Democracy Under Strain

How the Weimar Republic weakened and Hitler gained power

SS24.HOS.4b "Describe the Weimar Republic and the fragility of its democracy, and explain why Adolf Hitler was able to come to power.*"

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two features of Weimar democracy, circle three pressures that weakened it, and number in order the events that turned Nazi electoral success into a dictatorship.

From Republic to Dictatorship

1. When Germany lost World War I, its emperor stepped down, and a new constitution created the Weimar Republic in 1919. The German Empire had already held elections for a multiparty Reichstag, but its chancellor answered to the emperor, not to parliament. Under Weimar, the chancellor needed the Reichstag's support, and women gained the national vote. Citizens could elect representatives from competing parties and choose a president. Yet the constitution also gave the president emergency powers under Article 48. Those powers could bypass normal lawmaking during a crisis, leaving a dangerous opening if leaders treated emergency rule as routine.

2. Early crises tested the republic. In 1923, runaway inflation wiped out many people's savings, though the economy later stabilized. After the world economic crash of 1929, unemployment soared in Germany. Coalition governments made up of several parties struggled to agree on solutions, and some leaders increasingly relied on presidential emergency decrees. The Nazi Party promised jobs and national renewal while falsely blaming Jews and other groups for Germany's troubles. Its paramilitary supporters attacked political opponents in the streets. Economic fear, political deadlock, and violence made it harder for citizens to trust democratic compromise.

3. By July 1932, the Nazis had become the largest party in the Reichstag, but they never won a majority in a free national election. Conservative politicians hoped they could use Hitler's popularity while controlling him. President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor on January 30, 1933, rather than voters electing him to that office directly. After the Reichstag fire in February, an emergency decree suspended civil liberties and enabled arrests of opponents. In March, with opponents intimidated and some excluded, the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act, allowing Hitler's government to make laws without parliamentary approval. Democracy was dismantled through both legal measures and coercion.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Weimar Republic change the chancellor's relationship to the Reichstag and expand voting rights?

2. How did economic crises and disagreements among coalition parties weaken the republic?

3. How did the Nazis gain support and threaten democratic debate even though they never won a majority in a free national election?

4. How did Hitler move from leading the largest party to making laws without parliamentary approval?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write an 80- to 110-word newspaper editorial for German voters in late 1932. Explain one democratic feature of Weimar, connect two pressures to its fragility, and propose one realistic action citizens or leaders could take to defend democracy without claiming it would guarantee success.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.HOS.4b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two features of Weimar democracy, circle three pressures that weakened it, and number in order the events that turned Nazi electoral success into a dictatorship. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Weimar Republic change the chancellor's relationship to the Reichstag and expand voting rights?	**The chancellor needed the Reichstag's support rather than answering to an emperor, and women gained the national vote.**
2	How did economic crises and disagreements among coalition parties weaken the republic?	**Inflation destroyed savings in 1923, and unemployment soared after 1929. Coalition parties struggled to agree on solutions, while leaders relied increasingly on presidential emergency decrees.**
3	How did the Nazis gain support and threaten democratic debate even though they never won a majority in a free national election?	**They promised jobs and national renewal and falsely blamed Jews and other groups for Germany's troubles. Nazi paramilitary supporters attacked opponents, making open political debate harder.**
4	How did Hitler move from leading the largest party to making laws without parliamentary approval?	**Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor. After the Reichstag fire, an emergency decree suspended civil liberties and enabled arrests. With opponents intimidated and some excluded, the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Germany's republic gives women and men the vote, but a ballot alone cannot keep a government stable. The Depression has left many families desperate, and parties that cannot build coalitions struggle to answer their needs. Nazi speakers exploit that anger by falsely blaming Jews, while street violence makes open debate harder. Voters should reject parties that use intimidation and demand that elected representatives work across party lines on unemployment relief. That choice cannot erase the economic crisis, but it can protect the practice of solving conflicts through debate rather than threats.

Accept other passage-supported links between economic distress, political deadlock, emergency powers, and Nazi intimidation. For the editorial, accept a plausible democratic action framed as a possibility, not a guaranteed way to prevent dictatorship.