

## Part II: The Troubled Infancy of the Weimar Republic

Surprisingly, given its vast industrial and military power when the war began, Germany emerged from World War I a battered and, in many respects, bewildered country. In the final months of 1918, Germans had witnessed the reversal of their army's spring offensive, the resignations of the chancellor and the kaiser, and the signing of a hastily arranged armistice, all in the midst of massive civil unrest.

### ***How was the Weimar Republic established?***

Germany had also changed internally. When the kaiser and chancellor left, members of different political parties vied for power, and the country limped along for several months without a firm government in power. Then, in elections in January 1919, 76 percent of Germans voted for the three parties that favored democracy: the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Catholic Center (including its allies in the Catholic Bavarian People's Party), and the smaller German Democratic Party (DDP). In February, the elected officials met in the city of Weimar to draw up a constitution and establish a coalition, and the Weimar Republic was born.

Understandably, many Germans could not accept that they were the losers of World War I. And yet that was precisely the basis of the Versailles Treaty (so-called because negotiations, to which Germany was not invited, took place in Versailles, France) presented to the leaders of the Weimar Republic in May 1919. German officials, as well as the German people as a whole, were stunned by the harshness of the treaty's terms. They viewed the Versailles Treaty as unfair and humiliating. It called for Germany to give up its overseas territories, to send the coal from its richest coal region to France to aid in that country's reconstruction, to vastly reduce its military, and to pay reparations to the Allies. Although the Allies threatened a resurgence of the war to force German leaders to sign the treaty, many Germans blamed their leaders and identified the

Weimar Republic with shame and weakness. Some even blamed Jews for the defeat, after a fraudulent Russian document circulated around the country said that Jews were conspiring to take over the world.

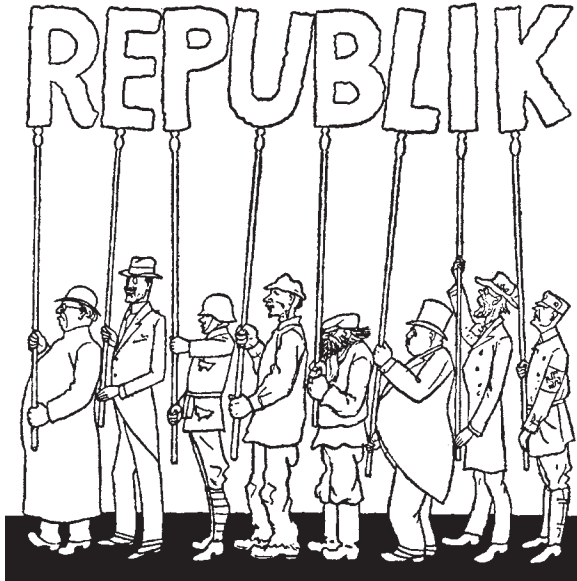
***“In the place where...the German Empire in all its glory had its origin, today German honor is being carried to its grave.... The German people will...reconquer the place among nations to which it is entitled. Then will come vengeance for the shame of 1919.”***

—from *Deutsche Zeitung*,  
a German newspaper

### ***Why did the Weimar Republic get off to such a shaky start?***

The political foundations of the Weimar Republic were shaky from the start. When the next elections were held a year later, in January 1920, the democratic parties' share of the vote shrank to less than 50 percent. Never again would the founding political coalition of the Weimar Republic receive more than 50 percent of the votes cast.

Meanwhile, parties on the far left and the far right of the German political spectrum together captured more than 35 percent of the vote in 1920. These forces rejected the basic legitimacy of the Weimar system. On the far left, the newly formed German Communist Party (KPD) earned 20 percent of the vote. KPD supporters were especially bitter that SPD leaders had called in the army to put down a Spartacist workers' uprising in Berlin in January 1919. On the far right, 15 percent of the vote in 1920 went to the nationalist German National Peoples' Party (DNVP). Most of the DNVP's members favored a return to the social order of prewar Germany and wanted the monarchy to be restored in some form. Throughout the Weimar period, at least one-third of the German electorate consistently voted for parties that opposed the new republican system.

From *The Culture of the Weimar Republic*.*The Republic*, by Thomas Heine

The Weimar Republic also faced attack from the wartime leaders of the German military. Beginning in late 1919, many of Germany's generals, most notably Field Marshal Erich von Ludendorff, argued that the civilian government that had taken power in the final days of the war had betrayed the armed forces. Former Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg's silence gave credence to the accusations. The notion that Germany had suffered a *Dolchstoß* ("stab in the back") appealed to many Germans who could not bring themselves to believe that their country's mighty army was on the verge of collapse in November 1918. (In fact, as Germany's top military commanders, Ludendorff and Hindenburg had pressed for a quick end to the war because of the sinking morale among German troops.)

## The Politics of Anger

German anger was further inflamed in January 1920, when the Allied Reparations Committee, which the terms of the Versailles Treaty established, issued its report. In effect, the committee demanded that Germany pay nearly all the damages of the war in Western Europe, including the costs of pensions to the families of Allied soldiers who were killed or maimed.

### ***Why were the Germans so upset over the reparations agreement?***

Initially, the total bill came to 269 billion German marks (equivalent to nearly \$70 billion at a time when the U.S. government's annual budget was slightly over \$5 billion). When the German government protested that the amount was excessive and far beyond the capacity of Germany to pay, the British and French threatened military action. After tense negotiations, the German government reluctantly agreed to pay 132 billion marks (about \$33 billion) in reparations. For many Germans, the reparations agreement meant that their government had accepted the article of the Versailles Treaty that held Germany and its allies fully responsible for the war.

The treaty also severely limited the size of the German army. As a result, thousands of young officers were left unemployed. Many of them joined the ranks of the *Freikorps* (Free Corps), which were organized to combat the political forces of the far left in Germany.

### ***How did many Germans express their anger about their plight?***

In March 1920, *Freikorps* brigades marched on Berlin and forced the government to flee. Even as they formed a new government, the *Freikorps* troops met no opposition from the German army. The army's chief of staff remarked, "the *Reichswehr* [German army] does not fire upon the *Reichswehr*!" The coup d'état, however, collapsed within a week, largely as the result of a general strike organized by the SPD.

The *Freikorps* uprising was an early example of the recurrent political violence of the Weimar Republic. Ultra-nationalist political groups (far right-wing groups who favored stability over democracy) carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks against their opponents in the early 1920s. Few of the right-wing terrorists were prosecuted, and conservative German judges generally treated them leniently. In contrast, left-wing terrorists received harsh sentences.

Among the most notorious acts of terrorism by ultra-nationalists was the assassination of German Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau in June 1922. Ultra-nationalists hated Rathenau for his role in reaching a settlement with the Allies and because he was a Jew. Anti-Semitism gained new strength during the Weimar era. Right-wing extremists blamed Jews for Germany's defeat in World War I and claimed that they had masterminded the communist revolution in Russia.

### **What role did Hitler and the Nazi Party play in the politics of the 1920s?**

At the time of its formation in 1920, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) was one of many small groups fanning the flames of extreme nationalism in the Weimar Republic. Within a few years, Adolf Hitler, the leader of the NSDAP (whose members were known as Nazis), drove the party to national prominence with his charisma and ambition.

Hitler was born in Austria and did not become a German citizen until 1932. Nonetheless, he fought in the German army during World War I. Like other ultra-nationalists, he viewed the Versailles Treaty as humiliating and blamed the Weimar government for Germany's post-war position.

The NSDAP first gained nationwide attention in November 1923, when Hitler and Ludendorff tried to instigate a rebellion against the Weimar system in Munich, the capital of the southern German state of Bavaria. Hitler confronted conservative Bavarian officials in a local beer hall and demanded that they support a plan to march on Berlin and seize power. The officials backed out of the *putsch* (coup), but the ultra-nationalists took their cause to the streets of Munich, where they met resistance from Bavarian police. Hitler was arrested and convicted of sedition, or insurrection against the government. He was given a light sentence, only five years in prison. During his imprisonment, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), a book that presented his political theories and framed the program of

## **From Hitler's *Mein Kampf***

### **On racial purity:**

"The stronger must dominate the weaker and not blend with the weaker, thus sacrificing his own greatness.... All great cultures of the past perished only because the originally creative race died out from blood poisoning..."

### **On the Jews:**

"With every means he [the Jew] tries to subjugate.... Culturally he contaminates art, literature, the theater, makes a mockery of natural feeling, overthrows all concepts of beauty and sublimity, of the noble and the good, and instead drags men down..."

### **On Germany's defeat:**

"The defeats on the battlefield in August 1918 would have been child's play to bear. They stood in no proportions to the victories of our people. It was not [the defeats] which caused our downfall; no, it was brought about by that power [Jews and Marxists] which prepared these defeats by systematically over many decades robbing our people of the political and moral instincts and forces..."

the NSDAP. Hitler was released after serving less than a year of his sentence.

Racism, particularly anti-Semitism, was at the heart of Hitler's philosophy. Hitler believed that the Germans were the "master race," entitled to rule the world. In his mind, Jews were poisoning the blood and culture of the German people.

After leaving prison, Hitler and his party remained on the fringes of German political life in the 1920s. In early 1924, shortly after the drama of the failed *putsch* in Munich, the NSDAP won 6.6 percent of the vote in elections to the Reichstag. In the elections of 1928, however, the NSDAP's share of the vote fell to 2.6 percent, indicating that Germans were not convinced at the time of the NSDAP's positions.

## Reparations and Hyperinflation

Despite the German government's pledge to pay reparations to the Allies, difficult economic conditions prevented Germany from keeping up with the schedule of payments. Meanwhile, French officials became alarmed at the resurgence of nationalism in Germany and the growing popular opposition to reparations. When Germany was late in delivering a shipment of telephone poles in January 1923, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr, Germany's industrial heartland. They seized control of German mines, railroads, and factories.

### *Why did the occupation of the Ruhr trigger serious economic problems?*

Without the military strength to oppose the occupation, the German government urged its citizens to fight back with nonviolent means. German workers in the Ruhr went on strike and refused to cooperate with the French and Belgians. The German government, whose financial resources were already

stretched to the limit, printed more money to support the strikers. After a nine-month stalemate, the German government abandoned its policy of passive resistance and began negotiations with the Allies. Reparations payments eventually resumed, prompting the withdrawal of French and Belgian troops from the Ruhr in August 1925.

The occupation of the Ruhr sparked an economic crisis in Germany. By printing money to support striking workers, the German government fed the inflationary pressures that had been building since the war. By late 1923, the German mark—historically valued at four to the U.S. dollar—became worth less than the paper on which it was printed. Although the source of German hyperinflation could be traced largely to German financial policies during World War I and the government's response to the Ruhr occupation, many Germans blamed their economic woes on the international banking system and the Allied reparations demands.

### *What role did hyperinflation play in German life and politics?*

Hyperinflation produced winners and losers in Germany. Millions of middle-class Germans, especially those in retirement, saw their life savings wiped out overnight. At the same time, hyperinflation allowed Germans who had borrowed money to pay off their debts with currency that was worth only a tiny fraction of what they had originally borrowed. In addition, the huge amount of money in circulation prodded industrial expansion.

**“Lingering at the [shop] window was a luxury because shopping had to be done immediately. Even an additional minute meant an increase in price.... A few million marks meant nothing, really.... People had to start carting their money around in wagons and knapsacks.”**

—German artist George Grosz

Bernard Partridge in *Punch*, February 7, 1923. Used with permission.



France's pledge: I am here—I stay here.



Getty Images/Hulton Archive. Used with permission.

An unemployed music professor in Berlin selling postcards he drew himself to earn a living.

In November 1923, the government took steps to halt hyperinflation. It introduced a new mark, valued at one trillion old marks, and adopted strict financial policies. These policies stopped hyperinflation, but the episode deepened the sense of insecurity and anxiety in Weimar Germany.

## Weimar Identity

Even as political and economic crises shook Germany in the 1920s, exciting breakthroughs in painting, architecture, music, graphic arts, film, and literature took place. Some of these developments were rooted in German culture. Others, like jazz, were adapted from the cultural explosion occurring at the same time in the United States. The “Weimar culture,” or “Weimar Renaissance” as the movement became known, was considered to be on the cutting edge of Western civilization. Berlin replaced Paris as the unofficial center of European culture. Much of the cultural shift

came from Germany’s need for new values following the war.

**“A world has been destroyed; we must seek a radical solution.”**

—Architect Walter Gropius

### ***Why did some Germans not welcome Weimar culture?***

Not all Germans welcomed Weimar culture. Many conservatives, for example, believed that new freedoms for women were a challenge to their traditional, family-centered values. Similarly, the new realism in literature offended those who favored writers that glorified the German past. The anti-war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by German writer Erich Maria Remarque, stirred widespread controversy in Germany. *All Quiet on the Western Front* depicted the horrors of trench warfare in World War I. The book portrayed German soldiers not as heroes, but as war-weary young men who wanted to go home. When the movie version of the novel premiered in Berlin in December 1930, conservative forces led by the NSDAP staged massive protests and disrupted screenings. The government eventually banned the film.

### ***How did the struggle between the two major parties further weaken the Weimar Republic?***

Cultural issues spilled over into the German political arena in the 1920s and strained relations between two of the key founding partners of the Weimar Republic, the SPD and the Center Party.

Both parties had developed strong identities in the nineteenth century, largely in reaction to the policies of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. In the 1870s, Bismarck had attempted to limit the influence of the Catholic Church in Germany. But his measures led many Catholics to deepen their allegiance to the church. The Center Party emerged as a defender of Catholic interests and enjoyed a loyal following. Likewise, Bismarck’s suspicion of

the labor movement strengthened the commitment of many workers to the SPD.

The clearly defined positions of the SPD and the Center made political compromise difficult in the Weimar Republic. Increasingly, the two leading moderate parties found themselves divided by specific issues and the values underlying them. During the hyperinflation of 1923, SPD cabinet officials left the coalition government dominated by the Center Party. The SPD remained the largest party in the Reichstag, but SPD representatives would not again serve as cabinet officials until June 1928. Meanwhile, Center officials sought new coalition partners to keep the SPD out of the government. They often turned to small, right-wing parties, many of which had originally called for the destruction of the Weimar system.

### ***How effective was Hindenburg as president?***

The presidential elections of April 1925 that were called after President Friedrich Ebert, the SPD leader, died in office, clearly revealed the conservative trend in German politics. Former Field Marshal Hindenburg, whom many suspected of wishing to restore the monarchy, narrowly defeated the Center's candidate, Wilhelm Marx.

The 1925 elections raised fears that Hindenburg would use the powers of the presidency under the Weimar Constitution to undermine parliamentary democracy. Three years earlier, Benito Mussolini and his Fascist Party had crushed a struggling democracy in Italy, drawing admiration from ultra-nationalists in Germany. Nonetheless, the first four years of Hindenburg's rule marked the high point of the Weimar Republic. Internationally, Germany entered the League of Nations in 1926 and peacefully resolved several of its disputes with the Allies. Economically, stable policies paved the way for growing prosperity. In June 1928 the Center, the SPD, and several moderate conservative parties joined to form a "grand coalition." In that year the non-democratic parties received only 13 percent of the vote.

## **Depression Sparks New Crisis**

Around the world, nations felt the crash of the U.S. stock market in October 1929. Germans discovered that their economy was especially vulnerable. Much of the prosperity in Germany from 1925 to 1929 had been fueled by loans from U.S. banks. German officials used these loans to meet reparation payments to the Allies and to finance German industrial expansion. When the U.S. stock market fell, U.S. bankers saw the value of their investments suddenly drop. To make up for their losses, they demanded that the Germans and their other foreign clients repay their loans. Three million people were unemployed in Germany in 1930.

### ***Why was the government deadlocked over the issue of the budget deficit?***

As the German economy sputtered, Germany faced a growing budget deficit. During the 1920s, the SPD had pushed a series of reforms through the Reichstag that were intended to improve conditions for workers. While the economy expanded, the government was able to keep up with the costs of providing benefits to unemployed workers and other social programs. With the economic downturn, German leaders were caught in a dilemma. To balance the budget, they would either have to cut benefits or raise taxes on employers. As defenders of the working class, the SPD and KPD fought against cuts in social programs, while the conservative parties opposed higher taxes. The government was deadlocked, and Germany's budget deficit ballooned. U.S. bankers responded by classifying Germany as a bad risk and blocked new loans to the government.

In March 1930, the "grand coalition" collapsed. For the next three years, no leadership would be able to count on the support of a majority of the Reichstag's members. The German political system was in tatters.

### ***How did Germans attempt to deal with their economic crisis?***

During the period of crisis, German chancellors called upon President Hindenburg

to take emergency measures to protect the existence of the republic, as permitted under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution. A form of presidential dictatorship replaced the Weimar system's parliamentary democracy.

At the polls, the parties of the extreme left and right showed dramatic gains as the economic depression worsened. In the Reichstag elections of September 1930, the KPD polled 1.3 million more votes than it had two years earlier, while the NSDAP total jumped from 800,000 to more than 6.4 million—making the Nazis the second largest party in the Reichstag.

On the streets, organized violence by paramilitary groups, such as the *Sturm Abteilung* (Storm Troopers), or S.A., of the NSDAP, and their counterparts in the communist party, became a regular feature of German politics. Extremists of both the right and the left attempted to intimidate their opponents and dominate neighborhoods. While the

authorities tried to ban paramilitary groups and limit demonstrations, their measures were ineffective in stemming the tide of violence, particularly in the cities.

Internationally, the collapse of global trade and the German government's budget crisis crippled Germany's finances. Without earnings from foreign trade, Germany was unable to pay reparations to the Allies. In response to the crisis, U.S. President Herbert Hoover called for a temporary halt to German reparations payments. In addition, Hoover allowed the British and the French to reschedule their debts to U.S. banks.

But the economic circumstances in Germany did not improve, and political turmoil increased. In the next section, you will read more about the relationship between culture and politics of the Weimar Republic, to get a fuller picture of the situation most Germans faced in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Study Guide—Part II

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1. Give two reasons why the Germans resented the Treaty of Versailles.
  - a.
  - b.
2. Name the three political parties that were instrumental in setting up the Weimar Republic.
3. Describe the results of the election of 1920.
4. On whom did some Germans start to lay the blame for losing the war and being threatened by communism?
5. What was the *Freikorps*?
6. What are some of the things that Hitler and the NSDAP (the Nazi Party) stood for? List three.
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

7. "Hyperinflation produced winners and losers in Germany." Who were the winners and who were the losers?

winners:

losers:

8. Why did some Germans dislike the cultural changes that occurred in the 1920s?

9. Who were the major supporters of the Center Party? Of the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany)?

Center:

SPD:

10. How did the U.S. stock market crash affect Germany?

11. Why do you think many Germans resorted to violence as the economic situation worsened?