

1929: A TURNING POINT DURING THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

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Facing History and Ourselves

A general amnesty for political prisoners has just been declared and [Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz](#) is now a free man. It is 1929 and he has spent the last five years in prison for his involvement in crimes committed by right-wing nationalist terrorist organization called Consul. Heinz is unreconciled to the existence of the Weimar Republic but has accepted the fact that violent revolution or political assassination won't destroy it. He knows that the misery that had aided the efforts of Weimar's enemies in the early 20's has been relieved by five years of economic growth and rising incomes. Germany has been [admitted to the League of Nations](#) and is once more an accepted member of the international community. Certainly the bitterness at Germany's [defeat in the Great War](#) and the humiliation of the [Treaty of Versailles](#) have not been forgotten but most Germans appear to have come to terms with the new Republic and its leaders. Heinz will never come to terms with the new Republic and the essays and stories he has written from his jail cell speak of betrayal, moral decay and weakness as the characteristics of the new Germany. Perhaps [Adolf Hitler](#) and the [Nazis](#) offer some hope for the future but for now Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz has decided he will use his pen to fight for a "true Germany" and "authentic" leaders.



Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz

[Gustav Stresemann](#) has just died. Germany has, in part, as a result of his efforts become a respected member of the international community again. Stresemann often spoke before the League of Nations. With his French and American counterparts Auguste Briand and Frank Kellogg he had helped negotiate the [Paris Peace pact](#) which bore the name of his fellow diplomats Kellogg-Briand. Once again Gustav Stresemann had decided to take on the arduous job of leading a battle for a policy he felt was in his nation's vital interest even though he was tired and ill and knew that the opposition would be stubborn and vitriolic. Stresemann was the major force in negotiating and guiding the [Young Plan](#) through a plebiscite. This plan although opposed by those on the right-wing won



Gustav Stresemann

majority approval and further reduced Germany's reparations payments.

How had Weimar Germany become by 1929 a peaceful relatively prosperous and creative society given its chaotic and crisis-ridden beginnings? What significant factors contributed to the survival and success of the Republic? What were the Republic's vulnerabilities, which would allow its enemies to undermine it in the period between 1929 and 1933?

Politics

The Weimar Republic, which Heinz hated and Stresemann embraced, was a bold experiment. It was Germany's first democracy, a state in which elected representatives had real power. The new [Weimar constitution](#) attempted to blend the European parliamentary system with the American presidential system. In the pre-World War I period, only men twenty-five years of age and older had the right to vote, and their elected representatives had very little power. The Weimar constitution gave all men and women twenty years of age the right to vote. Women made up more than 52% of the potential electorate, and their support was vital to the new Republic. From a [ballot](#), which often had thirty or more parties on it, Germans chose legislators who would make the policies that shaped their lives. Parties spanning a broad political spectrum from [Communists](#) on the far left to [National Socialists \(Nazis\)](#) on the far right competed in the Weimar elections. The Chancellor and the Cabinet needed to be approved by the Reichstag (legislature) and needed the Reichstag's continued support to stay in power.

Although the constitution makers expected the Chancellor to be the head of government, they included emergency provisions that would ultimately undermine the Republic. [Gustav Stresemann](#) was briefly Chancellor in 1923 and for six years foreign minister and close advisor to Chancellors. [Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz](#) participated in plots to undermine the Republic and thwart the efforts of Chancellors and their close advisors. The constitution gave emergency powers to the directly elected President and made him the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. In times of crisis, these presidential powers would prove decisive. During the stable periods, Weimar Chancellors formed legislative majorities based on coalitions primarily of the [Social Democrats](#), the [Democratic Party](#), and the [Catholic Center Party](#),

all moderate parties that supported the Republic. However, as the economic situation deteriorated in 1930, and many disillusioned voters turned to extremist parties, the Republic's supporters could no longer command a majority. German democracy could no longer function as its creators had hoped. Ironically by 1932, [Adolf Hitler](#), a dedicated foe of the Weimar Republic, was the only political leader capable of commanding a legislative majority. On January 30, 1933, an aged President von Hindenburg reluctantly named Hitler Chancellor of the Republic. Using his legislative majority and the support of Hindenburg's emergency presidential powers, Hitler proceeded to destroy the Weimar Republic.

Economics

Germany emerged from World War I with huge debts incurred to finance a costly war for almost five years. The treasury was empty, the [currency was losing value](#), and Germany needed to pay its war debts and the huge reparations bill imposed on it by the [Treaty of Versailles](#), which officially ended the war. The treaty also deprived Germany of territory, natural resources, and even ships, trains, and factory equipment. Her population was undernourished and contained many impoverished widows, orphans, and disabled veterans. The new German government struggled to deal with these crises, which had produced a serious hyperinflation. By 1924, after years of crisis management and attempts at tax and finance reform, the economy was stabilized with the help of foreign, particularly American, loans. A period of relative prosperity prevailed from 1924 to 1929. This relative ["golden age"](#) was reflected in the strong support for moderate pro-Weimar political parties in the 1928 elections. However, economic disaster struck with the onset of the world depression in 1929. The [American stock market crash](#) and bank failures led to a recall of American loans to Germany. This development added to Germany's economic hardship. Mass unemployment and suffering followed. Many Germans became increasingly disillusioned with the Weimar Republic and began to turn toward radical anti-democratic parties whose representatives promised to relieve their economic hardships.

Class-Gender

Rigid class separation and considerable friction among the classes characterized pre-World War I German society. Aristocratic landowners looked down on middle and

working class Germans and only grudgingly associated with wealthy businessmen and industrialists. Members of the middle class guarded their status and considered themselves to be superior to factory workers. The cooperation between middle and working class citizens, which had broken the aristocracy's monopoly of power in England, had not developed in Germany. In Weimar Germany, class distinctions, while somewhat modified, were still important. In particular, the middle class battled to preserve their higher social status and monetary advantages over the working class. [Ruth Fischer](#) wanted her German Communist party to champion the cause of the unemployed and unrepresented.

Gender issues were also controversial as some women's groups and the left-wing political parties attempted to create more equality between the sexes. Ruth Fischer struggled to keep the Communist party focused on these issues. As the Stalinists forced her out of the party the Communists lost this focus. Other women's groups, conservative and radical right-wing political parties, and many members of the clergy resisted the changes that Fischer and her supporters advocated. The [constitution](#) mandated considerable gender equality, but tradition and the civil and criminal codes were still strongly patriarchal and contributed to perpetuating inequality. Marriage and divorce laws and questions of morality and sexuality were all areas of ferment and debate.

Culture

Weimar Germany was a center of artistic innovation, great creativity, and considerable experimentation. In film, the visual arts, architecture, craft, theater, and music, Germans were in the forefront of the most exciting developments. The unprecedented freedom and widespread latitude for varieties of cultural expression led to an explosion of artistic production. In the [Bauhaus](#) arts and crafts school, in the studios of the film company UFA, in the theater of Max Reinhardt and the studios of the New Objectivity (Neue Sachlichkeit) artists, cutting edge work was being produced. While many applauded these efforts, conservative and radical right-wing critics decried the new cultural products as decadent and immoral. They condemned Weimar Germany as a new Sodom and Gomorrah and attacked American influences, such as jazz music, as contributors to the decay.



Paul von Hindenburg

KATHE KOLLWITZ



Kathe Kollwitz had decided early in her life to use her art in the service of the poor and the oppressed particularly women and children. By marrying a doctor and raising her family in the working class neighborhood where her husband practiced in a clinic she chose a life of struggle. Issues of gender and class were part of her every day experiences. She reacted to the misery of the early Weimar years and even when things improved she maintained her advocacy on behalf of international peace and women and children. By the end of 1929 she would once again have misery in her neighborhood and the country as a whole as subjects for her palette.

RUTH FISCHER

Ruth Fischer has entered the political battle of her life in 1929. She is struggling for the heart and soul of the German Communist Party. She believes that the Communist Party is the only party in Germany, which is truly committed to radical change in German society. It has fought against the military, against the landowners against the industrialists and for the unskilled workers, for the legalization of abortion and birth control and for reform of laws dealing with homosexuality. However Ruth Fischer had to battle within her own party against those who have urged and several times attempted armed revolution to destroy the Weimar Republic. She was in 1929 battling those who were willing to give up the independence of the German communist party and turn control of the Party over to the new master of Communist Russia Joseph Stalin. Just when the electoral fortunes of the party were going to take a great leap forward Fischer would lose her battle and the German Communist party of the last Weimar years would not be Ruth Fischer's.

Religion

Weimar Germany had a population that was about 65% Protestant, 34 % Catholic and 1% Jewish. After German unification in 1871, the government had strongly favored the two major Protestant Churches, Lutheran and Reformed, which thought of themselves as state-sponsored churches. At the same time, the government had harassed and restricted the Catholic Church. Although German Catholics had only seen restrictions slowly lifted in the pre-World War I period, they nevertheless demonstrated their patriotism in World War I. German Jews, who had faced centuries of persecution and restriction, finally achieved legal equality in 1871. Jews also fought in record numbers during World War I and many distinguished themselves in combat. Antisemites refused to believe the army's own figures and records and accused the Jews of undermining the war effort. The new legal equality of the Weimar period did not translate into social equality, and the Jews remained the "other" in Germany.

Catholics and Jews both benefited from the founding of the Weimar Republic. Catholics entered the government in leadership positions, and Jews participated actively in Weimar cultural life. Many Protestant clergymen resented the loss of their privileged status. While many slowly accepted the new Republic, others were never reconciled to it. Both Protestant and Catholic clergy were suspicious of the Socialists who were a part of the ruling group in Weimar and who often voiced Marxist hostility toward religion. Conflicts over religion and education and religion and gender policies were often intense during the Weimar years. The growth of the [Communist Party](#) in Germany alarmed Protestant and Catholic clergy, and the strong support the [Catholic Center Political Party](#) had given to the

FRIEDRICH WILHELM HEINZ



Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz detested the products of the amazingly free atmosphere for creative artists in the Weimar republic. He found them crude, ugly and offensive.

In 1929 he became the head of a conservative literary organization which advocated a return to "traditional standards" and strict censorship of work they considered objectionable .

GEORGE GROSZ



George Grosz and his publisher Wieland Herzfelde were in 1929 condemned by a law court for blasphemy and sentenced to two months in prison or a fine of 2000 marks. The offending

Republic weakened in the last years of the Republic. While Jews had unprecedented opportunities during the Weimar period, their accomplishments and increased visibility added resentment to long-standing prejudices and hatreds and fueled a growing antisemitism.

drawing by Grosz depicted Christ on the cross wearing a gas mask and army boots. The inscription read "Shut up and obey." An appellate judge, Siegert acquitted the defendants arguing that the only priests satirized were those who preached war in the name of Jesus. Justice Siegert, though a conservative, was removed from office by the Nazis after they took power.

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