

## **MODERN HISTORY: *GERMANY***

### **To what extent was the Great Depression of 1929 responsible for the failure of democracy and the Weimar Republic by 1933?**

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Despite the economic, social and political progress the Weimar Republic experienced between 1918-1929, democracy was unable to avoid the implications of the economic hardship brought on by the Great Depression. It hastened the loss of confidence in the parliamentary system, creating a climate for the rise of extremist ideologies against democracy.

#### **Unstable parliament**

Despite the fact that the Weimar Republic experienced a period of prosperity between 1924-1929, the Great Depression highlighted the vulnerability of a weak democratic system. The introduction of proportional representation within the German Reichstag prevented any major party gaining a majority. This heavily restricted the Government's authority on the Republic and their ability to react to crises. The failures of the system were most evident in the government's response to the Wall Street collapse and the Great Depression. As the economic collapse became apparent in 1929, the SPD on the left wished to raise taxes and maintain welfare payments while the DVP wanted large cuts to government spending. Consequently, the next government under Chancellor Brüning failed to pass any of his economic reforms, instead, having to invoke the President's emergency powers contained within Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution. This allowed Chancellor Brüning to pass his economic programme without it first passing through the Reichstag. The Great Depression was the catalyst for the shift from a parliamentary government to an executive presidential government. Historian Graham Darby notes that while the Weimar Republic was politically weak, its collapse was not inevitable. Rather it required an economic climate such as the Great Depression to cause the failure of the Republic. In effect, the Reichstag was made virtually redundant, marking the failure of the democratic system in Germany.

#### **Conservative elites**

The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 heightened the importance of the army and the conservative, right-wing elites in the role of Government. By 1933, the fragile nature of Weimar's economy, and of its political life, meant that it would not be in a strong position to deal with crises. While these industrialists, Junkers and members of army command had tolerated the Republic in the years of German prosperity in 1924-1929, they had never fully supported the idea of democracy as it restricted their control on the nation. By 1929, there was a growing belief amongst these groups that Germany needed to return to a stronger, more authoritarian government in order to deal with the increasing economic problems that confronted the nation. Due to the failure of the German parliament by this time, power resided solely with President Hindenburg and a handful of parliamentary leaders. In reaction to growing economic and social problems caused by Great Depression, this group of conservative elites attempted to control the largest party in the Reichstag. They placed the leader of the Nazi Party, Adolf Hitler into the position of Chancellor in a process of backstairs intrigue. While the right became more willing to support Hitler once his authoritarian views became apparent, their own misjudgement of Hitler meant that he had sole control of the fate of democracy during a time of much upheaval and distress during the Great Depression.

#### **Treaty**

The Great Depression highlighted the repercussions on the German people of the Treaty of Versailles, to the extent that extremist political groups were able to easily target the incompetency of the Republic and its government. Underlined by the War Guilt Clause and the payment of reparation, the Treaty left a long-term bitterness within the German population. However, key political extremist figures such as Hitler effectively framed the Weimar Republic for the consequences of the Treaty. The economic repercussions saw Germany paying annual reparations

to Allied nations up until 1932. This required Germany to take out hazardous short-term loans from America in order to generate economic growth. While the loans helped create much prosperity between the years 1924-1929, the onset of the Great Depression saw all American loans recalled, causing an economic collapse similar to the scenes on Wall Street. Fuelled by extremist propaganda, the German population found it harder to have any emotional loyalty to a political system that appeared to have failed the German people by 1933.

## Hitler

The role of Hitler in exploiting the impact of the Great Depression was crucial in the demise of the Weimar Republic and democracy. His skill as an orator enabled him to attract large audiences in support of his ideologies. In order to gain the support he required to gain control of Germany, Hitler's policies attempted to satisfy the needs and wants of all classes of German society. He sought the approval of the working class by promising employment and a raised standard of living. To the *Mittelstand* he promised to do away with the failing parliamentary system, and in its place, put an authoritarian government with aims of restoring German pride and nationalism. These ideals were released amongst the 25 Point Program by the Nazi Party in 1920. The ineffectiveness of these policies is evidenced through the Nazi Party's election results, holding only 14 and 12 seats in the Reichstag in the 1924 and 1928 elections respectively. However in 1930, the Nazi Party received a large swing in support from a population seeking social and economic stability in a time of great instability caused by the Great Depression. The 1930 election saw the party take 107 seats as opposed to the 12 it held in the 1928 election. This is evidence of the success Hitler encountered during great economic and social instability caused by the Great Depression. It allowed his party to feed on the incompetency of past governments in promoting the restoration of pride and the idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* in the greater German nation. Hitler presented himself as a strong authoritative figure, someone who could successfully lead the German people out of crises. However, historians widely agree that it was only through the social climate caused by the Great Depression that Hitler gained power.

Ultimately, the failure of the democracy in Germany was due to the build up of underlying flaws within the Republic and its people. The Great Depression and the economic collapse accompanying it created the climate for a major change in the structure of Germany's social and political environment.

The Great Depression was therefore responsible for the failure of democracy as it provided Hitler with a platform to gain power.

However, the failure of democracy cannot be blamed solely on the Great Depression.

Many historians agree that the downfall of Weimar was inevitable. As such there were many other issues that led to the failure of democracy. For example, the underlying resentment of the Treaty of Versailles by the German people, the failure of the democratic system of parliament and the repatriation of monies to the Allies all had a significant impact.

- 'judiciary civil service had not embraced republican values',
- Extremist were marginalised.
- *Volksgemeinschaft*
- Historian opinion has changed – worker supported Nazis