

BACKGROUND WILHELMINE GERMANY 1871 – 1918 ...

Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Structure of the Second Reich 1871-1918 Germany had a written constitution but no statement of individual rights ...

Kaiser (Emperor)

- Hereditary monarch (also King of Prussia)
- Appointed/dismissed the Government
- Could dissolve the Reichstag
- Controlled the foreign policy and the armed forces

Government - appointed Chancellor and Ministers

- Appointed/dismissed by the Kaiser
- Proposed new laws to the Reichstag
- Was only responsible to the Kaiser-did not depend on support from the Reichstag

Reichsrat (Assembly of appointed ambassadors from the 26 State Governments)

- Could veto on legislation passed by the Reichstag

Reichstag

- Members (deputies) were elected by universal male suffrage (men over 25 voted every three years - they also voted for the local assemblies)
- Could agree or reject laws proposed by the Kaiser or the Government
- Could not remove the Chancellor or the Government
- Summoned and dismissed by the Kaiser

Political Parties

- Conservatives
- National Liberals (moderate conservatives)
- Progressives (Liberals)
- Centre or Z (interest party for the Catholics)
- SPD (Socialists)

Geographic structure of the Second Reich 1871-1918

- Prussia dominated the unified Germany - 2/3 of the land area and 2/3 of the population. Prussia was dominated by a conservative Junker class which controlled both the army and the state
- Bavaria was the third major German state. Bavaria kept its monarch 1871. Strong Catholic area proud of its own identity
- Germany had no clear natural borders or major mountain ranges
- Several main rivers cut through the German territory (Rhine, Elbe, Oder, etc...)

Economic structure of the Second Reich 1871-1918

- Fertile land with modern farming
- Expanding population
- Lots of mineral resources -coal in Ruhr, Saar, Silesia - iron ore in Alsace-Lorraine and Ruhr- Potash (the common name for various mined and manufactured salts that contain potassium in water-soluble form - mostly used in fertilizers) in Alsace Lorraine

- Massive industrial development, both in old industries (iron, coal) and new industries (steel, chemicals, electrical)
- Sophisticated banking system with close links to the industry
- Advanced communications (especially railroads)

Society

- Most urbanized state in Europe (more than 60% living in urban areas)
- Best elementary education system in the world
- Good technical higher education
- Growing number of white-collar workers (lower middle class - often civil servants)
- Declining Artisans
- Poor agricultural population
- Industrial workers with rising wages but still living in poor conditions

Culture

- Composers like Beethoven, Wagner and Strauss
- Writers like Goethe, Heine and Schiller
- Thinkers like Hegel, Marx, Kant, Nietzsche

Economic and political effects of WWI

Economic effects of WWI

At first most Germans supported the war but...

- The war was financed by borrowing and printing money which led to inflation (between 1913 and 1918 the mark lost 75% of its value)
- Real earnings fell 20%-30%
- Still - the war industry made vast profits which were increasingly resented by ordinary Germans
- Agricultural production fell
- Meat consumption fell to 12% of pre-war level
- Major food and fuel shortages
- Starvation
- On top of these economic problems came a disease, the "*Spanish influenza*", this would kill more than one million Germans...

Political effects of WWI

- Late in 1916 Hindenburg and Ludendorff were transferred to the Western Front in hope that they would break the stalemate situation
- This transfer also marks the transfer of political power. Ludendorff basically became the country's military dictator and Hindenburg acted as the figurehead. Kaiser Wilhelm II accepted this situation
- When Germany resumed the unrestricted submarine warfare 1917 the US was drawn into war
- Bethmann-Hollweg was forced to resign after he tried to start some peace negotiations
- The new Chancellor, Georg Michaelis, was disliked. He failed to win the support of the Reichstag and resigned after 100 days.
- Georg von Hertling, an old, half blind aristocrat, took over as Chancellor
- In an attempt to neutralize Russia Germany agreed to let Lenin return to Russia (and they backed him up with monetary contributions). This worked well for Germany in 1917 since Lenin and the Bolsheviks grabbed power in October 1917 and then stopped the war against Germany and her allies ...

- The Socialists (SPD) had supported the war in 1914. The war sufferings now brought a split in the party and a more radical left-wing party was established (USPD = the Independent German Social Democratic Party). Inside this radical party was an even more radical group - the Spartacist League. They were encouraged by the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia and now aimed to create a revolution in Germany...
- Protests, strikes and demonstration started to become common. In June 1917 the navy base in Kiel faced several mutinies. In January 1918 over 400 000 Berliners went on strike. This unrest spread and after a few weeks more than one million German workers were on strike
- A Reichstag resolution of seeking a negotiated peace was ignored by the High Command (Ludendorff, Hindenburg and Wilhelm II)
- The Ludendorff offensive was launched at Spring 1918. At first it succeeded but after some weeks it came to a stop. When a counter-offensive was launched (with another million American soldiers) Germany was forced to retreat. On October 6th the last German defensive positions (the Hindenburg Line) were breached. Now it was just a matter of time before the war would be lost...
- On 29 September Ludendorff advised the government that the war was lost and called for an armistice
- Georg von Hertling stepped down as Chancellor. Prince Max of Baden (a liberal ruler known for his democratic views and a man who had earned international respect for his work with the Red Cross) was asked to form a government
- His Cabinet became the first parliamentary cabinet in German history - it included representatives of the majority parties of the Reichstag- even SPD and USPD
- Prince Max tried to carefully approach the US President Woodrow Wilson. He realized that Wilsons "*14 points*" represented the most lenient peace Germany could hope for
- President Wilson response was to demand the withdrawal of German troops from all occupied territory and the dismissal of Germany's undemocratic rulers (Kaiser Wilhelm II, Ludendorff and Hindenburg + a few more military senior advisers). When Ludendorff tried to urge another military offensive as an answer he was met with protests. This made him resign and then disguised with blue spectacles and false whiskers make his way to Sweden(!)
- Now - at the end of October 1918 began a period which some historians refer to as the "**German Revolution**". The news that Germany was suing for an armistice led to an increase of revolutionary activity
- In Wilhelmshaven and Kiel sailors mutinied. In Kiel some sailors set up revolutionary councils ("*soviets*"). The killing of eight sailors led to further actions - sailors together with workers ("*soviets*") in Cuxhaven, Bremen, Hamburg, Lubeck and Rostock took control of their ports.