

Germany 1890-1939

Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1918

Difficulties of Ruling Germany

Before 1871, Germany had been a collection of tiny independent states, with one powerful kingdom (Prussia). In 1871, after a war against France, it had been unified, but it had a weak, complex system of government. All the old states kept their own systems of local government, and sent representatives to the *Bundesrat* (Council) to make sure their influence was undiminished (the Bundesrat was dominated by Prussia, and Prussian ideas of militarism and conservatism). There was an elected sort-of-parliament called the *Reichstag*. The Army was semi-autonomous. And over it all stood the Kaiser who was Emperor of Germany, but stayed King of Prussia at the same time. The Kaiser was a constitutional autocrat – all laws were formulated by the Kaiser and his Chancellor; but the Bundesrat and Reichstag could refuse to pass them.

All went fairly smoothly until 1890, under the control of the Chancellor Bismarck. He – in a rapidly industrialising Germany (with all the economic and social upheaval that entailed) – kept the working classes happy with social benefits (such as pensions); banned Socialist meetings and outlawed trade unions; and kept the band in the nick with foreign nations, primarily through a 'Reinsurance Treaty' with Russia.

In 1890, however, the 29-year-old Wilhelm II became Kaiser. He wanted to rule, and he wanted to be kind. He introduced an *Immediatsystem* so that people wanting to see him did not need to go first through a Minister; and he took *Kommandogewalt* (command of the Army) so he controlled both the civil AND military decisions of government. This turned out to be the final and greatest problem for Germany's system government – he was a 'catastrophe'.

From 'New Course' to *Weltpolitik*

Very soon, Bismarck found himself 'retired', and replaced by Wilhelm's army buddy Caprivi, who introduced a 'New Course' – basically a charm offensive towards the Reichstag. He allowed the Anti-Socialist Law to lapse in 1890. He encouraged employers to raise wages, and banned Sunday work, work for children under 13, and more than 11 hours work for women. He made trade treaties (which reduced prices) and tried to reduce the length of national service in the Army. The Reinsurance Treaty with Russia was allowed also to lapse, leaving Germany isolated diplomatically. Instead, Wilhelm sought friendship with the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires.

There was an outcry. In addition, the kindnesses to the workers did not stop the Social Democrats criticising the government in the Reichstag. Worst of all, Caprivi argued with Wilhelm! Some time about 1898, Wilhelm gradually ditched the 'New Course', and replaced it with a policy he thought would do better at getting public support – *Weltpolitik* ('world politics' aimed at getting Germany the 'place in the sun' Germany deserved).

In foreign affairs, this involved 'taking on' the superpowers of the time – Britain and France – in the Middle East (1897: he entered Jerusalem and promised to 'protect' the Christians and 300 million Muslims); South Africa (1900: supported the Boers in their war against Britain); China (1898: he established a naval base (Kiaochow) and sent troops to help put down the Chinese 'Boxer rebellion' which broke out in 1900); and Morocco (1905: he offered to be their 'Protector' and sent a gunboat there in 1911). Meanwhile he steadily increased the size of the Germany Navy (1898-1912). All this created massive tension with Britain and France, which would not have been so bad had not Wilhelm been continually forced to back down humiliatingly.

Neither did *Weltpolitik* improve things with the Reichstag. Although popular with the people, the Reichstag complained about the expense the Navy Laws involved. The climax came in 1908 when Wilhelm told the British newspapers that Germans hated Britain but he was Britain's friend. This infuriated everyone in Britain and in Germany. It was the end of Wilhelm's 'personal rule' – thereafter he kept a low profile.

The Impact of the First World War

At first everyone supported the War. Even the parties in the Reichstag agreed a *Burgfrieden* – 'ceasefire' – to work together. But as time went on, Germans tired of censorship, the moral policing of women, and military control over civilian workers and, after a Strike in Berlin in 1918, martial law. The war ruined the economy and the British Blockade brought starvation and disease. In September 1918 there were widespread riots, and in November the sailors in Kiel mutinied.

Weimar Germany, 1918-1933

Setting up the Weimar Republic

There was a peaceful revolution. On 7 November, a pro-peace demonstration of 60,000 people marched in Munich to commemorate the Russian Revolution of 1917 – by which time, the Naval Mutiny had taken control of Kiel, and revolutions in towns all over Germany had chased out the Imperial politicians and military, freed political prisoners, and set up Workers, Peasants and Soldiers Councils. On 9 November the Kaiser abdicated, and a Republic was declared.

After a short period of political chaos, the members of the Reichstag met in the small town of Weimar, near Berlin, and set up a new government in February 1919.

The Weimar Republic was a very good democracy. It had a Bill of Rights to protect the freedoms of the people, and it gave the vote to all men and women over the age of 21. The voting system was one of 'proportional representation' – which elected MPs exactly in line with the wishes of the people. The people elected the Reichstag, which appointed the government and made the laws. The Republic did have a President – Frederick Ebert – but he was elected too.

The Weimar Republic runs into difficulties

It sounds amazing that the people of Germany, so long under the dictatorship of the Kaiser, should not welcome such a wonderful democracy. But many Germans hated it from the start! The new Republic found itself attacked from BOTH sides, from left- and right-wing politicians.

On the left, the Communists hated the new government. They didn't want a democracy – they wanted a 'dictatorship of the workers' which would bring in the Communist revolution. In January 1919 an extreme group of Communists called the Spartacists had rebelled, and there were many more Communist uprisings in the next few years.

And the right-wing politicians hated the Weimar government even more! The main problem was that the German Army had not actually surrendered – the German government had. Consequently, many proud right-wing Germans ('nationalists') refused to believe that they had actually lost the war. They called the politicians who had signed the Armistice 'the November Criminals', and they were even more angry when the terms of the Treaty of Versailles became known in June 1919. There was one right-wing rebellion – the Kapp Putsch in Berlin in 1920 – but right-wing attacks on the government took a different form. Right-wing groups assassinated politicians and set up paramilitary groups which terrorised their neighbourhoods. And when the government tried to bring any of them to court, right-wing judges let them off.

Proportional representation turned out to be a disaster too. It led to the election of many tiny parties, all of whom squabbled amongst each other, so no government could get a majority in the Reichstag – so it could never pass the laws it wanted.

The new government also ran into economic problems, too. The Treaty of Versailles had forced Germany to pay reparations, but – weakened by the war – the country wasn't economically strong enough to pay them.

Things came to a head in 1923, when Germany defaulted on a payment and the French invaded the Ruhr (the industrial part of Germany) and started to take the money in the form of coal and manufactured goods. Outraged, the Germans in the Ruhr went on strike and to help them the government promised to pay their wages anyway. How did it do this – it simply printed off paper money and gave it to the strikers.

In those days they didn't understand how the economy works, and they didn't realise what would happen if they stopped producing and started printing more money. The result, in fact, was hyperinflation – prices rose out of control. Some people made huge fortunes, but other were ruined. The country collapsed into chaos. There were Communist rebellions. One part of Germany – the Rhineland – declared itself independent.

In Munich a small right-wing terrorist group called the Nazis mounted an unsuccessful rebellion. It seemed as though Germany was falling apart.

How far did the Weimar Republic recover under Stresemann?

But Germany did not disintegrate. The man usually credited with 'saving' Germany was Gustav Stresemann. The most important thing he did was to organise an alliance of the moderate, pro-democracy parties. This meant that – for the first time – the government could get a majority in the Reichstag and pass the laws it wanted.

Stresemann sorted out Germany's economic problems. He called off the strike and started paying reparations. He called in the old worthless money and replaced them with a new currency (the 'rentenmark'). Most of all, in 1924 he arranged \$200 million loan from the American Vice-President Charles Dawes – which got German industry going. Stresemann also built new housing, and set up Labour exchanges to pay dole money to the unemployed. He became hugely popular, and the 'roaring twenties' came to Germany – these were the days of great creativity in Architecture (Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus school of architecture), art (Paul Klee and Otto Dix), Books (Erich Maria Remarque) and Films and Cabaret (Marlene Dietrich).

Stresemann started paying reparations again, persuaded the French to leave the Ruhr. Germany was allowed to join the League of Nations in 1926.

How did the Nazi Party develop its ideas and organisation up to 1929?

But although it LOOKED as though Germany had become strong, that strength rested on shaky foundations. Germany's economy depended on American loans. And – in the wings – many right-wing extremists waited, hating Stresemann for paying reparations, waiting their chance to get revenge for the Treaty of Versailles. One of these parties was the Nazi Party, led by Adolf Hitler. The Nazis had typical right-wing beliefs – they wanted to set up a dictatorship with tough laws, overturn the Treaty of Versailles and unite all the German-speaking peoples. They also believed in the superiority of the 'Aryan master race' (racism), and said they had the right to persecute the Jews and conquer *lebensraum* ('living space') in eastern Europe. They hated the Communists. Like many extremist political parties of these times, they had a paramilitary wing (called the SA) who attacked other parties and assassinated rival politicians.

But the Nazis were different to other right-wing parties. After 1923 they did not win many Reichstag seats (they only had 12 in 1928), but during this time they began to build for the future. They managed to get huge funding from rich businessmen (including the German steel bosses Krupp and Thyssen, the German car firms Opel and Skoda, and the American businessmen Henry Ford) who thought the Nazis would stop Communism. They were brilliant at propaganda (organised by Josef Goebbels) and used the most modern technology (radio, newspapers and airplanes) to get their ideas across. They used some communist ideas (e.g. state control of industry/ land to the small farmers/ better pensions) to gain the support of the working classes. They set up a fun youth club which began indoctrinating young people to believe the Nazi message. Adolf Hitler was a brilliant speaker, and his book – *Mein Kampf* – became a best seller. One-by-one, the Nazis began to take over other right-wing parties.

Nazi Germany, 1933-1945

The Great Depression

In 1929 there was a crisis on Wall Street (the American stock exchange) and a great depression hit the American economy. The American banks asked German firms for their money back – and so there was an immediate depression in the German economy too. By 1932, six million people were unemployed. Many working-class people joined the Communists, but middle-class people flocked to join the Nazis, who promised a strong government which would stop the chaos. In the July 1932 elections, 230 Nazis were elected to the Reichstag.

Stresemann was dead, and his alliance of pro-democracy parties fell apart. The government – led by Brüning – could not get enough support to pass its laws, and did not know how to solve the depression. It suggested cutting wages and unemployment pay – there was an outcry, but the government used Article 48 (a rule which allowed the President to pass any law he wanted in an emergency) to force it through. Brüning fell from power and Schleicher took over the government – but things did not get any better; the government still needed to use Article 48 every time it wanted to pass a law.

The Nazis are GIVEN power, 1933

In November 1932, there was *another* election, but instead of getting more seats, the number of Nazis actually fell. Hitler thought that the Nazis had missed their chance. But then something happened which GAVE him power! The elections had left Hindenburg (the President) and Papen (his chief adviser) with the same old problem: the government could not get enough support in the Reichstag to pass any laws. They needed the support of a big party – and Hitler's Nazis were the biggest party in the Reichstag. They offered Hitler post of Vice-Chancellor in return for his support. Hitler refused. He demanded to become Chancellor. Hindenburg and Papen took a risk – they argued that the government would still be full of their supporters, and that they would be able to control Hitler. In January 1933, they made him Chancellor of Germany.

How did Hitler change Germany from a democracy to a Nazi dictatorship?

Hindenburg and Papen were wrong – they could not control Hitler. Within 18 months, Hitler had made himself the dictator of Germany.

Hitler immediately called *another* election, and set about getting a majority. He was helped in this by the Reichstag fire of February 1933 (caused by a Dutch Communist called van der Lubbe, although some historians believe that the Nazis set the fire themselves). This gave Hitler the chance to arrest hundreds of Communists, and to terrify the German people that the government was in danger. As a result, the Nazis gained 288 seats in the election. This still didn't give the Nazis a majority, but Hitler was able to arrest the Communists and intimidate the other deputies, until the Reichstag passed The Enabling Act (23 March 1933) which gave the Cabinet the right to make any laws it (i.e. Hitler) wanted.

From this time on, Hitler set about eliminating all rivals. In April 1933, the Nazis took over local government and the police, sacked anti-Nazi teachers and professors, and set up the Gestapo, who sent to concentration camps opponents, Jews, Communists, gypsies, homosexuals, alcoholics, prostitutes and 'grumblers'. In May 1933 Hitler abolished the Trade Unions, and in July 1933 he abolished all parties other than the Nazis.

Even, in July 1934, Hitler used the SS to murder some 400 of the SA, thus eliminating his rivals within the Nazi party. When Hindenburg died in August 1934, Hitler declared himself Fuhrer – uniting the roles of Chancellor, President and Head of the Army.

To what extent did the German people benefit from Nazi rule in the 1930s?

For many people the Nazi regime was the happiest time of their lives. Nazi economic policies (including 'Autarchy' – the desire for Germany to be self-sufficient – re-armament and government work programmes) gave full employment, prosperity and financial security – many observers stated that there was no poverty in Germany. German 'autobahns' provided work and improved transport. A Nazi scheme called 'Strength through Joy' gave workers free picnics, visits to the theatre and even free holidays. There was law and order (few people locked their doors), and the Nazis knew the excitement of ceremonies and rallies. Germans had hope, and self-belief, and there was a feeling that Hitler 'keeps me safe from all harm.' Nazi philosophy idealised women and the family, and the Law for the Encouragement of Marriage gave newly-wed couples 250 marks for each child they had (Mothers who had more than 8 children were given a gold medal). Also, Nazi culture was very youth-oriented, and the HJ and BDN were treated with respect, and provided with fun activities.

What were the main features of totalitarian dictatorship in Nazi Germany?

On the other hand, all workers had to join the German Labour Front, wages fell, and strikers could be shot. All culture had to be German (eg Wagner) or Nazi (only approved authors could be read). Women doctors, teachers and civil servants were forced to give up their careers, and girls were forced to concentrate on the three Cs (Church, children, cooker). 'True Aryan girls' were sent off to special camps where they were bred (like farm animals) with selected 'Aryan' boys. Most of all, people were not free (eg there was no freedom of speech). Each block of flats had a 'staircase ruler' who reported grumblers to the Gestapo. Towards the end of the war, when youth gangs such as the Edelweiss Pirates grew up, rejecting the HJ; In Cologne in 1944 12 Pirates were hanged.

Jews and gypsies (called *untermensch*: 'sub-humans') were persecuted, put into concentration camps, or used for medical experiments; in the end the Nazis devised the 'Final Solution of genocide' (the Holocaust). Meanwhile black people, the mentally ill, the disabled and the deaf were sterilized or killed; beggars, homosexuals, prostitutes, alcoholics, pacifists and hooligans were put in concentration camps.