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The Failure Of The Weimar Republic

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The Weimar Republic formed at the end of World War I and was the first democratic government in Germany's history. Between 1919 and 1923, it survived a period of civil strife, several putsches, and a devastating period of hyperinflation. Weimar seemed stable and successful from 1924 until 1929, but struggled during the Great Depression. The Republic came to an end in 1933 with Adolf Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. It would be easy to assume that Hitler and his Nazi Party brought down the government, but they were more a symptom than a cause of Weimar's demise. Instead, the Republic failed because the government system was deeply flawed and lacked sufficient popular support. These problems emerged from the very beginning of the Weimar Republic in 1918. The coalition governments formed from the largest political parties struggled to gain a majority in the Reichstag. Parties at both extremes of the political spectrum undermined the Republic rather than actively supporting it. Many conservative nationalists detested the Republic's weakness, longing for a return of the monarchy or replacement by some other strong authoritarian government. The Communists wanted to establish their own rule and displace the Socialists. Weimar remained fragile through the golden years of the mid-to-late 1920s and was in no position to cope with a depression that hit Germany harder than almost any other country. In this time of crisis, Germany's leaders made poor decisions and weakened democracy and freedom (often intentionally) in the years before the Nazis achieved power.

Germany's major political parties predated the Weimar Republic. The six largest parties in 1919 were the Nationalists, People's Party, Democrats, Center Party, Socialists, and Communists. These parties reflected divisions within German society – by region, religion, and social class – and, except for the Communists, had changed little from the days of Imperial

Germany.¹ The politicization of German society ran deeper than in most other countries and Germans would spend most of their lives “encompassed by the party and its organizations” and thus “were too closely tied to their particular political ideology to find compromise and cooperation” with others.² The Social Democrats (SPD) overcame a great deal of early resistance to become the largest political party in Germany by 1912. Despite their popularity and law-abiding behavior, the SPD was a socialist party and could never shake the bias against them from the middle and upper classes and the legal system.³ Their credibility also suffered from scandals like the 1925 Barmat Scandal in which many SPD officials were found to have taken bribes.⁴

The SPD formed coalition governments with the next two largest parties in 1919: the Catholic Center Party (CCP) and the German Democratic Party (DDP). The CCP was best able to maintain its strength until the end, but its strong Catholic ties in a Protestant majority country limited its appeal. The DDP was a mostly middle-class party that lost popularity as the middle class drifted right. The SPD, CCP, and DDP were the three parties most identified with the new republic system and most committed to its success. Their popularity was almost immediately in decline: after combining for more than 76% of the popular vote in January 1919, they received only 48% in June 1920 and would never again combine for a majority without including other parties.⁵ In 1929, Ludwig Kaas led the CCP further to the right. In 1930, the DDP became the

¹ Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 16.

² Evans, 84-85.

³ Evans, 14-15 & 88.

⁴ Samuel Mitcham, *Why Hitler?: The Genesis of the Nazi Reich* (Westport CT: Praeger, 1996), 115-116.

⁵ Evans, 88.

State Party and became another weak nationalist party.⁶ By 1931, only the SPD was still giving “unreserved support” to parliamentary democracy.⁷

The other major political parties were all at odds with the Weimar Republic even if they participated in elections, sat in the Reichstag, and occasionally joined coalition governments. The Nationalists regarded the Republic as “utterly illegitimate” and wanted a return of the Kaiser.⁸ From 1924 to 1928, the Nationalists were the second largest party and their spreading of radical right-wing ideas helped “prepare the way for Nazism.”⁹ After they began to lose popularity in the 1928 election, Alfred Hugenberg became the new party chairman and led them even further to the right and frequently allied with the Nazi Party.¹⁰ The People’s Party was predominately the former National Liberals. Pro-Bismarck and never strong supporters of the new government, they kept active in Weimar’s coalitions because of their pragmatic leader, Gustav Stresemann. When Stresemann died in 1929, the party became even more openly hostile to the Republic and rapidly shifted to the far right.¹¹

As most opposition parties moved to the far right, one moved steadily in the opposite direction: the German Communist Party (KPD). They were implacable enemies of what they viewed as another bourgeois state to overthrow by revolution and replace with a Soviet government. The KPD collaborated with other enemies of the Republic and opposed reforms that might make the Weimar government more popular among the working class. Most Germans feared the communist revolution that the KPD sought to bring about, even the SPD who worried

⁶ Evans, 89-91.

⁷ Ian Kershaw, *Weimar: Why Did German Democracy Fail?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 19-20.

⁸ Evans, 94.

⁹ Evans, 94.

¹⁰ Evans, 94-95 & Mitcham, 133.

¹¹ Evans, 95-96.

they would suffer the same grisly fate that the Mensheviks had met at the hands of the Bolsheviks in Russia.¹²

The Weimar Republic struggled for legitimacy from the beginning. It lacked any “founding ritual” like the Declaration of Independence.¹³ Instead, the new government was discredited because they – and not the monarchy or military - signed the embarrassing armistice and harsh Versailles Treaty.¹⁴ Mistreatment of veterans by civilians helped turn them against the Republic.¹⁵ Germany struggled through chaotic conditions: the Spartacist Rebellion of 1919, the Kapp Putsch of 1920, an attempted Polish takeover of Upper Silesia in 1921, an attempted communist takeover of the Ruhr in 1921, Hitler’s Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, and devastating hyperinflation in 1923. The Weimar government repeatedly had to rely on Freikorps paramilitary groups instead of the police or army. The Freikorps were not an official arm of the government, frequently executed revolutionaries without trial, and were sometimes themselves in revolt against the Weimar government.¹⁶

Despite a new constitution, many elements of German government and military remained unchanged from or tied to the old Imperial German system. The judicial system remained largely the same, both in keeping the same law codes and maintaining a pro-authoritarian bias combined with a lack of respect for parliamentary government.¹⁷ The civil service system had also remained largely unchanged under the new government. Tenure was too strong and made it

¹² Evans, 57 & 93-94.

¹³ Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 5-6.

¹⁴ Mitcham, 14.

¹⁵ Mitcham, 22.

¹⁶ Mitcham, 25.

¹⁷ Evans, 134-136.

nearly impossible to remove those who were anti-Republic.¹⁸ State employment favored former military NCOs which helped keep the old militaristic mentality active despite the downsizing of the army.¹⁹ The Ebert-Groener Pact preserved the old officer corps from the Imperial German Army.²⁰ There was never a clean break with the old system.

The failure to purge Imperial elements from the new government was far from Weimar's only instability during the 1920s. The liberalizing of society after World War I – the Roaring Twenties – included avante garde art and open sexual perversion that disgusted social conservatives who saw such changes as a sign of cultural decay.²¹ The SPD-led coalitions instituted many labor law reforms that helped workers, but caused big business to long for the old days of anti-labor authoritarian government.²² A flawed proportional representation system perpetuated the fractured party system by making it possible for 40 different political parties to hold at least one Reichstag seat at some point between 1919 and 1933.²³ Coalition governments were difficult to form and frequently short-lived.²⁴ The government was “unable win confidence on a popular front.”²⁵ What political stability the country did have was “highly dependent on economic prosperity.”²⁶ Even during the most prosperous years of the late 1920s, the economy was stagnated and failed to return to pre-World War I levels.²⁷

¹⁸ Evans, 99-102.

¹⁹ Evans, 9.

²⁰ Evans, 97.

²¹ Jackson Spielvogel, *Hitler and Nazi Germany: A History* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 18-20.

²² Kershaw, 6.

²³ Mitcham, 27.

²⁴ Spielvogel, 13.

²⁵ Peukert, 12.

²⁶ Spielvogel, 17.

²⁷ Peukert, 12.

The Great Depression hit Germany exceptionally hard because short term loans from the United States supported the economy. The collapse of production in Germany was the worst of any European country.²⁸ The KPD was able to exploit the rising unemployment to rapidly increase their membership – usually at the expense of the SPD - and commit more acts of violence to spread terror.²⁹ The middle class had a growing fear of both a communist revolution and a return of the hyperinflation of 1923.³⁰ After all the troubles the Weimar Republic had gone through, for many Germans the Great Depression was the final straw. They lost faith in a government perceived as a “tool of dishonest, self-serving politicians.”³¹

Paul von Hindenburg was elected president in 1925 and seen as a link to the old regime because of his military service during World War I. He had “no faith in democratic institutions and no intention of defending them from their enemies.”³² In 1930, Hindenburg appointed Heinrich Brüning as Chancellor. Brüning was a lifelong monarchist and “at best a fair-weather friend to Weimar democracy.”³³ Hindenburg and Brüning formed a “cabinet of experts” that excluded the SPD and was thus not a majority coalition in the Reichstag. This did not matter because Hindenburg and Brüning ruled instead by emergency decree as allowed by Article 48 of the Weimar constitution. Brüning’s financial policies worsened the economic situation while his cuts to unemployment and welfare worsened the situation for the working classes, driving them toward extremist parties. He also restricted freedom of the press, particularly against those critical of his policies. When the Reichstag refused to pass Brüning’s budget, he dissolved the Reichstag to force new elections in September 1930. The main result of

²⁸ Evans, 235 & Mitcham 128.

²⁹ Evans, 237-238.

³⁰ Spielvogel, 55.

³¹ Kershaw, 21 & Mitcham, 135.

³² Evans, 59 & 82-83.

³³ Evans, 250.

the election was major gains for the Nazi Party, mostly at the expense of the Nationalists, People's Party, and various smaller center and right parties. The Nazis also received a quarter of their votes from first time voters.³⁴

When Hindenburg stood for reelection in 1932, the political spectrum had shifted far enough so that Hitler became the candidate for the right while the left was backed Hindenburg. Hindenburg had the improbable support of the SPD because "the party considered him the only man who could stop Hitler" and though he would keep Bruening as Chancellor which was "the last chance of a return to democratic normality."³⁵ The SPD threw their support behind the candidate "who was to dismantle the Republic from above, in an effort to keep in office a Chancellor whom Hindenburg actually disliked and distrusted, and whose policies had been lowering the living standards and destroying the jobs of the very people the Social Democrats represented."³⁶

Bruening resigned in May 1932 due to his dwindling popularity. He was replaced by Franz von Papen, a politician even more right-wing. Like Bruening, Papen formed a cabinet with no regard for a majority coalition. Worse, he selected mostly men with little experience and opposed to a multi-party system. His goals included rolling back liberalism, including more limits on the freedom of the press. Papen used the excuse of the "Blood Sunday" violence between Nazis and communists to depose the SPD-controlled state government in Prussia, an act that "destroyed the federal principle".³⁷ The SPD responded timidly with only a few protests and lawsuits, failing to deliver armed opposition or a major strike. This demonstrated to

³⁴ Evans, 250-262.

³⁵ Evans, 279.

³⁶ Evans, 279.

³⁷ Evans, 283-287.

conservatives and Nazis that “the destruction of democratic institutions could be achieved without any serious opposition.”³⁸

Papen made another serious mistake when he dissolved the Reichstag to trigger new elections. He intended to win over Hitler and the Nazi Party “to provide mass support for the anti-democratic policies of the new government.”³⁹ The elections showed the rising popularity of the KPD at the expense of the SPD, but more importantly the Nazis gained a massive boost in their power. Other than the CCP, the center and right parties suffered massive losses to the Nazis. The Nazi Party became the largest political party in the Reichstag, displacing the SPD for the first time in Weimar’s history, although still lacking a majority.⁴⁰

With street violence between the KPD and Nazis rising through the year and the Reichstag more deadlocked than ever, Papen decided to dissolve that representative body, but this time prohibit further elections. Preempted by a vote of no-confidence, he soon resigned. Papen’s replacement was Kurt von Schleicher who began his chancellorship in a bad situation that never improved. He was unable to establish any legitimacy or Reichstag support, significantly failed to win over or tame the Nazi Party, and alienated Hindenburg. Unable to do anything effective, undermined by intrigues, and fearing civil war, Schleicher resigned after less than two months.⁴¹ Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933 after negotiations that had been going on even before Schleicher’s resignation. Hitler’s was the first coalition government since 1930.⁴² Hindenburg and his advisors believed that filling Hitler’s cabinet with non-Nazi

³⁸ Evans, 286-287.

³⁹ Evans, 284-285.

⁴⁰ Evans, 293-294.

⁴¹ Evans, 297-307 & Kershaw 25.

⁴² Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 92-93.

conservatives would “keep him in check.”⁴³ Papen was part of the new cabinet as Vice Chancellor and naively believed “Within two months we will have pushed Hitler so far into a corner that he’ll squeak.”⁴⁴

Even with the aid of elites who mistakenly believed they could control Hitler, the Nazi Party could have never achieved the success it without a major crisis like the Great Depression.⁴⁵ The Nazi Party received only 2.6% of the vote in 1928, but got 18.3% in 1930 and 37.4% in July 1932.⁴⁶ The Nazis were able to reach groups like farmers that felt ignored by the other parties and benefited from a right shift by the middle class. Most importantly, they became the first political party in Germany to transcend the boundaries that divided the other parties. Rather than identify with a single class or interest group, the Nazi Party “managed to promise something for everyone.”⁴⁷ They became a “catch-all party of social protest” and a “rainbow coalition of the discontented.”⁴⁸

The Weimar government cracked down on the Nazis on many occasions, only to later back down. Hitler was jailed less than a year for his famous putsch and allowed to use his trial as a political soapbox. The Nazis were banned in November 1923, but were unbanned in January 1925 after a personal appeal by Hitler.⁴⁹ A couple months later, Hitler was banned from public speaking, but by late 1928 that ban had also been lifted.⁵⁰ The SA had been outlawed in April 1932, but this was not strongly enforced by police and was overturned a few months later.

⁴³ Evans, 306.

⁴⁴ Evans, 308.

⁴⁵ Mitcham, xii, 128, & 134-135.

⁴⁶ Evans, 209 & 293.

⁴⁷ Paxton, 66.

⁴⁸ Evans, 264 & 294-295.

⁴⁹ Mitcham, 112-113.

⁵⁰ Mitcham, 114.

After the “Bloody Sunday” violence in July 1932, Papen failed to institute a new ban on the extremist parties or their paramilitary units.⁵¹ In August 1932, Papen banned all public political meetings, an act that simply encouraged expression of discontent via street violence.⁵² He quickly followed with the promise of an automatic death penalty for anyone found guilty of committing political murders. When this led to death sentences for several Nazis, Papen commuted their sentences in a foolish attempt to placate the Nazi Party.⁵³ The depression seemed to have bottomed out and the Nazi Party seemed to have peaked in 1932 as they lost votes between the two elections that year, but Hindenburg and his advisors were impatient and felt it was “more urgent than ever...to tame the Nazis by bringing them into the government.”⁵⁴ Patience might have led to a further decline in Nazi popularity and possibly the bankruptcy of the party.⁵⁵ Instead they made the crucial mistake and provided “the final essential precondition of successful fascism: decision-makers ready to share power with fascist challengers.”⁵⁶

The KPD willingly contributed to Weimar’s downfall under the belief that the Nazi Party coming to power would bring the communist revolution closer. Street violence between communists and Nazis played perfectly into Nazi propaganda. While the two extremist groups beat and killed each other on the street, they repeatedly allied on the floor of the Reichstag to disrupt the government. The two parties were so disruptive that after the 1930 election “only negative majorities were possible in the Reichstag.”⁵⁷ In 1931, both parties walked out to force a long adjournment. The two enemies also voted together in the 1932 no-confidence vote that

⁵¹ Evans, 285.

⁵² Evans, 296.

⁵³ Evans, 296-297.

⁵⁴ Evans, 305.

⁵⁵ Paxton, 100.

⁵⁶ Paxton, 86.

⁵⁷ Evans, 275.

helped bring down Papen's government.⁵⁸ The KPD threw the 1925 presidential election in Hindenburg's favor by persisting in running a candidate who had no chance of winning rather than backing the SPD candidate.⁵⁹

Once Hitler became Chancellor, the Weimar Republic was effectively finished. Hitler had made all the right moves to put himself in position to gain power and disrupt the democratic system, but many factors were beyond his control. With a stronger political system, the Nazis might never have gotten a foothold in the Reichstag. If the Great Depression had been less severe then the Nazis would have had fewer discontent citizens to rally. If the SPD and KPD had ever forged even a temporary alliance then they would have had the combined numbers to block the Nazis, but they could never overcome their divide. Men like Hugenberg, Hindenburg, Bruening, Papen, and Schleicher helped the Nazis in their own attempts to make way for a nationalist authoritarian government. In such conditions, democracy simply could not survive.

⁵⁸ Evans, 297-301.

⁵⁹ Mitcham, 119.

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