

Reading 3A

CONSEQUENCES OF GERMANY'S DEFEAT IN WORLD WAR I

The consequences of Germany's defeat in World War I (1914-1918) were far-reaching:

- The old Germany monarchy, ruled by Kaiser (Emperor) Wilhelm, ended in 1918. The Weimer Republic, a democratic government, began.
- Inflation of monstrous proportions arose: for example, in 1910, a dollar was worth three marks. In 1921, there were one trillion marks to a dollar. One needed a wheelbarrow full of money in order to buy one postage stamp!
- Resentment and anger grew among many Germans who did not believe that Germany had really lost militarily because German troops still occupied parts of France and no foreign troops were on German soil. They believed that Germany had been betrayed at home or “stabbed in the back” by traitors who favored the new government. This notion became known as the *Dolchstoßlegende* {dolsh-shtoss-leggendeh} or “stab in the back legend.”
- In the Versailles Treaty, signed in Versailles, France, in November 1918, Germany surrendered unconditionally. The treaty demanded that Germany pay large amounts of money (reparations) to the Allies (France, England, the U.S.) over the course of the next 60 years. This was to cover the costs of the war, damages, and payments to widows and orphans of veterans, disability to the wounded, etc. It, also, gave German territory to France, Italy and Poland and saddled Germany with sole responsibility for starting the war. (The treaty was gradually changed in the 1920s and finally revoked by Hitler in 1935.)

The Austro-Hungarian Empire also was broken up. Austria, like Germany, became a republic and the nearly 700 year old Habsburg reign of the “Holy Roman Empire” came to an end as the Emperor abdicated (gave up the throne). (The Holy Roman Empire had officially come to an end in 1806.) Austrians, too, felt angry and alienated. Many Austrians and Germans felt that they had been forced into democracy and resented it. The “good old days” of aristocracy and traditional etiquette were gone.

Summary: German society had been shaken to the core by the loss of World War I. Germans of all social and economic levels felt insecure, frightened, angry, and frustrated. Many expressed those feelings by joining extremist political parties – either Communist or Nationalist – the two political opposites known as the extreme “left” and the extreme “right.” As a result, there seemed only one point of agreement: no support for the new Weimar Republic. The government was, consequently, weak, lacking electoral and financial backing as well as prestige. The mood of the country seemed threatening, violent and depressed.