

3 THE INTERWAR WORLD

The Rise of Nazism

Germany emerged from World War I divided and defeated. The Germans were unsure about what direction their government and their society should take. At first they created a fragile democracy, but this system could not survive the ravaging effects of the postwar inflation and of the Great Depression. Eventually, Germany succumbed to dictatorship.

Most Germans were bitter about the Versailles treaty after World War I. They believed that they had been unjustly forced to take all of the blame for the conflict. Throughout the interwar period, the Germans tried to prove that they, too, had been victims of the war.

Many Germans had trouble accepting their defeat, especially since no Allied troops had ever entered German soil. The fact that the peace treaty was signed by civilians disturbed some Germans. They believed that the army could have won, but that it had been “stabbed in the back” by civilian authorities.

Despite those feelings of resentment, the Germans set about changing their country into a democratic republic after the war. A new German government was formed in Weimar, Germany, in 1919. The government came to be called the Weimar Republic.

The Weimar government was headed by a president elected every seven years. There was also a national assembly called the Reichstag. The president appointed a chancellor to form a cabinet and to act as prime minister. The chancellor and the cabinet ministers, however, could be removed from office by the Reichstag.

After the formation of the Weimar Republic, several different political parties battled for political power in Germany.

The Social Democrats, a moderate party, wanted to lead Germany to a democratic future. The Democratic party, a middle-class group, contained many of Germany’s intellectuals. The Catholic Center party supported the republic but opposed major reforms. On the right, the German People’s party and the Nationalist party rejected the republic and hoped to restore the German monarchy.



Hitler was the supreme head of a chain of command that included some of the most fanatical, unscrupulous men in history. Through cunning and force, Hitler and his cohorts made the Nazi party the only political party in Germany.

Further on the right, a completely new political party started in Germany. It was called the National Socialist German Workers, or *Nazi*, party.

The Nazis completely rejected the attempt of the Weimar government to create democracy in Germany. They glorified German nationalism and said that all Germans should unite under one strong leader. The Nazis were led by Adolf Hitler.

Hitler had started out as an artist. After serving in World War I, he decided to become a politician. He joined the Nazis in 1919. Hitler proved to be an excellent public speaker, and he reorganized the party and made himself its leader. He began calling himself *Fuhrer*, meaning “leader,” and formed Nazi military troops called the *Sturmabteilung*, or SA.

Hitler’s program was one of intense nationalism and racism. He accepted the “stab in the back” theory regarding Germany’s surrender in World War I. He believed that the Germans should defy the Treaty of Versailles in order to redevelop their military strength and expand their country.

Hitler also developed an intense hatred of Jews. He believed various nineteenth-century theories about the superiority of

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northern European races called the *Aryan* race. He became convinced that Jews controlled too much money in Germany and were responsible for most of Germany's problems. He began to devise plans to rid Germany of Jews.

While he did so, Germany struggled with a rapidly rising rate of inflation in the early 1920s. The economic problems in Germany were much worse than anywhere else after the war. To pay for the expenses of the war and to make reparations payments, the German government kept printing more and more paper money.

This paper money, however, was not backed by gold. Each time more was printed, prices rose in Germany. Soon, the inflation rate reached astronomical heights.

In 1914, 4.2 German marks were equal in value to one American dollar. By the end of 1921, it took 160 marks to equal a dollar. At the start of 1923, the figure was 1,800 marks to the dollar. By the end of that year, it took more than four trillion marks. The sight of people pushing wheelbarrows of cash through German cities to buy loaves of bread was not uncommon.

During the devastating inflation, many people lost faith in the moderate parties. Extremist parties on both the right and the left grew in size and strength. Many workers joined the Communist party. At the same time, many people joined right-wing groups. The Nationalists and the Nazis both grew significantly.

In 1924 a number of factors combined to pull Germany out of the worst of the crisis. The Allies devised reparations payments that were more realistic. The German government decreased spending and increased taxes. As a result, inflation went down and German industrial output jumped.

This increase allowed moderate groups to retain power in Germany, despite the growth of the Communists, the Nationalists, and the Nazis. Right-wing groups had won some followers by arguing that the moderates had "sold out" Germany; to foreign governments, but prosperity encouraged support for moderation.

In 1929, however, a new economic crisis dealt another blow to the German

republic. As a result of the American stock market crash, foreign loans to Germany dried up. Banks and businesses closed, and inflation started to rise again. In March 1930 the coalition of moderate parties that shared power in Germany disintegrated.

Germany's government turned less and less democratic. The Weimar constitution allowed the German president to rule by decree in times of emergency. Paul von Hindenburg, who had been elected president in 1925, allowed German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, who was appointed in 1930, to issue emergency decrees in the name of the president.

Germany now moved on a dangerous course toward dictatorship. In the elections of 1930, the Nazis made great gains.

In 1932 Hitler ran for president of Germany. He finished second, behind Hindenburg. But Hitler had gained the support of the Nationalists during the race. He emerged as the leader of right-wing German nationalism, which had grown into a huge movement. He had also won the support of many German industrialists by promising that he would not hinder their efforts to develop German industry if he came to power.

Hindenburg had hoped that Brüning would help him win the support of the Right in the election of 1932. When this did not happen, Brüning was dismissed in May 1932.

At this point, politics in Germany became very confused. Brüning's successor, Franz von Papen, called parliamentary elections in 1932 in the hopes of decreasing the power of the Nazis. The Nazis did well in the elections, however, winning more seats in the Reichstag than any other party. This led Hitler to demand the German chancellorship.

After the elections, Papen resigned. Kurt von Schleicher became the new German chancellor. But Schleicher was in office only about eight weeks before he lost the support of both the Reichstag and Hindenburg.

With no other choice, Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor in January 1933. German leaders did not know it at the time, but Germany was about to become a one-party state.

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A. People

DIRECTIONS: Match each phrase to the person it describes.

- a. Adolf Hitler
- b. Paul von Hindenburg
- c. Heinrich Brüning
- d. Franz von Papen
- e. Kurt von Schleicher

- _____ 1. appointed chancellor who resigned in 1932
- _____ 2. leader of the Nazis
- _____ 3. chancellor from 1930 to 1932
- _____ 4. chancellor who served for eight weeks
- _____ 5. German president elected in 1925 and reelected in 1932

B. Fill in the Blank

DIRECTIONS: Fill in the missing word or words.

- 6. The _____ created democracy in Germany.
- 7. Hitler believed the _____ theory about the German defeat in World War I.
- 8. Germany's economy was devastated by extremely high _____ after World War I.
- 9. _____ was appointed German chancellor in January 1933.
- 10. Hitler believed in intense nationalism and _____, accepting the nineteenth-century theories about the superiority of northern European races.

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C. Cause/Effect Relationships

DIRECTIONS: In the space provided, write the cause of each of the following situations.

11. The Germans had a difficult time accepting defeat.

CAUSE: _____

12. The Germans lost faith in the moderate parties. Extremist parties on both the right and the left grew in size and strength.

CAUSE: _____

13. Inflation went down, and German industrial output jumped allowing moderate groups to retain power in Germany.

CAUSE: _____

14. Foreign loans to Germany ceased. Banks and businesses closed, and depression and renewed inflation hit Germany again. Germany's government turned less democratic and moved towards dictatorship.

CAUSE: _____

15. Hitler demanded the German chancellorship.

CAUSE: _____

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D. Political Parties

DIRECTIONS: Match each definition to the political party it defines. Then rewrite the definitions, substituting your own words for the underlined words on the spaces provided below. Use a dictionary to help you.

- a. Social Democrats
- b. Democrats
- c. Catholic Center party
- d. German People's party and Nationalist party
- e. National Socialist German Workers party

- _____ 16. right-wing group favoring restored monarchy
- _____ 17. moderate party desiring a democratic future
- _____ 18. group supporting the republic but opposing major reforms
- _____ 19. ultra right-wing group opposing democracy in favor of dictatorship
- _____ 20. middle-class party which included many intellectuals

Social Democrats _____

Democrats _____

Catholic Center party _____

German People's party and Nationalist party _____

National Socialist German Workers party _____

