

**Rosa Luxemburg, 1870–1919**



- Rosa Luxemburg was a German-Polish Socialist who had been imprisoned for her opposition to the First World War.
- She welcomed the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, but criticised Lenin's repressive policies. She argued that a true communist revolution must have popular support.
- With Karl Liebknecht she founded the Spartacist League which became the German Communist Party.
- She thought Germany was not yet ready for communism in 1919, but when a workers' revolt broke out in January she felt she had to side with the workers.
- She was captured by the Freikorps, assaulted, then shot. Her body was dumped in a Berlin canal. Thus ended the brief career of a revolutionary who has won respect for her humane vision of communism, but one who was unable to channel the chaotic socialist movement of 1918–19 into an effective revolution.

**FREIKORPS**

The Freikorps (Free Corps) was a general name for about 200 PARAMILITARY groups, largely recruited from demobilised soldiers and officers. They were dominated by right-wing nationalists. They saw themselves as the protectors of Germany from Bolshevism and as the kernel of a new German army.

The Freikorps helped the new government forcibly to suppress left-wing revolts even though many of them were hostile to the Weimar regime.

They were similar to the Fascist squads in Italy; many members of the Freikorps later joined Hitler's SA.

Not all decisions were so conservative. Major industrialists thought it wise to make concessions to trade union representatives to ward off workers' unrest. On 15 November industrialists, led by Hugo Stinnes, and trade unionists, led by Karl Legien, agreed to create a *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft* (ZAG), or 'central working association'. This established the principle of workers' committees, trade union negotiating rights with binding ARBITRATION on disputes, and an eight-hour day. This was one of the greatest achievements of the German Revolution.

A new compromise caretaker government, the Council of People's COMMISSARS, was set up with three members from both the SPD and USPD. Some of the protesters expected the new government to set up a socialist republic, but it was more moderate than its title suggested. The temporary government gained the support of representatives from the numerous councils throughout Germany. In December 1918 the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils voted 544 to 98 to reject a government based on the councils, supporting instead Ebert's preference for electing a constituent assembly. They did, however, favour some more radical changes, for example in the nature of the army and the SOCIALISATION of some industries, than Ebert's government was prepared to endorse.

Ebert's moderate line aroused left-wing opposition. In December 1918 the USPD left the government. In January 1919 mass protests at the dismissal of a radical official turned into a largely spontaneous rising which communist members of the Spartacist League tried to take over in the hope that it would turn into a communist revolution, as in Russia. The SPD government, led by Defence Minister Gustav Noske, ordered the army to suppress the Spartacist rising. The army was supported by the Freikorps, and the Spartacist leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were shot. Over a hundred workers were killed. Thus the German Revolution of 1918 ended in the suppression of radical revolutionaries.

The crucial decisions had been taken. The agreements with the army and the industrialists were vital in establishing the Republic, but these short-term measures were destined to have long-term effects on Weimar democracy, as Chart 1G shows.

**■ 1G The effects of Ebert's short-term measures**

Short-term measure	Immediate effect	Long-term effect
Deal with Groener and army	Army support for government against Left	Military elite in strong position to undermine democracy later
Deal with industrialists	Workers rally to reforming new government, and do not challenge private ownership of industry	Industrialists came to resent power given to workers, and rejected the Weimar regime

## *Why did the Weimar Republic survive the crises of 1919–23?*

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The Weimar Republic's infancy was just as traumatic and turbulent as its birth. Early in 1919, just as the new state was being created, it faced its first threat, the communist-inspired Spartacist rising. Then, in August 1919, even before the constitution had been formally adopted, the Republic received a hammer blow when the peace terms in the Treaty of Versailles laid full blame for the war on Germany and exacted crushing financial compensation. Within a year, in 1920, came a second attempt to overthrow the Republic, this time in the right-wing Kapp Putsch. A brief period of relative calm followed, only to be disrupted in 1923 by HYPERINFLATION that threatened economic chaos and undermined the government's reputation. Finally, in this period, came another right-wing assault, the Munich Putsch led by Adolf Hitler.

Despite these threats, the Republic survived – but why? Was its survival the result of its own strengths or because of the weaknesses of the challenges? This chapter enables you to answer these questions by looking at the following issues:

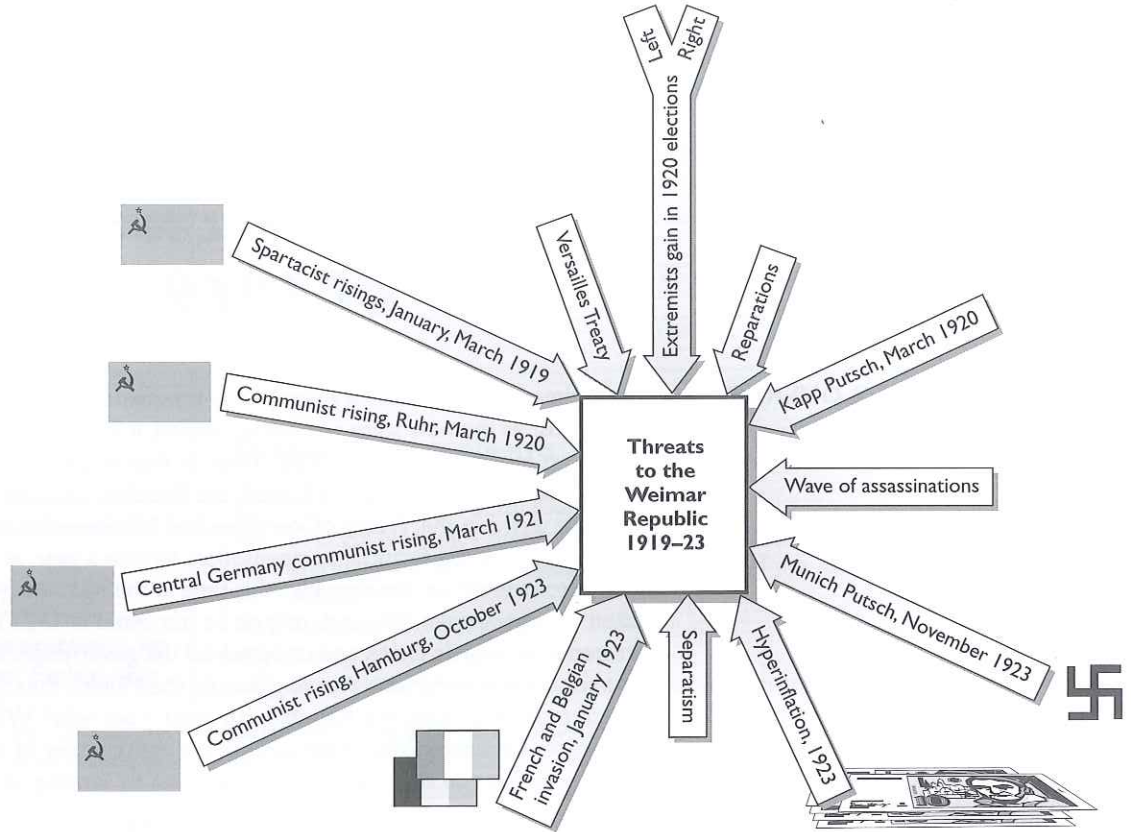
- A** How great a burden for the Weimar Republic was the Treaty of Versailles? (pp. 35–9)
- B** Did Weimar democracy face a serious challenge from the Left? (pp. 40–1)
- C** How strong was the challenge from the Right? 1: The Kapp Putsch and assassinations (pp. 42–4)
- D** Did the hyperinflation crisis of 1923 undermine Weimar democracy? (pp. 44–50)
- E** How strong was the challenge from the Right? 2: Hitler's Munich Putsch, 1923 (pp. 51–5)
- F** Review: Why did the Weimar Republic survive the crises of 1919–23? (p. 56)

### FOCUS ROUTE

As you read this chapter, you will be asked to copy and complete a table like the one below. It will help you to assess the danger posed by each challenge and to decide why the Weimar Republic survived. Use the table to compile evidence of the reasons why the challenges failed. The Review at the end of the chapter (page 56) refers back to this Focus Route.

	Major challenges to Weimar democracy			
	Radical Left		Radical Right	
	The Spartacist rising 1919	Further unrest 1919–23	The Kapp Putsch 1920	The Munich Putsch 1923
Reasons for challenges				
Possible reasons for failure	Evidence			
1 Lack of support				
2 Lack of firm leadership				
3 Lack of a clear strategy				
4 Internal divisions				
5 Actions by the government				
6 Support for the government				
7 Attitude of elite/powerful people, army and police				
Degree of danger (scale 1–5, with 1 = minimal danger)				

## 2A Problems facing the Weimar Republic 1919-23



## 2B Key events 1919-23

- 1919 Jan** Left-wing Spartacist rising  
**Jun** Treaty of Versailles lays blame for war on Germany: Allies demand reparations  
**1920 Mar** Right-wing Kapp Putsch attempts to overthrow the new Republic  
**1923 Jan** French and Belgian troops occupy the Ruhr. Hyperinflation threatens economic chaos  
**Nov** Right-wing Munich Putsch led by Adolf Hitler challenges the Weimar regime

### TALKING POINT

Using what you have already learned, would you expect the greatest threat to the Weimar Republic to come from the Right or the Left?

### TALKING POINT

A lot of words with similar meanings are used in this chapter, such as revolution, COUNTER-REVOLUTION, COUP, putsch, INSURRECTION and revolt. What does each one mean?

### Learning trouble spot

#### The Armistice, November 1918, and the Treaty of Versailles, June 1919

Students often confuse these events, not appreciating the time gap between the two. The First World War formally ended at 11 a.m. on 11 November 1918 when Germany and the Allies signed the Armistice. This laid down certain conditions, many of which were then built into the final treaty. The economic blockade and threat of renewed war were used as a lever to pressurise Germany to agree to the eventual terms. It took months of negotiations between the Allies before the actual Versailles Treaty (along with others with Germany's allies) was signed in June 1919.

## A How great a burden for the Weimar Republic was the Treaty of Versailles?

### FOCUS ROUTE

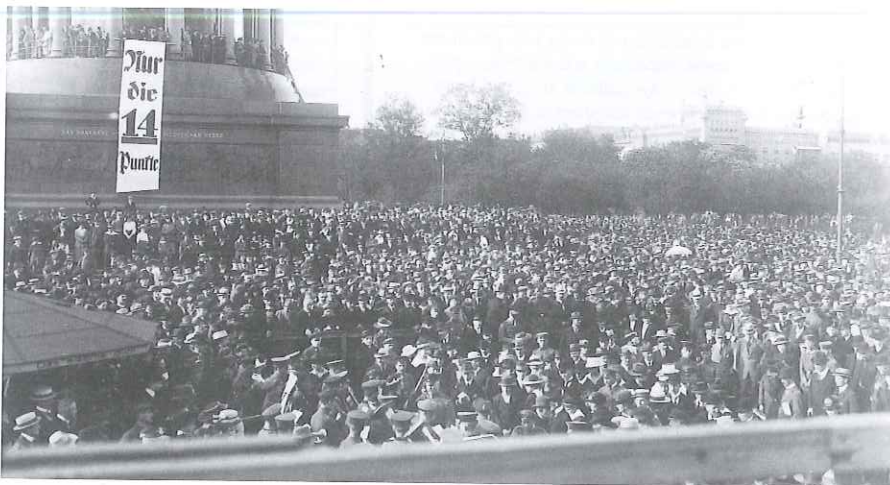
- 1
  - a) List the key features of the Versailles settlement.
  - b) Give two examples where the principle of self-determination did not apply to Germans.
  - c) Give two examples where it was applied, with the effect of harming Germany.
- 2 Which aspects of the treaty were most likely to
  - a) annoy
  - b) damage Germany?
- 3 In what ways did the treaty harm the prospects for Weimar democracy?
- 4
  - a) What arguments are there that in practice Germany was not greatly burdened by the Treaty of Versailles?
  - b) Do these arguments mean that the treaty did not undermine the Weimar Republic?

'Death rather than slavery' thundered the nationalist newspaper *Deutsche Zeitung* in response to the Treaty of Versailles. But it was not just the Right that was infuriated by the treaty. Virtually the whole German nation rejected it. Even the government was split over whether to accept it but in the end it had no choice. The threat of the Allies to resume the war and the fear of total German dismemberment led the government reluctantly to urge acceptance. The Constituent Assembly finally did so in June 1919 by 237 votes to 138.

German outrage at the treaty is explained in a number of ways. Most Germans, as late as spring 1918, had expected victory and to make major gains. The sudden collapse of their hopes bred anger as well as frustration. Secondly, Germany hoped that the Fourteen Points (proposed by President Wilson of the USA in 1917 as the basis for a treaty) would lead to a fair peace.

They were in for a major shock. The Fourteen Points were applied selectively so that millions of Germans were denied their national rights. The German government was excluded from the negotiations and was merely asked for comments within 21 days of a final draft. Two minor amendments were made and then the settlement was imposed as a Diktat, a dictated peace. In the hated 'war guilt' clause, Germany was blamed for the war in order to justify making her pay compensation to the Allies in the form of reparations.

Throughout the Weimar Republic's history its opponents laid the blame for Germany's humiliation at Versailles at the door of the new republic and the 'November criminals' who had stabbed the German army in the back. Did the democratic regime's association with the hated Treaty of Versailles severely weaken its prospects for survival? We focus on this issue below.



Demonstration for the Fourteen Points and against the Treaty of Versailles in Berlin in 1919

### ACTIVITY

Complete the following statements by matching the phrases in the two columns.

#### Under the treaty

- a) *Anschluss* was forbidden
- b) Germany was blamed for the war
- c) The Rhineland was permanently demilitarised
- d) The Rhineland was temporarily occupied
- e) Germany was split in two
- f) A German air force and U-boats were banned

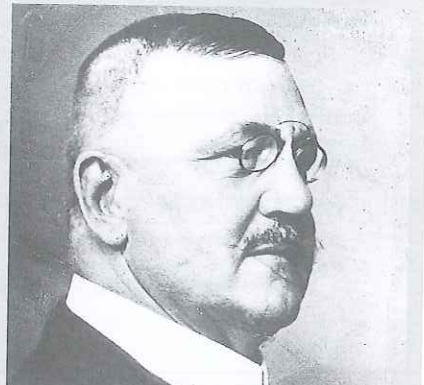
#### Intended result

- g) so reparations could be demanded.
- h) to give independent Poland access to the sea.
- i) to reassure France against German attack.
- j) to stop Germany gaining territory.
- k) to weaken Germany militarily.
- l) to make sure Germany paid reparations.

## FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Complete the third column in your copy of the table on page 33.
- 2 Make notes on the assassinations of this period. What do they, and the reaction to them, reveal about attitudes to the Weimar Republic?

Wolfgang Kapp, 1868–1922



- A right-wing journalist and civil servant, Kapp helped found the right-wing Fatherland Party during the First World War.
- In 1919 he was elected to the Reichstag as a monarchist.
- Rather surprisingly, Kapp became Chancellor of the new government briefly established by the Kapp Putsch, though the Freikorps leader Captain Hermann Ehrhardt and General Lüttwitz had been its main organisers.
- After its failure, he fled to Sweden where he died in 1922.

**SOURCE 2.9** Prosecution of the 705 people involved in the Kapp Putsch

Granted amnesty	412
Proceedings discontinued	285
Proceedings reviewed	7
Punished	1

## C How strong was the challenge from the Right? I: The Kapp Putsch and assassinations

In addition to the left-wing threat to Weimar democracy, there was strong right-wing opposition. This came partly from powerful conservative forces such as the army, industrialists and landowners and other members of the elite. There were also the Freikorps and paramilitary groups which thrived in post-war Germany and the numerous VÖLKISCH groups that had their roots in the pre-war period. These groups felt great bitterness towards the Weimar regime, and their activities weakened the new parliamentary democracy.

### The Kapp Putsch

The first major crisis from the Right was the Kapp Putsch in March 1920. After some order had been restored by the end of 1919, the Socialist-led government had less need for the Freikorps. It was also trying to reduce the size of the army to conform to the disarmament requirements of Versailles. So in February 1920 the Defence Minister ordered two Freikorps brigades (about 12,000 men) to disband. One of their leaders, General Walther von Lüttwitz, refused. Along with other disgruntled army officers and Wolfgang Kapp, leader of the Fatherland Party, he planned to overthrow the government. He contacted other generals, including Seeckt and Ludendorff, but they were non-committal.

On 12 March, 12,000 Freikorps marched twelve miles to Berlin where, crucially, the army refused to support the government. General Hans von Seeckt told Ebert: 'Troops do not fire on troops; when REICHSWEHR fires on Reichswehr all comradeship within the officer corps has vanished.' The government had no alternative but to flee and the Freikorps entered Berlin. A new government headed by Kapp was proclaimed. However, it failed to gain widespread support, even from most conservatives. In a few places, the army supported the putsch; in most areas, it was neutral.

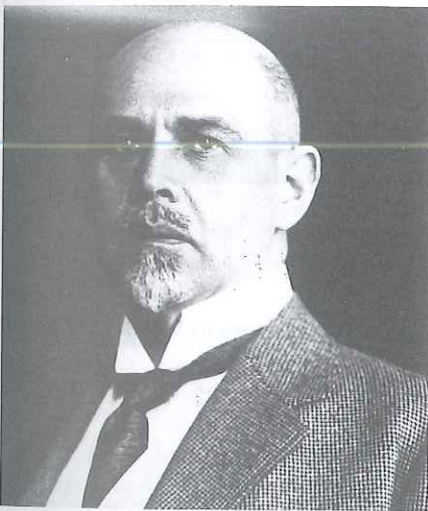
The Left organised a general strike in Berlin and elsewhere in protest at the putsch. Berlin was paralysed. Even civil servants and bankers refused to recognise Kapp's government. It was occupying government buildings but was not able to govern. After four days the Kapp government fled and Ebert's government returned to Berlin. In the aftermath, there were several clashes between workers and the army, especially in industrial areas such as the Ruhr, Halle and Dresden, as some workers tried to extend the successful strike to impose more radical changes on the restored government.

The government took no action against Seeckt and other army leaders for their lack of support. It realised it might still need them against the Communists. Kapp died before he could be prosecuted, but those actually involved in the putsch were treated leniently as Source 2.9 shows.

**SOURCE 2.10** A poster proclamation issued by the government in response to the Kapp Putsch. It was issued in the name of the SPD members of the government, including Ebert, and was probably sanctioned by him

*Workers, Party comrades! The military putsch has started. The Baltic MERCENARIES, fearing the command to dissolve, are trying to remove the republic and to form a military dictatorship. Lüttwitz and Kapp [are] at their head... The achievements of a whole year are to be smashed, your dearly bought freedom to be destroyed. Everything is at stake! The strongest countermeasures are required. No factory must work while the military dictatorship of Ludendorff and Co rules! Therefore down tools! Come out on strike! Deprive the military clique of oxygen! Fight with all means for the Republic! Put all quarrels aside. There is only one way against the dictatorship of Wilhelm II: paralysis of all economic life. No hand must move! No proletarian must help the military dictators. General strike all along the line! Proletarians unite! Down with the counter-revolution!*

**SOURCE 2.11** The Berlin general strike in protest against the Kapp Putsch



Walther Rathenau, 1867–1922

### Assassinations

Between 1919 and 1923 Weimar politicians lived in fear of assassination. The brutalising effect of war, the revolutionary origins of the Republic, the political struggles of the period and the challenge to traditional values encouraged some right-wing Germans to resort to murder to weaken the democratic regime. The lenient attitude to such actions of conservative judges, who had been kept in their posts in the new Republic, reinforced this trend. The Republic lost hundreds of devoted servants through assassination, including one of its greatest statesmen, Walther Rathenau.

### Walther Rathenau

Rathenau was head of the massive AEG electrical firm. He developed imaginative views about industrial organisation and the co-operation of workers and employers. During the Second Reich he had been a strong monarchist, favouring German expansionism, and had played a major role in running the war economy. He participated in arranging the armistice and attempts to improve the Treaty of Versailles. Like his more famous successor Stresemann, his political ideas became more progressive. He was a founder of the Democratic Party. In 1921 he became Minister of Reconstruction and Foreign Minister in February 1922.

Rathenau's involvement at Versailles and his Jewish background made him a target for nationalist extremists. Some Rightists chanted, 'Shoot down Walther Rathenau, that God-damned son of a Jewish sow.' After several failed attempts he was assassinated in June 1922 by a right-wing terror group, Organisation Consul. His death was seen as a major blow to the stability of the Weimar Republic but it led to a general revulsion against these tactics. Over 700,000 people demonstrated in Berlin against his assassination and the murderous Organisation Consul was forced to disband. After 1923 political assassinations declined.

Although there was a strong reaction against these murders, all the revolts and assassinations served to foster disillusionment with the new regime. Most Germans had the opportunity to express their opinions in elections in 1920 after the Spartacist rising and the Kapp Putsch. Source 2.16 compares their reactions one year into the regime with their initial feelings for the Republic.

**SOURCE 2.12** Political assassinations

	Left	Right
Murders committed	22	354 (326 unpunished)
Number convicted and sentenced to death	10	0
Number convicted and sentenced to severe punishment	17	1

**SOURCE 2.15** Cartoon of judges passing sentence on right-wing rebels. Many were reluctant to convict them. In 1926 a judge surveyed the political allegiance of his colleagues and reported the following results: 5 per cent republican, 15 per cent reactionary, 80 per cent waverers

**FOCUS ROUTE**

- 1 Why did the Weimar Republic suffer a major inflationary crisis in 1923?
- 2 How did inflation affect the German people?
- 3 How seriously did it harm the prospects for Weimar democracy?

**SOURCE 2.13** Finance Minister Matthias Erzberger, who had sponsored the Reichstag Peace Resolution in 1917 and had signed the Armistice, was wounded in January 1922 and killed in August. After his murder the Chancellor, Wirth, told the Reichstag

*A state of political bestiality [beast-like behaviour] prevails. I need only to mention poor Frau Erzberger who is constantly receiving letters announcing the intention to defile her husband's grave. Is it surprising, then, that I also received letters yesterday, headed 'on the day of Rathenau's execution', and declaring: 'You men of FULFILMENT mania have not listened to the voices of those who have tried to dissuade you from a bad policy. Let hard fate, therefore, take its course, so that the fatherland may prosper.'*

**SOURCE 2.14** Kurt Tucholsky, left-wing satirist

*When the Republic was created, these judges held over from the monarchy found it impossible to transfer their allegiance to the new organisation of the state... They created a private law and subverted [undermined] the public law of the Republic by refusing to administer justice in an equal manner to all people.*

**SOURCE 2.16** Election results 1919–20 (% of votes cast)

Main pro-Weimar parties	January 1919 (%)	June 1920 (%)
SPD	38	21
DDP	19	8
Z	20	18

Anti-republican parties	January 1919 (%)	June 1920 (%)
USPD/KPD	8	19
DVP	4	14
DNVP	10	15

**ACTIVITY**

- 1 From the point of view of Weimar's survival what were
  - a) the most encouraging aspects
  - b) the most ominous aspects
 of the Kapp Putsch and the assassinations?
- 2 What did the political opponents of Weimar hope to achieve by these assassinations?
- 3 What evidence do Sources 2.12–15 provide of the problems for democracy in Weimar Germany caused by
  - a) the limited nature of the 1918 Revolution
  - b) the Treaty of Versailles?
- 4 How successful were the right-wing attacks on the Republic in the period 1919–22?

## D Did the hyperinflation crisis of 1923 undermine Weimar democracy?

**The impact of inflation**

'Two women were going to the bank with a washing basket filled with notes. They passed a shop and saw a crowd standing round the window, so put down the basket for a moment to see if there was anything going that could be bought. Then they turned round and found that all the notes were there, untouched, but the basket had gone.'

It is difficult to believe that such a theft actually happened but it did – in Berlin in 1923. It happened because the German people had lost all confidence in their currency. Monetary systems are based on confidence. In Britain today,