

# Fascism was a direct consequence of wwi history essay



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The purpose of this work is to assess the extent to which fascism came about as a direct consequence of the First World War. Such analysis will utilise the rise of Hitler and the Nazi's in Germany as a source of reference and example. It will be shown in clear and determined fashion that the rise of Hitler can in numerous respects be attributed to the consequences and outcomes of the First World War. However, whether this allows historians to accurately proclaim that fascism was a direct consequence of the war is less certain. Ultimately, any examination of the development of European fascism requires the assessment of a variety of issues and concerns. Moreover, fascist development within individual countries often took place on a unique and individualistic basis. Thus, in the assessment of the rise of Hitler, it will be shown that issues specific to Germany can account for the growth of Nazi power between 1918 and 1933. However, although a plethora of issues need to be addressed, there can be little doubt that the impact of the First World War on the development and later success of fascism in Germany was protracted and significant. As such, the analysis of such impact is a pertinent place to begin this work's discussion.

When historians refer to the First World War in relation to the later development of fascism, the primary issue of concern is invariably the Treaty of Versailles. Rather surprisingly given her dominant pre war position, in 1918 Germany was forced to seek an armistice with the western allies, which now included the United States. In 1919 the Treaty of Versailles aimed to bring an official end to the war and ensure that such protracted and widespread conflict could never occur again. However, in addition certain members of the victorious alliance, most notably France, hoped to overtly

ensure that Germany was significantly weakened to such a point that she could never again pose a threat her neighbours (Henig, 1995). This active willingness to punish Germany for the consequences of the war created concerted and lasting reassessment among German leaders and in the wider population. The consistent historical argument has therefore been that this inherent resentment was utilised by Hitler in a way which propelled the Nazi message (Layton, 2002). Moreover, the severe punishment and humiliation which Germany suffered as a result of Versailles made it especially difficult for post war leaders of the Weimar Republic to successfully counter the rise of Nazism (Brooman, 1996). In order to assess the degree to which this assessment is correct, it is necessary to look in further detail at the prescriptions contained in the Versailles Treaty in relation to Germany, beginning with the loss of territory.

Firstly, it is important to note that not all the territorial decisions relating to Germany at Versailles were overtly unreasonable and unjust. The return of Alsace Lorraine to France and Schleswig to Denmark were generally perceived to be justified (Henig, 1995). Given that Bismarck had seized both these territories through aggression then it is certainly possible to lend credence to such assessment. However, the treaties failures with regards to German territorial processions were significantly more prevalent than the successes. Firstly, the industrial region of the Saar Basin was given to France even though “ in its entire history it had been French for only twenty three years” (Watt, 2003; p. 426). Secondly, the Rhineland settlement decreed that the region should be placed under a fifteen year allied occupation and thereafter demilitarisation, even though it remained a fully recognised part

of Germany. However, the cessation of German territory to Poland acted as the most severe source of resentment among the German population. The German port city of Danzig became an independent free city (although 90% of its inhabitants were German), whilst significant territory in the area was granted to Poland in order to ensure access to the sea. Other German territories which passed to Polish control included Upper Silesia and West Prussia (Henig, 1995). In addition to territorial losses, the Versailles Treaty imposed severe restrictions on the future levels of the German military. This included the reduction of troop levels to no more than 200, 000 and the entire dismantlement of the air force. Compulsory military service in Germany was to be abolished along with severe restrictions on the Navy, with exact specifications being “ 6 battleships... 6 light cruisers... 12 destroyers, 12 torpedo boats...no submarines (The Treaty of Versailles, Part 5; [online]). Although under Article 8 of the treaty the victorious allies promised to dramatically reduce their own armament levels, such reduction did not occur (Watt, 2003).

However, although the above conditions created significant resentment in Germany, it was the issue of war guilt and reparations which acted as the most serious issue of concern. Germany was to accept complete responsibility for the outbreak of the war and thus the consequences which followed. The war guilt clause therefore asserted that “ Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for all the loss and damage... imposed by the aggression of Germany and her allies” (The Treaty of Versailles, clause 231 [online]). The degree to which this clause of responsibility and guilt angered German leaders and the wider population

was widespread and concerted. Moreover, although historical debate continues to rage over the factors which led to the outbreak of war in 1914, it is generally now felt that no one country was ultimately responsible (Remak, 1971). Above all, the war guilt clause in the Versailles Treaty represented a determined attempt on the part of the allies to absolve themselves of responsibility for the war's outbreak. Indeed, in the years which immediately followed to 1919, the conception that Germany had been unfairly treated with regards war guilt was widespread in most western countries (Remak, 1971). In addition, allied attempts to pursue a trial of the Kaiser were met with vehement opposition in Germany. Although Dutch opposition eventually ended such attempts, the allied need "to blame someone for the carnage and devastation of the war" achieved little other than to create deep seated and long term resentment towards the treaty within Germany (Sharp, 1994; p. 127).

Finally, the issue of reparations was also essentially formed on the basis of Germany's war guilt. Thus, given that Germany was deemed responsible for the outbreak of the war, the prevailing view was that she should now be made to pay the financial cost. No concrete figure was reached at Versailles; however the Reparations Commission which was set up to decide the matter eventually reached the conclusion that Germany should pay 132 billion gold marks (Henig, 1995). Had this sum actually been implemented it would have taken numerous decades to pay. Moreover, although the full sum was not paid, yearly reparations payments from Germany to the victorious allies had by the 1923 caused hyper inflation. Various attempts were made to solve Germany's economic ills throughout the 1920s such as the Dawes Plan and

the Young Plan (Brooman, 1996). Such plans were largely successful however; such success was heavily reliant on American loans. As such, reparations and the various plans set in place to offer effective repayment did leave Germany particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the Wall Street Crash in 1929 (Morris, 1982).

Through an accumulation of the above factors, discontent and grievance towards the Versailles settlement within Germany was a consistent feature of German political and social discourse throughout the 1920s. There is no doubt that throughout the 1920s and early 1930s Hitler utilised the widespread discontent regarding Versailles for political purposes (Eliot, 1980). Moreover, the continued suggestion that Germany had been 'stabbed in the back' by her generals and leading Jews was further propagated for political gain (Eatwell, 1996). As such, it is certainly credible to suggest that the widespread discontent in Germany which resulted from the Versailles settlement did indeed create the necessary climate for Nazi outlook to flourish. However, it is with the issue of reparations and later attempts to stabilise the German economy that serious consequences of the war in terms of fascist development are to found.

The vast majority of historians agree that the Wall Street Crash and subsequent Great Depression had a direct impact upon the effective rise of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany (Lee, 2000). Indeed, the rapid meteoric rise in terms of electoral success enjoyed by the Nazi Party following the onset of the Great Depression provides clear credence to such assessment. Indeed, German election results from the period 1924 to 1933 clearly indicate the degree to which Nazi electoral fortunes were explicitly linked to Germany's <https://assignbuster.com/fascism-was-a-direct-consequence-of-wwi-history-essay/>

economic performance. For example, of the 472 seats available in the Reichstag elections of May 1924 the Nazis won a total of 32. However, this figure reduced in December 1924 and September 1928 to 14 and 12 respectively. However, in July 1930 total Nazi seats in the Reichstag totalled 107, rising to 230 in March 1932 (Hite, 2000). As such, it is possible to see a direct correlation between German economic difficulties and the electoral success of Hitler and the Nazis. Naturally, it can be argued that the failure of numerous Weimar governments to effectively deal with Germany's economic woes exacerbated the problematic rise of the Nazis. However, this does nothing to alter the clear and unequivocal link between economic calamity and Nazi electoral success.

Moreover, as suggested above, the imposition of hugely excessive reparations on Germany created the conditions which required massive foreign investment into the German economy during the latter 1920s. The removal of such investment following the Wall Street Crash therefore resulted in economic decline being more protracted in Germany than anywhere else (Hite, 2000). Thus, the early 1930s saw a return to hyper inflation in Germany, along with mass unemployment levels higher than any other developed country (Hite, 2000). Therefore, if we are to conclude that it was the consequences of the Great Depression which bolstered the appeal of Nazism, then we must also conclude that the First World War essentially led to such dire and protracted consequences. Above all, the outcomes and decisions made at Versailles set in motion a series of factors and developments which made Germany particularly prone to the worst excesses of the Great Depression. There is no doubt that Hitler and the Nazis were

able to capitalise on such excesses. Thus, had Germany's treatment at Versailles been different, then the German economy would not have been as heavily affected as was the case.

The various discussions above therefore highlight the degree to which the growth and development of fascism in Germany in many respects came about as a direct consequence of the historical impact felt from the First World War. Above all, not only was Hitler able to utilise widespread public discontent towards Versailles, but also the punitive reparations put in place in 1919 led Germany to be more prone to the global economic problems which emerged in the post 1929 period. Given that the severity of economic difficulties in Germany led to the growth and widespread endorsement of Nazism, the natural and inevitable correlation between cause and effect is quite obvious.

However, although in numerous respects the development of fascism in Germany was a direct consequence of the First World War, to entirely attribute the development of German fascism to the war is sometimes problematic. Above all, as suggested at the outset of this work, in order for effective examination of this issue a plethora of factors require analysis. As such, to suggest that the emergence of a complex phenomenon such as fascism can be attributed solely to one factor is particularly tenuous.

Firstly, as hinted earlier, the Nazis did not begin to enjoy noted electoral success until the post 1929 period. Moreover, it has been shown that there was a clear link between German economic difficulty and Nazi electoral success. However, the meteoric rise of the Nazis in the post 1929 period can



be attributed to other factors besides capitalising on economic misfortune. Firstly, there is a strong argument which suggests that German governments of the period failed to effectively address the problematic issues of fascist development. In many respects this failure can be attributed to the consistent fear of communist development in Germany, of which the Nazis represented the geometric opposite (Lee, 2003). Indeed, at numerous points throughout the inter war period the German Communist Party electorally surpassed the Nazis. However, the former were subject to far greater levels of proactive government action than the latter (Lee, 2003). Nonetheless, whatever the motivating factors, there can be little doubt that the attempts of consecutive Weimar governments to combat the rise of fascism in Germany along with the negative characteristics it engendered was mild at best. Such failure is exemplified by relative successes in other countries. For example, in Britain, Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) was dealt a severe "body blow" by the 1936 Public Order Act along with concerted and united opposition among the British political establishment (Pearce & Stewart, 2001; p. 409).

In addition, there is another factor which accounts for the failure of the BUF to gain an electoral foothold in Britain. Although it is certainly the case that fascist support in Britain was far less than in Germany, the BUF was essentially excluded from the possibility of electoral success was because of the British electoral system. Above all, the British First Past The Post electoral system favours major parties over those on the fringe (Pearce & Stewart, 2001). However, the electoral system of Weimar Germany was ordered on a purely proportional basis. There were two direct consequences

of this proportional system on the development of German fascism. Firstly, the proportional tendency to create governments based on multi party coalitions resulted in a succession of weak administrations in the Weimar Republic which lacked the political strength to effectively tackle Germany's economic woes (Taylor, 1961). Secondly, this necessity to form coalitions in order to establish effective government naturally meant that through the use of its parliamentary seats, the Nazi Party could directly influence the makeup of government (Taylor 1961). As such, historians tend to concur with the assessment that the proportional electoral system in the Weimar Republic played an essential role in the latter development of German fascism (Lee, 2003). Naturally, given that the Weimar system of government was established following the First World War, it may in some measure be possible to highlight a link between the two. However, on the whole it must be concluded that such links are tenuous at best.

In addition, it must be noted that the development of fascism was not something unique to Germany. Indeed, during the inter war years there was a dramatic increase support for extremist politics throughout Europe. With regards to Italian fascism, it is certainly possible to outline similar links with the First World War as it is with Germany (Eatwell, 1996). However, it is equally the case that fascism developed in countries that had suffered little impact from the war. The foremost example of this tendency is Spain. The victory of Franco and the Spanish fascists following the Civil War between 1936 and 1939 was in no way accountable through reference to the First World War (Eatwell, 1996). Thus, in the first instance it is historically inaccurate to suggest that there was a direct natural link between the First

World War and the general development of fascism in Europe. Moreover, even in cases where the impact of the war was protracted (as in Germany and Italy) it is nevertheless possible to highlight wider issues of concern that are essentially unrelated to the war. Returning to Germany, the historical progression which had generally resulted in strong authoritarian style government certainly appealed to many voters during the inter war period (Brooman, 1996). Naturally, the failure of democratically elected politicians to alleviate Germany's problems in many ways exacerbated this tendency. However, the general tendency was nonetheless evident. Moreover, the specific appeal of Hitler personally, along with the use of highly effective electioneering techniques undoubtedly further propagated the development of Germany fascism (Elliot, 1980). Thus, it is certainly possible to outline features and characteristics of German fascism which were relatively unique to Germany.

In conclusion, the issue of whether fascism in Germany came about as a direct consequence of the First World War has been discussed in depth. Above all, what is clear is that it is both possible and historically credible to suggest that the development of the Nazis in Germany came about as a result of the deep seated resentment which emanated in Germany as a consequence of the Versailles Treaty. Such resentment inevitably gave Hitler an effective platform on which to base his political ideology. Moreover, in practical terms the provisions of Versailles with regards to reparations set in motion a series of progressions which resulted in Germany experiencing particularly protracted economic difficulties in the post 1929 period. Given that support for the Nazis rose in conjunction with increased economic

problems it is a natural conclusion that the provisions of 1919 played a vital role in creating the necessary climate for fascism to flourish. However, we must be careful not to overemphasise the impact of the war on the development of German fascism. Indeed, it has been shown that a number of factors independent of the war and often unique to Germany played a role in the development of propagation of the Nazi movement. Moreover, fascism developed elsewhere in Europe in circumstances almost entirely divorced from the impact and consequences of the First World War. Ultimately, the First World War must be viewed as a pivotal factor in the development of German fascism; however, to suggest that such development is solely attributable to the war fails to accurately grasp the diverse nature of the subject in question.