

MODERN HISTORY: *GERMANY*

To what extent was the collapse of the Weimar Republic the result of the Great Depression?

The collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933 occurred due to an accumulation of reasons that remained embedded within the system, including the flawed constitution, psychological disillusionment and the failure to address the fundamental enemies. The Great Depression was the trigger to the collapse – it was the final issue that the government could not remedy. In this sense, the Great Depression was, to great extent, the reason for the collapse of the Weimar Republic, but only because of the abundance of other issues present in society.

By 1928, rates of industrial production had increased so that they were now higher than pre-war levels. However, the strong economy was largely reliant on foreign investors and borrowed money. With the crash of the US sharemarket in 1929, America could no longer afford to support the German government. As a result, within a couple of weeks, the entire economy collapsed as increasingly more businesses became bankrupt and unemployment rose.

The impact of the Great Depression extended across all of Germany and had damaging affects socially, psychologically and – possibly more important – politically.

In the area of social affects, unemployment increased drastically, leaving many in poverty and causing others to become homeless; malnutrition affected many children and had lifelong impacts; racial conflict became prominent as the Gypsies were blamed for the Depression; birth rates dropped, as did the population; and so on. These examples simply illustrate that the effect of the Great Depression was large and all-encompassing; that is, it affected all factions of society.

The social issues also led to psychological issues. The thought of losing one's job was so permeating that it evoked utmost fear into the population and resulted in extreme paranoia. Many families broke down and suicide rates steadily grew, demonstrating the state of mind of the population during this period.

Finally, the Great Depression also had great political ramifications. The Weimar Republic was seen to have failed the country and so, lost popularity. More people were prepared to listen to the extremist parties. They believed a new state ideology could address and remedy these issues. This contributed greatly to the collapse of the Weimar Republic, as the people – those in control of who they chose to represent them – no longer wanted a modernist party, they wanted an extremist one, and once in party, there was little that could be done to prevent the radical left or right to remove the Republic that they were so against.

In conclusion, the Great Depression had huge impacts on society that led the population to lose faith in the party and system that they blamed for the crisis. It played a vital role in the Nazis gaining popularity and eventually gaining government.

However, there were also some fundamental flaws of the Weimar Republic that failed to be addressed or remedied. Their accumulation meant that the government was weak. As such, they, too, had a great impact on the collapse.

Firstly, the impact of psychological disillusionment was great. Germany had a long tradition of authoritarian rule, which meant that the people quickly grew accustomed to it. The introduction of the Republic was imposed – a “diktat” – by the Treaty of Versailles. Not only did the people have very little experience in ruling democratically, but their emotions of resentment towards the treaty were directed towards all the changes it forced society to make. Any issues that arose – whether social, economic or political – were blamed on the Republic. The people remembered the grandness of their nation prior to the first World War and comparisons were made between the two,

without any consideration for the changing context. Obviously, the latter was seen in a more positive light.

Psychological disillusionment had a great impact on the collapse of the Weimar Republic as people had little faith in the government. As more issues arose, disillusionment grew, until the majority of the population sought another government to fix society.

Similarly, from the very beginning of its formation, the Weimar Republic possessed great numbers of enemies – predominantly from the right. Their failure to address these enemies or reduce their influence meant that they continued to disobey the government and refused to implement reform. The enemies included the industrialists, the army, the civil service, the judiciary and teachers. Industrialists lost large sums of money from the Treaty of Versailles and directly related this to the Republic; the army were traditionally right and only supported the SPD to prevent the communists gaining power; the civil service prevented the implementation of reform; the judiciary's judgements reflected their bias and not the concept of justice; and teachers continued to teach their syllabus, including the "stab in the back" legend, instilling contempt for the government in the youth – the future leaders.

It is clear that not only did the Weimar Republic possess many enemies, but their enemies resided in high places in society and held much power. Failure to counter their threats meant that the grip the government had on society was tenuous; their enemies could choose to respond and render the government powerless at almost any time.

Finally, upon gaining power, the Weimar Republic introduced a constitution. While it is to be applauded for granting the people basic freedoms – including the right to assembly and the right to religion – it possessed two great flaws. The first was the inclusion of Article 48 – an article which granted extreme power to the president. He could appoint or dismiss chancellors and dissolve the parliament. This occurred 135 times under Ebert's term and was used almost constantly by Hindenburg after 1930, simply illustrating the lack of political stability and the fact that the Reichstag was hardly representative of the people's choice. It also meant that he could use the army whenever he deemed there was an 'emergency', interrogate citizens, employ arbitrary arrest, and so on. Fundamentally, Article 48 equated to the suspension of the rights granted under the constitution. It was not democratic, which the people opposed. The second flaw was in the concept of proportional representation. At the time, this was perceived democratic as it allowed small parties to be represented in the Reichstag, but most historians agree that it led to too many parties being represented and too many elections being called. All of the twenty-one governments in the fourteen years were coalitions, with each party having different ideas on how to govern the nation. Conflict divided.

There were two massive flaws in the constitution that resulted in democracy not being upheld. Rights could be suspended and politics were unstable. The people grew angry that the document that was meant to protect them failed its duty.

It was an accumulation of events that resulted in the collapse of the Weimar Republic. While structuralists believe the collapse was inevitable from the very beginning of the Weimar Republic arriving to power, other historians acknowledge the structural issues but believe it could have been avoided despite these. However, both agree that the Great Depression was the trigger: the final event that the republic could not recover from. In lieu of this, the Great Depression was, to a great extent, responsible for the collapse of the Weimar Republic, but only as there were other issues underlying society that rendered it vulnerable.