

How stable was the Weimar Republic?

In the first of a new series, profiling the issues raised by key A-level questions, Gareth Affleck identifies the points to discuss.

This question, frequently asked, is a vital one for any student studying the period. Answering it requires both looking back at the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Republic, and forward to a consideration of the reasons for its failure. Of course within the constraints of an exam essay, or even within a two-page article, a comprehensive answer is impossible. This article is intended both to provide a brief answer to the question and to illustrate how a good A-level student approached this essay.

Introduction

The years 1924-9 in Weimar Germany present one of the most tantalising 'might have beens' in history. In this period the Republic prospered economically, politically and in its foreign policy, and it is tempting to conclude that but for the intervention of the Great Depression of the 1930s Germany would have developed into a stable parliamentary democracy, and the horrors of Hitler might have been avoided. However a closer examination of the situation reveals otherwise, as this student believes:

The Weimar Republic was seen to be in a period of stability between 1924 and 1929. It was not only Germans that noticed that this was a high point for the Weimar Republic. William Shirer, an American journalist writes 'A wonderful ferment was working in Germany. Life seemed more free, more modern, more exciting than in any place I had ever seen'. Indeed it did seem as if the German economy was beginning to heal itself. Political recovery and apparent success in foreign affairs strengthened the belief that the Weimar Republic and Germany were becoming stable at last. However, as the Weimar Republic disintegrated almost as soon as the world depression fell, this so-called stability has been questioned. In comparison to the years before and after, this period was stable. Nevertheless, historians now agree that both political and economic recovery in Germany, and healthier foreign affairs, were all built on 'unstable foundations'. It is even thought that conditions were so bad by 1929 that the Weimar Republic may have soon collapsed without the onset of world depression.

Whilst the last sentence of this introduction perhaps overstates the situation, it probably is the case that Weimar Germany would have faced severe economic and political difficulties even without the world depression.

Economic stability?

The link between the health of the Republic and its economy is striking. It is no surprise that the Republic faced its most serious difficulties in times of economic hardship. There is an ongoing debate amongst economic historians concerning the strength of the economy in 1929, and lack of space precludes a detailed discussion here, but nevertheless the student is able to draw some general conclusions:

The stabilisation of German currency and the introduction of the Dawes plan in 1924 brought economic growth and affluence. The plan rescheduled German reparations according to her capacity to pay them. She was also granted a large American loan, and the plan also led to the evacuation of the Ruhr by French troops. Germany seemed to make a remarkable economic recovery in this period. In 1928 Gilbert Parker, an American financier reported: 'German business conditions appear to have righted themselves on a relatively high level of activity'. With regards to industry, Germany experienced boom conditions in this period. Iron, steel, coal the heavy industries managed to equal and sometimes even exceed export and out-put levels of 1913. This occurred through greater efficiency and improved technology, which brought about higher levels of productivity. This economic progress in Germany also led to increased wages. A social welfare scheme was introduced including pensions and sick benefits, which gave support to the feeling that the economy was recovering and the Republic was becoming more stable.

However, this recovery was not as real as it seems to be at face value. In 1926 production declined, and Germany's balance of trade was in the red. Unemployment was never below 1.3 million and was especially bad in the agricultural sectors. Unfortunately world conditions did not favour Germany, who depended on her exports, at a time when world trade was not high. However the most important factor in German stability was that Germany's economic well-being was dependent on and vulnerable to 'the investment whims of foreign capital'. The German government wanted to balance the budget, they wanted to boost the economy and they took on large social welfare schemes. Of course there was also the question of reparations payments. Therefore she was forced to rely on international loans generally from America. So, the 'recovery' of Germany's economy was only 'a false image of prosperity' (Layton). Her economy could not possibly be stable when it was tied so tightly to external forces beyond her control.

The high cost of Germany's social welfare programme, declining exports (as a percentage of GDP), lack of internal investment, reparations payments and rising unemployment were merely concealed by the high levels of borrowing from abroad. Whilst it would be unfair to say that Germany's economy would have collapsed anyway, even without the world depression Germany was facing an economic crisis by 1929.

Political stability?

The Weimar Republic's greatest weakness throughout its history was its failure to establish lasting political stability. From the disastrous association with Versailles, the 'stab in the back' and the 'November Criminals' at its creation, to the turmoil of its last years, the period 1924-9 stands out as a time when a stable political system seemed to be developing. However, not only was this stability unable to resist the effects of depression in the 1930s, its very existence was something of an illusion, as this student points out:

There not only seemed to be an economic recovery between 1924 and 1929 but it also seemed as if some form of political recovery was underway. The election results of this period gave people grounds to believe the long term survival of Weimar was a strong possibility. There was a notable decline of support for the extremist right and left wing parties. In comparison the parties sympathetic to the Republic gained seats, as in the case of the Social Democrats who held the majority 153 seats. Carr, however, rightly calls this an 'illusion'. He says 'Superficial prosperity and the growing international stature of the republic served to mask a state of chronic political weakness'. There was no progress made in the parliamentary and political system: the coalition governments did not enhance the credit of party politics in Germany, where the foundations of democracy were insecure. Their disagreements over trivialities such as the issue of the national flag or the creation of denominational schools only showed that 'there was no effective consolidation nor any significant sign of political maturation in particular the main democratic parties had still not recognised the vital necessity of working together in a spirit of compromise' (Layton).

The political system was undoubtedly weak in 1929. It had failed to establish itself in the hearts of the people, and this failure was not the fault of the constitution, as is often claimed, but of the politicians: they failed to capitalise on the opportunities offered by economic prosperity to establish democratic values strong enough to resist future crises. America suffered comparably to Germany in the depression of the Thirties, but its political system was never under threat. Germany's political system in contrast succumbed quickly even before the advent of Hitler, democracy was effectively dead with the appointment of Brüning's presidential government in 1930.

Foreign Policy

It is in the field of foreign policy that Weimar seemed to make the most progress in this period, yet even here the

work of Stresemann, often hailed as the man who could have saved Weimar, had drawbacks:

Stresemann's main aim was to bring about a revision of the Treaty of Versailles. The Dawes Plan of 1924 and the Locarno Treaties of 1925 were seen to be diplomatic successes for Stresemann, who 'achieved a great deal... at very little cost' (Layton). Germany joined the League of Nations and the Kellogg-Briand Pact was subscribed to. Pacts and Treaties such as these, including the Treaty of Berlin with Russia and reduced reparations in the Young Plan, led Germany to believe she was no longer the 'ogre' of Europe. However Layton aptly states 'His achievement was indeed considerable though by 1929 his policy had not lasted long enough or gone far enough to establish a momentum that could survive the very different circumstances of the 1930s'.

The problem with Stresemann's policy of revision was that by 1929 it had seemed to reach a dead end, and he himself was disappointed by its limits. There was a growing feeling inside Germany that a more dynamic approach was required. Certainly one of Hitler's most powerful attractions was his promise to overthrow the Versailles Treaty, and he won genuine popularity for his moves in this direction in the 1930s.

Conclusion

It should be obvious by now that the most that can be claimed for the Weimar Republic by 1929 is 'relative stability' in neither economic, political or foreign affairs had sufficient progress been made to enable the republic to withstand the coming storm:

By 1929 neither the economy nor the political system were stable. Prosperity in Germany was based on large international loans, and the economy was facing severe internal structural problems. There was no sign of political maturation by 1929. The parties had not learned to work together for the good of the country. In 1929 with the death of Stresemann came the end of stability in foreign affairs. Therefore by 1929 the Weimar Republic was not stable.

The importance of this conclusion should be obvious to those studying the rise of Hitler the Great Depression cannot take all the blame.

The extracts in this article are taken from an essay by Bik Hughes. She was formerly a sixth-former, and Gareth Affleck a teacher, at Stockport Grammar School.