

MODERN HISTORY: *GERMANY*

Assess the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on the emergence of the Democratic Republic of Weimar up to the end of 1923.

The Treaty of Versailles had a huge impact on the emergence of the democratic republic of the Weimar up to the end of 1923. Many significant aspects of the Democratic Republic of the Weimar emerged due to the treaty, which led to the new constitution, political instability, negative effects on militarism and the economic crisis, which all caused a negative social impact on Germany. As said by R. Evans, the Germans were denied “the stability in which a new democratic order could flourish”. The terms of the treaty came as a great shock to many Germans and it was perceived to be a ‘diktat’, imposed on them by the victors. The treaty left a long-term legacy of bitterness and humiliation in Germany. The terms of the treaty consequently led to a series of events that affected the emergence of the Democratic Republic of the Weimar in a massive way. The military, territorial and colonial provisions affected Germany as Article 231 of the treaty was the ‘war guilt’ clause that meant Germany was required to take full responsibility for the consequences of war. Military provisions meant the army was cut to 100,000, no air force, submarines or tanks were allowed, and there were limits on the amount of naval vessels and artillery. Territorial and colonial provisions also meant, among others, that Germany lost Alsace and Lorraine to France, the Rhineland was permanently demilitarised, any union with Austria (Anschluss) was forbidden, the Saar region was put under international control and Germany lost all of its colonies. The Weimar spurred nationalistic anger and resentment as it was forever associated with the perils of 1918.

The new German constitution was part of the new Democratic Republic of Weimar. A German democracy was very new to the people and was a major task of the national assembly, which elected Friedrich Ebert the first president of the German republic. After much debate, the German constitution was approved in July 1919 and, as mentioned by K. Fischer, was “one of the most democratic documents in the world”. The constitution meant that basic freedoms were guaranteed but also gave large power to the president who not only had the right to dismiss and appoint the chancellor, the right to dissolve the Reichstag and to call new elections but, under Article 48 was given emergency powers to intervene with the use of armed forces to restore order if stability within the country was threatened. Another important aspect of the German constitution was its voting system, proportional representation. This meant votes were cast for the party rather than the individual, and it used a quota system where every 60 000 votes usually guaranteed one member of that party into the Reichstag making it possible for small parties such as the communists and Nazis to gain representation in parliament, giving voice to minority groups. The German democracy was doomed to failure as the extremely democratic concept realistically led to the creation of numerous political parties and made it impossible for one party to achieve majority therefore the Reichstag was consistently in the hands of coalitions and this made for a weak government. This was demonstrated as during 1919-33, there were twenty separate coalition governments and the longest government lasted only two years. This political chaos caused many to lose faith in the new democratic system.

The Democratic Republic of Weimar also led to political instability. The impact of the treaty was long-lasting and extended well beyond the angst of the moment. People had lost faith in the government and despised them for accepting such a ‘harsh’ and ‘dictated’ agreement. In 1920, extreme right wing elements, led by Wolfgang Kapp, tried to overthrow the government in what became known as the Kapp Putsch. This was caused when the government tried to implement the military clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. The government ordered dissolution of the Freikorps brigade stationed outside Berlin, but the military commander, general Luttwitz, refused and ordered troops to march on the city. The chancellor and president expected the army to intervene according to the Ebert-Groener pact as they had before with left wing challenges such as the Spartacists uprising however, the leader of the army, general von Seeckt refused to make the army intervene. The Kapp Putsch ended a few days later when a strike was declared by the workers and trade unions in support of the government. Kapp Putsch revealed the weakness of the government as

they were forced to leave the city but more importantly exposed the strength and growing power of the German army and their sympathy towards right-wing leadership. The army was prepared to protect the state from threats from the left but not from threats from the right. Another attempted overthrow of government occurred in 1923, called the Munich Beerhall Putsch, led by Hitler, the putsch failed but was significant as Hitler was treated very leniently, serving a very light sentence. It again exposed the very nationalistic judiciary who had a tendency to support the German right-wing.

Many political assassinations also arose from the treaty of Versailles and were mostly from the extreme right. They demonstrated the threat of the right and the Conservative landowning class, traditional orders who governed Germany (industrialists, civil services, the judiciary, education system and the church) and the army who could not accept the republic as it stemmed nationalistic outlooks that were associated with defeat and humiliation from 1918. This led to 370 political murders between 1919 and 1922. Among these was Erzberger known as one of the 'November criminals' because he signed the armistice and in 1922, foreign minister Walter Rathenau, his crime (In the eyes of the right-wing) was that he supported the policy of fulfilment. Anyone who looked like they were going along with the Treaty was contrived by the right wing to be outright bad for Germany.

The treaty of Versailles had a massive impact on the economic state of Germany. This was triggered by the reparations payments. The final figure of these payments was 132 000 billion gold marks to be paid in cash and resources such as coal and iron ore. The first reparation payment was paid in 1921 but by the end of the year the German economy was already weakening and they were unable to meet the deadline of the second payment. The following month 60 000 French and Belgian troops crossed the border and occupied Germany's industrial heart, the Ruhr. This stirred anti-French feeling throughout Germany and the government called for passive resistance in the Ruhr where German workers went on strike and refused to cooperate with the French. This passive resistance led to extreme violence. During the occupation, the government had naïvely pledged to support and pay wages for the Germans resisting therefore accumulating more war debt for the government. The war had already left little capacity for economic recovery and the government response to the growing costs was to print more money. This would see a dramatic fall in the value of German gold mark. By summer 1923 government costs had soared 700% and the German economy was in the severe state of hyperinflation. By June 1923, the government had lost control of the economy. Strikes were frequent due to the rise of unemployment and wages failed to keep up with the costs of living.