

# The Weimar Question: British views during the post-war planning on the reasons of the failure of German democracy

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## Introduction:

Germany's "democratic experiment", the **Weimar Republic**, had been analysed by the British government during the latter stages of World War II to determine **why democracy had failed** and how to avoid such a fate in the post-war world.

In looking at the Republic, the **British Foreign Office** focused on three aspects of Germanic society: the pre-existing structures that were left unchanged in the transition to a fully-fledged democracy, how the economy and society as a whole functioned under a full democracy and the aspects of political life that led and lent to the rise of the Nazi Party.



Foreign &  
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Office

Fig. 1

## Research Methodology and Historiography:

The majority of the **Foreign Office** sources were accessed through the **National Archives** in London. I accessed files dealing with the planned re-education of Germany to the various political parties involved in the running of the German parliament, the Reichstag. Furthermore, the **People's History Museum** in Manchester houses the Labour Party archives, providing a unique aspect on various post-war issues including the spread of disease in post-war Germany and the question of rearmament.

Amongst others, Peter Gay's analysis of two Germanies, militaristic and artistic (1), Hans Mommsen's seminal *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy* (2) and Sheri Berman's examination of Weimar civil society (3), provided a broad and comprehensive range of background material. A high degree of **acumen** could be gathered from the Foreign Office as analysis in the 1940s was matching what historians were discovering decades later.

## Findings:

- A peaceful economy should be encouraged within post-war Germany.
- Education reform should reprioritise objective facts over the lessons taught under the Nazis.
- Hyperinflation during 1923 as well as the Great Depression in 1929 created severe economic instability, allowing extremist parties to rise.
- The Republic's formal democracy was superimposed on an inherited social structure which remained **deeply undemocratic**.
- A 'pariah' status was imposed upon Germany by the **Treaty of Versailles**.
- The political gulf within the social democratic SPD between what they preached and their actions in power created **disillusionment within the electorate**.
- **Article 48**, the Emergency Power Act, rendered the **Weimar Constitution** a dead letter.

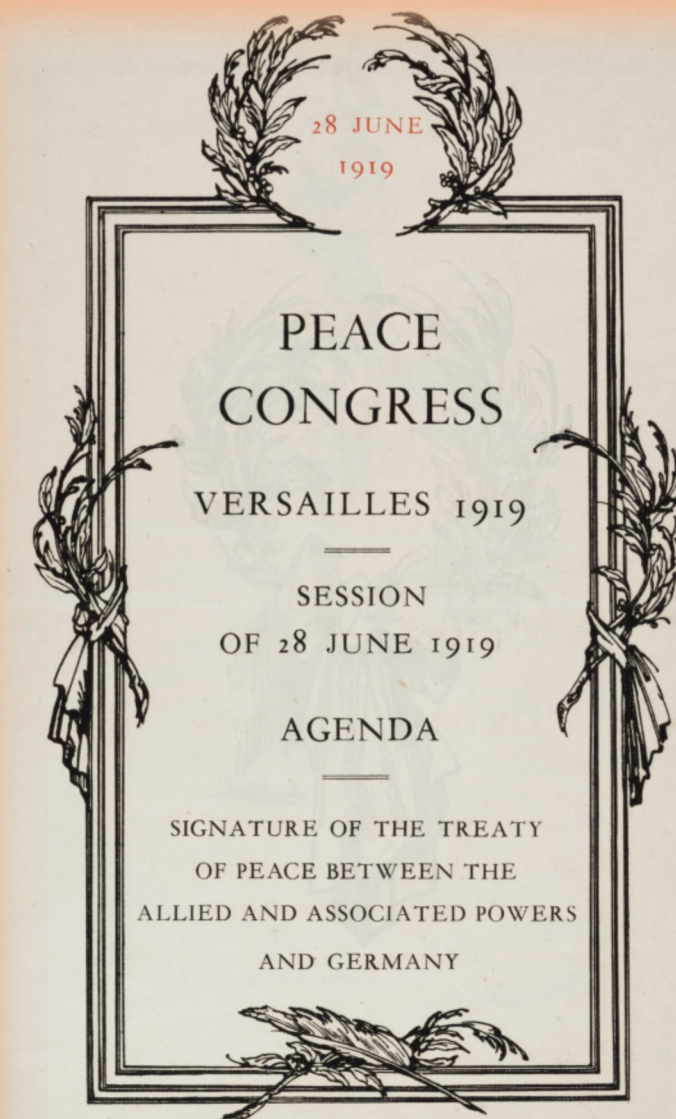


Fig. 2

Interestingly, AJP Taylor's *The Course of German History* states that Hitler's rise to power was inevitable. However, Foreign Office sources argue that the rise of the Nazi Party was no accident and it was certainly not in the German character to elect such a man. Contemporary analysis in fact deems **Hitler's rise as 'lucky'** due to his party beginning to get restless at the lack of political power as well as the centrist parties **not being able to agree on an effective government**. Historiography on the topic followed Taylor's line of thought until the 1970s, highlighting the previously mentioned **acumen** shown by the Foreign Office.

## Conclusions:

**Denazification** was a key issue surrounding post-war Germany. Moreover, the Allied Powers assumed a level of control over certain aspects of German life such as education, employment and the economy. In doing so, the extremist elements of German political life were nullified on top of a stronger, largely peace-driven economy.

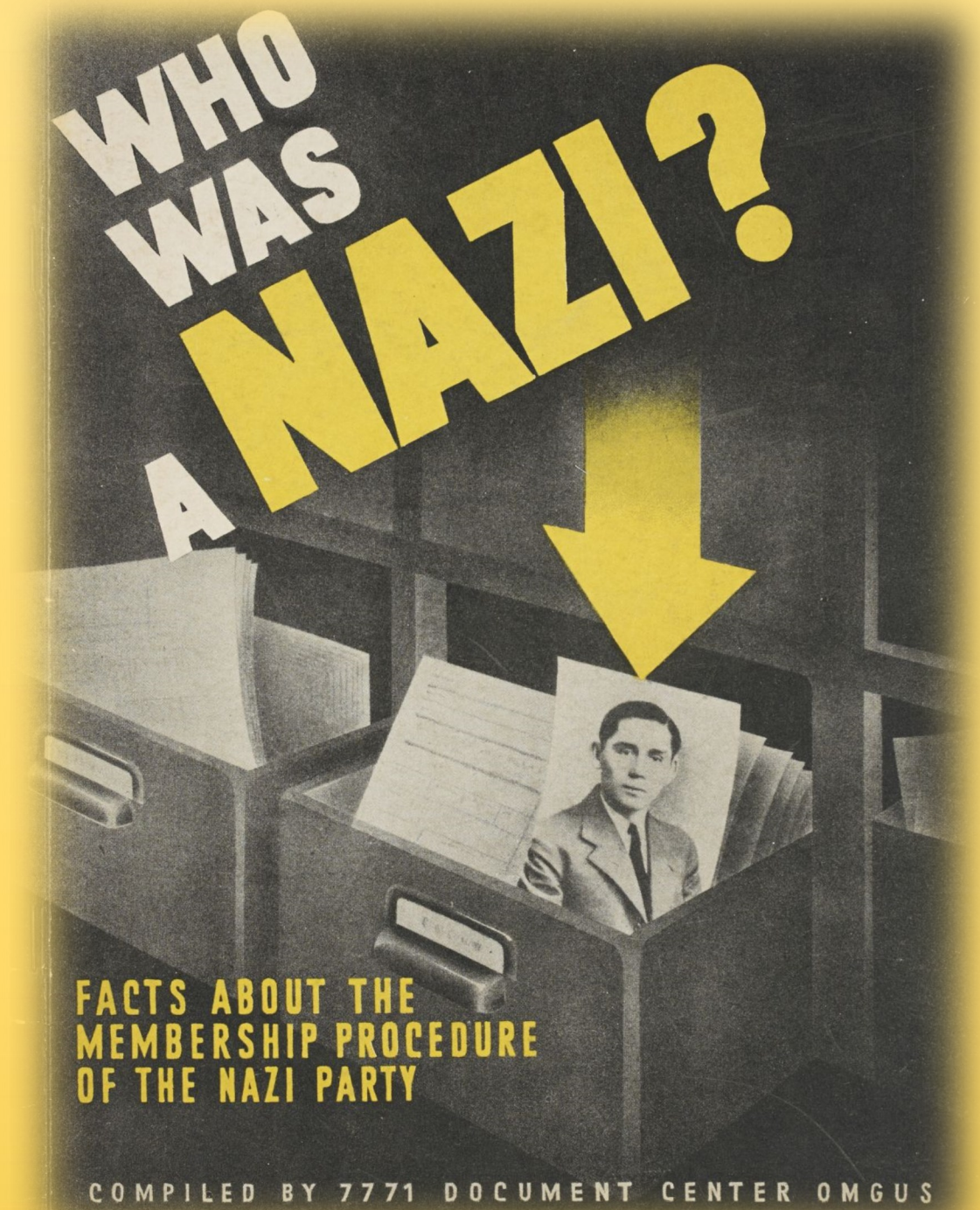


Fig. 3

The British Foreign Office had a very real insight into the weaknesses of the Weimar Republic, allowing unique foresight into the reconstruction of Germany. Analysis of the social and economic factors leading to the dissolution of the Republic allowed for insight into how to reconstruct Germany society. A degree of Allied control in areas of Germany society was deemed necessary to begin the process of denazification in Germany and establish a fully-functioning democracy.

## References:

- 1) Gay, P., *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).
- 2) Mommsen, H., *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy* (United States of America: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- 3) Berman, S., 'Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic', *World Politics*, 49: 3 (1997), 401-429.