

OCR AS/A-level History

DEMOCRACY AND DICTATORSHIPS IN GERMANY

1919–1963



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Contents



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5 Introduction

1 The establishment and development of the Weimar Republic, 1919 to January 1933

- 8 The consequences of the First World War
- 10 The impact of the Treaty of Versailles
- 12 The challenges to Weimar, 1919–23
- 14 Stresemann and the Golden Years
- 16 The impact of the Great Depression
- 18 The rise and appeal of the Nazis
- 20 Hitler's admission to power in January 1933
- 22 Exam focus

2 The establishment of the Nazi dictatorship and its domestic policies, February 1933 to 1939

- 26 Hitler's consolidation of power
- 28 Hitler and the system of government and administration
- 30 Censorship and propaganda
- 32 The police state and terror
- 34 Opposition and resistance
- 36 Nazi religious policies and attitude to the Churches
- 38 Economic policy
- 40 Women and the family
- 42 Education and youth
- 44 Racial policies to 1939
- 46 Exam focus

3 The impact of war and defeat on Germany, 1939–49

- 50 The war economy and total war
- 52 Bombing, anti-Semitism and genocide
- 54 Potsdam and the establishment of the Soviet zone
- 56 The consolidation of the SED and developments in the Soviet zone
- 58 The Western zone, 1945–49
- 60 The Cold War and the Berlin blockade
- 62 Exam focus

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4 Divided Germany: the Federal Republic and the DDR, 1949–63

- 66 The Basic Law and the constitution of West Germany
- 68 Political parties and elections
- 70 The West German economy and the economic miracle
- 72 Foreign policy: integration with the West
- 74 Social change and the decline of Adenauer
- 76 The emergence of the DDR
- 78 Economic change in the DDR
- 80 Social change in the DDR
- 82 The Berlin Wall
- 84 Exam focus

- 88 **Glossary**
- 93 **Key figures**
- 95 **Timeline**
- 97 **Answers**

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1 The establishment and development of the Weimar Republic, 1919 to January 1933

The consequences of the First World War

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The First World War, which began in 1914, had split Europe into two armed camps, with Germany, Austria–Hungary and Turkey (the Central Powers) fighting against Britain, France and Russia (the Allies). Russia made peace with Germany in 1917, but the USA joined the Allies. In order to try to defeat the Allies before large numbers of American troops arrived, Germany launched a massive attack against Allied forces in France in the spring of 1918. At first this was very successful, but war-weariness and the strength of the Allies brought it to a halt. On 29 September, the chief of staff, General Ludendorff, informed his superior, Field Marshal **Paul von Hindenburg**, and Chancellor Hertling that the war was lost and that Germany should appeal to the USA for an **armistice**. Ludendorff urged the creation of a more democratic regime to show that Germany was serious about making peace.

Impact on the German people

News of impending defeat in late October/early November 1918 was a shock, despite the increasing food shortages caused by the naval blockade, as Germany had defeated Russia, and German troops were still in Northern France and Belgium. During the war the army commanders had been telling the people that they were close to victory.

The navy disagreed with an armistice and ordered the fleet to sea, but this led to a mutiny, which was followed by the establishment of soviets in many cities across Germany.

Political impact

On 9 November the **Kaiser** abdicated. Power went to a Council of People's Representatives, a temporary government under **Friedrich Ebert**, the leader of the largest political party, the **SPD**, until a national assembly could be elected. It appeared as if Germany was on the verge of revolution.

Ebert and the SPD did not want a revolution like in Russia because it would:

- lead to civil war
- disrupt demobilisation
- disrupt the distribution of food
- hinder peace negotiations.

Ebert was able to prevent a revolution for the following reasons:

- He maintained the support of the army by not reforming it or creating a new force.
- He kept the support of industrialists, who negotiated with trade unions the Central Working Association Agreement, which gave workers an eight-hour day and established workers' councils in large companies.
- The working class was divided between the communists (KPD), who wanted a Soviet style of government, and supporters of the SPD, who wanted a parliamentary system.

Economic impact

The war had a considerable economic impact on Germany, with the following results when it ended in 1918:

- Industrial production was only two-thirds that of 1913.
- National income was one-third that of 1913.
- There were 600,000 widows and 2 million children without fathers, with the result that by 1925 the state was spending one-third of its budget on war pensions.

Social impact

The war deepened divisions within German society, with huge gaps in the living standards between rich and poor. This situation had been made worse by the restrictions placed on workers' earnings during the war, while factory owners had been able to make large profits. During the war, many women had worked in factories and some believed that this had damaged family values.

The establishment of a republic

Following the Kaiser's abdication, Ebert signed an armistice and announced that the Republic would guarantee:

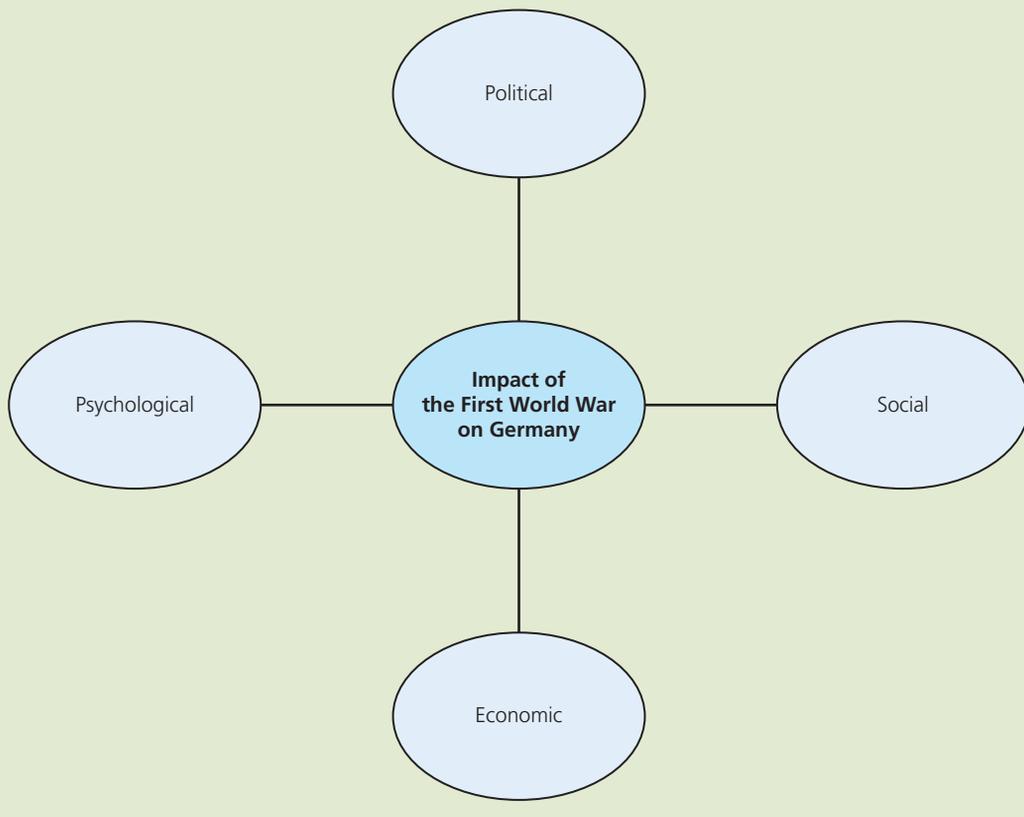
- freedom of speech
- freedom of worship
- better working conditions.

A new constitution was drawn up, but the change in government from an autocratic system to a new democratic government created opposition and challenges (see page 12). This helped to create the '**stab-in-the-back**' myth, which claimed that Germany had been betrayed by politicians such as Ebert and that it was this that prevented Germany from winning the war.



Mind map

Make a copy of the mind map below and use the information on the opposite page and the following page to add detail to it, showing how the First World War impacted on various areas of Germany.



Support your judgement

Below are a sample exam question and two basic judgements. Read the exam question and the two judgements. Support the judgement that you agree with most strongly by adding a reason that justifies the judgement.

'The most serious impact of the First World War on Germany was political.'
How far do you agree?

Overall, the most serious impact of the First World War on Germany was political.

It was the economic, not the political impact which had the greatest effect on Germany.

Tip: whichever option you choose, you will have to weigh up both sides of the argument. You could use phrases such as 'whereas', or words like 'although', in order to help the process of evaluation.

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The challenges to Weimar, 1919–23

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Many German people wanted the return of the Kaiser, and the new republic was unpopular from the very beginning, with its position further weakened by the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The period from 1919 to 1923 was one of continuous crisis and this further damaged the reputation of the Republic. The economic and social legacy of the war (see page 8) only added to the problems of the Republic.

The Weimar Constitution

Some have argued that the constitution weakened the Republic as it created instability.

There were three key elements to the constitution:

- The **president** was directly elected by universal franchise; he chose the **chancellor** and could declare a state of emergency.
- The Reichsrat was the upper house, where individual states were represented.
- The **Reichstag** was the lower house, elected by universal franchise and on the basis of **proportional representation**. This system allowed many small parties to gain representation and meant that governments were **coalitions**, which were subject to frequent change.

There were also many parties, such as the right-wing **DNVP**, that were opposed to the **Weimar** democracy.

The challenges from the left

Many workers had hoped for the establishment of a series of soviets, factory councils and the **nationalisation** of industry, but these hopes did not materialise. The decision to give power to parliament and the lack of reforms led to the resignation of the Independent Socialists from the Council of People's Representatives, and to the formation of the Communist Party (KPD).

The KPD attempted to seize power, through the **Spartacist Revolt**, in Berlin in January 1919. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, two of its leaders, were murdered and the revolt was put down by the **Freikorps**.

There were further challenges from the left and soviets were set up in Munich and Bremen. However, these were also crushed. An uprising also broke out in the **Ruhr** in March 1920 and the KPD soon controlled much of the region. This was crushed by the *Freikorps*.

The challenges from the right

Many extreme parties emerged on the right, most notably the **German Workers' Party**, whose meetings **Hitler** attended. The major challenge to Weimar came from the

Kapp Putsch in March 1920, led by **Wolfgang Kapp**, the founder of the German Fatherland Party, following government attempts to disband the *Freikorps*. It was defeated by trade unions calling a general strike, which paralysed public services.

The crisis of 1923

The occupation of the Ruhr

In January 1923, Germany fell behind in its reparation payments and France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr. This united Germany; reparation payments were halted and workers in the Ruhr went on strike. This put pressure on the economy and added to inflation, made worse by the government printing money to pay the strikers. The French brought in their own workers and this increased tensions further.

Hyperinflation

The war had caused inflation in Germany, but by printing more money to pay the strikers and compensate for lost tax revenues, the value of the mark fell so that it was worthless. This destroyed savings and ruined those on **fixed incomes**. Prices rose so fast that the **black market** and **barter** flourished. Some, such as industrialists, did gain from this situation.

Munich Putsch

Bavaria was governed by a conservative Catholic regime. It wanted to unite the nationalist right, which included the Nazi Party, to restore traditional values. Despite some opposition, the plan was for a **putsch** in Munich and then a march on Berlin. Hitler acted and seized the Bavarian state governor. After initial success, it was defeated by police. Sixteen Nazis and three police were killed; Hitler was arrested, put on trial and sentenced to imprisonment for five years, but was released after just nine months.

Why did Weimar survive?

There were other political murders during this period:

- Karl Gareis, leader of the USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany)
- Matthias Erzberger
- Walter Rathenau, the foreign minister.

Yet the Republic survived for a number of reasons:

- The government took effective action.
- Many in Germany were willing to give Weimar a chance.
- Political opposition was weaker than it appeared.

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Stresemann and the Golden Years

The appointment of Gustav Stresemann and the establishment of a '**Great Coalition**' in September 1923 are often seen as the beginning of a period of recovery for the Republic. Passive resistance in the Ruhr was ended and a new currency, the **Rentenmark**, was introduced.

Economic recovery

Industrial production gradually recovered, so that by 1927 it had returned to pre-First World War levels. The recovery was helped by loans of 800 million marks from America with the **Dawes Plan**, which also rescheduled reparation payments.

Stabilising the economy resulted in the cost of exports rising; therefore, industrialists looked to cut their costs, often by making workers redundant. Germany also became heavily dependent on loans, which, if withdrawn, would have a serious impact.

Agriculture did not fully recover and was then hit by a depression in 1927 due to global overproduction. Farmers complained that food was imported so that in return Germany could export industrial goods. This created resentment in the countryside.

Political stability

Coalitions continued to be unstable as the largest parties, the SPD and liberals, disagreed over economic and social policies.

Parties that supported democracy did well in these years, so that by 1928 they had 136 more seats than radical parties, with the Nazis winning less than 3 per cent of the vote. However, support for the liberal parties did decline and **special-interest parties** gained support.

In 1925 Hindenburg was elected president. His support for the Republic was lukewarm; he wanted to exclude the SPD from government and bring in the right-wing DNVP.

Social improvements

During the Stresemann years there were numerous social improvements:

- Wages for workers rose.
- An eight-hour day was introduced.
- The standard of living rose.
- Welfare benefits and pensions increased.

However, there were still problems:

- Farmworkers' earnings were only half the national average by 1929.
- There were still extremes of wealth and poverty.
- There were wage disputes and strikes.
- There was concern about the cost of the welfare system and the level of taxation.

Foreign policy success?

It appeared that Stresemann was able to achieve a number of foreign policy successes, which revised the Treaty of Versailles in Germany's favour. However, many of the agreements angered the nationalists, who did not want to negotiate with their former enemies.

- The Locarno Treaties of 1925 guaranteed Germany's frontiers with France and Belgium, but not Germany's frontiers in the east.
- In 1926, Germany joined the League of Nations.
- In January 1927, the Allied Disarmament Commission withdrew from Germany.
- In August 1927, Allied troops were withdrawn from garrisons in the Rhineland.
- The **Young Plan**, which reduced reparations, was signed in 1929, and Britain and France agreed to evacuate the Rhineland by the end of June 1930.

The flourishing of culture

Architecture flourished, seen in the works of the **Bauhaus** group. Painters, such as Otto Dix, formed the New Objectivity Movement. The film industry grew, producing controversial films, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which angered nationalists. Jazz was popular in the nightclubs and bars in many cities.

Success?

Despite the achievements:

- The Republic did not win loyalty from either the left or the right.
- Many were scandalised by the culture, particularly the cabaret clubs, which mocked the values of the 'old Germany' with jazz and often nudity.
- The economy was burdened by the war, the cost of welfare and reparations.
- Governments were short-lived, as a result of unstable coalitions.

However, there were signs of recovery and stability in many cities.

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Develop the detail

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Below are a sample exam question and a paragraph written in answer to this question. The paragraph contains a limited amount of detail. Annotate the paragraph to add additional detail to the answer.

‘The years 1924–29 were successful for the Weimar Republic.’ How far do you agree?

Between 1924 and 1929, the Weimar government was largely successful. The government was able to bring about some economic recovery, although the recovery was not complete and depended on help from outside the country. Conditions for workers also improved and they gained many benefits. The political situation was also more stable; support for extreme parties fell and support for those that supported democracy increased. Foreign policy was also a success, although some groups were angered by the agreements. However, Stresemann did improve relations with European powers and Germany was able to join international organisations.



Using knowledge to support or contradict an argument

Below are a sample AS Level exam question with an interpretation written by a historian. You must read the quotation, identify the argument, and use your own knowledge to support and provide a counter-argument, challenging the interpretation offered.

‘The Weimar Republic never really won the loyalty of the German people, and economically it was burdened by the legacy of a lost war and the heavy costs of running a welfare state.’

Adapted from: Mary Fulbrook, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Germany 1919–1963* (2008)

Evaluate the strengths and limitations of this interpretation, making reference to other interpretations that you have studied.

- What is the view of the interpretation?
- What knowledge of your own do you have that supports the interpretation?
- What knowledge of your own do you have that challenges the interpretation?

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