

The ultimate failure of the Republic had such catastrophic consequences for Germany and the world that it has always overshadowed the history of the first German parliamentary democracy. It is therefore important to stress that Weimar's collapse was never inevitable, though in the final years of the Republic the chances of survival had become desperately slim. Some of the reasons for the failure lie further back in history — in the weakness of liberalism in Germany after the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848, followed by the successful unification of the country by Bismarck through force of arms. The principal causes for the failure have, however, to be sought in the years after 1918.

Revolution

Many of Weimar's problems had their roots in the defeat and the revolution of 1918. These events came as a traumatic shock to most patriotic middle-class Germans. They were prepared to tolerate the new parliamentary democracy only as long as it seemed likely to bring Germany a more lenient peace. When the treaty of Versailles became public in May 1919, it was regarded by most of the German public as deeply humiliating and was accepted only under duress. Nationalist right-wing opinion swiftly turned against the new Republic. It accepted the notorious stab-in-the-back myth, namely that the German army had never been defeated on the battlefield, but had been betrayed by the politicians, mostly from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the main party of the working classes, who had been brought to power by the revolution.

This was a travesty of the facts. When in October 1918 the German High Command was compelled to seek an armistice, the imperial regime had become totally discredited and was swept away by the masses of workers and

soldiers yearning for peace. The leaders of the SPD, headed by Friedrich Ebert, later the first President of the Republic, took power reluctantly and did their best to protect the country from break-down and disintegration in very difficult circumstances not of their making.

They faced an early challenge from the Left, who wanted a more thorough-going revolution, using the spontaneously emerging workers' and soldiers' councils as the basis for a socialist society. For the extreme Left, represented mainly by the Spartakus League, the nucleus of the German Communist Party, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia was the model. For the moderate Left, as well as for the middle classes, the avoidance of 'Russian conditions' and chaos became a priority.

Ebert and his colleagues have been criticised for becoming obsessed with the threat from the Left and for relying too much on civil servants and military officers inherited from the previous regime. Historians now generally accept that a profound social upheaval was unlikely in an advanced industrial society such as Germany. A dictatorship of the proletariat based on workers' and soldiers' councils would have been a backward step in a country where male workers had had the vote for fifty years.

Historians are now also sceptical about the argument that the councils could have been used to democratise German society more thoroughly. It was, however, an error by the politicians in power in 1919, notably Ebert and the defence minister Gustav Noske, to rely on volunteer forces — the so-called *Freikorps* — to fight a counter-revolutionary civil war against the extreme Left. Sections of the working class became alienated from the Republic and this contributed to the deep division in the labour movement throughout the Weimar period. *Freikorps* members often joined the Nazi Stormtroopers. The habit of resolving political conflict by force became engrained and paramilitary formations again posed a threat to democracy in the closing years of the Republic.

The political system

The foundations, many of them not very sound, had thus been laid for the new parliamentary democracy, even before the republican consti-

The reluctant President — Friedrich Ebert.



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tion came into force in August 1919. On paper, the Weimar Constitution was a perfect democratic instrument, containing, for example, provisions for the direct participation of the voters through referenda. It also included a section laying down individual rights, which was advanced for its time. It provided for the protection of the family, of motherhood and childhood, with equal rights for illegitimate children. And it contained a far-reaching charter for the rights of labour, including co-determination by workers in industry.

Historians now argue that expectations were aroused, which a country in the parlous economic state of defeated Germany would find it difficult to fulfil. The political system devised at Weimar has, in spite of its theoretical perfection, often been criticised in practice and is held to have contributed to the Republic's downfall.

Three features in particular have been attacked. One was the electoral system of strict proportional representation. The second was the existence of two authorities directly elected by the people: the *Reichstag* (national parliament) and the Presidency. Direct election made the President an unduly strong figure. His power was further enhanced by the third, much-criticised, provision — that under article 48 of the Constitution he could assume emergency powers and rule virtually without the *Reichstag*.

To all these criticisms there are counter-arguments. Proportional representation (PR) was not the main reason for Germany's multiplicity of parties. Its diversity, and the existence of two major religious denominations, had given rise to at least five main groupings in the nineteenth century and these survived the revolution of 1918 little changed. Government had therefore normally to be by coalition, but the parties — which in the imperial era had not been responsible for providing the national executive government — still found it difficult after 1918 to make the compromises necessary to ensure stable coalitions.

The large number of very small parties, often adduced as an argument for the absurdity of the system by those who opposed it, were usually not unduly significant. The Weimar PR system did, however, allow the volatility of the electorate to express itself without hindrance. Thus the Nazi party went from a marginal 2.6% of the vote and 12 seats in May 1928 to 18.3% and 107 seats in September 1930, making it the second largest party.

As for the Presidency, it was thought necessary to have a counterweight to the otherwise unchecked power of the parliament and to provide a focus of loyalty in place of the fallen monarchs. The presidential emergency powers were not, in themselves, unusual. When Ebert was President, they were used to resolve crises and restore normal parliamentary government; but from 1930 they were deliberately employed to by-pass the *Reichstag*. Thus, it was not the political and constitutional arrangements in themselves that were at fault, but the way in

which they were used in a country where large sections of the population had little regard for democracy and parliamentary government.

Years of crisis 1919–24

The first few years of the Republic were a period of virtually uninterrupted crisis, culminating in 1923, when Germany almost disintegrated. Having first been threatened by overthrow from the Left, by 1920 the pendulum had already swung back so far in the direction of nationalist anti-republicanism that a coup from the Right was attempted — the Kapp *Putsch* of March 1920. It failed because the trade unions called a general strike and the senior civil servants, although by no means fully loyal to the Republic, did not cooperate with the plotters. The first *Reichstag* elections, held in June 1920, showed that the parties fully committed to parliamentary democracy now no longer had a majority. To say that Weimar was a republic without republicans is perhaps an exaggeration; but the supporters and opponents of democracy were at best finely balanced.

In the next few years the divisions were further embittered by the reparations problem (the payments imposed on Germany under the Versailles treaty) and, from the summer of 1922, the advent of hyper-inflation. The French occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923, in response to German failure to pay reparations in full, led to the total collapse of the German currency. Wages had to be paid with washing baskets full of bank notes, and the printing presses could not keep pace with the precipitous decline in the value of money.

Nationalist resentment reached fever pitch, but by September 1923 passive resistance to the French had broken down, for Germany was at the end of its tether. In October and November 1923 there were several attempts from the Right and the Left to overthrow the Republic — including Hitler's Beer Hall *Putsch* in Munich, an ignominious failure.

At the point of greatest danger, solutions to Germany's internal and external problems began to emerge. Gustav Stresemann, Chancellor for 100 crucial days from August to November 1923 and thereafter Foreign Minister until his death in October 1929, became the Republic's strong man. A new currency, the Rentenmark, was successfully introduced; and the Dawes Plan established a system of reparations payments, which the German economy could bear and the international community accept. These measures paved the way for the French evacuation of the Ruhr and the Locarno treaties, which permanently guaranteed Germany's western frontiers as agreed at Versailles and ruled out the use of force in any revision of its eastern borders.

Years of stability 1924–29

From 1924 to 1929 Germany enjoyed greater stability and prosperity. Given the severity of the preceding crises, this highlights the resilience of the Weimar system. There were, however,

political and economic factors which put the permanence of the stability in doubt.

In national politics this was still a period of weak, frequently-shifting coalitions. The influence of the extreme Right was reduced, but Hitler's Nazi party, rebuilt from 1925 around him as *Führer* (leader), became a principal element within it. The more moderate nationalist Right, represented by the *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* (DNVP or German National party) and the *Stahlhelm*, an ex-soldiers' league in which many former *Freikorps* fighters had found refuge, still accepted the Republic with reluctance.

The uncertain attitude of many sections of the German people was symbolised by the election of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, Chief of the German Supreme Command for much of the First World War, as President of the Republic in succession to Ebert, who died in 1925. A 'substitute emperor', with little regard for parliamentary democracy, now held the highest republican office. This was to have fateful consequences after 1929, but for the moment it was widely felt that Hindenburg would help to reconcile national opposition to the republican system.

The decline of the liberal middle-class parties, including Stresemann's own party the *Deutsche*

A French soldier guards a German coal train, 1923



Volkspartei (DVP), continued unabated. On the Left, the Communist party (KPD), drawing at least a quarter of the working class-vote, was firmly established as the rival of the SPD, making it difficult for the latter to enter into coalitions with the middle-class parties — a collaboration essential for republican stability. The leadership of the KPD was increasingly obedient to the policy laid down by Stalin in the interests of the Soviet Union.

The *Reichstag* election of May 1928 seemed to represent a high point for the Republic, with the SPD gaining nearly a third of the vote. There was, however, a great fragmentation in the middle spectrum of politics. The injustices caused by hyper-inflation hit this section of the population particularly hard, and left a deep resentment against Weimar and all its works. It was among such voters that the Nazis were to make large gains, when crisis struck again.

In the economic sphere, German living standards seemed to recover rapidly, reaching something like pre-war levels by 1928. In recent years, economic historians have generated much controversy about the nature of this recovery. Attention has been drawn to dependence on American loans, weak public finances, inadequate investment and high social costs, all of which made it difficult for German governments to cope with the world-wide slump that began in 1929.

The Great Depression

The German economy began to falter, even before the Wall Street stock-market crash of October 1929 signalled a world-wide depression of unprecedented severity. Rising unemployment caused a heavy outflow of money from the national insurance system, the setting up of which in 1927 had been a striking achievement of the Republic. Disagreement between the parties on how to meet the budget deficit led to the collapse, in March 1930, of the last coalition firmly based on the *Reichstag*. Influential voices, drawing support from widespread and long-standing anti-democratic sentiment, began advocating reform of the political system in a more authoritarian direction, around the President.

When it seemed impossible to build a democratic coalition government, Hindenburg and his advisers prepared to appoint a Chancellor who would govern using the President's emergency decree powers under article 48 — which required merely the toleration, rather than the full consent, of the *Reichstag*. The most important among these advisers, who pressed this course on the 82-year-old President, was General Kurt von Schleicher, the Army's political voice. It was another element in Weimar's weakness that the officer corps of the small professional army (*Reichswehr*) permitted by the Versailles treaty gave only conditional loyalty to the Republic.

The Chancellor whom Hindenburg appointed to govern, if necessary by decree, was Heinrich Brüning. When the *Reichstag* refused to accept his package of austerity measures, he reissued



The 'Hunger Chancellor', Heinrich Brüning.

them under Hindenburg's emergency powers and dissolved the *Reichstag*. The ensuing elections, in September 1930, produced the sensational Nazi breakthrough. Henceforth, Brüning could govern only by decree and only as long as the Social Democrats, fearing a Nazi take-over, refrained from voting against these decrees — even though they imposed growing hardship on their supporters.

Brüning, soon to be known as the 'Hunger Chancellor', ruthlessly cut government expenditure — including wages, salaries and welfare payments — regardless of the political consequences. He tried to make a virtue of necessity by using the rise of political extremism in Germany to bring about the end of reparations.

Recent historical debates have revolved around the question whether there was an alternative to Brüning's policy of strict deflation,

General Hindenburg was a leading member of the officer corps, which gave only conditional loyalty to the Republic.



which had the disastrous result of turning Hitler and the Nazis into an imminent threat. It is argued that, given the previous weaknesses of the German economy and the profound German fear of renewed inflation, he had little room for manoeuvre. The exceptional severity of the slump did not, in any case, become apparent until the late spring of 1931 and reflationary measures could not have become effective until well into 1932. By that time, Hindenburg and his advisers had become tired of underpinning the unpopular Brüning and he was dismissed in May 1932. There were now at least six million unemployed — a third of the labour force.

The surrender of democracy

The misery caused by the slump enabled Hitler and the Nazi party to mobilize an enormous protest vote. The only sections of the electorate to remain immune to the Nazi appeal were the Roman Catholic voters traditionally supporting the Centre Party (*Zentrum*) and the working-class voters in the big cities normally voting SPD or KPD. The KPD, as totalitarian and anti-democratic as the Nazis, was gaining ground at the expense of the SPD, which remained committed to the Republic and democracy.

Modern historiography has produced highly sophisticated analyses of the social basis of the Nazi vote. Although the middle classes in non-Catholic areas were the chief source of Nazi support, Hitler's appeal cut across all classes — thus justifying to some extent the claim that Nazism was a movement and not a divisive party, like the others. A vote for Hitler was mainly a negative vote: anti-democratic and anti-Weimar, anti-liberal, anti-semitic. As one Nazi leader put it, 'Nazism is the opposite of everything that now exists.'

By 1932, if Nazi and Communist votes are added together (admittedly a purely theoretical calculation), it can be shown that a majority of the German electorate had turned against democracy. This made it very difficult to find a viable government that did not include Hitler, particularly if, as was the case with Hindenburg and his circle, any recourse to Left-wing parties was excluded. Influential groups such as the industrialists felt that only a stable government including the Nazis could pull Germany out of the slump — and they had always disliked the Republic as dominated by labour and the Left.

Few historians, however, now accept the Marxist argument that Hitler was merely the tool of capitalists. More importance is attached to the influence of the large landowners in the eastern provinces of Prussia, the *Junkers*, because of the direct access they had to Hindenburg — who was one of them. Rule by presidential decree had made the decisions and misjudgements of the small circle of men around the President crucial.

Personal factors cannot therefore be left out of account in explaining Hitler's accession to power. In the eight months between the fall of Brüning and the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor, Papen and Schleicher became

Chancellor (successively) and hoped to find a way of 'taming' Hitler and his movement. Although the Nazis suffered heavy losses in the second *Reichstag* elections of November 1932, which seemed to make Hitler's inclusion in government avoidable, they were still the largest party and controlled a huge, semi-revolutionary para-military force, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*). When the Hitler Cabinet was formed on 30 January 1933, it contained a majority of conservatives, led by Papen, and only three Nazis, including Hitler himself. Many observers thought that the 'taming' had been achieved.

This turned out to be an illusion. Hitler had learnt from the fiasco of the Beer Hall *Putsch* that revolution in a modern state could not be made at the barricades and that confrontation with the armed forces of the state had to be avoided. With his mass movement revitalised by his appointment as Chancellor, and with the power of the state legally surrendered into his hands, with breath-taking speed he was able to establish a dictatorship — the beginning of the far-reaching revolution he had always intended.

The death-throes of democracy: Hitler swears in Nazi members of the Reichstag.



Further reading

- Feuchtwanger, E. J. (1995) *From Weimar to Hitler: Germany 1918–1933* (2nd edn), Macmillan.
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 Nicholls, A. J. (1991) *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler* (3rd edn), Macmillan.
 Peukert, D. J. K. (1993) *The Weimar Republic: Crisis of Classical Modernity*, Penguin.

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The Rise and Fall of the Weimar Republic

- 1918 November:** Revolution in Berlin; Emperor William II abdicates.
1919 June: Treaty of Versailles signed by German delegates.
1920 March: First right-wing nationalist coup, the Kapp *Putsch*, fails.
1923 January: French troops occupy the Ruhr.
November: 4,200 billion marks exchanged for one Rentenmark.
1925 February: Hitler refounds NSDAP after his release from prison.
May: Hindenburg takes office as President.
October: Locarno treaties signed.
1929 October: The Wall Street Crash; Stresemann dies.
1930 March: Brüning becomes Chancellor.
September: Nazis become second-largest party in *Reichstag* elections.
1932 April: Hindenburg, aged 84, beats Hitler in presidential election.
June: Franz von Papen succeeds Brüning as Chancellor.
July: *Reichstag* elections make Nazis the largest party.
November: Nazis lose two million votes in *Reichstag* elections, but remain the largest party.
December: Kurt von Schleicher succeeds Papen as Chancellor.
1933 January: Hitler is appointed Chancellor, with Papen as Vice-Chancellor.