

# Weimar republic in the years 1919 – 1923 essay sample

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What were the more significant threats to the stability and survival of the Weimar Republic in the years 1919 - 1923? The right wing of German politics in the early to mid-20th century contained mainly industrialists and white collar workers, who mostly all had instinctive ambitions for a return to a more autocratic German state as oppose to the newly formed Weimar Republic, for whom they had a particularly ambivalent attitude. The left wing was also almost entirely committed to class struggle and revolution, subsequently and obviously hostile to the new Republic. After the war ended on 11 November 1918, it was vital that the new Germanic society was reconstructed carefully. With peace declared and the Kaiser gone, the most important task facing Chancellor Ebert was to ensure political stability. However, the parties in Ebert's government were divided on the best way for this reconstruction to take place.

The new government faced threats from the left and right. In December 1918 a group of revolutionaries, known as the Spartacists, broke away from the USPD. Led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, their aspirations were radical. With the nationalisation of all large-scale industries and for all farms to become the property of a "fair state", they hoped for the abandonment of the election for the new National Assembly and all power transferred to workers and their councils. In short, they wished to provoke a revolution, and this is an obvious threat to a fresh, vulnerable administration. This threat was quickly recognised by Ebert, and he rushed to ensure defences were in place. A disgruntled military, which had their previous chief, the Kaiser, abdicated, were in no position of guaranteed influence in the new Republic. However, they resumed that influence after Ebert

promised the army supplies and protection of its status against the armed workers' militias, while in return the army promised to put down revolutionary activity with damning force.

On 1 January 1919, the German Communist Party (KPD) was created from members of the Spartacist Union and other left wing groups. This was swiftly followed by a worryingly successful revolutionary uprising in Berlin, where newspaper offices were seized and extreme left wing committees formed. However, the uprising was halted just as quickly. The military stood by their promises to Ebert's government, and after General Walther von Lüttwitz led Freikorps troops and the regular army to Berlin to crush the revolutionaries, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered on the 15th January. The apparent threat of a revolution appeared fully repressed; it potentially saved Germany from a widespread communist uprising. Yet there quickly became an issue with how Ebert dealt with the ordeal, and an even bigger problem in terms of future defence systems.

From then on, the governments of the new republic were tied to using anti-democratic forces such as the army and Freikorps. The next month, a USPD leader was assassinated in Bavaria by a right wing student. This murder provided the final ingredient in a recipe for another left wing revolution, also encouraged by the rise of the Soviets in Hungary. In early April, the Bavarian Soviet Republic was declared. Carrying out communistic policies, such as seizing the property of the wealthy, leader Eugene Levine soon started rounding up well-known right wing opponents and mercilessly executing them. Once again, though, Ebert's military acted swiftly and went into

Bavaria 30, 000 handed, and the Soviet Republic was crushed after some bitter fighting that claimed the lives of thousands of members of the Red Army. After the fighting ended, 800 known communists were rounded up by the Freikorps, including Levine, and executed. The threat this posed to the Weimar Republic was that it proved how easily susceptible Germanic society was to communist uprisings, but did continue to demonstrate a dominant government policy.

Another pivotal turning point in the Weimar Republic struggle was the Treaty of Versailles. In May 1919, the terms of the treaty were presented to a horrified German delegation and public. There was bitter resentment in Germany at the war guilt clause and the fact that the treaty was considerably harsher than what Woodrow Wilson intended in his original theologies, presented in his Fourteen Points. Rather than disregard public opinion and put Germany in a totally defenceless position, Scheidmann's government resigned on 20th June. The following day, British naval base Scapa Flow experienced the scuttling of Germany's fleet by her sailors; an act of protest and defiance against the "harsh" treaty terms. The replacing government was led by Chancellor Gustav Bauer of the SPD and Erzberger of the Centre Party, and they mutually agreed, along with the rest of Weimar, that any more resistance to their opponents was self-derogatory for the whole constitution. Therefore, they had no choice but to sign the treaty.

It is important to distinguish between the realities of the extent of the terms of the treaty and the great psychological damage it inflicted on the national consciousness of German culture. One of the worst adverse effects of the

treaty was the reaction it had from vengeful right wing parties; the press regarding it is a humiliating Diktat that should never have been signed. Field Marshal Hindenburg hypocritically condemned the signing of the treaty, as it was him who called for an armistice in 1918. He also blamed the left wing for the failure to provide a healthy German state after the war; this provided fuel for a serious revolt from the right against the left. Such accusations gave the anti-Republican right a false belief in the morality of their illegal actions, and provided a serious threat to the Weimar constitution. The threats to the Republic from the right wing forces were apparent and dangerously real in the early part of 1920.

The reduction in military might which the Treaty of Versailles demanded was too much for a number of right wing nationalists who demanded that these terms be rejected. In spite of this, the government imposed a policy of disbandment, ordering certain brigades of the Freikorps to disintegrate. A group of army officers led by General von Luttwitz disobeyed, and on the night of 12th March led his Freikorps brigade into Berlin where they seized the government district of the city. When the army was ordered to react, General von Seeckt refused. Kapp was declared Chancellor by von Luttwitz, and the government fled to Dresden. However, before they left they sent out a mass appeal to strike in defence of the Republic. Immediate success followed; a large general strike paralysed the capital, and the rebels fell heavily out of favour. The original constitution was reinstated. The Kapp-Luttwitz Putsch posed a significant threat to the Weimar Republic; it revealed

the army's reluctance to support the Republic and the dubious loyalty of the Freikorps.

The changing political and financial situation faced by Germans was worst in 1923, the year of the Ruhr crisis. The German defaulting on reparation payments led to the French invasion of one of, if not the, heartland of industrial strength in Germany; the Ruhr. Germany was outraged, and the government encouraged the workers of the Ruhr to adopt a policy of passive resistance. On the one hand, it meant France couldn't utilise the free labour of the Germans. However, coal and other raw materials were subsequently not being produced from the Ruhr, so Germany faced an economic disaster. The lack of income tax for the government as a result led to a hard-lined simple policy of quantitative easing; by August 1923 the German currency collapsed into hyperinflation. This sent the Weimar constitution into disarray and acted as a catalyst for social anarchy. Although the economic crisis did not result in the collapse of the Republic, it shook the faith of many Germans. It was this loss of faith which was to prove fatal in the years to come.