

Western Oregon University

Digital Commons@WOU

Honors Senior Theses/Projects

Student Scholarship

Spring 2021

The Treaty of Versailles and the Rise of Nazism in Germany, 1918-1933

Michaela Yonkman

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/honors_theses

The Treaty of Versailles and the Rise of Nazism in Germany, 1918-1933

By

Michaela Yonkman

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

Dr. David Doellinger
Thesis Advisor

Dr. Gavin Keulks,
Honors Program Director

June 2021

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Dr. David Doellinger and Dr. Kimberly Jensen for their guidance and support throughout this project. Without them this process would not have been possible.

Thank you to my family, friends, teammates, and coaches. I would not be who I am without you.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
The Treaty of Versailles and the Rise of Nazism in Germany, 1918-1933	4
Bibliography	49

Abstract

This project explores the way in which the Nazi Party used the Treaty of Versailles, which laid out the Allies' terms of defeat for Germany after World War I, in their propaganda before 1933. The First World War had disastrous effects on Germany. The volatile conditions of post-war society created many roadblocks to recovery and left millions feeling alienated and disconnected from the newly established democratic government. The Treaty of Versailles was incredibly unpopular and factored into much anti-government propaganda during the interwar years. In my research I analyzed Nazi publications, speeches, and member testimony from 1918-1933 and discuss how the Treaty was politicized by the Party to fit their agenda. I found that the Nazi Party used the Treaty to build their movement by identifying people or groups who had caused Germany's collapse and to justify the purging of those elements. Through the extreme rhetoric of violence and conflict the Nazi Party also used the animosity toward the Treaty of Versailles to create their own set of cultural values for Germany to rebuild the national community and restore Germany as world power.

The Treaty of Versailles, signed June 28, 1919, was the peace treaty that laid out the conditions of defeat for Germany after the First World War. In addition to disarmament, reduced military size, and giving up colonial holdings and territory gained during the war, the Treaty stated that Germany must accept full responsibility for starting the conflict and needed to pay reparations to the Allies for damages.¹ Versailles was most vigorously opposed by nationalists, conservatives, and the political right, who often referred to it as the *Diktat*, the dictated peace, because it was only accepted under threat of continued hostility by the Allies.² The National Assembly debate of June 22, 1919 regarding whether or not to accept the Treaty of Versailles focused not on if terms were fair and just but on if Germany had the capability to continue the war with a ruined economy and no remaining allies.³ Reception of Versailles was not aided by the fact that it was nearly universally rejected by the parties in parliament who voted on it and was incredibly unpopular with the German people.⁴ This near-universal hatred for the Treaty of Versailles created a strong foundation for the Nazi Party to use it in their propaganda to create and identify enemies of the German state. Demonizing Versailles allowed the Nazi Party to exploit and manipulate the emotions of the German people during the tumultuous first years of the German Republic and

¹ “The Treaty of Versailles, 28 June 1919”, in *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook*, ed. Roderick Stackelburg and Sally A. Winkle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 57.

² Fritz Morstein Marx, *Government in the Third Reich* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1936), 5.

³ “The National Assembly Debate on the Treaty of Versailles,” in *Inside Hitler’s Germany*, ed. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz (Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992), 46-47.

⁴ Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 30.

project it onto people or groups implicated in the breakdown of German society following the end of the war.

The Treaty of Versailles further destabilized politics and made it more difficult for Germany to establish itself as a democracy after the war. Germany made the switch from constitutional monarchy to parliamentary democracy after Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated in November 1918, passing power to the largest parliamentary party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD). A new constitution was drafted and signed in August 1919 in the city of Weimar, cementing Germany as a democracy and giving the German Republic the nickname Weimar Germany. To its most ardent opponents, the Treaty of Versailles was a national humiliation and evidence that Germany's enemies were subjecting the country to "economic enslavement" via enforcing reparations payments.⁵ For a country that so long prided itself on its military strength defeat was unthinkable, and the changes German society was undergoing were unacceptable. Conspiracy theories about internal sabotage of the military and government abounded. This "stab in back", perpetrated by the "November Criminals" (referencing the Armistice of November 1918), embodied conservative and nationalist discontent with and rejection of democracy in Germany. To them, the Treaty of Versailles marked the foreign takeover of Germany and its downfall as a world power.

⁵ Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 122.

The National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), most commonly known as the Nazi Party, was founded in February of 1920 and based much of their ideology on opposing the changes German society underwent as a result of the Treaty of Versailles. A main goal of the Nazi Party was to restore Germany to world power status through abolishing the Treaty. The Nazi Party cited Versailles as the root of all the crises that struck Germany. The success of Nazism depended on conflict and crisis, making the Treaty of Versailles necessary to the Party. They would argue that all the economic, political, and social crises facing Germany in the Weimar period were its direct consequences. As long as the Treaty was in effect, enemies of Germany could always be identified or created, giving the Party purpose. Socialists, the political left, Jews, Communists, the Allies, the November Criminals; Nazi propaganda tied them all to Versailles and portrayed them all as threats to Germany that needed to be purged.

This project explores how the Nazi Party used the Treaty of Versailles in their propaganda from the end of the First World War in 1918 until Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in March of 1933, though focuses primarily on the period of 1919 to 1923. It was during these early years of social, economic, and political crisis that the Nazi Party was formed and shaped their ideology. The purpose of this work is not to establish Versailles as important to Nazism (as that is hardly debated) nor is it trying to paint the Treaty as the cause of Third Reich. Rather, it is to provide an analysis of the specific way that the Treaty was used in

Nazi propaganda. This project also analyzes why Nazi propaganda about sabotage and betrayal resonated with certain groups of individuals, such as conservatives, nationalists, and veterans, and the circumstances that made them susceptible to the violent rhetoric of National Socialism.

The emergence of Nazism as a major political force in Weimar Germany has been extensively studied by scholars since the beginning of the Third Reich in 1933. Even during the Weimar period scholars were searching to explain how a movement like National Socialism formed and rose to prominence in German politics. In the 1930s, German historian Fritz Morstein Marx and American sociologist Theodore Abel both attributed the rise of Nazism to inflamed nationalism. For Marx, it was how the Allies treated Germany as a defeated nation through the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, particularly the demilitarization clauses, that radicalized sectors of the population.⁶ Abel, in his 1938 book *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, wrote that Hitler was not “building his movement upon a void”, but was rather using and exploiting the existing fear, opposition, and discontent in Germany that resulted from the loss of the war and the imposition of the Treaty of Versailles.⁷

The Sonderweg, or “special path”, thesis became popular for explaining Nazism in the World War II and post-war eras. Sonderweg posited that the Third

⁶ Marx, *Government in the Third Reich*, 3.

⁷ Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, 13.

Reich was the logical conclusion to all German history, implying that democracy was destined to fail in Germany. Scholars asserted that the weaknesses of the Weimar system were in part because of the authoritarian nature of German political culture. This complicated Germany's path of modernization in the nineteenth century and made democratization impossible. This view is flawed, however, because it is based on the idea of there being a correct way for a country to modernize, ignoring Germany's unique sociocultural circumstances or applying them incorrectly.⁸ The trend of looking to Germany's political past to try to explain how a movement like National Socialism could come to be was also popular in this era. Rohan Butler in *The Roots of National Socialism* (1942) and Ralph Flenley in *Modern German History* (1953) start their analysis of German society and politics centuries before German unification in 1871. Butler provides an in depth analysis on the quality of German national thought starting in the eighteenth century, and comes to the conclusion that Germany's authoritarian political history meant that a democratic state was destined to fail.⁹ Flenley takes a more middle ground position by saying that while the Third Reich itself was not the singular outcome of the collapse of the Weimar Republic a political structure akin to Hitler's dictatorship was its most likely successor because of the prevalence of authoritarian thought in German political culture.¹⁰ But, as historian

⁸ Geoff Eley, *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986), 256.

⁹ Rohan Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism, 1783-1933* (1942; repr., New York: Howard Fertig, 1968).

¹⁰ Ralph Flenley, *Modern German History* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1953).

Geoff Eley later points out in *Unification to Nazism* (1986), this approach risks taking what eighteenth and nineteenth century German philosophers, politicians, and historians thought about government and the role of the state out of their appropriate context and twisting them to fit a specific narrative, as well as oversimplifying the study of Nazism by attributing it to merely the persistence of old political traditions.¹¹

More recent scholarship has moved away from the idea that the Third Reich was inevitable. In the 1980s and into the 1990s authors such as Eberhard Kolb, Detlev Peukert, and Eley argued that the Weimar Republic needed to be studied as more than just a precursor to the Third Reich. Eley wrote that the Third Reich is too often considered the “terminal point” that every political development in Germany from unification to the Weimar era led to.¹² Germany’s attempts to fulfil the terms of the Treaty of Versailles are almost always referred to as having only negative outcomes. Peukert refuted this idea in his book *The Weimar Republic* when he argued that the Treaty of Versailles had the potential to actually enhance Germany’s position in Europe through cooperation and accommodation with other nations, strengthening it in the long term, but it was the psychological barrier of losing the war that prevented the German government from effectively utilizing its new position.¹³ Peukert established that there existed a disconnect between the

¹¹ Eley, *From Unification to Nazism*, 233-34.

¹² Eley, *From Unification to Nazism*, 232.

¹³ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 45.

perception of the effects of the Treaty of Versailles and its real effects. Kolb is of the same vein when he said the “highly unpropitious circumstances” of the Republic’s birth did not doom its long-term viability.¹⁴

The primary sources analyzed in this project consist mainly of publications from the Nazi Party, including leadership and regular members. Speeches and accounts from Adolf Hitler and Party propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels indicate how current events were being explained as products of the Treaty of Versailles. They also present Nazism as the sole solution to these issues. Within these documents it is important to look for who or what is being identified as a problem for Germany and why they are being portrayed that way. Accounts and memoirs from people who joined the Nazi Party between 1920 and 1933 are also used to provide insight for how messages from the Party resonated with people and persuaded them to join. Accounts from other important political actors provide greater context for how Versailles was seen in the conservative-nationalist camp, as well as give a sense of the general political atmosphere of post-war Germany. Other documents, like the Treaty of Versailles itself and the National Assembly Debate of June 1919 are also of great importance as they set the groundwork for the political, economic, and social developments of the entire Weimar era.

This research project begins with an overview of German politics and political culture prior to the First World War to gain an understanding of how

¹⁴ Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, trans. P.S. Falla (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 4.

Germany viewed itself as a nation and how that conception was threatened by the defeat and the Treaty of Versailles. This is followed by a discussion of the genesis of the Nazi Party, the circumstances it was born into, and the way that Versailles and the Weimar Republic factored into its propaganda. From there is a discussion about German cultural identity and how it was redefined by the crises of the Weimar era and the affect this had on German politics leading up to the 1932 elections when the Nazis gained control of the government.

The Treaty of Versailles was hated amongst nationalist circles because it signified German society coming under foreign influence. The signing of the Treaty marked a fundamental shift in German politics because of its international origins. Rejection of the foreign in favor of a purely German culture was central to how Germany viewed itself as a people, or a *Volk*, and a political entity. The conceptualization of Germany as a Volk has roots in the Enlightenment, when German intellectuals and historians were taking ideas about reason, freedom, and empiricism to redefine notions of government and the nation state. Eighteenth century historian Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) popularized the view of German peoples being part of an organic whole, tied together by culture and language.¹⁵ It was also during this period that the Volk took on racial and ethnic connotations, as a Volk was strongest when it was pure.

¹⁵ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 25.

Volk thought greatly informed German politics, starting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Influential philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) believed that the primary goal of the governing body of a nation was to create an environment that best supported the advancement and well-being of its people.¹⁶ For Germany this meant achieving autarky and practicing a purely German culture.¹⁷ Philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854) built on this idea when he envisioned the state as the embodiment of the culture of the people comprising it.¹⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) believed, similar to Schelling, that the state was the spirit of the Volk.¹⁹ It was therefore above judgement by any recognized standard of morality.²⁰ Nazi ideology was influenced by Hegel in that the Nazis did not believe in universal ethics. Every national community evolved its own set of moral standards and could not be judged based on another's.²¹ Part of the reason the Treaty of Versailles was rejected was because it was a set of rules another country made for Germany to follow.

The idea of creating and preserving a pure German culture also helped militarize conceptions of the Volk in the nineteenth century. In 1813, French forces under Napoleon invaded Germany. It became critical for Germany's

¹⁶ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 38.

¹⁷ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 38.

¹⁸ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 62-63.

¹⁹ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 75.

²⁰ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 77.

²¹ Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918-1945* (New York: Yale University Press, 2010), 5.

survival to have a strong military to repel attacks and prevent being absorbed into another culture's body politic. Unity of ideology was also stressed as important for military strength; the people needed to truly believe in what they were fighting for. Aggression towards the foreign was prominent in Volk thought, though not universal.²² Another aspect of Volk militarism was the acquisition of resources to ensure Germany's survival for generations to come. Political theorist Adam Heinrich Müller (1779-1829) was one of the earliest thinkers to assert that war was necessary for the natural growth of the nation and should thus be met with enthusiasm.²³ Later historian Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-1896) took Müller's ideas to an extreme when he said, "war must be conceived as an institution ordained by God."²⁴ It was Germany's divine purpose as a Volk to expand across the world using war as the instrument to do so. In this way the Volk transformed from a political philosophy into a cultural mindset.

Unity of ideology became even more important to German leadership after unification in 1871 and the establishment of the German Empire. Germany as a Volk was used in state propaganda to inspire the people of the different German states to see themselves as part of a single entity. It also stressed loyalty to the state and conformity to a set of values outlined in official propaganda. There was no place for division and difference if the new German Empire were to succeed.

²² George Mosse, *Germans and Jews: The Right, the Left, and the Search for a "Third Force" in Pre-Nazi Germany* (New York: Howard and Fertig, 1970), 14.

²³ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 72.

²⁴ Quoted in Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 148.

Geoff Eley called this approach “unification from above.”²⁵ This drive for unity greatly discouraged party politics. Opponents of parliamentarianism said that party politics only encouraged division and distracted people from working towards a common good.²⁶ Party politics were unnecessary for, or even actively damaging to, the strength and advancement of the nation.

The political structure of the German Empire was a constitutional monarchy, but democratic practice was weak. Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), the German statesman who masterminded German unification, was appointed Chancellor by the emperor and headed the federal government until 1890. Bismarck’s government was strongly centralized around his office as Chancellor. He viewed the party system of the Reichstag (the German parliament) as a marker of public opinion, but not something he considered himself nor the government obligated to follow.²⁷ He viewed political parties as irresponsible, calling them the “ruin of our constitution and our future.”²⁸ It is easy to see how Volk political tradition dominated this era. Even the progressive camp was not free from its influence. Many liberals in the Bismarckian era accepted the centralized monarchical-military control because they believed it would bring unity, however, this inhibited the ability of the progressive movement to make significant gains over conservatism.²⁹ Volk political thought held that the few would act for the

²⁵ Eley, *From Unification to Nazism*, 72.

²⁶ Marx, *Government in the Third Reich*, 33.

²⁷ Marx, *Government in the Third Reich*, 28.

²⁸ Quoted in Flenley, *Modern German History*, 289.

²⁹ Flenley, *Modern German History*, 280.

good of the many as long as the many trusted and remained loyal to the few. In this context, parliamentarism only bred unnecessary division and questioned the validity of the entire German political system.

Volk ideology created unique interpretations of how democracy should operate in Germany. In *The Roots of National Socialism*, Rohan Butler uses the example of Weimar foreign minister Walther Rathenau to illustrate how Volk ideology colored the perception of the viability of republicanism in Germany.³⁰ During the First World War Rathenau oversaw Germany's economy and was a minister of reconstruction after the defeat. He was part of the left-leaning German Democratic Party (DDP), a party that supported democracy and liberal reform but had not voted yes on accepting the Treaty of Versailles.³¹ In what seems rather paradoxical, Rathenau felt that a hybrid of democracy and autocracy was the best fit for German government; a ruling elite would represent the interests of society, but ultimately all power would be held by one individual.³² Rathenau's views of democracy were not universal in the leftist camp but they do demonstrate how German political thinkers were changing democracy to fit German culture rather than changing German culture to fit democracy, and how there was still a place for authoritarianism in liberal thinking.

³⁰ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 228-232.

³¹ "The National Assembly Debate on the Treaty of Versailles", 47.

³² Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 231.

The monocratic structure of German government did not disappear with the monarchy after 1918. The office of President held disproportionate power. Presidents could appoint chancellors, ministers, army commanders, and civil servants without Reichstag approval.³³ Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution stipulated that if public safety and order were threatened the Reichstag President could enact martial law and “temporarily abrogate, wholly or in part, the fundamental principles laid down in Articles 114, 115, 117, 118, 123, 124, and 153.”³⁴ The referenced articles pertained to civil liberties, such as the right to free speech and expression of opinion (118) and the ability to peacefully assemble (123).³⁵ The arbitrary power afforded to the President reveal that the writers of the constitution were either hesitant or reluctant to establish a truly parliamentary system.

The existence and persistence of these authoritarian structures complicated Germany’s ability to become a democracy after the end of World War I. German politics emphasized top-down control. Creating a true democracy meant completely reversing prior thought and practice. During the war the military had controlled the country, with generals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff as de facto dictators. The transition from a monarchy to a republic was very abrupt and was done more to secure potentially lenient terms of defeat from the Allies

³³ Marx, *Government in the Third Reich*, 53.

³⁴ “The Constitution of the German Republic,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 48.

³⁵ “The Constitution of the German Republic,” 49.

than to a commitment to democratizing German politics. The lack of transparency with the German public about the country's performance in the war also ensured that much of the population was unprepared for the changes in politics that were to come.

When it became clear that they were losing the war in the fall of 1918 German leadership began devising ways to mitigate the costs of defeat. They placed their hopes on appealing to the United States for securing more favorable peace terms. In January of 1918 President Woodrow Wilson gave his Fourteen Points speech outlining his vision for ending the war and preventing similar conflict in the future. Because Wilson detested the authoritarianism and militarism of the German Empire, Hindenburg and Ludendorff believed that America would be more likely to intervene on Germany's behalf during peace negotiations if Germany adopted a more democratic system of government.³⁶ In October of 1918 Kaiser Wilhelm II agreed to introduce democratic reform to German politics. The Reichstag Chancellor was made responsible only to parliament instead of the emperor, and at Hindenburg and Ludendorff's insistence the civilian parties of the Reichstag conducted negotiations with the Allies in place of the imperial apparatus.³⁷

³⁶ Catherine Epstein, *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths* (Chicester: John Wiley & Son, Ltd., 2015), 10.

³⁷ Epstein, *Nazi Germany*, 10.

As peace negotiations went on, pressure mounted from both progressive and conservative camps for the government to make even more radical political changes to placate the Allies. Working class, middle class, and petty bourgeoisie alike were calling for more radical constitutional reforms.³⁸ Among the demands for political change was Wilhelm's abdication. It was believed that abdication was the only possible option for securing American support after President Wilson declared that the United States demanded German surrender if it were to enter peace talks with an authoritarian monarchy.³⁹ In October of 1918, Secretary of State Robert Lansing said that "The Government of the United States cannot deal with any but veritable representatives of the German people who have been assured of a genuine constitutional standing as the real rulers of Germany."⁴⁰ Wilhelm's advisors convinced him to step down as emperor on November 9, 1918 and Germany signed the Armistice of November 11 as a parliamentary democracy.

Peace negotiations between the Allies and Germany after 1918 were long and messy, ending with the bitter reality of the Treaty of Versailles. With its economy and army in ruins, Germany did not have the leverage to tilt negotiations in its favor by way of threats.⁴¹ In the words of Kolb, "the disputes and conflicts at the peace conference took place not between the Allies and their defeated enemies

³⁸ Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 6.

³⁹ Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 6.

⁴⁰ United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918, Supplement 1, The World War, Volume 1*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1918Supp01v01/d327>.

⁴¹ Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 23.

but within the Allied camp itself.”⁴² The Germans were also incensed that the terms of defeat were not being drafted based on President Wilson’s Fourteen Points. But Germany had misconstrued Wilson’s call for their surrender the previous October. Wilson’s demand to only negotiate with “veritable representatives of the German people” did not necessitate the abolition of the monarchy, only that parliament be given more power. Constitutional reform was already being advocated for before November. The German imperial government had taken matters to the extreme when they did not have to.

The new government of Germany, headed by the Social Democrats, earned itself the name the November Criminals with the signing of the Armistice. The expectation among Germans was that the abolition of the monarchy would be enough for the Allies to give Germany more lenient conditions of defeat. The drive for abolishing the monarchy had been led by the liberal camp and the Social Democratic Party. For the SPD to advocate for such radical changes to the government – changes that worked in their favor – without getting the promised pay off was seen as nothing short of treason to their political opposition. The SPD’s reputation was not aided by the fact that on the night of November 8, 1918, they had offered the monarchy an ultimatum: either the Kaiser abdicates, and SPD influence is strengthened, or the party withdraws from the government.⁴³ The SPD

⁴² Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 23.

⁴³ The World War I Document Archive, “Ultimatum by the Social Democrats,” https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Ultimatum_by_the_Social_Democrats.

was the largest political party in Germany at this time. Their withdrawal from politics would have had dire consequences for political and social stability. In subsequent years, the November Criminals were vilified by the Nazi Party for acting in their own interests rather than for the good of the country. Not only had they sabotaged the war effort, but they violated Volk principles of the state being the guardian of the people. Bismarck's belief of party politics ruining the country seemed to hold true. Many conservatives and nationalists vehemently opposed democracy because of its close association with losing the war, delegitimizing the Weimar Republic before it even truly began.

The Social Democratic Party was unequipped to handle real authority when they were passed power in 1918. Part of this is because of Germany's authoritarian political traditions. As discussed above, the Reichstag had very little real power prior to 1914 because of how the imperial government viewed parliamentarism. Furthermore, the SPD failed to take advantage of their newfound power to make the revolutionary changes they promised. Even before the First World War their commitment to revolutionary values was debated. In 1900, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Imperial Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow described the Social Democratic Party as being a "reforming party" rather than a revolutionary one.⁴⁴ Their desire for majority support made them take a gradual implementation

⁴⁴ Flenley, *Modern German History*, 304.

approach rather than enacting sweeping change all at once.⁴⁵ In his book *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, historian William Sheridan Allen said the SPD “was unwilling to be a revolutionary party at a time when the best defense of democracy may have been social revolution.”⁴⁶ The SPD chose to work within the existing power framework rather than create a new one that was more conducive for what they wanted to achieve. In some ways this is understandable because they were keen to avoid alienating more of the population. Unity was a priority, prompting the SPD to make the hard choice of compromising its revolutionary goals to garner support from the center and the right. Unfortunately, it was precisely this unwillingness to take a hard stance and risk alienating voters that gained the socialist government the reputation of being weak, ineffective, and harmful to the wellbeing of the nation.

The failure of the Social Democrats to unite German politics and their inability to alleviate the effects of social and economic crisis created fertile a breeding ground for radical fringe groups to form and grow. The Nazi Party was merely one such group. The atmosphere of high unemployment, food scarcity, and attacks on cultural identity between 1919 and 1923 politicized the population and drove many into forming or joining radical antidemocratic groups. It was during this time that a young Adolf Hitler joined what would become the Nazi Party. But

⁴⁵ Calvin Hoover, *Germany Enters the Third Reich* (London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1933), 35.

⁴⁶ William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945*, revised ed. (Danbury: Franklin Watts, 1984), 54.

the plethora of radical right-wing parties that emerged in this period were hardly united. They were disorganized and often contradicted each other in their ideology, inhibiting them from forming a strong front of opposition to the socialist government.⁴⁷ This also kept them from threatening the political power of already established right-wing parties, such as the German National People's Party (DNVP), the major conservative-nationalist party in Weimar. It was not until the Nazi Party (and even then not until the late 1920s) that the radical right fringe consolidated and took over the traditional conservative-nationalist position.

The Nazi reaction to the Treaty of Versailles was informed by the Volk ideology of rejecting and purging foreign elements that weakened Germany as a people and a nation. The Nazi Party was originally founded as the German Worker's Party (DAP) on January 5, 1919. That same day, party founder Anton Drexler published a set of guidelines for the DAP in the newspaper *Auf gut Deutsch* (In Good German), an antisemitic weekly run by party cofounder Dietrich Eckart. One guideline reads, "We want to be governed only by Germans; foreigners and Jews govern us only in their own interest or in the interest of a foreign country."⁴⁸ Nationalists and conservatives hated the Treaty of Versailles before its terms were even finalized because of what it represented: Germany being conquered by a stronger entity. In Volk philosophy this almost certainly

⁴⁷ Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, 25.

⁴⁸ Anton Drexler, "Guidelines of the DAP (1919)", *Alpha History*, <https://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/guidelines-of-the-dap-1919/>.

meant death as a weak Volk was easily conquered, and a Volk that had been conquered meant it had been weak. It also revealed the anxiety over the extent of foreign influence that the DAP and the larger radical nationalist faction expected peace negotiations would bring. The un-Germanness of the parliamentary system and hatred of internationalism featured heavily in later Nazi anti-Weimar propaganda.

The Party Program of 1920 is very telling of Nazi attitudes towards the changes the Treaty of Versailles brought to Germany. The program was presented at the Party's first public meeting on February 24, 1920. Adolf Hitler drafted the program alongside Gottfried Feder and Anton Drexler. Its twenty-five points establish the basis of Nazi ideology and their goals and demands. The Treaty of Versailles is referred to explicitly very early on; the second point reads, "we demand equality of rights for the German people in its dealings with other nations, and the abolishment of the Peace Treaties of Versailles."⁴⁹ The first point calls for the unification of all Germans into a Greater Germany on "the basis of the right of self-determination."⁵⁰ The Nazi Party immediately established itself as standing in direct opposition to Versailles. They portrayed it as the instrument the Allies were using to impose their own will on Germany and to deny them the dignity and respect afforded to other nations.

⁴⁹ "The Party Program," in *Inside Hitler's Germany*, ed. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz (Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992), 72.

⁵⁰ "The Party Program", 72.

The stab-in-the-back legend circulated by right-wing nationalists also contributed to the rejection of the Treaty of Versailles. Official propaganda about the success of the German war effort had done its job as most on the home front were unaware Germany was even struggling until the Armistice was announced.⁵¹ It was unthinkable that Germany's strong military could have suffered so complete a defeat as in 1918. Prominent military men and politicians advanced the idea that internal sabotage made Germany lose. General Hindenburg, in his testimony before the Constitutional Assembly in November 1919, said that Germany's defeat was the result of "secret intentional mutilation of the fleet and the army" by revolutionary forces.⁵² Revolutionary forces meaning the political left. For those who believed it, the political left and any entities associated with it (most often the Jews) came to represent the downfall of Germany and the continued negative impact of foreign institutions. The stab-in-the-back legend was a crucial element in Nazi militarism because it justified aggression against those who would see Germany fail.⁵³ By identifying them as enemies, violence against perpetrators of Weimar was encouraged as necessary.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff's propagation of the stab-in-the-back myth gave it legitimacy. Hindenburg was a well-known political figure and a war hero and Ludendorff had been leader of the Supreme Army Command. That two

⁵¹ Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 5.

⁵² Paul von Hindenburg, "The Stab in the Back", in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 15.

⁵³ Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 35.

military leaders such as these would believe that Germany had been sabotaged must be true. Yet it was these two generals who had masterminded the German surrender in 1918. The SPD and the political left were only criminals and traitors because military leadership had failed to win the war. Hindenburg and Ludendorff's success in passing control of the country to the Reichstag parties absolved the old leadership of facing the consequences of its own failed policy.⁵⁴ In this way the reputation of the political right was not seriously damaged by the events of 1918 and 1919.⁵⁵ The left had a harder time gaining new supporters from the conservatives and nationalists because of this. The stab-in-the-back also made out the new political right, represented by groups like the Nazis, as a valid alternative to current politics because these groups advocated for and engaged in violence against the government in order to right the injustices the November Criminals had committed against the German military and the German people.

Reparations payments were one such injustice forced upon Germany and were an especially contentious part of the Treaty of Versailles. In his address to the National Assembly in February of 1919, while peace negotiations were still ongoing, German President and SPD leader Friedrich Ebert strongly objected to reparations and encouraged the Assembly to contest them. Like many of his peers, he considered the demand for reparations to be nothing more than the Allies trying

⁵⁴ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 26.

⁵⁵ Lee McGowan, *The Radical Right in Germany: 1870-Present* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 46.

to exact revenge on Germany by resigning them to debt slavery; “the German people cannot for 20, 40, or 60 years be made the wage slave of other nations.”⁵⁶ The effect of reparations on Germany’s economy and its consequences for the good of the people factored prominently in Nazi propaganda in the 1920s. In one of his speeches, prominent Nazi orator, speech writer, and future propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels said that the Allies had essentially reduced Germany to the status of colony, being used only to “fill money sacks with interest payments.”⁵⁷ The Volk fear of being conquered by another, stronger nation had apparently been realized and it was the current leaders of the country who had enabled it to happen. There could be no more clearer evidence than this that allowing the democratic government to continue running the country would only result in more ruin.

At the National Assembly debate of June 22, 1919, the only parties that voted to accept the Treaty were the Social Democrats, the Independent Social Democrats (USDP),⁵⁸ and the Catholic Center Party.⁵⁹ But the reasons for the SPD and Center yes vote were not because they believed Versailles to be a fair

⁵⁶ “A New Constitution and a New Form of Government,” in *Inside Hitler’s Germany*, ed. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz (Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992), 42.

⁵⁷ Joseph Goebbels, “We Demand,” *German Propaganda Archive*, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/angrif05.htm>.

⁵⁸ The Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USDP) was a radical left anti-war splinter group of the Social Democratic Party that formed in August of 1917 in response to the SPD’s continued support for the war effort. The Independents believed that the SPD was untrue to socialist values by conceding to the imperial government. The USDP enjoyed moderate success in elections but after 1922 membership dwindled and the party dissolved in 1931. The USDP as a splinter group highlights that the political left in Germany, though dominated by the SPD, was not strongly united.

⁵⁹ “The National Assembly Debate on the Treaty of Versailles,” 46-47.

agreement. Rather, they believed that the Treaty was a means of preventing future destruction. The SPD believed that voting no to a peace agreement only delayed a yes vote because Germany did not have the means to resist at that time.⁶⁰ There were still clauses that these parties opposed, such as accepting full blame for the war and paying reparations. But admitting the Treaty of Versailles “exceed[ed] the limits of Germany’s ability to comply”⁶¹ and still voting yes hardly endeared the SPD to non-supporters and did little to dispel the myth of the party’s betrayal.

Using the stab-in-the-back legend, the Nazi Party placed the Weimar Republic and its democratic values in direct opposition to true German values. In the early days of the Party Hitler often cited the Social Democrats and their allies, sometimes even the entire parliamentary system, as responsible for the breakdown of German political life. In a speech given in Munich in December 1922, Hitler contrasts the failings of the current system with the strength of the old Empire. The SPD were swindlers, liars, “the dumbest people and those most useless to their professions” who acted in the interest of the Allies instead of the German nation, and whose successes were “attributable only to a propaganda of lies.”⁶² Hitler presented the National Socialists as being the only dependable party because they espoused the same values of greatness and victory that the old Empire did.⁶³ In contrast, the November Criminals had betrayed the country and

⁶⁰ “The National Assembly Debate on the Treaty of Versailles,” 46.

⁶¹ “The National Assembly Debate on the Treaty of Versailles,” 46.

⁶² Adolf Hitler, “An Early Speech by Hitler,” in *Inside Hitler’s Germany* ed. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz (Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992), 68-69.

⁶³ Hitler, “An Early Speech by Hitler,” 69.

drove it to ruin to advance their own agenda. A key element of anti-Versailles Nazi political propaganda was that Nazism was the only solution to the issues created by Versailles.

The clauses of the Treaty regarding Germany's military help explain why veterans made up a large portion of Nazi support. The Allies had enforced German disarmament without disarming themselves, putting Germany in a position where it was surrounded by armed enemies with no military power of its own.⁶⁴ At the signing of the Armistice the German military numbered six million.⁶⁵ Versailles reduced this to only one hundred thousand and set strict limits on the size of the navy and completely abolished the air force.⁶⁶ By severely reducing the size of the military the Allies had directly attacked a cornerstone of German nationalism. The military as an institution was the nation's first line of defense against hostile outsiders. Removing this left the country unprotected and vulnerable to further assault.

The loss of World War I and the imposition of the Treaty of Versailles was a great humiliation to Germany, and ex-soldiers felt this very keenly. In more ways than one many veterans found returning to civilian life difficult. "The march home was the bitterest experience I have ever had," writes one ex-soldier, "I was a

⁶⁴ Marx, *Government in the Third Reich*, 3.

⁶⁵ Richard Bessel, *Germany After the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1993), 69.

⁶⁶ "The Treaty of Versailles", 55.

broken man, on the point of losing himself...”⁶⁷ The chance of a military career for veterans was reduced to almost nothing given the restrictions outlined in the Treaty. Jobs were scarce due to the damage the war wrought on the economy. Many veterans felt that the promises of liberty, peace, and democracy made by the socialist government did not apply to them.⁶⁸ They were left confused and disoriented in a new, alien society. One soldier wrote, “we could not be reconciled to the apparent fact that all our struggles and sacrifices had been in vain.”⁶⁹ The slow return of German prisoners of war did not aid in the demilitarization of a significant portion of men. In 1919 there were still over eight hundred thousand German prisoners of war being held by Allied forces, and many would not be home until mid-1920.⁷⁰ Available jobs were taken by that point, leaving many unemployed, desperate, and resentful. Many men joined the Nazi Stormtroopers (*Sturmabteilung, SA*) for the simple reason that it fed and clothed its members in times when work was scarce or irregular.⁷¹ In this way the NSDAP succeeded where the government did not in providing for the German people, and the Party used this to its advantage to discredit the so-called socialist values of the Weimar government.

⁶⁷ “The Story of Soldier”, in Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 254-255.

⁶⁸ Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, 36.

⁶⁹ Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, 26.

⁷⁰ Bessel, *Germany After the First World War*, 73.

⁷¹ Robert E. Herzstein, *Adolf Hitler and the German Trauma* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1974), 74.

As a proxy for the real military, many former military men joined paramilitary organizations like the Freikorps. The private units, or citizen militias, that made up the Freikorps were often hired by national-conservative political groups to put down left-wing movements or uprisings, sometimes working alongside what was left of the formal German military, the Reichswehr.⁷² The drive of the Freikorps was to protect Germany from internal and external threats.⁷³ The Freikorps was decidedly antidemocratic, anticommunist, and was willing to act outside the law. At their peak in 1919 the organization had over two hundred thousand members, most of them veterans.⁷⁴ Robert Herzstein wrote that the Freikorps “was an outlet for frustrated militaristic and patriotic sentiments.”⁷⁵ One young man who joined the Freikorps soon after the war detailed the feeling of hopelessness and betrayal he felt watching crowds cheering for the soldiers returning from the front, “Could the casualties of war have been for nothing? That could not be the case; that was impossible.”⁷⁶ For the true patriot, defeat was an unacceptable reality. As for why he joined the Freikorps he said, “what we wanted we did not know, and what we knew we did not want. War, adventure, excitement, and destruction; an indefinable, tormenting force...”⁷⁷ Joining militaristic organizations gave these men order and purpose when they felt there was none.

⁷² McGowan, *The Radical Right in Germany*, 48.

⁷³ Herzstein, *Adolf Hitler and the German Trauma*, 29.

⁷⁴ McGowan, *The Radical Right in Germany*, 48.

⁷⁵ Herzstein, *Adolf Hitler and the German Trauma*, 29.

⁷⁶ “The Defeated Troops Come Home,” in *Inside Hitler’s Germany* ed. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz (Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992), 30.

⁷⁷ “The Defeated Troops Come Home,” 31.

Many who joined the Nazi SA after its founding in 1921 were former Freikorps members.

Between 1921 and 1922 the Freikorps were behind a series of assassinations of Republican leaders, which were applauded by Germany's political right.⁷⁸ Their victims included Matthias Erzberger, the Center politician who had signed the Armistice, and Walther Rathenau, the Republic's Foreign Minister and the man who had been in charge of organizing Germany's economy during World War I. Erzberger and Rathenau were among the November Criminals, so their deaths were justified as the elimination of an enemy of Germany. Eliminating those implicated in Germany's downfall during World War I was the necessary first step to restoring Germany as world power.

Hitler's status as veteran gave him considerable influence with the unsettled ex-military population. He had served in the German army from 1914 to 1919 and understood the bitter feelings of the soldiers well. One veteran-turned-Nazi said of Hitler; "You are our man. You speak as a soldier of the front and as a man...you have given your whole being...for the wellbeing of Germany."⁷⁹ His anti-Versailles militarism drew in those who felt the terms of the Versailles Treaty were driven by the Allies' fears of a strong Germany. To the disaffected patriot, Hitler represented the true German man, the strong soldier willing to sacrifice

⁷⁸ Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, 26.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, 153.

everything for his nation. He also offered strong leadership and inspired hope and confidence in Germany's future, two qualities that many felt Weimar was seriously lacking.⁸⁰ The Nazi Party was also supported by what was left of the Reichswehr. The German army was well known to assist radical right-wing groups to subvert the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles regarding military activity.⁸¹ Much of the funding in the NSDAP's early days came from the Reichswehr.⁸² In fact, it was Reichswehr officials who ordered Hitler to attend a DAP meeting in September of 1919.⁸³ The official military gave these groups legitimacy through its patronage, helping to swell their numbers. Through contact with the Nazi Party, many young veterans were introduced to politics "in the familiar terms of discipline and fighting."⁸⁴ The Weimar Republic was subsequently turned into the antithesis to everything these men held to be true about their people and country.

There was no shortage of anger over the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles for the Nazi Party to exploit. Along with reparations, the infamous war guilt clause caused an uproar. Article 231 required that "Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjects."⁸⁵ Germany felt itself surrounded by enemies who hated it and wished to see it fall. "We know

⁸⁰ Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, 151.

⁸¹ Herzstein, *Adolf Hitler and the German Trauma*, 31.

⁸² Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, 63.

⁸³ Herzstein, *Adolf Hitler and the German Trauma*, 32.

⁸⁴ Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, 63.

⁸⁵ "The Treaty of Versailles," 57.

the intensity of the hatred which meets us,” said Foreign Minister Ulrich von Brockdorf-Rantzau at the Versailles Peace Conference in Paris in May of 1919.⁸⁶ Placing full blame for the destruction on Germany was both egregiously unfair and well beyond the nation’s economic capability to cover. Theologian Ernst Troeltsch called Versailles “an imperialist monstrosity made possible by the deceit of the Fourteen Points,”⁸⁷ putting into words the popular sentiment that the War Guilt clause and the Treaty of Versailles as a whole were less about peace and reconciliation between equals and more the Allies trying to annihilate a threat to enhance their own power.

The Nazi Party used the Treaty of Versailles to create friend-foe dichotomies. Everything was presented as opposites: National Socialism or Marxism, German or Jew, national or foreign, strength or weakness, survival or annihilation. In Nazi thought, as it was in Volk thought, internationalism was the breakdown of German strength. Germany’s restoration could only come about if Germans focused on helping other Germans. By using fears of social breakdown, the Nazi Party appealed more to emotion than to reason. Hitler believed that appealing to emotion was the best way to build a movement because it inspired stronger belief. In his autobiography *Mein Kampf* he wrote, “The broad masses of a population are more amenable to the appeal of rhetoric than to any other force.

⁸⁶ Count Ulrich von Brockdorf-Rantzau, “Speech of the German Delegation, Versailles, May 7, 1919,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 10.

⁸⁷ Ernst Troeltsch, “The Dogma of Guilt,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 12.

All great movements are popular movements. They are the volcanic eruptions of human passions and emotions...”⁸⁸ Weimar Germany had nothing if not eruptions of emotions. There existed in Weimar Germany an existential fear for the country’s future. It was not difficult for the Nazis to convince people of impending doom and get them to support radical action when they may not have otherwise.

In October 1925, Joseph Goebbels published a tract regarding the state of Weimar politics and the future of Germany titled “National Socialism or Bolshevism?” This piece argues that the international qualities of Weimar socialism are ineffective in providing for the needs of the German people.⁸⁹ Internationalism was detrimental to the health of the German Volk because it is not the German way. Goebbels conceded that Socialist Democrats and National Socialists have the same goals for the country – freedom and stability – but argued that only National Socialism could achieve them. He writes, “we want freedom, as you do, but with other means, with means that lead with to the goal... The community of the people today is nothing but the struggle for the rights of the people for the sake of the nation.”⁹⁰ The means and methods of National Socialism are rooted in Volk cultural values, making them the best path forward for Germany. One such method of attaining freedom for Germany was to protest the

⁸⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy, Project Gutenberg Australia, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200601.txt>.

⁸⁹ Joseph Goebbels, “National Socialism or Bolshevism?” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 127.

⁹⁰ Goebbels, “National Socialism or Bolshevism?”, 129.

German government that had decided not to fight the forces that subjugated the country. Goebbels asserted that going the route of peaceful discussion with the Allies made a mockery of the suffering the German people experienced after the end of the war. “To talk of calm today is to make the cemetery one’s home; to be peaceful under this government is to be pacifist and cowardly.”⁹¹ Associating peace and pacifism with cowardice is very telling of how Nazism viewed foreign relations. Germany was meant to be a strong nation, a world power, and it could not be that via peaceful cooperation. This could only be attained through struggle against foreign entities and institutions. Goebbels called for unity between Germans to overthrow the democratic government in favor of a National Socialist one to ensure the survival of the nation.

Another success of the Nazi Party was that it set itself apart from the Weimar political system. National Socialism was much more than a political party with an agenda, it was a movement “that encompassed everything Germans held to be true and just.”⁹² Theodore Abel’s 1938 study *Why Hitler Came Into Power* provides insight into why so many people converted to Nazism during the 1920s. In 1934, as a sociology professor at Columbia University, Abel convinced the Nazi state to let him hold an essay contest for Party members who had joined before 1933 by saying that the rest of the world needed to learn more about

⁹¹ Goebbels, “National Socialism or Bolshevism?”, 127.

⁹² Randall Bytwerk, “The Magical Force of the Spoken Word,” in *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 10.

National Socialism. In one essay, a bank clerk who joined the Party sometime before 1927 said that the belief in National Socialism was not something learned, but something that sprang up from instinct.⁹³ Nazism was successful because it put into words the feelings many already held about the state of Germany and its future. The Treaty of Versailles uprooted deeply entrenched social values and produced an emotional reaction from the people.⁹⁴ This emotion manifested in the extreme nationalism the Nazis were known for.

The rallying point of National Socialism was the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or the national community. In 1925 Hitler cited the real reason for Germany's collapse in World War I as being the millions of Germans who "no longer believe[d] in their ethnicity."⁹⁵ A common idea spread among nationalists following 1918 was that unity had not been strong enough during the war.⁹⁶ This is how the stab-in-the-back was able to happen: the Socialist-Jewish construct of class lines had encouraged internal divisions, causing Germans to turn against Germans instead of fighting their external enemies. To unify once again and restore the German nation to its former strength, the Nazis stressed conformity to a set of values based in the Volk. One such value was racial purity. In *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918-1945*, historian Thomas Kühne analyzes how advocating for

⁹³ "The Story of a Bank Clerk," in Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 278.

⁹⁴ Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*, 29.

⁹⁵ Adolf Hitler, "Reestablishing the National Socialist German Worker's Party," in Randall Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 16.

⁹⁶ Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide*, 16.

mass murder was used by the Nazi Party as a unifying force. He wrote that genocidal war against the Jews and other “undesirables” was more than just a purge of potential danger, it was a way for the German people to bond as part of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, “delud[ing] themselves into believing that they would attain a homogenous and harmonious social body, cleansed of pollution, conflict, and inner enemies.”⁹⁷ The unification of Germany the National Socialists desired went far beyond just politics. They believe that a pure German populace would no doubt support Nazism because the Party represented pure German ideals. The political divisions and social upheaval that Germany experienced after 1918 were therefore not just the result of differences of opinion between groups or individuals, they were differences of biology and culture. This absolutist view encouraged violence against “others” because those deemed dangerous could not be changed, they had to be eradicated for the threat they posed to be neutralized.

Jews were an important group in Nazi propaganda against the Treaty of Versailles and the Weimar government. Jews were lumped in with the November Criminals, Socialists, Communists, or any group that was associated with the Weimar system and blamed for the outcome of the war. Like the others, the Jews were accused of working against the common good by allying with international forces to further their own agenda. The purported rootlessness of German Jews – that they had moved onto the land instead of organically evolving there – meant

⁹⁷ Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide*, 4.

that they had no spiritual connection to and love for the land or its true people, and therefore had more potential to cause harm.⁹⁸ In a 1922 speech Hitler charged that the Communist and Social Democratic movements were Jewish creations made with the intent of destroying German culture.⁹⁹ Goebbels once wrote in no uncertain terms that “the Jew caused our misery and lives from it today.”¹⁰⁰ Appealing to fear was the Nazi’s specialty, and they used this tactic to make Germany’s Jews into perhaps the greatest enemy facing the nation.

Nazi accusations of the Jews of committing treason through sabotaging the war effort and working with the Allies to impose the Treaty of Versailles on Germany did not create the rabid antisemitism Hitler’s party was known for, though it certainly had a hand in its radicalization. Antisemitism was centuries old in Germany by the time Hitler was trying rebuild a nation with it. The idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* formed in the late sixteenth century and with it came the concept of “blood and soil” (*Sturm und Drang*),¹⁰¹ where each “race” of people had evolved their own culture in their own land. The Germans were an Aryan/Nordic people, the French were Latin, and the Jews were Jewish. These were lines that could never be crossed as they were how populations had naturally evolved. Therefore, a Jew could never be a German, and vice versa. Nor were the

⁹⁸ For a more in-depth discussion on the origins of Germany’s antisemitism, see chapter two of George L. Mosse, *Germans and Jews* (New York: Howard and Fertig, 1970).

⁹⁹ Adolf Hitler, “Hitler on the Jews (1922),” *Alpha History*, <https://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/hitler-on-the-jews-1922/>.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Goebbels, “Why Do We Oppose the Jews? (1928),” *German Propaganda Archive*, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/angrif17.htm>.

¹⁰¹ Butler, *The Roots of National Socialism*, 21.

Jews native to the land they lived on; Jewish culture had developed in the Levant, not Central Europe. The European Jewish population not being an organic part of the places they resided was key to how the Nazi's weaponized antisemitism.¹⁰²

Jews were not of German blood nor of German soil, thus their presence was cause for alarm. *Gemeinschaft* also has connotations of being a genuine or authentic community, meaning that Jews or other outsiders could not just assimilate to German culture and be accepted.¹⁰³ If the German nation and people were to be as strong as possible, they needed to be rid of foreign elements that drained resources and weakened the national community.

Germany's Jews were outsiders to German culture, and it was this view of them that the Nazis capitalized on. Antisemitism it was nearly ubiquitous in Volk philosophy and pervaded German nationalism. As was common in Volk nationalism, the Nazis said that any outside influence was hostile to Germany. Nazi caricatures of Jews drew on stereotypes and prejudices that had existed since the nineteenth century,¹⁰⁴ meaning there was a readily available audience of people who either believed already, or were predisposed to believe, negative things about Jewish people. The aftermath of World War I left many searching for someone or something to pin blame on, especially because of the credence given to the stab-in-the-back legend. The Jews were easy scapegoats because they were

¹⁰² Mosse, *Germans and Jews*, 67.

¹⁰³ Mosse, *Germans and Jews*, 91.

¹⁰⁴ Mosse, *Germans and Jews*, 35.

“others”, a non-German people taking up space on German land and using German resources.

The desire to rid Germany of enemies came to a head in November of 1923 when Hitler attempted a coup in Munich to take over the southern state of Bavaria. Between 1918 and 1922, Bavaria had become a breeding ground of conservative-nationalist resistance because it was the only state that had not outlawed a number of radical right fringe groups deemed threats by the federal government.¹⁰⁵ On the night of November 8, in a beer hall that frequently hosted Nazi meetings, Hitler attempted to coerce right-wing Bavarian leaders into supporting his plan to takeover Berlin. Hitler declared that Bavaria had a new government headed by him, with his cabinet including current officials. Upon leaving the beer hall the morning of November 9, Hitler and his men were detained by police. Hitler was tried for treason and sentenced to five years in prison, but he would only serve nine months.

The Beer Hall Putsch, as it became known, shows how irreparable the divide between the nationalists-conservatives and the political left had become. Among Hitler’s entourage in Munich the night of November 8 was General Erich Ludendorff. After the war Ludendorff embraced the violent nationalism of the radical right. His involvement was significant because, as war hero and former military leader, it aligned the goals and ideals of the Nazi Party with those of the

¹⁰⁵ McGowan, *The Radical Right in Germany*, 49.

German Empire, which the nationalists romanticized as the epitome German strength. One such ideal was that the survival of the German nation and people could only be ensured by the destruction of the forces that would do it harm. Just one year prior to the Putsch, Ludendorff said that the German people should begin preparing themselves for war with the Allies once again because it the only way Germany's suffering could be alleviated. For Ludendorff and other Volk nationalists, war

is the foundation for comprehending anything political, the foundation of our future, even and especially for the enslaved Nation of the Germans. Its premise is that [Germany] wants to win back its autonomy, its freedom, its welfare, and its developmental possibilities; and it resists our enemies' intention to have us resign ourselves in perpetuity to degradation, to let ourselves be stricken from the stage of world history.¹⁰⁶

For Hitler, Ludendorff, and those who followed them, the Weimar system could not be saved. The only solution to the economic, social, and political crises Germany experienced was the complete annihilation of Weimar, the people who brought it on and perpetuated it, and everything it represented.

The Putsch was also in part a response to two critical events of 1923: the French occupation of the Ruhr industrial region near the French-German border and the hyperinflation crisis. Both were labelled as consequences of fulfilling the terms of the Treaty. Germany was in the midst of economic collapse when Hitler was holding Bavarian officials hostage in a beer hall. From the Republic's very

¹⁰⁶ Erich Ludendorff, "On Overcoming the Consequences of the Lost War (1922)," <http://www.csun.edu/~hfspc002/442/txt/luden.html>.

beginning Germany struggled to keep up with reparations payments. The reparations clauses of the Treaty of Versailles were drafted with Germany's ruined economy in mind yet made not concessions. Article 232 recognized that Germany's ability to pay was insufficient at the time of drafting but made full compensation a requirement regardless.¹⁰⁷ This is where the idea of debt slavery emerged. Given the state of Germany's economy in 1918 and immediately after it was clear that Germany would be making payments decades into the future. On January 9, 1923, French forces occupied the Ruhr region on the pretext that Germany was behind on reparations payments.¹⁰⁸ Starting in the summer of that year, inflation started to escalate dramatically. Inflation was not new to the people of Weimar Germany, as prices had risen significantly between 1919 and 1921 following demobilization.¹⁰⁹ But the rate of inflation accelerated in 1922 because the government was funding itself by printing new money.¹¹⁰ This continued through 1923 and by the end of November the German Reichmark was valued at one four-trillionth the US dollar, resulting in the wholesale collapse of German currency.

Hitler justified the Putsch by saying it was done to save the German nation from destruction. The events of 1923 certainly made the German people feel as though the country were about to crumble. He directly mentions French

¹⁰⁷ "The Treaty of Versailles", 57.

¹⁰⁸ Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 62.

¹¹⁰ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 63.

occupation of the Ruhr as one of his reasons, as well as the desire to free the German people from “slavery.”¹¹¹ At his trial in 1924 he said, “Either Marxism poisons the people, their Germany is ruined or the poison is going to be eliminated – Then Germany can recover again, not before that.”¹¹² Compromise was not an option. Germany could only return to its place in the sun through war: “World politics are not made with the palm branch, but with the sword.”¹¹³ German suffering could only end if National Socialism took over, because they alone recognized the true source of that suffering and were the only force willing to act.

The Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler’s trial, and his short imprisonment forced the Nazi Party to rethink its political tactics for achieving its goals. Another failed takeover could spell the end of the movement. 1928 marked the first time the NSDAP participated in national parliamentary elections. Though participating in the hated democratic system was contrary to all Nazi beliefs, Goebbels makes it clear that this step did not mean the Party was compromising its values. It was only to ensure that the National Socialist will was heard. In an article published in April of 1928 in the Nazi newspaper *Der Angriff* (The Assault) Goebbels wrote, “We will step foot on the marble floor of parliament with hard strides, and will bring with us the revolutionary will of the multitude from which destiny has spawned us. We don’t give a damn about cooperating with a stinking dung heap.

¹¹¹ “The Beer Hall Putsch and Hitler’s Trial,” in *Inside Hitler’s Germany* ed. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz (Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992), 76.

¹¹² “The Beer Hall Putsch and Hitler’s Trial,” 76.

¹¹³ “The Beer Hall Putsch and Hitler’s Trial,” 77.

We are coming to clear the manure.”¹¹⁴ The new tactic for taking over the country was to infiltrate the government and dismantle it from the inside.

Blaming the Treaty of Versailles and the November Criminals continued to be a critical point of Nazi propaganda during the Depression. Tensions were high as unemployment and food scarcity skyrocketed starting in 1930. After the hyperinflation of 1923 Germany had used short-term American loans to pay reparations to France and Britain. When the American stock market crashed in October of 1929 Germany was unable to pay back the money when the credits were called in. After 1930, disagreements between parties about how best to handle the economic crisis made a stable parliamentary majority coalition unattainable, leaving Reichstag Chancellor Heinrich Brüning with no choice but to use emergency powers to pass laws.¹¹⁵ How to handle the Depression was proving beyond the capabilities of the Reichstag, and the situation only further deteriorated as time went on. By the start of 1933 one in three people were unemployed.¹¹⁶ A few weeks before the first of the 1932 elections, Joseph Goebbels gave a speech in Berlin railing against those in power who ruined the country.¹¹⁷ In true Nazi fashion he appealed to emotion to exploit the fear and desperation that pervaded Germany during the Depression. He said, “the nation’s whole fortune is

¹¹⁴ Joseph Goebbels, “The Nazis in Parliament”, in *Inside Hitler’s Germany*, ed. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz (Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992), 89.

¹¹⁵ Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, 92.

¹¹⁶ Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 112.

¹¹⁷ Joseph Goebbels, “The Storm is Coming,” in Randall Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 32-39.

squandered, people are robbed of their inheritance, people are desperate and without hope.”¹¹⁸ The choice of voting National Socialist or Social Democrat was presented as being literally the difference between Germany’s life and death. Goebbels makes several references to specific consequences of Versailles as well. The territory given to Poland after the war so it could have sea access is referred to as a “bleeding wound” that divided the country because it cut off the state of Prussia in the east from the rest of Germany.¹¹⁹ The Dawes Plan of 1924 and the Young Plan of 1930, both readjustments to Germany’s reparations plan in the aftermath of economic crisis, brought only “more hunger, more torture, more terror, more horror, and more suffering” to Germany.¹²⁰ Using the same messages and themes of social breakdown between 1929 and 1932 as between 1919 and 1923 allowed the Nazis to say that not only had Germany’s situation not improved after fourteen years of Social Democratic control, it had gotten infinitely worse. Germany’s experiment in democracy ended in March 1933 when Hitler was appointed Reichstag Chancellor after the National Socialists secured a majority of the vote in the 1932 election.

The Treaty of Versailles did not create the Third Reich, but it was instrumental in the Nazi rise to power. The Treaty was important to the Nazi Party because through it they were able to convince millions that Germany faced an

¹¹⁸ Goebbels, “The Storm is Coming,” 34.

¹¹⁹ Goebbels, “The Storm is Coming,” 34.

¹²⁰ Goebbels, “The Storm is Coming,” 34.

existential threat and the choice between National Socialist and any other political creed was a matter of life or death. By doing this National Socialism portrayed itself as the only force that recognized these threats and the only one willing and capable to eliminate them. Depictions of Versailles remained much the same between 1919-1933; it was the cause of all German suffering. The Treaty was so hated in Germany that it being blamed for any and every crisis was believable, even if said crises was not caused by, or could not be explicitly tied to, fulfillment of treaty conditions. The overarching message the Nazi Party pushed during the Weimar era that was so successful was that accepting defeat and following the Allies terms guaranteed Germany's eventual annihilation. The very existence of the German people was at stake because of the Treaty of Versailles, and that necessitated radical and decisive action.

The rhetoric of Weimar-era Nazi propaganda regarding the Treaty of Versailles underscores the existential fear that pervaded Germany after 1918. At the beginning of the First World War the country seemed to be united as it never had been before. The sudden announcement that Germany would surrender to the Allies left millions of Germans in shock, wondering how such a thing could have happened. Veterans were especially susceptible to Nazi rhetoric of sabotage and betrayal because they were reminded that they had failed to protect their country. The fundamental shift in German politics – from monarchy to democracy – came so suddenly there was no way to prepare for it. Germany continuing the war as

long as it had decimated the economy and with the added burden of reparations payments guaranteed recovery would be slow and laborious and that the German people would be feeling the negative effects long into the future.

This profound sense of fear and confusion manifested as anger and hopelessness. The weak, fractured society of Germany after 1918 was a complete reversal from the military world power it had been in 1914. Everyone wanted answers, to have any way to rationalize what had happened. Losing World War I and being subjected to the Treaty of Versailles challenged deeply entrenched cultural ideals rooted in the Volk and shook the foundations of German cultural identity. Millions of Germans were forced to reassess their place in the world on both a national and individual scale.

Hitler and the Nazi Party exploited and harnessed the anger and uncertainty over Germany's future after the end of the war. The Party also created channels for these frustrations to be released through by identifying certain people or groups of people as being the reason why Germany failed. The Socialist government was of course targeted because of its role in peace negotiations in 1918 and 1919 and because of its inability to fix the crises that struck Germany afterward. The Jews were also targeted because their status as outsider to German culture made them a threat according to Volk philosophy. The November Criminals comprised a mix of Socialist, Communist, leftist, and Jewish elements that in some way or another supposedly had a hand in Germany's downfall. The conspiracy theories

the Nazi Party had about their opponents and their hand in making the Treaty of Versailles created for Nazi supporters tangible goals and a sense of purpose in a period defined by uncertainty and insecurity.

Studying the character of anti-Versailles Nazi Party propaganda raises interesting questions about German identity and the quality of German nationalism in the early twentieth century. The calamitous events of 1918-1933 upset previously held notions of what it meant to be German and prompted, if not necessitated, their redefinition. This attack on German national identity combined with the existential fear that defined the Weimar era created a deadly brand of reactionary nationalism, headed by the National Socialists, that sought to purge every element that had upset those convictions and threatened the spirit of the German Volk. Violence and mass murder against any and all foreign entities became the only tools effective enough to restore the German nation to glory and to save the German people from sure destruction.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

- “The Beer Hall Putsch and Hitler’s Trial.” In *Inside Hitler’s Germany*. Edited by Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz. Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992, 75-78.
- Brockdorff-Rantzau, Ulrich. “Speech of the German Delegation, Versailles, May 7, 1919.” In *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, 9-12.
- “The Constitution of the German Republic,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, 48-51.
- “The Defeated Troops Come Home,” in *Inside Hitler’s Germany*. Edited by Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz. Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992, 28-31.
- Drexler, Anton. “Guidelines of the DAP (1919)”. *Alpha History*.
<https://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/guidelines-of-the-dap-1919/>.
- Goebbels, Joseph. “National Socialism or Bolshevism?” In *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, 127-129.
- , “The Nazis in Parliament.” In *Inside Hitler’s Germany*. Edited by Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz. Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992, 87-89.
- , “The Storm is Coming.” In Randall L. Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008, 32-39.
- , “We Demand.” *German Propaganda Archive*. Calvin University.
<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/angrif05.htm>.
- , “Why Do We Oppose the Jews? (1928).” *German Propaganda Archive*. Calvin University. <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/angrif17.htm>.
- Hindenburg, Paul von. “The Stab in the Back.” In *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, 15-16.

Hitler, Adolf. "An Early Speech by Hitler" in *Inside Hitler's Germany*. Edited by Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992, 68-69.

----- . "Hitler on the Jews (1922)." Alpha History.

<https://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/hitler-on-the-jews-1922/>.

----- . *Mein Kampf*. Translated by James Murphy. Project Gutenberg Australia. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200601.txt>.

----- . "Reestablishing the National Socialist German Workers Party." In Randall Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008, 14-31.

Ludendorff, Erich. "On Overcoming the Consequences of the Lost War (1922)." <http://www.csun.edu/~hfspc002/442/txt/luden.html>.

"The National Assembly Debate on the Treaty of Versailles." In *Inside Hitler's Germany*. Edited by Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz. Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992, 45-47.

"A New Constitution and a New Form of Government," in *Inside Hitler's Germany*. Edited by Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz. Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992, 41-45.

"The Party Program." In *Inside Hitler's Germany*. Edited by Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz. Lexington: DC Heath and Company, 1992, 72-75.

"The Story of a Bank Clerk." In Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938, 274-289.

"The Story of Soldier." In Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came Into Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938, 244-262.

"The Treaty of Versailles, 28 June 1919." In *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook*. Edited by Roderick Stackelburg and Sally A. Winkle. New York: Routledge, 2002, 54-58.

Troeltsch, Ernst. "The Dogma of Guilt." In *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendburg. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, 12-15.

The World War I Document Archive. "The Ultimatum by the Social Democrats." https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Ultimatum_by_the_Social_Democrats.

United States Department of State. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918, Supplement 1, The World War, Volume 1*. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1918Supp01v01/d327>.

Secondary Sources:

- Abel, Theodore. *Why Hitler Came Into Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938.
- Allen, William Sheridan. *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945*. Revised Edition. New York: Franklin Watts, 1984.
- Bessel, Richard. *Germany After the First World War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Butler, Rohan D'Olier. *The Roots of National Socialism, 1783-1933*. New York: Howard Fertig, 1968.
- Bytwerk, Randall L. "The Magical Force of the Spoken Word." In *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008, 1-13.
- Eley, Geoff. *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986.
- Epstein, Catherine. *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015.
- Flenley, Ralph. *Modern German History*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1953.
- Herzstein, Robert E. *Adolf Hitler and the German Trauma*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974.
- Hoover, Calvin. *Germany Enters the Third Reich*. London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1933.
- Kolb, Eberhard. *The Weimar Republic*. Translated by P.S. Falla. London: Unwin Hyman, 1988.
- Kühne, Thomas. *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918-1945*. New York: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Marx, Fritz Morstein. *Government in the Third Reich*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1936.
- McGowan, Lee. *The Radical Right in Germany: 1870 to Present*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.
- Mosse, George L. *Germans and Jews: The Right, The Left, and The Search For a "Third Force" in Pre-Nazi Germany*. New York: Howard Fertig, 1970.

Peukert, Detlev. *The Weimar Republic*. Translated by Richard Deveson. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.