

# Weimar government



The perception that the NSDAP “ did not win power”, but rather the Weimar government had failed is valid to an extent. Indeed, the weaknesses of the Weimar Government were a crucial factor in accounting for the rise of the NSDAP. Due to its birth from post-war defeat, the legitimacy of the Republic was consistently compromised throughout the era, which as a result facilitated the rise to power of the NSDAP.

However, it is insufficient to account for its rise solely by the notion that “ the Weimar Government had failed”, as it disregards the exploitation of democracy by the NSDAP. The NSDAP pro-actively campaigned, infiltrated German society and successfully generated mass appeal. Furthermore, the NSDAP utilized the constitution of Weimar democracy, namely the electoral system which comprised proportional representation. Therefore, the chaotic circumstances of the Weimar era- especially during the Depression- and the compromised legitimacy of the government provided a climate of grievances that the NSDAP capitalized upon. The government’s inaction in reforming the entrenched nationalistic sentiments of the traditional army, judiciary and civil service affected the legitimacy of Weimar. Despite the Ebert-Groener pact, the army’s agenda was independent of the government and its actions during the Kapp Putsch reflected this autonomy.

Furthermore, the Republic’s inactivity to “ ensure that civil servants... were committed to the democratic political order” (Evans, 2003, pg 99), rendered it reluctant to defend the Republic in times of crisis. Also, the anti-Republican judiciary exercised its power with political bias through the harsh repression of communist uprisings and a general leniency towards those of the right wing.

The leniency of Hitler's sentence after the Beer-Hall Putsch exemplifies this. However, there was no majority in the Reichstag- as a result of proportional representation in elections- for the sort of radical measures needed to purge those who wished a return to authoritarian government. Therefore, there was a lack of faith in the democratic institution which rendered anti-democratic parties, such as the NSDAP, seats in the Reichstag and in turn undermined the very institution which allowed them to attain governmental power. The failure to initiate complete reformation of traditional German institutions rendered long term consequences which were detrimental to the Republic. The failure to reform the army and the judiciary resulted in the alienation of the KPD. Both these institutions exercised their power through their own political interests which were against those of the left-wing.

Therefore, this prevented a united left wing opposition to the rise of the NSDAP. The economic instability of Weimar exacerbated the disillusionment of German society to democracy. The precarious economic situation brought upon by the responsibility of postwar reconstruction and the unpopular acceptance of reparations under the Treaty of Versailles limited the government's scope of maneuver. The economic upheaval rendered a gap between the promises of 1919 and its delivery. The failure of the welfare system demonstrates that the difficulties originating from the outset of the republic placed a burden upon the welfare system which it was unable to sustain.

As a result, due to the massive expenditure to meet the post-war societal demands, the delivery of the promise of an effective welfare system became a means of discrimination and control. Therefore, it not only failed the

expectations of the German people but also exacerbated the inflation through its expenditure. Essentially, the promises established by the Republic for social stability became problematic upon severe economic upheavals. The social consequences of the Depression accentuated the resentment for Democracy. Unemployment rates rose exponentially to the extent that one worker in three was registered as unemployed.

Despite the hindsight argument given by Evans (2003, pg 243) that the Communist threat lacked substance, there was a sense among the middle class that a communist revolution was imminent. Thus, bourgeois sympathies which initially sided with the SPD during in 1919 due to the communist threat then, now generally sided with the Nazis. Brüning's economic policy of deflation resulted in the income of farmers to decrease significantly and consequently many of them turned to Nazism. As Nicholls suggested, it became fashionable to attack the deflationary policies of Brüning as counter-productive.

He furthermore insisted that Brüning's policies " may well have exaggerated the crisis and caused unemployment to rise more" (Nicholls, pg 111, 1968). Therefore, perhaps the resentment for the government was justified to an extent. Nevertheless, the government was reacting to a circumstance of economic distress and Brüning aimed to restore the country's economy through inspiring confidence amongst manufacturers and investors.

Furthermore, the deflationary policy, as concurred by both Nicholls (Nicholls, pg 111, 1979) and Newton (Newton, pg 149, 1990), was a method adopted by other western countries in dealing with the crisis. Thus, circumstances such as the Depression, which occur beyond the control of the government-

as the foreign loans of the “ Golden” years were attained without the knowledge of an imminent world economic collapse- dictated the actions of the government which resulted in the exacerbation of its unpopularity and illegitimacy. The NSDAP capitalized upon the political and social upheaval caused by the Depression.

This is demonstrated by the election results of July 1932, where the Nazis dramatically increased its influence to becoming the largest party within the Reichstag. The election of 1930, after Brüning had dissolved the Reichstag, was taken advantage of by the NSDAP and became an opportunity for which it catapulted itself to the second largest party in the Reichstag. This demonstrates the rise of the NSDAP as a result of the fragility of democracy. The voters for the NSDAP were those disenchanted by the Republic and affected by the depression, such as farmers who were forced to live on working-class incomes, the educated middle class who were threatened by communism as a result of the depression and finally the massive unemployment crisis rendered many of the lower middle-class into the arms of the NSDAP.

This demonstrates the circumstances of economic upheaval and the resentful mentality of the German people as a means which undermined the Democracy and its legitimacy, which in turn assisted the rise of the NSDAP to power. The disaffection for the fragile democracy provided a context which the NSDAP exploited to broaden its influence and obtain widespread support. The NSDAP exploited democracy and sought to attain power through the electoral system. Its effective campaigning and propaganda, by which they were able to shift their position on policy issues to suit the various groups it

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targeted, successfully transcended the boundaries of class division.

Therefore, as Schoenbaum the NSDAP were willing and able to mobilize the disaffection of millions of Germans (Schoenbaum, pg 200, 1966).

The reasons for its popularity were its sympathies to small business, yet not opposed to big business, its extreme nationalism and its resentment of the Treaty of Versailles, thus combined to render it an attractive party. In addition, the NSDAP through rallies, slogans, Hitler's oratorical skills and symbols, was able to project an image of strong and decisive leadership, which directly addressed the German society's yearning for a return to authoritarian rule. It also overshadowed the propaganda efforts of other political parties. The fact that there was no united, definable Nazi ideology, with its vagueness, its mixture of the old and new and its inconsistency was in effect an advantage for the NSDAP, in that it gave the freedom for the people to draw their own interpretation. As a result, " the Nazi Party became the first truly national party of postwar Germany", ( McCallum, 1992, pg66).

Furthermore, their rise in influence and power were attributed to their proactive effort in infiltrating German society and establishing a sense of its legitimacy. The participation of the NSDAP in the Harzburg Front against the Young Plan rendered great benefits. The alliance with Hugenberg and his media empire, allowed Hitler to attain publicity and exposure. Furthermore, the association with acceptable right-wing forces such as DNVP allowed the NSDAP to obtain an aura of respectability they lacked before. Furthermore, the NSDAP was able to exert its influence upon a range of social and professional groups within German society. For example, the National

Socialist Factor Cell Organisation was designed to penetrate the working class.

There were also other organizations that targeted the appeal of the middle classes such as the League of Nazi Lawyers, the League of Nazi Doctors and the League of Nazi Schoolteachers. Despite the popularity of the Nazis, there existed opposition, such as the SPD, KPD, the Church, industrialists and conservative elites. However, they were not a unified force to counter the growing influence of the NSDAP. The leftist parties were engulfed in their own conflict, as a result of the compromise of the SPD with the old order.

However, as Evans argues, the communist threat was an illusion and blinded the Republic to the threat posed by Nazism. The left-wing parties were ineffective in countering the movement of National Socialism, partially due to its disunity. The Catholic Church opposed the various elements of Nazism; however the vigor of their opposition receded as the threat of communism diminished. The industrialists also exercised caution against the NSDAP, as the Twenty-Five Point Program threatened big business and free enterprise.

However, by 1930 Hitler clarified the lack of intention in implementing the “socialist” elements of the program. Overall, there were fragmentations of opposition to the Republic, which were ineffective in restraining the rise of the NSDAP. Furthermore, the fact that opposition from industrialists and the church diminished as a result of the promise of non-socialist policies and a recession in communist threat, demonstrates the lack of willingness to defend the dying Democracy. Indeed, the perception that the rise of the

NSDAP is accountable to the “ failure” of the Weimar government is valid in explaining the phenomenon.

Essentially, the “ failures” of the Weimar government occurred due to the difficult circumstances of the Weimar era, which undermined the Republic and simultaneously established a context of social discontent which was capitalized upon by the NSDAP. However, the notion that the NSDAP “ did not win power” fails to consider the enormously successful efforts of the NSDAP to exploit the weaknesses of Weimar, and through such establish its legitimacy and respectability and thus, generate more appeal than any other Nationalist right-wing parties.