

Weimar

Democracy in freefall

Gaynor Johnson

It lasted longer than Hitler's Reich and it was one of the most sophisticated, liberal regimes in Europe. Why do we write off Weimar?

Key concept

Significance

Before you read this

It is so difficult to drop hindsight when looking at Weimar. List three good reasons why, by the mid-1920s, there was every reason to suppose that the republic would last and flourish for the foreseeable future.

The history of democracy in Germany during the Weimar Republic (1918–33) is one which most historians associate with failure. It now seems doomed from the outset. Why did the introduction of one of the

most forward-thinking and modern democratic constitutions ever created not live up to expectations? How did this lack of success pave the way for the excesses of Hitler's Third Reich (1933–45)?

Such is the preoccupation of historians with explaining Hitler's rise to power that the general characteristics of democracy in the Weimar period tend to be overlooked. But we should remember that the Weimar Republic actually lasted longer than the Third Reich, and that Hitler's involvement in the Republic's politics represented only a small (if important) part of its history.

In this article, I provide a broad assessment of the context in which Weimar democracy operated and explain some of the main obstacles to its success. Some of these help to account for Hitler's ultimate popularity, but several do not. Another question I ask is, was it inevitable that the extreme right rather than the extreme left would provide the most coherent and long-term opposition to democracy in Germany at this time? We tend to assume that the answer is 'Yes' because we know that ultimately it did. But are we right to do so?

To revolt or not to revolt?

The first point to consider is the context in which the Weimar Republic came into being. Europe in 1918 was unstable, not only because of the havoc wrought by the First World War, but also because of fears about the spread of communism. The Russian Revolution had taken place only the previous year. To many in Germany, who were disenchanted with the failure of **Kaiser Wilhelm II** to prioritise social welfare over military expenditure, the events in Russia provided an attractive role model. Consequently, the early history of Weimar democracy was concerned with how far this social revolution should go.

There were some, such as **Hugo Haas**, who believed that democracy should be abandoned altogether in favour of a full-blown socialist revolution, while others, such as Friedrich Ebert, preferred a more moderate mixture of social reform and democracy. That it was to be Ebert whose views prevailed owed less to a German rejection of a Russian-style revolution than to the realities of the political situation at home and abroad. If Germany had embraced communism, it would almost certainly have resulted in the country being occupied by the British, French, Italians and Americans, who were anxious to stem the tide of communism across Europe. This, in turn, might persuade these powers to take a harsh line when drafting the terms of the peace treaty being negotiated between Germany and the **Allies** in Paris (the Treaty of Versailles).

Another consideration was German war-weariness; the German people lacked the energy to undergo a radical revolution after 4 years of war. Scholars also place a great deal of emphasis on the failure of the **Spartacists** to galvanise support for a left-wing alternative to democracy. The challenge to Weimar democracy from the extreme political left failed primarily because it lacked long-term widespread political support. This was much less true of the extreme political right. But it is also important to

Key points

- Weimar democracy lasted longer than Hitler's Third Reich.
- The constitution of the Weimar Republic was the most liberal of its kind at the time.
- Most political parties were left of centre.
- Hitler thought democracy 'un-German'.
- Democracy did not have strong enough roots — unlike in Britain and France — to be able to withstand the crises of the 1930s.
- Paradoxically, Weimar democracy was too democratic to be able to work effectively.

remember that, until the end of the 1920s, Germany was governed by coalitions dominated by the political left and not the right. That amounts to most of its history.

Even by today's standards, the constitution of the Weimar Republic is considered extremely modern. But in the Germany of the 1920s and early 1930s, its emphasis on liberalism, social reform and welfare was radically new and ahead of its time. In addition, it was operating in a country used to autocratic rule with no history of democratic government. Under the terms of the constitution, the government was to be elected by a system of proportional representation. Unlike women in Britain and France at the time, all women in Germany over the age of 21 had the vote. The head of state was to be elected for a 7-year period. The two men who held this post were Friedrich Ebert (1919–25) and **Field Marshal von Hindenburg** (1925–34). Under Article 48, the president was accorded special powers to use in an emergency.

Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941, reigned 1888–1918)

- 1890** Dismissed Bismarck and abandoned policy of seeking European domination in favour of von Bulow's policy of world leadership.
- 1908** Unsuccessfully sought British friendship, then began build-up of German navy to rival Britain's.
- 1914** Sought a 'short, preventive war' to settle grievances in Europe, perceiving neither the implications of the extended European alliance systems nor the war's potential scale and length.
- 1916** Military leaders Hindenburg and Ludendorff began to dominate German policy making.
- 1918** Fled to Holland on the advice of the military, which saw him as an impediment to advantageous armistice terms.
- 1941** Died in Holland, where he was given protection by Queen Wilhelmina and the Dutch government. They refused the Paris peacemakers' demand that Wilhelm should be handed over for trial.

Kaiser Wilhelm II: German emperor (1888–1918), often viewed as erratic and with strong militaristic sympathies.

Hugo Haas: member of the USPD, the German Independent Social Democratic (i.e. socialist) Party (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands).

Allies: the wartime alliance of Britain, France, Italy and the USA was maintained during the peace negotiations in Paris.

Spartacists: German Communist Party. Under the leadership of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, they staged a putsch in 1919 that was brutally put down by the German army and the *Freikorps*.

Field Marshal von Hindenburg: along with Ludendorff, effectively governed Germany in the last 2 years of the First World War. A respected military leader, he became president of the Weimar Republic in 1925.

Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919)

A Jewish socialist of Polish birth, who acquired German citizenship by marriage while at university in Switzerland.

- 1905** Participated in anti-tsarist riots.
- September 1905** Began collaboration with Karl Liebknecht to establish syndicalism within the German Socialist Party (SPD).
- 1910 on** Organised left-wing demonstrations in Berlin.
- September 1914** With Liebknecht, denounced war, which mainstream SPD supported, as an imperialist conflict.
- 1915** Organised the Spartacists, a group of socialists opposed to war.
- 1915–1918** Imprisoned, but continued to direct socialist activism from inside.
- December 1918** Started to organise German workers to stage a revolution, but Spartacist action began prematurely.
- January 1919** Captured by *Freikorps* (right-wing paramilitaries tasked to stamp out revolutionary activism) and was murdered with Liebknecht.

It was under this authority that President Hindenburg effectively suspended democracy between 1930 and 1933 through his use of the so-called presidential cabinets. Prompted by the worsening economic crisis in Europe caused by the Great Depression, Hindenburg ruled by emergency decree, appointing allies and close associates, such as Heinrich Brüning, to the post of chancellor. As a

result, historians have debated the extent to which Hindenburg — a soldier in the pre-war German army — was truly committed to democracy. Some have argued that the economic crisis meant that he had little choice but to act as he did. Others have argued that his association with the military (the group most sceptical about whether Germany should be democratic) meant that, when he became president, democracy was ultimately doomed to fail.

Under the constitution, the chancellor was elected for 4 years, although none came close to the maximum term of office, for reasons to be discussed. Most of the features of the constitution were present within the British and French political systems and most historians believe that those who drafted the constitution of the Weimar Republic looked to established democracies for role models. But the difference was that in Britain and France political structures and traditions had been shaped over many centuries of heated debate. Germany was expected to adopt an entirely new way of government without having such a long period of adjustment.

Political parties and the social background of politicians

Ironically, it could be argued that democracy in Weimar Germany actually became a victim of the democratic process. There was a daunting number

Questions

- If Russia could get rid of its emperor and have a communist revolution, even though its people were worn down by war and its armies were defeated and demoralised, why couldn't Germany?
- If the Weimar Republic allowed the president to suspend democracy and rule by decree, was it really democratic?
- Might the Weimar Republic have been stronger with a first-past-the post system, rather than proportional representation?
- Can democracy be imposed successfully on a defeated state? (Before you leap to conclusions, consider Germany *after* Hitler.)

of political parties, many of which were ideologically very similar to one another, making it difficult for electors to choose between them. The large number also meant that it was difficult for one party to secure a majority in the German equivalent of the House of Commons, the Reichstag.

Consequently, most of the history of Weimar democracy is the history of coalition government. Doing deals with political rivals in order to remain in office, which is what such a system involves, was inevitably fraught with danger. Policies developed on key issues such as the economy and foreign affairs were watered-down compromises appealing little to the electorate. Most policies were also short-term, as the majority of governments did not remain in office for enough time to implement anything longer-term.

Because they were made up of political rivals from many different parties, Weimar coalition governments tended to fall apart after, on average, 10 months. This situation would have undermined democracy even in a state with a long tradition of such a system of government, operating during a time of international diplomatic and economic stability. But this fledgling constitution was forced to operate against the backdrop of the complexities and uncertainties of the peace-making process at the end of the First World War, with all of the controversy that held for Germany. It was also set at the start of the worst economic crisis the world had yet seen — the Great Depression, caused by the **Wall Street Crash** in October 1929.

Weblink

Historians have long agonised over whether or not the Weimar Republic could have survived had one or two things been slightly different — had Stresemann been in better health, for example. There is a useful collection of essays and links on the Weimar Republic at:

www.johndclare.net, including an essay on whether or not the republic was doomed. An important part of any informed analysis is to look at the republic's constitution, and you can do just that, thanks to John Jay College in the USA; see <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~jobrien/reference/ob13.html>.

You might also want to include an analysis of election results — it helps put Hitler's rise into better perspective. You can get these from another US college, Virginian Wesleyan, at <http://facultystaff.vwc.edu/~dgraf/weim.htm>.

During the early years of the Weimar Republic, the majority of politicians were from a different social class from those who had held office under the kaiser. Before 1914, most German politicians and diplomats were from the aristocracy or a military background, for example **Bismarck**. In contrast, Weimar politicians were, with one or two exceptions, mostly from the upper middle class.

Wall Street Crash: collapse of the US stock market in the autumn of 1929 that led to the worldwide economic depression that lasted until the outbreak of war 10 years later.

Bismarck: Otto von Bismarck created the unified German state in 1871 and was its first chancellor.

Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925)

- 1905** Appointed secretary-general of Socialist Democratic Party (SPD).
- 1912** Elected to Reichstag.
- 1913** Succeeded August Bebel as leader of SDP.
- 1914** Persuaded the SPD to support the German war effort.
- 1917** SPD fragmented into multiple left-wing groups, many not supporting the war.
- 1918–19** Ebert worked to establish a coalition of parties in favour of parliamentary democracy and constitutional government, e.g. Black–Red–Gold coalition, which won a majority in 1919 elections and drew up the Weimar constitution. Ebert was elected first president of Weimar Germany. Germany was destabilised by numerous left-wing coup attempts.
- 1920** Black–Red–Gold lost its majority in Reichstag, being blamed for unpopular Versailles Treaty terms, for which Ebert bore much of the blame.
- 1923** Ebert appointed Gustav Stresemann to resolve the Ruhr coal dispute and quashed Hitler's Munich Beer Hall putsch.
- 1925** Ebert died soon after being found guilty of high treason for supporting munitions strikers during the war, accused by the left of betraying the revolution and by the right of 'stabbing the army in the back' at the end of the war.

Walter Rathenau: a Jewish banker and intellectual, minister for reconstruction in 1921 and minister for foreign affairs until he was assassinated in 1922.

stab in the back: myth generated after the war by the German High Command, claiming that lack of support for the military among the general population (strikes in arms factories) was like a 'stab in the back', which forced the High Command to seek an armistice in November 1918.

Many were self-made businessmen, such as **Walther Rathenau**, but most had little experience of senior political office. In 1919, this social shift was considered to be important in persuading the German people of the acceptability of democracy. The new system of government was operated by people from a different background from the class that had led Germany to defeat in 1918. This meant that, not only could the ghosts of the First World War be laid to rest, but the change would demonstrate to the rest of the world that the new postwar Germany had abandoned militarism in favour of the pursuit of peace. This was likely to strike a positive chord with the British, French and Americans, who were the principal powers responsible for shaping Germany's diplomatic future after 1919. Not only were they democratic powers themselves, but they were anxious to encourage the growth of democracy in areas of Europe that had previously been part of the old pre-war empires.

to work within the Republic's democratic structure, Hitler's view of democracy remained consistent throughout the history of the Republic. Moreover, he associated the restoration of Germany's status as a major European power with a rejection of democracy.

Conclusion

The history of democracy in Germany between 1918 and 1933 is usually seen as being one of failure because of the way in which Hitler eventually swept aside all that had been achieved. But should we be so dismissive of what one scholar has called this 'democratic interlude'? The constitution of the Weimar Republic was one of the most progressive in the twentieth century, giving greater political freedom to German citizens than the British and French political systems offered at the time. Its left-of-centre politics helped ultimately to lay the foundation of the Christian Socialist governments that were so powerful for the last 40 years of the twentieth century in Germany.

Yet the sophistication of Weimar democracy proved to be a weakness, not a strength. There was too much political choice for the system to work efficiently and most of the politicians of the era failed to convince the hearts and minds of the German people that democracy was the way forward. Ultimately, however, it failed because the people in government stopped wanting democracy to work in Germany.

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Further reading

All the books dealing in detail with the nature of democracy in the Weimar Republic are only available in German. However, the subject forms an element in most general books dealing with German domestic policy in this period. See for example:

Hidden, J. (1996) *The Weimar Republic*, 2nd edn, Longman. A good general history of the period that places Weimar foreign policy in its wider context.

Kolb, E. (1988) *The Weimar Republic*, translated by P. S. Falla, Unwin Hyman. The Weimar Republic from the German perspective.

Nicholls, A. J. (2000) *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler*, 4th edn, Macmillan. The standard work on the subject and also a good read.

An 'un-German' concept

A final point to consider is the attitude to democracy of the extreme right in Germany between 1918 and 1933. Traditionally, scholars have argued that members of the aristocracy, and the military in particular, simply failed to accept the legitimacy of the democratic governments, preferring to bide their time until a more acceptable alternative could be created. Hitler saw democracy as being 'un-German' because it lacked historical foundation. It was associated with the humiliations of the 'stab in the back', the terms of the Versailles settlement and with German subservience to Britain, France and the USA. Even when he languished in jail for his part in the **Beer Hall putsch** in 1923 and decided

Beer Hall putsch: name usually given to Hitler's attempt to stage a coup against Weimar democracy in Munich in 1923. For his part in the rising, he was put in jail for 10 months, during which time he dictated part of *Mein Kampf*.