

# Chapter 4: Weimar Germany and the Rise of the Nazi Party, 1919-1933

## Introduction

The period **1919-1933** saw Germany transition from the **Weimar Republic**, a fragile democracy born out of defeat in **World War I**, to the establishment of a Nazi dictatorship under **Adolf Hitler**. Weimar Germany faced **economic crises, political extremism, and social unrest**, which were exploited by the Nazis to gain power. The failure of democratic institutions, combined with the **Great Depression**, led to Hitler's appointment as **Chancellor in 1933**.

## 1. The Establishment of the Weimar Republic (1919)

### The Aftermath of World War I

- **9 November 1918: Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated**, and Germany became a republic.
- **11 November 1918: The new government**, led by **Friedrich Ebert** (Social Democratic Party, SPD), agreed to an **unconditional ceasefire**, ending WWI.
- Many Germans believed **Germany could have won the war**, leading to the “**stab in the back**” (**Dolchstoß**) myth, blaming politicians for surrendering.

### The Weimar Constitution (1919)

- Germany became a **democratic republic**.
- A **President** was elected for **seven years** and had the power to **appoint the Chancellor**.
- The **Reichstag** (parliament) was elected by **proportional representation**.
- **Article 48: The President** could rule by decree in emergencies, undermining democracy.
- **First President: Friedrich Ebert** (SPD), first Chancellor: **Philipp Scheidemann** (SPD).

### Challenges to the New Republic

- **Left-wing threats:**
  - **Spartacist Uprising (1919):** Led by **Rosa Luxemburg** and **Karl Liebknecht** (communists), crushed by the **Freikorps** (ex-soldiers).
- **Right-wing threats:**
  - **Kapp Putsch (1920):** Right-wing coup attempt led by **Wolfgang Kapp**, defeated by a **general strike**.

## 2. The Treaty of Versailles and Economic Crises

### Treaty of Versailles (June 1919)

- Germany was forced to accept **full responsibility (War Guilt Clause)**.
- **Lost 13% of its territory** (Alsace-Lorraine to France, Polish Corridor to Poland).

- **Military restrictions:** Army limited to 100,000 soldiers; navy and air force severely reduced.
- **Reparations set at £6.6 billion (1921).**
- Germans called it a **diktat (dictated peace)**, fuelling resentment.

### *Hyperinflation Crisis (1923)*

- Germany failed to pay reparations (1922), leading to the French occupation of the Ruhr (1923).
- **Passive resistance** (workers on strike) caused economic collapse.
- **Weimar government printed more money, causing hyperinflation:**
  - Bread cost 250 marks in January 1923 but 200 billion marks in November 1923.
  - Middle class lost savings, leading to increased support for radical parties.

### *3. Gustav Stresemann and Economic Recovery (1924-1929)*

#### *Stresemann's Economic Policies*

- Introduced the **Rentenmark (1923)**, stabilising currency.
- **Dawes Plan (1924):**
  - US loans of 800 million marks helped rebuild Germany's economy.
  - Reparations rescheduled over a longer period.
- **Locarno Treaties (1925):**
  - Germany accepted its western borders with France and Belgium.
- **Young Plan (1929):**
  - Reduced reparations and extended payments over **59 years**.

#### *The 'Golden Years' of Weimar (1924-1929)*

- Industrial production doubled by 1929.
- Workers' wages increased.
- Germany joined the **League of Nations (1926)**.
- Berlin became a **cultural centre** (cabaret, cinema, Bauhaus architecture).
- However, prosperity depended on **US loans**, making Germany vulnerable.

### *4. The Wall Street Crash and the Rise of the Nazis (1929-1932)*

#### *Impact of the Great Depression*

- **1929 Wall Street Crash:** US banks demanded repayment of loans.
- **Germany's economy collapsed:**
  - 6 million unemployed by 1932.
  - Businesses closed, wages fell, savings lost.
- **Government instability:**

- Chancellor Brüning (1930-1932) introduced spending cuts and wage reductions, worsening conditions.
- President Hindenburg used Article 48 to rule by decree, weakening democracy.

### *Nazi Electoral Success*

Year	Nazi Seats in Reichstag
1928	12
1930	107
1932 (July)	230 (largest party)
1932 (Nov)	196
1933 (March)	288

- The Nazis gained support from:
  - Middle class (anti-communist, economic fears).
  - Farmers (promised protection from debts).
  - Young people and unemployed (jobs promised through public works).
  - Nationalists (opposed Treaty of Versailles).

## *5. Hitler's Rise to Power (1919-1933)*

### *Hitler and the Nazi Party*

- **1919:** Hitler joined the **German Workers' Party (DAP)**, later renamed **National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP/Nazi Party)**.
- **1921:** Hitler became leader, formed the **SA (Stormtroopers, Brownshirts)**.
- **1923: Munich Putsch:** Failed coup attempt; Hitler imprisoned and wrote *Mein Kampf*.
- **Mein Kampf's Main Ideas:**
  - Aryan supremacy.
  - Anti-Semitism.
  - Lebensraum (expansion into Eastern Europe).
  - Totalitarian dictatorship.
- After 1925, Hitler pursued legal means to gain power.

### *Hitler Becomes Chancellor (January 1933)*

- **July 1932 elections:** Nazis won **230 seats** but lacked a majority.
- **November 1932 elections:** Nazis lost seats (**196**), but remained the largest party.
- **January 1933:**
  - President Hindenburg, pressured by Franz von Papen, appointed Hitler as Chancellor.
  - Believed Hitler could be controlled.
  - Only three Nazis in the cabinet.

## 6. Hitler Consolidates Power (1933)

### The Reichstag Fire (February 1933)

- Communist Marinus van der Lubbe blamed.
- Hitler convinced Hindenburg to pass the **Reichstag Fire Decree**, suspending civil rights.

### The Enabling Act (March 1933)

- Gave Hitler the power to rule by decree for four years.
- Democracy ended; Hitler became dictator.

### Eliminating Opposition

- Banned political parties (July 1933) - Germany became a one-party state.
- Night of the Long Knives (June 1934):
  - Hitler ordered the execution of SA leader Ernst Röhm and other opponents.
- August 1934: President Hindenburg died; Hitler combined Chancellor and President, declaring himself Führer.

### Conclusion

- The Weimar Republic failed due to economic crises, political extremism, and weak leadership.
- Hitler and the Nazis exploited the Great Depression, fear of communism, and nationalist sentiment.
- By 1933, Hitler legally became Chancellor and soon established a dictatorship.

### Key Terms

- **Dolchstoß (Stab in the Back) Myth:** Belief that Germany was betrayed by politicians.
- **Article 48:** Allowed the President to rule by decree in emergencies.
- **Proportional Representation:** Electoral system leading to unstable governments.
- **Freikorps:** Right-wing ex-soldiers who opposed communists.
- **Hyperinflation:** Economic crisis due to excessive money printing.
- **Dawes Plan (1924):** US loans to Germany to stabilise the economy.
- **Young Plan (1929):** Reduced reparations payments.
- **Wall Street Crash (1929):** US financial collapse causing global depression.
- **Reichstag Fire (1933):** Incident used by Nazis to suppress opposition.
- **Enabling Act (1933):** Gave Hitler dictatorial powers.
- **Night of the Long Knives (1934):** Hitler's purge of political rivals.
- **Führerprinzip:** Nazi leadership principle making Hitler absolute ruler.
- **Lebensraum:** Hitler's policy of territorial expansion.