

Emergence of Authoritarian States - Hitler's Germany (Conditions)

General Information

Timeframe studied: November 9 1923 (Hitler's failed coup) – August 2 1934 (Hitler merges the posts of chancellor and president – becomes Fuhrer)

Conditions: the circumstances Germany was facing, which the Nazis did not control or instigate.

Rise to power: Hitler's installation in both a legal position of power, as well as the less quantifiable influence he had over the populace of Germany.

Impact of War

Topic Sentence

The Impact of World War One on Germany is the main factor as to why Hitler was able to rise to power 1923 to 1934

Elaboration (Facts)

Weimar Germany never escaped from being a postwar society; social, cultural, and political points of reference were the war

- Both politicians and voters during the Weimar years affected by the war
 - o Politicians
 - Adolf Hitler – “Most memorable period of his life” provided a bridge from a life as a pseudo-bohemian to a politician
 - Heinrich Brüning – Testified to importance of his wartime service in an elite shock-troop of machine gunners, introduced government as a ‘cabinet of front soldiers’
 - o Voters
 - 10 million German veterans were able to cast their votes during elections of 1932 and 1933
 - All of the electorate would have been deeply affected by events of 1914 to 1919
 - All entitled to vote in 1932 were old enough to have remembered the war (Youngest German voter 6 years old during armistice in 1918)
- German defeat and the consequences; Treaty of Versailles
 - o Attacks on German Pride
 - Germany was not consulted on TOV; imposed on them by the victors; US, Britain, France, Italy
 - Germany excluded from LON – robbed Germany of great power status
 - Disarming of Germany - The army was restricted to 100,000; only 4000 officers – no conscription, and no air force (Was very harsh due to German pride in its long military history)
 - Demilitarisation of the Rhineland
 - o Economic Consequences
 - Lost 25,000 square miles of territory (13% of total), 7 million people (12% of population), including Alsace-Lorraine, Rhineland, Danzig, Posen and West Prussia
 - Loss of 48% of its iron ore, 16% of its coal and 15% of its agricultural production
 - War Reparations - 132 billion gold marks (6.6 billion pounds), to be paid until 1988
 - o War-guilt clause

- Article 231 on the Germans; blamed the war on German aggression and singled out the Kaiser for blame
- Moral Justification for all other clauses
- Led to the rise of the 'stab in the back' myth which labelled the civilian politicians as 'November criminals'

Elaboration (Analysis)

- Unreasoning hostility to the Versailles Treaty, particularly the war-guilt paragraph 231, was one of the few points of consensus across a bitterly-divided polity
 - Formed a key element of the context in which the Nazis attracted support and came to power
 - Profoundly affected the way in which they captured power
- Memory of war and its legacy served to legitimate the capture of power
 - Hitler's successful presentation of himself as a simple front soldier and the representative of the generation of the trenches lent itself to his success
 - Appointment by a president whose popularity rested on having been a Field Marshal and Germany's great war hero
 - Legitimacy of the Nazi capture of power rested on the memory of war
- Discontent at TOV and irredentist war consensus
 - Political culture of Weimar Germany was generally bellicose (aggressive)
 - Characterised by an urge to strike back at those who had imposed the hardships of a lost war
 - Injustice of a supposedly unfair and dictated peace settlement
 - Willingness to tolerate and support politicians who militantly and violently advocated revision
 - Society which millions of people who have been given the power to vote bore war wounds – physical, psychological, financial
 - Nurtured sentiments which the NSDAP and especially its leader, the "simple front soldier" expressed effectively
 - Urge to not just restore Germany economically and militarily, but desire for revenge on those deemed responsible

Evaluation

- The impact of the war set the basis for the Nazi rise to power
- German Culture's strong focus on national pride particularly concerning the military meant that defeat in WW1 shook German society at every level
- Discontent which spread through all classes of society – Electoral statistics show the Nazi Party drew support from all classes
- Motivation for voting for Nazis; Due to discontent at current government because of impacts of war – "November Criminals"
- Nazi messages which convinced people were always specifically targeted to invoke anger and dissatisfaction at the outcome of war – useless without pre-existing and real conditions caused by it

[Link](#)

Discontent caused by the impact WW1 had on Germany set the basis for the phenomenal growth of the Nazi Party, and made the crude politics of Adolf Hitler and his henchmen acceptable to both Germany's elites and Germany's masses, creating a climate where Hitler could rise to power

Social Division

Topic Sentence

Social division in German society from 1923 to 1934 led to discontent between social classes, which the Nazis exploited to gain support. However, it is not the main factor for Hitler's rise to power.

Elaboration (Facts)

- German society was divided by many different factors
 - o Economic: Industrialisation in German society since 1871 led to emergence of a wealthy middle-class and an increasingly discontent working class
 - Effects of hyperinflation crisis were uneven; The Mittelstand (Lower middle class) and those who relied on savings, investments, fixed income, or welfare support (e.g. war widows living on state pension) lost out the most
 - Landowners suffered less
 - Farmers gained very little benefit from the economic recovery of 1920s
 - o Political: Deeply polarised society
 - Elections of June 1920 saw a swing to the parties of the extreme Left and Right, while the more moderate "Weimar coalition" parties lost ground – SFP vote fell from 37.9 to 21.7% while German Democratic Party fell from 18.5% to 8.2%
 - Judiciary throughout the Weimar Republic displayed considerable political bias in treating left-wing offenders harsher than right-wing offenders
 - o Social: Age group
 - Young people suffered disproportionately from the rise in unemployment after 1924
 - 1925-26, 17% of the unemployed were in the 14-21 age groups
- No political party was genuinely national or broad-based; people voted along class, regional, or confessional lines
 - o Political parties can be described as conservative, middle class, working class and or/catholic – The SPD's votes came largely from urban cities with large numbers of working class citizens

Elaboration (Analysis)

- This division was taken advantage of by the Nazis who appealed separately to each group and played on distrust between them
 - o Upper class: frightened by the increase in support for the communists, supported Nazis who took extreme anti-communist stand
 - o Middle class: discontent with the current government and perceived failure of democracy, they decided that the country needed a strong government and gave their votes to Hitler
 - o Youth: Hitler Youth offered young people responsibility, and helped to provide the party with many future party activists and voters
 - o Nazis represented a wider range of economic and social groups than any other political party
- Division led to a chaotic and polarised society, which drew support to more extremist groups

- July 1932 elections saw the Nazis emerge as the largest party with 37.3% of the vote and 230 seats
- The KDP (Communist Party) emerged as the third largest party with 14.32% of the vote

Evaluation

- While the social divide in Germany led to a generally chaotic and more polarised society which benefited fringe parties with more extremist views, the Nazis were not the only party that benefitted
 - In areas with the highest concentrations of unemployed industrial workers, the KDP did best, enjoying over 60 percent of the vote
- Individuals and groups were prepared to desert traditional allegiances and vote for the Nazis not because of class divide, but because of discontent at their conditions which pushed them to seek an alternative/radicalise
- While each class individually had different grievances, the unifying factor which drove them to the Nazis was dissatisfaction at the current system derived from the impact the first world war had on German society

Link

Thus, though social divide in Germany resulted in a more easily exploited population by the Nazis, and led to more polarisation which benefited extremist parties such as the NSDAP, it was not the driving factor for Hitler's rise to power.

Economic Factors

Topic Sentence

Rampant economic weakness in the Weimar republic, while it contributed to the rise of Hitler, was not the most important factor.

Elaboration (Facts)

- The Weimar Republic suffered from major economic problems since its inception
 - o Means of financing the First World War – loans and bonds, had laid the foundation for post-war inflations which had been fuelled and exacerbated by government policies in connection with reparations in 1922-3
 - o Faced the worst inflationary crisis in 1923
 - o Reliant on short-term loans from abroad
- The Great Depression
 - o “Weimar’s economy suffered from an inherent instability, and like any unstable structure required only a relatively small push to bring down the whole structure” – Harold James (Economic Historian)
 - o In October 1929, the Wall Street Crash prompted the withdrawal of American loans from Germany
 - Heralded a phenomenal rise in bankruptcies and unemployment in the following three years
 - 1.4 million to 6 million of the insured population
 - 42% decreases in industrial production
 - Devastating collapse in agricultural prices

Elaboration (Analysis)

- Given its inherent weakness, Germany’s economy being affected so badly by the Great Depression precipitated the actual collapse of Weimar democracy and paved the way for the rise of the Nazis to power
 - o Muller’s administration fell over the issue of unemployment insurance In the wider context of economic recession and rising unemployment
 - o Economic collapse intensified feelings against the Weimar Republic
- Economic helplessness gradually produced and merged with the helplessness of the democratic system
 - o Replacement by Chancellor Brüning, who ruled by presidential decree – death of democracy (lacked majority support in Parliament)
 - o He pursued austere, deflationary policies designed – at the cost of sacrificing the well-being of millions of German families
- Brüning’s policies, combined with the economic weakness heralding the fall of the democratic system, produced the socioeconomic and political circumstances which provided fertile ground for Nazi agitation
 - o Under conditions of rising economic crisis in September 1930, NSDAP achieved electoral breakthrough – 6.4 million votes, 18.3% of the total vote, 107 seats from 12 in 1928
 - o Provided Hitler with an ideal opportunity to play on anxiety of middle-class and rural German voters during the ‘Great Depression’

- Many Germans were looking for some way out of what seemed never-ending misery and perpetual crisis – Hitler claimed to be the answer

Evaluation

- However, these gloomy economic conditions did not exclusively benefit the Nazis
 - Similar extremist parties like the communists (KDP), who were perceived as the party that traditionally represented worker's interests, benefitted as well; 1930 Nazis gained 107 seats, communists gained 77
- Many did not vote Nazi for economic reasons
 - Unemployed (most affected economically) voted for the SPD and KDP
 - Seeing the increase in Nazi support as a one-off "bitterness" or "protest" vote is simplistic
 - Motivated by deeper reasons – unified a group of highly disparate voters into a 'national' desire for a 'new Germany'
- Economic depression magnified the underlying anti-democratic mood, but did not create it
 - Caused by impact of the war which cast the civilian government in a negative light
 - Bellicose political atmosphere caused by discontent at German defeat – many saw democracy as a weakening of Germany, and economic depression only magnified this

Link

Hence, although economic weakness exacerbated the weaknesses of the Weimar republic, and fuelled discontent which motivated Nazi support from the populace, in isolation it is insufficient to explain the Nazi rise to power.

Weakness of Political System

Topic Sentence

The failings of the Weimar constitution, and overall weakness of the German political system lent itself to the Nazi rise to power but was not the main factor for it.

Elaboration (Facts)

- Lack of popular support for the Republic
 - o Weimar Republic's association with the TOV meant that a sizeable proportion of the German populace lacked faith in the republic
 - The German people showed support for a majority of anti-democratic parties
 - o Constant changing of the Chancellor and inability to pass legislation showed it to be weak
 - Was compared to the decisiveness of imperial Germany
 -
- Proportional representation resulted in coalition governments
 - o Disunity of the many Weimar parties
 - In July 1932, 27 different parties contested the national election and 15 won seats
 - Divided groups with similar ideals into many different parties
 - Liberals divided between the German Democratic Party (DDP) and the more right-leaning German People's Party (DVP)
 - Right-Wing; Leading right-wing conservative party was the German national people's Party (DNVP)
 - o Encompassed reactionary pro-Kaiser, Prussian militarists – elitists masquerading as popular politicians who had no real sympathy with the masses
 - o Beyond the DNVP were a bewildering number of small right-wing fringe and special interest parties
 - o Voting for the Reichstag – The German parliament, where national power resided, was by proportional representation
 - Coupled with many parties vying for power, meant that no party had a majority
 - Up to 1930 there were 20 coalition governments, with each cabinet lasting an average of only 8 months
 - Immense difficulty finding a majority to pass legislation in the Reichstag
 - Political landscape was extremely volatile
- Article 48
 - o The Weimar Constitution created the post of the President
 - o Was given the subsidiary power under Article 48 of the constitution to appoint and dismiss elected governments and suspend civil rights he alone judged to be a 'national emergency'

- Due to the indecisiveness of the government, the president often exercised executive powers, for example during the Great Depression
 - Lee argued that the crisis of democratic Republic and growing authoritarianism resulted in the alienation of the electorate, as they lost faith in the effectiveness of the democratic system
 - Hitler's plan of seizing power through legal means meant he was "constitutional", unlike the radical socialists and the incumbent government

Elaboration (Analysis)

- Coalition governments
 - The onus was on democracy to prove itself more effective than the authoritarian systems of the past
 - Coalition governments resulted in ineffective governance
 - Coalition government led to frequent changes of government, and an overheated political atmosphere – perpetual election campaign
 - Diminished the respect and standing of democracy among the population
 - Democracy looked like a system that provided no long-term stability
 - No strong charismatic leader emerged in any of the traditional democratic political parties – leadership vacuum gave Hitler a great advantage
 - In a system where democracy had not put down deep roots, it had failed to win the support of its citizens
- Article 48
 - No effective safeguards against the abuse of article 48, and constituted a real threat to the survival of democracy
 - From 1929 to 1932, over 100 laws were passed by using Article 48 while only 29 were passed by the Reichstag
 - The Weimar Republic's constitution was thus constitutionally flawed and provided Hitler with a legislative precedence for authoritarianism, while resulting in minimal backlash

Evaluation

- The Weimar Government's institutional problems were made more apparent by the Great Depression
 - Stresemann and the Dawes & Young Plans did see some success pre 1929, and it was only after the Depression that the sense of crisis resulted in the exposure of the faults of the Weimar system, and forced Hindenburg to resort to Article 48
- Without his ideology-driven support, Hitler would have been unable to control the largest political party in Germany. Similarly to economic conditions, these were situations that benefitted all radical alternatives, and it was Hitler's authoritarian ideology and charisma that propelled him to leadership.

Link

Thus, though the weaknesses of the Weimar political system facilitated Hitler's rise to power, the government was still able to function before the Depression, and it was ultimately economic crisis that was the nail in its coffin.

Conclusion

It was this socio-political configuration, in a country defeated in war, reduced in territory and status, subjected to a burden of reparations, rankling with revisionism, lurching from one political crisis to the next, and finally suffering major economic collapse, which ultimately spelled the death of democracy and rise of the Nazis. Yet out of all these factors, the impact of WW1 is what set the basis for the unique set of circumstances that led to Nazi seizure of power; it united the divided classes through all-encompassing and widespread discontent, discredited the political system through this same dissatisfaction levelled at a civilian government which was incapable of meeting the people's demands, and plunged the country into economic ruin both directly – reparations and war taking a toll on the German economy, and indirectly – setting the political climate required for Brüning to make decisions which drove millions to the Nazis.