

Early Pressures faced by the Weimar Republic, 1919-24.

1. The new Weimar Republic of Germany was set up at a time associated with defeat for the country – the end of WWI.

Political – the politicians had taken the decision to sign the armistice on November 18th 1918.

Economic – at this time conditions in Germany were poor – starvation, hunger.

Social – the German people, and the army itself had become very demoralised. The army had even mutinied at Kiel, and refused to obey orders to fight the British.

The Kaiser abdicated and fled Germany. Friedrich Ebert was the leader of the new government – he was the head of the largest political party in Germany at the time (Social Democratic Party).

Because the Republic had been declared following the defeat of Germany and the abdication of its previous leader, Weimar was instantly associated with a negative and turbulent period in Germany's history. This reputation would dog it for a long time to come.

2. The Treaty of Versailles.

This was a political move by the politicians of the new Republic. They had no choice but to accept the terms of the Treaty after they had signed the armistice. **The key leaders of the Allies (David Lloyd Georges – Britain; Georges Clemenceau – France; Woodrow Wilson – USA)** decided that German delegates would only be allowed to attend the signing of the Treaty and were to have no part in the actual discussions. The German people thought that they would be dealt with fairly as a nation. When it emerged that the Weimar politicians had signed the crippling terms of the Treaty, they felt **betrayed**. Defeat + betrayal – not a promising start for a new democracy! This would be difficult to forgive. *When you have to talk about this in an essay you will be expected to mention the key parts of the Treaty eg. blame for war, reparations, territorial and military losses.*

3. The Weimar Constitution – Coalition Governments.

Because of **PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION** no single party ever had a majority in the Reichstag (German Parliament). This meant that all the governments were coalitions (a mix) put together from several political parties. This led to weak governments as they found it very **difficult to agree on policies**. This also **encouraged the growth of extremist parties** such as the Communists because they knew they might be able to gain seats in Parliament, and therefore have a say in the running of the country.

4. The Weimar Constitution – Presidential Power.

According to the constitution the President had the power to appoint and dismiss the Chancellor. If he considered that there was an emergency he could use **Article 48** to rule by his own laws instead of applying the democratic policy. This was dangerous as one man theoretically had the power to rule the whole country – as Hitler would from 1933 onwards!

5. The Spartacist Uprising, Jan 1919.

The Spartacist League was made up of **German communists** who were against everything that Ebert and Weimar did. They were led by **Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht**. **They wanted Germany to be ruled by the Communist Russians**. If this happened many middle and upper class Germans would lose their property, business and land.

The **Spartacists tried to seize power in Jan 1919** by occupying public buildings, organising a general strike and forming their own revolutionary committee to take action! The Weimar government gets its name from the fact that politicians had to flee to Weimar to work out the constitution when Berlin was under threat from the Communists.

Ebert did a dangerous deal with the army commanders – in return for them killing the German Communist leaders, he would allow the old army more freedom (they were against the Republic as they felt they had been betrayed in the war as well – they wanted revenge, and Ebert was effectively helping them to achieve it!).

From then on, the **Communists would always want their own revenge** on the Weimar government as long as it was led by parties like the SDP. They were a constant threat.

6. Revolts in Berlin and Bavaria.

These were more political threats to the new Republic. It was clear by now that many political parties were never going to accept that the Republic was led by democratic parties. **Communists organised more riots and strikes in Berlin – crushed by the militia called Freikorps or the Free Corps.**

In Bavaria the Socialists set up their own Republic. They took food, money and houses from the rich and gave them to the workers – this a key belief of Communists. Soldiers soon broke into the Bavarian capital Munich and massacred the leaders. The Weimar government had successfully defeated its immediate political opposition, but at a price – the army now had more power to use as they wished!

7. The Kapp Putsch, 1920.

The Treaty of Versailles had ordered that the German army be reduced. Many soldiers lost their jobs, and decided to form a band known as the **Free Corps** – they had helped support the government and dealt violently with the initial political threats. Because of the increasing power of the Free Corps, the Allies were urging Ebert to take action and break them up. **The Free Corps led by Wolfgang Kapp marched into Berlin to seize power** – this was a *putsch* (an attempt to seize power by force). They had the support of the army and the Berlin police – very dangerous for Ebert! Ebert and his government had to flee to

Dresden. They appealed for help from the workers of Berlin – the workers responded by organising a general strike – cut off water, coal and gas to Berlin. The putsch collapsed – order was restored and the government could return to Berlin.

8. Reparations and Occupation of the Ruhr, 1922.

The **Treaty of Versailles had ordered that Germany pay reparations of £6.6 million.** The Germans paid the first instalment of this bill in 1921 but then **claimed not to be able to afford** any more for the next 3 years. The **French refused to believe this and invaded the Ruhr industrial region** to take what they were owed by force. The invasion began in Jan 1923 – approx. 60,000 French and Belgian troops took control of very mine, factory, steelworks and railway in the area. The streets were manned with guns.

The German government could not take military action because of cuts in its armed forces. Instead they **ordered the people of the Ruhr to carry out passive resistance against the invaders – a strike.** The French expelled thousands of people who were involved in the strike, and shot others. Industrial production halted and the crisis was averted.

9. Hyperinflation, 1923.

Due to the amount of money being printed by the new Republic, and the constantly rising prices, the **German currency soon became worthless –hyperinflation.** For Germans who had jobs, wages rose higher and higher – some had to collect their wages in wheelbarrows. But the price of goods tended to rise faster than wages. People on fixed incomes had no hope of keeping pace with inflation –they could not live on their wages (starvation, lack of clothing and heating, savings in the bank became worthless etc). However, debts could be repaid more easily!

But the **number of people who suffered was much higher than those who gained**, and the **blame for such hardship was directed at the Weimar government. People were angry** and the popularity stakes fell even lower! Violence erupted when **the Nazi party** tried to seize control with another political **putsch in Munich, 1923** (*this is dealt with in later lessons when we look at Hitler's road to power*). The Weimar Republic survived this economic crisis through the work of a new Chancellor and then Foreign Minister, **Gustav Stresemann.**