

The weimar republic – doomed to failure



Indeed, the republic faced enormous problems of political, social and economic origin. The constitution itself was a main reason for disorder in the Weimar Republic. Elements of presidential, representative and plebiscite democracy were combined. Its concept of proportional representation enabled splinter parties to gain access to the Reichstag and thus favoured the formation of radicalised groups which finally led to a general radicalisation of parts of society to the extreme left or right – the political extremism emerged especially after 1929. In addition, the work of the parliament itself was hindered because of the parties' disability to agree to compromises. Coalitions were very difficult to be formed.

So there were quarrels in the Reichstag whose most important task originally was to stabilise the German Reich after the lost World War instead of questioning its own sense. Right-winged Reichstag parties like the DNVP denied the constitution and the parliamentary system itself which legitimated their presence in the Reichstag – an ironic contradiction. A wide discrepancy between the parties' basic principles aggravated the concentration on the most important issues. The Treaty of Versailles had to be signed, reparations had to be paid, the industry had to be manoeuvred out of its crisis and the reintegration of soldiers had to be realized. External threats hindered the parliamentary system in addition to the internal problems in the Reichstag: the parliamentary system and the “ Weimar Coalition” (SPD, DDP, Centre) faced opposition from the “ old order” being in favour of a monarchy fearing a “ parliamentary absolutism” and from the left which fought for a council republic. Here lies the root cause for the strong

presidential powers which were granted to the President by the constitution as a counter-balance to the Reichstag.

The President could call or dismiss the Reichstag and introduce laws by article 48 (criticised as “ article of dictatorship” (2) later) as emergency decrees. Critics called the President “ Ersatzkaiser” because of the enormous power the constitution had equipped him with. Article 48 states:” In the case of the State not fulfilling the duties imposed on it by the Federal Constitution or the Federal laws, the President of the Federation may enforce their fulfilment with the help of armed forces. Where public security and or order are seriously disturbed or endangered within the Federation, the President of the Federation may take the measures necessary for their restoration, intervening in the case of need with the help of the armed forces.

For this purpose he is permitted, for the time being, to abrogate, either wholly or partially, the fundamental laws laid down in articles 114, 115, 117, 118, 123, 124 and 153.” It comes out that article 48 was idealistically intended as a temporary emergency measure in order to restore stability. But with President Hindenburg’s presidency the article was in an authoritarian manner perverted into a justification for an almost permanent state of emergency. Presidential cabinets were formed by President Hindenburg and could not rely on a majority in the Reichstag. Another burden for the democracy was that the former employees of the traditional institutions remained in their positions so that the German Reich’s administration was not really changed. Their loyalty to the monarchy over decades could not be cast off by a constitution from one day to another.

OHL representatives even wanted to keep the chance of returning to a monarchy one day. And Friedrich Ebert, the first President of the German Reich had agreed to a pact with Ludendorff's successor General Groener (OHL) to gain military support for the government in order to avoid a further progress of the German revolution. By initiating the Ebert Groener pact already on November 10th, a day before Ebert's confirmation by 3000 council representatives, he enabled the OHL leaders to keep their positions and made them become more like "equal partners" than the parliament's instrument of power. Ebert and his government were thus lead into a situation of dependency which became obvious with the Kapp putsch in 1920. With the explanation, an intervention of the Reichswehr to oppress the upheaval would be "Reichswehr against Reichswehr", the intervention was denied.

As a conclusion one can point out that It is impossible to blame one factor for the tremendous difficulties the republic was faced with – it was the combination of many negative factors which caused the republic's problems. The interesting question is of course if an alternative solution would have brought better results than the parliamentary Weimar Republic. Many problems would have been the same – would it have also failed? But it is obvious that the constitution relied on idealism and could be easily abused to gain authoritarian power which was the major weakness of the republic. Furthermore, the difficulties in the Reichstag among the parties and the radicalisation of society showed that Germany was to some extent not yet prepared for a democracy.

In so far the parliamentary system of the Weimar Republic was doomed to fail. Adolf Hitler was the evidence for this theory but also showed that his “alternative” was not better. He made use of almost all the weak points of the constitution and the social situation the Weimar Republic offered him.