

The Divided Nation
A History of Germany 1918-1990

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Two The Weimar Republic: Origins and Orientations

The Weimar Republic was Germany's first attempt at parliamentary democracy. Born in 1918 of military defeat and domestic revolution, it was riddled with compromises and burdened with difficulties. After turbulent beginnings, from 1924 to 1928 there was a period of at least apparent stabilization; yet between 1929 and 1933, concerted attacks on democracy in the context of mounting economic difficulties culminated in the collapse of the regime and the appointment of Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP or Nazi Party), as Germany's Chancellor.

The ultimate demise of the Weimar Republic has inevitably overshadowed interpretations of its course. Some commentators have drawn such a stark and gloomy picture of its early difficulties that the Republic seems foredoomed to failure from the outset; other scholars have placed greater weight on problems arising from the Depression after 1929; and some historians have emphasized the importance of particular decisions and actions made by key political figures in the closing months of the Republic's existence, in 1932-3. It is important to bear in mind, when exploring the complex paths of Weimar history, the constant interplay of structure and action, context and personality; it is important also to bear in mind that under certain circumstances, the scope for human intervention in the course of events may be more limited or constrained than at other times. The conditions in which Weimar democracy was born were certainly not such as to help it flourish; and as it unfolded, it was clearly saddled with a burden of problems, in a

range of areas, that would render Weimar democracy peculiarly susceptible to anti-democratic forces in the end.

Germany in the Early Twentieth Century

What was Germany like in the decades prior to 1918? Germany had only been unified as a result of Prussian chancellor Bismarck's policies of 'blood and iron' in 1871. Although processes of industrialization had started earlier in the nineteenth century, the pace of change was dramatically quickened by unification. In the period from 1871 to the outbreak of war in 1914, Germany's output of manufactured goods quintupled, while her population grew from 41 million to 67.7 million. Rapid changes in economy and society were associated with a host of strains in the autocratic political system that was Bismarck's legacy for Imperial Germany.

Some areas were experiencing rapid modernization, with expansion in urban areas, such as the great metropolitan capital, Berlin, and in the heavy industry and coal-mining centre of the Ruhr. Workers migrating from the countryside to the towns were lucky if they were housed in the housing estates of paternalistic employers such as Siemens; many more found themselves living in cramped, dark tenement buildings with poor sanitation and limited backyards which were the only areas where their children could play. Meanwhile, the urban upper middle classes led their rather stuffy lives in the somewhat pompous buildings that were characteristic of Imperial Germany. The 'middle classes' were a far from homogenous entity. At the upper levels were the officials, professionals and state servants (the *Beamten*, in Germany a less narrow category than the British 'civil servant'). Then, at a more modest social level, there were the increasing numbers of white-collar employees (*Angestellten*), as well as the older groups of the self-employed, traders and shop-keepers, and small artisans. These

latter groups were increasingly challenged by the rise of 'modern', large-scale mechanized industry, run by major entrepreneurs, and by the growth of big

department stores as outlets for mass-produced wares. Urban life was clearly changing and expanding at a quickening rate.

Peasants in far-flung rural areas, such as southern Bavaria, might still appear to be living as they had done for centuries, although the notion of a static, unchanging 'traditional' rural society is something of a myth. While the urban bourgeoisie might be enjoying the fruits of modern technology such as electricity these peasants would be living in the old, wooden farmhouses, with their religious wall-paintings and flower-bedecked balconies, where they still relied on candlelight, water from the well, and very rudimentary sanitary facilities. Small peasant economies in the south and west had been interpenetrated by artisanal activities for centuries, and had also begun to cater to the newer pursuits of tourism. In the north-east and, particularly, eastern areas of Germany, rural life was characterized by a rather different social pattern: estates owned by the aristocratic land-owning class, the Junkers, were worked by landless agricultural labourers (often Polish), and were increasingly under strain in the competitive atmosphere of a rapidly industrializing nation. While retaining a socially and politically dominant position, the militaristic land-owning caste was suffering a period of economic difficulty, necessitating a series of compromises with, particularly, increasingly important industrial interests.

There were many regional variations: the German Empire had by no means homogenized the differences between its constituent states, and in many ways regional loyalties overrode any 'national' identification. There were traditional antagonisms between, for example, Bavaria and Prussia, based on centuries of political, cultural and social differences. Religious differences, too, were of crucial importance: post-Reformation Germany was divided between Catholicism and a variety of forms of Protestantism (both Lutheran and Reformed).

While some states notably Prussia were of a mixed religious complexion, divisions between Catholic and Protestant communities in many areas were highly salient. These divisions went right through the community: it was quite possible to live one's life entirely within the framework, for example, of the Catholic church and

its political, economic and social institutions: the Catholic Centre party in politics, the Catholic trade unions at the workplace, the reading, cycling, and singing clubs when at leisure. Similarly, Protestants and others had their own penumbra of institutions. Political persuasion might be as important as religious confession: the Social Democrats, for example, had a comparable range of organizations and leisure activities, encompassing many aspects of life and helping to define a particular social and cultural milieu. It is difficult to evaluate the implications of these socio-cultural environments; some have seen them as giving members of those subordinate groups which the architect of Imperial Germany, Bismarck, dubbed 'Enemies of the Empire' (*Reichsfeinde*) an accepted place in society, while others have seen more subversive aspects to their varied activities. Then, too, there were those members of society who constituted different 'underworlds': those who resisted all attempts at organization of whatever kind. 1

Politically, the old Prussian aristocracy retained pre-eminence nationally, through its domination of the largest constituent state of the federal Empire Prussia. The inegalitarian three-class voting system obtaining in Prussia entailed the division of the population of each electoral district into three classes according to the payment of wealth taxes. The minority who were the richest then obtained one-third of the votes; the moderately wealthy the next one-third, and the large majority who fell into the poorest category were also allotted only one-third of the votes. The double effect of this system not only greatly disadvantaged the propertyless masses, but also promoted the political position of the landowning Junker class (who were relatively the wealthiest within the sparsely populated rural constituencies) in comparison with the very much wealthier urban bourgeoisie. Dominating Prussian politics, the Junkers were then able to play a

major role in the Prussian-dominated Reich. It was a role they were to exercise in the context of the autocratic political structure of the German Empire: real power lay, not so much with the parliament or *Reichstag*, as with the Emperor, his close circle of advisers, his Chancellor, and leaders of the army and the civil service. Influence was exerted on these groups and individuals by the increasingly important pressure groups many stridently

nationalist which circumvented parliamentary politics in pursuit of their aims. As the German sociologist Max Weber put it, no person with any aspirations to real power would seriously consider becoming a member of parliament in Imperial Germany.

Yet at the same time, Junker domination was not unchallenged. For one thing, with Germany's extraordinarily rapid industrialization, the propertied bourgeoisie (*Besitzbürgertum*) was becoming increasingly important, and compromises had repeatedly to be hammered out between policies reflecting bourgeois economic interests and the often conflicting interests of the land-owning classes. At the same time, the masses were emerging on to the political scene, particularly through the ever-growing Social Democratic Party (SPD). This latter, while professing a certain revolutionary rhetoric deriving from its Marxist heritage, was in practice rather moderate, with a marked focus on parliamentary representation and activity (partly as an ironic result of Bismarck's anti-socialist laws which effectively restricted Social Democratic activity to this sphere). Nevertheless, the growth of an explicitly radical party representing the expanding working classes struck fear in the hearts of the elites, who on some accounts resolved certain differences among themselves in order to present a more united front against a perceived threat from below. Whatever the wider merits of this interpretation, certainly one manifestation was the fostering of German nationalism, in the hope that loyalty to the German 'fatherland' would transcend bitter divisions between the classes. Fear of potential civil war at home contributed to willingness to engage in war abroad.

In the event, the First World War did little to resolve the domestic strains of Imperial Germany. Despite a brief moment of apparent and much celebrated (if not exaggerated) national unity in August 1914, social tensions were exacerbated rather than eased by the experience

of total war. Industry became more concentrated, with cartels fixing prices and production quantities; but organized labour also became more powerful, since the government and employers had to find ways of avoiding strikes and maximising production in a war economy, and therefore had to treat with the recognized representatives of labour. With the

continued expansion of industrial capitalism, the 'old' middle classes the small producers, shopkeepers and traders found their already declining position ever more threatened. New sections of the population were increasingly politicized: with many men away at the front, and with the large numbers of war casualties, women and young people were drawn into sectors of the economy in which they had not previously worked, and gained first-hand experience of union organization, confrontation with employers, and notions of 'class war'. Even those women who were not part of the paid labour market may have become somewhat politicized through the sheer struggle for survival, and the realization that the government rather than the individual might be held responsible for the difficulties they found in feeding their families. This awareness of the responsibilities of the state continued after the war, heightened by more widespread dependence on state benefits and pensions.

During this protracted war in which progress was measured from the trenches in terms of yards rather than miles circumstances on the home front soon deteriorated. Food supplies became a problem as early as 1915. In April 1917 the first major strikes occurred, a consequence of the cutting of bread rations. Civilian government broke down with the resignation of the moderate Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg in July 1917, and the country was under the effective military rule of Chief-of-Staff Hindenburg and General Ludendorff (in conjunction with two short-lived and ineffective civilian Chancellors, Georg Michaelis until October 1917 and Count von Hertling until October 1918). In 1917, there were two successful revolutions in Tsarist Russia a far less economically advanced autocracy, and one which, according to a Marxist analysis, should not have been the first to experience communist revolution. Following the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in the autumn, Russia concluded an

armistice with Germany and entered into negotiations for peace. After abortive discussions, Germany renewed hostilities in February 1918, and, from a position of strength, was able to impose the annexationist Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on Russia in March 1918. This harsh

treaty was greeted with a mixed reception at home, and hardened the attitudes of the western powers against Germany.

Meanwhile, rising domestic unrest in Germany played a role in the Army leaders' decision, in the winter of 1917/18, to ignore the chance of achieving peace with the western powers on relatively moderate terms, since they had begun to believe that only a spectacular military victory could now avert the threat of domestic revolution. In January 1918 there were more strikes, and a widespread war-weariness and desire for peace, even as the Army High Command, supported by the recently founded right-wing *Vaterlandspartei*, propagated ever more extravagant military aims. Yet on the left, the political forces opposing both the military and the right-wing nationalist parties were themselves divided. The Social Democratic Party, since its formation in 1875 out of two pre-existing parties with different traditions, had long experienced tension between its reformist and revolutionary wings. Under the strain of responding to the war effort, the SPD finally split in 1917. The more radical wing formed the so-called Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), while the majority remained with the more moderate SPD, sometimes known as the Majority Social Democratic Party (MSPD). A loose, more radical grouping further to the left of the Social Democrats was the Spartacus League, whose leading lights were Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. It was in this complex domestic configuration that the new Republic was born.

The 'Last Revolution from Above'

Despite the success of the spring offensive against Russia, by the summer of 1918 it was clear even to the leaders of the Army that the war was lost. The Army High Command now felt that it would be advisable to hand over power to a civilian administration: Army

leaders who were already propagating the myth of a 'stab in the back', the betrayal of an undefeated Germany by Jews and Bolsheviks at home, an enemy within preferred that a civilian government should have to shoulder the opprobrium of accepting national defeat.

Accordingly, in October 1918 a new civilian government was formed under the chancellorship of Prince Max von Baden. Faced with considerable domestic unrest, this government introduced certain reforms. The reforms were not simply (as they are often described) a 'last revolution from above', a desperate attempt to salvage some credibility for the Imperial system; they also resulted from very strong pressures in parliament, particularly on the part of the moderate Social Democrats. Most notable among the reforms were the introduction of ministerial responsibility to parliament, the control of the armed forces by the civilian government, and the abolition of the iniquitous Prussian three-class voting system. The removal of this system, along with the other reforms, constituted a progressive move in the eyes of democratic forces; but there was one step that Prince Max von Baden's government failed to take. Despite efforts to persuade Emperor Wilhelm II to abdicate in favour of one of his sons, the obdurate Emperor, supported by his sons, refused to assume sole responsibility for Germany's ills. Had he agreed to leave the political scene gracefully in October, the monarchy might have been saved.

The Incomplete Revolution of November 1918

However, matters developed otherwise. All the cautious moves for reform from above were swept away by a revolutionary tide on the streets which, by early November, it was no longer possible for Max von Baden's government to control. Uprisings all over Germany were sparked off by a sailors' mutiny in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel at the end of October. Ordered out on a last, suicidal mission against the British fleet, the sailors decided they would rather save their own skins than attempt to salvage 'German honour'. News of the mutiny led to the formation, in a large number of places across Germany, of 'sailors', soldiers' and workers' councils', which wrested control of administration from local governments. On 8 November, a Republic

was proclaimed in the 'Free State' of Bavaria, under a workers', soldiers' and peasants' council led by Kurt Eisner. The German war effort had clearly collapsed, the authority of the regime was rapidly

crumbling, the threat of strikes and civil war on the streets loomed ever larger.

On 9 November Max von Baden made a last-ditch effort to salvage what he could from the situation. He felt that Friedrich Ebert in his view the most level headed of the Social Democrats and the one for whom he had most respect might yet be able to maintain a modicum of control over the situation and avert the threat of radical social revolution headed by the far left. Unable to reach the Emperor (who had fled the unrest of Berlin) by telephone by midday, Max von Baden, in something of a panic, took it upon himself to pronounce the abdication of the Emperor and the intended appointment of Ebert as leader of a new civilian government. The shape of such a government had by no means been decided when, at around two o'clock, Ebert's colleague Philipp Scheidemann went to a balcony of the Reichstag to proclaim a republic, in an attempt to marginalize the almost simultaneous proclamation of a socialist republic by more radical socialists in another part of Berlin. It was clear that Ebert and the moderate Social Democrats would have to move fast to assert control over a situation of strikes, uprisings, mass demonstrations and the breakdown of governmental authority across a Germany which was, formally, still at war.

Rapid negotiations took place between the moderate Social Democrats and the USPD leaders, and a compromise caretaker government was agreed. This consisted of a six-member 'Council of People's Representatives' (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*), of whom three Ebert, Scheidemann and Landsberg were members of the SPD, and three Haase, Dittmann and Barth were members of the USPD. Even before this body had been constituted, Ebert had declared his priorities to the people of Germany. The new government was committed to organizing elections for a national constituent assembly, which would

be elected by all men and women over twenty years of age. Until this elected body could take power, the temporary government would agree an armistice, lead peace negotiations, seek to ensure an adequate food supply for the people, and oversee an orderly demobilization of troops and the return of former soldiers to civilian life and work. In the mean time, law and order were to

be upheld, the people were to desist from plunder and violence, and help to build a better future.

In the context of widespread strikes and demonstrations, the obstacles to a peaceful transition to a new order were formidable. The USPD did agree to cooperate with the SPD, despite their rather different general aims, and the new government which was to last only a few weeks was duly given popular legitimization, first by a meeting of council delegates in Berlin in November, and then in December by a wider body of delegates from workers' and soldiers' councils from all over Germany. An armistice was achieved on 11 November, although it was not until the following summer that the terms of the peace treaty would be revealed.

In the first few days after the proclamation of the Republic, two very significant agreements were reached, which embodied compromises which would have a profound effect on the subsequent course of events. The first was between the new government and the Army; the second between leaders of industry and the trade unions.

There were fears among members of the Army High Command, not only of the effects on the troops of the abdication of the Emperor, to whom they had traditionally owed obedience, but also of the possibility of a Soviet-style Bolshevik revolution in Germany. On 10 November, General Groener (who had succeeded Ludendorff as Quarter-Master General) decided that the best approach would be to enter into a pact with Ebert, whom Groener, like Prince Max, considered to be the most sensible and moderate of the Social Democrats. Groener offered Ebert the support of the army in maintaining law and order and suppressing revolutionary uprisings; Ebert accepted. In this pact lay the seeds of many future problems. It illustrated the limited nature of the revolution not only the Army, but

also the other elites of Imperial Germany (including the civil service, the judiciary, and the economic elites), were to remain untouched and unscathed by what remained a purely political, rather than a far-reaching social and economic, revolution. Perhaps more importantly, it also laid the foundations for the repeated repression of radical

movements in the following months and years, inaugurating a split between moderate and radical socialists that was ultimately to contribute to their failure to unite in defence of Weimar democracy.

The other early compromise was that negotiated by the trade unionist Carl Legien and the employers' leader Hugo Stinnes. With the 'Stinnes-Legien agreement' of 15 November 1918, the employers made certain crucial concessions to labour. These included: recognition of the legitimacy of trade union representation of the workforce, and agreement no longer to support 'employer-friendly associations'; the smooth reincorporation, so far as possible, of former employees returning from war into their old jobs; the establishment of 'Workers' Committees' (or Works Councils) in enterprises with more than fifty employees, to ensure discussion between employers and employees over conditions of work; the limitation of the working day to eight hours; and the institution of a 'Central Committee' (*Zentralausschuss*) made up of representatives of the unions and the employers to regulate not only the more immediate problems of demobilization and the reconstruction of a war-torn economy, but also the longer-term issues of wages, working conditions, and other contentious matters that might arise in labour affairs. This committee laid the foundations for the *Zentral-Arbeits-Gemeinschaft* (ZAG), which was to give Weimar democracy a corporatist element that later played a role in the economic elites' utter rejection of the 'system' that allowed workers such a considerable voice. Concessions made by employers to workers, when the latter were relatively strong and the former feared a more radical revolution, were to be fundamentally queried and subject to sustained assault as was the political system that guaranteed those concessions when the relative circumstances of the parties had changed.

By December 1918, the USPD had fallen out with Ebert's cautious

course. The radical socialists had wanted to seize the opportunity for a thorough-going reform of the army, and for the socialization of the means of production; in short, they wanted to effect a genuine revolution, not to administer affairs on a temporary basis pending national elections. The USPD left the

government; and at the end of December, the far left formed the German Communist Party (KPD). In January 1919 the split between moderate Social Democrats on the one hand, and radical socialists and communists on the other, became an unbridgeable chasm. A largely spontaneous uprising in Berlin, occasioned by the dismissal of the radical Police Chief Eichhorn, belatedly came under the control of the Spartacist leaders. The SPD overreacted to the demonstrations, requesting the support of the Army and Free Corps (*Freikorps*) units (privately financed paramilitary groups of demobilized soldiers) to suppress the revolt by force. This they did with a vengeance. In the process of being arrested and imprisoned, the Spartacist leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were brutally murdered. Radicals never forgave moderate Social Democrats for their use of force which was to be repeated all over Germany, many times, in response to unrest in the following months and years and the bitter resentment and hostility aroused at this early date helped to sustain the Communists' later (Moscow-dominated) view of Social Democrats as 'social fascists', a worse enemy even than the Nazis.

Street-fighting, strikes, demonstrations and barricades provided the backdrop for a national campaign for the elections of 19 January 1919. The SPD, which had been relying on this for a solid majority confirming its mandate to govern the new Republic, was disappointed. It gained only thirty-eight per cent of the vote, which under the system of proportional representation entailed forming a coalition government in conjunction with the Catholic Centre Party (*Zentrum*) and the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP). On 6 February 1919 the National Constituent Assembly convened in the town of Weimar (hence the name 'Weimar Republic'), and within a week Ebert had been elected the Republic's first President, while Scheidemann became head of the coalition cabinet.

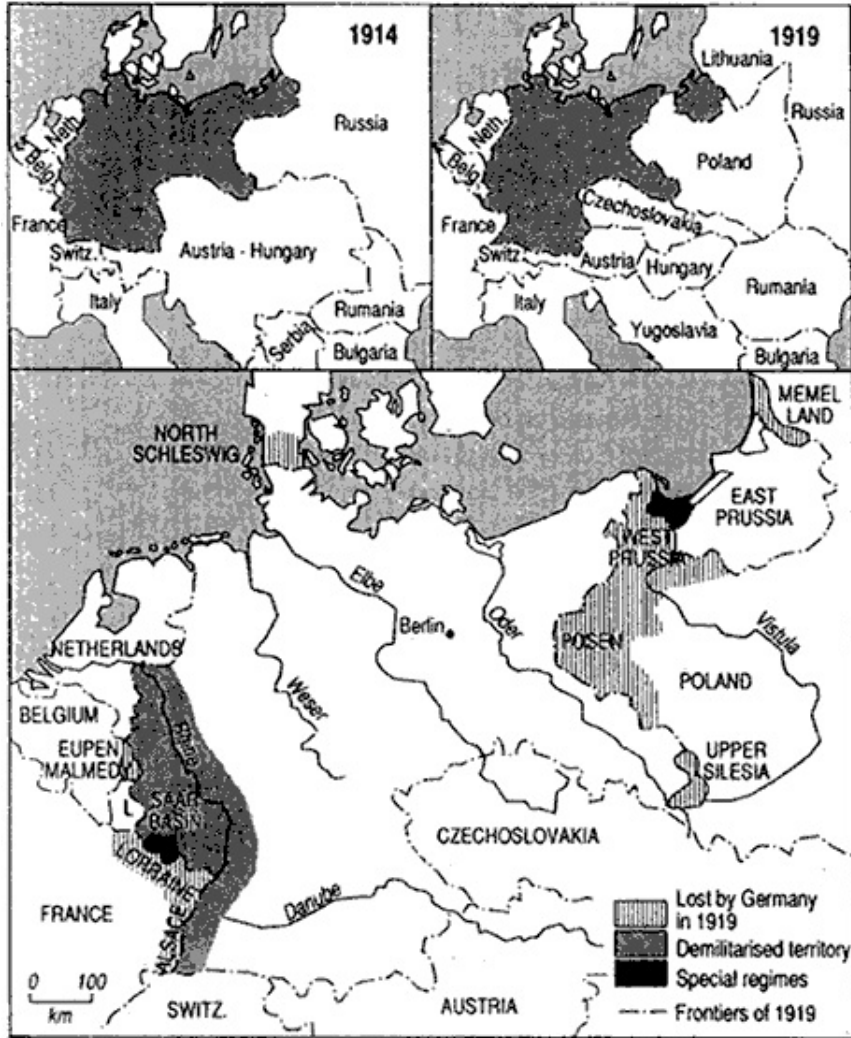
The Weimar Constitution and the Treaty of Versailles

During December 1918, a group of experts (including Max Weber), under the leadership of Hugo Preuss, a left-liberal

Professor of Law, had been busy developing a draft constitution for the Republic. This constitution was then considered by the National Assembly, and an agreed version took effect on 11 August 1919. It appeared and indeed was very progressive, but has subsequently come under much criticism for alleged weaknesses which facilitated the subsequent collapse of democracy.

The electoral system was to be one of proportional representation of parties in the national parliament according to the percentage of votes cast by all men and women over the age of twenty. In the event, the nature of the party system in the Weimar Republic, and what might be called the 'political culture' of a number of Weimar parties, rendered post-election bargaining over possible governmental coalitions much more difficult than it has proved to be in other democracies where proportional representation prevails; thus, as we shall see, it was not so much the rules of the game, as the nature of the parties playing the game, that rendered proportional representation a serious liability for Weimar democracy. The constitution also stressed the participatory, rather than purely representative, aspects of the democratic system. Referenda could be called with direct popular vote on policy issues of considerable importance. The President himself was to be elected by direct popular vote for a seven-year period of office. The elected President, who as a ceremonial head of state replaced the hereditary office of Emperor, was in many ways what has been called an *Ersatz-Kaiser* (substitute Emperor). He had tremendous personal powers, including the right to appoint and dismiss Chancellors, to dissolve the parliament and call new elections, and, in cases where no parliamentary majority could be found in support of governmental policies, to authorize the Chancellor to rule by presidential decree. The notorious Article 48 of the constitution, which gave the President such emergency powers, also permitted military intervention in the

affairs of the different local states or *Länder* if it was deemed that a state of emergency obtained. Given the considerable personal power of the President, a lot depended on the particular character who held the office. Friedrich Ebert made use of presidential powers to



The Versailles settlement, 1919

stabilize democracy; his successor, the ageing military hero Field Marshal Hindenburg, turned out to be much less committed to upholding parliamentary democracy and was to play an important role in its destruction.

One of the first tasks of the new government was to sign a peace treaty with the victorious powers. The provisions of the Versailles Treaty, when they were finally revealed in the early summer of 1919, proved to be harsh. Scheidemann's cabinet resigned, and a delegation from a new cabinet under Bauer went to sign the Treaty on 28 June 1919. Germany lost not only her colonies, but also large areas of German territory in Europe: Alsace-Lorraine was to be returned to France (which was also to enjoy the fruits of coal production in the Saar basin); West Prussia, Upper Silesia and Posen (Poznan) * were to be restored to a newly reconstituted Poland, and Danzig was to become a free city under the supervision of the newly established League of Nations. The 'Polish Corridor' thus created separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. Border areas of Germany were to be demilitarized; the left bank of the Rhine was placed under Allied supervision for a prospective period of fifteen years. There was to be no union of Germany and Austria. The German army was to be reduced to 100,000 men, for domestic and border-guard purposes only, while the German navy was similarly restricted - submarines were forbidden and an air force was not permitted at all. Article 231 stated that Germany and her allies were responsible for the war and the damage it had caused. In consideration of this responsibility, Germany was to pay an unspecified sum in reparation, to be determined later. When the details of reparations were finally announced at the Paris conference of January 1921, the high sums involved were to arouse great indignation, and to have tremendous political and (politically exacerbated) economic consequences. Altogether, the harsh treatment

of Germany after the First World War was to prove a considerable burden for Weimar democracy, and a powerful cause of the persistent, widespread and energetic revisionism on the part of many groups and individuals in the following years. The legend of the 'stab in the back' was to gain considerable currency in the summer of 1919, and for

many people 'democracy' became synonymous with national humiliation and, increasingly, economic ruin.

Political Unrest and Economic Chaos

The fledgeling Republic was subjected not only to a hammering from abroad, but also to onslaughts from a variety of quarters at home. Its first four years were characterized by a high level of political violence, with frequent assassinations, coup attempts, strikes and demonstrations, these last generally being put down with considerable force. A second attempt at establishing a Bavarian Republic, following the assassination of Kurt Eisner, was brutally suppressed in May 1919 by Free Corps units, with perhaps a thousand deaths. An attempted national right-wing putsch, with a march on Berlin led by Generallandschaftsdirektor Kapp and Infantry General Freiherr von Lüttwitz in March 1920, was only brought down by a general strike, after the army had refused to fire on the putschist troops. Later a successful coup in Bavaria installed a right-wing regime under Kahr, turning Bavaria into a haven in which small nationalist (or *völkisch*) groups could safely organize and foment unrest against democracy. The army, despite its unwillingness to act against the Kapp putsch, was only too happy to fire on the so-called 'Red Army' in the Ruhr, when there were left-wing uprisings against the Republic in the spring of 1920. The army and Free Corps were also keen to intervene to suppress Communist-led uprisings and left-wing regimes in Saxony, Thuringia, and Hamburg in the autumn of 1923. Faced with repeated strikes, demonstrations, and political violence, the SPD sadly misjudged the situation and, instead of responding to the causes of distress, sought to use force to suppress the symptoms of unrest. 2 Moreover, the judiciary throughout the Weimar Republic displayed considerable political bias in treating left-wing offenders very harshly, while meting out lenient sentences to offenders on the right. A deeply

polarized society was hardly coming to terms with the new political circumstances of the time.

In the elections of June 1920, there was a swing to the parties of the extreme left and the right, while the more moderate 'Weimar

coalition' parties lost ground. The SPD's share of the vote fell from 37.9% to 21.7% while the German Democratic Party's (DDP) vote fell to 8.2%, less than half its former 18.5% and the Centre dropped moderately from 19.7% to 13.6%. The USPD share grew from 7.6% to 17.8% while the KPD (which had not contested the 1919 elections) won 2% of the vote; on the right, the German People's Party (DVP) increased its poll from 4.4% to 13.9%, and the German National People's Party (DNVP) gained 15%, compared to its earlier 10.3% share of the vote. The SPD-led coalition government was replaced by a centre-right coalition.

From 1921 to the summer of 1923, governmental policies served to exacerbate Germany's political and economic difficulties. Wirth's government of 1921 pursued a so-called 'policy of fulfilment' which, by attempting to fulfil Germany's reparations obligations, served to demonstrate that the German economy was in fact too weak to pay reparations as envisaged. This coincided with the pursuit by the French of revisionist policies aimed at gaining control of the left bank of the Rhine and setting up a puppet state. Matters came to a head under the government of Cuno, from November 1922 to August 1923, which included the DVP while the SPD remained in opposition. In January 1923, the French and Belgians sent troops to 'supervise' production in the Ruhr, using the shortfall in German wood and coal deliveries to the French as a pretext. This military occupation of the Ruhr entailed the deployment of 100,000 men equivalent to the total strength of the German army. The Germans responded with a policy of 'passive resistance', ceasing economic production and refusing to cooperate with the occupation. The need to subsidize Germans in the now unproductive Ruhr was exceedingly detrimental to the German economy, and coincided with an extraordinary period of catastrophic inflation.

While the roots of German inflation lay in the earlier financing of war by bonds and loans rather than taxation increases, its explosive growth was fuelled by, among other factors, the printing of paper money for the payment of reparations, and for the financing of heavy social expenditure (on pensions, for example).

This sent the value of money totally out of control. In the course of the spring and summer of 1923, the German Mark progressively became worthless. The American dollar was worth 4.2 Marks in July 1914; it had risen to 8.9 Marks in January 1919, 14 Marks by July 1919, and a peak of 64.8 Marks in January 1920. There was then a brief period of respite, but after January 1921 the snowball started rolling again. By July 1922, the dollar was worth 493.2 Marks; by January 1923 the figure was 17,972; and in an inflationary explosion, the figures rose to 4.62 *million* Marks by August, 98.86 million Marks by September, 25,260 million Marks by October, and an almost unimaginable 4,200,000 million Marks by 15 November 1923. Paper notes were simply stamped with a new increased value; people were paid their wages by the cartload; prices doubled and trebled several times a day, making shopping with money almost impossible; and the savings, hopes, plans, assumptions and aspirations of huge numbers of people were swept away in a chaotic whirlwind.

Those on fixed incomes, and those dependent on money savings, were of course hit the hardest. 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 which was thereafter equated with economic distress and a heightened fear of the possible consequences of economic instability. A few groups and individuals were by contrast well-placed to benefit, and even to make a profit, from the inflation, such as the industrialist Hugo Stinnes.

In the end, the situation was brought under control by the Stresemann government of August–November 1923. The policy of passive resistance in the Ruhr was terminated, easing the burden on the German economy and defusing international tension, while a currency reform introduced the *Rentenmark* and laid the foundations both of a

more stable currency and of a reconsideration of the reparations question in the following year. At the same time, a number of putsch attempts, including communist-inspired uprisings in Saxony, Thuringia and Hamburg, were suppressed. One putsch attempt of this period which

was at the time but one among many-has gained particular historical notoriety. In Bavaria, a number of nationalist groups were laying complex plans for a right-wing 'march on Berlin', copying the successful model of Mussolini's Fascist march on Rome of the previous year. One of the groups associated with these plans was the small party formed out of the earlier German Workers' Party (DAP) led by Anton Drexler, and now known as the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, or Nazi) under the leadership of a certain Adolf Hitler. At the time relatively insignificant, the failed 'Beer Hall Putsch' of 8-9 November 1923-which lost crucial support in high places at the last moment-in the event gave Hitler and his associates considerable national publicity in the trial which ensued. Sentenced to a minimum of five years' detention-of which he served less than a year, in relatively comfortable circumstances in Landsberg prison-Hitler took the opportunity to write the political diatribe entitled *Mein Kampf*, and to ruminate on the future strategy of his party. In the mean time, however, from 1924 the Republic appeared to be recovering from its early turbulence, and entering into a new period of stabilization, on both the domestic and international fronts.

Apparent Stabilization, 1924-9

In November 1923, Gustav Stresemann became Foreign Minister. A member of the right-wing liberal DVP, Stresemann only gradually became committed to the Republic, intellectually rather than emotionally (as the German phrase *Vernunftrepublikaner* implied). Despite the frequent changes of governmental coalition during the Weimar Republic, Stresemann retained the position of Foreign Minister until his death in October 1929. During this period he made a major contribution to the stabilization of the Republic as far as foreign affairs were concerned-which, as it sadly turned out, was in the end not quite far enough.

The Versailles Treaty had left a number of outstanding problems. It was clear after the catastrophes of 1923 that the issue of reparations would have to be reconsidered. In

1924 the Dawes Plan was adopted, which aided both German economic recovery and American expansionist economic policies. Essentially postponing a final settlement, this plan allowed Germany a breathing space before full reparations would be payable, with payment staggered over four years before reaching a maximum level in the fifth year. For Germany, it also meant considerable economic dependence on short-term loans from abroad, particularly from America. In the early phases only one-fifth would be paid from Germany's own resources while four-fifths were to come from international 'start-up' loans. Stresemann was quite clear about the difficulties this would entail for the weak German economy, but felt that the potential benefits of normalization of relations with France in particular outweighed the obvious and serious economic problems involved.

In July 1925 the Rhineland began to be cleared and French troops started to leave the Ruhr. After long negotiations, in October 1925, the Locarno Pact was signed by representatives of Germany, Belgium, Britain, France, Italy, together with separate agreements between Germany and Poland, and Germany and Czechoslovakia. Locarno guaranteed the frontiers between Germany and France, and between Germany and Belgium, and its parties mutually renounced the use of force or invasion of each other's territory except in self-defence. Since the militarily emasculated Germany was in no position to use force, and since Locarno entailed further recognition of the validity of the Treaty of Versailles, as well as appearing to favour good relations with Germany's western neighbours at the expense of relations with Russia, the agreement provoked highly hostile responses from both left-and right-wingers at home. On the other hand, Locarno appeared to mark the beginning of the re-entry of Germany into a community of nations seeking a framework for peace and security in Europe, and it paved

the way for Germany's entry into the League of Nations in September 1926.

Partly to reassure domestic opinion, and partly to reaffirm Germany's position *vis-à-vis* Russia, Stresemann concluded with Russia the Berlin Treaty of 1926. This confirmed the Rapallo Treaty of 1922, concluded when Rathenau (who was assassinated after the Treaty was signed) was Foreign Minister. Rapallo

had re-established diplomatic relations between Germany and Russia, and the two powers had mutually renounced claims to reparations or compensation. This foreign policy initiative, which aroused considerable resentment among the western powers (who were suspicious of a special relationship between Germany and Russia), had also included a secret military agreement allowing German remilitarization inside the territory of the USSR. In the Berlin Treaty of 1926, Russia and Germany reassured each other of their friendly relations, and committed themselves to remaining neutral in the event of the other country being at war with a third power or powers. This meant that if, for example, Poland and Russia were at war, France would not be able to come to Poland's help via German territory. Stresemann was anxious to reassure his opponents at home that Germany was not exclusively western-orientated in her foreign policy, but rather could act as a peace-keeping bridge in the centre of Europe between West and East. It was nevertheless clear that Poland's position was rather weak, and the issue of Germany's eastern frontiers was left sufficiently open to give hope to revisionists in Germany that changes might yet be effected on that front.

In January 1927 the allied military commission overseeing the post-Versailles disarmament of Germany was withdrawn. The reparations question was reopened, as the 'normal' years of full reparations payments, 1928-9, drew closer. In August 1929 the Young Plan revised the reparations schedule yet again, setting a new total figure and a reduced annual average of reparations payments. This was met with an intense campaign of domestic opposition in which the Nazis gained some respectability and free publicity by associating themselves with conservative nationalists in the DNVP. But the referendum 'against the enslavement of the German people' failed to win the required 21 million votes (receiving the acclamation of 'only'

5.83 million). In the event, under the Young Plan, foreign controls were to be removed and the Rhineland evacuated by the Allied powers in June 1930, five years earlier than envisaged in the Versailles Treaty. To moderate observers, it might appear that under Stresemann's guidance, a considerable amount had been achieved: reparations had been renegotiated to a more

manageable level, Germany's relations with her former enemies and neighbours had been regularized, the Ruhr and Rhineland had been evacuated, Germany had been accepted into the League of Nations and at the same time there still appeared to be the possibility of reconsidering Germany's eastern frontiers, thus pursuing revisionist aims in a peaceful manner.

Yet many observers in the Weimar Republic were far from moderate. Each of the measures negotiated under Stresemann was highly contentious. Moreover, under the facade of apparent stabilization there were many cracks, both political and economic. In the period of renewed crisis after 1929, these cracks were to turn into an earthquake, bringing the shaky edifice of Weimar democracy tumbling down in ruins. We shall consider the intrinsic domestic weaknesses of the Weimar Republic as they affected its eventual collapse in the next chapter. In the mean time, however, on another front 'Weimar culture' was beginning to achieve international renown.

The Golden Twenties?

Society and Culture in the Weimar Republic

Many people who know little more about the politics of the Weimar Republic than that it ended with the rise of Hitler may know a great deal about 'Weimar culture'. The Weimar years, brief though this political epoch was, saw an explosion of creativity across a wide range of scientific and artistic fields. The German traditions of research in the natural sciences, particularly physics and chemistry, and expertise in psychology and psychoanalysis, continued to develop in the 1920s. In the field of social sciences, great contributions were made by, for example, the 'Frankfurt School' of Critical Theory, members of which included Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. This school of social theory, forced into exile in the

Nazi period, was subsequently rediscovered in the 1960s by younger American and European social theorists, influenced particularly by the ageing Marcuse and by a second generation of critical theorists such as Habermas. In the visual arts, tendencies existing before the First World War particularly

the schools known as 'Die Brücke' (based in Dresden) and 'Der blaue Reiter' (based in Munich) continued to be creative in the early Weimar years. Expressionism associated with names such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Franz Marc exploded, and diversified into an array of experimental and avant-garde tendencies: cubism, futurism, Dada, and other styles flourished. In literature, a great range of prose, poetry, and drama was produced which has proved to be of enduring merit and lasting reputation. Names such as Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Rainer Maria Rilke, Bertolt Brecht (and his musical associate Kurt Weill) have achieved international standing. Even in architecture, Weimar Germany produced a phenomenon of enduring interest: the Bauhaus school led by Walter Gropius. In music, too, there was experimentation in the atonal work of Arnold Schönberg.

Given such an extraordinary diversity of talent and creative production, it is difficult to form valid brief generalizations about Weimar culture, or to suggest a periodisation. It is also clear that not all of that which has been termed 'Weimar culture' was actually a direct product of the Weimar period itself: many commentators have pointed to a cultural epoch stretching from the turn of the century to about 1930. Many of the schools, tendencies, and individuals associated with Weimar culture had been creative already in the decade before the outbreak of the First World War. Some elements were, however, new, and corresponded curiously to the political phases of Weimar democracy. Eberhard Kolb has pointed out that the tendency known as 'new objectivity' (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), with which the Bauhaus, for example, was associated, coincided with the period of relative stabilization from 1924 to 1929.⁴ After the near-apocalyptic exuberance of the early years in both the political and artistic realms a new emphasis was given to a cool, detached

combination of utilitarian and aesthetic qualities. The final years of the Weimar Republic witnessed not only a radical political polarization, but also a heightened politicization and polarization in art, particularly in such fields as theatre. And the social conditions and political violence of the closing years of the Republic, with the onset of the depression, were

witnessed to in such realist novels as Alexander Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

But there are perhaps more important ways than simple periodisation in which Weimar culture reflected, refracted, and contributed to the complexities of Weimar politics. For Weimar culture, far from being a homogenous entity, was a deeply divided phenomenon: indeed, perhaps it would be more apposite to speak of Weimar cultures in the plural. And, most importantly, the one element that united the most diverse aspects of this culture was the problematic relationship that proponents of both left-wing and right-wing tendencies had to 'modernity' in general and the Weimar Republic in particular. Use was made of modern means of communication, modern machinery and media, to criticize the age of the machine and modern society. On the left, artists such as Georg Grosz, Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz, and Heinrich Zille criticized the bourgeois society in which the bourgeois, conservative and nationalist 'pillars of society' (to borrow the title of one of Grosz's most scathing and biting pictures; *see cover*) grew fat at the expense of the masses, who were driven into conditions of abject poverty. This poverty was captured with humour in Zille's drawings of the life of the Berlin working classes in the early twentieth century, and with pathos in Käthe Kollwitz's representations of misery and suffering. While left-wing political cabaret and theatre attacked the pomposity and injustice of bourgeois capitalist society, the right-wing attacked parliamentary democracy, the political form of the Weimar Republic. The influx of new forms, such as American jazz music held by right-wingers to be the ultimate in decadence and the perceived 'laxity in morals', particularly in metropolitan centres such as 1920s Berlin, were held to be evidence of cultural decay. The Weimar Republic itself was held responsible for this decadence, and for the penetration of western forms of shallow, superficial

'civilization' into the purer German 'culture', defiling it in the process. So while the left attacked capitalism, the right attacked democracy: neither wing of elite culture with the exception of a few individuals, most notably (and belatedly) Thomas Mann spoke out to sustain the Weimar Republic in principle.

Nor was culture in the wider sense to sustain the new Republic. The social institutions which had the most influence on popular attitudes were still the churches and the schools: and both religious and educational institutions by and large tended to undermine Weimar democracy. Both the Catholic and the Protestant churches propagated essentially conservative, monarchist and anti-democratic sympathies; they were moreover highly critical of the moral decadence, as they saw it, of a society in which birth control was for the first time becoming widespread. The education system was also, in general, conservative and anti-democratic in outlook. Many schoolteachers were traditional conservative nationalists. Student fraternities and university teachers were similarly preponderantly right-wing and anti-democratic in sympathy: the Left was only to dominate German student politics for the first time in the West Germany of the late 1960s. However, in the sphere of education, as in virtually every other aspect of Weimar life, quite different tendencies co-existed. Alongside the highly conservative educational establishment ran currents of reform, and progressive schools. After the Second World War, largely unsuccessful attempts were made to resurrect some of the more progressive elements in Weimar education.

The Weimar period saw an explosion in new media of communication. The cinema began to replace the theatre, as films first silent, then from 1929 with soundtracks became an increasingly popular form of mass entertainment. Radio ownership spread rapidly among German households, and contributed to the formation of a new national public. There have been suggestions that the commercialization of leisure started to break down the divisions between class-based subcultures, and perhaps also to erode the hold of the SPD over the outlook and organizations of large parts of the working class. ⁵ Regional isolation was also diminished, in a less than

democratic manner, with increased concentration in the newspaper industry: press barons such as Hugenberg not only directly owned and influenced their own newspapers, but also indirectly affected the contents and political bias of 'independent' local papers through their press agency services and the provision of news snippets and

commentaries. In film, radio and newsprint, as in other areas of Weimar culture, developments were ambiguous. While certain renowned films, such as Remarque's 'All Quiet on the Western Front' (*Im Westen nichts Neues*), took a firm stand against war, they remained the exception: there were many more, generally ephemeral and of low artistic quality, which glorified nationalism, war, and the fatherland. In the sphere of radio, pro-Republican forces failed to gain political control or make serious use of a medium which was for most of the Weimar period intended to be politically neutral. It was only in 1932 that von Papen (then Chancellor) asserted political control of the radio, leaving a welcome gift for the Nazis to exploit in their propaganda efforts after January 1933.

If one turns from culture, at both elite and mass levels, to society more generally in the Weimar period, then a similar range of complexities, ambiguities and conflicts appear. Women were formally 'emancipated' in what was essentially a highly progressive welfare state. But this was an 'emancipation from above': despite the existence of minority feminist movements, both bourgeois and socialist, the majority of women continued to have rather traditional conceptions of their role. Being a wife and mother was held to be the essential fulfilment of womanhood: paid employment outside the home was preferably to be undertaken only before marriage, or only if economically absolutely essential. Weimar 'emancipation' was more theoretical than real: while women gained the vote (of which they made slowly increasing use), they remained in predominantly low-paid and low-status occupations. While women had always formed a considerable proportion of the agricultural labour force peasant farms, for example, being family concerns where women brought in the hay, fed the chickens and milked the cows as a matter of course women in the Weimar Republic were increasingly employed in white-collar occupations in the new

middle class, a trend evident since the beginning of the century. A minority of women did achieve a certain status, if not actual power: the first Parliament of the Weimar Republic, for example, had a distinguished group of women Members. But by and large, despite the spread of birth control and the

progressive framework of the constitution, attitudes both of and towards women remained highly traditional. In the depression, with rising unemployment after 1929, there was criticism of 'double earners' (*Doppeherdiener*), as people complained of the unfairness of some families having two incomes while others had no income at all. And when women voted they tended to vote disproportionately for parties which did *not* hold progressive attitudes on women's questions, such as the conservative and Christian parties. The two parties with the most progressive views on women's issues, the SPD and the KPD, failed to attract a proportional share of the votes of women. ⁶ Formal appearances notwithstanding, most women neither were nor seemed to want to be 'emancipated'. The minority who adopted what they held to be an emancipated *style* smoking cigarettes in long holders, cutting their hair in short fashions, driving cars and indulging in an apparently glittering night life attracted criticism from many of the more staid and stolid *Hausfrauen* of Weimar Germany.

There was nevertheless widespread experimentation in life styles among some groups, with 'reform' movements in the areas of food and health, for example. There was an emphasis on nature, with members of youth movements indulging in long hiking trips through the German pine forests, swimming in lakes and rivers, camping and youth hostelling at every opportunity. There had been a tradition of such youth movements in Imperial Germany, such as the largely middle-class *Wandervogel* movement, and the comparable SPD youth organizations. Their activities continued to flourish in the Weimar Republic. Perhaps partly in reaction against the constraints and repressions, the restrictions and gloom of life in large cities, emphasis was given to escape into the countryside.

Whatever the ambiguities of Weimar society and culture, perhaps the deepest and most fatal splits were embedded in the Weimar social

compromise, and in the institutional framework of relations between the classes. It was these which contributed mightily to the breakdown of the Weimar political system, creating the opportunities which the Nazis were to seize. We must turn now to the complex and contentious task of explaining the ultimate collapse of the short-lived Weimar Republic.