

# Program Script

## The Weimar Republic

This is the valley of the river Sommes in France. It's beautiful countryside, but only in peacetime.

In 1916 one of the bloodiest battles of WWI was fought here: the notorious battle of the Sommes.

Allied soldiers tried in vain to break through the German lines for 5 months. Tens of thousands died. The Allies blockaded Germany and stopped food from being imported. Before the end of the war more than 300000 people had died from starvation.

Paul von Hindenburg, the most popular General and a symbol of victory, became the chief of the German general staff in 1916. In March 1917 the first Russian revolution broke out. To capitalise on the unrest, the Germans sent Lenin into Russia on a freight train. In November, he led the second Russian revolution and seized power from the provisional government. One of the first things he did was to take Russia out of the war.

In January 1918 the US president Wilson presented a plan for a "just peace". This just peace never eventuated.

Finally on 8 August 1918, in the biggest tank battle of WW1, the British overran German positions and took 16 000 prisoners. It was the German army's blackest day.

Hindenburg and his General Quartermaster Ludendorff announced that any continuation of the war was hopeless. On 29 September they offered an armistice to the Allies. However, the German Reichstag had already demanded a peace agreement over a year earlier. This demand can be regarded as the first step to German democracy.

Prince Max von Baden was appointed Chancellor on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, 1918. Four weeks later he introduced a new democratic constitution. On the same day, the sailors of the German High Sea fleet at Kiel mutinied after they were ordered to make a suicidal attack on the British navy. This mutiny led to workers' and soldiers' councils being set up in Kiel and other German cities.

On November 9 two revolutions broke out in Berlin: a communist revolution led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, and a democratic revolution led by the Socialist Democratic Party, or SPD. Philip Scheidemann, a social democrat, proclaimed the new democratic republic from this window of the Reichstag building.

Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated the next day.

The National Council of Representatives was an uneasy coalition between the SPD and the left wing independent socialist party. Prince Max von Baden handed governmental powers over to its leader, Friedrich Ebert. In effect, the NCR became the new German government. This meant that the Germany which finally signed the armistice in this wagon in France on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918 was led by democrats.

The supreme army commanders made sure that no one from the military signed the armistice. Instead it was done by a politician, Matthias Erzberger. He was later assassinated for this very act.

Even though it was obvious that Germany could not have won the war, a legend was created and spread among the German people that the undefeated German army had been stabbed in the back by the democrats, the “November Criminals”. In January 1919, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the leaders of the communists, were murdered by right wing ex-soldiers, the “Free Corps”. Their bodies were thrown into this canal in Berlin.

Gustav Noske, the chief commander of the government troops restored law and order so that elections for the National Assembly could take place.

The new government was forced to meet in Weimar because of the unrest in Berlin. Its main task was to draft a new constitution. In July 1919 the new democratic constitution was passed with a two thirds majority. When it was officially proclaimed in August, Germany became a parliamentary democracy.

The fact that Germany was now a democracy was not taken into account at the Versailles peace conference. The victors basically dictated the treaty and decided that Germany was solely responsible for WWI. The German representatives did not take part in these negotiations. They had to wait in this hotel. The allies threatened to invade unless the Germans signed the treaty.

The treaty of Versailles changed Germany’s map. Alsace Lorraine became part of France. Almost all of Posen and West Prussia was given to Poland. Danzig became an independent city. The Memel region was to be administered by the allies. The Hultschiner country was given to the new country of Czechoslovakia. And the Rheinland was occupied by the allies.

Plebiscites had to take place in the following areas:

In the Saar region, where it was to be decided in 15 years whether it would become part of Germany or France. Until then, the region stayed under the administration of the League of Nations.

In 1921, plebiscites were to be conducted in:

In North Schleswig,

East-Prussia,

Eupen Malmedy,

And Upper Schlesien.

Germany remained politically unstable. In Bavaria the left wing Social Democratic Kurt Eisner had proclaimed an independent state in November 1918. He was assassinated in February 1919, and his enemies declared a communist republic.

It lasted for only three months. In May, government troops arrived in Munich and overthrew it.

However, the Weimar government continued to lose authority. Its representatives were taken to court, such as financial minister Erzberger, or were defamed as appeasement politicians.

Violent opposition against the Weimar government came from a force of right wing ex-soldiers, the Free Corps. In March 1920, they took control of Berlin and tried to set up a new government led by right wing politician Wolfgang Kapp. The civil servants, however, refused to support the revolutionaries and the legitimate government moved to Stuttgart. The unions along with the German Democratic Party and the socialists announced a general strike. After five days, the “Kapp putsch” was over.

Crucially the revolutionaries had not gained the support of the German army and without it they had no real authority.

In January 1921 the Allies announced the reparation payments for WWI. Germany had 42 years to pay 226 billion gold Marks. In February the German counterproposals were rejected in London.

The Allies occupied 5 cities in the Ruhr area.

Then in May the reparations were reduced to 132 billion gold Marks. Germany agreed to this amount under the threat of invasion. In the meantime, the plebiscites outlined in the treaty of Versailles had the following outcomes:

Of the two zones in divided North Schleswig the bigger one became part of Denmark. The counties of Marienwerder and Allenstein remained part of Germany. Eupen Malmedy became part of Belgium. And Upper Silesia was divided in spite of a 60% vote for Germany. This division gave Poland important cities and rich coal mines. The enormous reparations and the loss of land were to have serious consequences for the establishment of democracy in Germany.

The first foreign policy success for the Weimar Republic came when foreign Minister Walter Rathenau signed the Rapallo treaty with the Soviet Union in 1922. Both countries agreed to cancel each other's war reparations. Right wing extremists accused Rathenau of being part of a Jewish communist conspiracy and two months after the signing of the treaty he was assassinated.

Alarmed by the treaty of Rapallo, France accused Germany of defaulting on war reparations and occupied the Ruhr Valley in January 1923. The German government announced a policy of passive resistance. It encouraged citizens in the Ruhr to work slowly and to sabotage equipment. Less coal was produced in the 8 months following the French occupation than had been produced in the first 10 days of the year.

One of the leaders of the passive resistance movement was Albrecht Leo Schlageter who blew up a railway bridge to make the transportation of coal to France more difficult. He was denounced to the French by a German informer and was executed. The right wing radical movement now had a martyr.

An outcast in Western Europe, the German government looked to Russia for help. There had been minor cooperation between Russia and Germany since 1920 but now it was considerably expanded. German pilots and tank officers underwent secret training in Russia.

But the political situation in Germany remained unstable. By 1923, the Republic had already had six chancellors: Philip Scheidemann, Gustav Bauer, Hermann Mueller, Konstatin Fehrenbach, Joseph Wirth and Wilhelm Cuno.

Gustav Stresemann became Chancellor in August 1923 and faced several immediate problems. The German government had paid for passive resistance by simply printing more money, which caused hyperinflation. German money literally wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

Separatist movements sprang up, here in Aachen and Koblenz as well as other places, and had to be put down. Three men saved the Republic at this time. Friedrich Ebert, Gustav Stresemann and General von Seeckt, the commander of the army. In November 1923 General Ludendorff, aided by Adolf Hitler and his private army, the Stormtroopers, staged the "Beerhall putsch".

Ludendorff, who had demanded an immediate armistice in 1918, now called the democratic government traitors. The putsch was put down by the army and police. Hitler was found hiding and arrested. Although he was eligible for the death penalty, Hitler was sentenced to just five years in prison. Ludendorff, the war hero, was set free.

It was while in prison that Hitler wrote down his philosophical and political ideas in his book, "Mein Kampf". He dictated the text to Rudolph Hess, who later was the commander of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Six months into his five year sentence, Hitler was set free.

Meanwhile, a new French government realised that Germany was not able to pay the enormous war reparations. In 1924 in Paris a conference of finance experts under the leadership of the American Vice

President Charles Dawes formulated a plan for more gradual payments. The USA agreed to lend Germany millions of dollars. The “Dawes Plan” was designed to stabilise the German economy and government.

The Dawes Plan was sealed in London and was an immediate success. The German economy received a boost but was still too weak to withstand a serious crisis.

Meanwhile members of the right continued to attack the state. They mounted a relentless slander campaign against President Ebert, accusing him of being a traitor to the country and of shady financial dealings. He was literally hounded to death by his enemies. He died in February 1925 after delaying treatment of an inflamed appendix in order to appear before a parliamentary committee of investigation.

Paul von Hindenburg, the Imperial Fieldmarshal, became the second president of the republic. Despite his own aristocratic background and right wing beliefs, he seriously tried to govern according to the democratic constitution.

As a consequence of the Dawes Plan, the French-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr area was ended and the political situation calmed down.

In October 1925 seven nations including Germany signed the Locarno treaty which accepted Germany’s western boundaries as outlined in the Treaty of Versailles. Gustav Stresemann, former chancellor and foreign minister since 1923 was the leader of the German delegation. At the same time as the Locarno Treaty was signed, Germany was accepted into the League of Nations. Germany, which had been an outcast since the end of WWI was once again part of the European community.

In 1926 Stresemann addressed the League of Nations: “As long as the League of Nations works for peace, freedom and unity, Germany is keen to be involved.” The French foreign minister, Aristide Briand declared a new beginning in the Franco German relationship.

During the conference Stresemann and Briand had a private meeting here in the French town of Thoiry. They agreed on the importance of a reconciliation between France and Germany, and both were awarded the Nobel peace prize for 1925.

Their idealism was not shared by all.

Back in Germany, Stresemann had to face right wing opposition to the League of Nations. And in France the newly elected Prime Minister Pointcare delayed the retreat of French troops from the Ruhr valley. In 1929, a new round of negotiations regarding Germany’s war reparations began. The outcome, the “Young Plan” reduced Germany’s reparations drastically. But the left and the right would not accept any reparations at all. The fight against the republic grew more and more dogged.

At this time, Stresemann died. His death caused shock waves in Europe. As German chancellor and later foreign minister he had made the hard decisions to get Germany back on the road to prosperity. He negotiated the Locarno treaty and the entry of Germany into the League of Nations. He was a symbol of a peaceful, democratic modern Germany.

At this time, Albert Einstein opened the Berlin radio and television exhibition: “The source of all technical achievements is the divine curiosity, and the need to play, of a fiddling and brooding researcher, combined with the constructive imagination of a technical inventor.” And at that time there were many technical achievements: the Dornier X, the biggest airplane of that time, the Steamer “Bremen”, the fastest cruise liner in the world, and the Zeppelin which carried the message of German achievement around the world.

The period of 1924-1929, known as the Stresemann years, were also the golden years of the Weimar Republic. It was a time of prosperity and a time of new fads, like the Charleston. There was also an artistic and cultural revival and the period is considered a high point of German art and cinema. The members of Berlin’s high society were not interested in boring things like politics. The literati didn’t show much interest either. Thomas Mann was an exception. He was a staunch defender of democracy. Herman Hesse did not openly criticise the extremist groups. Ernst Junger was admired by the far right. Bertholdt Brecht gradually became a devoted communist. The intelligentsia was radical and fought against the Nazis. Writers and

painters reflected in their artworks the many faces of the republic. But no-one was really interested in democracy. In fact, the major problem was that the democratic republic lacked democrats.

In October 1929 the New York Stock Exchange collapsed and the German economy was thrown into crisis. The German government of that time, led by Mueller was the first political victim of the Great Depression. The new minority government under Heinrich Brüning was unable to pass legislation in the Reichstag, so Brüning attempted to rule using the president's emergency powers as outlined in the constitution. Few attempted to save the republic. The streets were ruled by its enemies – the communist red front and Hitler's SA the "Stormtroopers". Both gathered in mass displays of power while honouring those that had died for their respective causes.

The Reichstag election on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1930 saw the breakthrough of the Nazi Party. The Nazis' representation in the Reichstag increased from 12 to 107 members. They were now the republic's second largest party. The economic situation continued to deteriorate and Brüning's minority cabinet was forced to use the president's emergency powers to pass legislation again and again. Rising unemployment fuelled the rise of extremist parties.

In October 1931 the German National Party and the Nazi Party formed a right wing coalition. The parties became more like armies.

In response to the right wing coalition the defenders of the democracy, including the General German Workers Union, formed their own coalition, the Iron Front, but they remained weak. In 1931, a string of banks collapsed in Austria and Germany. The Great Depression was in full swing and soon afterwards 6 million Germans were unemployed. In April 1932 Hindenburg successfully contested the presidency against Hitler. He was 84 at the time, but he was determined to defend the constitution. To secure the authority of the state, the government banned Hitler's private armies, the SA and SS. Hitler didn't have enough power to stage a putsch, but he was still a loose cannon. "They can oppress us they can kill us but we will never surrender."

But Brüning could not find solutions in critical situations and he lacked charisma. He lost the support of Hindenburg and the army. In June 1932 the new chancellor Franz von Papen formed a cabinet made up of nationalists. The ban on the SS and SA was lifted. Papen wanted to destroy the democracy and replace it with a semi-fascist state. A few days later at an international conference in Lausanne, the former allies cancelled Germany's reparation payments. But it was too late to stabilise the political situation in Germany. It is one of history's ironies that a politician like Papen reaped what the statesman Stresemann had sown.

Still in June the last stable state government in Germany came to an end. Papen attempted to break the power of the socialist party by dismissing the Prussian state government of the social democrats led by Otto Braun and Carl Severing, who had governed since 1920.

Hitler stepped up the fight against the democracy from election to election, and there were two in 1932. Some actions weakened the democracy even further, like the public transport strike in Berlin which was supported by the otherwise deadly enemies, the communists and the Nazis.

Since the establishment of the national assembly in 1919 the proportion of votes for democratic parties continually declined, as shown here in white. The brown section at the bottom of the graph shows the rise of the Nazi party.

In 1919 democratic parties received 76.2% of the vote, and at the elections on the 6 November 1932, just 36.3%. The democracy was strangled from the left and the right.

After the election, Papen was forced to step down. General von Schleicher became the new chancellor. His attempt to split the Nazi party failed. But Papen did not give in. He met Hitler at this house in Cologne and did a deal. Hitler was to be chancellor, on the condition that Papen was his vice chancellor.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1933 the Nazis scored a landslide in the county Lippe election. Hitler seemed unstoppable.

Chancellor von Schleicher demanded that President Hindenburg grant him emergency powers to take dictatorial action against the left and the right. Hindenburg refused. He was tired of minority governments. On the 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1933 President Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler as chancellor of the German Reich.