

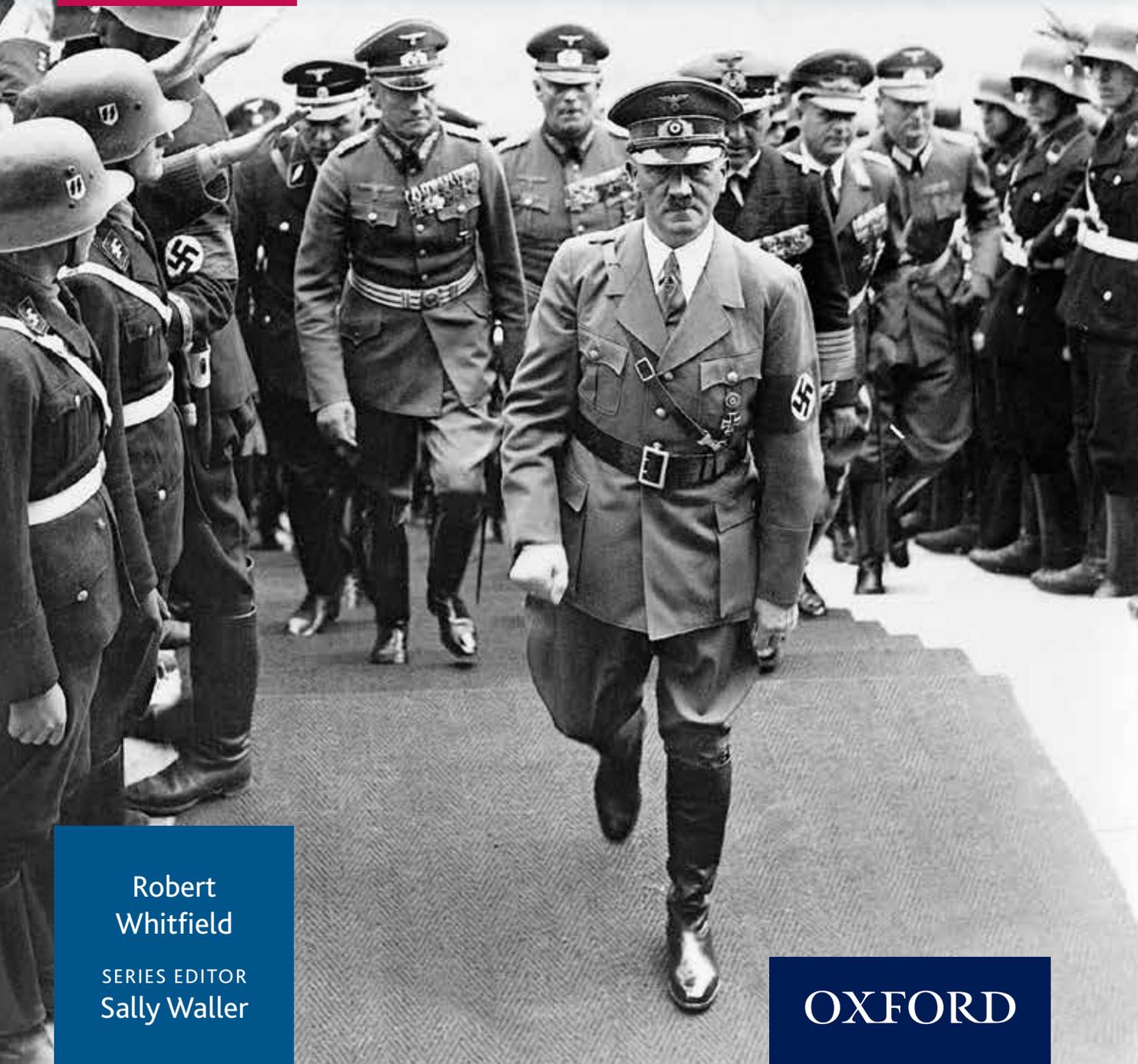
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## 1

# The establishment and early years of the Weimar Republic, 1918–24

## 1 Impact of war, the political crises of October to November 1918, and the establishment of the Weimar Constitution

### The abdication of the Kaiser

At 1:30pm on 9 November 1918, in a house adjacent to the German army headquarters in Spa, Belgium, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany was brought the news that his abdication had been announced in Berlin. His reign was at an end. He might well cry ‘treason’ but, by 5:00pm in the afternoon, he had been forced to accept what had happened. His companions advised him that his only hope of safety was to travel northwards into Holland, which had remained neutral during the war which Germany had been waging on the Western Front for the last four years against the British and French. Wilhelm, however, was uncertain what to do. His wife, the Empress Dona, was still in Berlin and it was not until just before dawn on 10 November, that a convoy of 10 cars, including the Kaiser’s, with its royal insignia removed, set off to the Dutch border at Eysen. Here, the royal party was kept waiting for six hours while the Dutch authorities decided what should happen to such an important visitor, but eventually they were allowed to continue by special train. When Wilhelm met the German ambassador the next day he complained, ‘I am a broken man. How can I begin life again? My prospects are hopeless. I have nothing left to believe in.’ However, as Europe celebrated the **armistice** on 11 November 1918, Wilhelm sat down to ‘a good cup of English tea’ at his new residence.

By the end of September 1918 it had been clear to General Ludendorff and the German High Command that Germany was on the brink of defeat. Although the Allied armies had not yet entered German territory, German forces were in retreat along the Western Front. Elsewhere in Europe, Germany’s Allies were trying to negotiate peace terms. Ludendorff concluded that Germany’s only hope of avoiding a humiliating surrender was to ask the Allies for an armistice. US **President Wilson’s Fourteen Points** offered a possible basis for a negotiated peace settlement but Ludendorff understood that Germany’s autocratic political system was an obstacle to this. He, therefore, advocated a partial democratisation of the political system in Germany as a way of getting better peace terms from the Allies.

#### A CLOSER LOOK

### President Wilson’s Fourteen Points

Woodrow Wilson was an idealist and his Fourteen Points were devised as a means of dealing fairly with the aftermath of war. Some points, such as the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, were quite specific and punitive towards Germany. However, there were also some general principles, such as the establishment of a League of Nations to monitor future disputes and self-determination, whereby different nations should rule themselves, together with general disarmament and Wilson’s determination to create a peace that would last and prevent another war.

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- the impact of war and the reasons why the Kaiser abdicated in November 1918
- the struggle for power in Germany after the abdication, and the political crises of October to November 1918
- the establishment of the German Republic and its constitution
- the strengths and weaknesses of the Weimar Constitution.

#### KEY TERMS

**Republic:** a system of government in which the Head of State, or President, is elected into office

**Armistice:** an agreement to suspend fighting in order to allow a peace treaty to be negotiated



**Fig. 1** Kaiser Wilhelm II (left) celebrated 30 years of government in 1918, but he was forced to resign in November of that year

**CROSS-REFERENCE**

A key profile of information on General Erich Ludendorff is in the introduction, page XII.

**KEY PROFILE**

**Prince Max of Baden** (1867–1929) was a member of the royal house of the Grand Duchy of Baden and a former army officer. In 1914 he became President of the Baden section of the German Red Cross, working to improve conditions for prisoners of war. This humanitarian work earned him widespread respect.

**KEY TERM**

**Constitutional:** any established set of principles governing a state

**ACTIVITY****Evaluating primary sources**

In what ways would Source 1 be of value to an historian investigating the feelings of the German people at the end of the war?

**The October Reforms**

In October, following the recommendations of Ludendorff, the Kaiser began a series of reforms that effectively ended his autocratic rule:

- He appointed **Prince Max of Baden** as his new Chancellor
- The Chancellor was to be responsible to the Reichstag and he established a new government based on the majority parties in the Reichstag, including the German Social Democratic Party (SPD)
- The armed forces were put under the control of the civil government.

These reforms were a major **constitutional** transformation in Germany but they did not come about as a result of popular pressure, nor because of pressure from the main democratic parties in the Reichstag. They amounted to a 'revolution from above' which was not only designed to save Germany from humiliation, but also to save the Kaiser's rule.

**The Peace Note**

On 3 October, Prince Max wrote to President Wilson asking for an armistice. It took nearly three weeks for Wilson to reply, largely because he was suspicious that the German High Command was using the request for an armistice as a means of buying time to regroup and prepare for a new offensive. When Wilson replied, he demanded that Germany must evacuate all occupied territory, call an end to submarine warfare and fully democratise its political system. These terms, which effectively demanded a German surrender and the Kaiser's abdication, were too much for Ludendorff to accept. He tried but failed to gather support for a last ditch military effort to resist, whereupon he resigned and fled to Sweden. The reforms had failed to achieve his objectives.

**The impact on the German people****SOURCE 1**

Ernst Toller, a Jewish writer and member of the Independent Socialist Party, recalled the events of 1918 in his autobiography which was published in 1933:

Germany's needs became ever more desperate. The bread got ever worse, the milk got thinner, the farmers would have nothing to do with the towns. The men at the front were incensed. For four years they had fought, on the Eastern Front, on the Western Front, in Asia, in Africa; for four years they had stood their ground in the rain and mud of Flanders. During the night of 3rd October the Peace Note was dispatched to President Wilson. This unexpected bid for peace opened the eyes of the German people at last; they had no idea of the impending catastrophe. So it was all for nothing – the millions of dead, the millions of wounded, the starvation at home. All for nothing. The people thought only of peace. They had been thinking of war too long, believing in victory too long. Why hadn't they been told the truth?

The news that Prince Max's government was asking for an armistice was a shattering blow to the morale of the German people and to their armed forces. The Peace Note was an admission that Germany had lost the war. This was the first occasion on which the German people had learned the truth about their country's hopeless military situation. It undermined their respect for the Kaiser and his military and political leaders. Civilians who had borne the hardships of food shortages with fortitude were no longer prepared to show restraint. Many soldiers and sailors lost respect for their officers. The Kaiser was increasingly seen as an obstacle to peace but he resolutely refused to abdicate. During a strike in Friedrichshafen on 22 October, workers shouted 'The Kaiser is a scoundrel' and 'Up with the German Republic.' On 28 October,

when the German navy's high command, in one last futile act of resistance to a humiliating peace, ordered ships from Wilhelmshaven to attack British ships in the English Channel, the crews of two cruisers refused to obey orders. This naval **mutiny** was the beginning of a much broader revolutionary movement.

## The November Revolution of 1918

Unrest in the navy spread to the main German naval base at Kiel. On 3 November 1918, sailors there mutinied against their officers and took control of the base. On the following day the revolt spread to the city, and workers' and soldiers' councils were established, similar to the **Soviets** in Russia during the Revolution of 1917. Despite attempts by the government to meet the mutineers' demands, the revolt spread to many other German ports and cities. By 6 November there were workers and soldiers councils springing up spontaneously all over Germany. Radical socialists did not lead these revolts, although it might seem to outsiders as though Germany was on the verge of a communist revolution like Russia's. In fact, most members of the councils were patriotic Germans who wanted the Kaiser to abdicate and a democratic republic to be established.

Once the authority of military officers, government officials and police had been successfully challenged, the collapse of the regime happened with extraordinary speed. On 8 November a republic was proclaimed in Bavaria and the Bavarian monarchy was deposed. This, according to the historian William Carr, was the 'decisive moment in the German Revolution'. It was certainly a key stage in the establishment of an all-German republic, as it brought home to Prince Max that he had lost control of the situation, but the most important developments were happening in Berlin.

On 9 November 1918, the SPD called on workers in Berlin to join a general strike to force the Kaiser to abdicate. They also threatened to withdraw support from Prince Max's government unless the Kaiser abdicated within 24 hours. Max knew he could not continue to govern without the SPD, so when the Kaiser still refused, Max took matters into his own hands and, on 9 November, he released a press statement claiming the Emperor had abdicated! This was a desperate move by Prince Max to keep some control over the situation, even though he had no constitutional authority to act in this way. On the same day, Prince Max resigned as Chancellor and handed the position to **Friedrich Ebert**, the leader of the SPD. At about the same time, Phillip Scheidemann, another leading figure in the SPD, stood on the Reichstag balcony and declared that the German Republic was now in existence. All of these events happened before the Kaiser had, in fact, abdicated. Later in the day, **General Groener** told the Kaiser that the army would no longer fight for him. At this point the Kaiser had lost control of the situation and had no choice but to abdicate, although he did not actually *sign* his abdication until after it had been announced.



**Fig. 2** Revolutionary sailors and civilians demonstrate in Berlin, led by a sailor from Kiel

## KEY TERMS

**Mutiny:** a revolt by soldiers or sailors against their officers

**Soviets:** the workers' and soldiers' councils established in the Russia Revolution of 1917 (also known as the October Revolution), when the Russian Provisional Government was removed and the Bolsheviks, under the influence of Lenin, took control; the revolution was announced at the second Congress of the Soviets, which were democratic bodies that existed in parallel to the Provisional Government

## CROSS-REFERENCE

Turn to the map in the introduction, page XII, to familiarise yourself with Bavaria and the various other German states mentioned throughout this book.

## KEY PROFILE



**Fig. 3** Friedrich Ebert was a saddle-maker by trade

**Friedrich Ebert** (1871–1925) became active in the SPD and was elected to the Reichstag in 1912. A year later he rose to become President of the party. He led the party into supporting German entry into World War I and expelled the anti-war faction from the party in 1917. He became the first Chancellor in the new German Republic in November 1918 and its first President in 1919.

## ACTIVITY

Summarise the main reasons why the Kaiser was forced to abdicate on 9 November 1918.

## KEY CHRONOLOGY

<b>1918 29 September</b>	Ludendorff called for armistice negotiations
<b>30 September</b>	Kaiser promised political reform
<b>1 October</b>	Prince Max of Baden formed new government
<b>3 October</b>	Prince Max's letter to President Wilson asking for an armistice
<b>24 October</b>	Wilson replied to Prince Max's request
<b>26 October</b>	Ludendorff resigned and fled to Sweden
<b>28 October</b>	Kaiser introduced further reforms making the Chancellor accountable to the Reichstag
<b>30 October</b>	Naval mutiny at Wilhelmshaven
<b>3 November</b>	Naval mutiny spread to Kiel
<b>8 November</b>	Revolt in Bavaria led to declaration of Bavarian Socialist Republic
<b>9 November</b>	Declaration of a German Republic in Berlin and abdication of the Kaiser
<b>10 November</b>	Ebert–Groener Pact
<b>11 November</b>	Armistice signed with Allies

## KEY PROFILE

**General Wilhelm Groener** (1867–1939) came from Württemberg and had had a long and distinguished military career. During the First World War he distinguished himself as an efficient army administrator through his work organising the deployment of troops and ensuring the continuity of vital supplies. He also served on both the Western and Eastern fronts. After the dismissal of General Ludendorff, who fled to Sweden in October 1918, Groener succeeded him as Quartermaster General and Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

## SOURCE 2

In 1922 Kaiser Wilhelm II wrote his memoirs, in which he gave his version of the events of November 1918:

I went through a fearful internal struggle. On the one hand I, as a soldier, was outraged by the idea of abandoning my still-faithful troops. On the other hand, our foes had declared that they were unwilling to work with me to conclude any peace endurable to Germany; and there was my own government's statement that civil war was to be prevented only by my departure for foreign lands. In this struggle I set aside all that was personal. I consciously sacrificed myself and my throne in the belief that, by so doing, I was best serving the interests of my beloved Fatherland. The sacrifice was in vain. My departure brought us neither better armistice conditions, nor better peace terms; nor did it prevent civil war – on the contrary, it hastened and intensified the disintegration of the army and the nation.

## ACTIVITY

## Evaluating primary sources

With reference to Source 2, and your understanding of the historical context, how valuable would this source be for an historian researching the events of November 1918 in Germany?

## The struggle for power

Ebert was not a revolutionary. He believed in evolutionary change through winning a majority in parliamentary elections and then introducing reforms. But, even though he had been chosen by Prince Max as the new Chancellor because he was the leader of the majority party in the Reichstag, he had come to power through a revolutionary act. He was conscious of the fact that his government lacked legitimacy. He was, therefore, determined to establish

a new constitution as quickly as possible. His priority, after agreeing the armistice with the Allies on 11 November, was to organise elections for a **Constituent Assembly**.

### SOURCE 3

Philipp Scheidemann was a leading figure in the SPD. It was he who announced the abdication of the Kaiser, in a speech from the steps of the Reichstag building, on 9 November 1918, he declared:

The enemies of the people are finished forever. The Kaiser has abdicated. He and his friends have disappeared; the people have won over all of them, in every field. The new government may not be interrupted in their work to preserve peace and to care for work and bread. Workers and soldiers, be aware of the historic importance of this day. Great and incalculable tasks are waiting for us. Everything for the people. Everything by the people. Be united, faithful and conscientious. The old and rotten, the monarchy, has collapsed. The new may live. Long live the German Republic!



### PRACTICE QUESTION

With reference to Sources 2 and 3, and your understanding of the historical context, which of these sources would be more valuable to an historian studying the events of November 1918 in Germany?

Prior to the creation of a new constitution, Ebert urged Germans to keep essential services running, to avoid street demonstrations and to maintain law and order. His problem was that his authority did not extend much beyond Berlin where disorder and violence were becoming the norm. After the armistice and the demobilisation of much of the army, bands of angry, disillusioned and workless ex-soldiers roamed the streets. Street demonstrations, strikes and armed clashes became regular occurrences.

### KEY TERM

**Constituent Assembly:** an elected body with the specific task of drawing up a new constitution, usually in the aftermath of a revolution

### CROSS-REFERENCE

See below and A Closer Look on page 7 to study the different political parties.

### STUDY TIP

All sources have some value for historians but their specific value depends on their provenance and the context in which they were written. It is also important to consider the tone and the emphasis of each source. These two sources have very different tones which reflect their provenance and the audience for whom they were intended.

## A CLOSER LOOK

### Socialist groups and parties in 1918

Spartacist League (later KPD)	USPD	The Social Democratic Party (SPD)
<b>Founded:</b> 1916, by a more revolutionary minority group from the SPD. The name was changed to German Communist Party (KPD) in January 1919.	<b>Founded:</b> 1917, by a breakaway minority group from the left of the SPD.	<b>Founded:</b> 1875, as a Marxist socialist party committed to revolution.
<b>Leaders:</b> Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.	<b>Leaders:</b> Hugo Hasse.	<b>Leaders:</b> Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann.
<b>Aims:</b> Wanted republican government controlled by workers' and soldiers' councils, welfare benefits, nationalisation, workers' control of major industries, disbanding of the army and creation of local workers' militias. Opposed to First World War.	<b>Aims:</b> Wanted a republic with national Reichstag working with workers' and soldiers' councils, welfare improvements, nationalisation of industry, breaking up of large estates, reform of the army and creation of a national militia. Opposed to First World War.	<b>Aims:</b> Wanted moderate socialist republic with democratic elections and basic personal freedoms, welfare improvements and gradual nationalisation of industry. Wanted continuity and order. Supported Germany's entry into First World War.
<b>Support:</b> a throng of workers would often join them on their rallies and demonstrations in the streets.	<b>Support:</b> grew in strength during 1918 as war-weariness grew.	<b>Support:</b> Appealed largely to working-class voters and, in 1912, became the largest party in the Reichstag.
<b>Membership:</b> c. 5,000	<b>Membership:</b> c. 300,000	<b>Membership:</b> c. 1 million

**Pressure from the left**

Ebert's efforts to contain the revolution were further threatened by pressure for more radical change from the left. He could not ignore the fact that the workers' and soldiers' councils, in which the USPD and the Spartacists had established a foothold, had made the running in the early stages of the revolution. They were not about to allow Ebert's government to take the key decisions without any reference to them. On 22 November an agreement was reached between the new government and the Berlin workers' and soldiers' councils whereby the government accepted that it only exercised power in the name of these councils. This was merely a temporary compromise. Many in the USPD, whose leaders were part of Ebert's government, saw the councils as the true expression of the revolutionary will of the people and the means by which the revolution could be extended. They believed that the autocratic system of government would not finally be abolished unless the **aristocratic** estates were broken up, the army, civil service and judiciary were democratised, and the key industries were nationalised under workers' control.

**KEY TERM**

**Aristocracy:** the highest class in certain societies, typically comprising people of noble birth holding hereditary titles and offices

**Pressure from the army and the Ebert–Groener Pact**

In this situation, the survival of Ebert's government depended on the support of the army. Most army officers came from aristocratic backgrounds, had been loyal to the Kaiser and were vigorously opposed to democracy. They had no wish to see Germany become a republic. In late 1918, however, the political situation in Germany was highly unstable and many officers believed that Germany faced the danger of a Bolshevik revolution (like Russia's in October 1917), which would lead to civil war and possible occupation by Allied forces. Their first concern, therefore, was to prevent the revolution going any further. On 10 November, General Groener telephoned Ebert to assure him that the army leadership would support the government. In return, Groener demanded that Ebert should resist the demands of the soldiers' councils to democratise the army and defend Germany against communist revolution. Ebert assured Groener that the government was determined to resist further revolution and to uphold the existing command structure in the army. This agreement became known as the Ebert–Groener Pact.

For Ebert the Pact was a necessary and unavoidable device to ensure an orderly transition to the New Republic. For his critics on the left, however, it was an abject betrayal of the revolution. Whilst Ebert and his cabinet made preparations for elections to a Constituent Assembly, to be held in January 1919, the struggle for power continued:

- On 6 December a Spartacist demonstration in Berlin was fired on by soldiers, killing sixteen
- On 23–24 December, a sailors' revolt against the government in Berlin was put down by the army. In protest, the three USPD ministers in the government resigned
- On 6 January, the Spartacists launched an armed revolt against the government in what became known as the January Revolution, or the Spartacist Uprising. After a week of heavy fighting in Berlin, the revolt was crushed.

**CROSS-REFERENCE**

Read page 27 in Chapter 4 to find out more about the left-wing Spartacist Party and their attempt to bring about a Bolshevik revolution in January 1919.

**CROSS-REFERENCE**

The precise terms of the constitution are set out in Fig. 5 of this chapter.

The Versailles Treaty will be discussed later in Chapter 2, page 12.

**The establishment of the Weimar Constitution in 1919****Elections to the Constituent Assembly**

Amidst the political and social tensions, the elections for the Constituent Assembly were held on 19 January 1919. Women were allowed to vote for the first time. The SPD secured the largest share of the vote and the largest number of seats in the Assembly but they did not have an overall majority and



Fig. 4 SPD propaganda team campaigns on the streets before the January election

KEY PROFILE

**Philipp Scheidemann** (1865–1939) was a popular, long-standing member of the SPD, having first joined in 1883. He became a Reichstag deputy in 1903. Although he supported Germany’s entry to the war, he was in favour of a negotiated peace. On 9 November 1918, it was Scheidemann who announced the birth of the New Republic even before the Kaiser had officially abdicated. He was Chancellor of the first coalition government in the New Republic from February to June 1919, when he resigned in protest against the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty.

would, therefore, have to compromise with other parties in order to establish a new constitution and govern the country. The Assembly met in the small town of Weimar rather than Berlin, as the political situation in the capital was still unstable in the aftermath of the January Revolution. This was how the new political order came to receive its name – the Weimar Republic. Ebert was elected by the Assembly as the first President of the Republic and a new government, led by **Philipp Scheidemann**, was formed by the SPD in coalition with the Centre and German Democratic parties. The workers’ and soldiers’ councils handed over their powers to the Constituent Assembly, which could then concentrate on the business of drawing up a new constitution. Although the representatives did not agree on all issues concerning the new constitution, there was general agreement that it should represent a clear break with the autocratic constitution drawn up by **Otto von Bismarck** for the German Empire in 1871. It, therefore, began with the clear declaration that ‘Political authority derives from the people’, and the constitution was designed to enshrine and guarantee the rights and powers of the people.

KEY PROFILE

**Otto von Bismarck** (1815–98) was the Minister-President of Prussia from 1862 to 1871 who led his state through three wars (against Denmark, Austria, and France) which resulted in the unification of Germany under Prussian domination. He continued to serve as Chancellor in the new German Empire from 1871 to 1890.

A CLOSER LOOK

The main non-socialist political parties in the new republic:

<p><b>Centre Party</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formed in 1870 to protect Catholic interests in the mainly protestant German Reich</li> <li>• Had strong support in the main Catholic areas of Bavaria and the Rhineland</li> <li>• Supported a democratic constitution</li> </ul>	<p><b>German Democratic Party (DDP)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A left-leaning liberal party, based on the old Progressive Party</li> <li>• Most support came from intellectuals and middle class</li> <li>• Supported a democratic constitution</li> </ul>
<p><b>German National People’s Party (DNVP)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A nationalist party, based on the old Conservative Party</li> <li>• Most support came from landowners and some small business owners</li> <li>• Rejected the democratic constitution</li> </ul>	<p><b>German People’s Party (DVP)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A right-leaning liberal party, based on the old National Liberal Party</li> <li>• Most support came from upper-middle class and business interests</li> <li>• Opposed to new republic but willing to participate in its governments</li> </ul>

Table 1 The election results of January 1919

Party	Number of seats gained
SPD	163
USPD	22
Centre	91
DDP	75
DNVP	44
DVP	19

## The Weimar Constitution, 1919

### Strengths of the constitution

The Constitution of the Weimar Republic was, in many ways, more democratic than the systems of government in force at the time in other democratic countries. It also marked a clear break with Germany's autocratic past.

- The new German constitution provided a wider right to vote than in countries such as Great Britain and France. Women were able to vote on the same terms as men and they were allowed to become deputies in the Reichstag and state parliaments.
- The system of **proportional representation** enabled even the smaller parties to win seats in the Reichstag and influence government decisions. The country was divided into 35 electoral districts, each with about one million voters.
- There was full democracy in local government as well as central government. Unlike in the Second Empire, the largest state, Prussia, was not in a position to dominate the rest of Germany.
- The constitution also set out clearly the rights of the individual. The 'Fundamental Rights and Duties of German citizens were guaranteed in the second part of the constitution. Statements included: 'all Germans are equal before the law'; 'personal liberty is inviolable'; 'censorship is forbidden'; 'the right of property is guaranteed'; and 'all inhabitants enjoy full religious freedom'. It gave illegitimate children the same rights as legitimate ones and promised 'economic freedom for the individual'.
- Referendums could be called for by the president, the Reichsrat, or by people's request' if a tenth of the electorate applied for one.

#### KEY TERM

**Proportional representation:** a system of elections in which parties are allocated seats in parliament according to the proportion of votes they receive

### Weaknesses of the constitution

#### Proportional representation

Proportional representation was designed to ensure that all shades of political opinion were represented in the Reichstag, since parties were allocated seats in proportion to the percentage of votes that they received in an election. This was a very fair system but it had two clear consequences:

- **The proliferation of small parties:** Smaller parties could gain representation in the Reichstag – something that does not usually happen in a system of elections based on the first-past-the-post principle (Britain uses this election process). This enabled smaller parties – many of which were anti-republican – to exploit the parliamentary system to gain publicity. Proportional representation did not, in itself, create the fragmented party system. This was due to the deep divisions in German society and the lack of a national consensus.
- **Coalition governments:** Because of the proliferation of small parties, none of the larger parties could gain an overall majority in the Reichstag. Since governments had to command majority support in the Reichstag, all governments in the Weimar Republic were coalitions, many of which were very short-lived.

#### CROSS-REFERENCE

See tables on pages 5 and 7 in this chapter for a summary of the socialist and non-socialist parties in Germany at the time.

More details on the problems of coalition governments are in Chapter 4, pages 26–27

#### ACTIVITY

**Divide the class into pairs. Each pair should consider their answers to the following questions and then report their conclusions to the rest of the class:**

1. Which were the **most** democratic features of the Weimar Constitution?
2. Which were the **least** democratic features of the constitution?

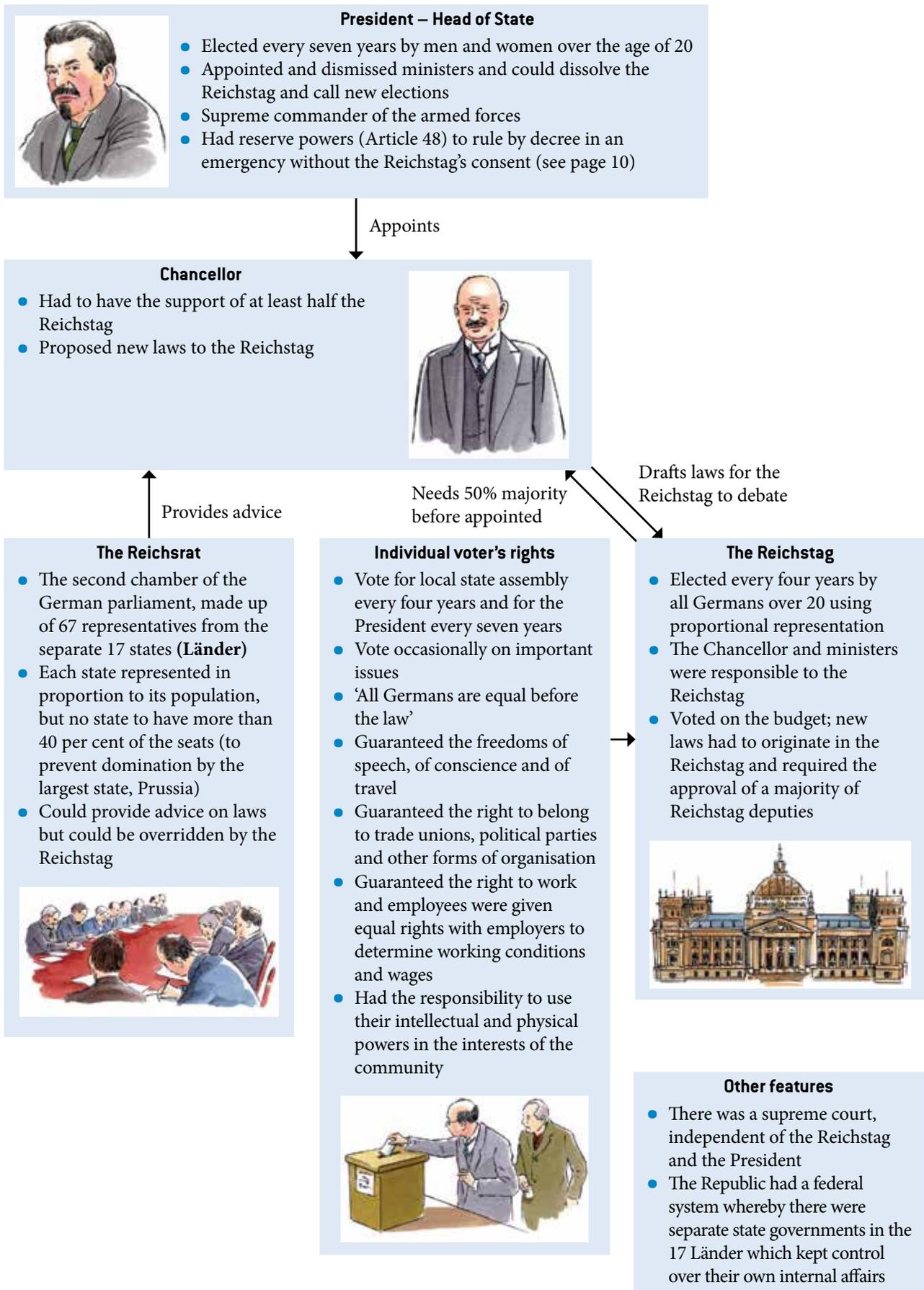


Fig. 5 The constitution of the German Republic

## A CLOSER LOOK

**Länder: the 17 local states of Germany**

Before unification in 1871, Germany consisted of separate states of varying sizes. After unification, these were incorporated into the German Reich but local traditions and loyalties remained strong. Each state (Land) retained control over some functions of government. In the Weimar Constitution, the states retained their powers over the police, education, religion and social welfare.

## KEY TERM

**Autocracy:** a system of government in which power is concentrated in the hands of one person

## KEY PROFILE

**Hans von Seeckt** (1886–1936) was a career soldier who had been placed in charge of the German forces in East Prussia at the end of the war. He was a member of the German delegation to Versailles and was appointed head of the *Truppenamt* ('troop office'), which replaced the forbidden army general staff. He became Commander of the Reichswehr (army) from 1920. He was instrumental in disbanding the Freikorps units. Under his command from 1920 to 1926, the army became a privileged elite beyond accountability.

## CROSS-REFERENCE

See page 28 in Chapter 4 for more on the volunteer Freikorps units.

**Rule by presidential decree**

Article 48 of the constitution gave the President the power to rule by decree in exceptional circumstances. The granting of such powers was not remarkable in itself – indeed, all democratic constitutions allow for an executive authority to use exceptional powers in a time of national emergency. It was not anticipated by those who wrote the constitution, however, that these powers might be used on a regular basis. Ebert, the first President, used Article 48 powers on 136 occasions. Some of these occasions could be deemed to be genuine emergencies but Ebert also used his power in non-emergency situations when he simply wanted to override opposition in the Reichstag. There were no effective safeguards since a president could threaten to dissolve the Reichstag and call new elections if it refused to agree to a presidential decree. It is ironic that Ebert, who had been a leading voice for the cause of parliamentary democracy in the 1918–19 revolutionary upheavals, should, as President, undermine democracy through his overuse of Article 48.

**The survival of undemocratic institutions**

In the Second Empire, the army, the civil service and the judiciary were key pillars of the regime. Army officers, senior civil servants and judges were recruited from the aristocracy, supported the **autocracy** and looked with disdain on democratic politicians. They would not, therefore, fit easily into the new democratic republic. An opportunity existed for the architects of the new constitution to reform these institutions but, because they placed the need for stability above the desire for a thoroughly democratic system of government, they did not do so.

- **The army:** It had been largely free from political control in the Second Empire and its leaders were determined to preserve as much independence as they could in the Weimar Republic. The officer corps of the army in the Second Empire was allowed to continue intact into the new republic with the result that the army was far from being politically neutral. The full force of military power would be used against left-wing revolts whilst conspirators from the Right were often supported by elements within the army. General **Hans von Seeckt**, who was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the army in 1920, believed that the army owed loyalty not to the Republic, which he regarded as merely temporary, but to a timeless Reich that was the true expression of German nationhood. Although he would not allow his officers to meddle in politics on their own initiative, he nevertheless believed that the army as a whole, and under his command, could intervene in politics whenever he saw fit.
- **The civil service:** Under the Weimar Constitution, civil servants were given a guarantee of their 'well-earned rights' and of their freedom of political opinion and expression as long as this did not conflict with their duty of loyalty to the state. This meant that government administration in the new republic was left in the hands of those who were anti-democratic in their outlook. Senior civil servants, especially in the German Foreign Office, were still recruited overwhelmingly from the aristocracy. Top civil servants could wield enormous power, especially when ministers in coalition governments were frequently changing.
- **The judiciary:** Article 54 of the constitution guaranteed the independence of the judges. This would be a basic requirement in any democratic constitution but in Weimar Germany the judges who had served the Second Empire remained in their posts. These men were staunchly monarchist and anti-democratic and showed their bias in their legal judgements. The penal code of the Republic stipulated that anyone

attempting to overthrow the constitution by force should be sentenced to life imprisonment. Members of left-wing groups who were brought before the courts were punished with great severity. Right-wing conspirators, on the other hand, were treated very leniently.

**ACTIVITY**

Review the terms of, and comments on, the constitution in this chapter. Copy and complete the table below.

Aspects of the constitution	Strengths	Weaknesses
The powers of the President		
The voters and the system of elections		
Other aspects		

**Summary**

The defeat of Germany in the First World War brought about the abdication of the Kaiser and the emergence, after a period of conflict and instability, of a new democratic republic. Henceforth, Germany was to be governed by a President and Reichstag, both of which were elected under one of the most democratic electoral systems in Europe at the time. But the circumstances under which the new republic was created left a legacy of bitterness and distrust that was to cause problems for Germany’s new rulers for years to come. On the one hand, those on the left who had fought for a more radical change to Germany’s political, social and economic structures were disappointed and felt betrayed. Key centres of power in Germany – the landowners, the officer corps, the civil service and judiciary, and the owners of big businesses – were largely untouched and unreformed. On the other hand, these supporters of the Kaiser blamed the leaders of the November revolution for the humiliation of military defeat and for the illegal overthrow of the monarchy. In the eyes of the right, the German army had not been defeated on the battlefield in 1918 but had been ‘stabbed in the back’ by the revolution in Berlin. For them the Republic, which owed its existence to that revolution, was illegitimate and deserved to be overthrown. As the historian William Carr has written, ‘The Republic was accepted by many Germans not as a superior form of government but as a convenient means of filling the void left by the collapse of the monarchy’ from the Republic’s inception.

**A LEVEL PRACTICE QUESTION**

‘The Weimar constitution was not democratic nor did it provide the basis for stable government.’  
Assess the validity of this view.

**STUDY TIP**

When faced with this type of question, you should challenge the quotation, but you should also look for points of agreement. You will need to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the constitution, identifying both the democratic and the non-democratic elements in it. You will also need to assess whether the constitution was designed to enable stable governments to be formed. Both elements are important, and try to link them if you can.

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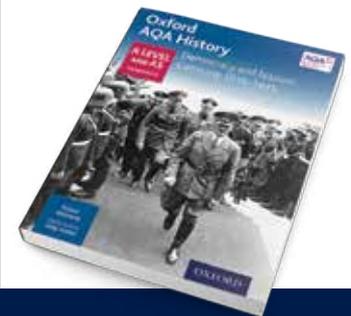
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## What's on the cover?

Adolf Hitler and senior Nazi army officers arrive at the 1938 Nuremberg Rally. The rally was a large propaganda event for the Nazi Party and was held annually between 1933-38.



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ISBN 978-0-19-835457-4



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