

# BBC Bitesize GCSE History - 20th century Germany

## Episode 2 – The Weimar Republic

**Announcer:** BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

**Datshiane:** I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

**Katie:** and I'm Katie Charlwood.

**Datshiane:** And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

**Katie:** This is the second episode in a nine-part series on 20th-century Germany.

**Datshiane:** In this episode, we'll be looking at the establishment of the Weimar Republic, the German government established following World War I, its strengths and weaknesses and how this fed into the economic recovery and German culture.

**Katie:** We'll be checking in with our time-travelling reporter and there'll be a short test, a summary and hints and tips along the way. As always, it may be useful to have a pen and paper or laptop and keyboard handy to make revision notes, and you can find loads more useful knowledge on the Bitesize website.

**Datshiane:** So, Katie, the Weimar Republic. Give us the basics: what, when, where and who?

**Katie:** The Weimar Republic was the democratic government established in Germany after World War I, lasting from 1919 to 1933. It was named after the city of Weimar, where its constitution was drafted.

**Datshiane:** Thanks. So, let's talk a bit about that constitution, because if you remember, before the war, Germany was ruled by the unelected Kaiser Wilhelm II, who was pretty powerful, and he could ignore laws passed by the German government. In comparison, the Weimar Republic was much more democratic. Katie, tell us why.

**Katie:** Right, so, for the first time all Germans over the age of 20 had equal rights, including the right to vote. Elections for the president and the German Parliament, or Reichstag, took place every four years. And this time, unlike under the Kaiser, almost all the power lay with the politicians in the Reichstag, and the results were a Bill of Rights which gave every German freedom of speech.

**Datshiane:** Taken together, this democracy, power of the government and the Bill of Rights can be thought of as major strengths of the Weimar Republic. But what were some of its weaknesses?

**Katie:** Well, the system by which the government was voted in was a proportional representation system. That means that every party got the same proportional number of members in the Reichstag as they got in proportion of votes.

**Datshiane:** You might want to make a note of that. So, if they got half the votes, they got half the members. That sounds pretty fair to me, Katie, don't you think?

**Katie:** Well, that sounds like a good idea, but this often led to unstable coalition governments, making it difficult to pass laws and govern effectively. Datshiane, give us an analogy of why this might be the case.

**Datshiane:** Well, I guess it's a bit like if I go out with a large group of my friends, trying to get a decision as to what restaurant to go to or which film to watch, which everyone is happy with, can be a nightmare. So, just imagine what it must have been like in a coalition government trying to get agreement on decisions that affect people's lives when all those parties want different policies.

**Katie:** So, you had a collection of political parties ranging from the Communist Party on one side who were supported mainly by the working class, to the Centre Party, supported by the middle class businessmen, to the National Socialist German Workers Party, or Nazis, supported by many unemployed former soldiers.

**Datshiane:** And another weakness of the Weimar Republic was something in the constitution called Article 48. This meant that the president could pass laws in an emergency without them going through the Reichstag. Though it didn't clearly define what kind of emergency this applied to, it meant that in the wrong hands this could justify something that looked undemocratic. Therefore, Article 48 was looked at with suspicion by many people.

**Katie:** So, weaknesses: proportional representation and Article 48. An exam question might ask you to write about these; so grab a pen, hit pause and write down those definitions as a revision aid. As well as the weaknesses that came from the system and constitution itself, many people were against the Weimar Republic from the start. Many Germans hated that the government had signed the

Treaty of Versailles in November 1918, calling the government 'the November criminals', as they did not believe that Germany had lost the war. The Republic was also never fully supported by all groups in society, with many longing for a return to the good old imperial rule and days of the Kaiser.

**Datshiane:** But that's not all. The government also faced challenges from the extremist political parties, which came from both the left and right wings.

**Katie:** You can find more details about three uprisings against the Weimar Republic on the Bitesize websites. These were: the left-wing Spartacist Uprising in Berlin, 1919, by a communist-led group, and then there were two right-wing uprisings: one, the Kapp Putsch, again in Berlin in March 1920; and the Munich Putsch by Adolf Hitler's party, the National Socialist German Workers Party, or NSDAP, in 1923. The problems caused by these political instabilities were compounded by the huge economic problems the nation was facing.

**Datshiane:** The Treaty of Versailles had imposed £6.6 billion of reparations on Germany to pay the winning Allies for the damage caused by World War I and although Germany managed to scrape together the first payment in 1921, the next payment in 1922 was missed. Germany had lost important industrial land in the treaty, so it simply didn't have the means to make the payment.

**Katie:** This led to a standoff with France and Belgium, who said that they didn't believe that Germany couldn't afford the payment and decided to take back what they felt they were owed; in this case, by marching 60,000 soldiers into Germany's most productive areas, the Ruhr region, and taking control of every factory, mine and railway.

**Datshiane:** So, more political upheaval, which fed into more economic woe. The German government ordered its workers in the Ruhr region to go on strike and not to cooperate with the French and Belgian soldiers. The government promised to keep paying the striking workers their wages by printing more and more money, as well as paying the France and Belgium governments the reparations they owed, but this led to hyperinflation.

**Katie:** How? Because more and more money being printed meant that German workers could spend that in the shops.

**Datshiane:** Which meant that shopkeepers kept putting up their prices.

**Katie:** Which meant that the German government had to keep printing more and more money.

**Datshiane:** Which meant that the workers could spend that in the shops.

**Katie:** Which meant that the shopkeepers could put up their prices even more.

**Datshiane:** Uh-oh...

**BOTH:** Hyperinflation.

**Katie:** Let's head back in time and hear from our time-travelling reporter Kitty who we've sent back to 1923 Germany.

**KITTY:** Hi, Kitty here, reporting from the streets of post-war Germany 1923. People are not happy and I'm here to find out why. We're four years into the rule of the Weimar Republic and things are chaotic. I've just met a woman pushing a wheelbarrow full of cash, not because she was super rich, but because this is what she needs just to buy a loaf of bread. And a journalist I spoke to named Friedrich Kroner told me that rice was 80,000 Marks a pound yesterday, but costs 160,000 Marks today and tomorrow perhaps twice as much and after that, maybe no rice. Although not everyone has been affected badly. I spoke to one businessman who was able to pay back his entire 10,000 Mark loan taken out two years ago with just one bank note last week. Just a few examples of the hyperinflation we've all been hearing about. Money is almost worthless and as I'm watching people are literally walking round with bags full of money that will buy them barely anything. I'm hearing a lot of folks blaming this on the Weimar Republic government for agreeing the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. That woman with the wheelbarrow told me that she couldn't believe they made Germany accept full blame for the war and pay huge reparations. Others blame it on encouraging the Ruhr region workers to strike. But there might be some hope in the coming months, in 1924, with talk of loans from the USA called the Dawes Plan. These are supposed to stabilise the economy. Fingers crossed it works. This is Kitty, reporting for Bitesize GCSE History. Back to the studio.

**Katie:** Thanks, Kitty. And the economy did indeed begin to recover under the leadership of Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann who had become German Chancellor in August 1923. He introduced a new currency called the Rentenmark to stabilise the economy and negotiated the Dawes Plan in 1924.

**Datshiane:** This provided loans from the USA to rebuild the economy, and industry grew during this period, especially in sectors like coal and steel.

**Katie:** International relations also improved with Germany joining the League of Nations in 1926 and signing treaties like the Locarno Pact, which guaranteed borders with France and Belgium.

**Datshiane:** The Weimar Republic was also a period of vibrant cultural creativity. Berlin became a centre for experimental art, literature, architecture and cinema.

**Katie:** However, this cultural freedom also provoked a backlash from conservatives and nationalists who viewed these changes as a sign of moral decay. Time for a quick Weimar Republic test. Three questions, five seconds - or hit pause for more time. We'll never know! Here goes.

**Datshiane:** Name two weaknesses of the Weimar Republic political structure.

**Katie:** The system of proportional representation and Article 48.

\*[correct bell sound]\*

**Datshiane:** What was the name given to the left-wing communist rebellion in 1919?

**Katie:** That would be the Spartacist Uprising.

\*[correct bell sound]\*

**Datshiane:** And who was the leading politician responsible for Germany's recovery between 1924 and 1929?

**Katie:** That would be Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann.

\*[correct bell sound]\*

**Datshiane:** Great. I'm sure you all did brilliantly. Now it's time for a quick summary.

**Katie:** The Weimar Republic was the Democratic government established after Germany's defeat in World War I.

**Datshiane:** Its system of proportional representation led to unstable coalition governments.

**Katie:** And it faced political violence from left-wing and right-wing extremists, along with economic crises like hyperinflation in 1923.

**Datshiane:** Economic recovery was thanks to Gustav Stresemann through the Dawes Plan.

**Katie:** And Berlin became a centre of arts and culture, with developments in film, art and architecture.

**Datshiane:** There's loads more 20th-century Germany revision hints and tips at the Bitesize website and in the other episodes in this series.

**Katie:** In the next episode, we'll look at how the abrupt end of the Weimar Republic paved the way for the rise of the Nazis. Thanks for listening.

**Datshiane:** Bye.