

17.50, Introduction to Comparative Politics (Fall 2006)
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Session 10: Case Study: Weimar Republic

Introduction

Why Weimar? A big event that raises of the most important questions in political history

- How did a person like Adolf Hitler come to power in a country like Germany, one of the most civilized nations on the earth?
- How could a country in the middle of Europe, with such an illustrious cultural legacy, turn so barbarous?
- Was this the inevitable product of the German political psyche or of particular economic conditions and constitutional arrangements in Germany during the early 1930s?
- If not inevitable, what went wrong in Weimar? What mistakes were made, and who was to blame?
- Could it happen again?
- These debates are very much alive today, and continue to generate controversy from both academics and non-academics

Myths about Hitler's rise to power

- Hitler was simply a tool of the economic elite (Communist myth)
- Nazi success was primarily the product of international forces: "Versailles and Moscow" (SPD myth)
- Hitler's rise was inevitable
 - U.S. faced equally devastating economic downturn
 - Even among democratic reversal, this was rare
- Nazi triumph was unique product of German history; sui generis and non-comparable; nothing can be gleaned from it

Background on Weimar Republic

- History
- Deeply divided by class and religion
- Weimar created in aftermath of WWI
- Republic has some ugly birthmarks
- weak democratic norms and values at both mass and elite levels; "republic without republicans and democracy without democrats"
- Another big inheritance for Weimar is economic mess
- Still another legacy is the trauma of WWI and militias
- As a result of economic mess, popular sentiments, etc., difficulty in consolidating democratic rule; several coup attempts and failed revolutions

The Republic in operation

- Despite problems, democracy seems to be consolidated by mid-1920s
- Some talented leaders, e.g. Otto Braun (1872-1955)

Some obvious problems with Weimar remain

- Persistence of semi-loyal opposition (elites, military, KDP, etc.)
- Fragmented party system
- Military small, constrained, and insular, but not loyal to system
- Versailles Treaty
- Weird institutions (quasi-presidential system, constitutional ambiguity on powers of president, no confidence votes, etc.)
- Power of paramilitary groups

All these problems come into bold relief when economy fails in late 1920s

The deterioration of republican institutions

- Economy collapses in 1929
- Begins in 1930, when SDP-ZP coalition fails no-confidence vote
- September 14, 1930 elections give huge boost to Nazis (2.6% to 18.3%)
- Everything comes to depend on Hindenburg
- Right resists reform
- Elections of July 31, 1932 confirm Nazis as major political force; issue now is what to do with them
- Eight months of political intrigue over bringing Hitler into cabinet
- At the end of January 1933, Hindenburg appoints Hitler chancellor
 - Does what he say he would do: one-party personalistic dictatorship

Explaining mass support for Nazis

- Desperation
- Few other parties can represent Protestant middle classes
- Nationalism, racism struck a cord
- Fear of Communism
- Appeal to action and self-improvement
- Charisma of Hitler
- But, important to note that Nazi support begins to deteriorate after July 1932 elections

Elite support for Nazis

- In general, elites were the Nazis' reluctant partners
- Business elites were split
- Junker class suspicious
- Attitude of officer corps was somewhat similar to that of economic elites
- Hindenburg sums all this up

Rival explanations for Nazi rise to power

- Marxist/social structure
- Cultural
- International factors
- Economic factors
- Luck and leadership

The Nazi consolidation of power and the construction of new institutions

- Begin with suppression of unions and left
- Centralization of power in Berlin
- Merging of party, presidential and PM functions under Hitler (personalistic rule)
- Corporatization of economic life; growth of state planning
- Creation of secret police (Gestapo) and concentration camps for political opponents (started in 1933)
- Rearmament and mass conscription
- Propaganda (e.g., mass radio)
- Special Nazi programs and offices related to racial purification; "Aryanization"

Goal is complete remaking of German state and society

- Largely successful
- German population cowed, co-opted, or openly supportive

- Resistance is where you'd expect it: former KDP/SPD, a few elites, etc.