

## 3 Germany 1918–45

### 3.1 Was the Weimar Republic doomed from the start?

#### Topic Summary



As the First World War came to an end, Germany's Kaiser abdicated and a democratic government, the Weimar Republic, was set up. The new republic faced many problems. It got off to an unpopular start by agreeing to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, which most Germans hated. Extremists tried to undermine the government and seize power. In 1923 the Ruhr was invaded by Belgium and France to force Germany to keep up reparations payments. The German economy collapsed under the impact of hyperinflation. In November 1923 the Nazis staged an unsuccessful putsch (rebellion) in Munich. However, the Republic recovered from these setbacks. Under the leadership of Stresemann, and with the help of US loans agreed in the Dawes Plan (1924), prosperity seemed to return, along with a golden era of art and culture. However, the Republic was less stable than it appeared, and many doubted that the good times could last.

#### What do I Need to Know?



You will need to understand how the end of the First World War affected German politics and society, and be able to explain why the Kaiser's regime collapsed and was replaced by the Weimar Republic. You should know why the Republic faced violent opposition from the start, and how the German people reacted to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. You should be able to explain how and why the German economy collapsed in 1923, what the effects of this were, and how Stresemann overcame the crisis. You should be able to judge how far in the following years the republic was able to recover from the effects of the 1923 crisis, and to assess the achievements of the republic up to 1929.

#### Key Topics

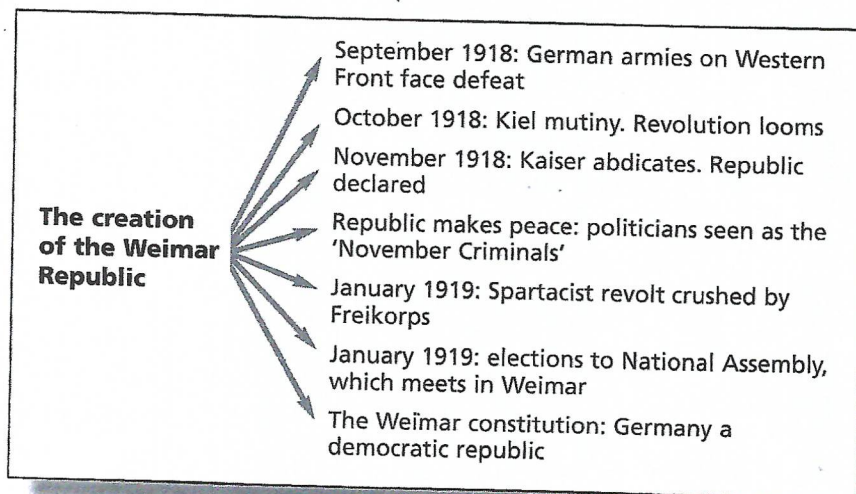


#### How did Germany emerge from defeat in the First World War?

- By September 1918 the German armies on the Western Front were retreating. Defeat loomed. The German people were suffering severe food shortages because of the British naval blockade.

- In October 1918 the German navy in the port of Kiel mutinied when it was ordered to leave port and attack. By November, workers' councils, similar to soviets in Russia, were being formed all over the country. Germany was on the brink of revolution.
- Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated on 9 November 1918. Once he had gone, Germany hoped that the allies would agree a more lenient peace.
- Also on 9 November 1918, Ebert, leader of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), declared that Germany was a republic. He became the first President.
- It was the new republican leaders who made peace with the Allies. This was a bad start. Many Germans did not believe that their armies had really been defeated. They called those who made peace the 'November Criminals'. Right-wing nationalists claimed that the politicians had betrayed Germany, and that she should have fought on. This was known as the 'stab-in-the back' theory.
- The republic was also threatened by left-wing extremists who wanted Germany to become a communist state, like Russia. In January 1919 members of the communist Spartacus League - Spartacists - tried to stage a revolt in Berlin. The revolt failed, and its leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were murdered. However, to crush the revolt the government had to rely on groups of ex-soldiers called Freikorps, who were bitter enemies of the communists.
- In January 1919 elections were held for a National Assembly. The Assembly met in Weimar to escape the violence in Berlin - hence the name 'Weimar Republic'.
- The Assembly agreed a constitution for the republic. Everyone over 21 could vote in elections for members of the Reichstag (Parliament). Election results were decided by proportional representation. Germany would have a chancellor (prime minister) as head of government, and a president (elected every seven years) as head of state.

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**Summary Box 1**

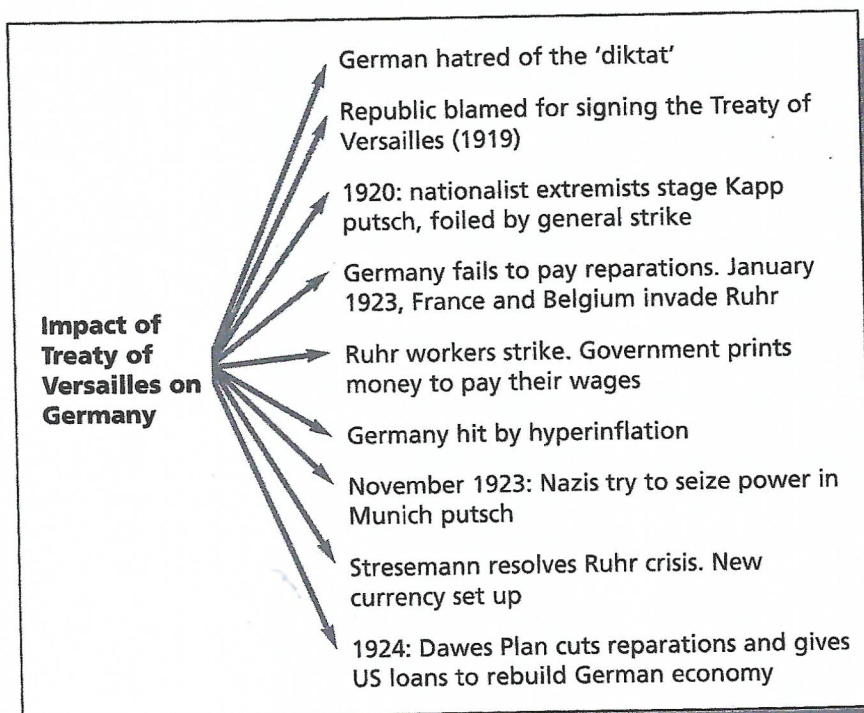


- The Weimar constitution had serious weaknesses. Proportional representation made it unlikely that any party would ever form a government on its own. All governments would then be coalitions, with a tendency to weakness. In addition, the constitution gave the president emergency powers to dissolve the Reichstag and rule by himself.

### **What was the impact of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) on the Republic?**

- The Germans expected a treaty based on Wilson's Fourteen Points. They were furious at the harsh terms of the treaty.
- They called the treaty a 'diktat' (dictated peace). The Germans had no chance to negotiate - they were forced to accept it.
- By signing the treaty, the leaders of the Republic became even more unpopular. Extreme nationalists, who would never accept the treaty, now began to plan the overthrow of the Republic.
- In 1920 the government tried to disband the Freikorps. This provoked a rebellion. Units of Freikorps, under the leadership of Wolfgang Kapp, marched on Berlin. The army refused to intervene, and the government fled. But the Kapp putsch was defeated by a general strike of Berlin's workers, who hated the right-wing Freikorps and refused to co-operate with them.
- The government survived but the violence continued. During these years many prominent politicians were murdered by extremists.
- In 1921 the Allies fixed the amount of reparations Germany was to pay at £6600 million. The German economy, already weakened by the effects of war, was bound to struggle under this extra burden. At the end of 1922 the Germans said they could not pay. The French and Belgians invaded the Ruhr in January 1923 to seize coal and iron as reparations. The workers of the Ruhr went on strike. To support the strikers, the government printed money to pay them. This caused hyperinflation.
- In 1923 German money ceased to have any value. Businesses went bankrupt and people's savings were wiped out.
- Taking advantage of the crisis, in November 1923 Hitler attempted to seize power in Munich. This Munich putsch was a fiasco. Hitler was arrested and imprisoned, but was able to use his trial to gain publicity and make himself a national figure.
- In August 1923 Stresemann became chancellor. He knew that the Ruhr crisis would have to be settled. He agreed to resume paying reparations. By scrapping the worthless money and launching a new currency, the Rentenmark, he got the economy going again. In 1924 he agreed the Dawes Plan with the USA. This reduced Germany's annual reparations payments, and gave her US loans to build up the economy.

Summary Box 2



**To what extent did the Weimar Republic recover after 1923?**

- Between 1924 and 1929 Germany received over 25 billion marks in loans. German industry was rebuilt.
- Chancellor Stresemann improved Germany's international position. The 1925 Locarno Pacts resolved Germany's borders with France and Belgium. In 1926 Germany was allowed to join the League of Nations.
- Stresemann believed in working with other countries to get the Treaty of Versailles revised, but many Germans criticised his moderate approach.
- The greater freedom that the Republic offered to artists and writers produced a cultural revival. German artists (such as George Grosz), architects, writers (like Brecht) and musicians became world famous. Berlin became the centre of this artistic revival.
- However, to a great extent, Germany's recovery after 1923 was an illusion. The economic recovery depended on loans, while some sectors of the economy, like agriculture, were in serious trouble.
- The political recovery also concealed the fact that many Germans hated the Republic, and would never accept the terms of the Versailles Treaty. The election of Hindenburg - a monarchist and one of Germany's war leaders - as president in 1925 was an indication of many Germans' true feelings.

### What do I Know?



What was the importance of:

- the 'stab-in-the back' theory
- the Kapp putsch
- hyperinflation
- the Dawes Plan?

- 1 Name a German naval base at which there was a mutiny in October 1918.
- 2 Who was the first president of the Weimar Republic?
- 3 Which communist organisation staged a revolt against the republic in January 1919?
- 4 What name was given to the right-wing bands of ex-soldiers who were responsible for much of the violence in the early years of the Republic?
- 5 How did the Weimar Republic get its name?
- 6 What voting system was adopted by the Republic?
- 7 How long was the term of office of the president of the Republic?
- 8 What was the 'diktat'?
- 9 What was the sum agreed in 1921 that Germany would have to pay as reparations?
- 10 Which two countries invaded the Ruhr in 1923?
- 11 What was the reaction of the Ruhr workers to this invasion?
- 12 Which German politician solved the Ruhr crisis?
- 13 Name the new German currency set up in 1923.
- 14 Which international organisation was Germany permitted to join in 1926?
- 15 Name a famous German artist or writer of the Weimar period.

My score ...

### Exam Type Question



The Optional Depth Studies are tested in Section C of Paper 1. On your chosen Depth Study you will have to answer **two** questions. The first will be a compulsory source-based question. There will be three sources and three sub-questions to answer. The second question will be structured, also consisting of three parts (worth 4, 6 and 10 marks for each part). There will be two of these structured questions, and you choose one.

Here is an example of a structured question on the Weimar Republic.

- (a) Describe how a republic was formed in Germany at the end of the First World War. **(4 marks)**
- (b) Explain why many Germans hated the Treaty of Versailles so much. **(6 marks)**
- (c) Which of the following was the greatest threat to the Weimar Republic in 1923:
  - (i) the invasion of the Ruhr;
  - (ii) hyperinflation;
  - (iii) the Munich putsch?Explain your answer. **(10 marks)**