

History, Weimar and Nazi Germany

Lesson 3

**Worksheet:**

**How democratic was the Weimar constitution?**

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# The German Revolution, 1918-1919

By 1918 it was clear that the German army was going to be defeated in World War One. The war had also caused huge social problems in Germany. The British naval blockade prevented Germany from importing vital resources and supplies to its people. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of Germans were forced into **starvation**.

The German people wanted change and the person they blamed for their problems was the Kaiser. **Workers went on strike** across the country and the southern state of Bavaria even tried to declare independence from the rest of Germany! In Berlin it was clear that the Kaiser had to go.



# The abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II

On the 9th November 1918 the Kaiser was advised by his close ministers to abdicate the throne. They believed that this was **the only way to restore order in Germany**. Initially, the Kaiser was firmly against the idea but it soon became clear that he had **lost the support of his military**. There were naval mutinies in Kiel and Hamburg and the officers in the German army headquarters refused to support the Kaiser.

When General Wilhelm Groener, the army's second-in-command, informed the Kaiser of the events, he realised he had no choice but to abdicate. **On the 9th November 1918, he abdicated** before fleeing to Holland.



# The declaration of a republic

The abdication of the Kaiser left a political vacuum in Germany. Extreme political parties such as the **Communists** wanted to seize power, like had been done in Russia in 1917. **Moderate politicians** such as Philipp Scheidemann of the Social Democratic Party knew they had to act quickly to prevent a Communist takeover. They quickly announced to the German people that a new 'German Republic' was born.

The SPD had to work quickly to establish the new republic. Friedrich Ebert - leader of the SPD, was announced as **Chancellor**. Ebert rapidly made an agreement with General Groener for the army to support them against the Communists.



# The armistice

The most pressing issue for the new government was Germany's continued involvement in the First World War. Facing defeat and seeing the German society in despair, Ebert sent a representative to negotiate a **peace settlement** with Britain, France and America.

On the 11th November 1918, Ebert's representative, Matthias Erzberger, signed the armistice. **This was the formal agreement between Germany and the Allies to end the First World War.** This was the first major decision of the government. The terms of the peace, the Treaty of Versailles, were to become a permanent burden to the new Republic



# Setting up the Weimar Republic

Ebert took several steps to increase people's confidence in the Republic:

- Arranged for the civil servants who served the Kaiser to keep their jobs. **This allowed the government to function.**
- Reassured General Groener that the army would not be reformed. **This made the army support the new government**
- Reassured industry leaders and rich businessmen that there would be no nationalisation of private industries. **This ensured the economy continued to function**
- Won support from the trade unions by offering workers an eight-hour working day



# The Weimar Constitution

**The Head of State (President)** - Head of the Weimar Republic • Elected by the people every seven years. Played no part in day-to-day politics. Had some important political powers. For example, **the president chose the chancellor.**

**The Government (Chancellor)** - Head of government in the Weimar Republic. **Chose all government ministers** and was in charge of the day-to-day government.

**The Government (Cabinet)** - The most important ministers worked closely with the chancellor in the cabinet, the **main decision-making body of the government.**



# The Weimar Constitution

**Parliament (Reichstag)** - The more powerful of the two houses.

**Controlled taxation.** Directly elected by the people at least once every four years.

**Parliament (Reichsrat)** - Also elected every four years. However, it **represented the regions of Germany.** Each region sent a certain number of representatives, depending on its size.

**Electorate** - Consisted of all **men and women of 21** years old or over.





# Strengths of the Weimar Constitution

**Democratic** - For the first time in Germany, **women were able to vote** as well as men. **The voting age was reduced from 25 to 21.**

**Proportional Representation** - This was meant to make sure that even the smaller parties had a fair share of seats in the Reichstag. **Every party was allocated one representative for each 60,000 votes in its favour.**

**Checks and balances** - The constitution was carefully constructed so that **no one person or one group could have too much power.** The chancellor decided which laws should be passed, though they only became law if the majority of the Reichstag and Reichsrat voted for them.



# Weaknesses of the Weimar Constitution

**Coalition government** - Proportional representation meant that many small parties won seats in the Reichstag – there were 29 parties in total during the 1920s. **Often, no single party had a clear majority.** This meant that coalition partners had to compromise, **often resulting in a lack of clear, strong policies.**

**Weakness in a crisis** - The lack of strong, single-party governments was a particular problem during a crisis, when swift, clear decisions were needed. The solution to this was **Article 48** of the constitution, which said that, in a crisis, the **chancellor could ask the president to pass a necessary law by decree, without the support of the Reichstag.**



# Comprehension Questions

1. How was the Weimar Republic democratic?
2. What powers did the President have?
3. Why did the Kaiser abdicate?
4. How did Ebert gain support for the Weimar Republic?
5. Challenge question: How did the system of Proportional Representation hinder the Weimar Republic?

**Once you have completed your answers, resume the lesson to find out how you got on and hear some more.**



# Glossary

**Abdicate** - When a leader/monarch gives up their position or throne

**Democracy** - A form of government where the people have the authority to choose their governing legislation

**Constitution** - The rules which set out how a country is run

**Revolution** - The forcible overthrow of a government or monarch

**Electorate** - People who are allowed to vote in an election

**Trade unions** - Groups of workers who formed to protect the interests and rights of workers.

**Civil servant** - A person who works for the government in some way

