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

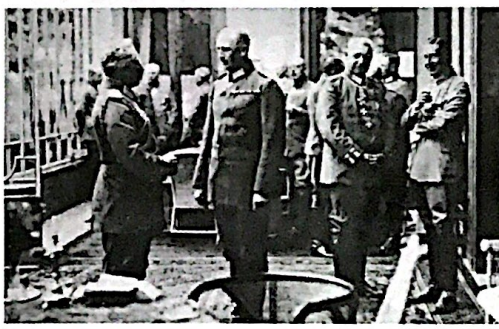


Fig. 1 *Kaiser Wilhelm II (left) celebrated 30 years of government in 1918, but he was forced to resign in November of that year*

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

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 t 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. 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

ACTIVITY

Evaluating historical 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?

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. Thi was the first occasion on which the German people had learned the truth about their country's hopeless military situation. It undermined their respec 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 shou 'The Kaiser is a scoundrel' and 'Up with the German Republic'. On 28 Octob

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 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

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

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.

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.

ACTIVITY

Evaluating historical 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 Novembe 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 com 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**.

KEY TERM

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

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!

CROSS-REFERENCE

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

AS LEVEL 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?

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.

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.

A CLOSER LOOK

Socialist groups and parties in 1918

Spartacist League (later KPD)	USPD	The Social Democratic Party (SPD)
Founded: 1916, by a more revolutionary minority group from the SPD. The name was changed to German Communist Party (KPD) in January 1919.	**Founded:** 1917, by a breakaway minority group from the left of the SPD.	**Founded:** 1875, as a Marxist socialist party committed to revolution.
Leaders: Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.	**Leaders:** Hugo Hasse.	**Leaders:** Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann.
Aims: 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.	**Aims:** 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.	**Aims:** 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.
Support: a throng of workers would often join them on their rallies and demonstrations in the streets.	**Support:** grew in strength during 1918 as war-weariness grew.	**Support:** Appealed largely to working-class voters and, in 1912, became the largest party in the Reichstag.
Membership: *c.* 5,000	**Membership:** *c.* 300,000	**Membership:** *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 th 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 whic the revolution could be extended. They believed that the autocratic system of government would not finally be abolished unless the **aristocratic** estates wer broken up, the army, civil service and judiciary were democratised, and the ke 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 bee 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 demande 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.

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

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.

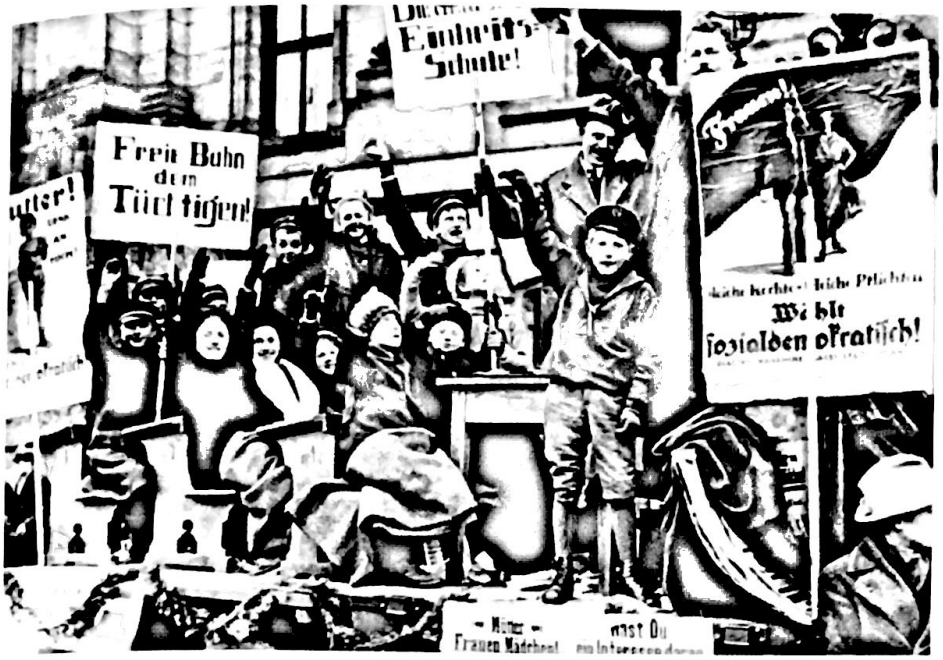


Fig. 4 *SPD propaganda team campaigns on the streets before the January election*

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

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.

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:

Centre Party • Formed in 1870 to protect Catholic interests in the mainly protestant German Reich • Had strong support in the main Catholic areas of Bavaria and the Rhineland • Supported a democratic constitution	**German Democratic Party (DDP)** • A left-leaning liberal party, based on the old Progressive Party • Most support came from intellectuals and middle class • Supported a democratic constitution
German National People's Party (DNVP) • A nationalist party, based on the old Conservative Party • Most support came from landowners and some small business owners • Rejected the democratic constitution	**German People's Party (DVP)** • A right-leaning liberal party, based on the old National Liberal Party • Most support came from upper-middle class and business interests • Opposed to new republic but willing to participate in its governments

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 th second part of the constitution. Statements included: 'all Germans are equa 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 an 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 publicit 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, al governments in the Weimar Republic were coalitions, many of which wer 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?



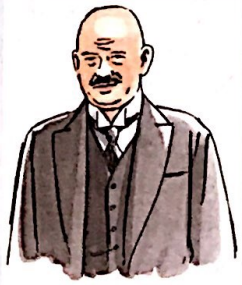
President – Head of State

- Elected every seven years by men and women over the age of 20
- Appointed and dismissed ministers and could dissolve the Reichstag and call new elections
- Supreme commander of the armed forces
- Had reserve powers (Article 48) to rule by decree in an emergency without the Reichstag's consent (see page 10)

Appoints

Chancellor

- Had to have the support of at least half the Reichstag
- Proposed new laws to the Reichstag



Provides advice

Needs 50% majority before appointed

Drafts laws for the Reichstag to debate

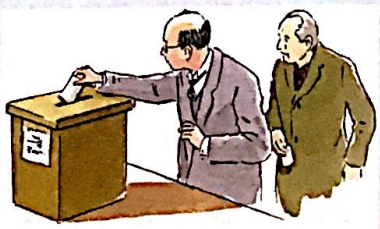
The Reichsrat

- The second chamber of the German parliament, made up of 67 representatives from the separate 17 states **(Länder)**
- Each state represented in proportion to its population, but no state to have more than 40 per cent of the seats (to prevent domination by the largest state, Prussia)
- Could provide advice on laws but could be overridden by the Reichstag



Individual voter's rights

- Vote for local state assembly every four years and for the President every seven years
- Vote occasionally on important issues
- 'All Germans are equal before the law'
- Guaranteed the freedoms of speech, of conscience and of travel
- Guaranteed the right to belong to trade unions, political parties and other forms of organisation
- Guaranteed the right to work and employees were given equal rights with employers to determine working conditions and wages
- Had the responsibility to use their intellectual and physical powers in the interests of the community



The Reichstag

- Elected every four years by all Germans over 20 using proportional representation
- The Chancellor and ministers were responsible to the Reichstag
- Voted on the budget; new laws had to originate in the Reichstag and required the approval of a majority of Reichstag deputies



Other features

- There was a supreme court, independent of the Reichstag and the President
- The Republic had a federal system whereby there were separate state governments in the 17 Länder which kept control over their own internal affairs

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 th new democratic republic. An opportunity existed for the architects of the ne constitution to reform these institutions but, because they placed the need fo 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 independenc 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, 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 giv 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 ne 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 serva could wield enormous power, especially when ministers in coalition governments were frequently changing.
- **The judiciary:** Article 54 of the constitution guaranteed the independen 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.

2 The Impact of the Versailles Settlement on Germany

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Germany's expectations of the terms of the Peace Treaty of Versailles, and the reality
- the terms and problems of the Treaty
- attitudes to the Treaty within Germany and abroad.



Fig. 1 *German delegates signed the Treaty of Versailles in the Hall of Mirrors in 1919*

KEY TERM

Diktat: an order or decree imposed by someone in power without popular consent

KEY CHRONOLOGY

1918	**11 November** Armistice agreement to end the fighting on the Western Front
1919	**18 January** Peace Conference convened at Palace of Versailles
7 May	German delegates given document containing first draft terms of the treaty
16 June	Germans given seven days to sign the treaty
20 June	Coalition cabinet collapsed because of divisions over signing treaty
22 June	Reichstag voted to accept the treaty
28 June	German delegates signed the Treaty of Versailles

The Peace Settlement of Versailles, 1919

SOURCE 1

The German delegates to the Versailles Peace Conference expressed their opposition in May 1919 to the terms of the treaty in a letter to the Allies:

We came to Versailles in the expectation of receiving a peace proposal based on the agreed principles. We were firmly resolved to do everything in our power with a view of fulfilling the grave obligations which we had undertaken. We hoped for the peace of justice which had been promised to us. We were aghast when we read the demands made upon us, the victorious violence of our enemies. The more deeply we penetrate into the spirit of this treaty, the more convinced we become of the impossibility of carrying it out. The exactions of this treaty are more than the German people can bear.

ACTIVITY

With reference to Source 1, summarise the main German objections to the Treaty of Versailles.

The war had ended with the armistice agreement on 11 November 1918. Although Germany was on the brink of defeat, the armistice was not a surrende It was an agreement to stop fighting and withdraw German forces from occupie territory, pending a full peace settlement. A conference to settle the peace terms between the Allied powers and Germany met at the Palace of Versailles, outside Paris, in January 1919. The Germans were not invited to attend or allowed to se the terms of the treaty until 7 May. The German government suggested changes to the treaty but the **Allies** agreed to very few and, on 16 June, gave the Germar government seven days to accept the treaty. This provoked a political crisis in Berlin and led to the formation of a new coalition government. Finally, on 28 June, the Versailles Treaty was signed by all the powers. It imposed much harsh conditions on Germany than most Germans had expected or were prepared to accept. Moreover, because Germany had not been allowed to participate in the conference or to negotiate over the terms, the treaty was regarded by Germans all political viewpoints as a ***Diktat*** or dictated peace. Hatred of the treaty, and o the politicians who had signed it, would continue to cause political divisions throughout the life of the Weimar Republic.

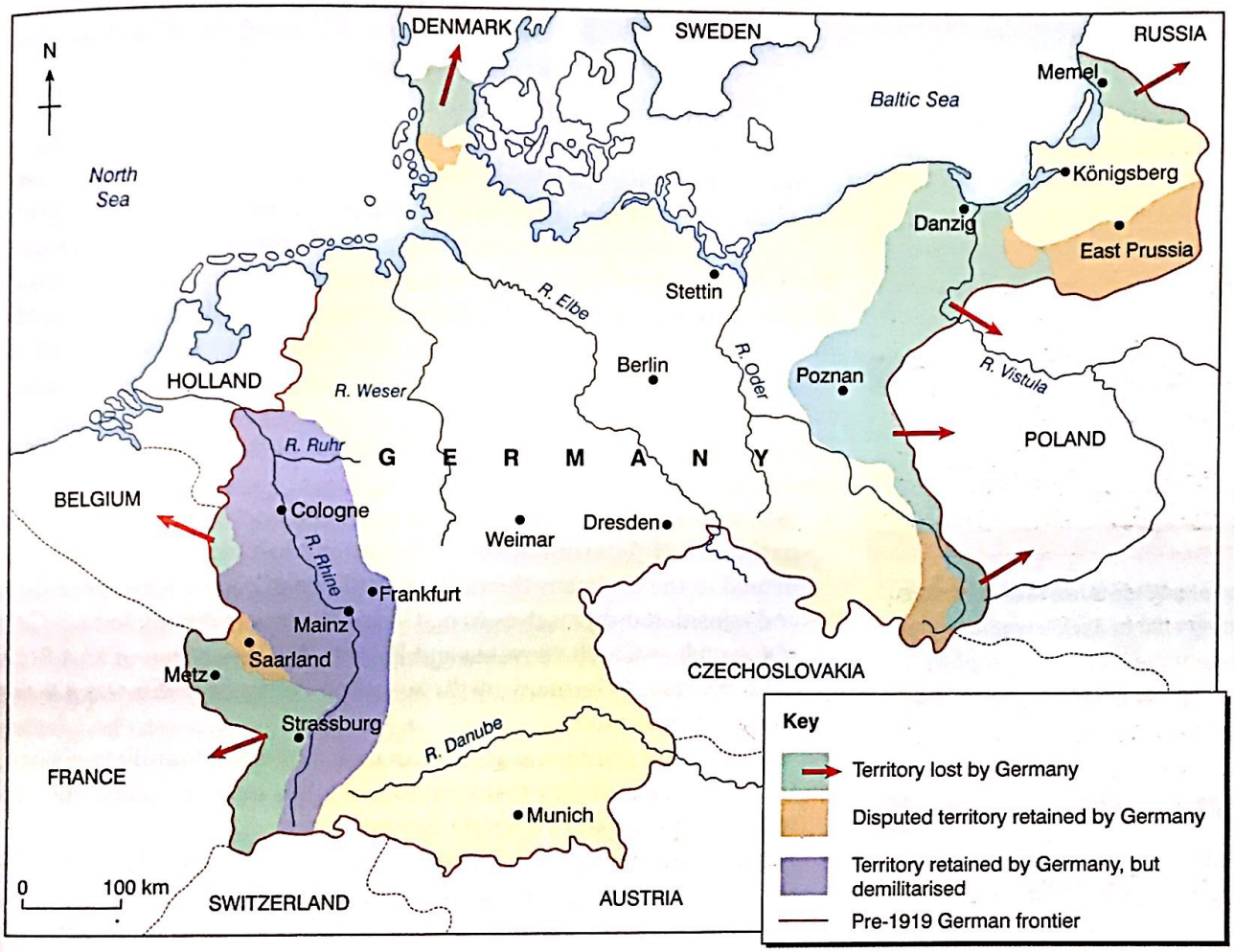
A CLOSER LOOK

The Allies at Versailles

The Paris Peace Conference opened on 12 January 1919 and meetings wer held at various locations in and around Paris. Leaders representing about 75 per cent of the world's population attended but the defeated powers wa excluded and all the major decisions were taken by the four most influent leaders: US President Woodrow Wilson, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, French Prime Minister and conference chairman Georges Clemenceau and Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando.

The terms of the treaty

Territorial losses: The treaty removed over 70,000 km² (13 per cent) of German territory and all Germany's overseas colonies: Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France; Eupen and Malmedy were given to Belgium; Northern Schleswig-Holstein was given to Denmark; Most of Posen, West Prussia and part of Pomerania (the Polish Corridor) were given to Poland; Danzig, a city with a majority German population, became a free state under League of Nations protection; Memel was taken by Lithuania; Eastern Silesia was given to Poland, although Western Silesia voted to remain part of Germany. This all meant that Germany lost 75 per cent of its iron ore, 68 per cent of its zinc ore, 26 per cent of its coal and 15 per cent of its arable land. All of Germany's overseas colonies in Africa and the Far East were placed under League of Nation's control (in practice, divided between the Allies).



Disarmament of Germany: Germany had to surrender all heavy weapons and dismantle fortifications in the Rhineland and on the island of Heligoland. Conscription to the German armed forces was forbidden and the German army was limited to a maximum of 100,000 men. The German army was forbidden to use tanks or gas. The German navy was limited to 15,000 men. The navy was allowed a maximum of six battleships but no submarines and a small number of coastal defence vessels. Germany was forbidden from having an air force.

War guilt: Under Article 231 of the treaty, Germany had to accept responsibility for starting the war. This 'war guilt clause' made Germany liable to pay reparations to the Allies to cover the costs of damage suffered in the war. The final amount of reparations was fixed by a commission in 1921 at £6.6 billion; Germany also had to hand over to the Allies most of its merchant shipping fleet, railway locomotives and rolling stock, patents and overseas investments.

The Rhineland: The left bank of the Rhine (western side) and a 50 km strip on the right bank (eastern side) was permanently demilitarised. An Allied army of occupation was based in the Rhineland to ensure Germany fulfilled its treaty obligations.

The Saarland: This area of south-western Germany, which contained rich reserves of coal, was separated from Germany and placed under League of Nation's control for 15 years, so Germany would supply France, Belgium and Italy with free coal as part of the reparations agreement. France was allowed to exploit coal mines in the area.

Other terms of the treaty: Austria was forbidden from uniting with Germany; Germany was not allowed to join the new League of Nations; The Kaiser and other Germans were to be put on trial for war crimes.

Fig. 2 *The terms of the Treaty of Versailles*



Fig. 3 *German military aircraft being dismantled and scrapped; the German air force was destroyed in 1919 according to the Versailles Treaty terms*

German reactions to the treaty

The terms of the treaty, and the decision by the government to sign it, was greeted with horror and disbelief by the majority of Germans. Until 1914, Germany had been one of the greatest military powers in Europe. For much of the war, and especially in the early months of 1918, victory in the war seemed to be only a matter of time. This, at least, was the way Germany's war effort was portrayed in official propaganda, even after the Allies began to force the German army to retreat, after halting its advance in France in the spring of 1918. Neither ordinary soldiers nor the civilian population were told how desperate Germany's military situation on the Western Front had become by the autumn of 1918. Despite the hardship caused by the Allied blockade, support for the war effort was still very strong. The abdication of the Kaiser and subsequent signing of the armistice, therefore, came as a profound shock to millions of Germans. When followed by the signing of a humiliating and 'dictated' peace treaty, there was almost universal resentment at the harsh terms and few Germans would accept moral responsibility for fulfilling the terms of the treaty.

German objections to the treaty focused, in particular, on a number of its provisions:

- Whilst Wilson's Fourteen Points stressed the importance of the right of **national self-determination** as a basis for a just peace, this right was denied to the Germans themselves. Millions of people who spoke German and considered themselves to be German were now living in non-German states such as Czechoslovakia and Poland. The separation of East Prussia from the rest of Germany by the so-called Polish Corridor was a major source of resentment.
- The 'war guilt clause' was seen as an unjust national humiliation since Germans believed they had been forced into a just war against the Allies, who had attempted to encircle Germany.
- **Reparations** were a major cause of anger, partly because Germans felt that the level was too high and would cripple the German economy, and they did not accept the 'war guilt clause', which justified the reparations.
- Allied occupation of parts of western Germany, and French control of the Saarland coal mines, led to continuing friction. German nationalists were outraged by the outlawing of nationalist groups and banning of German patriotic songs and festivals in areas under French control.
- The disarming of Germany and its exclusion from the League of Nations was seen as unjust discrimination against a proud and once-powerful nation.

CROSS-REFERENCE

See Chapter 1, page 1 for the potential obstacles to Wilson's Fourteen Points.

KEY TERM

National self-determination: nations being able to decide whether they govern themselves, independent of larger empires or groupings of nations

STUDY TIP

This type of question requires a balanced response. There is plenty to agree with in the quotation, as the new German government entered into peace negotiations from a position of weakness but expected the Treaty to reflect Wilson's Fourteen Points, forgetting that France and Britain would demand a much harsher peace settlement. Much of Germany's reaction to the treaty was motivated by the belief that Germany had not been defeated and therefore did not anticipate that Germany would be severely punished. The key points of the treaty which were resented by all Germans were the war guilt clause, the scale of reparations, and the loss of territory, especially that lost to Poland in the east – which left millions of Germans living in Poland.

AS LEVEL PRACTICE QUESTION

'German horror at the terms of the Treaty of Versailles was the result of unrealist expectations'.

Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

A CLOSER LOOK

How justified were German complaints about the Treaty of Versailles?

It is possible to sympathise with the German reaction, but in some ways it was based on unrealistic expectations:

- Wilson's Fourteen Points and the armistice agreement had made it clear that Alsace-Lorraine would have to be returned to France, that a new state of Poland with access to the sea would be created, that Germany would be expected to hand over some of her assets and that considerable German disarmament would be expected.
- The treaty was not as severe as it might have been. Had Clemenceau had his way, he would have extended the French border to the Rhine, or annexed the Saar coalfields and created an independent Rhineland. The French wanted to ensure that Germany could not threaten them again, but the other Allies resisted this as they wanted Germany to remain strong enough to withstand the spread of communism from Russia.
- The treaty did not punish Germany as severely as the Germans had punished Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. Then, Germany had broken up the western part of the Russian Empire and annexed large swathes of territory. In the Reichstag debate on that treaty, only the USPD had voted against this action.
- Germany's war aims of 1914 had included the annexation of territory from its enemies, the expansion of Germany's colonial empire and a very severe reparations bill to be paid by the defeated Allies. In other words, if Germany had won the war, the peace settlement would have been very harsh on the defeated Allies.
- The reparations bill was much lower than demanded by the French. Although reparations were a continuing source of friction between Germany and the Allies during the life of the Weimar Republic, it was not beyond Germany's capacity to pay.

KEY TERM

Reparations: the compensation for war damage paid by a defeated state

ACTIVITY

Class debate

Work in four groups, representing Britain, France, the USA and Germany. Each group should research what their country wanted from the Treaty of Versailles and how far it would have been satisfied by the final terms. Each group should then present its findings to the class.

The political impact of the Versailles Treaty in Germany

The political crisis of June 1919

SOURCE 2

A conservative DNVP deputy, speaking in the Reichstag debate on the treaty, expressed his party's opposition to the Versailles Treaty:

Our Fatherland finds itself in the most difficult hour of its history. We in our party are aware of the results for our people which a rejection of the peace treaty will entail. The resulting harm, however, will only be temporary, but if we accept this treaty we will abandon countless generations of our people to misery. For us, the acceptance of the treaty is impossible for many reasons. In addition to making Germany defenceless, there is also the matter of the theft of our territory.

When the harsh terms of the treaty were revealed to the German government in May 1919, ministers from all parties shared Chancellor Scheidemann's view that accepting it would be incompatible with German honour. At that stage, however, it seemed possible to negotiate some amendments to the treaty. In the event, the rejection of German requests for extensive changes and the

KEY PROFILE



Fig. 4 *Gustav Bauer*

Gustav Bauer (1870–1944) had been a trade union official before he entered the Reichstag as an SPD deputy in 1912. In the political upheaval of 1918–19 he was appointed as Minister of Labour in the cabinets of Prince Max, Ebert and Scheidemann. After Scheidemann resigned in June 1920, Bauer became Chancellor, but he was forced to resign in March 1920 after the Kapp Putsch. He continued to serve as a minister and a Reichstag deputy for several more years.

CROSS-REFERENCES

To remember who Hindenburg was, you can return to his profile in the introduction of this book, page XIII.

The policy of fulfillment is discussed further in chapter 8, page 60.

The Kapp Putsch was a coup attempt in March 1920 aimed at overthrowing the Weimar Republic. Turn to Chapter 4, page 29, to find out what happened.

demand for acceptance of the treaty within seven days caused a political crisis in Germany. Scheidemann and some of his ministers wanted to reject the treaty, whereas the majority of the cabinet and of the SPD members of the Reichstag believed that Germany had no other choice but to sign the treaty. Scheidemann resigned and a new coalition cabinet, led by **Gustav Bauer**, was formed. Meanwhile, some high-ranking officers in the German army, with the tacit support of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, were discussing the possibility of resisting the signing of the treaty through renewed military action. President Ebert told General Groener that he would support rejection of the treaty if there was any chance that military action could be successful. Groener was a realist. He informed Ebert that military resistance would be futile and Germany had no alternative but to accept the treaty. The Bauer cabinet bowed to the inevitable and signed the treaty.

The reaction of pro-republican parties

The divisions over the signing of the Versailles Treaty continued to dominate German political life throughout the years of the Weimar Republic. The SPD and its allies in government in 1919 were well aware that signing it would rebound upon them. Indeed, they were so concerned that they asked their main opponents in the DNVP, DVP and DDP to state that those who had voted for the treaty were not being unpatriotic. They also took the view that the most sensible course of action in the coming years was to outwardly comply with the terms of the treaty whilst negotiating modifications to it. Th became known as the policy of fulfilment.

Even more importantly, however, the treaty turned some (even former supporters) against the Weimar Republic. Its real damage was in alienating moderates who had been happy to accept the new constitution and its promises of a 'better' Germany, but who could not stomach politicians who appeared to have betrayed an unbeaten country. The treaty caused political demoralisation at the very centre of government, associating the Republic once again with weakness and failure. The politicians who agreed to it were forced to become defensive. To the public at large, the gains of the revolution seemed unimpressive.

Reaction on the Right

Right-wing resentment of the Republic was intensified by the signing of the Versailles Treaty. German nationalists could not accept the fact of Germany's military defeat, nor the establishment of the new republic. The signing of the peace settlement was the final straw and led many to join groups committ to overthrowing the Republic. In the eyes of extreme nationalists, the politicia who now governed Germany lacked any legitimacy because they had betraye the 'Fatherland' several times – in the dethroning of the Kaiser, the signing of the armistice and the acceptance of the Versailles Treaty. These politicians became labelled the 'November Criminals' and their actions of 'betrayal' were referred to as 'the stab in the back'. The German army bore no responsibility for the defeat of 1918. The fact that Ludendorff had advised the Kaiser in late September 1918 that the army was on the verge of defeat was conveniently forgotten. Indeed, Ludendorff had advised the Kaiser to appoint a new civilia led government in the hope that better peace terms would be secured and that the high command would avoid responsibility for the defeat and signing of the armistice. It was Ludendorff, and his superior von Hindenburg, who actively promoted the 'stab in the back' myth. This myth was the justification continued nationalist attacks on the Republic, its political supporters and on treaty. It was particularly appealing to ex-soldiers who had suffered in fightin for what they regarded as a noble cause and had then experienced insults an humiliation when they returned to a Germany in the throes of revolution.

SOURCE 3

Field-Marshal Hindenburg gave his view of who was responsible for the defeat and humiliation of Germany, at a commission into defeat in November 1919:

Our repeated requests to the government for strict discipline were never met. Thus our operations were bound to fail. The revolution was only the last straw. An English general said with justice: 'The German army was stabbed in the back.' No guilt applies to the good core of the army. Its achievements are just as admirable as those of the officer corps. Where the guilt lies has clearly been demonstrated. If it needed more proof, then it would be found in the quoted statement of the English general and in the boundless astonishment of our enemies at their victory.

Not all the soldiers who returned to Germany in the wake of the defeat were hostile to the new republic. Many working-class soldiers, who had previously been members of trade unions and supported the SPD, supported the new democratic system. Others gravitated towards the communists. Many, however, could not adjust to civilian life, especially as they had great difficulty in finding employment and yearned for the comradeship and sense of purpose that the war years had given them. These men gravitated towards the **Freikorps** and right-wing nationalist groups. As a result, in the early years of the Weimar Republic, democratic politics was under continuous threat from violent nationalist groups.

SOURCE 4

One German soldier recalled his experiences on returning to Germany in November 1918:

On 15 November 1918 I was on my way from the hospital at Bad Neuheim to my garrison at Brandenburg. As I was limping along with the aid of my cane at the Potsdam station in Berlin, a group of uniformed men, sporting red armbands, stopped me, and demanded that I surrender my epaulettes and insignia [i.e. military badges of rank]. I raised my stick in reply, but my rebellion was soon overcome. I was thrown down and only the intervention of a railway official saved me from my humiliating position. Hate flamed in me against the November Criminals from that moment. As soon as my health improved somewhat, I joined forces with the groups devoted to the overthrow of the rebellion.

A LEVEL PRACTICE QUESTION

Evaluating primary sources

Look back at Sources 2, 3 and 4. In what ways would these sources be of value to an historian studying right-wing political views in the Weimar Republic?

Reactions from abroad

The Allies who drew up and imposed the treaty on Germany had varying reactions to the treaty.

Britain

When Prime Minster Lloyd George returned to London after the signing of the treaty, he was given a rapturous reception from a large crowd. On the

ACTIVITY

With reference to Source 2, explain the main reasons why this deputy was opposed to the Versailles Treaty.

ACTIVITY

Evaluating primary sources

1. What is the value of Source 3 for understanding Hindenburg's motives for claiming that the German army was 'stabbed in the back'?
2. Read Source 4 in this chapter, followed by Source 1 in Chapter 1. Which source do you think is of most value for studying the experiences of soldiers returning to Germany at the end of the war?

CROSS-REFERENCE

The instability and violence of the early years of the Weimar Republic are explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

Read A Closer Look on page 28 of Chapter 4 for more detail on the Freikorps.

STUDY TIP

The three sources come from different social perspectives among the right wing. Source 2 gives an insight into the views of conservative politicians in the Reichstag, Source 3 is a statement from Hindenburg and Source 4 comes from an ordinary soldier. Sources 3 and 4 reflect the feelings on the right about the politicians who took power in November 1918, that they stabbed the army in the back and were the so-called 'November Criminals'. Taken together, the three sources are valuable for building up an understanding of why the nationalist right hated the Republic, but be aware that the narrowness of these perspectives may limit their value.

whole, British public opinion was satisfied that Germany had lost its overseas empire, along with its large fleet, and would be unable to threaten European peace for a generation. Privately, however, Lloyd George believed that Germany should not be so weak that it would be unable to resist the expansion of the USSR westwards, and he wanted Germany to become a strong trading partner with Britain again. Many in Britain saw the French as being greedy and vindictive and there was a growing feeling in Britain that Germany had been unfairly treated at Versailles. One influential view was put forward by the economist, John Maynard Keynes, who argued that the level of reparations was too high. He believed that the level of reparations 'was one of the most serious acts of political unwisdom for which our statesmen have ever been responsible.'

France

The French felt they had suffered the most out of all the combatant nations and they were determined to seek revenge at Versailles. The recovery of Alsace-Lorraine, the demilitarisation of the Rhineland and the payment of reparations were key French demands which had been met. Despite this, there were many in France who regarded the treaty as being too lenient on Germany, and President Clemenceau, who was blamed for making too many concessions, was defeated at the next election in 1920. Marshal Foch, the wartime military commander, expressed a widely held view in France when said, 'This is not peace. It is an armistice for twenty years.'

The United States

Reactions to the Treaty in America were generally negative. There was a widespread opinion that the treaty had been unfair on Germany and that Britain and France had used the treaty to enrich themselves at Germany's expense. The Republicans in the American Congress opposed the treaty and Wilson failed to win the Congressional vote to ratify the treaty, leaving the USA to make a separate peace with Germany in 1921. The USA refused to join the League of Nations and, in the 1920s, retreated from involvement in European affairs.

Summary

The Treaty of Versailles stripped Germany of land, people, resources and military power. Although Germany might have suffered even greater losses if the demands of the French Prime Minister Clemenceau had been accepted by the other Allies, the German people viewed the treaty in wholly negative terms. Its signing by Bauer's socialist-led government in June 1919 was viewed by many as an act of national betrayal. The circumstances in which the new republic had been founded in November 1918 prompted many Germans to reject its legitimacy, despite the democratic process that later led to the drawing up of the Weimar Constitution. For German nationalists the new republic – and, in particular, the socialist politicians who had taken the lead in its foundation – was permanently tainted by its association with betrayal and the humiliation of an unjust and dictated peace.