

FHAO Germany and World War I: How Defeat Changed a Nation

Name _____

Before the War: Understanding Imperial Germany

Before World War I began in 1914, Germany was very different from the democratic nation it would become. Germany was a **monarchy** ruled by an emperor called the **Kaiser**. The Kaiser at this time was Wilhelm II, who had enormous power over the government and military. The German people had never lived under a democracy. They were used to being ruled by a king or emperor, and most Germans respected and trusted the Kaiser's leadership.

In the years before WWI, Germany had become one of the most powerful nations in Europe. Germans felt great pride in their country—a feeling called **nationalism**. This intense national pride made many Germans extremely confident when war broke out in 1914. They believed Germany's military was unbeatable and that the war would be over quickly, perhaps in just a few months. German soldiers marched off to war with cheers and celebrations, expecting an easy victory.

The War Reality: Four Years of Struggle

The reality was very different. World War I dragged on for four brutal years (1914-1918). Millions of German soldiers died in the trenches. At home, German civilians suffered from severe food shortages and economic hardship. However, here's something crucial to understand: **the German government and military leaders kept the truth from the German people**.

Throughout the war, government propaganda told Germans they were winning. Newspapers printed stories of victories. The Kaiser and his generals never admitted how badly the war was actually going. When German armies were losing ground in 1918, the public wasn't told. Most ordinary Germans believed their country was still strong and would ultimately win.

The Shocking Surrender

In November 1918, Germany suddenly surrendered. For most Germans, this came as a complete shock. How could they be losing when they'd been told they were winning? Making matters more confusing, no foreign armies had invaded German territory. The fighting had all taken place in other countries. To average Germans, it seemed impossible that Germany had actually lost the war.

Around this same time, Kaiser Wilhelm II gave up his throne and fled to the Netherlands. Germany's monarchy collapsed, and a new democratic government called the **Weimar Republic** was quickly formed. These new civilian leaders—politicians, not military generals—had the terrible job of signing the surrender and accepting the terms of peace.

The Treaty of Versailles: A Harsh Peace

In June 1919, the new German government was forced to sign the **Treaty of Versailles** at the Palace of Versailles in France. The treaty's terms were devastating:

- **War Guilt Clause:** Germany had to accept complete blame for starting the war
- **Massive Reparations:** Germany had to pay enormous amounts of money to the Allied countries (about \$33 billion—an astronomical sum)
- **Territory Loss:** Germany lost significant territory, including valuable industrial regions and all its overseas colonies
- **Military Restrictions:** Germany's army was limited to just 100,000 soldiers, and Germany could have no air force or submarines
- **Economic Crisis:** These payments and restrictions crippled Germany's economy, leading to massive inflation and unemployment

The "Stab in the Back" Myth

Here's where things get complicated and important to understand: Many Germans didn't blame Kaiser Wilhelm II or the military generals for losing the war. Instead, they blamed the new democratic government that had signed the treaty.

Why would they blame the new government instead of the leaders who actually fought and lost the war? Several reasons:

1. **They didn't know the truth:** Since the Kaiser and generals had hidden the military defeats from the people, Germans didn't realize the war was already lost before the new government took over
2. **Timing seemed suspicious:** The new government came to power and immediately signed the surrender. To many Germans, it looked like these new civilian politicians had betrayed Germany by surrendering when they could have kept fighting
3. **The "Stab in the Back" legend:** German military leaders spread a lie that became widely believed. They claimed the German army hadn't really lost on the

battlefield. Instead, they said, weak politicians and certain groups at home (they especially blamed Jewish Germans and Communists) had "stabbed Germany in the back" by surrendering when victory was still possible.

This was completely false. The German military had clearly lost the war by late 1918. Generals knew this but refused to take responsibility. Instead, they let the new civilian government take the blame.

Long-Term Consequences

The Treaty of Versailles and the "stab in the back" myth had terrible consequences for Germany's new democracy. The Weimar Republic started life with most Germans resenting it. Many saw it as weak, illegitimate, and responsible for Germany's humiliation. This resentment created an opening for extremist political movements.

The economic disasters caused by war reparations—including hyperinflation that destroyed people's savings—made life miserable for ordinary Germans. They associated this misery with democracy itself. In the 1930s, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party exploited this anger and resentment, promising to restore Germany's power and overturn the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler repeatedly referenced the "stab in the back" myth and blamed the Weimar politicians for Germany's problems.

Understanding this history helps explain how Germany, one of Europe's most advanced nations, could turn to dictatorship and extreme nationalism just 15 years after World War I ended. The seeds of World War II were planted in the resentment and confusion that followed World War I.

Key People and Terms

Kaiser Wilhelm II - The German Emperor (Kaiser means "emperor" in German) who ruled Germany from 1888 to 1918. He gave up his throne at the end of WWI and fled to the Netherlands. Many historians believe his aggressive foreign policy and poor military decisions contributed to Germany's defeat, though he avoided blame.

Weimar Republic - The name for Germany's democratic government from 1919 to 1933. It's called the "Weimar Republic" because the constitution was written in the city of Weimar. This government faced constant political and economic crises.

Treaty of Versailles - The peace treaty that officially ended World War I, signed on June 28, 1919, in the Palace of Versailles in France. It imposed harsh penalties on Germany and is considered by many historians to have been overly punitive.

War Guilt Clause (Article 231) - The part of the Treaty of Versailles that forced Germany to accept complete responsibility for causing World War I. This was deeply humiliating to Germans and economically significant because it justified making Germany pay reparations.

Reparations - Money that Germany was forced to pay to the Allied countries (Britain, France, etc.) to compensate for war damages. The amount was so large that Germany couldn't realistically pay it, leading to economic chaos.

"Stab in the Back" Myth (Dolchstoßlegende in German) - A false but widely believed conspiracy theory claiming that Germany's military hadn't really lost WWI. Instead, the myth claimed that Jewish people, Communists, and civilian politicians had betrayed Germany by surrendering when victory was still possible. This lie helped extremists like the Nazis gain power.

Nationalism - Intense pride in and loyalty to one's nation, often including a belief that one's country is superior to others. German nationalism before WWI made people overconfident about winning the war.

Propaganda - Information, especially biased or misleading information, used to promote a particular political cause or point of view. The German government used propaganda during WWI to hide military defeats from the public.

Hyperinflation - An economic situation where prices increase extremely rapidly and money loses its value. In the early 1920s, German money became nearly worthless. People needed wheelbarrows full of cash to buy basic items like bread.

Allied Powers (Allies) - The countries that fought against Germany in WWI, including Britain, France, Russia (until 1917), and the United States (from 1917). They were called the "Allies" because they were allied (united) against Germany and its partners.

Analysis Questions

1. Cause and Effect: Information Control How did the German government's decision to hide the truth about the war from its citizens contribute to the problems the Weimar Republic faced after WWI? In your answer, explain the connection between wartime propaganda and the "stab in the back" myth.

2. Comparing Government Systems Based on the reading, what advantages might a democracy have over a monarchy in terms of government accountability?

3. Historical Perspective Put yourself in the position of an ordinary German citizen in November 1918. You've been told for four years that Germany is winning the war. Suddenly, the Kaiser flees, a new government forms, and Germany surrenders. How might you feel, and who would you be most likely to blame? Explain your reasoning.

4. Reflection: Lessons About Truth This reading shows how keeping citizens uninformed about important events can have serious long-term consequences. Why is it important for governments to be honest with their citizens, even when the truth is difficult or unpopular? Use specific examples from the reading to support your answer.