How Did The Weimar Republic Survived The Apparantly Insurmountable Problems That It Faced 1918-23? Essay, Research Paper

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Faced 1918-23? In order to answer this question we must first establish whether infact the problems that Weimar faced were insurmountable and how much of a threat they posed to the survival of the republic. The years of 1918 to 1923 are deemed by many historians as the “crisis years” as they were a period of much unrest and discontentment, to add to this there were social, economic and political breakdowns and much opposition from several quarters. Before the arise of any additional problems there was already instability in the government, with the abandonment of the Kaiserreich, three parties made up the broadly based Weimar Coalition. Although democratic, the coalition operated on a system of proportional representation – in other words if party A, for example, gets 10% of the votes then they would get 10% of seats in the Reichstag. The introduction of proportional representation became a controversial issue and was the subject of much criticism at the time. By having several parties running the country, all with different aims and ideas, it was difficult to agree on policies. It can also be argued that this system may have assisted in the rise of Nazism and Communism. There was also tension in the government due to the ambiguous relationship between the President and the Reichstag. The president acted as a counter-balance to the Reichstag as a result of fears of parliamentary absolutism, he could dismiss and dissolve the Reichstag and had the right to interfere with legislations. This ambiguity meant that there was uncertainty from the start as to whether ultimate authority was with a representative assembly or the elected head of state. Due to the continuity of traditional social and economic institutions and the introduction of progressive civil liberties, the daily life of the republic was greatly influenced by conservative foundations. Many of these institutions, such as the legal and education systems and the civil services were opposed to the republic. Although it had it´s problems, the Weimar Constitution proved to be democratic and liberal which was an improvement on the totalitarian and strict Bismarkian constitution. However, it could not control the circumstances and conditions in which it was forced to function. The Treaty Of Versailles, a peace treaty with the allies, meant harsh terms for Weimar; compulsory military service was to be abolished, the army was to be reduced from

600 000 to 100 000, naval personnel not to exceed 15 000, a limit if twenty-four naval ships with no submarines, all military and naval aviation to be abandoned and all importation, exportation and production or war materials was to be stopped – thus resulting in Weimar having insufficient resources to keep order and defence and left many soldiers unemployed. Weimar was ordered to provide all countries that sustained damages from the allies during the war with compensation, both financially and in the form of trade goods – this compensation was known as ‘reparations´. There was also a loss of many German colonies; this meant the loss of many economic regions and negatively affected Weimar. The terms of The Treaty of Versailles was believed by the majority of Germans to be unfair, however many under the impression that they were fighting a purely defensive war. Weimar also faced a significant economic crisis. The cost of war, lack of confidence in the currency, willingness of government to print money, government expenditure outweighing income, reparations, trade deficit and attempts to put off reparations all contributed to the problem of hyperinflation which swept the nation. It was mainly the middle classes who lost out due to this inflation, also people on fixed incomes such as students and pensioners. However, there were also a fair amount of winners who benefited from the situation; those with debts and mortgages, tradesmen and exporters due to the weakness of the mark, people involved in industry and real estate, for example Hugo Stinnes. Hyperinflation had both advantages and disadvantages regarding the survival of Weimar. It aided survival by reducing the unemployment rate, increasing the level of economic activity and attracted new investments – especially from places such as the U.S.A. However, it threatened Weimar by causing the majority of society a lot of anguish and trauma. Weimar tried to put off paying reparations, which led to the French growing impatient and deciding to take action. They sent troops into the industrial area alongside the Rhine – Weimar responded by instructing all workers to go on strike and offer “passive resistance”. To add to this workers still wanted continued wage payments, the government could no longer collect taxes from the Ruhr and the French prevented coal delivery to the rest of Weimar. These mounting problems almost crippled industry and made the financial situation worse, however, Weimar did gain some popularity for defending themselves. Eventually they surrendered to the French and resumed reparation payments. Probably the most threatening problem that Weimar was forced to face was the political crisis. There was opposition from the left and right and political violence from both sides. There were three main left wing parties; the SPD who supported the parliamentary democracy, the USPD who were to an extent caught in the middle as their aim was an entirely socialist society and lastly the KPD, an extreme revolutionary left wing breakaway group of the USPD. The KPD believed that Weimar had not gone far enough and were aiming to provoke a socialist revolution, taking inspiration from Bolshevik Russia. The KPD called themselves the Spartacist League; they took this name from the ancient gladiator slave Spartacus who led a battle against the Romans. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, who wanted a new revolutionary to government to replace the existing Weimar one led the KPD, they aimed to achieve this without violence. On 6th January 1919 radical left wing workers began an uprising in Berlin, this is known as the Spartacist Rising, although Liebknecht and Luxemburg felt it was to early for a revolution they felt obliged to offer their support and go along with it. It was down to Noske the leader of the SPD, the party now entirely ruling the country, to put down the rising. He turned to an extreme right wing nationalist group of ex-soldiers know as the Freikorps for helping repressing the uprising. The Freikorps were heavily armed and renound for being violent and particularly nasty. It can be argued that this decision may have affected survival and could facilitated in the failure of the Weimar Republic. Weimar supposedly had a liberal and democratic government that was slightly leaning towards the left wing, but for some reason turned to the extreme right in this situation. There was three days of savage fighting before the rising was put down. The Freikorps rounded up all the leaders and brutally beat and murdered them, this included Luxemburg and Liebknecht. The way the SPD handled the Spartacist Uprising caused much resentment, even from people who has no Spartacist sympathies. Right wing opposition posed much more of a threat to the Republic that left wing opposition, mainly due to the sheer numbers of right wing supporters. The main right wing parties were the DNVP and the NSDAP – they rejected the Republic and it´s principals, wanted to destroy the democratic constitution and was in support of a strict nationalist system. The army was very conservative and never really supported Weimar as they wished to remain neutral and there was also opposition from institutions. The Freikorps were becoming an increasing threat to society and the survival of the Republic – they secretly hid weapons for fighting Communists and to take part in liberation wars against France and Poland, they also were influencing the support of younger people who had not been old enough to participate in the war. In 1920 the Treaty of Versailles directed the government, at this point under the leadership of Bower, to reduce the army from 600 000 to 100 000. This action resulted in a lot of unemployed soldiers and caused a great deal of resentment, especially with the officers. A group of the embittered officers decided to make plans to overthrow the government, Ludendorf supported them. Wolfgang Kapp, a member of the Reichstag, joined the conspiracy. The Kapp Putsch soon followed. Several army troops defied Noske´s order to disband and they marched to the center of Berlin to join the Kapp Putsch. The Freikorps occupied Berlin without resistance and appointed Kapp as Chancellor. Noske turned to Army Command and asked General von Seekt for help but he refuses; he wishes the army to remain neutral and does not want the army to fire on other army units, his famous quote is, “Reichswehr does not fire on Reichswehr”. However, it can also be argued that the reason von Seekt does not provide assistance is because he wants Kapp to succeed, proving how little the army cared for the republic. It was left to the workers to put down the Kapp government by going on strike. Confidence in socialist action was strengthened as a result of the success of the strike, in spite of this in some areas there was more chaos brought to the republic as some strikes turned into industrial uprisings. The consequences of the Kapp Putsch failure brought more problems for Weimar in the shape of radical right wing terrorism, known as “White Terror”. During 1921-22 Sir Walther Rathenau, Matthias Erzberger and Kurt Eisner were all murdered by right wing terrorists. Rathenau was a wealthy Jewish industrialist who supported the Weimar government and became Foreign Secretary. Erzberger imposed taxes and socialist legislation. 1920 saw another uprising in which hundreds were executed. A left wing group set up a so-called Soviet Republic but the army quickly put it down. In this situation the army were only too happy to help as communists were causing the uprising, however, they would not assist during the Kapp Putsch, as this was a right wing uprising. This leads us to question the loyalty of the army to the Republic. There were many contributing factors that enabled the Weimar Republic to overcome the problems it faced and survive. The Weimar government itself took action to save the republic by making changes in the government, taking action to save the economy and introducing emergency powers. To prevent things getting out of control in times of crisis the President had the right to dismiss and dissolve the Reichstag and interfere in legislations. In August 1923 Gustav Stresemann was appointed Chancellor and this proved to be a fundamental turning point that set Weimar on the road to recovery, as he was prepared to actually face up to the country´s problems and set about resolving them. He called off passive resistance and recommenced reparation payments, reduced the trade deficit by cutting down the government expenditure and also created a new currency. This new currency, the Rentenmark, immediately stopped hyperinflation and established a stable currency, creating a basis on which Weimar´s economic predicaments could be internationally negotiated. External factors also played a part in the survival of the Weimar Republic. Sympathy was gained from the allies as a result of Stresemann´s policies, this led to the Dawes Committee being set up to investigate Weimar financial situation. In 1924 the Dawes Plan was published, it designed the reparation payments in a realistic way that the economy could cope with but did not reduce the amount. Both Weimar and the Allies accepted the plan and it was a step forward regarding international relations and Weimar´s domestic position. Investment from the U.S.A. followed soon after the Dawes Plan and Weimar was able to re-establish its industry. Despite the negative effects of hyper inflation the workers were actually better off as it created employment due to the increased levels of economic activity. Although Weimar played a principal role in the war, most of the resentment felt by the enemies was channeled towards the French and the allies rather than directly at Weimar itself. There was also no political alternative to the republic as neither the left of right would have been able to successfully run the country. The right was not strong enough and had no clear line of attack and the left did not have enough support and was still un-recovered from its earlier divisions. In my opinion the problems faced by the Weimar Republic were not insurmountable as in the end they were successfully overcome. However, there is no doubt that they were very serious and at times posed a very real threat to the survival of the republic. Although there were other significant factors, I feel that the evidence suggests that Stresemann was a fundamental figure in Weimar´s fight for survival. Perhaps it is true that Weimar could have survived without him, but personally I think it would have been more of a case of struggling on until its demise. Stresemann exerted such an intense influence and initiated vital economic developments. It can be argued that the Weimar Republic never actually had a real chance of survival from the start. In my opinion it had a particularly unfortunate amount of problems but nevertheless it triumphed in overcoming them. It was pure bad luck that in 1929 not only was Weimar confronted with more economic adversity but also Stresemann died at this crucial time. The Nazis were in the right place at the right time in order to exploit this misfortune. If it had not been for these fateful circumstances, I believe that the Weimar Republic would have survived longer.