

History of Germany 1890-1945

From 1890 to 1945, Germany went through big changes that greatly affected its people, politics, and economy. This period includes the last years of the German Empire, the troubled Weimar Republic, the rise of the Nazis, and the impact of World War II.

The German Empire (1890-1918)

In 1890, Germany was a powerful empire led by Kaiser Wilhelm II. Germany had been unified in 1871 under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, becoming a strong industrial and military power. Wilhelm II, wanting to make Germany more influential, dismissed Bismarck, and followed a more aggressive foreign policy. At home, Germany saw rapid industrial growth, more people moving to cities, and social changes, leading to tensions between the conservative elites and the growing working-class movement.

Political and Social Tensions

Germany's quick industrial growth brought many social changes. The working class grew larger, and so did the influence of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The SPD fought for workers' rights and social reforms, challenging the traditional power of the conservative aristocracy and the Kaiser. Despite strict measures to suppress it, the SPD became the largest party in the Reichstag (German parliament) by 1912. Women's roles also began to change as they entered the workforce in greater numbers and demanded more rights.

World War I and Its Impact (1914-1918)

World War I greatly affected Germany. The war effort needed total mobilization of the economy and society, leading to military rule, severe shortages and hardship at home. By 1918, the strain of the war caused widespread discontent. Soldiers and civilians alike were exhausted, and a series of strikes and mutinies broke out. In November 1918, facing defeat, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated, and Germany became a republic. The armistice signed on November 11 ended the fighting, but the war's legacy of destruction and loss left a deep anger in German society.

The Weimar Republic (1919-1933)

The Weimar Republic, named after the city where its constitution was written, started in 1919. It faced big challenges from the start. The Treaty of Versailles imposed harsh terms on Germany, including significant territorial losses, military restrictions, and heavy reparations payments. Many Germans felt humiliated and 'stabbed in the back' by these terms, which fuelled widespread resentment and political instability.

The early years of the Weimar Republic saw hyperinflation. In 1923, the value of the German mark plummeted, wiping out savings and causing widespread poverty. This economic crisis led to political extremism, with uprisings of both far-left groups – including the Spartacists (January 1919) a brief Soviet Republic in Bavaria (April 1919) and an uprising in the Ruhr (1920) – and far-right groups – notably the Kapp Putsch of 1920, the Black Reichswehr Rebellion of 1923, and a failed Nazi coup in Munich in 1923.

Stresemann's Leadership

Gustav Stresemann, who was Chancellor and Foreign Minister, played a crucial role in stabilizing Germany during the Weimar Republic. Stresemann ended hyperinflation by introducing a new currency, the *Rentenmark*, and negotiated the Dawes Plan in 1924, which eased reparations and brought in foreign loans and led to a time of economic prosperity. His policies improved Germany's international standing and led to a period of relative stability and prosperity in the late 1920s.

Cultural Flourishing and Political Strife

Despite these challenges, the Weimar Republic also saw a cultural flourishing known as the 'Golden Twenties.' Berlin became a centre of innovation in the arts, cinema, and science. However, political strife remained. The Republic had frequent changes in government, and no party could secure a stable majority in the Reichstag.

The Great Depression and Rise of the Nazis

The Great Depression, starting in 1929, had a disastrous effect on Germany. Unemployment soared, and many businesses collapsed. The economic crisis eroded confidence in the Weimar government, and extremist parties gained support. The Nazi Party, led by Adolph Hitler, with its promises to restore German greatness and provide jobs, capitalized on the public's discontent and attracted many desperate voters.

***Machtergreifung*: Hitler's Seizure of Power**

In 1933, in an attempt to provide a stable government, President Hindenburg and the then-Chancellor Franz von Papen did a political deal with Hitler, by which Hitler was appointed Chancellor. He quickly moved to consolidate power, using the Reichstag Fire in February 1933 to push through the Enabling Act, which gave him dictatorial powers. This period, known as the *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power), saw the Nazis dismantle democratic institutions and suppress political opposition through violence and intimidation.

***Gleichschaltung*: The Coordination of German Society**

Following the *Machtergreifung*, the Nazis implemented *Gleichschaltung*, a process of confirming all aspects of German society to Nazi ideology. They took control of the media, education, and cultural institutions, ensuring that all public life conformed to their totalitarian regime. Trade unions were replaced with the German Labour Front, and all political parties, except the Nazi Party, were banned. The regime also targeted Jews, political dissidents, and other minorities, leading to widespread persecution.

Nazi Germany (1933-1945)

Under Nazi rule, Germany underwent significant changes. The Nazis aimed to create a racially "pure" state, leading to the systematic persecution of Jews, political dissidents, and other minority groups. The regime implemented policies that promoted Aryan supremacy and antisemitism, culminating in the horrific genocide known as the Holocaust.

Domestically, the Nazis focused on rearming Germany and preparing for war, violating the Treaty of Versailles. They also launched massive public works projects, such as the construction of the Autobahn, to reduce unemployment and stimulate the economy. These measures, along with the rearmament effort, initially helped improve the economy and reduced unemployment.

Impact of World War II on German Lives

World War II had a profound impact on the lives of German people. As the war progressed, daily life became increasingly harsh. Cities were heavily bombed, leading to widespread destruction and loss of life. Food and essential supplies were rationed, causing shortages and malnutrition. Many men were conscripted into the military, leaving women to manage households and work in factories. The constant threat of air raids, the displacement of millions, and the fear of advancing Allied forces created a climate of fear and uncertainty. By the end of the war, Germany was in ruins, both physically and economically, and its people faced a long and difficult recovery.