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# Germany

Democracy to Dictatorship  
c.1918–45 for WJEC

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## Context: Germany in 1914

The country 'Germany' as we know it today did not exist until 1871. Before then, there were many individual states spread across central Europe where German was the main language. However, during the 1860s, the largest and most powerful of these states, **Prussia**, brought about unification. This was achieved through a series of successful wars against Denmark in 1861, Austria in 1866 and France in 1870–1, and led to the declaration of the **German Empire** at Versailles, in defeated France.

### The political system

The chief minister of Prussia, **Otto von Bismarck**, played a major role in the unification. He was chosen as the first chancellor (prime minister) of the united Germany and his influence meant that he had almost total authority. As a Prussian aristocrat, Bismarck ensured that Prussian power was preserved in the new Germany by the terms of the new **constitution**:

- The King of Prussia was proclaimed Kaiser, giving him power over the other 25 different states.
- The Kaiser appointed the chancellor and other imperial ministers who were directly responsible to him and therefore independent of the **Reichstag**.
- There was an element of democracy in the constitution as all men over the age of 25 were eligible to vote in elections to the **Reichstag**. However, the power of the **Reichstag** was limited as the Kaiser could ignore its decisions, and it could be dissolved at any time.
- The German army was accountable only to the Kaiser and took an oath of allegiance to him.
- Prussia's power was enhanced as Austria, although it was German speaking, was excluded from the new German state. This had resulted in the creation of a **Kleindeutschland** as opposed to a **Grossdeutschland**.

However, Germany was a **federal state** and power was divided between the states and the federal or imperial government.

### KEY TERMS

**Prussia** The wealthiest, most powerful and largest German state in the 1800s, making up 62 per cent of the population of the German Empire.

**German Empire** This is also known as the Second Reich, 1871–1918, or Kaiserreich.

**Constitution** The rules and principles that govern a state.

**Reichstag** The German parliament. It had limited powers.

#### **Grossdeutschland and Kleindeutschland**

A debate within the states of Germany in the nineteenth century as to whether a unified Germany should include Austria, *Grossdeutschland*, or exclude Austria, *Kleindeutschland*. It was the latter which prevailed.

**Federal state** A state in which powers are shared between central and regional governments.

### KEY FIGURE

#### **Otto von Bismarck (1815–98)**

Minister president of Prussia and then chancellor of Germany from 1871 until 1890. He worked closely with the kaisers, dominating both domestic and foreign affairs, until replaced by Wilhelm II.



## KEY FIGURE

### Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941)

Emperor of Germany from 1888 until his abdication in 1918. He aimed to create a German Empire abroad and build a large navy and army to rival other European powers. His policy of *Weltpolitik* brought him into conflict with other European powers and was a factor in the outbreak of the First World War. As Germany faced military defeat in 1918, he abdicated and fled to the Netherlands.

## KEY TERMS

**Autocrat** Rule by one person, usually a monarch, who will have absolute power.

**Socialism** A political and economic theory that argues the means of production should be owned by the community for its collective benefit.

**Junkers** The landowning aristocracy, they were particularly dominant in Prussia and other parts of eastern Germany.

The first three kaisers kept Bismarck as their chancellor and the political system appeared to be quite successful as the kaisers and Bismarck had the same political outlook. However, in 1888, **Kaiser Wilhelm II** came to the throne. He wanted to rule Germany by himself and forced Bismarck to resign in 1890. From then until 1918 the Kaiser ruled Germany as an **autocrat**, with the chancellor having very little power.

## The German economy

Germany had begun industrialising in the nineteenth century, but industrial growth really took off between 1890 and 1913. Industries, such as coal, iron, steel and textiles, were well established and, in the period up to the outbreak of the First World War, there was dramatic growth in the new industries of chemicals, electrics, petrochemicals and mechanical engineering. Companies such as Daimler and Benz developed cars, while AEG and Siemens became huge electrical enterprises. In particular, Krupps became a major armaments producer.

By the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Germany was Europe's leading industrial power and able to compete with Britain's supremacy. Its industrial output was second only to that of the United States, making it a powerful and wealthy country.

## German society

Industrialisation brought about much social change. This was seen most noticeably in population growth and in the rapid urbanisation that took place. It meant that by 1910 more people lived in towns and cities than in rural areas. Berlin was the largest city with a population of over 2 million, but other towns, such as Cologne and Munich, had populations of over half a million. This rapid population growth, however, created other problems such as overcrowding and poor living conditions. Although unemployment was not a major problem, the standard of living of many workers was low.

These developments led to a greater interest in politics by the working classes. What followed was a growth in **socialism** and trade unionism as well as support for a new political party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which represented the interests of the workers. By 1913, the SPD was the largest party in the *Reichstag*, but had little influence on government policy.

These rapid changes also created a divide in German society between the landowners, or **Junkers**, who sympathised with the army and other elite groups in society, and the working classes. The *Junkers* saw the new working class as a threat to stability, while the middle classes also felt threatened by the growth in socialism as they saw its ideas as a challenge to their economic position.

Industrialisation also attracted a large number of immigrants to Germany who contributed greatly to its economic growth but caused further social disruption.

## Foreign affairs

After the fall of Bismarck, Germany had become very isolated in Europe, with Austria-Hungary its only reliable ally, which was very weak economically, militarily and politically. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, Germany had attempted to become a world power, following a policy of **Weltpolitik**, and attempted to acquire an overseas empire as the Kaiser was envious of the British Empire. The Kaiser also built up the German navy in the years before the First World War and the British saw this as an attempt to challenge its dominance. Germany also had a very large army which made it a threat on mainland Europe.

The tensions caused by the Kaiser's policies and the need to defend its only reliable ally, Austria-Hungary, were major reasons for going to war in 1914. The declaration of war by the Kaiser resulted in a surge in patriotic fervour, with the main political parties agreeing a political truce. There was great expectation of a swift victory based on the **Schlieffen Plan**, but this failed, and Germany was drawn into a war of attrition. By 1916, the government had become a virtual military dictatorship. The civilian population also suffered as food shortages and inflation sapped morale. It was this collapse in morale, as well as military failure in 1918 with the **Ludendorff Offensive**, that led to the collapse of the regime, the abdication of the Kaiser and the signing of the armistice in November 1918.

Defeat in the First World War led to a dramatic period of German history, which is the focus of this book. The Weimar Republic that emerged from defeat faced many challenges and in 1933 was replaced by Adolf Hitler. He, and his Nazi Party, soon established a one-party state and took Germany into the Second World War. By 1945, Germany had been defeated again, was divided, and faced many social and economic problems.

### KEY TERMS

**Weltpolitik** The policy of the German government in the 1890s and 1900s by which it sought to advance German interests throughout the world.

**Schlieffen Plan** Drawn up by General Schlieffen to avoid Germany fighting a war on two fronts by defeating France on the Western Front before dealing with the threat from Russia. The plan was to defeat France in six weeks, but this failed because of Belgian, British and French resistance. Russia also mobilised more quickly than the Germans expected and so more men had to be sent to the Eastern Front, weakening the German attack in the west. Its failure led to trench warfare and a war of attrition.

**Ludendorff Offensive** A German offensive launched in the spring of 1918 on the Western Front, designed to win the war before large numbers of US troops arrived to aid the French and British.

## CHAPTER 2

# The challenges facing the Weimar Republic 1918–23

The Weimar Republic replaced the Kaiserreich in 1919. It faced numerous challenges in its early years from both the left and right wing, yet was able to survive these.

This chapter examines the reasons why the republic was established and considers the political, economic and social challenges it faced by focusing on the following themes:

- ◆ The collapse of the imperial regime of Kaiser Wilhelm II
- ◆ The Treaty of Versailles and its impact on Germany
- ◆ The Weimar constitution
- ◆ Challenges to Weimar from the left and right
- ◆ The emergence of the National Socialist German Workers' Party
- ◆ The economic crisis
- ◆ The occupation of the Ruhr

The key debate on page 30 of this chapter considers the nature of the German Revolution of 1918.

### KEY DATES

<b>1918</b>	<b>Sept.</b>	Ludendorff accepted that Germany was unable to win the First World War	<b>1919</b>	<b>Aug.</b>	Weimar constitution adopted
	<b>Nov.</b>	Naval mutiny at Kiel Wilhelm II abdicated Armistice signed	<b>1920</b>	<b>March</b>	Ruhr rising Kapp <i>Putsch</i>
<b>1919</b>	<b>Jan.</b>	Spartacist uprising in Berlin	<b>1923</b>	<b>Jan.</b>	French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr
	<b>June</b>	Treaty of Versailles signed		<b>Jan.–Nov.</b>	Hyperinflation
				<b>Nov.</b>	Beer Hall <i>Putsch</i> in Munich

### KEY FIGURE

#### General Ludendorff (1865–1937)

Ludendorff was a German general who, with Hindenburg, became virtual military dictators of Germany between 1916 and 1918. He attempted to control the constitutional reform in 1918 but failed and was dismissed. Later, he supported both the Kapp *Putsch* and the early activities of Hitler.

## 1 The collapse of the imperial regime of Kaiser Wilhelm II

### ■ What was the impact of the First World War on Germany?

In the spring of 1918, Germany had launched a massive attack against Allied forces in France. Germany's hope had been to defeat the Allies before large numbers of American troops arrived, following the US entry into the First World War in 1917. At first, the attack was very successful, but the strength of the Allies and German war-weariness brought the advance to a halt. This led to the chief of staff, **General Ludendorff**, informing his superior, Field Marshal Paul

von Hindenburg, and the chancellor that the war was lost. Ludendorff offered two pieces of advice to the government:

- it should appeal to the USA for an armistice
- a more democratic regime should be created.

The news of impending defeat was a shock to the German people, who had become accustomed to hearing from the army commanders that they would win the war. This sense of shock was only added to as Germany had defeated Russia in the east and German troops were still in France and Belgium. However, many in Germany were also weary of the war because of food shortages caused by the naval blockade. During the final two years of the war, the British navy successfully blockaded German ports and prevented the German merchant fleet from functioning. This resulted in severe food shortages, with many Germans facing starvation. In the winter of 1916–17, the supply of potatoes ran out and people were left with just turnips. The food shortage meant that civilians were vulnerable to disease and it is possible that some 750,000 Germans died from a combination of hunger and disease.

## The growth of revolutionary activity

The navy, which had been largely inactive during the war, was now ordered to sea. However, the sailors at the naval base at Kiel, seeing it as a last desperate but futile move, **mutinied**. This resulted in similar action in the ports of Bremen and Lübeck before unrest spread to other cities across Germany. **Soviets** or councils, similar to those established in Russia following the **Bolshevik Revolution of 1917**, were established to run affairs. Popular discontent was becoming increasingly revolutionary. It was very clear that the government was losing control and that attempts to change the government from an autocracy to a **constitutional monarchy** under a civilian government would fail as people demanded the abdication of Wilhelm and immediate peace.

As a result of this failure, the Kaiser **abdicated** on 9 November 1918. Power was passed to a Council of People's Representatives, a temporary government under **Friedrich Ebert**, the leader of the largest political party, the **Social Democratic Party (SPD)**. This temporary government would rule Germany until a national assembly could be elected.

## The defeat of revolutionary activity

Ebert feared that Germany would follow Russia into revolution, which would lead to civil war and add further to the problems that the country faced. He was concerned that it would disrupt **demobilisation**, add to the problem of food supply and make peace negotiations even more difficult.

However, Ebert was able to defeat the revolutionary threat for the following reasons:

- He maintained the support of the army by not reforming it or replacing it with a new force.

### KEY TERMS

**Mutiny** The refusal of the armed forces to obey orders.

**Soviet** A Russian word for an elected council, often comprised of workers.

**Bolshevik Revolution of 1917** The Bolsheviks were the majority within the Russian Social Democratic Party, which, under its leader Lenin, seized power in October 1917 and established the world's first communist state.

**Constitutional monarchy** A system where the monarch's powers are limited by a constitution.

**Abdication** The act of a monarch giving up his or her throne.

**Social Democratic Party (SPD)** In Germany, a moderate socialist party, which should not be confused with Russia where the Social Democrats were more radical, with one part forming the Bolshevik or Communist Party.

**Demobilisation** The removal of troops from active service at the end of a war.

### KEY FIGURE

#### Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925)

Ebert was co-chairman of the SPD and became leader of the German provisional government in 1918. He oversaw both the armistice and the transition to democracy. He then became president of the Weimar Republic in 1920.



- The working class was divided between the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), which wanted to establish a soviet-style of government and the SPD, which wanted a parliamentary form of government.

## The impact of the First World War on Germany

The war had an enormous political impact on Germany, bringing to an end the rule of the Kaiser. However, it also had a large economic and social impact.

### Economic impact

The war had a considerable economic impact on Germany:

- Industrial production had fallen so that it was only two-thirds that of 1913.
- National income was only a third of that of 1913.
- There were 600,000 widows and some 2 million children without fathers. As a result, the state was spending one-third of its budget on war pensions by 1925.
- Many Germans had invested in **war bonds**, but the face value of those bonds had been eroded by inflation, with the result that many lost most or all of their wealth.

### Social impact

The war served only to deepen divisions within German society, with huge gaps in the living standards between the rich and the poor. This situation had been made worse by the restrictions placed on workers' earnings during the war, while factory owners had been able to make large profits.

Food shortages continued as the British naval blockade, introduced during the war, was tightened, intending to put further pressure on Germany to agree to the terms of the armistice. This created further tensions within society as those living in cities accused those in the countryside of hoarding food.

During the war, many women had worked in factories and although this helped to maintain levels of income while husbands were away fighting, others believed that this had damaged traditional family values.

Germany was, therefore, in a dangerous state when the Kaiser abdicated, and faced many serious problems. Ebert was able to sign an armistice after the Kaiser's abdication and announce that a new republic would be established which would guarantee:

- freedom of speech
- freedom of worship
- better working conditions.

Even though a new constitution was drawn up, there was considerable opposition to the concept of a democratic government, which would lead to further challenges to the new regime. These developments helped to create the **stab-in-the-back myth**, which claimed that Germany had lost the war because it had been betrayed by politicians such as Ebert.

### KEY TERMS

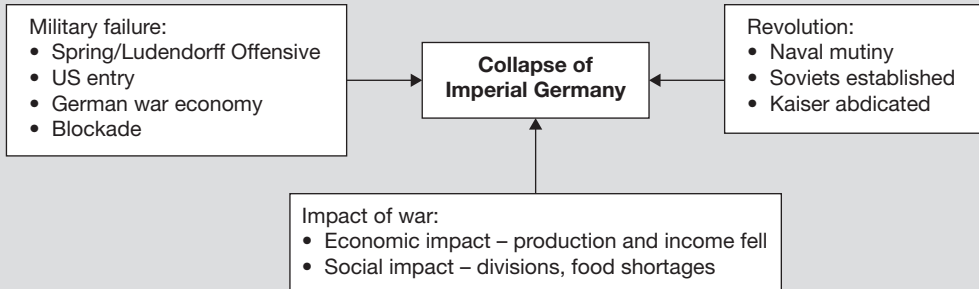
**War bonds** In order to finance the First World War, the German government encouraged people to invest in government funds in the belief that their money was secure and they were helping the war effort.

#### **Stab-in-the-back myth**

The belief that the army had not lost the war but had been let down by groups at home, such as Jewish people and socialists. This made it much harder for the new Weimar government to gain popular support.

## SUMMARY DIAGRAM

## THE COLLAPSE OF THE IMPERIAL REGIME OF KAISER WILHELM II



## 2 The Treaty of Versailles and its impact on Germany

■ *What was the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on Germany?*

The psychological shock of the defeat had a profound impact on the German people and would play a significant role in their reaction to the **Treaty of Versailles**. The military position of Germany when the armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 meant that the German government hoped it would be able to negotiate a moderate peace with the Allied powers. However, instead of being able to recover its strength and position as a great power, Germany was given little choice but to sign a treaty whose terms were viewed as harsh by a nation that was still finding it difficult to accept the reality of defeat.

Germany did not expect to be forced to pay **reparations** for anything other than the damage that it had caused in northern France and Belgium. It expected that it would be able to unite with other German-speaking areas, such as Austria, and be able to join the new **League of Nations**. Not only were these hopes dashed, but as a result of the treaty, Germany suffered far-reaching losses. It lost:

- 10 per cent of its land
- 12.5 per cent of its population
- 16 per cent of its coal
- 48 per cent of its iron industry.

These losses had a severe impact on Germany's economic position.

It also lost all of its overseas colonies, all of which Germany's new leaders claimed would have a considerable impact on its ability to pay reparations. These losses also destroyed its position as a major power. Even more humiliating for many was the war guilt clause (clause 231 in the Treaty of Versailles), which stated that Germany was guilty of starting the war and would therefore deserve the punishments of the Allied forces.

### KEY TERMS

#### Treaty of Versailles

The Allied powers met in Paris during 1919–20 and drew up five treaties with the defeated powers and created the League of Nations. The Treaty of Versailles was signed with Germany on 28 June 1919 and was much harsher than the Germans had expected, leading to national outrage.

**Reparations** Money and goods paid by a defeated power to cover the cost of damages caused by war.

#### League of Nations

An organisation set up at the end of the war to help maintain peace, and to improve living and working conditions; it is often seen as the forerunner of the United Nations. The League was the brainchild of US President Woodrow Wilson. However, the US senate refused to approve it and the USA never joined the League. The defeated powers were initially not allowed to join.

## KEY TERMS

**Alsace-Lorraine** Largely French-speaking provinces that had been taken by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1.

**Plebiscite** A people's vote on an issue, similar to a referendum.

### Mandates

The supervision of former German and Turkish colonies that were administered by the Allies after the First World War.

## Land lost

Germany lost land from virtually every border area. While it had expected to lose **Alsace-Lorraine** on the northern border with France, and possibly some land in the east to Poland, the scale of the losses was seen as a humiliation by many Germans.

- In the north, Schleswig was given a **plebiscite** and voted to return to Denmark.
- In the east, Upper Silesia, which was rich in coal and contained steelworks, was given to the new state of Poland.
- West Prussia and Posen were also given to Poland, which meant that Germany was now split into two, with East Prussia separate from the rest of Germany.
- Hultschin was lost to the new state of Czechoslovakia.
- In the south, *Anschluss*, or union, with Austria was forbidden (see page 10).
- In the west, Alsace-Lorraine, which had been taken from France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1, was given back.
- Eupen and Malmedy were granted to Belgium.
- Two other areas were also placed under control of the League or Allied forces. The Saarland, which was a rich industrial area, was placed under League of Nations control before a plebiscite would be held in fifteen years to decide its future. The Rhineland, which bordered France, was demilitarised and was occupied by Allied forces for fifteen years in order to improve the security of France.

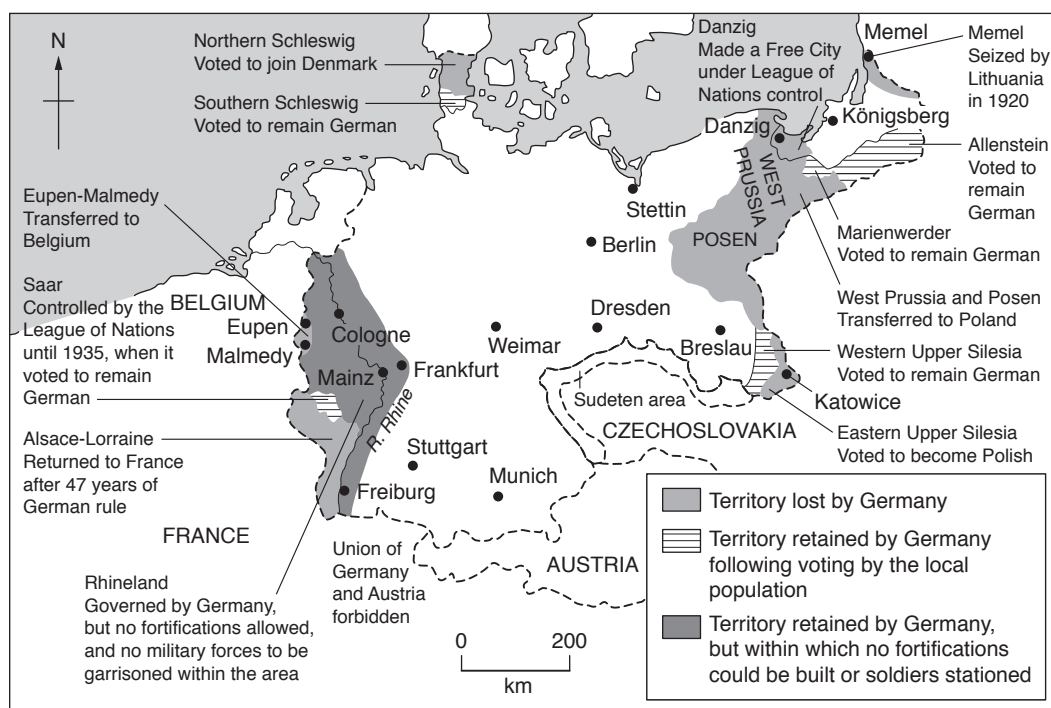
There were considerable colonial losses, mostly in Africa and the Pacific Ocean:

- Togoland and the Cameroons were to be run by Britain and France as **mandates**.
- German South West Africa was mandated to South Africa.
- German East Africa was mandated to Britain.
- New Guinea to Australia.
- Samoa to New Zealand.
- The Marshall, Mariana and Caroline Islands to Japan.

## Military losses

Germany's military strength had been a source of great pride for the nation. It was its military power in the 1860s that had allowed the German states to unite, but concerns about its recovery after the First World War led to its drastic decrease. Many Germans argued that the reduction would make Germany more vulnerable to attack.

- The army was reduced to no more than 100,000 men, all of whom would have to be volunteers.



**Figure 2.1** The terms of the Treaty of Versailles 1919.

- The general staff was disbanded.
- The navy was reduced to no more than 15,000 men.
- Germany was not allowed tanks, aircraft, submarines or poison gas.

These reductions angered Germany as, not only was the military a source of great pride, but also none of the other Allies were disarmed to the extent that Germany was in the 1920s, despite **Wilson's Fourteen Points** calling for disarmament.

## Reparations

When the treaty was drawn up and signed in June 1919 it was not known how much damage had been caused and, therefore, reparations were not fixed in the treaty. Instead, the Allies established a Reparations Commission. Its job was to find out how much Germany could pay and fix a final sum. The Commission did not report until 1921, when it set a sum of £6600 million, which would be paid in instalments over many years. Most Germans considered this sum to be outrageous and argued that the country could not afford to pay it. However, such claims have caused considerable debate, with many historians arguing that it was well within Germany's capabilities and others arguing that the demands were much less than those imposed on Russia by Germany at the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk**.

## KEY TERMS

### Wilson's Fourteen Points

When the USA entered the First World War its president had drawn up the Fourteen Points to explain what the USA was fighting for. The aim was to create a more just world. One of the Fourteen Points called for disarmament as many believed the First World War had been the result of an 'arms race'.

### Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

The treaty signed between Germany and Russia in March 1918 that ended the war in the east. It was much harsher than Versailles, with Russia losing 62 million people, 27 per cent of farmland, 26 per cent of railway lines and 74 per cent of iron and coal resources.

## KEY TERMS

**Diktat** A dictated peace, where a treaty is imposed without negotiation.

### Self-determination

The right of people of the same race to decide their own government.

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## SOURCE QUESTION

How useful is Source A as evidence for the reaction of the German people to the Treaty of Versailles?

## KEY TERMS

### Austro-Hungarian Empire

Austria-Hungary had been Germany's closest ally since 1879. The multinational empire ended when Austria was forced to accept defeat. The 8-million-strong state of Austria, despite being German in language and culture, was forbidden to join with Germany. The new states created from the empire had German-speaking minorities.

**Successor states** Term used to describe the states created from the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. These were often weak and this would make it easy for Germany to take them over in the 1930s.

It can be suggested that the actual sum was almost an irrelevance. It would not have mattered how much Germany was required to pay since any amount would have led to protests as many Germans did not think that they should be paying anything and could not accept that they had actually lost the war.

## War guilt

The territorial, military and economic losses and reparations were sufficient to anger most Germans. This was reflected in the hostile reaction to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which saw demonstrations on the streets of Germany, and in newspapers, such as the *Deutsche Zeitung*, which called for revenge. However, the war guilt clause only added to the sense of injustice as Germany was forced to accept the blame for starting the war. Many in Germany thought that the war was a just conflict which had been brought on by Germany's enemies threatening the security of the nation.

## SOURCE A

From the pan-German newspaper, *Deutsche Zeitung*, published 28 June 1918. Quoted in K.S. Pinson, *Modern Germany*, Macmillan, 1966, p. 398.

*Vengeance! German nation! Today in the Hall of Mirrors of Versailles the disgraceful treaty is being signed. Do not forget it! In the place where, in the glorious year of 1871, the German empire in all its glory had its origin, today German honour is being carried to its grave. Do not forget it! The German people will, with unceasing labour, press forward to reconquer the place among the nations to which it is entitled. Then will come vengeance for the shame of 1918.*

## German reaction to the Treaty of Versailles

The Allies gave Germany fourteen days to consider the terms of the treaty. However, in reality, the Germans had little choice but to sign it. The naval blockade was still in force and the Allies were in the Rhineland and poised to invade. As a result, many Germans viewed the treaty as a **diktat**, but they still disapproved of the government signing it and the government lost further public support. Most Germans believed that their treatment was not in keeping with the Fourteen Points, with **self-determination** given to states such as Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, but denied to Germany. As a result of the treaty, many Germans now found themselves living under foreign rule, in Poland or Czechoslovakia, or in occupied areas.

Although, at first sight, the treaty appeared tough on Germany, many historians have argued that it was not as harsh as it seems. The overarching German view that they had not lost the war meant that, no matter what the terms of the treaty, there would have been opposition. But, even with the losses, Germany was still powerful. Its position had, in many ways, been strengthened in central Europe with the collapse of the **Austro-Hungarian Empire** and the defeat of Russia. This meant that Germany was still the strongest regional power, a position reinforced by the creation of a number of small **successor states**.



Despite Germany's remaining power and influence, the signing of the treaty played a major role in tipping the country into chaos, particularly as Ebert's government was very weak. It led to attacks on the government from the right-wing nationalists, who could not accept the terms of the treaty, to the French occupation of the Ruhr and **hyperinflation**, as Germany battled to pay reparations (see pages 27–9). However, how far these events were due to the treaty is a matter of debate.

#### SUMMARY DIAGRAM

##### THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES AND ITS IMPACT ON GERMANY

###### Terms:

- Land lost
- Reparations
- War guilt
- Loss of empire
- Military loss
- Disarmament

###### Treaty of Versailles

###### Significance:

- Psychological shock
- Loss of Great Power status
- Diktat
- Stab-in-the-back myth
- Weakened Germany economically

#### KEY TERMS

**Hyperinflation** A very rapid rise in prices. In Germany, this was caused by the government printing large amounts of money so that the value of the currency fell dramatically.

**Sovereignty** Where ultimate power to make decisions resides.

## 3 The Weimar constitution

■ *How far reaching were the changes brought about by the Weimar constitution?*

### The establishment of the Weimar Republic

As a result of the Kaiser's abdication in November 1918, Germany would change from an authoritarian state, where the ruler appointed the chancellor, to a democracy and republic, where **sovereignty** was based on the people. This was a major change for Germans. The support of the people for the new regime was further limited as the new democratic government signed the Treaty of Versailles, giving the impression that it was weak, unlike the strong rule of the kaisers.

During the autumn of 1918, the draft for a new constitution had been drawn up and elections for a National Assembly took place in January 1919. The turnout for the elections was high, with over 80 per cent of the electorate taking part. The results saw Ebert's SPD emerge as the largest party, winning 165 seats and 38 per cent of the vote (see Table 2.1, see page 12).

The National Assembly met at Weimar, hence the name for the new republic, because Berlin was considered unsafe owing to communist unrest (see pages 15–17). Ebert was elected president of the new republic and the Centre and German Democratic parties joined the Social Democrats in a coalition government. It appeared as if the new government was off to a strong start

**Table 2.1** National Assembly seats, January 1919

Party	Number of seats
Social Democratic Party	165
Centre Party	91
German Democratic Party	75
German National People's Party	44
Independent Social Democratic Party	22
German People's Party	19

as 75 per cent of the electorate had voted for these three parties, all of which supported the new republic and democracy.

Despite this apparent success, the final constitution which was produced by the Assembly has often been seen as making the fall of the Weimar Republic virtually inevitable. The main features of the constitution were:

- Germany was a republic.
- Sovereignty was based on the people.
- It was a federal state, as the empire had been. This meant that individual states retained their power over matters such as education, police and churches.
- The central government was responsible for foreign policy, taxation and the armed forces.
- The head of the central government was the president, with two chambers, the *Reichstag* and the *Reichsrat*.

## KEY TERMS

### Universal suffrage

An electoral system in which every adult has the right to vote.

### Proportional representation

An electoral system by which the number of seats given to a party depends on the number of votes it gains.

**Veto** The right to block laws or decisions.

## The *Reichstag* and *Reichsrat*

- Members of the *Reichstag* were elected every four years by **universal suffrage**, with everyone over the age of twenty eligible to vote.
- Members were elected by **proportional representation**.
- The chancellor and ministers had to have the support of the *Reichstag* and had to resign if they lost its support.
- The *Reichstag* initiated and approved legislation.
- The *Reichsrat* was made up of delegates from each state. It could **veto** legislation, although this could be overturned if the *Reichstag* voted two-thirds in favour.

## The president

- Elected by popular vote every seven years.
- Head of the armed forces.
- Summoned and dissolved the *Reichstag*.
- Appointed the chancellor and the government.

At the same time, a bill of rights was passed which guaranteed personal liberty, equality before the law, freedom of movement, expression, conscience and the right of association.

The constitution was approved in July 1919 by 262 votes to 75, with the Nationalists and the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) voting against it.

## The challenges facing the Weimar constitution

It is perhaps not surprising, as the republic lasted for only fourteen years, many of which were troubled, that the constitution has been highly criticised. Some historians have even argued that the terms of the constitution did much to facilitate the rise to power of the Nazis. Such claims have focused on three main issues:

- The use of proportional representation.
- The relationship between the president and the *Reichstag*, in particular Article 48 which gave the president emergency powers.
- The continuation of some traditional institutions of Imperial Germany.

It is important to consider the validity of these claims. In particular, there has been much focus on the system of proportional representation.

### Proportional representation

The system allocated the number of seats within the *Reichstag* in proportion to the total number of votes cast for each party. This meant that many small parties, such as the Nazis (see pages 21–4), gained representation, with the result that none had a majority and governments were made up of a coalition of a number of parties. These coalitions were often unstable and, therefore, short lived, with frequent changes in government. It is argued that frequent changes did much to damage confidence in the new democracy and left many desiring a return to a more conservative or authoritarian alternative.

It would be difficult to argue against this claim as there were twenty different cabinets between February 1919 and January 1933. However, it must be remembered that for much of the period governments were battling against serious economic problems which did little to encourage stability. People constantly changed support for political parties as they looked for one that could solve the problems.

### The relationship between the president and the *Reichstag*

The relationship between the president and the *Reichstag* was meant to produce a system whereby there were checks and balances to ensure that neither would become too powerful. The aim was to produce a presidency that could limit the powers of the *Reichstag* and prevent it from becoming too powerful. However, in achieving this, it gave a large amount of power to the president. It also raised the question of where ultimate authority actually resided. Was it with the *Reichstag* or the president?

### Article 48

The president was also given the powers to suspend civil rights in the event of an emergency and to issue presidential decrees. Although the aim was to ensure that government continued, it meant that in practice the president could override the powers of the *Reichstag*. This situation would arise in 1923–4 during the Ruhr and hyperinflation crises and again from 1930–3, following the Wall Street Crash and the collapse of the Müller government (see page 72). However, in 1923 presidential powers were used to good effect to deal with the impact of the French and Belgian invasion of the Ruhr (see pages 27–9).

### The continuity of imperial institutions

There were a number of areas where traditional, conservative institutions remained in place and were able to exert a great deal of influence. This can be seen in:

- The civil service, which often upheld the conservative values of Imperial Germany.
- The judiciary, whose sympathies were not with the values of the republic.
- The army, which had held great status under the Kaiser and was not sympathetic to democracy.

The result of this was that conservative forces within Germany still exerted great influence and clashed with the desire of the republic to extend civil liberties and democracy.

### How strong was the new constitution?

Despite the criticisms, there were a number of strengths in the new constitution. It was democratic, with universal suffrage and the system of proportional representation. Although this is often seen as weakness because governments were short lived, it is often forgotten that there was much continuity in terms of membership of the governments, with ministers often continuing to serve different chancellors. While proportional representation led to many small parties gaining representation and government through coalitions, this was not new for Germany as coalitions had been present under imperial rule. It might also be argued that proportional representation ensured that a wide range of interests were represented in the *Reichstag*. The preservation of traditional institutions, although seen as challenging the ideals of the new republic, meant that experience was available to the new regime. Perhaps the greatest criticism of the new constitution has been reserved for the emergency powers available to the president under Article 48 and used in the period 1930–3 to undermine democracy. However, this provision was to ensure that government would continue to function during a crisis and worked well dealing with the invasion of the Ruhr and hyperinflation in the years 1923–4, suggesting that when it was used properly it was a strength rather than a weakness. It might, therefore, be argued that it was the peculiar and challenging circumstances rather than the actual constitution that weakened the new republic.

## SUMMARY DIAGRAM

## THE WEIMAR CONSTITUTION

## Key terms:

- Republic
- Federal
- President
- *Reichstag*
- *Reichsrat*
- Universal suffrage
- Proportional representation

## The Weimar constitution

## Areas of controversy:

- Use of proportional representation
- Article 48 and emergency powers
- Traditional institutions

## 4 Challenges to Weimar from the left and right

- *How serious were the challenges to the Weimar Republic from the left and right?*

It is perhaps unsurprising that the Weimar government faced challenges from both the left and right of the political spectrum in the years 1919–23. There was limited support for the new republic, with many Germans wanting a return to the traditional, authoritarian government of the Kaiser. The regime was further weakened by signing the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. However, even before this there had been political unrest, particularly from the left with the attempted establishment of workers' soviets in many towns and cities at the end of the war.

### The Spartacist rising

With the ending of the war, many workers hoped that a soviet-style government would be established and that industries would be **nationalised**. However, the failure of the revolutions at the end of 1918 ensured that this did not happen. The decision to give power to parliament and a lack of genuine reform led to the resignation of the Independent Socialists from the Council of People's Representatives and the formation of the Spartacists, the forerunners of the KPD.

The Spartacists attempted to seize power in Berlin in January 1919 and it was their actions that led to the National Assembly meeting in Weimar rather than the capital. The revolt lasted from 5 to 12 January. Its aim was to overthrow the provisional government and establish a soviet-style government. On 5 January, the Spartacists occupied public buildings and called for a general strike to bring down the government, which they believed was betraying the revolution.

The rising was never a serious threat to the government, even though there were three days of brutal street fighting, which resulted in the deaths of over 100 people. The rising was poorly supported, with only a few workers,

#### KEY TERM

**Nationalised** When an industry is owned and run by the government.



## KEY FIGURES

### **Gustav Noske** (1868–1946)

A basket-maker who became a trade unionist and SPD member. He was the first defence minister in the early Weimar governments.

### **Rosa Luxemburg** (1871–1919)

Known as 'Red Rosa'. She was a founder of the Spartacus League and imprisoned during the war. She helped to form the Communist Party but was murdered while in police custody during the Spartacist rising.

### **Karl Liebknecht** (1871–1919)

A German socialist who, with Luxemburg, was co-founder of the Spartacus League and Communist Party. He was assassinated during the rising.

## KEY TERM

**Freikorps** The Free Corps, a right-wing group of former soldiers. Nationalist in their outlook, they acted as a paramilitary group who were willing to take action against communist activity.

## ? SOURCE QUESTION

What is the battle portrayed in the poster in Source B?

trade unionists and Social Democrats joining. The rising also failed to gain support in the rest of Germany and this made it much easier for the defence minister, **Gustav Noske**, to crush it. He had the support of the army and the **Freikorps**, with about 400,000 troops. The rising also saw the murder of two of the Communist leaders, **Rosa Luxemburg** and **Karl Liebknecht**, which further reduced the organisational capacity of the party.

## SOURCE B



'What does Spartacus want? Fighting the new militarism, capitalism and landowners.' A KPD poster from 1919.

**SOURCE C**

From an article from a SPD newspaper, *Vorwärts*, published in early January 1919.

*The despicable actions of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg soil the revolution and endanger all its achievements. The masses must not sit quietly for one minute longer while these brutal beasts and their followers paralyse the activities of the republican government and incite the people more and more to a civil war.*

However, although the Spartacist revolt had been crushed, this did not mean that the threat from the left had ended. There were a series of strikes throughout the country over the next four months and soviets were set up in cities such as Bremen and Munich. The collapse of the **Bavarian monarchy** allowed the leader of the USPD, **Kurt Eisner**, to take the political lead there, but he was assassinated in February 1919. In the confusion that followed, a Bavarian soviet republic was set up, but this was crushed after a month by the *Freikorps* and the army in what became known as the **White Terror**.

Despite the crushing of the left-wing unrest, which removed the immediate threat to the republic, it increased polarisation within society and led many on the right to believe that the country faced a soviet-style revolution. This fear appeared to come to fruition in the Ruhr in March 1920 when the KPD was able to take control of much of the region. Once again, this was crushed by the army and *Freikorps*, but it led to the feeling on the left that the army was undemocratic.

## How serious was the threat from the left?

The almost continuous unrest among the left in the early years of the republic gave the impression to many in Germany that the country was facing a soviet-inspired threat, which was added to by propaganda from the right. This fear appeared to be confirmed by the success the left enjoyed in elections throughout the period, securing some ten to fifteen per cent of the vote. However, although strikes were a regular feature of life, it did not mean that large numbers were willing or about to undertake revolutionary activity. There were a wide range of reasons why left-wing activity failed to threaten the government:

- The government was able to suppress left-wing activities. Leaders such as Luxemburg were killed, reducing the effectiveness of groups, while the threat of brutal action deterred others.
- Leadership was often poor, particularly after the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. There were also divisions between leaders over the tactics to be adopted.
- There were divisions between different groups.
- The government was able to make concessions, which further split its opponents.

**SOURCE QUESTION**

What is the view of Source C about the Spartacist rising?

**KEY TERMS****Bavarian monarchy**

Bavaria was one of the oldest states in Europe, but was part of Imperial Germany, and kept its monarchy until November 1918.

**White Terror** First used to describe the suppression of the soviet or 'Red' republic in Bavaria in 1919, it became used to describe the murders and violence that took place in 1919–22.

**KEY FIGURE****Kurt Eisner (1867–1919)**

A journalist and a socialist. He organised the socialist revolution that overthrew the Bavarian monarchy in November 1918. He proclaimed the People's State of Bavaria but was assassinated by a nationalist in 1919.

## The threat from the right

There was much dislike of the new government from the right of the political spectrum, particularly from army officers, civil servants and the judiciary, who all longed for a return to the authoritarian rule of the Kaiser. There were some who were willing to take action to remove the republic, while others focused on rebuilding their own position.

There were also a number of extreme right-wing political parties. They were able to play effectively on the supposed insult to the nation that the new government had committed by signing the armistice and the Treaty of Versailles. These patriotic and often anti-Semitic groups had developed during the First World War, but were able to gain more support in the chaos that followed defeat, often arguing that members of the new government had Jewish links. One of the most notable of these was the German Workers' Party under Anton Drexler, whose meetings were attended by Adolf Hitler, which put forward the view that Germany had been betrayed by Jewish people. There were also more mainstream right-wing parties, such as **German National People's Party (DNVP)**, whose aim was to combat the left and establish a more conservative, nationalist government.

### KEY TERM

#### German National People's Party (DNVP)

A coalition of nationalists that included the Fatherland Party and the Pan-German League. Many of its members were racists and extremists. Its support came from landowners and industrialists, but it also had backing among the middle classes and was the largest of the more radical right-wing parties.

**Table 2.2** Weimar-era political parties

Party	Main views and support
ZP (Centre Party)	Created in the nineteenth century to protect Catholic interests, attracted wide range of supporters
DDP (German Democratic Party)	Formed from the old National Liberal Party, it gained support from the professional middle class
DNVP (German National People's Party)	A right-wing party, monarchist and anti-republic
DVP (German People's Party)	Founded by Gustav Stresemann, it initially disliked the republic but it became a supporter of parliamentary democracy and attracted support from the Protestant middle and upper classes
KPD (German Communist Party)	Opposed the republic and wanted revolution
NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party – Nazis)	As the name suggests it was a mixture of nationalism and socialism, but the socialism was largely abandoned as the party followed a more right-wing agenda
SPD (German Social Democratic Party)	Moderate socialists and were the party of the working class and trade unions. They supported parliamentary democracy
BVP (Bavarian People's Party)	A regional party formed from elements of the Centre Party in 1919. Its aim was to uphold the interests of Bavaria
USPD (Independent German Social Democratic Party)	Broke away from the SPD and contained more radical socialists, with some later joining the KPD, but others returned to the SPD

## The Kapp Putsch

The opportunity for right-wing groups came when the government began to disband the *Freikorps* and reduce the size of the German army in accordance with the terms of the Versailles treaty. A rising began when it was proposed to disband two brigades of the army stationed close to Berlin. **Wolfgang Kapp** and General Lüttwitz led 12,000 troops into Berlin, proclaimed Kapp, the founder of the wartime patriotic Fatherland Party, as chancellor and seized the main buildings in the capital.

### SOURCE D

From a proclamation by Wolfgang Kapp, 13 March 1920. Quoted in John Laver, *Imperial and Weimar Germany*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, p. 43.

*The Reich and nation are in grave danger. With terrible speed we are approaching the complete collapse of the State and of law and order. The people are only dimly aware of the approaching disaster. Prices are rising unchecked. Hardship is growing. Starvation threatens. Corruption, usury, nepotism and crime are cheekily raising their heads. The Government, lacking authority, impotent, and in league with corruption, is incapable of overcoming the danger ...*

*From the east we are threatened by destruction and violation by war-like Bolshevism. Is this Government capable of resisting it? How are we to escape internal and external collapse?*

*Only by re-erecting a strong State ... there is no other way but a government of action.*

The army refused to put the rising down despite government requests and, as a result, the government was forced to flee. It appeared as if the threat was serious. However, the government was saved by the trade unions responding to a government request to call a general strike, which not only brought the capital to a standstill but also the rest of the country. This action paralysed public services, including water, electricity and gas, and after four days Kapp and his 'government' fled the city.

### SOURCE E

From an appeal by the Social Democrats, March 1920.

*We refuse to buckle under this military pressure. We did not bring about the revolution to make this bloody Freikorps regiment legal. Workers! Comrades! Go on strike, put down your work and stop the military dictatorship. There is only one way to prevent the return of a Kaiser: shut down the economy!*

### KEY FIGURE

#### Wolfgang Kapp (1858–1922)

A Prussian civil servant who helped to found the Fatherland Party. He wanted to see the Kaiser restored.

### SOURCE QUESTION

How accurate are Kapp's comments in Source D about the situation in Germany in 1920?

### ONLINE EXTRAS

[WWW](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras)

Test your understanding of the value of a source by completing Worksheet 2 at [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras)

### SOURCE QUESTION

According to Source E, why was there opposition to the Kapp Putsch?

## How serious a threat was the rising?

The crushing of the rising would suggest that the government had been successful. It had been able to defeat the rising and during the crisis it had been able to retain the support of the people of Berlin. However, the fact that the rising had taken place and the army's unwillingness to come to the aid of the republic is a clear indication of its weak position. It also suggests that the army had the right to behave as it saw fit, a position that had already been accepted by the **Ebert–Groener Pact**. The supreme army command had agreed to support the government and use troops to maintain it in return for Ebert opposing revolutionary socialism and the authority of army officers. In reality, the army had become a '**state within a state**'. This was made even clearer by developments in Bavaria where the army was able to install a right-wing government, leading to the state becoming a hotbed for radicalism, culminating in the Munich *Putsch* of 1923 (see pages 23–4).

### KEY TERMS

#### Ebert–Groener Pact

Agreed in November 1918; by this, Groener, the supreme army commander, agreed to support the new government under Ebert and use troops to maintain the stability of the republic.

#### State within a state

Where another power can threaten the authority of the government.

## The aftermath of the Kapp Putsch

The elections of June 1920 resulted in further loss of support for democratic parties, such as the SPD, and saw gains for the right wing, which was determined to abandon the programme of social and economic reforms. This served only to encourage further hostility from many workers, reflected in the left-wing risings of 1921 and 1923. At the same time, the extreme right wing also continued to grow as disputes with the Allies over the peace terms and reparations (see pages 25–6) created further resentment.

### SUMMARY DIAGRAM

#### CHALLENGES TO WEIMAR FROM THE LEFT AND RIGHT

Challenges from the left wing:

- Spartacist rising
- Strikes
- Bavarian Soviet Republic
- Ruhr

Challenges from the right wing:

- Kapp *Putsch*
- Munich *Putsch*

Challenges to Weimar

Why did challenge from the left fail?

- Numbers poor
- Lack of mass support in Germany
- Government had the army's support
- Leaders killed
- Divisions among left

Why did challenge from the right fail?

- General strike defeated Kapp



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