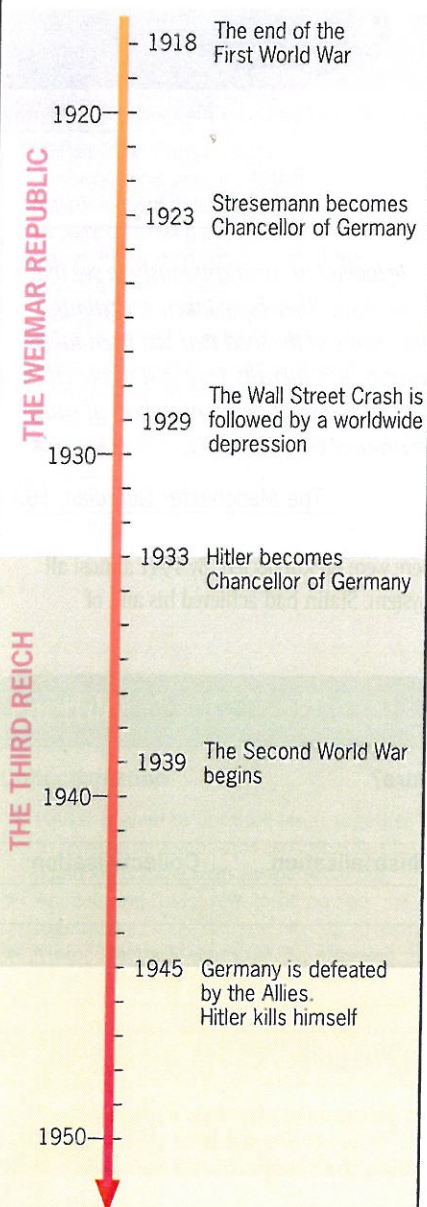


8.1

The Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazis

Timeline

This timeline shows the period you will be covering in this chapter. Some of the key dates are filled in already. To help you get a complete picture of the period, you can make your own copy and add other details to it as you work through the chapter.



Focus

At the end of the First World War Germany's old regime collapsed and was replaced by a new democratic government. This government faced many problems and was eventually overthrown by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

In Section 8.1 of this chapter you will investigate the challenges which faced the new Weimar Republic, 1919–29, including:

- ◆ the attempts to overthrow the democratic government
- ◆ problems caused by the Treaty of Versailles
- ◆ economic and political challenges from extreme groups.

In Section 8.2 you will investigate:

- ◆ how economic problems helped Hitler come to power
- ◆ how the Nazis ruled Germany
- ◆ the impact of Nazism on German society.

The impact of the First World War

In 1914 the Germans were a proud people. Their Kaiser – virtually a dictator – was celebrated for his achievements. Their army was probably the finest in the world. A journey through the streets of Berlin in 1914 would have revealed prospering businesses and a well-educated and well-fed workforce. There was great optimism about the power and strength of Germany.

Four years later a similar journey would have revealed a very different picture. Although little fighting had taken place in Germany itself, the war had still destroyed much of the old Germany. The proud German army was defeated. The German people were surviving on turnips and bread. A flu epidemic was sweeping the country, killing thousands of people already weakened by rations.

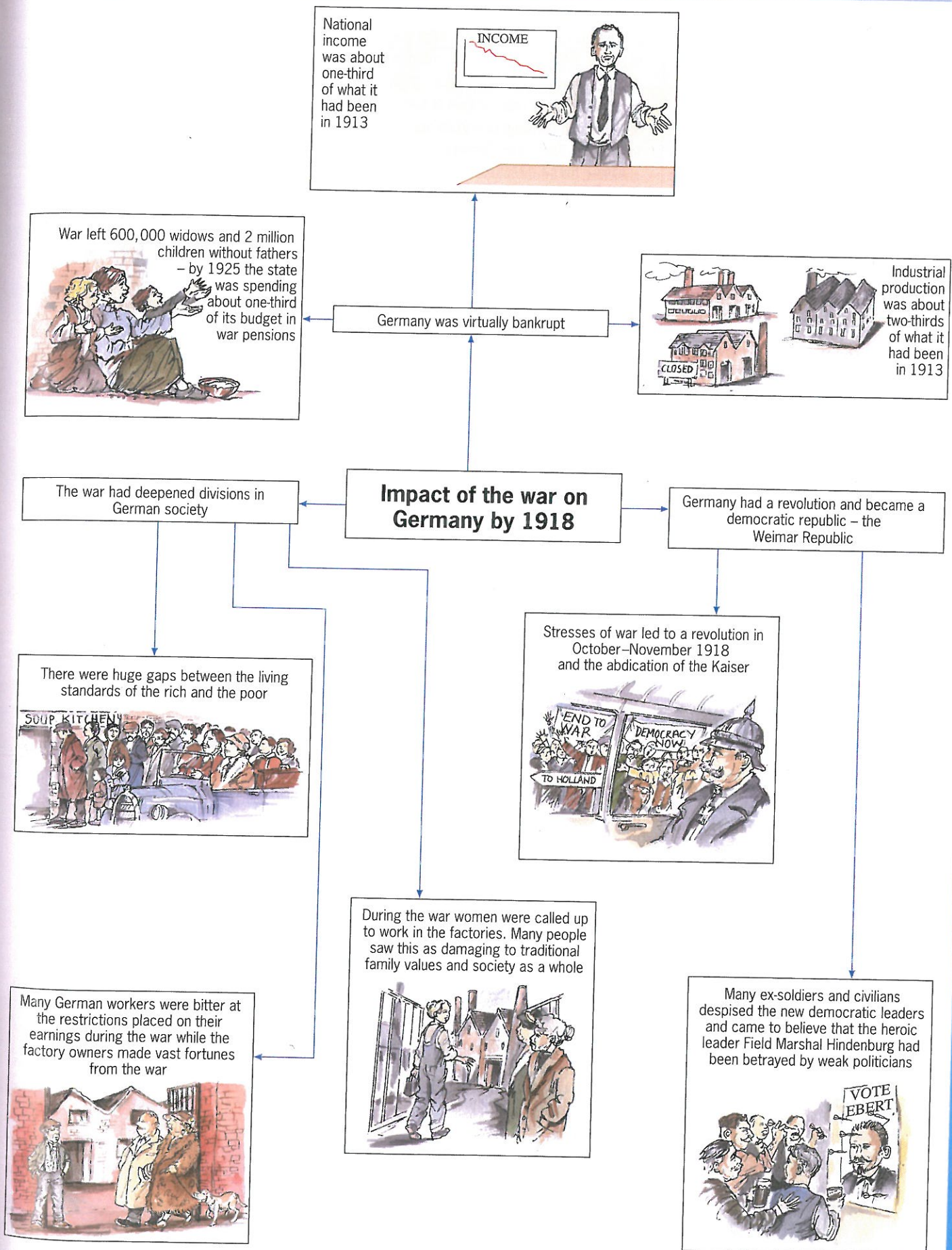
This may not surprise you, given the suffering of the First World War. What might surprise you is that five years later the situation for many people in Germany was still very grim indeed.

Whatever had gone wrong in Germany? To find out, you are going to look back at the final stages of the First World War.

SOURCE 1



German women sell their possessions to buy food in 1922.



The impact of war on Germany by 1918.

Focus Task

How did Germany emerge from defeat in the First World War?

- 1 Use Source 2 on page 175 and the information on this page to make a list of the challenges facing Ebert when he took over in Germany in 1918. You could organise the list into sections:
 - ◆ Political challenges
 - ◆ Social challenges
 - ◆ Economic challenges
 - ◆ The impact of the war
- 2 Imagine you are advising Ebert. Explain what you think are the three most serious challenges that need tackling urgently.
- 3 Take a class vote and see if you all agree on which are the most serious challenges.

The birth of the Weimar Republic

In autumn 1918 the Allies had clearly won the war. Germany was in a state of chaos, as you have seen in Source 2. The Allies offered Germany peace, but under strict conditions. One condition was that Germany should become more democratic. When the Kaiser refused, sailors in northern Germany mutinied and took over the town of Kiel. This triggered other revolts. The Kaiser's old enemies, the Socialists, led uprisings of workers and soldiers in other German ports. Soon, other German cities followed. In Bavaria an independent Socialist Republic was declared. On 9 November 1918 the Kaiser abdicated his throne and left Germany for the Netherlands.

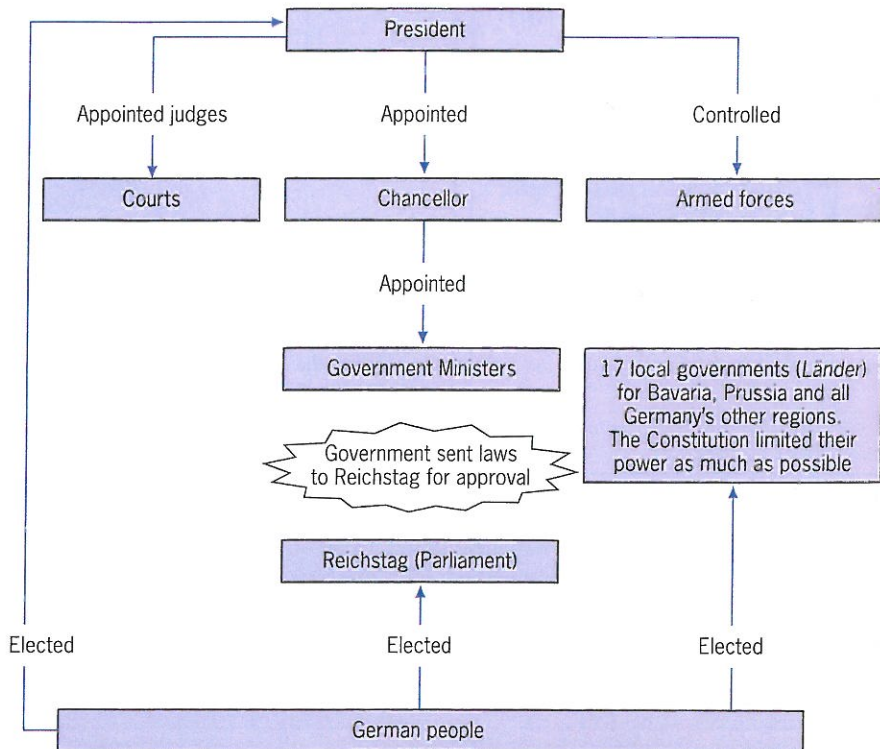
The following day, the Socialist leader Friedrich Ebert became the new leader of the Republic of Germany. He immediately signed an armistice with the Allies. The war was over. He also announced to the German people that the new Republic was giving them freedom of speech, freedom of worship and better working conditions. A new constitution was drawn up (see Factfile).

The success of the new government depended on the German people accepting an almost instant change from the traditional, autocratic German system of government to this new democratic system. The prospects for this did not look good.

The reaction of politicians in Germany was unenthusiastic. Ebert had opposition from both right and left. On the right wing, nearly all the Kaiser's former advisers remained in their positions in the army, judiciary, civil service and industry. They restricted what the new government could do. Many still hoped for a return to rule by the Kaiser. A powerful myth developed that men such as Ebert had stabbed Germany in the back and caused the defeat in the war (see page 177). On the left wing there were many Communists who believed that at this stage what Germany actually needed was a Communist revolution just like Russia's in 1917.

Despite this opposition, in January 1919 free elections took place for the first time in Germany's history. Ebert's party won a majority and he became the President of the Weimar Republic. It was called this because, to start with, the new government met in the small town of Weimar (see Source 6) rather than in the German capital, Berlin. Even in February 1919, Berlin was thought to be too violent and unstable.

SOURCE 3



The Weimar Constitution.

Factfile

The Weimar Constitution

- Before the war Germany had had no real democracy. The Kaiser was virtually a dictator.
- The Weimar Constitution, on the other hand, attempted to set up probably the most democratic system in the world where no individual could gain too much power.
- All Germans over the age of twenty could vote.
- There was a system of proportional representation – if a party gained twenty per cent of the votes, they gained twenty per cent of the seats in the Parliament (Reichstag).
- The Chancellor was responsible for day-to-day government, but he needed the support of half the Reichstag.
- The Head of State was the President. The President stayed out of day-to-day government. In a crisis he could rule the country directly through Article 48 of the Constitution. This gave him emergency powers, which meant he did not have to consult the Reichstag.

SOURCE 4



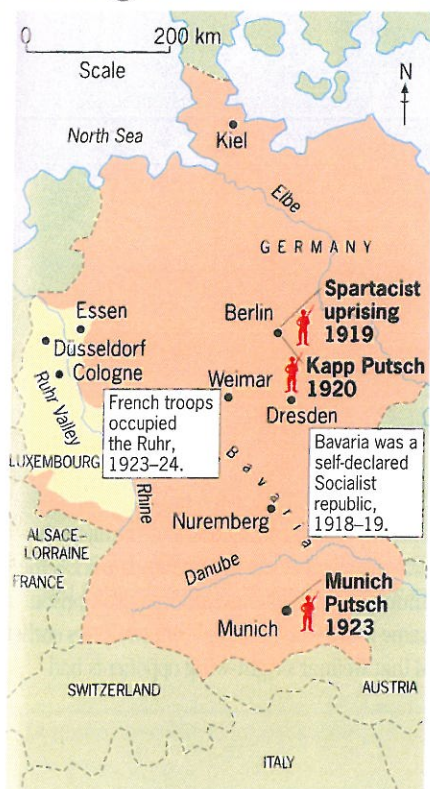
Spartacists – the Communists who felt that Germany was ready to follow Russia's example of Communist revolution.

SOURCE 5



The Freikorps – ex-servicemen who were totally opposed to Communism.

SOURCE 6



Problems for the Weimar Republic, 1919–24.

Challenges to the Weimar Republic, 1919–23

From the start, Ebert's government faced violent opposition from both left-wing and right-wing opponents.

The threat from the Left

One left-wing group was a Communist party known as the Spartacists. They were led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Their party was much like Lenin's Bolsheviks, who had just taken power in Russia. They argued strongly against Ebert's plans for a democratic Germany (see Factfile). They wanted a Germany ruled by workers' councils or soviets.

Early in 1919 the Spartacists launched their bid for power. Joined by rebel soldiers and sailors, they set up soviets in many towns. Not all soldiers were on the side of the Spartacists, however. Some anti-Communist ex-soldiers had formed themselves into vigilante groups called Freikorps. Ebert made an agreement with the commanders of the army and the Freikorps to put down the rebellion. Bitter street fighting followed between the Spartacists and Freikorps. Both sides were heavily armed. Casualties were high. The Freikorps won. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were murdered and this Communist revolution had failed. However, another one was soon to follow.

It emerged in Bavaria in the south of Germany. Bavaria was still an independent Socialist state led by Kurt Eisner, who was Ebert's ally. In February 1919 he was murdered by political opponents. The Communists in Bavaria seized the opportunity to declare a soviet republic in Bavaria. Ebert used the same tactics as he had against the Spartacists. The Freikorps moved in to crush the revolt in May 1919. Around 600 Communists were killed.

In 1920 there was more Communist agitation in the Ruhr industrial area. Again police, army and Freikorps clashed with Communists. There were 2,000 casualties.

Ebert's ruthless measures against the Communists created lasting bitterness between them and his Socialist Party. However, it gained approval from many in Germany. Ebert was terrified that Germany might go the same way as Russia (at that time rocked by bloody civil war). Many Germans shared his fears. Even so, despite these defeats, the Communists remained a powerful anti-government force in Germany throughout the 1920s.

The Treaty of Versailles

The next crisis to hit the new Republic came in May 1919 when the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were announced. You can read more about this on pages 18–23, but here is a summary. Germany lost:

- 10 per cent of its land
- all of its overseas colonies
- 12.5 per cent of its population
- 16 per cent of its coal and 48 per cent of its iron industry.

In addition:

- its army was reduced to 100,000; it was not allowed to have an air force; its navy was reduced
- Germany had to accept blame for starting the war and was forced to pay reparations.

Most Germans were appalled. Supporters of the Weimar government felt betrayed by the Allies. The Kaiser was gone – why should they be punished for his war and aggression? Opponents of the regime turned their fury on Ebert.

As you read on page 20, Ebert himself was very reluctant to sign the Treaty, but he had no choice. Germany could not go back to war. However, in the minds of many Germans, Ebert and his Weimar Republic were forever to blame for the Treaty. The injustice of the Treaty became a rallying point for all Ebert's opponents. They believed that the German army had been 'stabbed in the back' by the Socialist and Liberal politicians who agreed an armistice in November 1918. They believed not that Germany had been beaten on the battlefield, but that it had been betrayed by its civilian politicians who didn't dare continue the war. The Treaty was still a source of bitterness in Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933. You can read about German reactions to the Treaty on pages 20–21.

- 1 Why might the Right dislike the Weimar Constitution (see Factfile, page 176)?
- 2 For each aspect of the Treaty of Versailles, explain why it would anger Ebert's right-wing opponents.

The threat from the Right

Ebert's government faced violent opposition from the Right. His right-wing opponents were largely people who had grown up in the successful days of the Kaiser's Germany. They had liked the Kaiser's dictatorial style of government. They liked Germany having a strong army. They wanted Germany to expand its territory, and to have an empire. They had been proud of Germany's powerful industry.

In March 1920 Dr Wolfgang Kapp led 5,000 Freikorps into Berlin in a rebellion known as the Kapp Putsch (Putsch means rebellion). The army refused to fire on the Freikorps and it looked as if Ebert's government was doomed. However, it was saved by the German people, especially the industrial workers of Berlin. They declared a general strike which brought the capital to a halt with no transport, power or water (see Source 7). After a few days Kapp realised he could not succeed and left the country. He was hunted down and died while awaiting trial. It seemed that Weimar had support and power after all. Even so, the rest of the rebels went unpunished by the courts and judges.

SOURCE 7



Workers being bussed to work privately during the 1920 general strike.

- 3 From reading pages 177–78, what differences can you see between the treatment of left-wing and right-wing extremists? Can you explain this?

Ebert's government struggled to deal with the political violence in Germany. Political assassinations were frequent. In the summer of 1922 Ebert's Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau was murdered by extremists. Then in November 1923 Adolf Hitler led an attempted rebellion in Munich, known as the **Munich Putsch** (see page 188). Both Hitler and the murderers of Rathenau received short prison sentences. Strangely, Hitler's judge at the trial was the same judge who had tried him two years earlier for disorder. Both times he got off very lightly. It seemed that Weimar's right-wing opponents had friends in high places.

SOURCE 8

There was a lot of official harassment. There was widespread hunger, squalor and poverty and – what really affected us – there was humiliation. The French ruled with an iron band. If they disliked you walking on the pavement, for instance, they'd come along with their riding crops and you'd have to walk in the road.

The memories of Jutta Rudiger, a German woman living in the Ruhr during the French occupation.

- 4 For each of Sources 9 and 10 write an explanation of its message.
- 5 Is it possible to answer the question 'Could Germany afford the reparations payments?' with a simple yes or no? Explain your answer.

Economic disaster

The Treaty of Versailles destabilised Germany politically, but Germans also blamed it for another problem – economic chaos. See if you agree that the Treaty of Versailles was responsible for economic problems in Germany.

The Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to pay reparations to the Allies. The reparations bill was announced in April 1921. It was set at £6,600 million, to be paid in annual instalments. This was two per cent of Germany's annual output. The Germans protested that this was an intolerable strain on the economy which they were struggling to rebuild after the war, but their protests were ignored.

The invasion of the Ruhr

The first instalment of £50 million was paid in 1921, but in 1922 nothing was paid. Ebert did his best to play for time and to negotiate concessions from the Allies, but the French in particular ran out of patience. They too had war debts to pay to the USA. So in January 1923 French and Belgian troops entered the Ruhr (quite legally under the Treaty of Versailles) and began to take what was owed to them in the form of raw materials and goods.

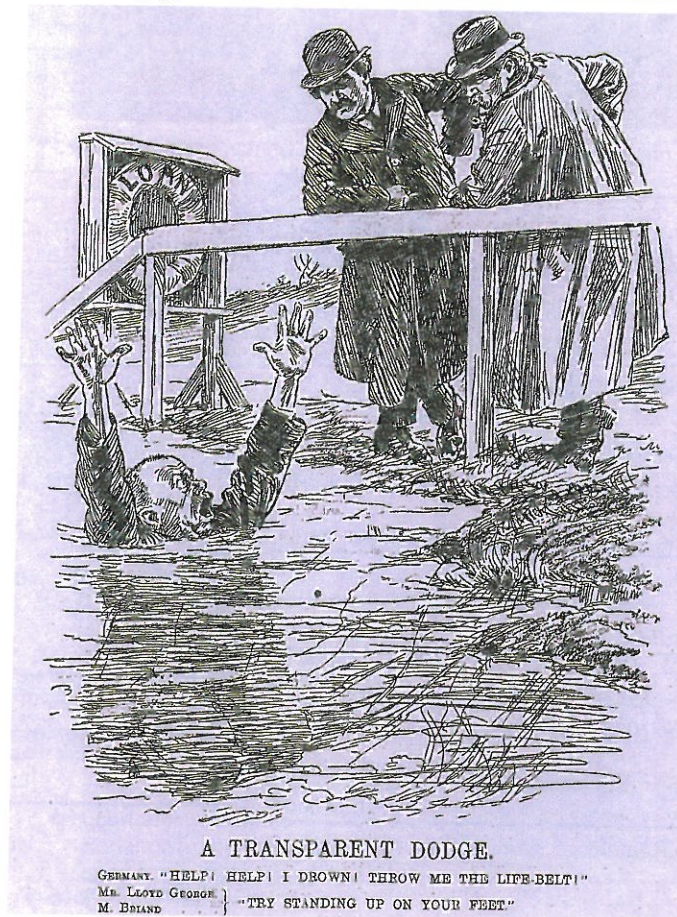
The results of the occupation of the Ruhr were disastrous for Germany. The government ordered the workers to carry out passive resistance, which meant to go on strike. That way, there would be nothing for the French to take away. The French reacted harshly, killing over 100 workers and expelling over 100,000 protesters from the region. More importantly, the halt in industrial production in Germany's most important region caused the collapse of the German currency.

SOURCE 9



A 1923 German poster discouraging people from buying French and Belgian goods, as long as Germany is under occupation.

SOURCE 10



A British cartoon from 1921.

SOURCE 11



A photograph taken in 1923 showing a woman using banknotes to start her fire.

Hyperinflation

Because it had no goods to trade, the government simply printed money. For the government this seemed an attractive solution. It paid off its debts in worthless marks, including war loans of over £2,200 million. The great industrialists were able to pay off all their debts as well.

This set off a chain reaction. With so much money in circulation, prices and wages rocketed, but people soon realised that this money was worthless. Workers needed wheelbarrows to carry home their wages. Wages began to be paid daily instead of weekly. The price of goods could rise between joining the back of a queue in a shop and reaching the front!

Poor people suffered, but the greatest casualties were the richer Germans – those with savings. A prosperous middle-class family would find that their savings in the bank, which might have bought them a house in 1921, by 1923 would not even buy a loaf of bread. Pensioners found that their previously ample monthly pension would not even buy a cup of coffee.

SOURCE 12

	1918	0.63 marks
	1922	163 marks
January	1923	250 marks
July	1923	3465 marks
September	1923	1,512,000 marks
November	1923	201,000,000,000 marks

The rising cost of a loaf of bread in Berlin.

SOURCE 13

	1921	£1 = 500 marks
Nov	1923	£1 = 14,000,000,000,000 marks

The exchange rate value of the mark in pounds.

SOURCE 14



A German banknote of 1923.

SOURCE 15

Billion mark notes were quickly banded on as though they burned one's fingers, for tomorrow one would no longer pay in notes but in bundles of notes . . . One afternoon I rang Aunt Louise's bell. The door was opened merely a crack. From the dark came an odd broken voice: 'I've used 60 billion marks' worth of gas. My milk bill is 1 million. But all I have left is 2000 marks. I don't understand any more.'

E Dobert, *Convert to Freedom*, 1941.

- 1 Look at Source 14. Use Source 12 to work out how much bread this banknote could buy in July 1923 and November 1923.
- 2 Use Sources 11–15 to describe in your own words how ordinary Germans were affected by the collapse of the mark.

- 3 Read Source 16. Choose two of Sources 11–16 to illustrate a leaflet containing a published version of Hitler's speech. Explain your choice.
- 4 Explain why people might agree with Hitler that a dictatorship would solve Germany's problems.

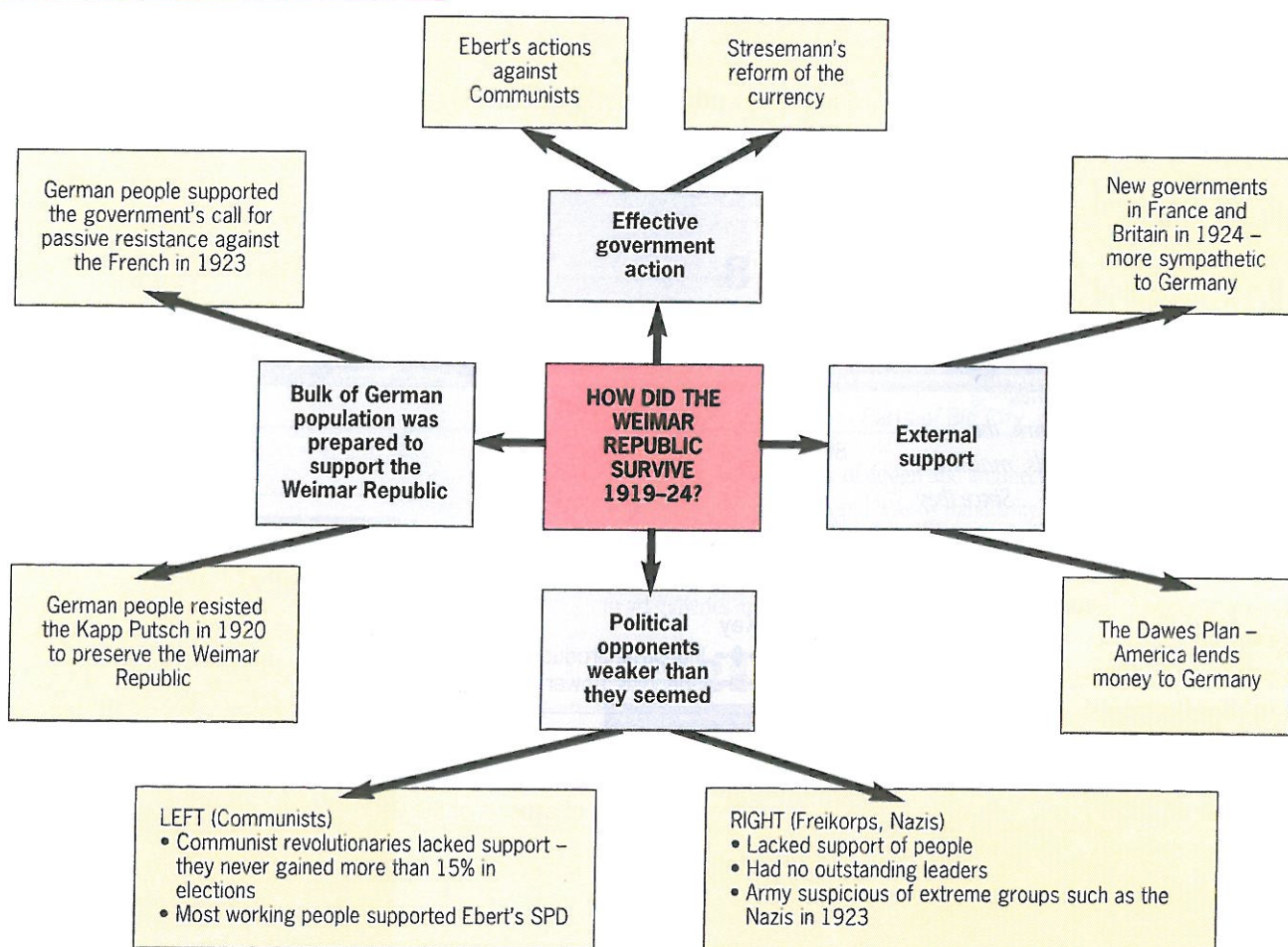
SOURCE 16

Believe me, our misery will increase. The State itself has become the biggest swindler . . . Horrified people notice that they can starve on millions . . . we will no longer submit . . . we want a dictatorship!

Adolf Hitler attacks the Weimar government in a speech, 1924.

Focus Task

REVIEW: What was the state of the Weimar Republic in 1924?



This diagram summarises how the Weimar Republic survived its problems between 1919 and 1924. On its own it presents quite a positive image of the Republic. Is it too positive, or is it about right?

Your task is to write a status report on the Weimar Republic in 1924. You could write your report as though you are advising Ebert or as a modern historian with the benefit of hindsight.

You could divide your report into sections:

a) Political opposition to Weimar

Explain whether you think all of the regime's political opponents had been completely defeated by 1924.

b) Economic problems

Explain whether you think all of the economic problems had been completely solved by 1924.

c) Popular support

Explain whether you think the regime had the complete support of all of the people of Germany.

d) Germany and the wider world

Explain

- ♦ whether you think Germany's relations with other countries had improved in 1924
- ♦ whether the problems created by the Treaty of Versailles had been resolved by 1924.