

## Reading 3C

### POLITICS

#### Questions:

1. What were some German reactions to the defeat in World War I?
2. What type of government did many German people prefer to the democratic Weimar Republic?
3. How did some politicians use anti-Semitism after World War I?
4. Compare the medieval view of the Jew as scapegoat to the view held by political leaders like Hitler in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1918, Germany lost World War I. With the Allies fast approaching, Kaiser Wilhelm fled, leaving Germany without an official representative to negotiate with the victors. The new government, the Weimar Republic, therefore, seemed to be a product of Germany's defeat.

The Weimar Republic was a federal republic (like the United States) composed of states such as Prussia and Bavaria. It had a democratic constitution, which allowed for a *Reichstag* (parliament), a president, a chancellor and a cabinet of ministers. The constitution guaranteed civil rights and basic freedoms. It provided for elections and a multiple party system. The new government's first official act, unfortunately, was the signing of the Versailles Treaty in 1919, which ended World War I. In this treaty, Germany was forced by Allied representatives to accept total defeat and total responsibility for starting the war. The Weimar Republic accepted defeat; a defeat the majority of Germans did not understand.

The German people were bewildered by the defeat. During the war, they had received news only through the severely censored government newspapers. No foreign soldier was on German soil when the German armies surrendered. Only the military and political leaders knew that they were utterly defeated and that the Allied forces (France, England, the U.S.) threatened to devastate Germany by starvation and armed force. These facts were not made public, even after the armistice (cease fire).

Many Germans felt there had been some betrayal behind the scenes. The *Dolchstoßlegende* {*dolsh-shtoss-leggende*} or "stab in the back legend" became widely believed. Extremists linked Germany's defeat to false stories of Communist and Jewish conspiracies to dominate the world. Some famous Jews had participated actively in radical or revolutionary movements in Europe. For example, many were active in the Russian Communist Revolution of 1917.

The 1920s were a time of political crisis and turmoil in Germany. People of various political viewpoints were dissatisfied with the Weimar Republic because of its role in Germany's surrender. Some groups on the political right wanted to re-establish an old-style monarchy. Other groups on the political left wanted to establish a communistic people's government (called a Soviet). There were several attempts to overthrow the new

government. Also, right-wing, armed gangs called *Freikorps*, who belonged to extreme nationalist groups like the National Socialist or Nazi party, fought Communist demonstrators in the streets all over Germany.

*Freikorps* often attacked Jews and Jewish businesses. Perhaps the most infamous example of such assaults occurred in 1922. The German Foreign Minister, Walther Rathenau, was assassinated by a fanatical member of an ultra-nationalist group. Rathenau had been a staunch supporter of the Kaiser. He had organized the war economy and was responsible for Germany's remarkable ability to continue to fight until 1918. Devoted to Germany, he then became a central figure in the Weimar Republic. Rathenau was a Jew. Despite his patriotism, Rathenau was identified by anti-Semitic groups as a symbol of their invented "Jewish conspiracy" to dominate the world. Rathenau's murderers believed that no Jew should or could represent Germany. Although he was totally dedicated to his country, they killed him. His assassination robbed Germany of one of its most able economic administrators who was internationally respected.

Opponents of the Weimar Republic were generally anti-Jewish. They accused Jews of being traitors, responsible for Communism and, at the same time, responsible for all that Communism opposed. In short, these groups blamed whatever seemed to be wrong with the country on the Jews. Facts simply were irrelevant; the Jews again became scapegoats.

Many Germans felt humiliated by the World War I defeat. They had lost national pride and had a negative national self-image. Millions were unemployed. Because of the startling changes brought about by the war and its aftermath—loss of the war, change of government, violence in the streets, inflation—many Germans felt a sense of alienation and confusion. They were drawn to political parties that wanted to regain lost territory, rearm and expand the army, return to an aggressive stand and oppose Communism at all costs. They looked for political parties with strong leaders. Those political parties talked of rejecting the Versailles Treaty, the new Republic and democratic institutions. Almost all such groups were anti-Semitic.

On November 9, 1923, Adolf Hitler and his young Nazi (or National Socialist) Party attempted to seize power in Munich, Bavaria. (Munich is the capital of Bavaria, the second-largest state in Germany.) The Nazis accused all their political opponents of treason, greed and conspiracy, which they said had brought about Germany's defeat in World War I.

Having attempted to overthrow the state government of Bavaria by force in the so-called Beer-hall Putsch, Hitler was sentenced to five years in a minimum security prison. He served less than nine months. His trial gave him the opportunity to gain publicity. During the trial, the judges allowed him to rant his political speeches day after day. The judges and the public seemed willing to listen to his ideas. This was a bad omen for the Weimar Republic.