

## *Historical Committee: Weimar Republic*

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### **I. Historical Background**

Europe's historical powerhouse is struggling from the aftermath of the Great War, a conflict many believe Germany was still fully capable of winning. The Weimar Republic, home to the world's finest army of the Prussian tradition, great scientific and economic development, is being punished by hyperinflation and brutal policies of war reparations. The year is 1919. The new Weimar constitution blended the European parliamentary system with the American presidential system. From a ballot which contained a plethora of parties, Germans chose legislators who would make the policies that shaped their lives. In 1923, parties spanned a broad political spectrum that included many parties from the far-left and far-right and everything in between. The Chancellor and the Cabinet needed to be approved by the Reichstag and needed the Reichstag's continued support to stay in power. Cohesion between the Reichstag, Cabinet, and President are essential to the survival of this brand-new republic.

### **II. Weimar Politics**

The Weimar Republic was Germany's first democracy, a state in which elected representatives had real power. The new constitution attempted to blend the European parliamentary system with the American presidential system. In the pre- World War I period, only men twenty-five years of age and older had the right to vote, and their elected representatives had very little power. The Weimar constitution gave all men and women twenty years of age and older the right to vote. Women made up more than 52% of the potential electorate, and their support was vital to the new Republic. From a ballot, which often had thirty or more parties on it, Germans chose legislators who would make the policies that shaped their lives. Parties spanning a broad political spectrum from Communists on the far left to National Socialists (Nazis) on the far right competed in the Weimar elections. The Chancellor and the Cabinet needed to be approved by the Reichstag (legislature) and needed the Reichstag's continued support to stay in power.

Although the constitution makers expected the Chancellor to be the head of government, they included emergency provisions that would ultimately undermine the Republic. The constitution gave emergency powers to the directly elected President and made him the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. In times of crisis, these presidential powers would prove decisive.

During the stable periods, Weimar Chancellors formed legislative majorities based on coalitions primarily of the Social Democrats, the Democratic Party, and the Catholic Center Party, all moderate parties that supported the Republic. However, as the economic situation deteriorated in 1930, and many disillusioned voters turned to extremist parties, the Republic's supporters could no longer command a majority. German democracy could no longer function as its creators had hoped. Ironically by 1932, Adolf Hitler, a dedicated foe of the Weimar Republic, was the only political leader capable of commanding a legislative majority. On January 30, 1933, an aged President

Hindenburg reluctantly named Hitler Chancellor of the Republic. Using his legislative majority and the support of Hindenburg's emergency presidential powers, Hitler proceeded to destroy the Weimar Republic.

### **III. Weimar Economics**

Emerging from a devastating war which destroyed not just the German countryside, but the German people, the government of Germany was left with no money to pay off the reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty also deprived Germany of territory, natural resources, and even ships, trains, and factory equipment. Her population was undernourished and contained impoverished widows, orphans, and disabled veterans. The new German government struggled to deal with these crises and in response, started an inflation crisis on a scale that had never been seen before. By 1924, after years of crisis management and attempts at tax and finance reform, the economy was stabilized with the help of foreign, particularly American, loans. A period of relative prosperity prevailed from 1924 to 1929. This "golden age" was reflected in the strong support for moderate pro-Weimar political parties in the 1928 elections. However, economic disaster struck with the onset of the world depression in 1929. The American stock market crash and bank failures led to a recall of American loans to Germany. This development added to Germany's economic hardship. Mass unemployment and suffering followed. Many Germans became increasingly disillusioned with the Weimar Republic and began to turn toward radical anti-democratic parties whose representatives promised to relieve their economic hardships.

### **IV. Inflation**

The new Weimar Republic was saddled with a massive war debt that it could not afford. That was worsened by the fact that it was printing money without economic resources to back it. The Treaty of Versailles, with its demand for reparations, further accelerated the decline in the value of the mark, so that 48 paper marks were required to buy a US dollar by late 1919. German currency was relatively stable at about 90 marks per dollar during the first half of 1921. Because the Western Front was mostly in France and Belgium, Germany came out of the war with most of its industrial infrastructure intact. It was in a better position to become the dominant economic force on the European continent. In April 1921 the Reparations Commission announced the "London payment plan", under which Germany would pay reparations in gold or foreign currency in annual installments of 2 billion gold marks, plus 26% of the value of Germany's exports; this was accepted by Germany after an Allied ultimatum the following month. The first payment was made when it came due in June 1921. It marked the beginning of an increasingly rapid devaluation of the mark, which fell in value to approximately 330 marks per dollar. The total reparations demanded were 132 billion gold marks, but Germany had to pay only 50 billion marks.

Since reparations were required to be repaid in hard currency, not the rapidly depreciating paper mark, one strategy that Germany used was the mass printing of bank notes to buy foreign currency, which was then used to pay reparations. That greatly exacerbated the inflation of the paper mark.



During the inflation years, people who had saved their money in banks or were living on pensions or disability checks found themselves bankrupt. Those with jobs found that their salary increases could not possibly keep up with the almost instantaneous rise in prices. Artist George Grosz described what shopping was like in those days:

“Lingering at the [shop] window was a luxury because shopping had to be done immediately. Even an additional minute meant an increase in price. One had to buy quickly because a rabbit, for example, might cost two million marks more by the time it took to walk into the store.

A few million marks meant nothing, really. It was just that it meant more lugging. The packages of money needed to buy the smallest item had long since become too heavy for trouser pockets. They weighed many pounds. People had to start carting their money around in wagons and knapsacks. I used a knapsack.”

## V. Golden Age

By the end of 1924, the Weimar Republic appeared to have survived its crisis and to have entered a period of stability. The second election of 1924 had seen movement away from the extremes and towards those parties that were more supportive of the government. The period from 1924 until 1929 is often called the “Golden Age,” a time of great possibility when Germany achieved international acceptance, the currency was stable and production and real income were on the rise. Terrorist murders had ceased, and neither left-wing uprisings nor right-wing coup attempts threatened the very existence of the Republic itself. This stability was purchased at the price of great vision, effort and sacrifice by many, perhaps most of all by Friedrich Ebert (died prematurely of natural causes) and Walther Rathenau (murdered). The symbol of stability during the middle Weimar years was Gustav Stresemann who built on the work of these men.



## VI. Timeline<sup>1</sup>

<b>November 10-28, 1918</b> Abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II	On November 10, Kaiser Wilhelm fled to the Netherlands and on the 28th, he signed the official abdication act.
<b>January 15, 1919</b> Spartacist Revolution	Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, with their radical faction within the SPD, started worker-led riots in Berlin in an attempt to create a German Bolshevik State.
<b>June 28, 1919</b> Treaty of Versailles	The German government signed the Treaty of Versailles which humiliated and crippled Germany by stripping the country of territory such as Danzig and Alsace-Lorraine, and monumental monetary payments.
<b>August 11, 1919</b> Establishment of the Weimar Republic	Although the republic was initially proclaimed in November of 1918, the official Constitution was signed in August of 1919.
<b>February 24, 1920</b> Founding of the Nazi Party	The German Workers party is rebranded as the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP)
<b>November 8, 1923</b> Munich Beer Hall Putsch	During an official governmental meeting by the Bavarian government, Adolf Hitler stormed the beer hall the meeting was in and the next day close to three-thousand Nazi supporters clashed with police
<b>November 1923</b> Hyper-Inflation at its highest	The German mark loses almost all its value as workers demand more pay and time off. Millions of marks are needed to purchase basic goods
<b>August 1924</b> Dawes Plan	The U.S. and other countries agree to give various loans to Germany. This led to the end of hyperinflation
<b>February 28, 1925</b> Paul von Hindenburg becomes President	General Hindenburg, the hero of the Battle of Tannenberg, became president using the "stab-

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.facinghistory.org/weimar-republic-fragility-democracy/weimar-republic-timeline>

	in-the-back theory” to remain popular among the German populace.
<b>October 1929</b> Black Tuesday and the Wall Street Crash	After the crash, the US government demanded that Germany pay off the loans in 90 days. The impact of this crash left millions without jobs and many companies were forced into bankruptcy.
<b>January 30, 1933</b> Hitler named Chancellor	Adolf Hitler, head of the NSDAP, is elected chancellor and quickly started to destroy democratic institutions
<b>March 1933</b> Destruction of the Weimar Republic	Using the Enabling Act, Hitler and the NSDAP were able to pass laws without the approval of the Reichstag. With this, the Third Reich is established.

## VII. Party Differences

### A. Communist Party of Germany (KPD)

Led by Ernst Thälmann, the KPD was favorable to the Soviet Union and was the largest communist party in Europe. As such, the party was seen as the vanguard of the communist movement outside the Soviet Union. Splits between the KPD and the SPD allowed the Nazi Party to rise in popularity as each party created allegations about the leadership of the other.

Originally led by Rosa Luxemburg and her Spartacists, the party was committed to Leninism and spreading Communism throughout Germany.

### B. National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP)

Led by Adolf Hitler, the Nazi party’s foundation was that of anti-semitism, diffusing the “stab-in-the-back” myth to rally disillusioned soldiers and citizens of the former empire into supporting them, and the idea that Germans were racially superior to all other races.

Nazism is a version of fascism that incorporates anti-semitism, scientific racism, and eugenics into the rhetoric while including fascism’s hatred for the parliamentary democracies that were prevalent in Europe. The ideology also spread the idea of pan-Germanism which was shown in the 1938 annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland.

### **C. German Democratic Party (DDP)**

The German Democratic Party's (DDP) largely Protestant membership was drawn from the middle class, often from professional groups of lawyers, doctors and liberal academics. Some of its leaders were converts to democracy and republicanism, but the party was firmly supportive of the Weimar Republic and resistant to militarism and anti-Semitism. It attracted more Protestant than Catholic voters and many of Germany's Jews voted for the party. While the party fits on the left side of the political spectrum, it stressed its moderation. Unfortunately for the Weimar Republic, this party received its greatest vote totals in 1919 and saw its support erode for most of the Weimar period. Contributing to the decline of the Democratic Party were the untimely deaths of Max Weber and Friedrich Naumann, its most prominent leaders. Yet, in spite of its declining support, the party played a significant role during the Weimar years, and was an eager participant in coalition governments. In an effort to revive its fortunes in the final days of the Republic, the Democratic Party reconstituted itself as the "State Party."

### **D. Social Democratic Party (SPD)**

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) drew its support from blue-collar trade union skilled workers, and at times from more progressive white-collar workers and intellectuals. While the party had proportionally more Protestant than Catholic supporters, it did attract Catholic workers. In some parts of Germany landless farm workers voted for the party. German women from working class families voted for the Social Democratic Party in large numbers. Some of Germany's Jews also voted for the Social Democratic Party. From 1919 to 1932, the Social Democratic Party was the party that received the most votes in national elections and had the largest legislative delegation. The SPD was committed to further reform of Weimar society and hoped to eventually make the institutions and economy of Weimar more egalitarian. This party was a bulwark of the Republic and was the most active opponent of antisemitism during the Weimar years

### **E. German Nationalist People's Party (DNVP)**

The supporters of the German Nationalist People's Party (DNVP) were generally Protestant and represented a mix of landowners and industrialists with crafts people and civil servants and farmers who followed the lead of the wealthy landowners. The party also attracted the more conservative elements among the white collar clerical and retail sales workers. It was militaristic, resistant to republican government, opposed to attempts to fulfill the terms of the Versailles treaty, and anti-Semitic.

### **F. German People's Party (DVP)**

The German People's Party (DVP) represented owners of small and middle-sized businesses and white-collar workers, and its support was much stronger among Protestants than Catholics. It lacked the rural base of the nationalists and was more moderate in its nationalism and less extreme in its anti-Semitism. The party had a core group which was willing to support and participate in Weimar coalition government, and these reform conservatives kept Gustav Stresemann as party leader. At the same time, other People's Party members were never reconciled to the new Republic.

## VIII. Guide Questions

1. What is your delegation's position on the current state of the Weimar Republic?
2. What plans does your delegation have to improve the situation in the Republic?
3. What does your delegation propose to combat the negative effects that the Great Depression has had on the Republic?
4. What would be your delegation's position as fascism takes momentum in Germany?
5. Does your delegation consider the terms of the Treaty of Versailles fair? If so, what's your thought on the role of the Treaty of Versailles on the rise of Nationalism in the Weimar Republic?
6. Which government does your delegation think is ideal for Germany and its people?

## IX. Message from the Dais

Delegates, the information we have provided here is only the surface of what's available to you. While we do hope you use all the information provided, we hope that you branch out and do research of your own to create varied, unique, and unanticipated plans for the other delegates to react to. The main goal of the committee should be for each delegate or group of similarly minded delegations to band together in creating a stronger Germany with their ideal form of government, and the Dais is looking forward to seeing the arguments for and against the differing forms of government that the delegations strive for. To add to this, the dais is working hard to ensure that the committee runs well and that the committee is fun for you guys as delegates. The position papers are due on **January 17, 2019** by midnight and the format is **Times New Roman, size 12, with 1.5 spacing**. The papers will have a minimum length of **1 and a half pages** and a maximum of **3 pages**. If you have any questions about the committee, feel free to email us with any questions you may have.

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## X. Resources

<https://encyclopedia.usmmm.org/content/en/article/the-weimar-republic>  
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Weimar-Republic>  
<https://www.history.com/topics/germany/weimar-republic>  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-Democratic-Party>  
<https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/guides/z9y64j6/revision/1>  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-National-Peoples-Party>  
<https://alphahistory.com/weimarrepublic/>  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-Peoples-Party>