The Political Spectrum and Voter Options in Weimar Germany

The Election of 1932

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Germany- Pre-WWII

- First Reich in Germany was the medieval Holy Roman Empire that lasted until 1806. It is believed to have lasted about 1000 years.
- Germany unified under Otto von Bismarck in 1871.
- Second Reich in Germany was the German Empire that existed from 1871 until the abdication of kaiser Wilhelm II in 1918.
- “Reich” means realm or empire.
Holy Roman Empire--First Reich--962-1806
Second Reich
Germany’s Heritage

- In the 1st decade of the 20th century, Germany was the fastest growing industrialized nation in Europe. German steel production bypassed Britain.
- Rapid development in chemical and electrical industries.
- From 1871 to 1911-population grew from 40 million to more than 65 million--growing faster than other major European powers.
Germany’s Heritage

- By 1911, German society was well-educated and homogeneous. Compulsory education ages 6-14.
- Illiteracy rate lower than England and France.
- Universities were centers of research/teaching and influenced universities in Europe and America.
- 99% of Germans were Christian--62% Protestants and 37% Roman Catholics.
- Germany’s 600,000 Jews represented about 1% of the population.
Germany’s Heritage

- Prominence of Jews in business, universities, and government made them a visible minority and a target of resentment.
- Anti-Semitism was an established feature of German politics.
- German culture was rich--musicians (Bach, Beethoven), writers (Goethe, Schiller), and philosophers (Kant and Hegel).
Political Spectrum

- A term used to show how different political perspectives relate to one another.
- Origins of the terms left and right trace back to the time period following the French Revolution.
- The more liberal thinkers sat on the left side of the chamber while the more conservative thinkers sat on the right.
- There is no simple explanation for what is a liberal or a conservative.
- This explanation focuses on the extremes of the left and the right, as the extremes contributed greatly to the demise of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler and Nazism.
The Spectrum

The spectrum is often depicted as a line. The farther one moves away from the center, the more extreme the political views.
The Spectrum can also be depicted as a circle.
Why Study Weimar?--From Facing History and Ourselves

1. The history of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) illuminates one of the most creative and crucial periods in the twentieth century and serves as a significant case study of the critical issues of our own time. Many of the questions asked about the Weimar Republic are relevant to problems that individuals and society face in the twenty-first century.

2. Citizens and leaders of the Weimar Republic had to wrestle with the problems of a newly developing democracy: the creation of a new constitution and political culture and the need for institutional reform particularly of the judiciary, the police, and the educational system.
Why Study Weimar?--From Facing History and Ourselves

3. The Weimar Republic experienced hyperinflation and depression, gender and generational conflict, political violence and terrorism, conflicts dealing with the relationship between church and state, and racist antisemitism.

4. The fourteen years of the Weimar Republic were a way station on the road to genocide, and yet they also witnessed the struggle of many decent, sincere people to create a just and humane society in a time of great artistic creativity.
Germany-Post WWI

- Germany at the end of WWI is battered and bewildered. Chancellor resigned, Kaiser abdicated, and an armistice is hastily signed.
- For months, Germany has no firm government in power.
- In election of 1919, 76% of Germans voted for the three parties that favored democracy-- Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Catholic Center Party, and the smaller German Democratic party (DDP).
- February 1919-elected officials met in Weimar, Germany to draw up a constitution.
- May 1919--Germany forced to sign the Versailles Treaty.
- In 1920 elections, democratic parties receive less than 50% of the vote--never again would the founding coalition of the Weimar Republic receive more than 50% of the vote.
Versailles Treaty

- Blamed Germany for WWI.
- Germany forced to give up overseas territories, reduce size of its military, and pay reparations to the Allies.
- Many Germans blamed leaders and identified Weimar Republic with weakness and shame.
- Some Germans even blamed the Jews after a fraudulent Russian document, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, circulated throughout Germany. It said the Jews were conspiring to take over the world.
- New political parties arose in Germany. By 1932 Germany had four major parties--Social Democratic Party (SPD), Catholic Center Party, Communist Party of Germany (KPD), and National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NAZI).
German losses

Versailles Treaty

- Germany lost all her colonies.
- North Schleswig given to Denmark.
- Danzig - a free city run by the League of Nations.
- Eupen and Malmédy given to Belgium.
- New government met here - so Germany was called the Weimar Republic.
- Saar coalfields given to France for 15 years.
- Germany was forbidden to unite with Austria.
- Posen - rich farmland given to Poland.
- Poland was given a "corridor" to the Baltic Sea, cutting off East Prussia from Germany.
- Alsace-Lorraine given to France (which had lost this land to Germany in 1871).
The Politics of Anger

- In 1920 election, more than 35% of the votes went to parties on the far left and the far right. These parties rejected the legitimacy of the Weimar system.
- The newly formed German Communist Party (KPD) received 20% of the votes on the far left.
- On the far right, 15% of the votes went to the nationalist German National Peoples’ Party (DNVP). Most of the members of this party wanted a return to the social order of prewar Germany and a restored monarchy.
- Throughout the Weimar period, at least \( \frac{1}{3} \) of German voters consistently voted for parties that opposed the republican system.
The Politics of Anger

- Late in 1919, many German generals argued that the civilian government that had taken power had betrayed the military forces.
- The notion that Germany had suffered a *Dolchstoss* ("stab in the back") appealed to many Germans.
- Germans were angry at the terms of the Versailles Treaty--War Guilt Clause, Reparations Clause, loss of territory, and loss of military resources.
- Ultra-nationalist right wing groups carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks against their opponents (Left wing).
- 454 murders committed by terrorist groups.
- Very few right-wing terrorists were prosecuted while far-left terrorists received harsh punishments.
Street fighting between KPD and NSDAP.
The Politics of Anger

- Ultra-nationalists executed German Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau in June of 1922. They hated him for reaching a settlement with the Allies and because he was a Jew.
- Anti-Semitism gained strength during the Weimar era.
- Right-wing extremists blamed Jews for Germany’s defeat in WWI and claimed that they had masterminded the communist revolution in Russia.
- In 1920 the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP/NAZI) was formed.
- Beer Hall Putsch-November 1923. Hitler arrested. While in prison, he wrote *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle).
Early Nazi Propaganda

For a period in the 1920’s, Hitler was forbidden to address public meetings in much of Germany, which was a major blow to the Nazi propaganda apparatus. This poster, by cartoonist Philipp Rupprecht (most known for his cartoons for Julius Streicher’s Der Stürmer) is captioned: He alone of two billion people on earth may not speak in Germany.” Courtesy of Dr. Robert D. Brooks.
Nazism

- Hitler patterned his Nazi Party on Mussolini’s Fascist Party in Italy. This was an extreme right party. As a result, the extreme right is usually labeled as Fascist.
- In general, fascists are extremely nationalistic; believe individuals should serve the state, not the reverse; believe in racism and inequality, and want to maintain a social class system; support a capitalist economy with close government supervision; and believe in total government control in virtually all aspects of life--family life, religion, and the arts.
- They are violently anti-communist and their support comes mainly from the middle and upper classes.
Communism

- Found on the extreme left.
- Promote an international revolution where national governments no longer matter; advocate a classless society; and support a socialist economy in which the government owns all large enterprises and lays out a master plan for the whole economy.
- Support for communism comes from the working class and the underprivileged.
- In their attempts to carry out their programs, they too resort to a dictatorship that exercises total control over all aspects of life.
- Communists are violently anti-fascist.
- Communism in practice is often in sharp contrast to its ideology.
Political Platform- Communist Party of Germany

1. Replace Weimar system with a workers’ state.
2. Stop cuts in wages and benefits for workers.
3. Increase spending on welfare for unemployed and social programs like low-cost housing, public transportation, and education.
4. Halt military spending.
5. Eliminate tariffs and trade barriers.
6. Close church-run schools and state support for organized religion.
7. Lower taxes on workers/raise taxes on the wealthy.
8. Legalize abortion.
KPD Propaganda

“End this system”
Political Platform- Social Democrat Party

1. Protect workers’ rights and improve standard of living.
2. Hold down military spending.
4. Ban religious instruction from public schools/maintain separation of church and state.
5. Impose tariffs on imported food to protect farmers.
6. Maintain spending for workers’ benefits and social programs.
7. Legalize abortion.
8. Re-establish eight-hour workday.
SPD Propaganda

“The Worker in the Realm of the Swastika!

Therefore, Vote SPD!”
Political Platform- Catholic Center Party

1. Balance budget by cutting spending on social programs and increase taxes on individuals.
2. Prohibit abortion and increase government support for strengthening traditional family values.
3. Build a fleet of cruisers to protect German shipping/ build fortifications in the Rhineland.
4. Reduce taxes on businesses to encourage industrial growth and economic recovery.
5. Impose tariffs on imported goods.
6. Protect the Roman Catholic Church from government interference.
7. Increase support for police to control street violence by the communists and other radical groups.
Center Party Propaganda

“Bruening--Freedom and Order--The Last Bulwark
Truth, Freedom and Justice. Vote Center.”
Political Platform- Nazi Party

1. Replace the Weimar system with a regime unified under the leadership of the Fuehrer of the NSDAP.
2. Reorganize society to encourage German people to work together for the greater good of our nation.
3. Reject the Versailles Treaty and punish the politicians responsible for stabbing the German military in the back in November 1918.
4. Rebuild the German army, build a fleet of battleships, reassert our military presence in the Rhineland.
5. Unify Germans and expand territory toward the east, beginning with Poland, to provide Germans with living space.
6. Purge Germany of non-Aryan influences.
7. Impose high tariffs on foreign imports to promote industrial growth, economic self-sufficiency, and to protect farmers.
8. Break the hold of international Jewish capitalism over German banks and financial institutions.
NSDAP Propaganda

“National Socialist Or the Sacrifice Was in Vain.”
Lesson and resources from:

The CHOICES Program--"Weimar Germany and the Rise of Hitler"

Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University

Facing History and Ourselves

Echoes and Reflections