

THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC AND THE RISE OF THE NAZI PARTY



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

The Weimar Republic refers to the German government that was formed at Weimar, a town in the eastern part of the country, in February 1919, after Germany's defeat in World War I. The new republic emerged following a revolution, resulting in the abdication of Wilhelm II in November 1918. The Weimar Republic's constitution safeguarded basic democratic human rights, such as freedom of speech and religion and even equality for women, including their right to vote in public elections (which had not yet been given to French and English women).

When the Weimar Republic was established, Germany did not have a long democratic tradition to support its transition. While the U.S. democracy had been in existence for more than a century at this time, for example, Germany had been ruled as a federal monarchy led by Kaiser Wilhelm II from 1871-1918.

The Republic was often perceived by Germans as having been forced upon them by the victors of World War I. Many German citizens remained deeply sympathetic to the Kaiser who was forced to resign, and to the leadership of the Second Reich, who had not signed the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty offended many sectors of the German nation mainly because of the following conditions:

- A)** Germany had to admit to being guilty for the war and for all the damage it had caused.
- B)** Germany had to pay reparations to compensate the victorious powers.
- C)** Germany was forced to give up 13 percent of its territory and six million of its inhabitants to France, Belgium, and Poland.
- D)** Germany was severely restricted in rebuilding and establishing its military force.

As a result of these conditions and the need to cope with the resentment it created in Germany, the "stabbed in the back" myth arose. According to this myth, Germany had not been defeated on the battlefield but rather had been betrayed by the Communists, Socialists, and Jews.



The Putsch: Nazi Party members arresting city councilmen, Munich, Germany. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (4254/80)

The Weimar Republic had to contend with many economic, political, and social problems. The German soldiers who came back from the war faced high unemployment. Many Germans were simply starving. Germany's heavy debts made it very difficult for the economy to recover and for new jobs to be created. One of the most serious problems was that of hyperinflation. The value of the German currency plummeted from 60 marks to the dollar in 1921 to 4.2 billion marks to the dollar at the end of 1923. For a time people were paid twice a day. The image that expresses this best is that of people filling wheelbarrows with currency and trying to buy anything they could before the currency lost more value.

Among other ways, the political crisis was expressed in frequent elections: 10 in 14 years. Three major revolution attempts also occurred in the first years of the Weimar Republic. In 1919, the Communists tried to overthrow the democratic republic, and in 1920 and 1923, there were attempts by right-wing nationalists, including Adolf Hitler, to seize power.

In 1922, Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau, who was a Jew and strongly identified with the Weimar Republic, was assassinated.

The New York stock market crash of 1929 deeply affected Germany—German banks collapsed and inflation rose. Six million Germans were unemployed in 1932, and the country, like most other nations, entered a serious and drawn-out economic depression.

In light of this situation, many Germans believed that the Nazis were the only ones who could solve Germany's problems and stop the "Communist menace." German president Paul von Hindenburg, who had opposed offering Adolf Hitler the leadership of Germany, was persuaded in January 1933 to appoint him chancellor. The government under Hitler was a coalition in which the Nazi Party was the dominant member with over one-third of the seats in the Reichstag (the German Parliament). Four weeks later,

the Reichstag building was set on fire. Hitler blamed the fire on the Communists and used it as an excuse to pass new laws "for the protection of the German people." This was the start of the Nazi dictatorship and the process of remaking German society in the Nazis' image. Over time media and culture came under control of the Nazis, democratic freedoms were abolished, and the Nazi Party replaced or overtook other previously existing organizations and institutions throughout the country.

SELECTIONS FROM "THE PROGRAM OF THE NATIONAL-SOCIALIST (NAZI) GERMAN WORKERS PARTY"

- 1 We demand the uniting of all Germans within one Greater Germany, on the basis of the right to self-determination of nations.
- 2 We demand equal rights for the German people (*Volk*) with respect to other nations, and the annulment of the peace treaty of Versailles and St. Germain.
- 3 We demand land and soil (Colonies) to feed our People and settle our excess population.
- 4 Only Nationals (*Volksgenossen*) can be Citizens of the State. Only persons of German blood can be Nationals, regardless of religious affiliation. No Jew can therefore be a German National.
- 5 Any person who is not a Citizen will be able to live in Germany only as a guest and must be subject to legislation for Aliens.
- 6 Only a Citizen is entitled to decide the leadership and laws of the State. We therefore demand that only Citizens may hold public office, regardless of whether it is a national, state or local office.
- 7 We demand that the State make it its duty to provide opportunities of employment first of all for its own Citizens. If it is not possible to maintain the entire population of the State, then foreign nationals (non-Citizens) are to be expelled from the Reich.
- 8 Any further immigration of non-Germans is to be prevented. We demand that all non-Germans who entered Germany after August 2, 1914, be forced to leave the Reich without delay.
- 9 We demand the nationalization of all enterprises (already) converted into corporations (trusts).
- 10 We demand profit-sharing in large enterprises.
- 11 We demand the large-scale development of old-age pension schemes.

12

We demand the creation and maintenance of a sound middle class; the immediate communalization of the large department stores, which are to be leased at low rates to small tradesmen. We demand the most careful consideration for the owners of small businesses in orders placed by national, state, or community authorities.

13

We demand ruthless battle against those who harm the common good by their activities. Persons committing base crimes against the People, usurers, profiteers, etc., are to be punished by death without regard to religion or race.

14

We demand the replacement of Roman Law, which serves a materialistic World Order, by German Law.

15

The State must raise the level of national health by means of mother-and-child care, the banning of juvenile labor, achievements of physical fitness through legislation for compulsory gymnastics and sports, and maximum support for all organizations providing physical training for young people.

16

We demand the abolition of hireling troops and the creation of a national army.

17

We demand laws to fight against *deliberate* political lies and their dissemination by the press. In order to make it possible to create a German press we demand:

- A) All editors and editorial employees of newspapers appearing in the German language must be German by race;
- B) Non-German newspapers require express permission from the State for their publication. They may not be printed in the German language;
- C) Any financial participation in a German newspaper or influence on such a paper is to be forbidden by law to non-Germans and the penalty for any breach of this law will be the closing of the newspaper in question, as well as the immediate expulsion from the Reich of the non-Germans involved.
- D) Newspapers which violate the public interest are to be banned.

18

We demand laws against trends in art and literature which have a destructive effect on our national life, and the suppression of performances that offend against the above requirements.

19

To carry out all the above we demand:

- The creation of a strong central authority in the Reich.
- Unquestioned authority by the political central Parliament over the entire Reich and over its organizations in general.
- The establishment of trade and professional organizations to enforce the Reich's basic laws in the individual states.

The Party leadership promises to take an uncompromising stand, at the cost of their own lives if need be, on the enforcement of the above points.

Reprinted with permission from Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, Abraham Margalio, eds., Documents on the Holocaust, Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland and the Soviet Union (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1981), 15-18. All rights reserved.