



The Weimar Republic, 1918–24

Why such troubled times?

Mark Rathbone examines the reasons behind Germany's period of turmoil in the first 6 years of the Weimar government

AQA AS The development of Germany, 1871–1925

AQA AS Anti-Semitism, Hitler and the German people, 1919–1945

Edexcel AS From Second Reich to Third Reich: Germany, 1918–45

Edexcel A2 From Kaiser to Führer: Germany, 1900–45

OCR (A) AS Democracy and dictatorship in Germany 1919–63

Argument

The price of defeat

The most fundamental reason for Germany's problems during the period 1918–24 was that Germany had lost the war. There was little loyalty among Germans to the Weimar government, which was associated with national humiliation. Bitter political divisions, inflation and a lack of effective political leadership made the problems worse.

On 9 November 1918 Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany abdicated and sought political asylum in the Netherlands. In his place, the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed Germany a republic (known as the Weimar Republic as its first meeting was held in the city of Weimar) and a new government, led by Friedrich Ebert, was

formed. 'Everything for the people! Everything by the people!' urged Scheidemann. 'The old and rotten, the monarchy, has collapsed. May the new order live. Long live the German Republic!'

Yet the optimism of that moment was short-lived and the next 6 years were to bring tremendous political and economic turmoil for Germany. This article examines the reasons for this.

Reason 1

Germany had lost the war

This may seem blindingly obvious, but the most fundamental reason for Germany's difficulties is that it had been defeated in the First World War. As Scheidemann's declaration acknowledged, 'The consequences of the war, need and suffering, will burden us for many years.' If Germany had won, it would not necessarily have been without problems in the succeeding years (Britain and France, which did win the war, had plenty), but they would certainly have been different and much less severe. As you read the rest of this article, think about which of the other reasons would not have applied if Germany had been victorious in 1918.

Reason 2

The government was blamed for the defeat

The government was blamed for the humiliation of defeat and the Treaty of Versailles. Two days after its creation, the new government signed an armistice with Britain, France and the USA. In the minds of many Germans this created an irrevocable link between the republic and national humiliation. The **November Criminals**, it was alleged, had ‘stabbed Germany in the back’ by surrendering, when the German armed forces were undefeated.

It was true that German territory was intact when the armistice was signed and the German Army remained for the most part in good order. Yet Germany’s allies — Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria — had already surrendered, the German Army had been in retreat since the **Battle of Amiens** in August 1918, and the German Navy was in open mutiny. Kaiser Wilhelm’s abdication had been an acknowledgement that the country was on the point of defeat. But this did not stop the Weimar Republic’s right-wing detractors from rewriting the history of November 1918 to suit their own political agenda.

The Treaty of Versailles

The guilt of the November Criminals was, furthermore, compounded by a second act of betrayal: they had gone on to sign the Treaty of Versailles. To Germans it seemed a harsh treaty: Article 231 said that Germany and its allies were entirely responsible for the war and this was used as a pretext to impose reparations on Germany, subsequently set at £6.6 billion.



Armed demonstrators during the Spartacist revolt in Berlin, January 1919

Alsace and Lorraine, Malmédy, North Schleswig and the **Polish Corridor** were to be handed over to other countries, so there would be millions of Germans living under foreign rule. The Rhineland was to become a **demilitarised zone**, German armed forces were severely restricted in size, and they were banned from having tanks, submarines or military aircraft. Worst of all, the Germans had not been consulted: they saw Versailles as a *Diktat* — a dictated peace.

Yet their government had signed the treaty. All this meant that few Germans felt any sense of loyalty to their new government. Walter Rathenau, the first Weimar foreign minister, declared, ‘Now we have a republic. The problem is we have no republicans.’ The truth of Rathenau’s analysis was dramatically confirmed by his assassination in 1922.

Reason 3

Germany was torn by bitter political divisions

Left versus right was the dominant political conflict of the Weimar Republic, inherited in its essentials from the monarchy that preceded it (Table 1). While

November Criminals
Term used to describe the Weimar government by right-wing critics, especially Nazis, implying that the surrender to the Allies in November 1918 had been a betrayal of German interests.

Battle of Amiens A turning-point battle in August 1918, when a British, Canadian, Australian and French counterattack, supported by hundreds of tanks, drove the German Army into headlong retreat.

Polish Corridor A strip of land that connected Poland with the Baltic Sea, separating East Prussia from the rest of Germany.

demilitarised zone The Germans were not permitted to station any troops or build any defences in the Rhineland region.

Table 1 Principal political parties of Weimar Germany

Party	Acronym	Politics	Support
Communist Party	KPD	Left	Radical workers and some middle-class intellectuals. Opposed to Weimar Republic — favoured revolution.
Social Democratic Party	SPD	Left	Workers, trade unions and progressive middle classes. The core of Weimar governments, it was the largest party 1919–32.
Democratic Party	DDP	Centre left	Mainly protestant and middle-class. Support declined during 1920s.
Centre Party	Z	Centre	Roman Catholics. Was part of every cabinet from 1919 to 1933.
People’s Party	DVP	Centre right	Owners of small and middle-sized businesses and white-collar workers.
Nationalist People’s Party	DNVP	Right	Landowners and industrialists, some skilled workers and farmers, anti-semites.
National Socialist German Workers’ Party	NSDAP or Nazi	Right	Lower middle classes, shopkeepers, skilled workers, anti-semites. Limited support in early 1920s.

Weblinks



A US website that includes essays, primary sources and biographies relating to Weimar Germany can be found at <http://weimar.facinghistory.org>

Also useful is a collection of short articles about Weimar Germany at www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/GERweimar.htm

There is a detailed study of the 1923 hyperinflation at www.usagold.com/germannightmare.html

democratic parties such as the SPD, the DDP and the Centre Party supported the new republic, on both left and right there were extremists who sought to destroy it and impose their own preferred forms of government. They wasted no time before trying to do so, moreover.

Between them, the parties of the left — the Communists, the SPD and the Democrats — had enough support to put them in a dominant position. But just as Lenin and the Bolsheviks had opposed the Provisional Government in Russia in 1917, so the German Communists refused to cooperate with Ebert and parliamentary democracy.

Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had founded the *Spartakusbund*. The Spartacists argued that only a Marxist revolution could bring about a government that was truly of the people, and in December 1918 they launched one on the streets of Berlin. Fearing he would meet the same fate as Alexander Kerensky in Russia a year earlier, Ebert appealed to the army and to the *Freikorps* to save the government. By mid-January 1919 these forces of counter-revolution were victorious and the Spartacist revolt had been crushed. Luxemburg and Liebknecht were shot.

Revolutions and putsches

This was not a promising start for the new Germany, not least because it left the Weimar government dependent on the nationalist forces of the right. They were soon to take their turn to try to seize power. On 13 March 1920 several thousand *Freikorps* soldiers, led by Wolfgang Kapp, began a rebellion in Berlin. Ebert's government quickly lost control of the city and, unable to rely on the support of the army, fled to Dresden and then Stuttgart. Ebert called for a general strike to defeat Kapp. The strike met with overwhelming support and Berlin ground to a

standstill. Unable to govern, Kapp and his followers fled to Sweden after only 4 days.

Away from Berlin, in November 1918 Bavaria declared independence and was later declared to be a Soviet Republic. The *Freikorps* crushed the revolution in May 1919, with over 1,000 deaths in the fighting and several hundred summary executions afterwards. Four and a half years later there was a further attempted revolution in Bavaria, this time from the right — Adolf Hitler's Beer Hall Putsch. There were more rebellions or attempted revolutions in other parts of Germany, including the Ruhr, Saxony and Hamburg.

All in all, the existence of substantial forces of both left and right, which refused to accept the legitimacy of the Weimar government and were prepared to take up arms against it, made it difficult for the new government to maintain order and govern Germany effectively for several years after 1918.

Reason 4

The huge burden of reparations created great economic problems

As well as political conflicts, Germany also faced enormous economic difficulties during these years, of which the most severe was inflation. This had started during the war, for which the Kaiser's government had paid by printing banknotes, but the problem escalated after 1918. Germany could only pay the amounts demanded in reparations under the Treaty of Versailles by again printing even more banknotes. Banks and financial institutions, understandably, lost confidence in German currency and on the foreign exchanges the mark's value continued to slide (Table 2). It became increasingly expensive for Germany to import food and raw materials from abroad and prices consequently continued to rise steeply.

In January 1923, because Germany missed the deadline to pay an instalment of reparations, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr. The Weimar government responded by ordering workers in the Ruhr to refuse to cooperate with the occupying forces. Without the income generated by Ruhr industries, Germany's financial situation deteriorated further and the government printed yet more banknotes, leading to the final slide into disastrous hyperinflation.

Spartakusbund A Communist group, named after the leader of a slave revolt in ancient Rome.

Alexander Kerensky Menshevik leader of the Provisional Government in Russia after the revolution of March 1917. He tried to establish a democratic republic but was overthrown by the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917.

Freikorps Militias made up of groups of ex-soldiers, who supported right-wing political parties.

Children playing with bundles of German mark notes, which had become worthless due to hyperinflation



Table 2 Inflation in Weimar Germany

Date	Exchange rate (marks to the US dollar)
July 1914	4.2
January 1919	8.9
July 1919	14.0
January 1920	64.8
July 1920	39.5
January 1921	64.9
July 1921	76.7
January 1922	191.8
July 1922	493.2
January 1923	17,972.0
July 1923	353,412.0
August 1923	4,620,455.0
September 1923	98,860,000.0
October 1923	25,260,208,000.0
November 1923	4,200,000,000,000.0

Reason 5

The Weimar governments lacked leadership

If there had been a strong government, it might have overcome the political conflicts and managed the economy more responsibly. But the Weimar governments between 1918 and 1923 proved to be too weak to govern effectively. The Weimar Constitution (Table 3) was one of the most democratic in the world, but with a multiplicity of parties and a proportional voting system no party ever secured anything approaching a majority in the Reichstag. The resultant coalitions were weak, unstable and irresolute.

Table 3 Main features of the Constitution of Weimar Germany

President	Elected every 7 years. Mainly a figurehead, but could be given extensive powers in a national emergency.
Chancellor	Leader of the government. Appointed from the Reichstag by the president.
Reichsrat	Upper House of Parliament. Contained representatives from the regions of Germany. Had limited powers.
Reichstag	Equivalent to the House of Commons. Elected every 4 years by proportional representation. This made it difficult for one party to gain a majority, so governments were coalitions.
Guarantee of rights	Rights such as freedom of speech and freedom from arrest without trial were guaranteed, but could be suspended in a national emergency.

Question

Might the Weimar Republic have survived if only four of the foregoing five elements in its weakness had been in force? Plot the likely outcomes by removing one element at a time to suggest the effect on the other four.

It was not the fact that they were coalitions that made them weak, however: it was the lack of a leader of real stature. The governments from 1923 to 1929 were also coalitions, yet this was a period when the Weimar Republic prospered. In August 1923 Gustav Stresemann, leader of the DVP, briefly became chancellor and was then foreign minister for 6 years. During his tenure the currency was renewed, the economy recovered to its pre-war levels and Germany's international relations were transformed. This demonstrated that it was lack of leadership, not the fact that they were coalitions, that had made the earlier governments so weak.

Conclusion

Losing the war was the foundation of Germany's problems, and the inevitable association of the Weimar government with national humiliation damned it from the start in the eyes of many Germans. Bitter political divisions were inherited from the monarchy but exacerbated by the circumstances of the end of the war. Inflation — again inherited from the pre-1918 regime — was made far worse by the burden of reparations and the occupation of the Ruhr. All this was too much for a nation that, until Stresemann gave it a few years of remission, had no effective political leadership.

Further reading

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