

# THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC AND THE RISE OF THE NAZI PARTY



The Weimar Republic refers to the German government that was formed at Weimar, a town in the eastern part of the country. It was formed in February 1919, after Germany's defeat in World War I. The new republic emerged following a revolution, resulting in the Kaiser (king) Wilhelm II giving up his rule in November 1918. The Weimar Republic's constitution protected basic democratic human rights. These protections included freedom of speech and religion and even equality for women, including their right to vote in public elections (which had not yet been given to French and English women).

When the Weimar Republic was established, Germany did not have a long democratic tradition to support its transition. Other nations had longer democratic traditions such as the United States. U.S. democracy had been in existence for more than a century at this time. Prior to the Weimar Republic, Germany had been ruled as a monarchy led by Wilhelm II from 1871-1918.

The Republic was often viewed by Germans as having been forced upon them by the victors of World War I. Many German citizens remained deeply sympathetic to the Kaiser who was forced to resign. They also had sympathy for the leadership under Wilhelm, who had not signed the Treaty of Versailles, and were angry with the new leaders who agreed to it. The treaty offended many areas of the German nation mainly because of the following conditions:

- A. Germany had to admit to being guilty for the war and for all the damage it had caused.
- B. Germany had to pay reparations to compensate the victorious powers.
- C. Germany was forced to give up 13 percent of its territory and six million of its inhabitants to France, Belgium, and Poland.
- D. Germany was severely restricted in rebuilding and establishing its military force.

Given this situation many Germans came to believe two false ideas. They thought that Germany had not lost the war on the battlefield and that Germany had



The Putsch: Nazi Party members arresting city councilmen, Munich, Germany. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (4254/80)

been betrayed by Jews, democrats and socialists, who were said to have stabbed Germany in the back.

The Weimar Republic had to contend with many economic, political, and social problems. The German soldiers who came back from the war faced high unemployment. Many Germans were simply starving. Germany's heavy debts made it very difficult for the economy to recover and for new jobs to be created. One of the most serious problems was that of hyperinflation. The value of the German currency plummeted from 60 marks to the dollar in 1921 to 4.2 billion marks to the dollar at the end of 1923. For a time, people were paid twice a day. The image that expresses this best is that of people filling wheelbarrows with currency and trying to buy anything they could before the currency lost more value.

Among other ways, the political crisis was expressed in frequent elections: 10 in 14 years. Three major revolution attempts also occurred in the first years of the Weimar Republic. In 1919, the Communists tried to overthrow the democratic republic, and in 1920 and 1923, there were attempts by right-wing nationalists, including Adolf Hitler, to seize power.

The New York stock market crash of 1929 deeply affected Germany—German banks collapsed and inflation rose. Six million Germans were unemployed in 1932. The country, like most other nations, entered a serious and drawn-out economic depression.



In light of this situation, many Germans believed that the Nazis were the only ones who could solve Germany's problems. They also felt the Nazis would stop the "Communist menace." German president Paul von Hindenburg first opposed offering Adolf Hitler a leadership position in Germany. He was finally convinced in January 1933 to appoint him chancellor, believing he could control Hitler.

The government under Hitler was a coalition in which the Nazi Party was the dominant member with over one-third of the seats in the Reichstag (the German Parliament). Four weeks later, the Reichstag building was set on fire. Hitler blamed the fire on

the Communists. He used it as an excuse to pass new laws "for the protection of the German people." This was the start of the Nazi dictatorship and the process of remaking German society in the Nazis' image. Over time media and culture came under control of the Nazis, democratic freedoms were abolished, and the Nazi Party replaced or overtook other previously existing organizations and institutions throughout the country. Opponents or people the Nazis believed to be opponents to the regime were brutally suppressed, primarily by being imprisoned in the newly created system of concentration camps.

## A SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS FROM "THE PROGRAM OF THE NATIONALSOCIALIST (NAZI) GERMAN WORKERS PARTY."

### The Nazi Party wished to promote the following:

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- 1** Uniting all German citizens within one nation surrounding by borders determined only by the German government.
- 2** Equal rights for the German people with respect to other nations and eliminating the Treaties of Versailles and St. Germain.
- 3** Enough land and soil to feed the German people and living space for all of the German population.
- 4** Only those the German government considered nationals could be citizens of Germany. Nationals must be of German "blood" (descent) and no Jewish person could be a German national.
- 5** Any person who is not a Citizen will be able to live in Germany only as a guest and must be subject to legislation for separate rules.
- 6** Only citizens can vote and hold public office.
- 7** Jobs must first be provided to German citizens. Non-citizens can only obtain jobs if there are extra positions. If there are not enough jobs for Germans, then non-citizens must leave the country.
- 8** Any further immigration is to be prevented and those who entered Germany after August 2, 1914 must leave immediately.
- 9** Nationalization of all corporations and profit-sharing opportunities in large businesses and community ownership of large department shares with opportunities for tradesmen to lease space within the stores.



- 10** Consideration for small businesses when the government needs services.
- 11** The development of a pension system for retirees.
- 12** The creation of a stable middle class.
- 13** Ruthless battle against anyone who harms the common good and punishment by death for those who commit certain crimes including fraud.
- 14** Raise the level of national health by supporting better care for mothers and children, promotion of mandatory physical fitness, bans on child labor and support for sports organizations.
- 15** Recreation of a large national army (prevented under the Treaty of Versailles).
- 16** The ability to fight lies in the media by creating a German press. As such:
  - All editors and editorial employees of German language newspapers must be German by race.
  - Non-German newspapers require government permission for publication and may not be printed in German.
  - Only Germans may invest in German newspapers, failure to comply will result in deportation of non-Germans.
  - Newspapers that violate these policies will be banned.
- 17** Bans on art and literature the government deems destructive to German life.
- 18** The creation of a government that has a:
  - Strong central authority
  - Unquestioned authority by Parliament
  - Trade organizations that enforce German laws

The Nazis promised to uphold these points by any measure, even at the cost of their own lives.