

The biggest threat to  
the weimar republic  
was the weimar  
constitution itself.  
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“ The biggest threat to the Weimar Republic was the Weimar Constitution itself. Discuss” The Weimar Constitution was the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic, because it eventually lead to many problems that would affect the Republic. These were: Hitler’s rise to power against the Weimar Republic, the downfall of the Reichsrat, the passage of the Enabling Act, use of proportional representation, political extremism and the institution of the Reichspräsident. Hitler’s Chancellorship eventually led to the downfall of the Reichsrat and also the passing of the Enabling Act.

This would lead to Hitler gaining full control of Germany and the end of the Weimar Republic. One of the factors which shows the Constitution was the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic was Hitler’s rise to power. In 1919, Hitler was employed as ‘ education officer’ (basically a spy) by the Bavarian army’s political section. In September of the same year, he went to a German Worker’s Party (DAP) meeting and joins, betraying the Bavarian army, becoming a committee member.

In February 1920, with DAP leader Drexler, he draws up the Twenty-five Point Programme; and changes the name of the party to NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei). His powerful speeches built up membership for the Party. In July 1921, he became chairman and Führer after he threatened to resign and set up the SA (the ‘ Brown Shirts’) in August. On 8th November 1923, Hitler and his ‘ stormtroopers’ burst into a meeting in the Munich beer-hall.

He forced Otto von Lossow and Gustav von Kahr into a side room and forced them to state their support for a march on Berlin to impose a new

government, with General Ludendorff as the new Commander-in-Chief. On 9th November, President Ebert declared a national state of emergency. Ludendorff persuaded Hitler to carry on with the march into Munich to seize power, as a first step to marching on Berlin. At noon, 2000 armed Nazis marched to a military base in Munich. They were met by armed police and Bavarian soldiers.

A shot was fired, possibly by a Nazi, and the police return fire. Fourteen Nazis were killed. Hitler and Ludendorff were arrested and General Seeckt bans the Nazis. Hitler was kept in Landsberg prison and while there, he dictated 'Mein Kampf' (My Struggle). The Nazis nearly disintegrated with their leader and on 24th December 1924, Hitler was released after nine months in prison. On the morning of 30 January 1933, in Hindenburg's office, Adolf Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor during what some observers later described as a brief and simple ceremony.

After Hindenburg's death in 1934, Hitler decided to unite all the jobs of President of Germany, Head of State and the commander of Germany and called himself the Fuhrer of Germany. Another factor which shows that the Weimar Constitution was the biggest threat was the downfall of the Reichsrat. The Weimar Constitution curbed the rights of the various states and the powers of their representation. The Reichsrat had no influence on the federal government. It could veto the Reichstag's bills, and the Reichstag could overrule the veto.

But the Reichsrat remained very powerful, because overruling it needed a majority of two-thirds in the Reichstag, which was splintered into many

parties and was frequently dissolved. So in effect, bills vetoed by the Reichsrat very frequently died. After Hitler's Chancellorship, the powers of the Lander (states) were transferred to the central government, rendering the Reichsrat obsolete. A month later, the Reichsrat itself was dissolved, making Germany a centralized state. The passage of the Enabling Act was another factor which shows the biggest threat was the Constitution.

On 23 March 1933, the Reichstag convened and in the midday opening, Hitler made a historic speech, appearing outwardly calm and conciliatory. He promised that the Act did not threaten the existence of either the Reichstag or the Reichsrat, that the authority of the President remained untouched and that the Lander (states) would not be abolished. However, this promise would soon be broken. The Act- formally titled the " Act for the Removal of Distress from People and Reich"- was passed by a vote of 441 to 94. Only the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) had voted against the Act.

Every other member of the Reichstag voted in favor of the Act and it went into effect the following day, 24th March 1933. The passage of the Enabling Act was widely considered to mark the end of the Weimar Republic and the beginning of the Third Reich. It empowered the cabinet to legislate without the approval of Reichstag or the President, and to enact laws that were contrary to the constitution. The use of proportional representation is another factor contributing to the fact that the Weimar Constitution was the biggest threat to the Republic.

The use of proportional representation in Weimar Germany meant that any party with a small amount of support could gain entry into the Reichstag.

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This led to many small parties, some extremist, building political bases within the system. Germany was divided into electoral regions. Within each of these regions a political party would put forward a number of candidates. The number of these who became deputies within the Reichstag was based on the total number of votes the party received within that electoral region. One member could be sent for every 60, 000 votes cast for the party.

The republic did not fall due to the small parties, but to the strength of the communists, conservatives and national socialists. The use of political extremism is another factor contributing to the fact that the Weimar Constitution was the biggest threat to the Republic. Throughout its early years, the stability of Weimar Germany was severely threatened by political extremism. The Weimar Republic suffered almost constant attacks from both the political left and right between 1919- 1923. Initially, the main threat came from the Communists.

Events culminated in the murders of the Communist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in 1919 after a failed uprising in Berlin. This event ensured the permanent opposition of the extreme left during the early years of the Republic, especially since rebels from the political left were often more severely punished than their counterparts on the right. The extreme right was no less vehement in its intentions to bring about the collapse of Weimar Germany. The culmination of the right wing attacks came in the Kapp Putsch in 1920 when Wolfgang Kapp attempted to seize control of Berlin and therefore Germany.

Whilst the Weimar Government fled Berlin in panic, it was left to the workers to bring an end to the attempted putsch by refusing to support Kapp in the form of a general strike. The putsches continued until they finally culminated in November 1923 with the failed 'Beer hall Putsch' by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in Munich, the capital of Bavaria. As well as putsches Germany suffered over 376 political murders during this period, including those of Matthias Erzberger in 1921 and Walter Rathenau in 1922, which supported Weimar Germany.

The various rebellions and political murders all served to undermine the stability of Weimar Germany and to alienate its appeal amongst the general populace of Germany who were horrified by the apparent anarchy and chaos within Germany, which the Weimar politicians and the Weimar system itself seemed unable to control or contain. Another factor which shows that the Constitution was the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic was the institution of the Reichspräsident.

The institution of the Reichspräsident was frequently considered as an Ersatzkaiser (a substitute emperor), which was an attempt to replace the Kaiser with a similarly strong institution meant to diminish party politics. Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution gave the President power 'to take all necessary steps if public order and security are seriously disturbed or endangered'. Although this was intended as an emergency clause, it was often used before 1933 to issue decrees without the support of Parliament and also made Gleichschaltung easier.

Gleichschaltung was a Nazi term for tight coordination over all aspects of society and commerce. One goal of this policy was to eliminate individualism by forcing everybody to adhere to a specific doctrine and way of thinking and to control as many aspects of life as possible using an invasive police force. This was a basic way to 'brainwash' the state, which is what Hitler did during his speeches, making the public have the same beliefs that he had. There are also some factors which show that it was not the Weimar Constitution that was the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic. One of these was the Treaty of Versailles.

The Treaty was considered by most Germans to be a punishing and degrading document because it forced them to surrender resource-rich areas, such as the Rhineland, and pay massive amounts of compensation (? 6.6 billion or 132 billion Gold Marks). While the official reparations were incredibly high, Germany ended up paying only a fraction of them. However, the reparations did damage Germany's economy by discouraging market loans, which forced the Weimar government to finance its deficit by printing more and more money, causing massive hyperinflation. This led to the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Great Depression of the 1930s was another factor which shows that it was not the Weimar Constitution that was the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic. The Weimar Republic had some of the most serious economic problems ever experienced by any Western democracy in history. Rampant hyperinflation, massive unemployment and a large drop in living standards were primary factors. In 1923-1929 there was a short period of economic recovery, but the Great Depression of the 1930s led to a worldwide

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recession. Germany was particularly affected because it depended heavily on American loans.

In 1926, about 2 million Germans were unemployed – this rose to around 6 million in 1932. Many blamed the Weimar Republic. This was made apparent when political parties on both right and left wanting to disband the Republic altogether made any democratic majority in Parliament impossible. This economic stagnation led to increased demands on Germany to repay the debts owed to the United States. As the Weimar Republic was very fragile in all of its existence, the depression proved to be devastating, and played a major role in the NSDAP's (The Nazis) takeover of the country.

Another factor showing that it was not the Weimar Constitution was labour unions & the Social Democrats. Industrial leaders identified the Weimar Republic with labour unions and with the Social Democrats, who had established the Versailles concessions of 1918/1919. Although some did see Hitler as a means to abolish the Democrats, the Republic was already unstable before any industry leaders were supporting Hitler. Even those who supported Hitler's appointment often did not want Nazism in its entirety and considered Hitler a temporary solution in their efforts to abolish the Republic.

Industry support alone cannot explain Hitler's enthusiastic support by large segments of the population, including many workers who had turned away from the left. Another factor showing that it was not the Weimar Constitution was President von Hindenburg's death. In 1932, Hitler ran against

Hindenburg for the presidency of Germany, but he lost. Hitler demanded to be appointed Chancellor as the crisis of the Great Depression worsened, but

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Hindenburg hated Hitler and would not agree until he was dying and desperate in 1933.

Hitler sprung into action and burned down the Reichstag building, blamed other political groups like the communists, and had the Enabling Act passed. Habeus corpus and all freedoms had been suspended, and also unions were banned. When Hindenburg died in 1934, rather than calling new elections, Hitler tore up the constitution of the Weimar Republic and declared himself President of Germany, Head of State and also the commander of Germany, meaning he was 'Führer' for life.

There were to be no more elections, and the army had to declare loyalty to Hitler, NOT Germany. This was the beginning of the Third Reich and Nazi Germany. The factors which show that the Weimar Constitution was the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic are Hitler's rise to power, the downfall of the Reichsrat, the passage of the Enabling Act, use of proportional representation, political extremism and the institution of the Reichspräsident.

The factors which show that Weimar Constitution was not the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic are the Treaty of Versailles, the Great Depression of the 1930s, labour unions & the Social Democrats and President von Hindenburg's death. In conclusion, this shows that the Weimar Constitution was indeed the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic, as most of the causes of its failure branch off of one thing: Hitler's rise to power. Hitler himself dissolved the Reichsrat, giving him control of the Lander (states) by rendering it useless.

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He also passed the Enabling Act, basically destroying the Constitution. Even factors showing that it was NOT the Constitution that was the biggest threat still lead to Hitler. Hindenburg's death led to Hitler becoming Fuhrer and he tore up the Constitution. The Treaty of Versailles led to rage in Germany, causing rapid hyperinflation, due to the government printing more and more money. This 'political chaos' may have caused a psychological imprint on Germans that could lead to extreme Nationalism, shown by Hitler.