The Weimar Republic

After World War I, the German ruler, Kaiser William I, abdicated and fled to Holland. The democracy that governed Germany in his absence met at the town of Weimar. It became known as the Weimar Republic. The Republic was weak from the beginning.

Treaty of Versailles

The Weimar republic was associated with failure in WWI since it had signed the Treaty of Versailles that had ended the war. Many nationalists believed the republic had sold Germany out to its enemies by ending the war too early. The treaty took territory from Germany and left the country facing crippling compensation claims. The limitations it placed on Germany’s armed forces, and especially the War Guilt Clause that blamed Germany and her allies for starting the war, left many Germans feeling humiliated. For these reasons it was deeply unpopular.

Economic

- The Republic failed to pay full reparations to France so the French invaded the Ruhr region of Germany and took control of key industries and natural resources. This worsened the economic crisis in Germany.
- The inflation rate rose so dramatically that the German currency lost virtually all value. Paper money was as good as worthless. This caused many people, especially in the middle classes to fall into poverty. Many never trusted the Republic again.
- In 1924 the crisis was brought to an end by the Dawes Plan, which restored the value of the currency. One result of this was go make the German economy dependent on loans from America. When the American Stock Exchange (Wall Street) crashed in 1929, this left the struggling German economy in chaos. Industries failed and unemployment rose to 6 million. Social unrest followed, as people starved.

Political

- There was no tradition of parliamentary democracy so there was no general support for the new republic.
- The ruling Social Democrats were linked to Versailles and nicknamed the ‘November criminals’ (the armistice to end the war was signed in November 1918). As such they were not trusted by the general public.
- Parliament was elected through a system of proportional representation. This meant there was no overall majority and the country was run by coalitions. The result was unstable governments and public suspicion of deals between parties.
- From 1919 to 1922, the republic came under attack from both left and right wing factions who demanded radical reforms. This spilled over into violence and unrest between the two rival camps. The government could not control the situation.

The Nazis

Adolf Hitler left WWI disillusioned and bitter. He felt the war had ended too soon and the Weimar Republic had sold Germany out by agreeing to the Treaty of Versailles. In 1919 he joined a small political party in Munich, known as the German Workers' Party. Before long he was its leader. He changed the party name to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP). This became known as the Nazi party.

Nazi policies

The Nazi party policies were deliberately vague so they might appeal to as many people as possible. It was not unusual to find people of both right and
moderate-left wing politics joining the Nazis because they agreed with one or more of their policies.

- The Nazis were violently opposed to Communism. The Communists believed all private ownership of land and assets was theft. This led many landowners and businessmen to support the Nazis.

- Their social policies, such as better pensions and reducing unemployment, appealed to the common man and also many traditional socialists.

- The Nazis proclaimed that they would abolish the Treaty of Versailles, that they felt unfairly punished Germany. This was a popular policy for many Germans.

- After losing territories at Versailles, the Nazis wanted Lebensraum (living space) for their surplus population. Bluntly, they wanted more land.

**Nazi popularity**

For several years the Nazis were only a small, marginal party, alongside hundreds of others. Over time, however, they became a force to be reckoned with.

- They came to be seen as the only credible right-wing alternative to the left-wing parties.

- Their belief in the supremacy of the German race appealed to nationalists.

- The paramilitary groups reminded people of the comradeship they shared as soldiers.

- Hitler was charismatic and he won people over by strength of personality.

- Hitler's hatred of Jews struck a chord with many people - they were a convenient scapegoat, to be blamed for all Germany's problems.

- Throughout the 1920's good organisation, effective propaganda and rallies spread the popularity of the party all over Germany.

**Making the most of opportunities**

Despite the failure of the Munich Putsch in 1923, when Hitler tried to seize power by violent revolution, he was able to use his trial for treason to make himself a national figure. He used the publicity to get his ideas published in Mein Kampf, his autobiography.

When social unrest increased, after benefits were cut in 1930, Hitler used fear of Communism to get support from Hugenberg, an industrialist who owned a chain of newspapers, and Thyssen, a steel manufacturer. They, and other industrialists, formed the Harzburg Front which helped finance the Nazi election campaigns in 1932-3 to ensure the Communists were defeated.

- At the July 1932 election, the Nazis won more votes than any other party. Hitler was offered political office in a coalition with two other politicians, von Papen and von Schleicher. He refused. He would not share power.

- After the November 1932 elections, Hitler refused the chancellorship because President Hindenburg tried to limit his powers. When he accepted the chancellorship in January 1933, he was one of only three Nazis in a Cabinet of eleven. The Vice Chancellor, von Papen, thought he could keep Hitler under control.

**The Reichstag fire**

In February 1933, the German parliament, the Reichstag, was burned down. The Communists were blamed. Hitler expelled the Communists from parliament and enforced a state of emergency where all civic freedoms were suspended. The Nazi party now had complete control of Germany's army, its police force, its government and its economy. Hitler was in power.