

Germany before 1933

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. That evening, the Nazis celebrated their coming to power with a raucous torchlight parade in Berlin. They passed government buildings, their bright torches lighting up swastika banners. They paused before the Chancellory. There, Hitler and the man who had made him chancellor, President Paul von Hindenburg, greeted the jubilant crowds. While some Germans shared the Nazi euphoria at Hitler's appointment, others feared this latest turn in German politics. Few, however, could possibly have imagined the day's true outcome. In just a few short years, Hitler would unleash World War II. Before it was all over, some 55 million individuals would lose their lives, including almost six million Jews. The war would dramatically transform Germany, Europe, and the world.

The day after Hitler's appointment, his propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels, noted in his diary, "Hitler is Reich Chancellor. Just like a fairy-tale." Many observers then and since have wondered just how the "fairy-tale" could have happened. Misperceptions on the matter abound. These include the notions that Hitler was the logical culmination of all German history; that the Nazi rise to power was a result of Germany following a "special path" to modernity; and that the Treaty of Versailles, imposed by the Allies on defeated Germany after World War I, brought the Nazis to power.

In fact, Hitler's appointment as chancellor was the immediate result of a series of intrigues surrounding the eighty-five-year-old President Hindenburg (see Chapter 2). There was nothing inevitable in Hitler's coming to power. As this chapter shows, though, there were long-term developments in German history that favored the rise of Nazism. World War I and its aftermath also helped to make Hitler's assumption of power possible, if hardly certain.

Germany before World War I

Germany could have taken many different paths in the twentieth century. Nazism was only one, and hardly the most likely, German trajectory. Some observers, however, such as Robert Vansittart, a British diplomat before and during World War II, and the historian A.J.P. Taylor, have argued that Nazism was the logical conclusion to all of German history. They believed that Germany was by nature aggressive and militaristic, and given to authoritarian leadership. This national character trait (or flaw) allegedly explained why Germans supported the Protestant reformer Martin Luther and the Prussian King Frederick the Great in earlier centuries, and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and Adolf Hitler in modern times. But one should be wary of any argument that claims that a nation (or a race) has some essential attributes – reasoning in essentialist categories comes perilously close to Nazi thinking. Instead, one should look to political, economic, or ideological reasons for why German history unfolded as it did.

A case in point involves the unification of Germany in the nineteenth century. Before 1870, there were many German-speaking lands but there existed no united Germany. Between 1864 and 1870, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, on behalf of the Prussian king, William I, initiated three wars so as to achieve German unification under Prussian aegis. In January 1871, shortly after the Franco-Prussian War, Germany annexed Alsace-Lorraine and proclaimed the second German Reich (empire) in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles (the first German Reich, or Holy Roman Empire, lasted from 962 to 1806). German unification was very popular among German elites. German liberals, in particular, were willing to sacrifice civic freedoms so as to advance national unification. Not least, unification promised them economic benefit. Their support of Bismarck had nothing to do with an alleged German penchant for authority.

The “special path” thesis

Following German unification, the Iron Chancellor, as Bismarck was dubbed, created political and constitutional arrangements for the new empire. These gave rise to another interpretation of why the Nazis came to power, the “special path” (*Sonderweg*) thesis. According to this argument, Germany never had a bourgeois (middle-class) revolution – such as the French Revolution – to send it down the path toward liberal democracy. In alleged contrast to Britain and France, Germany thus failed to develop either democratic institutions or a liberal political culture.

For the new German Empire, Bismarck created a set of constitutional arrangements. The Reichstag (parliament) was elected by universal male suffrage, but it had very little real power. The chancellor was responsible not to the Reichstag

but to the emperor. The emperor controlled military and foreign affairs. In addition, the Reichstag had little budgetary power since provincial states (such as Prussia) controlled most government monies.

Sonderweg proponents claimed that German leaders pursued aggressive policies because there was a mismatch between Germany's rapid industrialization and its backward political and social order. Bismarck sought ways to unite Germany's divided elites – agrarian estate owners, known as *Junkers*, had very different interests from industrialists – in support of the monarchy. Among other strategies, he pitted Germany's ruling classes against alleged “enemies” who threatened elite interests. He initiated a nasty campaign against Catholics, including against the minority Polish Catholic population. He also hounded the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the nascent socialist party, which supported political liberalization and the more equitable distribution of economic goods. The Iron Chancellor bequeathed a legacy of intolerant polarization to German politics.

In 1888, William II came to power and, soon thereafter, dismissed Bismarck. William ruled a society undergoing rapid industrialization. Germans poured into urban areas in search of factory or mining work. Conservatives decried the social ills – disease, poverty, immorality, urban crowding, and personal alienation – that accompanied modernization. Workers, in turn, were eager to better their lot; they voted for the SPD in the hope of securing a share of political power. William faced a dilemma. In an era of mass politics, he wished to legitimize his rule. But he was unwilling to limit his autocratic powers by democratizing the political system. Instead, he fastened on an aggressive foreign policy to win popularity from both German elites and workers. As we shall see, this proved disastrous.

Today, the *Sonderweg* thesis has been largely discredited. As its most prominent critics, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, argue, the western path from which Germany supposedly departed was only a perceived norm, not reality. Britain and France were less democratic polities than *Sonderweg* enthusiasts claimed. The German middle classes also asserted their political influence in arenas other than Reichstag politics. The *Sonderweg* thesis nonetheless retains some value. William II *did* pursue an aggressive foreign policy, rather than constitutional reform, to legitimize his monarchy. This led to World War I and, indirectly, to Hitler. And Germans *did* have little experience with democracy – a deficit that would have pernicious consequences.

Nationalism

Nineteenth-century Europe saw the rise of nationalism, scientific racism, and antisemitism. Germany was hardly unique in this regard. Take nationalism. Many liberals and conservatives across Europe came to share a set of beliefs about the “nation.” They argued that one's supreme loyalty should be to the nation (rather

than to town, region, class, or religion). To them, the nation was an organic entity with its own unique characteristics. At the same time, nationalists believed that a nation's members should be united in a nation-state, that nations needed overseas colonies to prosper, and that nations were locked in a zero-sum struggle in which one nation's gain was another's loss.

German nationalists drew on romantic myths of past German heroism and sacrifice. They harked back to the saga of Frederick Barbarossa, the crusading medieval Holy Roman Emperor who united warring Germanic factions and established peace in the German lands. Barbarossa was said to be sleeping in a mountain awaiting the rebirth of German glory. German nationalists also linked Germanness to the notion of *Volk* (variously translated as "nation," "people," or "race"). They championed a "blood-and-soil" (*Blut und Boden*) ideology: the notion that peasants ("blood") who farmed the countryside ("soil") were the true repository of traditional German values and authentic folk culture. In addition, some nationalists claimed a superior German "essence" that was rooted in the cosmic nature of the German forest landscape. Dark, mysterious, and profound, the forest was the alleged wellspring of German creativity, depth of feeling, and unity with other members of the *Volk*. German nationalists also believed that the German people cultivated profound inner values such as spirituality, idealism, and heroism. (The French, by contrast, supposedly fostered superficial values such as materialism and civilization.)

German nationalism had a mystical tone, but its many advocates worked to achieve concrete goals. Initially, they urged a nation-state. After unification, they demanded overseas colonies. But Germany entered the colonial race only late, in 1884, after other powers had laid claim to much of the globe. Still, Germany soon controlled some Pacific islands, Jiaozhou Bay in China, and the Cameroons, Togoland, German South West Africa (now Namibia), and German East Africa (now Tanzania) in Africa. In the 1890s, dissatisfied with what they saw as their puny empire, many Germans joined ultranationalist pressure groups that clamored for Germany to seek "its place in the sun." These groups included the Colonial League, the Navy League, the Pan-German League, and the Eastern Marches Society (aimed at expunging Polish influence in Germany's eastern provinces).

In response to this ultranationalist pressure, William pursued an ill-conceived *Weltpolitik* (world policy). This aggressive foreign policy had three major aims: parity with Britain as a world power, greater German influence in Eastern Europe, and additional overseas colonies. From 1897 onward, Germany spent enormous sums to build a "deterrent fleet" that would challenge British hegemony on the world's seas. But this only led Britain to seek new alliances with France and Russia. Meanwhile, attempts to enhance German influence in Eastern Europe alienated two sometime allies, the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Additional overseas colonies were only possible at other powers' expense. Germany's aggressive policies made the other great powers wary.

German imperial practice abroad generally differed little from that of the other great powers. Everywhere, colonial rule was cruel and unjust. Native uprisings were common. Between 1904 and 1907, however, the German military engaged in an unprecedented act of European colonial repression. To suppress a native uprising by the Herero in South West Africa, the German military commander, General Lothar von Trotha, unleashed genocide. Roughly 66–75% of the Herero people – some 40,000–60,000 individuals – perished. The historian Isabel Hull has argued that this genocide was another baleful consequence of German constitutional arrangements. Unlike more democratic countries such as Britain, there was no civilian oversight to check military excesses. Other historians, noting continuities in German racial views, military methods, and administrative personnel, explicitly link this genocide to the Holocaust forty years later.

Scientific racism

In the nineteenth century, racism joined nationalism as an integral element of European culture. In the 1850s, Arthur Comte de Gobineau published an *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*. According to Gobineau, “racial vitality” was the prime mover of history. That “racial vitality” was now found in an “Aryan” master race. “Aryan” referred to the ancient Indo-European culture from which European civilization had supposedly sprung. Gobineau believed that Europe’s global hegemony resulted from the superior characteristics of the “Aryan” race. But he worried about “Aryans” engaging in miscegenation, or racial intermixing, which he saw as the demise of all great races.

Gobineau insisted that his racial history was a science. Nineteenth-century contemporaries hailed the power of science; they believed that science could explain and even perfect human nature and the social order. Today, we recognize that science (and pseudo-science) is all too often placed in the service of ideology. Scientific notions of racial superiority rationalized European rule over native populations. Science also underlay Social Darwinism. In 1859, Charles Darwin outlined his theory of evolution based on natural selection in his *On the Origin of Species*. Others took his ideas and applied them to the social world. Social Darwinism held that individuals, as well as nations or races, were engaged in an evolutionary struggle of the “survival of the fittest.” For nations to survive, they needed virile populations, dynamic economies, and ever-growing territories.

Social Darwinism was closely linked to eugenics, or what the Germans called “racial hygiene.” Eugenics aims to improve a nation’s racial stock through selective breeding. In Germany, the rapid growth of the working classes generated fears that this population, living and working in squalid conditions, would sap the racial health of the nation. Advocates of racial hygiene argued that the strong should be encouraged to procreate and the weak prevented from doing so. Such

notions were not confined to Germany. The US state of Indiana passed the first compulsory sterilization law in 1907. California and Washington followed two years later. While some Germans championed similar legislation, there was no sterilization law in Germany until the Nazis came to power.

Antisemitism

Besides nationalism and scientific racism, antisemitism was a third element of nineteenth-century thought that eventually flowed into Nazi ideology. In pre-modern times, Christian prejudice against Jews was rooted in religion. Many Christians blamed Jews for Christ's martyrdom. Many also believed that Jews murdered Christian children for ritual purposes. Christians long subjected Jews to discrimination. They also carried out pogroms against them. Yet this Christian hatred of Jews was directed at Jews as non-Christians. If Jews stopped being Jews – that is, if they were baptized, converted, or assimilated – Christians left former Jews, or those of Jewish origin, alone.

In the late nineteenth century, antisemitism was transformed: it became racialized. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, for example, the son-in-law of Richard Wagner, the antisemitic composer, insisted that Jews were a separate and identifiable race. He and others asserted that the “Jew” was the very antithesis of the “German.” Germans, they insisted, were spiritual, idealistic, heroic, and productive, while Jews were materialistic, immoral, selfish, and cunning. Chamberlain claimed that Germans and Jews were locked in a mortal struggle in which Jews aimed to undermine the German race. For racial antisemites, Jews were always Jews; they could never escape their Jewish origins.

In the 1870s, a German, Wilhelm Marr, coined the term “anti-Semitism.” (Today, when writing about antisemitism, many historians avoid the hyphenated term since its use suggests that “Semitism” existed and was opposed by antisemites. No one, however, ever used the term “Semitism” to suggest anything but hatred of Jews. In effect, using the hyphenated term adopts the language of antisemites.)

There is little evidence that German antisemitism was more virulent or widespread than its variants elsewhere. In the 1890s, France was rocked by the Dreyfus Affair when a Jewish officer, Dreyfus, was wrongly convicted of traitorous activity on behalf of Germany. In Austria, the antisemitic demagogue Karl Lueger was the popularly elected mayor of Vienna (at the time when Hitler moved to that city). In Russia, tsarist officials blamed a small but violent revolutionary movement on the Jews. Moreover, after the 1905 Revolution, that country saw a wave of antisemitic pogroms. Everywhere, antisemites saw Jews – whether as plutocrats or revolutionaries – as the evil force lurking behind modernity and its attendant upheavals.

In Germany, antisemitism and *völkisch* nationalism merged. Antisemitic *völkisch* nationalists believed that both liberalism and socialism were divisive Jewish

ideologies that were tearing the nation apart. They crusaded against liberalism – laissez-faire capitalism, parliamentary democracy, and civic equality – and the individualism it spawned. They violently opposed socialism, linking it to equality, pacifism, and internationalism. To counter these ills, they posited a brave new world in which pure Germans would subordinate their personal strivings to a united *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) that embodied true German values. Before World War I, however, antisemitic *völkisch* nationalism was a marginal affair. Only war and the trauma of defeat allowed its enthusiasts to secure more widespread support.

World War I

Germany enters the war

In 1914, Germany was a strong country. Its population had surpassed that of Britain, growing from 41 to 67.7 million between 1871 and 1914. Germany's merchant marine was the second largest (after Britain's) in the world. Germany was Europe's leading industrial power. It outpaced Britain in iron and steel production and was only slightly behind in coal production. Germany had advanced electrical, chemical, and pharmaceutical industries. The label "Made in Germany" symbolized product quality and reliability. Germany's universities were the envy of the world. The country was home to many leading scientists and inventors. Art and culture flourished. To those who desired a more democratic system, German politics seemed to have some evolutionary potential: Catholics and workers maintained a strong oppositionalist press and were well represented in the Reichstag. Indeed, by 1912 the SPD was the largest parliamentary faction, representing roughly one-third of the electorate.

Germans had every reason to feel confident about their nation's future. But they didn't. Many Germans were frustrated by their country's inability to assert itself on the world stage. William's *Weltpolitik* had brought little success but much foreign enmity. After Germany unsuccessfully tried to assert its interests in Morocco in 1905 and 1911, and in the Balkans in 1912–1913, it was isolated diplomatically. Only Austria-Hungary, an empire crumbling under the weight of nationalist tensions, was a clear ally. Many Germans believed that they were encircled by enemies. A defensive war, they thought, would allow them to break out of their continental isolation.

On June 28, 1914, a Serb nationalist assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, during a royal visit to Sarajevo. The Austrians (wrongly) believed that the Serbian government was involved in the assassination. Sounding out Berlin, they received William's famous "blank check" – that Germany would support Austria-Hungary whatever

its choice of action. Several weeks later, Austria issued a set of demands to Serbia. Since fulfilling all of the demands would have violated its sovereignty, Serbia refused to accept the Austrian ultimatum. Three days later, on July 28, Austria declared war on Serbia. At that point, a series of alliance commitments sprang into action. Russia mobilized its troops to aid Serbia, and France, following Franco-Russian treaty obligations, followed suit. On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia and began a speedy mobilization to attack France. Three days later, German troops, en route to France, invaded neutral Belgium. Britain, in defense of Belgium, declared war on Germany. Germany and Austria, the Central Powers, were now ranged against Britain, France, and Russia, the Entente Powers.

The course of the war

Initially, Europeans welcomed war. War signaled release. Many Europeans were eager for a break from routine. In what became known as the “spirit of 1914,” the European peoples rallied to their countries’ colors. In Germany, William II announced a *Burgfrieden* (social peace) – a call for national unity and an end to all domestic conflict. The vast majority of Germans, convinced that their country was fighting a just, defensive war, supported the emperor. Even Social Democrats voted for government-requested war credits. They hoped that the emperor would reward their patriotism with democratic reforms. But the course of the war shattered these illusions. All too soon, the “spirit of 1914” gave way to disenchantment, the *Burgfrieden* to partisan division.

The German war plan, the Schlieffen Plan, was to prevent Germany from having to fight a two-front war. It presumed that Germany could hurriedly defeat France and then rush its troops eastwards to meet oncoming Russian armies. But the plan was flawed. Already in September 1914, the Germans, unable to defeat the French, were bogged down along the Marne river. On the western front, trench warfare – and military stalemate – ensued. A breakthrough proved elusive. Military commanders sent millions of soldiers to their deaths in battles that achieved no gains. In 1916, for example, the Germans attempted an all-out offensive against the French fortress system at Verdun. Despite casualties of more than 800,000 men (on both sides), the Germans were unable to break through the French lines. Verdun symbolized the tragedy of World War I. Soldiers were exposed to new and deadly weaponry such as barbed wire, poison gas, and mounted machine guns. Men died like flies – for no meaningful purpose.

While the ghastly experience of the western front has received much popular attention, the war on the eastern front deserves more. In August 1914, the Germans won an important victory when Generals Paul von Hindenburg and his chief of staff, Erich Ludendorff, halted Russian invasion forces in the Battle of Tannenberg. Hindenburg and Ludendorff became instant German heroes.

Germany before 1933

After dramatic advances in 1915, the Germans occupied lands that today encompass Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. To German occupiers, the east initially represented limitless possibilities of expansion and domination. Ludendorff, for example, established *Ober Ost*, a brutal military occupation regime determined to bring order and culture to northeastern areas that the Germans deemed chaotic, diseased, and barbarian. Difficulties during the war and defeat in 1918, however, dashed German hopes in the east. The Nazis would later build on negative German views of eastern populations that arose, in part, out of this wartime experience.

World War I was a “total war.” All of the belligerents’ resources, civilian and military, were mobilized for the war effort. In 1916, Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over the German High Command. They soon instituted a virtual military dictatorship. Among other measures, they introduced the Hindenburg Program, a plan to increase armament output. This demanded great efforts from the civilian population. Many women now took paid jobs in war industries or worked in or ran welfare-service agencies previously led by men. Meanwhile, many war veterans, maimed or otherwise traumatized, could not fulfill their role as family providers. “Total war” involved a transformation in gender relations.

As the war dragged on, many Germans resented what they saw as the unequal shouldering of wartime burdens. They believed that industrialists (in their imaginations, often Jews) earned soaring war profits while soldiers sacrificed their lives and ordinary civilians endured cold, hunger, and the loss of loved ones. Morale soon deteriorated. In opposition to SPD and union leaders, more radical socialists organized strikes intended to undermine the German war effort. (These wartime divisions soon led to a split between the SPD and what became the communists – a rift that proved significant in the Nazi rise to power.) By 1917, however, even moderate German politicians were advocating an immediate end to the war. Yet more strident German nationalists wished to continue. To them, only territorial acquisitions could justify German sacrifices and, not least, avert political and social revolution.

German defeat

Because the Central Powers controlled smaller quantities of the world’s resources, they were at a distinct disadvantage in what became a war of attrition. Britain also imposed a naval blockade that prevented Germany from importing many goods. In response, the Germans initiated unrestricted submarine warfare. This, however, led the United States to declare war on the Central Powers in 1917. The Entente Powers, with America’s vast resources of men and matériel now on their side, had the decisive edge. Still, the Germans remained optimistic. Russia, rocked by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, withdrew from the war. In March 1918, the Central Powers imposed a punitive peace, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk,

on Russia. The Bolsheviks were forced to cede 600,000 square miles – home to 50 million people and much of Russia's industrial potential and supply of natural resources.

Given this triumph in the east, the German population had little inkling that their own defeat was imminent. That same month, Germany began its final offensive. Initially successful, it soon stalled for lack of war matériel and reserve troops. By summer, the Allies had begun to pierce the German lines and, by early fall, the German military situation was hopeless. On September 29, recognizing the inevitable, Hindenburg and Ludendorff advised William to begin armistice negotiations.

Revolution

Hindenburg and Ludendorff believed that a more democratic government would bring more favorable armistice terms from the Allies – and especially from American President Woodrow Wilson (who detested the authoritarianism and militarism of imperial Germany). In October 1918, William thus acquiesced to making Germany a constitutional monarchy. The new chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, was responsible to the Reichstag, not to the emperor. Meanwhile, though, Hindenburg and Ludendorff refused culpability for military defeat. They insisted that the leaders of the reformist parties in the Reichstag conduct armistice negotiations. By taking responsibility for the negotiations, civilian leaders would take responsibility for Germany's defeat. By linking Reichstag leaders with national defeat, the German High Command delegitimized parliamentary rule right from the start.

Armistice negotiations proved slow going. In early November, German naval troops stationed in the Baltic mutinied. Simultaneously, imminent defeat led to antigovernment protests in the streets of many German cities. Soon, only William's abdication would satisfy many Germans and, most important, Wilson. On November 9, the chancellor and other advisors convinced William to relinquish his throne. Social Democrats, joined by other moderate politicians, proclaimed a revolution. They declared Germany a republic, a parliamentary democracy. Two days later, Matthias Erzberger, a Center politician, signed the armistice agreement on behalf of the new republic. Because of unfavorable armistice terms, the Nazis would soon vilify the new republic's leaders as "November criminals." For them, November 9 marked a day of infamy to be avenged (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 4).

The armistice presaged the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles (see below). Since Germany had become a republic, many citizens assumed that the Allies would not impose tough conditions. They were wrong. At the same time, most Germans did not realize the extent of German military defeat. After all, not a battle of the war was fought on an inch of German soil. Germany had just

triumphed on the eastern front. Many Germans still thought of their country as a strong power. The shock of defeat gave rise to a powerful “Stab-in-the-Back” legend. Assiduously propagated by Ludendorff, it held that the German army had not been conquered in the field but rather “stabbed in the back” by the treachery of Jews and socialists at home.

The Stab-in-the-Back legend both reflected and gave rise to growing anti-semitism. During the war, many Germans sought a scapegoat to explain their difficulties. Antisemitic rumors circulated that Jews were war profiteers at home and soldiers shirking combat assignments at the front. In 1916, the German High Command, submitting to antisemitic pressure, carried out a census of all Jewish soldiers. This census refuted the rumors, but military leaders refused to publish the results. At the same time, at war’s end, a number of prominent revolutionaries were Jews, fueling antisemitic charges that Jews, as communists and socialists, were bent on destroying the nation. Still, while a low-grade antisemitism was ubiquitous, it was hardly *the* dominant or defining social value. Germans were much more exercised by the loss of national prestige, symbolized by the Treaty of Versailles.

The Treaty of Versailles

On June 28, 1919, Germany signed the humiliating Treaty of Versailles. This peace was dictated. The Germans were not party to the treaty negotiations. Germany lost 13% of its territory and 10% of its population. It gave up all of its overseas colonies. Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France. Germany ceded many of its eastern areas to the new Polish state. Poland demanded access to the Baltic Sea, forcing Germany to give up a “Corridor,” a large strip of territory that separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. The German port city of Danzig (today Gdańsk) was placed under permanent League of Nations mandate. The Saar area, an industrial region bordering on France, was subject to League mandate for fifteen years. Germany and Austria were not permitted to join together in union.

The treaty made it impossible for Germany to attack or defend itself from stronger neighbors. The army was reduced to just 100,000 men, with 4,000 officers. Germany lost much of its navy and was not permitted submarines, tanks, or airplanes. The west bank of the Rhine, and a strip of territory approximately thirty miles to the east, was demilitarized. On the left bank of the Rhine, the Allies were allowed occupation troops for fifteen years, with Germany paying the costs of occupation. Adding insult to injury, the French used black troops mustered from their colonies as occupation soldiers. Some 14,000–25,000 black soldiers (out of roughly 200,000) were deployed. Many Germans believed that the French, by placing blacks in positions of authority, were threatening European civilization. In addition, to the horror of their compatriots, some



Map 1.1 Germany after World War I.

German women had relationships with black soldiers. The resulting offspring, known as the “Rhineland bastards,” suffered a cruel fate under the Nazis (see Chapter 4).

The Treaty of Versailles was intended to hamper Germany’s economic recovery. Many Germans believed that it amounted to economic enslavement. Article 231, the famous “war-guilt clause,” held Germany and its allies legally responsible for the material damages caused by the war. These damages, the Allies argued, included not only the physical ruin of French infrastructure but also pensions paid by Allied governments to their disabled soldiers and war widows. In 1921, an Inter-Allied Reparations Committee determined the reparations bill: 132 billion gold marks (\$442 billion in 2011 US dollars).

Ever since 1914, historians have passionately debated the “war-guilt” issue. There is little doubt that William II was eager for a victory abroad so as to shore

up his monarchy at home. Rather than diffusing the crisis, he issued the “blank check,” thereby escalating the conflict. Still, Germany alone was not responsible for the outbreak of war. All of the European powers bear some measure of blame; none tried to halt the seemingly inexorable push to war. Historians today generally concur that the treaty was unjustly punitive, especially since Germany was not the lone aggressor.

At the same time, many observers have argued that the Treaty of Versailles led directly to the Nazi assumption of power. Germans, they argue, turned to Hitler to restore their national honor and to rescue their economy, burdened with crushing reparations payments. In this reading of history, the Allies bear responsibility for Hitler and World War II. This is wrong, however. Had the Great Depression not intervened, Germans most likely would have lived down the treaty. Already in the 1920s, Germany was finding ways to mitigate the treaty’s burdens. The military, for example, embedded former air-unit officers into the new officer corps so as to maintain expertise in aerial warfare. Germany also negotiated security guarantees with its western neighbors and the withdrawal of most occupation troops (see below). Moreover, the reparations payments were not beyond what Germany could reasonably pay. *Not* the Treaty of Versailles, but rather the Great Depression, led directly to the Nazi assumption of power. Still, Germans bitterly resented the Versailles peace, and Hitler *did* exploit anti-treaty feeling to win electoral support.

The legacy of war and defeat

Absent World War I, it is hard to imagine Hitler’s ascendance. Most important, since parliamentary rule was associated with the Versailles peace, defeat soured many Germans on democracy. Subsequent events, described below, only confirmed many Germans’ disdain for democracy. War and defeat bred political attitudes and moral sensibilities that later resonated with Nazism. These included the growth of state intervention, the polarization of society, the glorification of militarism and violence, and the cheapening of life.

To an unprecedented degree, the state intervened in the lives of its citizens during and after World War I. It conscripted soldiers, enlisted factory workers, and deported undesirable persons. It categorized the population so as to distribute ration cards, issue passports, and determine war-related pensions. The growth of state expertise in the classification of individuals later aided Nazi projects that depended on the cataloging of whole populations – including Jews, Roma (Gypsies), Poles, and homosexuals, along with those “unfit” to reproduce or “unworthy of living” (see Chapter 4, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7).

Veterans often had enormous difficulties reintegrating into civilian life. What was then called “shell shock,” now posttraumatic stress disorder, afflicted millions of soldiers. Alienated from mainstream society, former soldiers sought community with fellow veterans. While some joined together to champion pacifism,

most turned to right-wing groups. Some hardened veterans reveled in vigilante groups, known as the Free Corps (see below and Chapter 2). Many former soldiers flocked to right-wing veterans' associations, especially the five-million-strong Stahlhelm (Steel Helmet).

Despite defeat, militarism remained a much-prized value. Indeed, even politics became militarized. A "friend-foe" mentality predominated. Every major political party had a paramilitary force. Uniformed political combatants battled for control of street corners or neighborhood pubs. Assassination was quite common. This militarization of politics, however, undermined the democratic order. Compromise and tolerance, so at odds with military culture, are essential for the smooth functioning of democracy.

The war fostered a cult of violence. Violence was seen as transformative; war allegedly created a New Man. Born in struggle, nurtured in masculine comradeship, and steeled in grizzly battle, the New Man could solve the challenges of the modern age. Violence, it was thought, would clear the way for a better future. The war had already swept away hitherto presumed certainties such as empire, political order, and gender relations. In the quest for a utopian society, many believed, all else could be upended, too.

Almost two million German soldiers died in World War I. Many Germans became callous to the loss of human life. In turn, the cheapening of life allowed perverse notions to gain currency. Some Germans, and not least future Nazis, came to believe that murder could improve society. By killing off undesirable groups, so this thinking went, the German people would be strengthened.

The spread of these and related values was hardly unique to Germany. Many were important elements of fascism, a movement closely associated with the Italian leader, Benito Mussolini. Fascism took its name from the ancient Roman *fascis*, a bundle of wooden rods that symbolized the magistrate's power, as well as strength in unity. The fascist movement emphasized devotion to a supreme, heroic leader; national unity; an activist state; and collective rejuvenation through political violence, militarism, and imperialism. Fascism was also defined by what it opposed: it was anti-individual, antiliberal, and anticommunist. (Fascism and Nazism shared many parallels, but racism and antisemitism were much more central to Nazism than Italian fascism.) Mussolini and his fascist movement came to power in Italy in 1922. Meanwhile, Germany underwent an experiment in democracy, the Weimar Republic.

The Weimar Republic

In the new republic, the first elections – to a National Assembly – took place in January 1919. They resulted in a decisive victory for parties committed to republicanism. Some 76% of the electorate voted for the SPD, the Catholic Center

Party, or the left-liberal German Democratic Party (DDP). To avoid the revolutionary chaos of Berlin, the elected National Assembly met in the city of Weimar – thus giving the republic its unofficial but ubiquitous name. In July, the assembly adopted a constitution. The Weimar Constitution foresaw a president as head of state, a chancellor as head of government, and a democratically elected Reichstag. While the president appointed the chancellor, the chancellor had to have the support of a Reichstag majority. Although the constitution was widely praised for its democratic attributes, some of its features eventually facilitated the Nazi rise to power (see Chapter 2).

Despite this auspicious beginning, many historians have argued that the new republic was doomed to fail. Too many political and economic forces, so this argument goes, were arrayed against it. In fact, however, the new regime's fate was open ended. The history of the Weimar Republic is generally divided into three parts. The first years, 1918–1923, were years of inflation and political upheaval. The middle period, 1924–1929, saw a degree of political and economic stability. The last stage of the republic, 1929–1933, was characterized by depression and presidential dictatorship. This was when Hitler and the Nazi movement enjoyed tremendous successes, and is described in Chapter 2.

Weimar politics, 1918–1923

Many Germans were soon dissatisfied with the Weimar Republic. In November 1918, for example, German employers had feared the revolutionary potential of eight million veterans and other disgruntled citizens. They had thus concluded an agreement with trade unionists, the Stinnes–Legien Agreement. This pact prevented the nationalization of industry and protected private property. But it also granted labor an eight-hour work day and worker participation in some management decisions. Employers soon rued these concessions and blamed the republic for an industrial order that favored workers.

Similarly, in November 1918 the cochairman of the provisional government, the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert, had feared further revolutionary upheaval. He now made a pact with General Wilhelm Groener, second-in-command of the army: the army would aid the republic in maintaining law and order, but the government would respect the military's autonomy. The Ebert–Groener and Stinnes–Legien agreements protected two pillars of the old imperial elite, industrialists and officers, in the new republic. At the same time, the new government refused to purge personnel in other leading institutions of society, such as the bureaucracies, the universities, or the churches. As a result, antidemocratic Wilhelmine elites maintained their positions of power and, as we shall see, used them to undermine the new republic.

The Ebert–Groener Pact was soon tested. In January 1919, the Spartacist Uprising, a communist revolt in Berlin, was suppressed by the Reichswehr (as the

army was now called). In addition, members of a Free Corps unit, one of many vigilante armed groups supported by the regular army, brutally murdered Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the two most important communist leaders. The fact that Social Democrats – fellow socialists – had repressed a communist uprising seemed a betrayal to the radical left. The government, along with the army, went on to suppress further leftist uprisings in May 1919, March 1920, March 1921, and October 1923. While the SPD supported the Weimar Republic, communists – soon organized into the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) – took inspiration from the Bolshevik Revolution in the Soviet Union and hoped to institute a communist regime in Germany. The KPD viewed the Weimar Republic as part and parcel of the capitalist system of oppression. These divisions eventually prevented the left from joining together to counter the Nazi threat.

While the army enthusiastically suppressed left-wing revolts, it was reluctant to put down right-wing coup attempts. In March 1920, Walther von Lüttwitz, the commander of the Berlin army district, and Wolfgang Kapp, a right-wing politician, staged a coup. Free Corps units seized control of Berlin. Hans von Seeckt, commander in chief of the Reichswehr, refused to allow army troops to suppress the insurgency. The republic was saved only because workers called a general strike to thwart the coup. The Kapp Putsch threw into relief the army's limited loyalty to the republic. Army officers begrudged support for a regime that had implemented the Versailles Treaty's restrictions on troop numbers, equipment, and operations.

At the beginning of 1923, the German government failed to deliver reparations in the form of wood and coal to the Allies. The policy of nonfulfillment was intended to show that Germany could not pay reparations and thus should be excused from future payments. Unpersuaded, France and Belgium occupied the industrial Ruhr area. In turn, the German government urged a policy of "passive resistance." It encouraged civil servants to go on strike but continued to pay them. To finance this, the government simply printed money. Neither gold reserves nor anything else backed the currency. Galloping hyperinflation ensued. One US dollar was soon worth an incredible 4.2 trillion – 4,200,000,000,000,000 – German marks. Since wages depreciated on an hourly basis, employees were paid two or three times a day. Germans carted around wheelbarrows of paper money to buy a bottle of milk or a loaf of bread.

The Great Inflation had its origins in the financing of World War I. At that time, the emperor's government had been reluctant to raise taxes to pay for the war. Instead, it issued war bonds. After the war, moderate inflation benefited the Weimar government. It lowered the costs of repaying war bonds. It also financed a measure of social stability. Employers passed on their higher labor costs by increasing the price of goods. Workers could keep up because they earned higher wages. Inflation also helped individuals paying off mortgages or other debts. The Great Inflation, however, was another matter. It was an economic catastrophe. Civil servants and other individuals living on fixed incomes were unable to pay

their daily expenses. Those with savings lost all of their monetary assets, often a lifetime of work. Hyperinflation undermined all certainties. Fairness and equity seemed out of reach.

In 1923, the Weimar Republic was on the brink of collapse. Many Germans questioned democracy, and rightly so. Democracy seemed to breed instability; there were ten different cabinets between January 1919 and May 1924. With so many uprisings and attempted coups, the republic seemed unable to uphold law and order. In addition, democracy had brought only humiliation and loss to many Germans – from right-wing nationalists to left-wing radicals. Now, however, the republic got a reprieve. In August 1923, Gustav Stresemann, a pragmatic politician, became chancellor. On November 15, he ended the Great Inflation by introducing a new currency, soon called the *Reichsmark*, which was linked to the gold standard in 1924.

Weimar culture

To the dismay of many future Nazis, the Weimar Republic saw a many-sided cultural ferment. The dizzying crisis atmosphere spawned an efflorescent creativity. Most famously, there was an outpouring of “Weimar culture,” modernist experimentation in the arts. Some avant-garde artists espoused Dada, an “anti-art” movement that questioned traditional aesthetics. Expressionist artists reveled in depicting subjective experience, often psychological or other anguish. German film directors made some of the world’s greatest silent movies, including *Metropolis* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. German architects founded the Bauhaus, a movement emphasizing streamlined functionality that remains influential even today.

Yet, while some Germans were drawn to the avant-garde, many more enjoyed mass commercial entertainment. Germans, and especially urban Germans, enjoyed new, modern pleasures. They attended lowbrow theater productions, feel-good films, and raucous cabaret and variety shows. They cheered sports teams in large, new stadiums. Eschewing traditional notions of modesty, they went sunbathing at nearby lakes or seashores. They flocked to dance halls and penny arcades, and shopped in big, bright department stores. They filled their apartments with mass-produced goods. They read cheap paperbacks and illustrated magazines, and listened to broadcasts on a new media, radio.

Weimar Germany also saw a sexual revolution. Social workers insisted on the importance of satisfying sex lives. A vibrant gay scene emerged, even though homosexual acts remained a criminal offense. Birth control became more accessible. The Weimar Republic was also famous for the “New Woman.” She was slender and athletic, single and employed. She bobbed her hair, wore seductive clothing, and brandished a cigarette holder. By testing the limits, she seemed Weimar incarnate. Despite her media dominance, however, the “New Woman” was a statistical rarity.

For many liberal and leftist Germans, these cultural trends pointed to the liberating potential of the Weimar Republic. For cultural conservatives, however, these developments rankled. The new modernist artworks exposed the sordid rather than celebrated the beautiful. The new sexuality was morally repugnant. Mass production threatened artisanal crafts. Mass entertainment played to base human instincts. To conservative critics, these trends symbolized all that was wrong with the new republic. As we shall see, the Nazis picked up and echoed many of these criticisms.

Weimar politics, 1924–1929

After the stabilization of the economy in late 1923, the Weimar Republic enjoyed a measure of prosperity. Industry financed expansion through short-term American loans. Still, even though economic conditions were much better than during the Great Inflation, economic performance remained sluggish. Germans blamed reparations for poor economic performance, but historians today argue that the Weimar economy suffered from structural weaknesses. Labor costs skyrocketed, but worker productivity barely grew. This was partly because the economy was organized in cartels that fixed prices, marketing, and production and thus undermined free enterprise. In the absence of competition, there was little incentive for German companies to innovate. From 1926 onward, there was also a worldwide agrarian depression that hurt German farmers.

In the mid-1920s, foreign relations allowed some optimism about Germany's situation. Stresemann, now Germany's foreign minister, fulfilled German treaty obligations in the hope that this would bring about revision of the Versailles Treaty. Proving his strategy, France soon withdrew many troops from the Ruhr. The 1924 Dawes Plan aimed to resolve the reparations issue by scaling back the annual level of payments. In 1925, Germany and the Allies signed the Treaty of Locarno. All parties agreed to recognize and guarantee Germany's current western borders (but not its eastern borders). Germany shed its status as a pariah nation. In 1926, it joined the League of Nations, and was even awarded a permanent seat on its Council of Ten. In 1928, it participated in the Olympics for the first time since the outbreak of war.

During these middle years of the republic, many Germans came to be *Vernunftrepublikaner* (pragmatic republicans) – that is, they made their peace with democracy. They could point to some Weimar successes. Local governments improved municipal services, built ambitious housing projects, and funded clinics and other welfare services. Many other Germans, however, remained die-hard opponents of parliamentary rule. To them democracy was a dirty word, imposed on Germany by the SPD and foreign powers. Right-wing parties were relentless in their agitation for authoritarian government and overturning the Versailles Treaty.

Could the republic have survived? The jury remains out. As more Germans lived democracy, they might have come to see its benefits (as happened in West Germany after World War II). But the odds were against this. In the interwar years, democracy seemed unable to solve the great problems of the day. While Britain, France, and Czechoslovakia remained democracies, many other European countries turned to fascism or other forms of authoritarianism. Still, absent the Great Depression, it is possible to imagine a stable Weimar democracy. After the onset of the 1929 Depression (see Chapter 2), this becomes impossible. The republic could draw on only limited reserves of legitimacy.

But even then, Hitler and the Nazis were not inevitable. Developments discussed in this chapter – *völkisch* nationalism, the democratic deficit, the trauma of war and defeat, and the upheaval of the Weimar years – did not necessarily lead to Nazism. They were, however, its indispensable preconditions. Just how, then, did Hitler and the Nazis actually come to power in Germany?

Citations for Quotations

Page	Source
1	“Hitler is Reich Chancellor...” Quoted in Ian Kershaw, <i>Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris</i> (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 423.
4	“its place in the sun.” Quoted in Richard J. Evans, <i>The Coming of the Third Reich</i> (London: Penguin, 2003), 18.

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