

# Gateway to Germany in 1919



## The unification of Germany

- The country of 'Germany' did not exist until 1871. Before then, there were many individual states spread across central Europe where German was the main language. In 1871, these states united to become one.
- Prussia had been the largest of the independent states. It was also the wealthiest and had a great army. The Prussian king became the new kaiser (emperor) of Germany.
- The chief minister of Prussia, Otto von Bismarck, played a major role in the unification of Germany. He was chosen as the first chancellor (prime minister) of the united Germany and his influence over the kaiser gave him virtually total authority.

## Economic and social development

- Germany began industrialising during the nineteenth century but industrial growth really took off between 1890 and 1913. By 1913, Germany's industrial output was second only to the USA, making Germany a very wealthy and powerful nation.
- Industrialisation created many social problems and led to a greater interest in politics by the working classes. This led to a growth in socialism and support for a new political party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD). By 1913, the SPD was the largest party in the Reichstag (although it had little influence on government policy).
- Industrialisation also attracted a large number of immigrants to Germany who contributed greatly to its economic growth but caused social disruption.
- Jews had lived in the area that would become Germany since Roman times. As elsewhere in Europe they were frequently persecuted. In the new Germany from 1871, they had legal equality and became largely integrated.

## The government of Germany

- Germany was a federal state and power was divided between the states and the federal or imperial government.
- Prussia dominated Germany politically as the king of Prussia was the head of the empire (the kaiser) and Prussia had sufficient voting power to block any changes in the constitution.
- The kaiser appointed the chancellor and other imperial ministers who were responsible to the kaiser.
- Although the first three kaisers kept Bismarck as their chancellor, Wilhelm II, who became kaiser in 1888, wanted to rule Germany by himself. He forced Bismarck to resign in 1890. From then until 1918, Germany was ruled absolutely by its monarch with the chancellor having little power.
- There was a parliament – the Reichstag – but as the chancellor and kaiser could choose to ignore its decisions and it could be dissolved at any time by the kaiser, it had little power.

## Foreign affairs

- Under Kaiser Wilhelm II Germany had attempted to become a world power, following a policy of 'Weltpolitik', and attempted to acquire an overseas empire as the kaiser was envious of the British Empire.
- In the years before the First World War, Germany had built up a navy that attempted to challenge British naval dominance. It also had a very large army.
- After the fall of Bismarck, Germany had become very isolated in Europe, with Austria-Hungary its only reliable ally and they were very weak economically, militarily and politically.
- A major reason for Germany going to war in 1914 was to defend Austria-Hungary.

# Chapter 1

## The establishment and development of the Weimar Republic 1919–January 1933

This chapter focuses on the reasons why the Weimar Republic was established and why it collapsed just fourteen years later. It will consider the challenges that the new republic faced in its early years and assess the extent to which it was able to overcome these. The chapter will examine how stable it was during the so-called 'Golden Years'. It will evaluate the reasons for its collapse, considering the impact of the Wall Street Crash, the rise of the Nazi Party and political intrigue within the Republic. It addresses a number of key questions that relate to its establishment, development and collapse:

- What were the consequences of the First World War for Germany?
- How serious were the challenges to the Weimar Republic 1919–23?
- How stable was the Weimar Republic in the 'golden years' 1924–29?
- Why was the Nazi Party able to gain support and come to power in the period from 1929 to January 1933?

This chapter will also explain how to understand the wording of a question and then how to plan a response to the question. It will focus on identifying the key words within the question and then explain how to ensure that you address the key demands of the actual question, rather than simply writing all you know about a topic.

### Timeline

1918	November	Mutiny at Kiel, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicates, Armistice signed
1919	January	Spartacist uprising
	August	Weimar Constitution adopted
1920	March	Ruhr uprising, Kapp Putsch
1921	July	Hitler becomes undisputed leader of the Nazi Party
1923	January	French and Belgian troops occupy the Ruhr
	January–November	Hyperinflation
	November	'Beer Hall Putsch' in Munich
1924		Hitler writes <i>Mein Kampf</i> while in Landsberg prison
	April	Dawes Plan
1925	October	Locarno Treaties
1929	October	Wall Street Crash
1930	March	Brüning replaces Müller as chancellor
	September	Nazis make large gains in elections to the Reichstag
1932	January	Unemployment reaches 6.1 million
	June	Von Papen replaces Brüning as chancellor
	July	Elections to the Reichstag; Nazis the largest party
	November	Elections to the Reichstag; Nazi support declines
	December	Von Schleicher replaces Papen as chancellor
1933	January	Schleicher dismissed as chancellor; Hitler appointed chancellor

## Overview

At the start of 1918, the German army launched an offensive to try and secure victory before the arrival of American troops following the USA's entry into the First World War. The failure of the offensive led the military leadership to realise that victory was not possible, and they began to seek peace. In order to help the process the ruler of Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was forced to abdicate and went into exile. These events brought the nation close to social revolution and, in January 1919, the Communists attempted to seize power but were defeated.

The authoritarian rule of the kaiser was replaced by the **democratic** Weimar Republic, but from its very beginning it was unpopular with many Germans. In part this was because it was associated with the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which Germany was forced to sign at the end of the war, but also because many wanted a return to the rule of an authoritarian regime. The early years of the Republic, from 1919 to the end of 1923, were a period of virtually constant crises. There were attempts from both the left and right wings to overthrow the government. France and Belgium invaded the Ruhr in January 1923 when Germany fell behind with reparation payments and this, and the decision by successive post-war governments to print money in order to pay off debts, led to **hyperinflation**. Many lost faith in the new democracy, particularly those who had lost out because of wartime inflation and post-war hyperinflation.

However, the period from 1924 to 1929 did witness some recovery. The economy returned to pre-war levels by 1927 and conditions for workers also improved with reductions in the length of the working day, and the introduction of unemployment insurance and pensions. Support for democratic parties grew, while extremist parties saw their support decline. Relations with foreign powers improved as Germany reached an agreement with France over its western borders and was admitted

to the League of Nations in 1926. The period also saw innovative cultural developments, in music, theatre, art and architecture. However, despite these improvements the Republic was heavily dependent on foreign loans to support the economy and nationalists did not approve of compromises with its former enemies, particularly the renegotiation of **reparations** payments under the Dawes (1924) and Young (1929) plans.

These improvements were brought to a shuddering halt in October 1929 with the stock market crash on Wall Street in New York. It brought an end to foreign loans to Germany and led to a decline in trade and rise in unemployment. The government was faced with a rising bill for unemployment benefits and was unable to manage the growing crisis. As unemployment continued to rise, support for extremist political parties, particularly the Nazi Party (National Socialist German Workers Party [NSDAP]), grew, so that by July 1932 they were the largest party in the Reichstag or parliament. By 1930, the government was divided in its approach to the problem of unemployment and benefits. Although a new government, under Brüning, came into power in March it was unable to secure a majority in the Reichstag and increasingly had to rule by emergency decree. After over two years in power, Brüning was replaced by Papen in June 1932, but he was also unable to gain a majority and was replaced by Schleicher in December. Schleicher's appointment did little to ease the crisis and Papen, who wanted revenge for his dismissal, began to intrigue with Hitler to remove him. Finally, in January 1933, Papen was able to convince the 85-year-old President, Hindenburg, that he would be able to control Hitler and his Nazi Party. Despite Hindenburg's personal dislike for Hitler he accepted Papen's assurances and appointed Hitler as **chancellor** and Papen as vice chancellor at the end of January 1933.

## What were the consequences of the First World War for Germany?

The First World War, which began in July 1914, had split Europe into two armed camps. Germany fought alongside Austria-Hungary, Turkey and later Bulgaria (the Central powers), against France, Britain, Russia and, later, the USA (the Allied powers, or Allies). Germany defeated Russia in 1918, but at the same time the USA joined the war on the side of Britain and France. In order to try and defeat the Allies before large numbers of American troops arrived, Germany launched a massive attack on the Western Front in early 1918.

This was known as the Ludendorff, or Spring Offensive. Although this was initially successful, it ground to a halt and German forces were forced back. By September, the German commander Ludendorff had informed his superior, Field Marshal von Hindenburg, and the **chancellor**, Hertling, that victory was not possible and that Germany should appeal to the USA for an **armistice**. Ludendorff also argued that Germany should restore parliamentary rule, and establish a more democratic regime in order to ensure that the army would not be blamed for defeat and to shift the blame to the democratic politicians and show the Allies it was serious about making peace.

The sudden reversal of German fortunes, particularly after victory against Russia, had a profound impact on the German people, politics and the economy. Much historical debate has centred on which aspect of Germany was most seriously affected by defeat. It is important to remember that news of the impending defeat caused a great shock within Germany, despite the ever-increasing food shortages caused by the British naval blockade. Most people in Germany expected victory as, throughout the war, the German press had been telling them how close they were to success. They found it difficult to understand how they had been defeated as German troops had been victorious in the east against Russia and there were still German troops in both Belgium and France; German soil had not been invaded. The psychological shock of the news raised many questions for the German people and played a large role in influencing their reaction both to the peace Treaty of Versailles (see page 15) and later political developments.

## The political consequences

The most immediate consequence of the news of defeat was the **abdication** of Kaiser Wilhelm II on 9 November 1918. Following his abdication, power passed to a **Council of People's Representatives**, a temporary government under Friedrich Ebert, until a national assembly was elected. Ebert was the leader of the largest political party in the Reichstag, the Social Democratic Party (SPD). He quickly signed an armistice to bring fighting to an end. However, despite these moves it appeared as if Germany was on the verge of a revolution similar to that in Russia of the previous year.

### Kaiser Wilhelm II

Wilhelm II was Emperor of Germany from 1888 until his abdication in 1918. He aimed to create a German Empire abroad and build a large navy and army to rival other European powers. His policy of **Weltpolitik** brought him into conflict with other European powers and was a factor in the outbreak of the First World War. Towards the end of the war he abdicated and fled to the Netherlands.

### Friedrich Ebert 1871–1925

Ebert was the co-chairman of the SPD and became leader of the German provisional government in 1918. He oversaw both the armistice and the transition to democracy. He then became president of the Weimar Republic in 1920.

### Erich Ludendorff 1865–1937

Ludendorff was a German general who, with Hindenburg, became virtual military dictators of Germany between 1916 and 1918. He attempted to control the constitutional reform in 1918 but failed and was dismissed. Later he supported both the Kapp **Putsch** and the early activities of Hitler.

### Paul von Hindenburg 1847–1934

Hindenburg was recalled from retirement to lead the campaign on the Eastern Front. He was, alongside Ludendorff, virtually military dictator of Germany. Following Germany's defeat he retired, but in 1925 reluctantly agreed to become president. He did not support democracy and hoped for the return of the monarchy. He played a crucial role in politics in the period after 1930, appointing chancellors and eventually agreeing to the appointment of Hitler.

### British naval blockade

During the last two years of the war the British navy successfully blockaded German ports and prevented the German merchant fleet from functioning. This resulted in severe food shortages, with many Germans facing starvation. In the winter of 1916–17, the supply of potatoes ran out and people were left with just turnips. The food shortage meant that civilians were vulnerable to disease and it is possible that some 750,000 Germans died from a combination of hunger and disease.

There were already signs of chaos as German sailors, who had been ordered to sea at the end of October, had **mutinied** following the arrest of their leaders. There was also considerable unrest among workers in the cities. They had established workers' councils or soviets in cities, such as Hamburg, Bremen and Berlin. This was a major concern for Ebert and his colleagues as they did not want a full-scale revolution because of the chaos and civil war it had brought to Russia. Such a development would hinder demobilisation, disrupt the distribution of food and, most importantly, hinder peace talks and possibly destroy the state.

Ebert was able to avoid revolution because he kept the support of the army by not reforming it or creating a new force, despite the defeat. He was also able to maintain the support of industrialists. They negotiated the Central Working Association Agreement with trade unions, which gave workers an eight-hour day and trade union recognition in larger companies. He was also fortunate that the left wing was divided between the KPD, or communists, who wanted a soviet-style revolution, and the Social Democrats, who wanted to establish a parliamentary republic.

Elections were held in January 1919 and the moderate parties of the SPD, the Catholic Centre Party and the German Democratic Party (DDP) formed a **coalition** with a majority. The new government drew up a new **constitution** and began peace talks with the Allied powers. Although a new constitution was drawn up, many viewed it with suspicion. It represented a significant change from the old **autocratic** system of the kaiser to a new democratic government and therefore faced significant opposition. The old military leaders, including Hindenburg, did much to foster the stab-in-the-back myth that politicians such as Ebert had betrayed Germany. Opponents argued that if only Germany had kept fighting it would have won the war and that the leaders of the new Republic had let down the soldiers who had fought so bravely. These issues, and the other problems created by the war, ensured that the early years of the new Republic were particularly difficult.

### Stab-in-the-back myth

The myth that the defeat had been brought about by weakness and defeatism on the home front, which had let the army down, resonated with the hero of German folk myth, Siegfried, who was killed by a treacherous spear thrust at his only vulnerable point – his back, as he would always face his enemies.

### The social consequences

The First World War served only to add to Germany's social problems. The war furthered divisions within German society as the gap in living standards between the rich and poor increased. This situation was made worse by the restrictions that were placed on workers' earnings during the war. While factory owners, particularly those involved in war production, made vast profits, the income of their workers stagnated or declined because of inflation. Shortages grew worse as the British naval blockade, introduced during the war, was tightened intending to put pressure on Germany to fulfil the terms of the Armistice. Divisions between urban and the rural areas emerged as those living in the cities accused those in the countryside of hoarding food and other essentials.

At the same time, and in order to maintain production levels, large numbers of women had been called up to work in factories. Although this helped to maintain income levels, particularly when husbands were away fighting, others argued that it damaged traditional family values and society. The war also resulted in the deaths of large numbers of soldiers. At the end of the war, there were some 600,000 widows and 2 million children without fathers.

## The economic consequences

The economic consequences of the war were severe. War pensions put a strain on the government as pension payments consumed one-third of the budget. The national income had fallen to about one-third of what it had been in 1913. Similarly, industrial production had also fallen so that it was only two-thirds of its pre-war levels. As a result of this Germany was virtually bankrupt and its situation would be further weakened by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which took away large areas of rich industrial land and imposed significant reparations. Millions of ordinary Germans had invested their own, often modest, savings in war bonds, but now found that the face value of the bonds had been eroded by inflation. For example, a 100 mark bond bought in 1914 was worth only the equivalent of 30 marks by 1918, and as a result many Germans lost most or all of their wealth.

## The impact of the Treaty of Versailles

The government had hoped that its military position at the end of the war (see above) would enable it to negotiate a moderate peace so that it would be able to recover its strength and remain a great power. It did not expect to pay reparations, except for the damage in northern France and Belgium, and expected German-speaking areas, such as Austria, to be able to join the new state. They also expected that Germany would be allowed to join the League of Nations. The terms that were enforced on Germany at Versailles were therefore a great shock, particularly as many in Germany were still finding it hard to accept the reality of defeat. However, the government had little choice but to accept the terms as the country was too weak to restart the war. Nevertheless, by accepting the terms, the position of the new government was further weakened.

As a result of the Treaty Germany lost:

- 10 per cent of its land
- 12.5 per cent of its population
- 16 per cent of its coal
- 48 per cent of its iron industry.

When this is added to the loss of all its overseas colonies it had a significant impact on its economy and, according to Germany's new leaders, would affect its ability to pay reparations.

## Land lost

Germany lost land from virtually every border area. In the north, Schleswig was given a **plebiscite**, with its Danish population voting to return to Denmark. In the east, Upper Silesia, which contained coal and steelworks, was given to the new state of Poland, as was West Prussia and Posen. This split Germany in two. Land was also lost to the new state of Czechoslovakia.

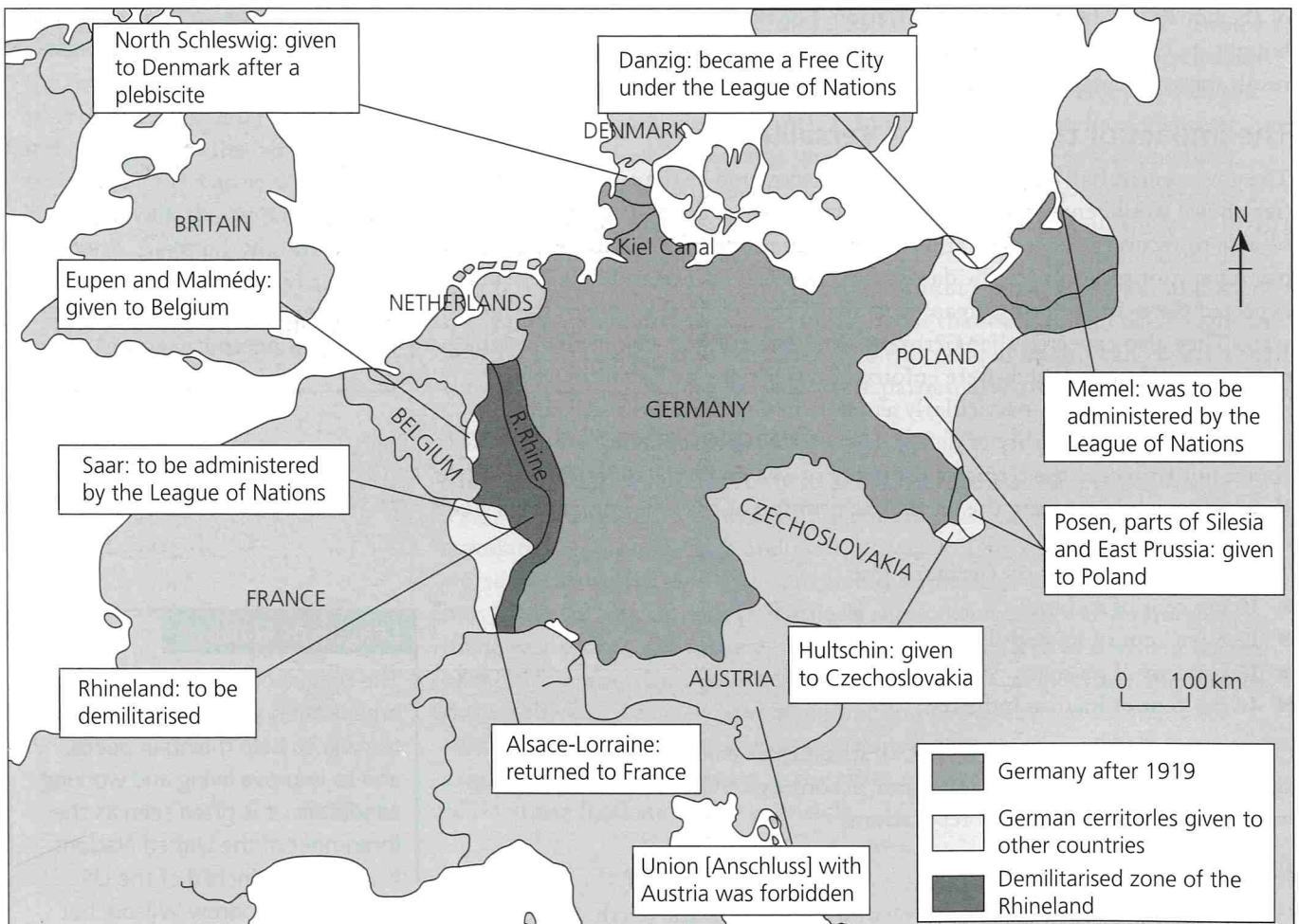
### League of Nations

The League of Nations was an organisation set up at the end of the war to help maintain peace, and to improve living and working conditions; it is often seen as the forerunner of the United Nations. It was the brainchild of the US President, Woodrow Wilson, but the US Senate refused to ratify America joining. The defeated powers were not allowed to join.

Meanwhile, in the south, Germany was forbidden to unite with Austria. In the west, Alsace-Lorraine, which had been taken from France in 1870 in the Franco-Prussian War, was returned, and Eupen and Malmédy were handed to Belgium. The Saar, a further rich industrial area, was placed under the control of the League of Nations.

**Franco-Prussian War**

Prussia and other states in the North German Confederation had defeated France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 and taken Alsace-Lorraine. The conflict had been caused, at least in part, by Prussian expansion and French fears of how this would impact on the balance of power in Europe. France was quickly defeated and the German states proclaimed the German Empire in the Palace of Versailles. The Treaty of Frankfurt in 1871 gave Germany the lands of Alsace and Lorraine.



▲ Territorial changes in Europe after the Treaty of Versailles

## Military losses

The military power of Germany had been a source of great pride, but the Treaty not only destroyed this, but also made it difficult for Germany to defend itself. The army was reduced to 100,000 men and the navy to just 15,000. They were also forbidden to have tanks, aircraft, submarines and poison gas, while the number of ships was also limited. The Rhineland in western Germany was to be permanently **demilitarised** by Germany, while the Allied troops would occupy it for fifteen years.

## Reparations

When the Treaty was drawn up and signed it was not known how much damage had been caused and therefore reparations were not fixed in the Treaty. The Reparations Commission was established to find out how much Germany could pay and fix a sum. The Commission did not report until 1921, setting a figure of £6,000 million to be paid in instalments over many years. Most Germans considered this sum as outrageous and argued the country could not afford it. Recent work of some historians challenges this view.

In order to justify the punishments Germany was also forced to accept that it was guilty of starting the war, with the War Guilt Clause 231 in the peace treaty. This caused huge resentment among Germans who had thought of the war as a just one, brought on by Germany's enemies threatening the security of the nation. Although Germany was given fourteen days to consider the terms, there was little they could do but sign the Treaty as the blockade was still in force and the Allies were poised to invade. Despite this, most Germans disapproved of the government signing it and, as a result, it lost further public support.

## The impact of the Treaty of Versailles

There is little doubt that the treaty had a profound impact on many Germans. Some now lived under foreign rule or in occupied areas. The destruction of the armed forces and loss of empire dented national pride. But, despite the losses, Germany was still powerful, particularly because of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the defeat of Russia. It meant that Germany was still the strongest power in Central Europe. However, most Germans did not view it in that way. It would not have mattered how lenient the Treaty had been, there would still have been opposition, and events in the mid-1920s showed just how quickly it could recover.

### Collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire

Austria-Hungary had been Germany's closest ally since 1879. The multi-national empire ended when Austria was forced to accept defeat. The 8 million strong state of Austria itself, despite being German in language and culture was forbidden to join with Germany. The new states created from the empire, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, had German-speaking minorities. Germany was surrounded by new and often weak neighbours, all of whom fell under its power.

### Activity

- 1 Make a list of the problems the new German government faced. Award each a mark out of six depending upon its seriousness, with six for the most serious.
- 2 Complete a table like the one below to show how serious the problems were.

Problem	Evidence it was serious	Evidence it was not serious	Mark out of 6

- 3 Write a paragraph explaining which factor you think is the most important and why.