

Germany

World War I shattered the economic and political stability of many European nations. For example, it led staggering inflation in Germany in the early 1920s. The situation in Italy during this period was equally serious, causing workers there to stage lengthy nationwide strikes. When the United States stock market crashed in October 1929, the worldwide economic depression that followed wreaked havoc on the already weakened German economy. The economic and social chaos created by war and depression made both Italy and Germany ripe for revolution in the postwar period.

The Weimar Republic

While Mussolini was founding the Fascist party in Italy, the Allies were preoccupied with making sure that Germany would never again threaten the peace in Europe. As a result, the Versailles Treaty limited the size of Germany's armed forces and required the Germans to form a democratic government. While many Germans believed that democracy had become inevitable after the breakdown of the monarchy, few really believed in it.

In early 1919 Germans went to the polls and elected delegates to a national assembly. Meeting in Weimar, the assembly drafted a constitution for Germany establishing a democratic republic. The republic, which lasted from 1919 to 1933, was called the Weimar Republic.

Reparations

More than just political problems threatened Germany. Great Britain and France promised their citizens that the German government would pay reparations for the full cost of the war. The Allies set this cost at \$35 billion. Already beset by serious economic problems, the German government in 1922 announced that it could not meet its obligations. France, however, insisted that Germany pay its debt. To ensure this result, French troops marched into Germany's industrial Ruhr Valley in 1923 and took control of the coal mines and steel mills. Angered at the French invasion, German workers went on strike while their government paid them. With income from Ruhr industries going to France, Germany had lost an important asset.

Rise of Nazism

To meet its growing expenses, the German government printed more and more paper money. As a result, inflation soared. Before the war, 4 marks equaled 1 American dollar. By the end of 1923, it took 4 trillion marks to equal 1 dollar. For members of the middle class, inflation was a disaster. It wiped out all their savings.

In the mid-1920s, Germany finally saw ahead some relief from its troubles. The French reached a compromise with the Germans that eased payments, and they left the Ruhr. Freed of debt and strengthened by American loans, Germany entered a five-year period of relative prosperity. But the seeds of discontent had already been sown.

Among the many new political parties challenging the Weimar Republic's authority was the National Socialist Workers' party, or Nazi party. One of the first recruits to this new party was a World War I veteran named Adolf Hitler. Born in Austria in 1889, Hitler failed in his efforts to become a successful artist. After the war, he settled in Munich and joined the Nazi party.

Hitler soon formed the Brownshirts, a private army of young veterans and street thugs. During the inflationary crisis of 1923, Hitler made an attempt to seize power. With armed Brownshirts outside, Hitler jumped on a table in a Munich beer hall and announced, "The revolution has begun!" When the police intervened and arrested Hitler, however, the revolt quickly collapsed.

While in prison, Hitler wrote his autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). In Hitler's view, the Germans were not responsible for losing the war. He blamed the Jews and the Communists for the German defeat. He also declared that the Germans were a "master race" whose destiny was to rule the world. Hitler saw himself as the leader who would unite all German-speaking people into a new empire that would dominate other groups.

During the economic boom of the mid-1920s, the Nazis' influence declined. When the worldwide depression struck in 1929, however, the fortunes of the Nazi party revived. After listening to Hitler blame the depression on the Jews for three years, many Germans began to believe him. In 1932 the Nazis won 229 seats and became the largest party in the Reichstag (RyKS-tahg), the German parliament. On January 30, 1933, German President Paul von Hindenburg asked Hitler to become chancellor. Although entirely legal means, the Nazis had come to power.

Hitler in Power

Hitler's goal all along was the creation of a totalitarian state. Because the Nazis were still a

minority in the Reichstag, however, he planned to hold a new election. But a week before it was to be held, the Reichstag building mysteriously caught fire and burned to the ground. Hoping to reduce Communist support among the workers, Hitler blamed the Communists for the fire. In the election, the Brownshirts forced German voters to back the Nazis. When the Nazi-dominated Reichstag met after the election, it voted Hitler emergency powers to deal with the "Communist threat."

Hitler used his new powers to crush his opponents and consolidate his rule. He banned all political parties except the Nazi party. He discarded constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and press. He placed labor unions under Nazi control. The Nazi government regulated wages, working hours, housing, and the production of goods.

Attacks on the Jews

Hitler directed his most bitter attacks against the Jews. In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their citizenship and their right to hold public office. The laws barred Jewish students from schools and destroyed Jewish businesses. The Nazis forced Jews to wear yellow badges on their clothing. In the *Kristallnacht*, members of the Nazi party attacked Jews on the streets and vandalized Jewish businesses, homes, and synagogues. Hitler's secret police, the Gestapo, arrested Jews and other opponents of the government by the thousands. Many of these opponents were shot. Others were sent to concentration camps, large prison camps where political prisoners or refugees were confined. Hitler was suspicious of even his closest supporters. He particularly feared radical members among the Brownshirts and set out to purge their ranks. In 1934 Hitler had hundreds of Brownshirts and their leaders shot.

The Third Reich

Assured of absolute power, Hitler took the title of *der Fuhrer* (duhr FYUR-uh), "the Leader." He called his government the Third Reich (RYK), or Third Empire, and boasted it would last 1,000 years.

To reach this end, he set about restoring Germany's Versailles Treaty, which limited the size of the German army, and ordered German factories to begin turning out guns, ammunition, airplanes, tanks, and other weapons. He made no secret of his ambitions to expand Germany's territory: "Today Germany, tomorrow, the world!"

Hitler also brought all intellectual and artistic activity in Germany under his control and imposed his own ideas on the arts. To glorify Nazism, he made plans to rebuild Berlin in the style of monumental classical architecture. He discouraged the artistic experimentation that had flourished during the 1920s. As a result, many of Germany's most talented artists and scientists—among whom were Walter Gropius, Arnold Schoenberg, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein—fled the country.

Hitler actively used the press, radio, and movies to flood Germany with propaganda praising the Nazi cause. In its propaganda, the government stressed the importance of a strong military and devotion to the nation and its leader. Hitler also set up organizations for young people between the ages of 6 and 18. These organizations aimed to mold German youth to accept Nazi ideas.