

Hitler's Rise and Weimar's Demise

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Graham Darby points to common errors and omissions that should be avoided.

Nazi Germany remains one of the most popular of topics at Advanced Level History, and this aspect of the topic – how Hitler came to power – is ever popular with both examination boards and students alike. It is surprising, then, that questions about this are often badly done. Too often candidates get bogged down in the detail of Weimar's early years, 1919-23, leaving themselves little time to get beyond 1929 to the crucial years of 1930-33.

Because students know so much about the early years (and GCSE may be partially to blame here) examiners are faced with considerable detail on Versailles, on the attempted coups (Spartacist, Kapp, Munich) and of course on the French occupation of the Ruhr and the subsequent hyperinflation, often with digressions about wheelbarrows full of banknotes. All these events are trotted out as reasons for Hitler's taking power – ignoring the fact that he did not come to power for another ten years and ignoring the most obvious and remarkable fact – which is that the Weimar Republic actually survived the chaos of 1919 to 1923! Now this is not to say that these events were not significant: clearly the humiliation of Versailles and the trauma of hyperinflation hung over the Republic like a black cloud throughout its history, becoming significant memories in the crucial 1930-33 period – but that is when they are relevant, when they are used by Hitler and the Nazis to undermine Weimar, to reawaken fears and anger in the German people.

The other mistake candidates make is justifying their concentration on this earlier period by implying that because of these events the collapse of the Weimar Republic was inevitable. But was it? Leaving aside any philosophical objections we might have to the concept of historical inevitability (if events were inevitable, then we would be able to predict the future etc), there is the problem of Weimar's period of prosperity: its heyday was between 1924 and 1929. Of course it would be wrong to suggest that the Republic in this period was not without considerable weaknesses, but a good candidate should at least acknowledge the existence of the 'golden age'. Counterfactual speculation is not very scientific but it is worth considering what might have happened to the Weimar Republic (and the fortunes of the Nazi Party) had the Wall Street Crash not occurred.

The other criticism levelled at Weimar is that it was stymied by proportional representation and plagued by weak coalition governments. Now it is true to say that in general PR does not enable a single party to have a majority and that this in turn leads to smaller parties having a disproportionate influence – the tail wagging the dog, as it were. However, candidates rarely if ever name a single coalition government let alone its composition or problems. How many were there? Formed by what parties? Of course it would be surprising if candidates were familiar with each of Weimar's 20 coalition governments, but some reference to a few would be appropriate.

If candidates do get on to the crucial period after 1929, too few of them either know or discuss the course of events or the election results, and yet these are essential to illustrate the

turnaround in Nazi fortunes. The Nazi Party went from a paltry 2.5 per cent of the vote in 1928 to 37 per cent in the summer of 1932. This dramatic transformation needs some explanation. Candidates often correctly cite the Wall Street Crash and the appeal of the Nazi Party as reasons, but usually without going into any depth. What exactly was the appeal of the Nazis? Who voted for them and why? This aspect is not often addressed.

The next common omission, apart from the complex sequences of events from 1930 to 1932, is 'backstairs intrigue'. Why was Hitler not made Chancellor in the summer of 1932 when he was the obvious choice? Why did he become Chancellor in January 1933 when the Nazis had actually lost votes in the election the previous November?

Weimar: Stable or Unstable?

So, was the collapse of the Weimar Republic inevitable? No, it was not, but having said that it was clearly a fragile entity. As we have stated, the Republic survived a most difficult birth through the years 1919 to 1923 after the shock of defeat in the Great War. However, by 1924 Weimar entered a period of relative stability, the 'Golden Age' of 1924-29. Clearly foreign policy was a success: in the capable hands of Gustav Stresemann, Germany was welcomed back into the international community via the Locarno Treaties (1925) and entry into the League of Nations (1926). Furthermore via the Dawes (1924) and Young (1929) Plans reparations were firstly made more manageable and secondly reduced (from £6.6 billion to £2 billion). Of course not everyone was happy with the pace of change but clearly aspects of the Versailles Treaty were being chipped away. It is also true to say that an element of political stability was now achieved. Candidates are fond of mentioning the large number of coalition governments, and in the period in question there were seven, but there was a remarkable continuity of personnel – Stresemann who was foreign minister throughout the period 1924-1929 being the most obvious example. Moreover, four were led by Wilhelm Marx and two by Hans Luther. So a change of government did not necessarily lead to a break in administration or a change of policy. Although the largest party (the SPD) remained outside government in the period 1924-1928, the reconciliation of the right-wing parties (the DNVP and the DVP) to the Republic brought some stability and continuity, and meant that the only parties wholly opposed to the democracy were the Nazis (NSDAP) and the Communists (KPD), and they were electorally insignificant in this period. Undoubtedly the political picture is a little ambiguous: democracy had not put down deep roots and the army, judiciary and civil service had not embraced republican values; but greater numbers were being reconciled to the Weimar Republic.

The real test of Weimar stability, however, is the economy – and clearly it was in recovery. Even prior to the Dawes Plan the currency had been stabilised. However, it was the Dawes Plan that opened the floodgates to short-term loans: it is thought over 16 billion Reichmarks flowed into Germany, largely from the United States. Given that in the same period the German governments only paid back 7 billion in reparations, the favourable balance of credit enabled German industry to recover. Indeed by 1928 production exceeded pre-war rates (and with reduced territory), so that by 1929 Germany was the world's second largest industrial power, after the United States. Wages also went up so that the standard of living was better than ever. In addition, millions of new homes were built along with new hospitals and schools. It appeared that prosperity had returned and, bearing in mind William Cobbett's claim that you cannot agitate a man on a full stomach, extremist parties became increasingly marginalised in the 1928 elections.

However, there were problems with the Weimar economy, summed up by Stresemann's famous remark that Germany was dancing on the edge of a volcano. The Weimar boom was built on short-term credit and would be particularly vulnerable to any downturn in the US economy. Secondly, much of the money was spent on unproductive projects like hospitals and

schools (both unproductive in the sense that they do not instantly generate wealth like manufacturing industry) and on welfare (26 per cent of Gross National Product in the late 1920s). Thirdly, the prosperity was not evenly spread: the agricultural sector in particular was in the doldrums running at about 75 per cent of pre-war levels. There was also relatively high unemployment throughout the period well before the crash of 1929, and because of the generous unemployment insurance scheme of 1927 the cost of welfare was becoming unmanageable. So clearly the economic recovery was fragile – and that must be our general verdict about the Weimar Republic as a whole in the ‘golden age’. There was undoubtedly recovery, and had it been able to continue there is no reason why the Weimar Republic would not have gone on and on. But 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 another major crisis – and that major crisis was just around the corner.

Müller’s Grand Coalition

The general election held in May 1928 brought a clear victory for those parties which accepted the constitution. The Social Democrats gained nearly 30 per cent of the vote and came into government for the first time since 1923. One of their number, Herman Müller, became Chancellor and created a ‘Grand Coalition’ of both left- and right-wing parties. Then in October 1929, the Weimar Republic suffered a double blow. Gustav Stresemann, the leader of the DNVP, died prematurely at the age of 51. More serious was the Wall Street Crash in New York, though this was not immediately obvious. However, by 1930, with unemployment passing 3 million and the end of loans from the USA, the welfare system was on the verge of collapse. Needless to say the coalition was split on what to do – the SDP on the left wanted to raise taxes and maintain welfare benefit whereas the DVP on the right wanted massive cuts, and reflected the resentment of those who had to pay for the system. Accordingly on 27th March 1930 Müller resigned. Nevertheless the important point to make here is that candidates who write about this topic should be aware that Weimar remained viable right up to 1930. It was laid low by the Great Depression not by any earlier events. Müller was succeeded by Heinrich Brüning (Chancellor 1930-1932), an important figure whose existence is often overlooked by many A level candidates.

Brüning

Many saw the failure of Müller’s government as a failure of democracy per se and there was a growing call for more authoritarian government. In this climate Hindenburg, prompted by General von Schleicher, the army’s political adviser, picked the new Centre Party leader, Heinrich Brüning, to form the next government. Without SPD support the government possessed no parliamentary majority, but Brüning made it clear he would press ahead with a programme of financial retrenchment by presidential decree if necessary. Thus Brüning was prepared to bring about a fundamental shift from parliamentary government to executive presidential government.

Unsurprisingly Brüning’s programme suffered defeat in the Reichstag, and so he dissolved parliament, called for a fresh election two years early, and appealed to the electorate for support. This was a grave miscalculation: the outcome would be momentous but not in the way Brüning had hoped for.

Although the Nazis had been making significant electoral gains in regional elections in the first half of 1930, no one (not even Hitler) anticipated the surge in support they received in September. Nearly 6.5 million votes made the party the second largest in the Reichstag, with 107 seats. Brüning now faced an even more difficult Reichstag, with about a third of the deputies (Nazis and Communists) committed to the overthrow of the Republic and its

democracy. Accordingly he now found himself forced to operate wholly by presidential decree. By 1932 the Reichstag was virtually redundant; Germany was no longer a parliamentary democracy.

The Great Depression gathered momentum in the years after 1929. Unemployment, already at crisis level in 1929, rose catastrophically: by February 1931 there were nearly five million registered unemployed, and a year later well over six million. This represented 35-40 per cent of the workforce and led to the collapse of the welfare system. Hundreds of thousands of families were plunged into poverty and despair. Brüning tackled this situation with massive salary cuts (in 1931 public employees had a pay reduction of 23 per cent), reductions in benefits and higher taxes. His policy eventually brought recovery (and Hitler benefited) but in the short term Brüning's aim was to avoid inflation (another 1923), dismantle Weimar's expensive welfare system, and get reparations cancelled by demonstrating Germany could not pay. In these matters he was in fact successful: reparations were in effect cancelled in June 1932. However, none of this made him popular with the German people who seemed to be offered continual sacrifice and little hope. The most obvious result was even greater political radicalisation, with Hitler the main beneficiary on the right but also an increasing Communist vote on the left.

Hindenburg remained loyal to Brüning throughout 1931 but in March 1932 he had to face re-election as president and the outcome of this contest ultimately led to Brüning's dismissal. Although Hindenburg won, he was forced History Review to go through a second round of voting and he felt humiliated. Brüning was replaced in May 1932 by Franz von Papen (a protégé of Schleicher) who lacked both political experience and parliamentary support. Von Schleicher and von Papen now hoped to tame the Nazis, and part of a potential deal with Hitler was another election. However, this election opened the floodgates to the Nazis: the result was a triumph for Hitler. The party polled 13.7 million votes (37.4 per cent), obtained 230 seats and was by far the largest party in the Reichstag. Weimar's days were clearly numbered as the two parties dedicated to its overthrow (the NSDAP and KPD) now had a majority in the Reichstag.

Who Voted for Hitler and Why?

The big question is, why was it Hitler and the Nazi Party – a relatively insignificant force in 1928 – who benefited? If the economic collapse explains Weimar's collapse, does it also explain Hitler's rise? Why did the German people turn to the Nazis rather than to the other anti-democratic right-wing parties? Candidates are often good when discussing the appeal of Hitler and the Nazis, but again there are misconceptions and omissions: the effects of propaganda are often overegged and there is rarely any discussion of the social and geographical composition of Nazi support. #

It used to be the case that textbooks glibly recorded that it was the lower middle classes who turned to the Nazis and elected Hitler. While we now have a much more nuanced analysis of Nazi support, it still holds true that the bulk of Nazi support did come from the protestant middle class of northern Germany. In addition, many workers from smaller towns and members of trade unions also turned to the Nazis, so that about a third of the Nazi vote was working class. However, the bulk of the working class (and unemployed) voted for the SPD or KPD. Catholics too remained mostly immune to Nazi appeal, but the party did well with women, young voters and first-time voters of all classes so that the Nazi claim to transcend social class had some truth in it. It was a party that appealed to all – unlike the other parties, which aimed at a particular group. Nevertheless it still remains true that it was the middle classes who turned to the Nazis en masse, a point reinforced by the collapse of traditional right-wing parties, the DNVP and the DVP. Why did they do so?

The answer given by candidates at A level usually revolves around Nazi propaganda – Hitler’s speeches, the rallies, the flags, the marching columns of SA, Goebbels’ manipulation of the media etc. But we must also be careful here. Until the Nazis linked up with Alfred Hugenburg in 1929 (he owned a film company and a chain of cinemas) the Nazis did not have access to the mass media. Secondly, early newsreels were silent and Hitler did not have ready access to microphones until the early 1930s. Then there is the problem about propaganda itself. Does it work? Groups such as the working classes of Berlin or the Catholics of Bavaria remained stubbornly resistant to the Nazi message. Propaganda only seemed to work with the partially converted. And then there is the problem of those remote rural areas of northern Germany, where there was no party apparatus, that voted Nazi. There were clearly two aspects of Nazi propaganda that did have an impact: the idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of people) enabled all classes to feel at home in the party, and the myth of the charismatic ‘Führer’. The desire for a strong leader found its expression in support for Hitler (no other party had such a charismatic leader), so much so that the movement we call Nazi was known as the ‘Hitler movement’ (*Hitlerbewegung*) to contemporaries – even on the ballot paper.

Did people vote Nazi because of the party’s programme? Much of the programme was actually rather vague but Hitler kept on attacking the same issues: he would overthrow the treaty of Versailles, he would overthrow the corrupt democracy, he would destroy the communists, he would offer a vision of a united Germany, a racial community working together, a new Reich in which Germany’s economic strength would be restored and the country would once again take its rightful place in the world. Hitler was a most effective speaker and this message struck a chord with many. In addition there was of course the protest vote: those who had become disillusioned with democracy. This is why the traditional parties were abandoned: they had become discredited through their association with the Republic. The middle classes also feared another 1923 and a Communist Revolution. Nazi violence against the Communists was therefore welcomed. Of course the Nazis exaggerated the Communist threat: the Communists never exceeded 17 per cent of the vote but they were a considerable presence in urban areas, particularly in Berlin. And of course it is to the Communists that many of the unemployed turned after 1929. Indeed 63 per cent of those who voted in the summer of 1932 did not vote Nazi, but Hitler had by far the biggest mandate and should have become Chancellor, but he did not do so for six months. Why?

Backstairs Intrigue

This aspect can be dealt with quite briefly. Basically Papen offered Hitler the Vice Chancellorship but Hitler refused and held out for the top job. Hindenburg, however, did not like Hitler (the ‘Bohemian corporal’ as he called him) and refused to make him Chancellor. The Papen government called another election in November. This time the Nazis actually lost ground: they remained the largest party but their share of the vote slipped from 37 to 33 per cent. In December Schleicher, that inveterate intriguer, now became Chancellor himself and hoped he could detach sections of the Nazi movement by offering the Vice Chancellorship to Gregor Strasser. This did not work and by January 1933 Papen was working with Hitler and trying to persuade Hindenburg to appoint him as Chancellor. That he finally did so was due to a number of factors: clearly Hindenburg’s advancing years might have clouded his judgment but he was also persuaded by his son, and by the argument that many, especially Papen, genuinely believed that by bringing Hitler into government the Nazis could be ‘tamed’ and controlled, a belief that turned out to be wholly incorrect. So, on 30th January 1933 Hitler became Chancellor. He had not seized power, it had been handed to him by the backstairs intrigue. However, Hitler was also voted in legitimately as his was the largest party in the Reichstag. Indeed to many this may have looked like a return to democracy. Hitler’s government was yet another coalition, with only three Nazis out of 12 in the Cabinet (Frick and Göring being the other two). Many felt that this Chancellor would, like all the others before

him, not last long. How wrong they were!

Conclusion

What are the key points that the student should take from this article?

- First of all, the collapse of the Weimar Republic was not inevitable. The Republic was viable but vulnerable and was laid low by the Great Depression brought on by the Wall Street Crash of 1929.
- Accordingly, the focus of any essay should be the period 1930-1933. That is not to say Versailles or the hyperinflation of 1923 were unimportant – they were clearly associated with the Republic and undermined its credibility – but they should not be the focus.
- Coalition governments could and did work; however, Müller's Grand Coalition (1928-1930) could not agree a common policy when faced with the disastrous economic situation in 1930.
- Brüning's government (1930-1932) was not democratic, it was an authoritarian attempt to push through deflationary economic policies which made a bad situation worse.
- It is simplistic to suggest that the six million unemployed then turned to the Nazis. While some undoubtedly did vote Nazi, the unemployed industrial working class mainly turned to the Communists, which in turn generated much fear among the middle classes.
- Hitler's oratory, reminding people of Weimar's association with defeat, Versailles, hyperinflation and weak government, struck a chord with many Germans across all social classes, but it was principally the middle class that abandoned democracy and turned to him in droves, driven by fear of another 1923, communist revolution, and the desire for strong leadership. For many Democracy had shallow roots.
- Hitler should have become Chancellor in 1932 but Hindenburg refused to appoint him
- Finally Papen was able to persuade the President to appoint Hitler in the false belief that the Nazi leader could be controlled.

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