

Political, social, and ethical ideologies on graphic design



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Mythology vs. Modernity

Political, social, and ethical ideologies on graphic design in the twentieth century

Abstract

The following dissertation will discuss whether mythology or modernity had the greatest impact upon the political, social, and ethical ideologies that were closely linked to or had an influence upon graphic design and artistic culture during the twentieth century.

The main focus of this dissertation will be to describe the often-complex relationship between mythology and modernity in relation to political, social, and ethical ideologies with particular reference to Germany and, to a lesser extent the Soviet Union, essentially between 1914 and the early 1930s. Germany and the Soviet Union were chosen as the main case studies for this dissertation, due to them being the countries that had the most complex situations, and often they had a highly contradictory relationship between mythology and modernity in the political, social, and ethical ideologies that influenced graphic design. Germany is of particular interest due to the clash between mythology and modernity at the end of the imperial regime, throughout the short and turbulent Weimar Republic and most strikingly during the Third Reich. Imperial Germany had a government that was autocratic in nature, the Weimar Republic allowed greater cultural diversity, yet suffered from political and economic weaknesses that allowed Adolf Hitler to bring the Third Reich into existence. In the Third Reich, it was Hitler who determined what graphic design was acceptable and pragmatic and

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which forms of it were politically, socially, as well as ethically unacceptable (just as he did with everything else). As will be mentioned Adolf Hitler's dislike of anything related to graphic design or architecture if known widely enough could be as effective at preventing things happening or closing down pre-existing organisations as any decree or government legislation. The Soviet Union also arguably interchanged mythology and modernity in the political, social and ethical ideologies that underpinned its graphic design, culture, and its architecture as well as the governing regime. The Communist regime in the Soviet Union and the Nazi regime in Germany had radical agendas that were intended to transform the politics and the society of the countries they ruled over. Both regimes had also intended to alter the political, social, and ethical ideologies of their populations through propaganda, indoctrination, and repression when required. For both regimes graphic design was just one of many ways to achieve their political, social, and ethical objectives, a method that they wished to control and even suppress if that suited their particular objectives and prejudices. These regimes could also find people that could use graphic design techniques to carry out their objectives whilst the formally qualified graphic designers were not used due to doubts over having suitable political, social, and ethical beliefs.

Introduction

Germany's defeat in the First World War and the collapse of the Imperial regime had major political, social and ethical consequences that were not just confined to the field of graphic design. Prior to the First World War, the German government had built up the mythology of the invincibility of the <https://assignbuster.com/political-social-and-ethical-ideologies-on-graphic-design/>

German army, strengthened by the modernity and dynamic growth of its economy and its advanced industrial complexes. Germany's rising economic production and the ability to make industrial products effectively meant that Germany's power was widely viewed as increasing, a cause for national pride, and also a cause of international concerns that poised a challenge to peace. German militaristic culture and its ambitions to be a great power contributed to the outbreak of the First World War, as did the decision to back all of Austria-Hungary's demands against Serbia (Fulbrook, 1991, p. 3). The Imperial German government used propaganda to maintain the war effort in the wake of heavy fatalities and severe shortages at home, due to the effectiveness of the Royal Navy blockade. The failure of the German spring offensives of 1918 brought about the final collapse (Roberts, 1996, p. 455). Around the issue of German surrender in 1918 myths and counter myths would abound. German nationalists claimed that Socialists, Social Democrats, the Centre parties, and the Jews had betrayed the country and its army. Such arguments were put forward by the leading German generals, most notably Ludendorff to deflect from the failures during the war. Other elements in Germany that favoured modernity were those that supported the Weimar Republic most strongly (although that support was not always returned by the Weimar authorities). The ideological conflicts between left and right would last until the Nazi Party came into power. Once the Nazis gained power they intended to radically alter the political, social, and ethical ideologies that dominated Germany through whatever means they had to use. The social and ethical alterations would revolve around cleansing the country of political, social, and racial undesirables (Bullock, 1991, p. 74). The effectiveness of German propaganda during the First World War; the <https://assignbuster.com/political-social-and-ethical-ideologies-on-graphic-design/>

political, social, and ethical ideologies and their impact upon graphic design in Germany will be discussed in chapters 1 to 3 as well as in the conclusions. The influence, innovations, and the subsequent legacy that the Bauhaus school had on graphic design in Germany and beyond will be scrutinised in greater detail.

In Germany the movement most closely linked to the concepts of modernity, rather than the concepts of mythology in graphic design would become known as the Bauhaus school after the graphic design school that opened in 1919. The leading members of the future Bauhaus school were frequently working as architects and artists before the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 (some of them in countries that fought against Germany). These artists and architects were equally committed to the concept of modernity and the political ideology of socialism. Ironically enough, the modernist concepts that would form the basis of the Bauhaus school were heavily influenced by British architecture, except for the Germans had in the vast majority of cases kept their allegiance to socialist ideals (Hobsbawm, 1987 p. 225). From its inception the Bauhaus had a mission simple to drive forward its work, projects, and its teaching. That publicly stated aim was ‘The Building of the Future’. The school hoped to make graphic design more accessible and pragmatic to help modernise the economy and help transform art and culture ([www. bauhaus/archiv](http://www.bauhaus/archiv)).

There was a competing stronger current in German culture that stressed the cultural, ethical and in more versions the racial superiority of the German nation above all other nations. This vision of a culturally superior Germany was favoured by most right wing groups throughout Imperial Germany, the <https://assignbuster.com/political-social-and-ethical-ideologies-on-graphic-design/>

Weimar Republic and was part of the extreme ideological basis of the Nazi party that came to power in 1933. For the German right wing nationalists' culture went further than occasional trips to the theatre or the cinema. Culture to them was part of the mythology of the greatness of the German people. Such strong and wide-ranging notions of nationalism go a long way towards explaining the highly militaristic nature of both Imperial Germany and the Third Reich. If anything, the militarism of the Third Reich was the most potent form as it was combined with the drive for racial purity, as well as plans to exterminate Communism and the Jews (Bullock, 1991 p. 76).

The emergence of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union also led to a mixture of mythology and modernity influencing the political, social, and ethical ideologies on graphic design. The Communist regime that took power in October 1917 to establish Marxism-Leninism across the former Russian Empire in what eventually became known as the Soviet Union. To secure its future the Communist regime used myths about the struggle to bring revolution, combined with the modernist urges, to end the political, social, industrial, and economic backwardness of the Soviet Union (Hobsbawm, 1994 p. 63). The Soviet regime maintained its grip on power through often large-scale brutal repression, the extensive use of official propaganda and censorship, and systems of party and government patronage. Under the cruel rule of Joseph Stalin the use of all these methods reached its systematic and violent peak with his campaigns to modernise the Soviet Union and crush all opposition real or made up (James, 2003 p. 61). The role of mythology and modernity in the graphic design of the Soviet Union will be discussed in greater depth in chapter 4 and the conclusions.

Chapter 1

Mythology, Modernity, and the collapse of Imperial Germany

Imperial Germany had a rich culture, with mythological and militaristic ideologies seeming to dominate less popular modernist tendencies. The appeal of mythological ideology and heavily military influenced nationalism are linked with German history and the struggle to create a united Germany. Many Germans prided themselves upon their own culture. Imperial Germany for instance, had popular and successful theatres, which had expanded in actual numbers, as well as in the size of their audiences. Musically the pre-war period witnessed the peak in popularity of Richard Wagner's operas, laden as they were with mythology and heroic references. Imperial Germany saw the foundation of the precursor of the Bauhaus school in the form of the Werkbund as early as 1907. Like the Bauhaus the Werkbund was intended to improve the efficiency of the industrial designs and machinery used by German businesses. The emphasis was upon modernity to drive forward economic growth. At this point in history, Germany was becoming an increasingly powerful country, with a strong economy and a powerful army. Its government was undemocratic, and there was a strong sense of nationalism. Modernity was not rejected, just harnessed to increase the country's wealth and power (Burns, 1995 p. 12).

As a united country Imperial Germany owed its very existence to war, or three wars to be exact. Prussia and Austria had been rivals for the position of the leading German nation, Prussian policy aimed to achieve a united Germany but that seemed to be an unlikely dream. Under the Chancellorship

of Count Otto von Bismarck the Prussians gained decisive victories over Denmark, Austria, and then France. Victory against France persuaded the more sceptical German states that it was time to form a united Germany. A single German empire was forged with the Prussian King becoming the German Kaiser (Rayner & Stapley, 2006, p. 92). In Imperial Germany, popular culture and mythology centred on the army that had done so much to forge a united Germany. Later, Germany would develop pride in the German navy that Tirpitz turned from a small coastal defence force into a powerful unit capable of challenging the formidable Royal Navy. The massive expansion of the German navy was a fine example of Germany's booming economy, strong grasp of design and the development of the most up to date technology available (Fulbrook, 1991, p. 3). German military strength and the rise of her naval power were a source of national pride, yet internationally the French wanted revenge for 1870, whilst the British and the Russians were wary of German intentions (Roberts, 1996, p.). When Bismarck had been Chancellor he had been careful to keep France isolated. However, the Kaiser's quest to increase German power and prestige meant that Russia and Britain became closer to France. The Kaiser's poor diplomacy and lack of tact meant that Germany had to fight on two fronts. The German military planned for a quick victory in the war in the west to avoid prolonged war on two fronts, although the breaching of Belgian neutrality caused Britain to join the war. However the Germans gained a crushing victory against the Russians at Tannenberg and the Eastern Front, yet were unable to finish the war on the Western Front in 1914 (Colvin, 2004, p. 244).

Despite rapid advances in the war the Germans were eventually stopped by the French and British, which would mean a long war (that made German victory unlikely). The German invasion of Belgium had brought Britain into the First World War, which meant that the German army had to gain victory before the Royal Navy blockade starved Germany into submission (Kennedy, 1976 p. 246).

The myth of the greatness of the German army had not been broken in 1914; after all it had almost gained victory in the war. The stunning victory at Tannenberg had produced two new heroes in the form of Hindenburg and Ludendorff who both became leading figures in the conduct of the war, as well as having a great deal of political influence. Neither side was able to break the stalemate on the Western front in 1915, although the Germans helped Turkey to stop the allied offensive in Gallipoli. From an early stage in the First World War the German government realised the importance of propaganda in maintaining both military and civilian morale. Any successes were exaggerated, set backs were either not mentioned at all or their significance was played down (Bourne, Liddle & Whitehead, 2001, p. 49).

The German army put all its hopes of winning into the massive offensive against Verdun in 1916, Falkenhayn aimed to kill so many French soldiers that it would break French morale and force their surrender. Verdun almost fell but for the efforts of Petain, it could have broken the French army. The German government presented the Verdun offensive as a victory due to the French having sustained heavier losses. The attack on Verdun brought forward the British led offensive on the Somme. For the Germans, the Somme helped to create the myth that the German army could not be

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defeated. The defences of the Hindenburg line were formidable and the massive artillery barrage that lasted a week did nothing to break it. The barely touched or harmed German defenders decimated the advancing British and French soldiers. The first day of the Somme remains the worst day in the British army's history. Allied failure to make a breakthrough in the Somme helped to keep Germany fighting and also morale and confidence high (Bourne, Liddle & Whitehead, 2001, p. 459).

However, the most decisive battle of 1916 was at sea, the battle of Jutland. The Germans claimed victory as they had inflicted heavier losses upon the Royal Navy. The Germans claimed that their ships were better built, more up to date, and therefore were superior, as were the gunnery skills of the German crews. The German navy and the German government did not make public that Jutland had almost been a disaster. The Germans had planned to reduce the superior numbers of the Royal Navy by isolating units from the main British fleet by sinking them all. Instead of that, the Germans met up with the entire Grand Fleet. Only nightfall and the cautious approach of the British admirals prevented the Royal Navy destroying the High Seas Fleet. After Jutland, the Royal Navy maintained its devastating blockade against Germany. From then on the only German naval threat came from its submarine force, and the crews of the High Seas Fleet would prove more of a threat towards the German government than the Royal Navy (Kennedy, 1976, p. 247).

During the First World War the German government controlled what newspapers could publish, the press did not usually publicise official casualty or fatality figures, discuss food and fuel shortages or mention anti-war

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protests. The German government vetted all public theatre or musical performances, whilst the country's 7, 500 cinemas could only show German made films that were considered patriotic. Hollywood films were banned as culturally unsound even before the United States entered the war. German cinemas did show newsreel footage of the war from 1917, yet that footage was restricted in the images that were shown. Germany produced less propaganda articles or posters than Britain or France. German news coverage and propaganda lacked effectiveness compared to British propaganda. The German government was hampered due to the political parties being unable to agree upon the country's war aims, there was disagreement as to whether they were fighting a war of containment or fighting for financial or territorial gains (Stevenson, 2004, p. 277). The German government seemed merely to tell the German media what it could not print or broadcast that it missed the opportunity to ensure that propaganda and information was presented in the most effective manner. The government left the decision of how to present information about the progress of the war to the newspaper editors. The style of writing and presentation of newspapers were adapted to the tastes of the people that brought the newspapers. To a certain extent official information and propaganda was able to disguise bad news from the front yet perhaps it was only effective due to wishful thinking or naivety on the home front. German propaganda and censorship however could not hide food shortage from the German people, those that were not in the army or did not live in agricultural areas had to make do with 50% less food than in 1914. It was also difficult to cover up increasing political divisions over the conduct of the war. Perhaps foolishly the government had not banned public discussions about national

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war aims, or whether Germany should find ways to end the war through peace talks. The government could not hide the splits of the Social Democratic Party either. The most left wing of the Social Democratic splinter groups was very outspoken about Germany's chances of winning the war and called for ending it as soon as possible. During the course of the First World War, German newspapers changed in size and in the actual print types used. Although smaller newspapers with simpler print types may have pleased readers such changes owed more to shortages of paper than altered graphic design or attempts to make propaganda more effective (Stevenson, 2004, p. 279).

The German government had great confidence that its submarines or U-boats could get Britain out of the war by breaking its Atlantic supply lines. At first the German navy had stuck to the rules of war, only naval ships were sunk on sight, merchant ships were inspected and all crews were usually evacuated before sinking the ships. The Royal Navy responded by arming merchant ships and using 'Q' ships, these were warships disguised as merchant ships to sink unsuspecting U-boats (a strategy that worked well but broke international maritime law). U-boat commanders retaliated by sinking ships if they believed them to be armed or carrying war supplies. The German government convinced the German public that its U-boats were providing heroic services and could even win the war. However, the U-boats caused controversy with the sinking of the liner Lusitania in May 1915 with the loss of over 1, 000 lives, including many Americans. German propaganda that the Lusitania was carrying munitions was not widely accepted as much as British denials were. The Germans sink on sight policy was dropped to

prevent United States entry in to the war (Rayner & Stapley, 2006, p. 105). The Germans returned to unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, arguing it was a morally justified measure in response to the Royal Navy blockade of Germany. The German U-boats initially caused heavy shipping losses that threatened British food and war supplies. The U-boat campaign helped to bring the US into the war against Germany, British propaganda was very effective in persuading American public opinion to support entry into the war. The German government however, could have increased its chances of victory by improving the efficiency of German industry and agriculture. The German failure to fully mobilise their resources disproved their claims of modernity and efficiency (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 28).

Despite the failure of the U-boat campaign to eliminate Britain from the First World War, the Germans still had chances to win the war. The collapse of the Tsarist regime in Russia presented the German military with opportunities to win the war before the United States could intervene decisively. The Russian Provisional Government carried on fighting against Germany, although the October Revolution that brought the Bolsheviks to power effectively ended the fighting on the Eastern front (Bullock, 1991, p. 69). The Russian exit from the war allowed Hindenburg and Ludendorff to transfer army units from the Eastern to the Western Front for the Spring offensive of 1918 (which they knew was their last chance to win the war). There was the drawback that part of the German army and navy became attracted to revolutionary ideas as a means to end the war and bring fundamental political changes to Germany (Fulbrook, 1991, p. 22). Hindenburg and Ludendorff knew something that the German government's propoganda kept from the public;

the spring offensive was the last throw of the dice. Although the spring offensive gave the German army its furthest advances in the West since August 1914, it failed to break the Allies and end the war. The failure of the spring offensive meant that Germany could only lose the war. Hindenburg and Ludendorff found civilian politicians to seek armistice to end the war. They hoped that these civilians would take the blame for the defeat, which is just what happened. The same generals that failed to win the war blamed the people left to pick up the shattered pieces of Imperial Germany for their failures. Hindenburg and Ludendorff invented the mythology of the 'stab in the back' that so undermined the Weimar Republic (Brendon, 2000, p. 9).

Germany's defeat came as a bitter shock to the majority of the German population as the government's strict censorship of bad news and its attempts at propaganda had convinced the majority of German people that defeat was not possible or indeed likely in the near future. Propaganda and censorship made it appear that Germany was in a stronger position than was actually the case. Government bulletins had deceived people into believing that the sacrifices and losses would be worth it once victory had been achieved. The bulletins gave an ultimately false impression that German victory was at hand. This was especially the case when the spring offensive made its initial gains. If the majority of the population had not believed wartime propaganda then the myth of the 'stab in the back' would not have gained so much currency in subsequent years after the war (Bourne, Liddle & Whitehead, 2001, p. 460). The truth was that the First World War exhausted Germany, the modernity of its army, navy and its weak allies, inefficient organisation, and the effects of the Royal Navy blockade nullified

industry. The German army and the navy were affected by Communist and revolutionary impulses. The German army's morale was lowered as a result of the spring offensives, soldiers found out that the Allied armies were better fed and equipped than they were (Brendon, 2000, p. 8). The army was broken after August 1918 and in non-stop retreat. It had not been defeated, although the arrival of large numbers of American troops and the surrender of Austria meant that defeat was inevitable (Holmes, 1999 p. 213). The 'stab in the back' myth had no basis in reality, yet it would endure long enough to severely undermine the viability of the Weimar Republic due to millions of Germans believing it (Fulbrook, 1991, p. 23).

Chapter 2

Mythology & Modernity during the Weimar Republic

Some of Imperial Germany's most gifted artists, architects, and writers had fought in the First World War. Although some of them had held left wing political opinions, they had not avoided military service. Amongst the influential modernists that served in the war was the painter Paul Klee. Paul Klee went on to survive the conflict, whilst his fellow artists Franz Marc and August Macke were killed in action. Marc and Macke had both been talented modernist painters. They had been in a group with Wassily Kandinsky they had decided to call 'Der Blaue Reiter' or in English, The Blue Rider. This small group of artists favoured a strand of modernity referred to as abstraction (Faerna, 2000 p. 8). It has been argued that the experiences of military service had the affect of radicalising those that returned from the front. In the case of Germany, her veterans were drawn towards either the

radically nationalist right wing groups such as the Nazi party, or they were drawn towards the revolutionary left. Amidst the debris of a war shattered country the old monarchy was replaced by the Weimar Republic. As a matter of coincidence the centre of excellence for the modernists in Weimar era Germany, the Bauhaus school was also founded in Weimar during 1919 (Hobsbawm, 1994 p. 179). In many respects the founders of the Bauhaus school had similar political, social, and ethical ideologies to those that had drafted the constitution of the Weimar Republic. Like the architects of the Weimar Republic, the founders of the Bauhaus favoured modernity, cultural diversity, and they were internationalist in outlook (James, 2003 p. 85).

History has certainly not been kind to the Weimar Republic, Germany's first taste of liberal democracy that was detested by millions of Germans, as well as being beset by major political and economic weaknesses particularly after the Great Depression. The collapse of the monarchy had allowed the Weimar Republic to be created to the decidedly inauspicious background of military defeat, an enforced peace treaty and political unrest at home. The optimism of pre-war Imperial Germany had been shattered by the time the First World War had finished (James, 2003, p. 73).

The Weimar Republic had a very liberal constitution with left wing and centre parties supporting the new system. The Weimar Republic was not at first accepted by the Communists or right wing nationalist parties. The new German state lacked the economic dynamism of Imperial Germany, especially as the Ruhr Valley industry output was harnessed to the French economy. The Germans protested about the reparations enforced upon them by the Treaty of Versailles. The Versailles settlement was intended to strip

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Germany of the power to wage war again, the army was reduced to 100, 000 men, and the high command was abolished. The German navy was reduced to a weak coastal defence force banned from having submarines. Germany was also banned from having an airforce. The Allies had hoped to break militarism in Germany, yet only caused resentment amongst the German people. Resentment of the Versailles settlement fuelled dislike of the Weimar Republic, although the government could not have rejected the treaty. Germany simply did not have the military, human, or economic resources to have carried on fighting which was why Ludendorff had brought civilians into the government in the first place, to use as fall guys for the army's failure to win the war (Shirer, 1988, p. 32).

However fragile the political and economic situation was in the Weimar era, Germany was certainly not a cultural or artistic backwater. In fact, Germany during the Republican period gained an international renown for its cultural and artistic achievements. Some of these cultural and artistic trends had existed before the First World War; others such as the Bauhaus School most closely linked with Walter Gropius flourished in this period (Fulbrook, 1991, p. 39). Much of the cultural diversity witnessed during the Weimar Republic fits into the concepts of modernity. Walter Gropius, Thomas Mann, and Arnold Schonberg were notable members of the German modernist avant-garde who got their best opportunities to fully express themselves after the First World War (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 179). German avant-garde modernism was influenced by two American imports after the First World War, cinematic films, and jazz music. The Weimar Republic had a flourishing filmmaking sector, although it could not match the production levels or profits generated

by Hollywood. Hollywood studios, especially Universal Studios liked to use ideas from relatively unknown German films, such as Frankenstein. Even before the Nazi's took power and repressed the degenerate elements of modernity; German technicians and filmmakers could always find work in Hollywood. Gropius and the Bauhaus linked itself with jazz music, which they regarded as the height of modernity in musical terms. The right wing politicians and extreme nationalists disliked jazz due to its Black American origin, as much as for its musical merits (Hobsbawm, 1994, pp. 184-85).

The Bauhaus School membership was almost entirely made up of left wing sympathisers who preferred the new republic to the old monarchy.

The Social Democrats retained their previous popularity but the new Weimar Republic actually allowed it a share of power. The greater freedoms that were allowed under the Republican regime would mean that the Bauhaus and other centres of German modernity were not only linked with Socialism or Marxism, they were also linked with Germany's moral degeneration.

Places where new culture was stronger, especially Berlin, were frequently resented for moral decadence and politically subversive views. The Bauhaus also tried to change the print types used in German newspapers and their own printed material. This was partly to make the graphic design better to look at as well as to save resources which traditional print types used more of (Fulbrook, 1991, p. 41). For instance, Lyonell Feininger taught at the Bauhaus, yet had previously been a cartoonist that had gained a reputation for producing hard hitting political satire in his newspaper cartoons. Whilst working for the Bauhaus Feininger went on to become a highly skilled painter and woodcutter. His work reflected that the influence of the Cubist

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movement remained strong throughout his career (www. articons. co. uk). Wassily Kandinsky had been a founding member of the ' Blaue Reiter' before the First World War forced his return to his native Russia. Whilst at the Bauhaus, Kandinsky did some of his finest work most notably the ' Kleine Welten' of 1922. He broadened his artistic horizons, whilst using his skills as a graphic designer to produce stage sets and theatrical costumes (www. articons. co. uk). Laszlo Moholy-Nagy came up with some innovative photographic techniques that later became widely used in journalistic graphic design. These techniques produced photographic quality pictures without the need to use a camera which Moholy-Nagy referred to as photograms. Moholy -Nagy became a film producer, as well as further developing photograms to be incorporated into printed text (Crystal, 1998 p. 652).

Dislike of the new democratic Germany was not just confined to extreme nationalist groups, teachers, civil servants, as well as the Catholic and Protestant churches were suspicious if not downright hostile towards the Weimar Republic. The political, social and ethical decadence of the Weimar Republic came to a head in 1923. This year was when the French occupied the Ruhr Valley and also when Germany was devastated by hyperinflation. Hyperinflation brought misery to millions of ordinary Germans; it made wages, savings, and pensions worthless. Millions turned in desperation towards the Communists, but also for the first time the Nazi party. Hyperinflation was the event, which also saw Adolf Hitler brought to national attention, after the failed putsch in Munich during November 1923. Hitler skilfully used his trial to publicly express the aims of the Nazi party.

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Germany's severe economic problems also prompted American recovery packages that gave the Weimar Republic the appearance of political and economic stability (Brendon, 2000, pp. 29-30). Domestically, stability seemed to be achieved under th