

## INTRODUCTION

Word Count: 347

After their defeat in the First World War (WW1), Germany was left with devastating economic and social problems and a new democracy to contend with. The armistice signed in 1918 forced Germany to switch to a democratic leadership from its previous autocracy. This new democracy was the Weimar Republic governed by Friedrich Ebert and his Social Democratic Party under a very ambitious, new constitution. It can be argued that the Weimar democracy was doomed from the start as the government faced a series of challenges. Germans felt ashamed by the unexpected defeat of WW1 and the 'stab-in-the-back' myth<sup>1</sup> and blamed politicians for the loss, leading to the belief that they were weak which created a lack of faith in democracy. Extremism emerged in Germany through non-democratic supporters from the left, including the Communist party, and the right such as the National Socialist German Workers' Party [Nazi Party].

There is historical debate surrounding the main reason for the Nazi rise to power. There is one argument that Hitler's leadership and charismatic personality, along with the clever use of propaganda, were the reasons why the Nazis were able to achieve power. However, others argue that the unstable situation in Germany at the time led power into the hands of the Nazis. William Carr argues that it was 'inconceivable' that Hitler was able to come to power without the impact of the Wall Street Crash in 1929, which led to a world economic crisis. On the other hand, Detlev Peukert contests that the collapse of the Weimar Republic was not the result of any single factor. There were other significant factors that allowed the Nazis to take power such as the role of Hitler, Nazi propaganda and social revolution in Germany before 1933.

Chapter one will examine economic collapse in Germany. Following on, radical extremism will be examined; the impact and growth in Germany and opposition to the Weimar. Additionally, other factors which led the Nazis gaining power will be analysed, such as Hitler's leadership, use of propaganda, the social revolution and weakness of the Weimar.

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<sup>1</sup> "The distorted view that the army had not really lost the First World War and that unpatriotic groups, such as socialists and Jews, had undermined it." Geoff Layton, Weimar and the Rise of Nazi Germany 1918-23, Hodder Education, 2015, Page 5

### CHAPTER 1: ECONOMIC COLLAPSE IN GERMANY 1928-1933

Word Count: 1352

To formally end WW1, Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles requiring Germany to pay reparations to the Allies to compensate for the war. These payments were designed to cripple Germany. By May 1921, Germany had to pay 20 billion gold marks, equivalent to around £1 billion, and a further 40 million marks by 1926<sup>2</sup>. There was mass unemployment in Germany as millions of soldiers returned home to no jobs. The Kaiser had tried to pay for the war through selling war bonds to the public leaving Germany in serious debt<sup>3</sup>. Germany's unstable economy meant it was unable to pay the hefty reparation funds and there was the additional pressure of the Allies threatening to restart the war if payments were not completed. Many Germans resented the Treaty believing the politicians had been forced into signing it, calling it a 'diktat'<sup>4</sup>. Mistrust grew between the politicians and citizens as people felt betrayed by the politicians who signed it. This turned Germans to extremists groups who promised to renege on the treaty.

In 1923, the Weimar Government, under the leadership of Ebert and the Social Democratic Party [SPD], realised that reparations would prove difficult to deal with, especially with opposition towards the Weimar from all sides. Germany requested more time to pay the reparations in July 1922 but the French demanded the payments. In January 1923, French and Belgian soldiers occupied the Ruhr, an important industrial area, to put pressure on Germany to pay. The Weimar led a policy of passive resistance towards the occupation, paying wages whilst workers were urged to strike and refuse to co-operate with French authorities. The Weimar allowed the mass print of paper money to pay the massive debts and cover the large expenditures, but this led to a hyperinflation crisis in Germany.

The long-term cause of hyperinflation was the failure to prepare an extended financial provision for war. The Weimar looked weak as they struggled to address the economic issues and attempts made to improve the economy continually failed. Holtfrisch argues that the policies implemented had been rational and smart given

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<sup>2</sup> Michael S Neiberg, 'The Treaty of Versailles: A Concise History', Oxford University Press, 2017, Page 61

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/the-nazi-rise-to-power/economic-issues/1919-1933-an-economic-overview/>

<sup>4</sup> A dictated piece

the circumstances<sup>5</sup> but it did not have as the impact intended. Unemployment and a decline in industry occurred leading to a growth in extremist groups as the Nazis emerged and promised to stop reparation payments to solve the economic issues. Hyperinflation happened so quickly that in only a few months, the cost of printing a bank note was greater than it was worth. Hyperinflation had set by 1923 and any serious attempts at stopping the economic problems failed. Extremist groups seized this opportunity to highlight the failures of the government and oppose democracy. By degrading the government and exploiting its weaknesses, extremist groups were able to attract voters who believed they would be better off with a different leadership focused on nationalist views.

Gustav Stresemann was appointed Chancellor in August 1923 and became foreign minister when his coalition collapsed at the end of hyperinflation. This collapse was a key problem as the lack of political consensus gave way to the rise in extremism. As Chancellor he introduced the new currency, the Rentenmark, and worked with Charles Dawes, an American banker, to resolve the economic and social problems, labelled the Dawes Plan. They decided the French troops would leave the Ruhr and reparation payments would be decreased. Also, Germany received a loan of 800 million marks from America to help stabilise the economy. Initially, this did help but at the cost of over-reliance on US funds. This proved catastrophic in 1929 when Wall Street crashed and Germany fell with it. Stephen Lee says: "The Dawes Plan made the German economy highly vulnerable to any major fluctuations on the American stock market"<sup>6</sup>. If Germany had not been as reliant on the US, then the impact may not have been so severe as other countries recovered better. Nonetheless, this could have been a result of the instability since WWI. The vulnerability that Germany suffered economically aided the rise in extremism as groups exploited the fact that the Weimar had made a wrong decision by relying on US funds. Extremist groups developed policies around providing the stability that Germans were seeking to make them more attractive and this successfully brought support to groups like the Nazis who grew at this time of economic hardship in Germany.

A Welfare State had been developed upon shaky foundations, funded by American loans, which added to future social and economic problems after the economic crash. The Weimar Government thought there was

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<sup>5</sup> Hite and Hinton, 'Weimar and Nazi Germany', Hodder Education, 2013, Page 49

<sup>6</sup> Stephen J Lee, 'The Weimar Republic', Routledge 1998, Page 93

little they could do to resolve the issue as they did not want a repeat of hyperinflation by printing more money, but failed to produce a better idea. This proved to Germans that the Weimar were not able to provide the stability they needed as they had led Germany into a second economic collapse and neglected to resolve the crisis quickly or effectively. Extremist groups preyed upon this and lured supporters by making promises to resolve issues and provide stability.

In 1929, 1.5 million people were unemployed. By 1933 this had become 6 million<sup>7</sup>. Resentment towards the government grew. Falling prices led to lower wages resulting in reduced demand and expenditure on goods meaning more unemployment. In order to tackle this, the Republic tried to reduce public spending, decreasing spending for infrastructure, services and welfare costs including pensions from the war. People in Germany became increasingly angry at the Government and their attempts to deal with this second economic crisis. Eric Weitz argues: “The toll of the war and the Versailles Treaty, hyperinflation and finally the depression left a battered population that by the winter of 1932 was desperate for a solution.”<sup>8</sup> Weitz here essentially argues that although there was a culmination of significant events that weakened Germany, the Wall Street Crash was the most significant factor. Holtfrisch concurs, saying: “The Nazi rise to power was essentially linked to the Great Depression which was a world-wide phenomenon and had little to do with domestic conflict” suggesting that the economic crash was the most significant factor the Nazis rise to power.

Throughout both crises, unemployment soared and people became desperate for solutions. A growth in crime occurred due to the desperate circumstances people were living in. Extremist groups such as the Communists and Nazis were harvesting support from individuals who had grown tired of the Weimar’s failings and used this as a tool to undermine the government. Mary Fullbrook agrees, “Even when the worst material impact was over; the psychological shock of the experience was to have longer lasting effects, confirming a deep-seated dislike of democracy.”<sup>9</sup> The unpredictability of the economy led to a distrust in the government due to their serious mismanagement. There is evidence to show that the economic crisis in Germany was a main factor in

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<sup>7</sup> <https://alphahistory.com/weimarrepublic/great-depression/>

<sup>8</sup> Eric D. Weitz, ‘Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy’, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007, Page 184

<sup>9</sup> Mary Fullbrook, ‘The Fontana History of Germany: 1918-1990 The Divided Nation’, Fontana Press, 1994, Page 34

the rise of extremism as the Nazis saw an increase of members from 27,000 in 1925 to 130,000 in 1929<sup>10</sup>. People turned to the Nazis as they looked for a new regime and new hope. The Weimar had been unable to provide economic stability and the Nazis offered a strong, authoritarian-style governance which many Germans had missed since the Kaiser.

Extremism became popular as people became desperate for a solution and strong leadership. The Nazis used the economic slump to their advantage, opening soup kitchens to appear as a 'salvation' to the German people. German elites supported this by placing blame upon the politicians through the 'stab-in-the-back' myth. The nationalist feelings of the Nazis and their supporters led to support for the German army, later relied on heavily by the Nazis, and an emphasis on the betrayal of the politicians who surrendered the war. It further promoted Nazi anti-semitic messages as they targeted Jews, due to the Jewish bankers and businessmen who remained successful through the economic crash. Although Germany had been badly weakened by economic problems caused by WWI and its consequences, it is unlikely that the Nazis would have been able to gain power without the economic crisis. Public faith in Weimar was lost by 1929 as economic stability was not a foreseeable goal.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/guides/z98gxsg/revision/4>.

## CHAPTER 2: RISE OF THE NAZIS AND RADICAL EXTREMISM IN GERMANY

Word Count: 1110

Weimar politicians faced several problems and concerns from the start. Opposition grew in the right and left of politics as the Social Democrats failed to suit the needs of either side or act properly to solve the economic difficulties. The Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party, KPD) was created at the end of 1918. The National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) had developed in 1920 from the German Workers' Party of 1919 with the founding principles of nationalism and anti-semitism. Hitler had joined the NSDAP after being assigned to monitor the party when he worked as a spy after the war. People were turning to extremist groups as the Government proved unstable and weak. The constitution added to the instability as it had been over ambitious and doomed from the start.

The Weimar Constitution, written in 1919 by Hugo Preuss, was heavily influenced by the democracies in Britain and America. Fischer has named it the 'world's most perfect democracy on paper'<sup>11</sup> as it featured many good protections for Germans; however, it also had several problems which proved fatal for Germany. Freedom of speech, religion and the press was guaranteed, along with workers having the right to join political parties and trade unions. Both of these were overturned quickly by the Nazis although they had helped them gain power. Presidential powers were a major flaw in the constitution. The President was only elected every seven years, appointed as Chancellor and headed the armed forces which gave one person too much power for a democracy. The President could also declare a state of emergency and the Enabling Act handed Presidential powers to the Chancellor if voted for by two-thirds of the Reichstag. Proportional representation, used in the elections for the Reichstag, resulted in coalitions which were the result of one party failing to achieve a majority. The weaknesses of the constitution led to the increase in extremism as the 'revolutionary' democracy was such a major change from the autocracy German people were used to. Politics were divided at this time. The left was split between the Socialists and the Communists. The socialists, namely the Social Democratic Party (SPD) fought for a unified Germany under democratic rule. The Communists tried to fight the rise of fascism and democracy wanting a communism regime in Germany similar to Russia. Extremist groups on both

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<sup>11</sup> Hite and Hinton, 'Weimar and Nazi Germany', Hodder Education, 2013, Page 30

sides capitalised on the weaknesses of the constitution and made the German public aware of the issues to make the Weimar appear weaker and for the public to seek new leadership.

Hitler was enlisted as an intelligence officer by the German Army after the war and spied on the German Workers' Party [DAP]. Impressing the small group through his propaganda skills, charisma and energy, Hitler worked with the party's leader, Anton Drexler, to create the party's main programme in February 1920 and changed the name to the National Socialist German Workers Party [NSDAP]. Hitler became the main force behind the party in 1921 and was influential in making policies and gaining support through his speeches. He set up the armed force of the party in 1921, the Sturmabteilung [SA], to promote hatred and show their strength as the unit threatened opposers and used violence to make people succumb. In 1923 Hitler led the Nazis' first attempt at power, the Munich Putsch. Hitler and other members of the SA invaded a public meeting in a beer hall to attempt to take control of the Bavarian government. The putsch failed and Hitler was arrested. He was sentenced to five years in prison however only served nine months. The Weimar failed to fully crush this opposition meaning the Nazis were able to quickly rebuild after Hitler's release. The Weimar's reluctance to fully eliminate the threat of the Nazis is potentially a result of the biased judiciary and army command. It was well-known that many judges and army officers felt betrayed by the democracy and wanted a return to autocracy, something Hitler promoted. They favoured right-wing opposition demonstrated by the brutal takedown of the Spartacist Revolt. Hitler only received a short prison sentence which provided him with time to write the book that the Nazi policies were built upon, *Mein Kampf*. It described his ideologies and it eventually became compulsory for every household in Germany to own a copy. The Weimar's leniency in treating right-wing opposition was a key part of their future demise. Hitler had learned that the only way the Nazis would achieve power in Germany would be by using legal and democratic ways to gain the support of the masses. However, he also realised that the judiciary were not going to treat him as harshly as other opposition groups and he used this to his advantage. Through Hitler's trial, the Nazis gained publicity and support. Hitler was smart and played to his strengths to appeal to those in society who would be able to bring the Nazis to power, such as elites.

Whilst Hitler was in prison, there was a quiet period for the Nazis, partially due to the absence of their leader but also as a result of the economic and social improvements that happened in Germany after the hyperinflation

crisis. Extremist groups tend to thrive in chaotic environments and the stability harmed support as people returned to the Weimar government who were improving social standards. In 1925, Hitler established his leadership of the NSDAP after he proved that he was the leader they needed and had learned from mistakes from the putsch, now knowing that the best way to secure power would be through politics and winning the elections instead of brute force.

In the 1928 Reichstag election, the Nazis won twelve seats, their membership increased by four times since 1925. However, it was hard to see that the Nazis could take power as they only received 2.6% of the vote. By September 1930, the Nazis had won 107 seats which amounted to 18.3% of the total vote. The increase in the support for the Nazis was a result of a combination of factors such as the economic crash as people looked to alternatives to effect change. Eberhard Kolb stated, "The downfall of the republic was caused by the nationalist and authoritarian opponents of democracy who mounted a major offensive against the state and destroyed it by unscrupulous methods". The country was fractured and those on the left had been treated far more harshly than the right showing little chance for a move away from conservative rule in Germany. This is disputed by other historians such as Eric Weitz who places emphasis on the culmination of damaging factors which, in total, caused the Nazis to come to power.

### CHAPTER 3: WHY THE NAZIS WERE ABLE TO GAIN POLITICAL CONTROL

Word Count: 1215

Nazis had an appeal through the leadership and charisma of Hitler and the tactical propaganda used which was also helpful in gaining support. Hitler held the strong belief that Germany would only be successful through Führerprinzip which people in Germany were attracted to this belief because of their history with an autocracy. The Nazis developed their leadership style with Hitler at the centre, Huber stated “If we wish to define political power in the Völkisch Reich correctly, we just not speak of ‘state power’ but of ‘Führer power’.”<sup>12</sup> Hitler introduced customs to show Nazi unity such as the ‘brown shirt’ uniforms of his personal bodyguards, the SA, and the Swastika which became Nazi Party emblem. By making the Nazis seem well organised, Germans wanted to join to gain a sense of stability. In particular, the right wing and middle class citizens of Germany enjoyed the sense of normality and loyalty the Nazis gave them which had been absent through the Weimar Era. These identities also made the Nazis seem more militaristic which promoted fear and compliance. Historians have placed emphasis on ‘emotional appeal’ of the Nazis, the emblems, demonstrations and Hitler’s leadership style, which drew in Germans who felt the Weimar lacked this intrigue<sup>13</sup>.

Propaganda was key in order for the Nazis to gain power. Hitler was a charismatic speaker and performed well in front of crowds. Rallies, leaflets, posters and adverts; support from prominent local people and speeches were also used for effect. By appointing Joseph Goebbels as propaganda chief, Hitler set about raising awareness and support for the Nazis. He tried to identify with all the different groups present at huge rallies and focused on rebuilding national pride and patriotism. Later, when the Nazis achieved power, their policy of ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ [the people’s community] furthered this as people were united and taught to serve Germany first and foremost. Through engaging local, influential people, the Nazis were able to gain support quickly as these individuals often held prestige and credibility, enticing others to support their views and donate money to the Nazi Party. Support grew as butchers, grocers and teachers shared their beliefs which Germans related to coming from local people who they trusted more than politicians. Hitler himself said: “The receptive powers of the masses are very restricted, and their understanding is feeble. On the other hand they

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<sup>12</sup> E Huber, ‘Verfassungsrecht der Grossdeutschen’, as quoted in Geoff Layton, ‘Democracy and Dictatorship in Germany 1919-1939’, Hodder Education, 2017, Page 93

<sup>13</sup> Hite and Hinton, ‘Weimar and Nazi Germany’, Hodder Education, 2013, Page 126

quickly forget.”<sup>14</sup> This shows Hitler knew that propaganda would eventually sway people to the Nazi ideology and this success can be measured by the fact that many people did buy into Hitler’s ideals.

During the 1920’s a social revolution took place; traditional views were changing in regards to women, music and art. This was an escape from post war Germany which had struggled to come to terms with defeat. The introduction of the cinema, radio and gramophone gave way to new forms of artistic expression to reach a mass audience. Although many people in Germany enjoyed the new developments in culture, there was a significant rejection from some Germans, namely right-wing, conservative groups like the Nazis. The Nazis objected to these new ideals as they fought to retain strict German traditions, such as forcing women to remain at home rather than take on professional roles and propaganda emphasised this. Furthermore, it helped to weaken the government as conservative groups criticised the Weimar Republic for allowing German culture to be altered by not acting anti-German groups. The Nazis played a key role in opposing the revolution, emphasising the damage the new culture impacted on German society and promised a return to traditional German customs and ideals.

Proportional representation provided Germany with many coalitions. This was a hinderance because coalitions are weak government structures, involving compromise, conflict and instability. This led to a decrease in support for pro-Weimar parties; however support had increased during the ‘Golden Years’ whilst Stresemann was Chancellor. Nazi support also changed during this period depending on when support was rife for the Weimar or not, doing better in times of hardship as people lost support for the government and looked for alternatives. This was important to the rise of the Nazis as they were gaining support by simply appearing as a better option to the government.

The weaknesses of Nazi opponents also helped the rise to power as their faults allowed the Nazis to progress. In July 1932, Franz von Papen became Chancellor and he helped the Nazis by ending the ban on the SA, implemented by Chancellor Brüning in 1932. Von Papen also supported the return of an authoritarian state and this pushed Nazi interests forward. President Hindenburg, who was an elderly and weak leader, struggled

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<sup>14</sup> Adolf Hitler, 'Mein Kampf', Pimlico, 1992, Page 267

to choose a Chancellor and approached the Nazis as he believed that they were in decline, meaning he could control them better to give him the support he needed in government. The desperate belief that he could control Hitler was an ill-fated miscalculation that led to disaster. This was a key weakness of the Nazi opposers who believed they had control of Hitler and thus gave him the key to securing power.

Hitler was appointed Chancellor on the 30th January 1933 after von Papen and Hindenburg mistakenly believed they would be able to control him. Hitler had placed himself in this position through campaigning and manipulation. His determination saw the Nazis through rise and fall and led them eventually to victory. Nevertheless, it cannot simply be said that Hitler himself or the strength of the Nazi party brought the Nazis to power. However, were it not for the miscalculation by von Papen and Hindenburg that they could control Hitler, it would have been harder for the Nazis to gain political power.

Over the following months Hitler gained complete power over Germany. When the Reichstag building burned in February 1933, Hitler blamed a Communist which led to people opposing the Communists as they believed them to be have literally led to the fall of the government. This was critical to the main success of the Nazis as the Communists were a significant threat and had support from the workers, the largest social group in Germany essential to Nazi success. Additionally, the fire gave Hitler emergency powers which he used to suspend political and civil liberties and called an election to gain a majority vote. The Nazis failed however on the 23rd March 1933, the Reichstag government voted in the Enabling Act, giving Hitler total power and ending democracy in Germany. As of July that year, the Nazis were the only legal party in Germany and Hitler commenced his totalitarian dictatorship.

Overall, the appeal of the Nazis; clever use of propaganda; shared rejection of the cultural revolution; weakness of the Weimar Republic and mistakes of opponents that collectively allowed Nazis to gain political control. These factors also contributed to the downfall of the Weimar Republic which was crucial to Hitler becoming Fuhrer. However, it is difficult to determine the most significant reason for the Nazis' success as each factor overlaps, making distinguishing which had the most influential effect on the rise of extremism and the downfall of the Weimar difficult. However, the weaknesses of opponents was a key reason as their miscalculation of

their ability to control Hitler by appointing him Chancellor gave the Nazis a clear, quick and direct route to complete power.

### CONCLUSION

Word Count: 374

Overall, many factors that allowed the Nazis to seize power in Germany by 1933. Some were conveniently timed for the Nazis such as economic disaster which led to an increase in support for extremism; whereas others were the Nazis using their own strengths to rise to prominence such as Hitler's rallies and propaganda. However, it was the failure of the Weimar Republic to deal with impact of the economic crises that brought people towards the Nazis as they sought a better way of life, especially a return to the autocracy they had known before the end of WW1.

After failing to adequately deal with the hyperinflation crisis in 1923 and by using substantial loans from America, the damage caused by the Wall Street Crash was inevitable. The role of Hitler has significant importance as his leadership developed the Nazi image and people were lured in by his speeches and charisma. Also, propaganda was effective in convincing people towards Nazi views. There was a lack of support for the Weimar as change was forced upon a fractured society following the war. Support further decreased during the economic crisis and the social revolution failed to alter people's views. Although all of these individual factors must be considered to some extent, the economic crisis was evidently the most significant. Historian Stephen Lee agrees, "The Nazis' success depended on the the vulnerability of the republic caused by the economic crisis from 1929. Hitler succeeded in collecting much of the electorate that had become disillusioned by the republic."

Hyperinflation showed weaknesses of the Weimar Republic who struggled to efficiently run the country and the second economic crisis proved definitively that the government was too weak to lead Germany. The Nazis were smart enough to capitalise upon this and were determined to gain power. Even though they never achieved a majority vote in the Reichstag, they did succeed in drawing people in using alternative methods. Nevertheless, the catalysts provided by events such as the economic crisis meant that the rise to power was greatly accelerated and it was much simpler for the Nazis to fully gain the control they desired. In conclusion, economic collapse allowed political extremism to dominate German politics from 1928-1933, to a large and significant extent.

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