You will be familiar with aspects of the material in this section from your study of Hitler’s rise to power for Paper 2. Take advantage of these overlaps to ensure that you have a really deep understanding of this period of German history.

However, the focus of this section is on the political, constitutional, economic and social problems experienced by the Republic throughout its 14 year existence. Hitler obviously features in this cautionary tale, but he is only one part of the story.

You should be comfortable thinking about these ‘big picture’ questions by the end of your revision for this section:

**1. Was the failure of the Weimar Republic inevitable? If so, what was the most significant reason?**

**2. Did the Weimar Republic fail purely for internal reasons or because of external pressures / forces?**

**3. What were the similarities and differences between the crises of 1919-24 and that of 1929-33?**

**4. What were the positive achievements of the Weimar Republic? How golden was the ‘Golden Age’ with hindsight?**

It is important to remember that the syllabus specifies that an in depth look at the ‘Impact of the Great Depression on one European Country’ could also be the subject of a separate essay question – therefore you need to know the period 1929-33 especially well, hence the detail in that section here. You should also therefore consider the following questions in addition to those above :

**1. Why was Germany, in particular, so badly affected by the Great Depression?**

**2. What was the causal link between economic problems and social problems? What evidence is there to show real distress in both these areas?**

**3. Why was the Weimar government unable to deal with the crisis? What political affect did this have?**

**4. How were the Nazis able to exploit the Great Depression? Did the Great Depression make their rise to power inevitable?**

This guide is structured according to the three distinct phases of the Weimar Republic:

1. A difficult birth (1919-24)
2. Stresemann’s ‘Golden Age’ (1924-1929)
3. Murder-suicide (1929-33)

**1. A Difficult Birth 1919-24**

The question of whether the failure of Weimar was inevitable really revolves around an evaluation of the manner and form of its creation, as well as its place in the general context of German history.

**a) The Signing of the Armistice**

By 1918 the Kaiser and his generals (who had effectively become military dictators of Germany) saw that the war was lost. Militarily, the massive final German assault of the war (the Ludendorff Offensive) had failed as the result of overwhelming numbers of US soldiers arriving at the Western Front. The German army was demoralised - the massive mutiny of the navy at Kiel had confirmed this. Socially and economically in chaos, with supplies running out and workers striking, Germany could no longer sustain the war effort. Extreme politics of the left and right had flourished under these conditions, with the communist party (inspired by the Russian Revolution) gaining mass support, as well as the far right who were especially popular among the armed forces.

The Kaiser refused to accept armistice terms from the Allies as they involved a demand for democracy to be introduced to Germany. Hindenburg and Ludendorff knew that peace terms had to be agreed but did not want to take responsibility themselves (so that the army’s reputation would remain intact) and therefore told the Kaiser he must abdicate and hand over power to a civilian government. The men who stepped up to this task were the leading politicians of the Reichstag (which had previously had very little real power) under the SPD leader Ebert.

Many soldiers, who were subject to military propaganda and censorship, were shocked by this turn of events and the new politicians of the Weimar Republic were branded the ‘November Criminals’ and the ‘Stabbed in the Back’ myth took hold among many groups on the right. This was fuelled by the calculating actions of Ludendorff, in particular, who effectively denied his role in events by scapegoating Ebert. Efforts by these politicians to explain the reality of the situation was largely ignored by the press who preferred the crowd pleasing narrative of the ‘stabbed in the back’ myth to the depressing reality of military failure.

The consequence was rioting, assassinations and violence. The new government could not even meet in Berlin safely and were forced to flee to the small town of Weimar for their first meetings.

**b) The Weimar Constitution**

Following the dictatorship of the generals during WW1, a new constitution for Weimar was introduced in January 1919 that was designed to be the opposite; perfectly democratic. It is worth noting at this point that 75% of the Reichstag voted in favour of the new constitution, Ebert was popularly elected by a clear majority in January 1920 and that the first coalition government of the SPD, Centre Party and the Democratic Party worked together effectively – indicating that there was hope for the Weimar Republic. However, two key elements of the constitution were to prove to be particularly detrimental:

**i) Article 48**: This gave the president the right to rule by decree in ‘emergencies’. What constituted an ‘emergency’ was not defined and therefore relied on the assumption that the President would be a committed democrat – Ebert courageously used it appropriately during the Ruhr crisis to appoint Stresemann as Chancellor, proving that it could be a valuable tool in resolving a crisis.

However, it was also open to misuse by less scrupulous leaders, notably after Hindenburg (who had no respect for democracy) was elected on Ebert’s death in 1925. For example, during Bruning’s time as Chancellor (1930-32)n he was to persuade Hindenburg to use it 109 times in just two years, fatally undermining the position of those advocating support for the Weimar Republic on the basis that it was a democracy.

**ii) Proportional Representation:** The choice of this voting system meant that all parties ended up being represented in parliament, which was very democratic. However, this also ensured that it was basically impossible for any one party to gain an overall majority and therefore coalition governments had to be formed – these were very unstable, especially as most parties only represented a narrow interest group (e.g. Catholic Centre, SPD for the trade unions etc). As a result governments came and went with alarming rapidity:

*- there were a total of 21 coalition governments in the 14 years of the Republic.*

*- only 8 of these actually had a majority in the Reichstag and could get their policies implemented.*

**iii) German political culture:** Germany had no history of real democracy and appeared to naturally be inclined to authoritarian rulers. They remembered the strong government and economic miracle of the Kaisers, which contrasted with the *perception* of the recent actions of the ‘November Criminals’.

The *Reichswehr* (army) was a far more powerful a force in politics than would be normal in a democracy and clearly had sympathy for the political right – in 1918 Ebert had made a deal with the top officers known as the **Ebert-Groening Pact**. This essentially promised that the army would retain its independence from the government (a ‘state within a state’) in return for a promise to crush any communist rebellions. **Without this deal, it is likely the Weimar Republic would have collapsed at the beginning** – nonetheless, as we will see, it also meant that the government would continue to struggle with threats from the far right, which the army was far more inclined to tolerate (or even support in some cases).

The other established institutions (judiciary, police, local government, civil service etc) were kept in place and clearly did not all fully support the new democratic government, essentially hoping it would fail. This can be seen in many examples – from the refusal of the army to take on the Freikorps in 1920 to the leniency of the judge at Hitler’s trial.

**c) The Signing of the Treaty of Versailles June 1919**

You should be able to reel off the terms of the treaty in relation to Germany by now, so they will not be repeated here. Needless to say, the politicians of Weimar did their best to disassociate themselves from it – even Brockdorff (the foreign minister who actually signed it!) was quoted as saying that it was the “death sentence of millions of Germans”.

This led to Ebert and the SPD coalition being accused of either further betrayal or incompetence in not getting a better deal. However, the reality was there was no choice – they had to sign or Clemenceau would restart the war to Germany’s ruin. Furthermore, the Allies had not even allowed the Germans to come to the negotiating table and they had been under the impression that a fair treaty would be created based on Wilson’s 14 Points.

Some historians have argued that the terms of the Treaty doomed the Weimar Republic from the start by giving the far right nationalists a stick to beat the new democracy with all through the period and by imposing reparations that would leave Germany open to repeated economic crises. Keynes, the prominent economist, was to argue this case as early as the 1920s.

**4) 1919-20: The First Crisis of the Republic: ‘Putschism’ & The Ruhr Crisis**

**i) ‘Putschism’ – Part 1 1919-20**

These hostile sentiments, from both the extreme left and right, manifested themselves in two attempted revolts (Putsch) that both highlighted the vulnerability of the Weimar republic and further eroded its legitimacy.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **3. Result 1: Left-Wing Rebellion** |  | **5. Result 2: Right-Wing Rebellion** |
| **Spartacists Jan 1919** | Group | **Kapp Putsch / Feikorps March 1920** |
| Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebnecht | Leaders | Kapp (far right wing politician), General Ludendorff and General Luddwitz |
| Communist revolution. They are incensed by the ‘betrayal’ of Ebert (who was a socialist) – abdication of Kaiser unique opportunity to introduce utopia of the workers – instead get ‘bourgeois democracy’. | Aims | To overthrow Weimar and install far right Kapp. They were contemptuous of democracy and saw it as their duty to destroy it as early as possible – they even toyed with the idea if reinstating one of the Kaiser’s sons. The signing of Versailles was their opportunity. |
| Communist republic already declared in Bavaria ‘Raterpublik’, launch a takeover of Berlin using | Actions | Organise a take-over of Berlin (putsch) Freikorps move to take over the city. Army refuse to fire on the Freikorps – seeing them as kin. However, they do not join the revolt – “the Reichswehr does not fire on the Reichswehr”. **The Ebert-Groener Pact did not therefore protect the Weimar republic from attacks by the Far Right** – indeed this incident showed how problematic the pact was in keeping the army free from government control. |
| Ebert has no adequate force – therefore turns to the Freikorps (enemies of his new democracy!) demobbed right wing veterans, who begin a campaign of terror – Luxemburg and other leaders are tortured and murdered. Anyone with a gun was ordered to be shot, over 1000 in total – **the Ebert-Groener Pact paid off in protecting the Weimar Republic from the far left.** | How defeated | Ebert appeals to the workers – recognising the Weimar Republic is by far the lesser of two evils, the workers strike and protest in huge numbers. Freikorps are forced to withdraw. |
| **Damages legitimacy of Weimar further** – brutal and out of touch with workers, socialist roots. In Bavaria, initially a replacement government loyal to Weimar was put in place, but that too was overthrown by the right wing Freikorps led by Gustav von Kahr. It was clear that the Weimar Republic could not control some of the German states, such as Bavaria. | Impact on Republic | **Makes them look weak, relying on extra-governmental help**. Highlights the reluctance of the army to actively support the new government. However, managed to survive the far left and the far right attempts to take power. But… far right remain active – assassinations follow, **including the foreign minister Rathenau and the leader of the Centre Party.** Republic cannot rely on army, weak. They cannot even punish the leaders – Kapp flees to Sweden and Ludendorff, who retains great prestige, is left completely alone. |

**ii) The Ruhr Crisis 1921-23**

Given the unpopularity of the Treaty of Versailles, the government pursued a policy of ‘obstructionism’ – despite having signed up to it, they did their best to delay and avoid implementation of its terms. You will remember that the actual amount of reparations to be paid was not decided by the allies until 1921. The massive figure of 6.6 billion GB Pounds outraged public opinion and the Weimar government consequently began an active policy of obstructionism that would lead to the occupation of the Ruhr by France and the hyperinflation of 1923. The table below summarises the key causes and impacts:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Causes**: | **[Jan]: Reparations Bill Presented to Germany** - Genoa conference on final schedule reparations – no agreement made due to the obstructionist policy of the Weimar government  **1922 [Apr]: Rapallo Treaty**  Weimar signs deal with the USSR (a fellow international outcast) – both agree to renounce reparations and co-operate with each other – French are livid. Persuaded by the British to give Germany 6 months to pay, but when no payments of lumber and coal are made in Dec of 1922…  **1923 [Jan]: Ruhr Invasion**  French Prime Minister Poincare orders French soldiers to enter the Ruhr (the German army, crippled by the restrictions of Versailles can offer no resistance) – idea was to seize the owed goods directly from Germany’s industrial heartland. |
| **Impact in the Ruhr** | **1923 [Jan-Nov]: Passive Resistance**  ▪ Strikes: United politicians and people vs French – Weimar government supported the strikers, Ruhr stopped working. French brought in own workers.  ▪ Deaths: Cut Ruhr off, search checks etc. Riots and violence, huge protests – murders of French soldiers, brutality reciprocated. 132 killed.  ▪ Evictions: The French deported leaders of the striking German workers, the entire Ruhr police force and all Weimar officials. 150,000 Germans are expelled from their homes in total. |
| **Impact on Germany** | **1923 [Jan-Nov]: Hyperinflation**  German government prints more money to try and inflate the economy to compensate for lack of Ruhr production and taxes. Businesses and banks do not trust this measure, rightly guessing that extra money in the economy will simply lead to the German mark losing value, and raise prices to prepare for this. The government, needing to pay the salaries of its officials and high welfare bills, simply prints more money and the situation quickly spirals out of control into hyper-inflation.  **Effects:**  **Savings become worthless** – the middle classes lose all of their life savings over night. This led to the Weimar Republic losing much of its core support – the middle classes were the traditional supporters of parliamentary democracy in Germany. The memory of hyper-inflation has haunted the German psyche ever since – a fear that put an extra pressure on the governments of 1930-33 who had to deal with the Great Depression.  **German mark became worthless**. A loaf a bread reportedly cost 200 billion marks!  Some historians argue that, ironically, the hyper-inflation actually helped big business in the long run – allowing them to pay off their considerable debts with worthless marks.  **Stresemann becomes chancellor** – Ebert uses Article 48 to appoint this popular and competent figure. |

**iii) ‘Putschism’ Part 2 – The Munich Beer Hall Putsch Nov 1923**

The final Putsch was attempted in November 1923 by Hitler and his Nazi Party – once again Ludendorff was also persuaded to lend his prestige to a far right putsch. Hitler, judging that the credibility and power of the Weimar Republic was at its lowest ebb, tried to seize power in Bavaria. He captured von Kahr and other members of the Bavarian government and sent the SA to occupy key parts of the city.

He had misjudged – he believed that the army and police would stand aside (as they had for Kapp) and, having taken the city, he would then be able to march on Berlin (inspired by Mussolini’s ‘March on Rome’). However, the army actively opposed the SA’s attempt to seize their garrison, while von Kahr and his right wing Bavarian government escaped and ordered the police to resist – 14 Nazis were killed and Hitler was arrested.

**Evidence of Weimar stability?** The army had evidently been satisfied by Ebert’s harsh measures against left wing extremists across Germany and appear to have been willing to take on the Nazis (as their suspicion of the Weimar Government had eased) as a result. The presence of occupying French soldiers in the Ruhr and the Rhineland also meant that they were wary of actively supporting far-right revolutionaries who might spark a foreign war they could not win.

The Weimar’s obstructionist policies had been popular and had, at least initially, united the people. The Weimar Republic had somehow survived a period of incredible instability had obviously earned a kind of acceptance – indeed, there are instances where it clearly enjoyed a reasonable level of popular support, such as during the Kapp Putsch and the Ruhr passive resistance. Ebert’s willingness to use Article 48 to appoint of Stresemann as Chancellor in 1923 was very important – he was well-respected in both Germany and internationally, strengthening the position of the government. His subsequent policies would prove successful, at least in the short term.

It is also worth recognising that the extreme revolutionary groups did not have the mass support necessary for their revolts to succeed – despite all the issues, it seems the German people were unwilling to unleash chaos and therefore the Weimar Republic survived by a kind of default. Hitler’s decision to adopt legal means after 1924 reflected his astute understanding of this.

**Evidence of instability?** However, while the government may have achieved some acceptance, it had hardly inspired active loyalty or support. Those instances where people had united behind it had clearly been as the result of it being perceived as the ‘lesser of two evils’. The trial of Hitler clearly illustrated the lack of active support for the government, even amongst its own officials. He was allowed to take over the trial and use it as a propaganda event, spreading his message outside of Bavaria for the first time. His sentence was incredibly lenient, being released after only a few months, while Ludendorff was once again let off completely. This is a small example of a bigger problem; democracy had failed to entrench itself as a positive feature into the political culture of Germany.

**2. Stresemann’s ‘Golden Age’ (1924-1929)**

The middle years of the Weimar Republic appeared to be a startling turn around. However, it is important to remember that the apparent ‘miracle’ swiftly changed into catastrophic disaster after 1929. Therefore it is important that we judge this period even-handedly – the table below seeks to identify evidence of stability and evidence of persistent instability to help you to do so:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **EVIDENCE OF STABILITY 1924-29** | **EVIDENCE OF INSTABILITY 1924-29** |
| **International Relations**  **1924: Dawes Plan: See economic**  **1925: The Locarno Treaties** - Stresemann in 1924 gets Ruhr back to work, pays reparations via the Dawes Plan. Stresemann’s diplomatic skills are evident and he quickly capitalises on this to negotiate an agreement with GB and France that settles the western borders of Germany – a move that builds trust:  ▪ Rhineland –Trust improved to the point that allied soldiers withdraw from the Rhineland 1926  ▪ League – France allows Germany to join L of N 1926  ▪ Nobel Peace Prize–Stresemann get prize (along with Chamberlain and Briand, the British and French foreign ministers).  ▪ Honeymoon **–** becomes known as ‘Locarno Honeymoon’ period which lasts throughout the period. | **International Instability**  **Relations with the USSR:**  **However…** the Locarno Treaties make no mention whatsoever of the borders Germany shares with the USSR in the East. This makes the USSR feel very nervous and undermines the Rapallo Treaty in which Germany and the USSR pledged to support each other. The USSR and Germany sign the Treaty of Berlin in 1926 in an attempt to rebuild their relationship, but it does not add up to much. |
| **Evidence of Cultural Recovery**  **Famously, there is a cultural flowering in Weimar Germany – here are a few examples:**  ▪ **Science:** Albert Einstein becomes prominent at Humboldt University  ▪ **Music**: Caberet and music of Schoenburg and opera of Weill – all new and innovative, forward looking.  ▪ **Literature**: Modernist writers such as Thomas Mann push boundaries.  **▪ Architecture**: Bauhaus style and modern housing schemes.  ▪ **Cinema:** Marlene Dietrich – new movies promoting strong female characters and role in society | **Evidence of Cultural Instability**  **Artists themselves critical of Weimar, undermining its achievement. For example:**  **Art – Dadaism / George Grosz:**  George Grosz leads the Dada movement, which bitterly rejects the idea that politics and religion have anything to offer. His drawings and paintings are scathing attacks on the new Germany.  **2. Conservative opinion sees new culture as immoral:** Erich Kastner described Berlin as follows: "In the east there is crime; in the centre the con men hold sway; in the north resides misery, in the west lechery; and everywhere–the decline." |
| **Evidence of Economic Stability**  **1923 [Nov]: End of Passive Resistance / The Rentenmark:**  Stresemann announces end of passive resistance in the Ruhr – new currency introduced to end the hyperinflation. The skilful finance minister, Schacht, is prominent. Ruhr starts to produce again, stimulating the whole German economy.  **1924 [Apr]: The Dawes Plan:** US lends Germany 800 million gold marks – Stresemann persuades them to also intercede with the French who also agree to allow longer payment frame.  1. Amount received from US actually more than Germany will have to pay in reparations.  2. Production levels overtake 1914 levels by 1928 – new huge firms such as IG Farben founded.  3. **Young Plan** in 1929 actually reduced reparations further from 6.6 bn pounds to 2.2. | **Economic Instability**  ▪ **Working classes**  High level of unemployment remains – Schacht controlling amount of credit to businesses, to keep inflation under control, but this means expansion (therefore job creation) is more limited.  ▪ **Middle** **Classes**  Memories of hyperinflation haunt them, still huge resentment for the loss of their savings in the hyperinflation. The new currency confirms this situation.  ▪ **Germany** **Economy**  Stresemann himself describes Germany as “Dancing on a volcano” – he meant that, as a result of the Dawes Plan, they were incredibly vulnerable to any problems in the US economy. |
| **Evidence of Political Stability**  **The Stresemann Factor -** Stresemann’s personal prestige is very high following his foreign policy and apparent economic success – his status lends legitimacy to the new democracy and he is a consistent leading figure in all of the coalition government’s between 1923 and his death in 1929 (after initially acting as Chancellor at the end of 1923, he holds the post of foreign minister thereafter)  **The end of Putschism -** It appeared that the danger of revolution and revolt had finally ended with the failure of Hitler in 1923. There were no more armed uprisings and the far-right, now predominantly represented by the Nazis, has publicly decided to seek office only by legal means – and were at least giving the impression of sticking to this.  **Elections May 1928 -** It appeared that by May 1928 mainstream democracy was working in Germany. The extremist parties were almost wiped out in that year’s election – for example the Nazis received only 2.6% of the vote and Hitler was increasingly being represented in the press as something of a joke. | **Evidence of Political Instability**  **Continuance of Hitler -** The inability of the Weimar Republic to punish men like Hitler left him at liberty to take advantage of the great Depression. It was clear that there was still not enough authority to significantly take on the civil service, local government etc, let alone the army, to get rid of those who did not support the new democracy.  **1925: Death of Ebert, election of Hindenburg as President -** damaging to the republic as Hindenburg openly contemptuous of democracy – one effect of this was his future willingness to use Article 48 (thereby undermining the claim to democracy), but also indicated that the German people are looking still to their authoritarian past rather than democratic future.  **1929: Death of Stresemann** – the gap left by Stresemann revealed how little the other politicians of Weimar had really achieved widespread popularity and trust. The timing was pretty terrible… **8 Coalitions:** Even during this period of stability, there were 8 different coalition governments formed in the Reichstag – this is an indication of the inherent instability of the Weimar system, although Stresemann managed to retain his post in all.  *(NB – does not mean 8 elections – there were actually three, when the parties of the Reichstag could not make a deal).* |

At this point you should pause to complete a ‘health check’ of the Weimar Republic by the start of 1929. What successes had there been? What obvious problems were there? What problems lurked just beneath the surface? What ‘hibernating’ problems (resulting from the birth of the Republic) were waiting to be re-awakened?

**3. Murder – suicide 1929-33 / Impact of the Great Depression of Germany**

**Essential Connections:**

a) **Wall St Crash 1929:** While not the cause of the Great Depression, it was a particularly damaging symptom of longer term world economic woes for Germany. Germany had been bailed out by the US and was essentially living on credit, beyond its actual means. When US money dried up (40% of its total foreign loans were to Germany), the economy tanked.

b) Therefore… **mass social problems** ensued. The people looked to the government for clear leadership in resolving these problems.

c) But… the **nature of Weimar democracy** (weak coalition governments) meant that a succession of divided, short lived governments were unable to offer any solutions or reassurance.

d) Consequently… parliamentary democracy, already unpopular in many quarters due to the context of German history, **lost widespread support and legitimacy**.

e) In combination with… **a slick, efficient and charismatic Nazi Party**, the Nazi State was established.

**(Economic problems + Social distress) + (Weakness of Weimar + strengths of Nazis) = Hitler’s Germany**

**1. Immediate: What was the economic impact of the Great Depression of Germany?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Area** | **Impact** | **Useful Facts** |
| **Industry** | With loss of foreign investment, factory production had to be cut back due to lack of capital. As economic problems spread globally, demand for German manufacturing contracted, which was accentuated by the introduction of import tariffs by the USA (in particular). | **By 1932:** Industrial production had fallen by 40 - 50%.  Every country in Europe had introduced tariffs. |
| **Banking/**  **Finance** | The German banks struggled on until 1931 when the Danat Bank (2nd largest in Germany) failed. This led to a loss of confidence in the whole system, causing excessive withdrawals and the collapse of four other banks.  Foreign currency traders feared that the German mark (currency) would lose its value and therefore tried to sell in a panic – this became a self-fulfilling prophecy as the sudden supply of currency forced its value right down.  Despite Hindenburg negotiating a year’s suspension of loan repayments to the US and the subsequent cancellation of reparation payments entirely at Lausanne in 1932, matters had gone so far that these measures had little impact. | **Six** significant German banks collapsed 1931-32.  **Government revenue fell** from 8bn marks annually in 1928 to 6bn by 1932. |
| **Agriculture** | Farmers were already struggling with low prices for their goods. After 1929, as a result of global demand falling and trading tariffs imposed by other countries, the prices of German agricultural goods collapsed – many were bankrupted. | |

**Remember: There was NOT hyperinflation during the Great Depression** – this had occurred in 1923 during the Ruhr Crisis.

**2. What was the social impact of the Great Depression?**

As a consequence of the above immediate economic impact, there was a dramatic change in the social position of most people in Germany:

**1. Business Owners**: Due to the falling demand for their goods, coupled with the difficulty in getting credit to buy materials, many businesses were forced to close. The powerful business elite were therefore seriously affected – those who were still in business were fearful that they would be next.

**2. Workers:** As a result of the above, unemployment soared. It is estimated that as many as 6 million men were out of work by 1932 (the official statistics did not include women!). As government revenue from taxation also consequently fell, its funds for unemployment relief soon ran out. Homes were re-possessed, tenants booted out as they could not afford rent and mass shanty towns grew up in the cities.

**3. Young People:** Businesses tried to prevent sacking existing workers by not employing new ones when people retired/left. This meant unemployment among the young was especially bad – it is estimated that over half of 18-24 year olds could not find jobs by the end of 1932.

**4. Farmers:** Already in debt due to low food prices in the 1920s, soon found themselves in real trouble. Thousands of farms were abandoned or repossessed and labourers left unemployed.

**5. Middle Classes:** Suffered in many ways. Professional jobs also contracted as a result of the economic problems and many lost their life’s savings in the banking collapses. Bruning’s government attempted to increase revenue by raising taxes which fell most heavily on the middle classes.

The overall consequence was an increase in fear and misery among the population. Even the natural allies of government, the middle classes and industrialists, were alarmed and affected by events to the point where they demanded effective action. The spectre of a return to the hyperinflation of 1923 loomed over them and they were therefore extremely sensitive to perceived government inaction.

**3. What were the political consequences of the Great Depression?**

**a) Political impact 1: Erosion of the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic**

It is important to note at this point that the governments in Germany were potentially very unstable – you should review your notes on the problems of having too democratic a constitution (PR voting system, coalition governments, Article 48, persistence of anti-democratic institutions such as the army). Under pressure from a world event, such as the Great Depression, such governments have a tendency to fracture and collapse, making strong leadership difficult.

**1. June 1928-March 1930: ‘The Grand Coalition’**

Led by Muller, this was a centre-left coalition of five political parties. As the effects of the depression began to be felt, all members were under intense pressure from voters to sort it out. Unfortunately, there was no ‘model’ to follow– inevitably the different parties had different ideas (based on the interests of their primary group of supporters) and rifts began to form. Two ‘camps’ emerged: reduce expenditure by cutting unemployment benefits and thereby balance the budget or increase benefits to stimulate the economy (but put the government into debt). Fatefully, memories of the hyperinflation of 1923 (coupled with the inability to find credit without a balanced budget) swung the argument in favour of cutting benefits.

The social consequence for workers has already been outlined; the political impact was that the Trade Unions (who also represented the interests of workers who had lost jobs) demanded that the Social Democrat Party (who had very close ties to the unions) abandon the coalition. As they were one of the larger coalition members, the government lost its majority in the Reichstag and could not continue.

***Analysis:*** *Historian Robert Paxton has argued that this was the end of true democracy in Weimar – thereafter governments had to increasingly rely on President Hindenburg’s use of Article 48 to survive.*

**2. Bruning (March 1930 to May 1932)**

Appointed to replace Muller by Hindenburg. He was from the conservative Catholic Party and was never able to form a strong enough coalition to get his laws passed in the Reichstag – he therefore persuaded Hindenburg to implement them using Article 48 (109 times in two years!).

He was an economic liberal (in favour of the free market) and introduced a range of deflationary measures (an idea that if you focus on making German goods cheaper, then foreign countries will buy more which, in turn, will save the economy). His measures included:

Cutting salaries for the civil service, ordering a general wage reduction to 1927 levels, twice reduced unemployment benefits – became known as the ‘Hunger Chancellor’, his policies likely made the situation worse and unemployment rocketed.

Historians see Bruning as the key to the rise in support for the extremists – Hitler, in particular, benefitted from a spreading belief that the government was corrupt and inept among the middle classes. The election Bruning called in 1932 (which he believed would strengthen his position) saw him punished by the voters. Both the extreme left and right benefitted in this election – the Nazis in particular – going from 6 seats in the Reichstag to 107.

Bruning limped on as Chancellor as long as he had support from Hindenburg as he could still pass laws through Article 48. However, his proposal to end land subsidies for the aristocracy (Hindeburg’s social class) was the last straw – Hindenburg withdrew his support and Bruning was forced to resign.

***Analysis:*** *Bruning’s government fatally undermined democracy – his economic policies made the social impact of the Great Depression worse in the short term, pushing many into the arms of extremists.**His inability to form a coalition led to reliance on Article 48, which destroyed his legitimacy in the eyes of many.*

**3. Von Papen 1932**

By this point, the government seemed to have little hope of ruling without Article 48 and had become a very confused and weak form of dictatorship. Von Papen was appointed by Hindenburg as head of the government – he tried to introduce currency controls to help imports and exports but this only probably had a negative impact. His main concern was his rivalry for power with another political figure, Schleicher.

Von Papen called an election in July 1932, seeking to increase his power – the result was that 37% of voters chose the Nazi Party instead, making them the single largest party in Germany (their support would now be essential to form any government that wanted to exclude the Communist Party who had received a large share of the votes). Von Papen sought to use the Nazi’s popularity and offered Hitler the job as Vice Chancellor – however, Hitler was shrewd enough to hold out for the top job or nothing. At this point, Hindenburg (who disliked Hitler) would have nothing to do with the Nazis and therefore a second election was held in November in which the Nazi’s remained the biggest party (although to a lesser extent).

**4. Schleicher (Dec 1932 – January 1933)**

Hindenburg realised that von Papen had failed to achieve enough support and replaced him with his rival, Schleicher. Schleicher’s goal was to keep power for himself at the expense of von Papen – he therefore sought to gain the support of the Nazis, convincing Hindenburg to appoint Hitler as Chancellor in January 1933. Schleicher believed he had tricked Hitler into accepting a deal where Schleicher would be Vice Chancellor and his supporters would hold most of the ministerial positions (i.e. Schleicher saw himself as the behind the scenes puppet master). Hindenburg probably agreed as he saw little alternative – especially as the communists (whom he dreaded above all) appeared to be growing in power. With the appointment of Hilter as Chancellor, the Weimar Republic essentially ended – the Reichstag Fire and Enabling Act would shortly follow.

Historian Hite: *“fatal, though understandable, miscalculation”*

***Analysis:*** *Von Papen and Schleicher made a mockery of the Weimar Republic through their obvious in fighting and inability to form anything like a majority in the Reichstag. Their economic measures had little obvious effect (although the economy was in reality beginning to improve). By this point, the frequency of elections made the Weimar Republic appear impotent and divided.*

**Political impact 2: the beneficial Impact on the fortunes of the Nazi Party**

As well as eroding the legitimacy of the Weimar governments (through the rapid collapse of coalition governments and the perception that they could not solve the crisis), the Nazi Party was able to effectively harness the crisis to increase support for their message.

You will have good knowledge of their methods from the Paper 2 revision – however, here are some points that would be relevant to this kind of Paper 3 question (that would require a focus on the impact of the Great Depression only / failure of Weimar):

1. The rise in support for the Nazi party mirrors the rise in unemployment rate almost exactly.

2. The economic programme promised by the Nazis became a great selling point – their emphasis on jobs through re-armament would have significant political impacts especially in foreign policy later in the 1930s.

3. The economic problems allowed Nazi propaganda to thrive – especially around the scapegoating of the Jews and the ineffectiveness of the democracy.

**Historiography: What was the political impact of the Great Depression on Weimar?**

While historians would generally agree that the Great Depression was a key cause of the collapse of the Weimar Republic, there are still some differing points of view about this question that may give your essay an overall argument, depending on the question set:

1. The fundamental flaws in the political system of the Weimar Republic were the real reason for its failure, the pressure of the Great Depression merely exposed them.

2. The Great Depression helps explain the collapse of Weimar but does not explain why it was Hitler and the Nazis that rose to the top (and not the communists etc)

3. The economy was (ironically) beginning to improve by the end of 1932 – some historians argue that this indicates that strong forces in Germany were keen to get rid of the Weimar democracy for reasons other than the economy (i.e. dislike of democracy) – Hitler was the best way of ensuring it would not return.