BBC Bitesize GCSE History - 20th century Germany

Episode 1 - First World War and its impact on Germany

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Katie: I'm history podcaster, Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And I'm history graduate and TV and radio presenter, Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And this is Bitesize GCSE history.

Datshiane: This is the first episode in a nine part series on 20th century Germany. In this episode, we'll begin with the First World War, looking specifically at German imperialism, the armistice, and the impact of the Treaty of Versailles.

Katie: Along the way on our journey, we'll be sharing revision hints and tips on how to remember those key facts, and there'll be exam tips, a test on your knowledge and we'll end with a summary of everything we're about to look at.

Datshiane: We'll also be introducing our Bitesize time-travelling reporters, who we'll be sending back in time to report from some key moments in history.

Katie: And remember that it might help if you have something to make notes on and do feel free to press stop and rewind whenever you need to.

Datshiane: Okay, 20th-century Germany and the road to the First World War. Katie, give us the basic who, what, where and when please.

Katie: At the beginning of the 20th century, Germany was a fairly newly formed nation. All its twenty-five previously independent states had been unified in 1871. The King of Prussia, its most powerful state, became the ruler, or Kaiser, in 1888. He was Wilhelm the Second. Having spent most of his youth in the army, he was keen to build a powerful army and navy. More on this later.

Datshiane: Under the Kaiser, was the chancellor, or chief minister, who was hired and fired by the Kaiser. He was his advisor with the help of other ministers.

Katie: Advisor to the Kaiser! Kinda important that the chancellor got on with his Kaiser then.

Datshiane: Then there was the Bundesrat, who were 58 representatives from each of the 25 states who could introduce law.

Katie: And the Reichstag would vote on these laws; there were 397 members, or deputies, who had to be voted in by the public.

Datshiane: So, you have the Kaiser, chancellor, Bundesrat and Reichstag, it's always good to get to grips with the political system. You might want to make notes as to what powers each of those tiers had and some of the weaknesses of the system - which were, Katie?

Katie: Well, the Kaiser was pretty powerful, to say the least; he was an autocrat, he was unelected and could completely ignore all the advice from his chancellor - the advisor to the Kaiser. And the chancellor could also ignore the Bundesrat and Reichstag and just make his own decisions. He also made all the military and foreign policy decisions.

Datshiane: Which created more problems, because, Katie?

Katie: Because, Datshiane, the largest state was Prussia and this was where the Kaiser was from. Being the richest and most powerful of the 25 states, it also had a much greater influence after German unification. Prussia provided 17 of the 58 votes in the Bundesrat, and since a law could be stopped with just 14 votes, it could simply veto ones not to its approval even if all the other states voted for them.

Datshiane: So you can see, there were some political problems already, but there were the beginnings of economic and social ones too, and in the next section, we're going to look at those.

Datshiane: Okay, the Kaiser wanted Germany to be a global power, an idea called Weltpolitik, or world policy; and Wilhelm wanted Germany to compete with Britain and France for overseas territories and trade dominance. This included a series of navy laws, which increased the size of both the navy and the army, which heightened tensions with Britain.

Katie: And how was this funded? By taxes. More and more money was ploughed into the navy and the army and new German colonies.

Datshiane: And the happier the Kaiser and his patriotic supporters became.

Katie: Yes, but more and more debt was being piled up by the German government and the economy went into deficit as the national debt spiralled.

Datshiane: Whoops. At the same time, the growth in German industrialisation led to huge social change. Many German workers were unhappy with low wages and poor working conditions, and they turned to the new socialist political party, the Social Democratic Party or SPD, which became more and more popular. By 1914, over three million German workers had joined trade unions, and some even wanted to overthrow the Kaiser and start a revolution. It's time to call up our time-travelling reporter to find out more. Jordan, where and when are you?

Jordan: Hi, Jordan here, reporting from the streets of industrial Germany, 1912. The air is thick with tension and noise. Just behind me, the gates of the steel factory are locked tight; workers are out on strike, organised by the local trade union, and I'm here to figure out what's going on.   I've just spoken to a worker who's been in a factory since he was a young teenager; he told me that life in the factories is hard, too many hours for too little pay. He hasn't seen a wage increase in years, despite the company profits going up. In the distance, you can hear the clanging of machinery inside, but there are chants of Gerechtigkeit - justice! - coming from the strikes outside. One thing I keep hearing is that the workers are tired of being ignored. They say the Kaiser and the factory owners seem to care more about expanding Germany's military and empire than improving conditions for the millions of industrial workers making the country's wealth. With no rights, no power, and no end to the exploitation in sight, they're looking for new ideas. The younger generation especially, see socialism as a way to have a voice in a system that's been stacked against them. It's no wonder workers are demanding better conditions, shorter hours and higher wages. The socialist party, the SPD, has grown rapidly to become the largest party in the Reichstag, and earlier today, I heard a speech by August Bebel, one of the founders of the SPD who said, "We stand here for the exploited and the oppressed. We demand social justice in a world where the capital thrives on the misery of the working class." This promise to fight for workers' rights is why so many are turning to them right now. This is Jordan, reporting for Bitesize GCSE History, back to the studio.

Katie: So, trouble was brewing at home, and trouble was brewing overseas too as Germany's rise as a military and industrial power, coupled with its aggressive foreign policy, created an atmosphere of distrust amongst European nations, who divided Europe into two armed camps.

On one side, we had the Triple Alliance: Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, and on the other side we had the Triple Entente: France, Russia, Britain. And the distrust between them eventually led to a war, because, Datshiane?

Datshiane: Because Austria-Hungary was in conflict with Serbia following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. Germany supported Austria-Hungary and this was a key factor in the escalation of the crisis that led to World War One.

Katie: Fast forward four long drawn out bloody years that devastated the continent and Germany's eventual defeat in late 1918.

Datshiane: Yes, by this time, Germany's population had become increasingly disillusioned with the war effort and the country was now facing collapse from food shortages. On top of that, the German economy was getting worse with inflation and debt spiralling. On November the 9th, in the face of revolutionary unrest and pressure from military leaders, the Kaiser abdicated - this was a huge turning point for Germany politically. Two days later, on November the 11th, Germany signed the armistice with the allies, ending the fighting.

Datshiane: War over, Germany defeated; what were the immediate impacts on life, Katie?

Katie: Well, it wasn't great for many Germans. Germany was virtually bankrupt due to the vast sums of money that had been borrowed to pay for the war. Society was divided even further; some factory owners had done very well whilst the workers' wages had been frozen.

And the country was rapidly becoming politically unstable with mutiny and talk of revolution across the nation. Many people also felt a sense of betrayal by the German surrender. All this social unrest became worse thanks to the Treaty of Versailles - the peace settlement that the victorious allies had drawn up.

Datshiane: This knowledge might help an exam question which asks you to write about the ways that the First World War impacted the lives of German people. You might want to pause here and summarise some of the ways that their work and society was affected by the war.

Katie: Remember to use those words beginning with **C:** Cause, consequence, change and continuity, that we look at in the Exam Skill series, have another listen if you need a reminder.

Datshiane: The Treaty of Versailles imposed harsh conditions on the country. Katie, I know you like your mnemonics, what have got for us?

Katie: A good way to remember conditions of the Versailles treaty are by the word "BRAT" B-R-A-T. B is for blame - the infamous 'war guilt' clause, Article 231. R is for reparations - a massive 6.6 billion pounds to be paid to Britain and France. A is for armed forces, which were to be hugely reduced. German land was taken away to form new European countries, like Czechoslovakia, and recreating

others, like Poland. And its overseas colonies were handed over to the allies. Remember B-R-A-T, BRAT, if you're asked to write about the Treaty of Versailles.

Datshiane: And not surprisingly, the Treaty of Versailles caused deep resentment amongst Germans; economically, the reparations crippled Germany's post-war recovery, leading to hyperinflation and widespread social unrest. Politically, the treaty fuelled nationalist anger, paving the way for extremist movements, including the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party; and in turn, World War Two.

Katie: But that is all to come in the following episodes in this series.

Datshiane: Of course. But for now, how about a quick test based on this episode? Three questions, five seconds to answer, or hit pause if you need to have a little more time. Here we go. What were the four layers of the German government prior to World War One?

Katie: The Kaiser, the Chancellor, the Bundesrat and the Reichstag.

[correct bell sound]

Datshiane: What was the name given to the Kaiser's plan for Germany to become a global power?

Katie: That would be Weltpolitik, or world policy.

[correct bell sound]

Datshiane: And what were the broad terms of the Treaty of Versailles?

Katie: BRAT! B for blame, R for reparations, A for armed force reduction, and loss of T - territory.

[correct bell sound]

Datshiane: Great! I'm sure you did brilliantly.

Katie: Quick summary, Datshiane?

Datshiane: Yes, please.

Katie: Okay, so during this period there were factors that contributed to Germany's growth as a world power, but also factors that contributed to political and social problems.

Datshiane: The parliamentary government was headed by the powerful Kaiser, Wilhelm the Second.

Katie: German industrialisation, growth of its military and empire expansion, fed into his Weltpolitik, which created an atmosphere of distrust and rivalry amongst Britain and its European allies.

Datshiane: And don't forget, low wages and working conditions resulted in many Germans turning to the Socialist Democratic Party.

Katie: After the loss of World War One and the Kaiser's abdication, Germany was made to sign the Treaty of Versailles.

Datshiane: Remember BRAT? Blame, reparations, army and territory.

Katie: There's more background on this subject and quizzes to test you on the Bitesize website.

Datshiane: And in the next episode, we'll look at the strengths and weaknesses of the Weimar Republic.

Katie: Thanks for listening.