

# Germany

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## From empire to democracy: the emergence of a democratic Germany

Unit 1

### KEY QUESTIONS

- What conditions led to the establishment of democracy in Germany?
- What role did leaders and political parties play?
- How did democracy function in modern Germany by 1955?

### Overview

- Germany changed from a Prussian-dominated monarchy, with little democracy in 1871, to a modern multiparty democracy by 1955.
- The Kaiser (emperor), as monarch, had immense influence in state affairs.
- Wilhelm II (reigned 1888–1918) in particular largely preserved the existing, rigid German political system, which operated to the detriment of many political parties and social groups.
- To many, the birth of democratic politics came with the emergence of the Social Democrats as the largest party in the 1912 Reichstag elections.
- Germany's defeat in the First World War brought a revolution in November 1918 that ended the monarchy and led to the establishment of the democratic Weimar Republic.
- The republic was headed by a president, and administered by a chancellor (prime minister) and a cabinet of ministers.
- Weimar became unworkable by 1932, leading to the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party (1933–45).
- After 1945, democracy gradually took root again in the western part of Germany.
- In 1949 West Germany was created when three occupied Western zones (USA, Britain and France) were absorbed into a new state, the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD).
- The Soviet zone – East Germany – became the communist German Democratic Republic (DDR).
- The BRD, under democratically elected chancellor Konrad Adenauer, became a full member of NATO and a sovereign state by 1955.
- The BRD became a major western ally and founder of the European Union (EU) in 1957.

### TIMELINE

- 1871** New German Reichstag elected.
- 1888** Wilhelm II becomes kaiser.
- 1890** Fall of Bismarck. Power now in hands of kaiser and military.
- 1914** First World War breaks out.
- 1918 Nov:** Germany signs armistice emerging defeated from the war. Kaiser abdicates.
- 1919 Feb:** National Assembly meets at Weimar: Ebert chosen as president of new German (Weimar) Republic.
- 1925** Ebert dies. Hindenburg elected president.
- 1930 Sep:** Reichstag elections; Nazi Party, wins 107 seats.
- 1933 Jan:** Nazi Party's Adolf Hitler invited to be chancellor.  
**Mar:** Enabling Act; end of Weimar Republic; start of Third Reich.
- 1945 May:** Second World War ends. Germany in ruins, occupied by four Allied powers: USA, USSR, Britain and France.
- 1945 Jun–Dec:** The four powers allow formation of political parties: SPD, CPU, KPD and LDPD.
- 1948 6 Jun:** The Six Power Conference agrees outlines of new federal state in West Germany.  
**20 Jun:** The new Deutsche mark introduced in western zones.
- 1949 24 May:** Foundation of BRD (Bundesrepublik Deutschland)  
**15 Sep:** Konrad Adenauer of CDU elected chancellor.  
**7 Oct:** Foundation of DDR in East Germany
- 1952 May:** Adenauer signs General Treaty with Western allies. Germany's 'occupied territory' status formally ends.
- 1953** Adenauer re-elected.
- 1955 May:** BRD officially a democratic, sovereign state; joins NATO.

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## Germany

## 2.1 What conditions led to the establishment of democracy in Germany?

### From empire to democracy: a contextual background



**Figure 2.1** Political map of the German Empire 1871–1918

Germany is situated geographically in the centre of Europe. It is a federal, parliamentary, democratic republic, with a population in 2014 of around eighty-two million people. Germany is the most populous state in the **European Union (EU)** and also has the largest national economy in Europe. As recently as 1990, this modern ‘Germany’ was formed with the amalgamation of the former German Democratic Republic (DDR or East Germany) and the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD or West Germany) into a single entity, with its capital in Berlin.

Up to the early 19th century, Germany had meant the ‘Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation’ (the Roman Empire restored by the Christian King Charlemagne), a feudal state comprising numerous small territories with different cultures and ethnicities, governed by relatively independent rulers. By the late 1860s, Germany was a confederation of thirty-nine states, and politicians focused on the question of whether or not there should be a single ‘Germany’.

**European Union (EU):** comprising twenty-eight European member states, the EU is a political and economic union that evolved out of the European Economic Community (EEC) of six nations, created in 1957.

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The German Confederation finally united and created an empire in 1870. Accordingly, the German Reich (Empire) was proclaimed under the leadership of Prussia and its Kaiser (emperor) Wilhelm I. The unification of Germany changed the balance of power in Europe, for under the leadership of the Kaisers and their chancellors – notably **Otto von Bismarck** – Germany became a growing industrial player, a modernising nation and an enthusiastic, aggressive, colonial and military power.

Paradoxically this new, unified Germany was a largely illiberal nation where democracy struggled to flourish, its political structure dominated by autocratic, landed elites. From 1888 to 1918, Germany's ruler was Kaiser **Wilhelm II**, and there was a stormy marriage in the Reich he inherited between democracy and the Prussian monarchy.

Wilhelm II took advantage of the constitution of the empire (see below) to manipulate the chancellor (prime minister) to secure the funds he wanted from the Reichstag for the army and navy. In short, despite the existence of a parliament (or Reichstag), it was the Kaiser who introduced laws, selected the ministers, declared war and made peace. He only allowed the Reichstag to change laws occasionally and, although there were several political parties, he ruled Germany with virtually complete power. Germany's defeat in the First World War in 1918, however, brought major changes. A naval mutiny in November 1918 precipitated a revolution that led to Germany seeking an armistice with the western Allies – and to the Kaiser being replaced by a liberal, democratic republic. Named after the town where the first constituent assembly took place, the Weimar Republic had an elected president as head of state, with daily government being administered by a chancellor and cabinet of ministers; the Weimar Republic heralded a dramatic change for Germany after the First World War. But having emerged from a national defeat and a revolution, this liberal democracy never fully escaped the difficulties of its conception and was beset by unfavourable national and international financial crises. Ultimately, it failed in the early 1930s and led directly to the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis (1933–45). The failure of the Weimar Republic was the failure of the first truly democratic parliamentary system in Germany.

The twelve years of Nazi dictatorship under Hitler led to even greater loss and defeat in the Second World War by 1945. From the ruins of Hitler's defeated state, Soviet forces occupied eastern Germany, while the United States, Britain and France occupied the western half of the nation. This political division of Germany into a democratic West Germany and a one-party communist state, East Germany, subsequently became permanent and epitomised the **Cold War** in Europe for more than forty years. Reunification did not occur until 1990.

Democracy was rekindled with the formation of the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BDR) in western Germany in 1949. Under the leadership of chancellor Konrad Adenauer and his economics minister Ludwig Erhard (see section 2.2, The Federal Republic of Germany) the BRD underwent an impressive post-war reconstruction, achieving the so-called 'economic miracle' of the 1950s.

By 1955, West Germany was finally deemed to be a fully democratic and sovereign state (see below), and by the 1960s the BDR was a trusted Western ally, a liberal democracy and dynamic, industrial state. But democracy did not prevail in all of Germany, and the eastern part – the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR) – remained a one-party communist state within the Soviet sphere of influence until 1989.

By 1990, German reunification was once more a reality, following the dissolution of the communist-led DDR in 1989, with the end of the Cold War. On 3 October 1990,

### Otto von Bismarck (1815–98)

He was a Prussian statesman and chief minister who became the first chancellor of the new united Germany in 1871. Bismarck aimed to build a powerful central European state with a unified national identity. He wanted the German Empire to be the most powerful in Europe. In 1890 he resigned as chancellor after disagreeing with the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II. It ended a career of long service: twenty-eight years as Prussia's prime minister followed by nineteen years as the German chancellor.

### Wilhelm II (1859–1941)

He was the eldest son of Prince Friedrich of Prussia and his wife, Princess Victoria – eldest daughter of Queen Victoria of Britain. He became Kaiser in 1888 and immediately fell out with his chancellor, Bismarck. An immature and jealous man, Wilhelm was obsessed with outshining his British relations. Being militaristic, he wanted to expand the army and navy so that it exceeded that of Great Britain. He was forced to abdicate in 1918, when Germany was defeated in the First World War. He fled to Holland and lived there in exile until his death.

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**Cold War:** hostilities short of direct armed conflict, consisting of spying, threats, propaganda and supporting conflicts by proxy. This term was applied specifically to the state of affairs between the Western powers (USA, Britain and France) and the USSR, between the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s.

**Constitution:** the rules and principles governing a state.

**Federalism:** a type of government where individual states retain a considerable degree of power, but where the central or federal government has control over such matters as foreign policy and defence.

**Unitary state:** a government where the constitution has given strong powers to the central government and limited power to provinces or states within a confederation.

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West and East Germany formally joined together and were reunified for the first time since 1945. When German federal elections took place two months later, it was the first free and universal election in all of Germany since 1933, with electors in the eastern part of the country included and free to choose. Thus the wheel had come full circle from unification in 1870 to reunification in 1990.

The establishment of democracy has been neither easy, nor consistent. This study now examines how circumstances and conditions in Germany at different times led to the establishment of democracy; first by assessing the extent to which it was present by the time the First World War broke out in 1914; then looking at attempts to establish democracy between 1919 and 1933 in the period of the Weimar Republic; and finally seeing how democracy rose from the ashes of Nazi tyranny to re-establish itself securely in the BRD, or West Germany, by 1955.

How democratic was Germany by 1914? Between German unification in 1870 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Germany transformed itself from a confederation of disparate and largely agrarian states into Europe's leading economic power. During this period, German steel production had increased eightfold, whereas Britain's had only doubled, and by 1914 Germany was poised to outstrip Britain as Europe's superpower. But Germany fell behind Britain and several other countries with regard to its democratic credentials.

Prussia was the largest and most powerful of the German Empire's constituent parts – comprising 60 per cent of the Reich's population of forty-one million – and its power and influence dominated the new **constitution**. It was also the most reactionary state.

### The constitution of the German Empire

The constitution of the German Empire drawn up by Bismarck in 1871 was a compromise between the forces of conservative **federalism**, and liberals who wanted a more **unitary state**.

Federalism was enshrined in the Bundesrat (Federal Council), which consisted of fifty-eight representatives from the various state governments. In theory, it was the key decision-making body, representing all parts of Germany and the independent interests of these states. It alone had the right to make changes to the constitution, and the agreement of the Bundesrat was necessary for all legislation. With the assent of the Kaiser, the Bundesrat also had the authority to declare war and settle disputes between states.

But Prussian dominance was overwhelming, having being apportioned seventeen of the seats at the Bundesrat council table; yet any military or constitutional issue could be vetoed by the opposition of fourteen votes. So Prussia guaranteed its privileged position within the political structure of the Reich.

The Imperial Parliament or Reichstag is somewhat more ambiguous. In what appeared to be a real concession to liberal democracy in the new constitution, the Reichstag was directly elected by both secret ballot and universal male suffrage. Its assent was required for all legislation, including the periodic renewal of the military budget. It was also made up of a wide variety of independent political parties, representing the full spectrum of political interests; moreover, it had the power to question the chancellor and to debate his policies.

But the Reichstag lacked most of the powers associated with full democracy. Neither the chancellor nor any other minister was responsible to the Reichstag for their actions.

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Moreover, it could not introduce legislation, but only discuss or ratify bills or proposals put forward by the Bundesrat and the imperial government.

They had no direct control over foreign policy, nor – beyond the voting of the military budget – over the conduct of the army. In short, the Reichstag was a representative assembly – albeit relatively democratically elected for the time – but it possessed no real power, and the political parties within it could play no direct role in the formulation of national policy.

This was exactly how the Kaiser wanted it to be, as he enjoyed great authority as of right. He had the final word over the conduct of German foreign policy, he was commander-in-chief of all armed forces in the Reich during peace and war, and he alone could appoint and dismiss the chancellor and the key state secretaries who made up the imperial government. It also meant that the appointed chancellor was not dependent on the confidence of a parliamentary majority. The Kaiser thus had immense powers at his disposal, should he so wish to exercise them, and Wilhelm II made full use of this.

Bismarck's constitution as drawn up in 1870–1 embraced two different political mentalities; one firmly planted in the roots of **liberalism**, the other acknowledging the authoritarian government pre-eminent in the German states before 1870. German democracy depended upon which mentality blossomed.

Another problem was that the Reich had no mass political parties with broad support bases. Many of the parties were more or less closely intertwined, or represented a distinct section of society, whose narrow interests were usually advocated. The most striking challenge came from the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) after 1890.

Bismarck had viewed socialism as a menace and used two assassination attempts on Kaiser Wilhelm I in 1878 to introduce a law banning meetings aimed at spreading socialist principles. He did not ban the Social Democrat Party, but outlawed trade unions and closed forty-five newspapers, which crippled the SPD. After Bismarck resigned in 1890, his anti-socialist laws lapsed. This led to the meteoric rise of the SPD in parliament.

It promptly organised itself nationwide, and in the seven Reichstag elections between 1887 and 1912 the SPD jumped from 11 to 110 seats out of 397. It was the largest political party in Germany at the outbreak of the First World War.

Kaiser Wilhelm II himself pursued policies that maintained the dominance of narrow social élites, despite changes elsewhere in Europe. He opposed those with liberal sympathies and remained steadfast in his desire for personal rule. In 1913 the Kaiser commented that 'the German parliamentarian becomes daily more of a swine', and the four chancellors succeeding Bismarck were essentially dependent upon Wilhelm II for their political survival. When the Kaiser's personal involvement was often erratic, hot-tempered and blundering, this made for difficult government.

The election results of 1912 had ensured that the conservatives in parliament were on their guard against the rising tide of socialism; but the very nature of the constitution and the dominance of reactionary Prussians meant that Germany in 1914 remained largely conservative. There was indeed a rapid growth in social democratic politics, demanding a transformation of society; but in practice, many SPD deputies in the Reichstag were content to preach the rhetoric of revolution while working for change within the existing system.

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**Liberalism:** a political doctrine that views the promotion and protection of the freedom of the individual as integral to politics. Liberals believe that government is a necessity in order to protect individuals from harm by others; but they acknowledge that government itself can pose a real threat to liberty.

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### Theory of Knowledge

#### History and ethics:

Look at the Kaiser's views on members of the German parliament. What do you think of them and his tone? Is it acceptable for an unelected, hereditary head of state to interfere so strongly in the daily running of a country? There is a saying that 'the end justifies the means' – but does it always? What exactly does this phrase mean? Is it ever right for any government or leader to use undemocratic or unlawful methods to achieve what is viewed as a justifiable and correct outcome?

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**Constitutional monarchy:** where the monarch has limited power within the lines of a constitution, and political power is in the hands of a civilian government.

**Fact:** Germans were war-weary by 1918. Millions were on the edge of starvation due to an Allied blockade; influenza was ravaging a weakened population; and riots erupted following a naval mutiny at Kiel. The Imperial Naval Command in Kiel ordered a fleet to sea for a final battle against the British Royal Navy. This edict triggered a mutiny on 24 October among the sailors, and then a general revolution. They refused to risk injury or death when the war was so obviously about to end, thinking it futile.

### Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925)

He was the first Weimar Republic president of Germany, a post he held from 1919 until his sudden death in 1925. Ebert had to deal with a loss of national morale following the country's defeat and the imposition of the Treaty of Versailles. He also presided over economic depression, the Ruhr Crisis and the devastating impact of hyperinflation in 1923. After 1920 – when Weimar's first parliament met – Ebert lost support among the German people, who believed that Versailles was simply a non-military way of destroying their country.

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There was a fervent message from the Kaiser and the government that this was a united nation-state named Germany. Yet Polish speakers in eastern Germany, French speakers in Alsace-Lorraine and stubborn independent Bavarians in southern Germany felt anything but German or united, while many Germans living in Austria and elsewhere were not included. Such ethnic and cultural divides later returned to haunt the nation. But Germany in 1914 was relatively stable, economically strong, largely autocratic and only notionally democratic. Perhaps apart from the SPD, no party yet believed that any lasting benefits might come out of constitutional change, and in Germany generally there existed a cautious, almost ambivalent attitude towards parliamentary democracy.

## How democratic was the Weimar Republic in its government and structure?

Germany went to war in 1914, with the support of most people, but by 1917 morale had slumped. There was a bleak military situation, food and fuel shortages, increasing civilian mortality, and shop prices double those of 1914. In 1918, social discontent grew against the Kaiser and politicians who had demanded total war. General Erich Ludendorff, a key military leader, sensed the likelihood of defeat and wanted to steer Germany towards becoming a **constitutional monarchy**, with the Kaiser or another member of the royal family on the throne, while establishing a more democratic government.

Ludendorff hoped that it would prevent a revolution and make the Allies more sympathetic to a democratic government. It might also shift the responsibility for defeat away from the leadership of 1914–18 and place responsibility in the hands of a new administration. In the last month of the war, a moderate chancellor was appointed: Prince Max of Baden, known in Europe for his work with the Red Cross and possessing more liberal views. Wilhelm II relinquished his powers over the armed forces, the chancellor and his ministers were now made accountable to the Reichstag instead of the Kaiser, and armistice talks began with Britain, France and the USA. But hopes of a transition to democracy via constitutional monarchy unravelled when naval mutinies at Kiel and Hamburg led to a general revolution, sweeping aside the monarchy.

On 9 November 1918, the Kaiser abdicated and went into exile in Holland. His departure paved the way for talks between Germany and the Allied powers, and the war ended two days later. A revolutionary climate existed in Germany, but unlike Russia, where a communist government emerged out of their 1917 revolution, the Social Democrats (SPD) – as the largest political party – took the helm of government and proclaimed Germany a democratic republic. **Friedrich Ebert**, the SPD leader, replaced the Kaiser as the national leader. Following an interim period, elections subsequently confirmed Ebert as president. He then convened a conference in the southern town of Weimar, away from riot-torn Berlin, to discuss how best to run Germany.

### The new Weimar Constitution

The new Weimar Republic born in 1919 had political parties and was elected on the basis of **proportional representation (PR)**. This raised hopes of true democracy following wartime humiliation.

Germany had a newly written Constitution, which was democratic and fair. The Weimar Constitution was strongly influenced by liberals who played a key part in its preparation. All Germans had the right of free speech and equal rights. Everybody – men and

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women – over the age of twenty had the right to vote. This was very forward-looking, given that in Britain at that time only women over twenty-eight years of age could vote. The new constitution created a bicameral assembly – a parliament made up of two layers. One layer (the Reichstag) represented the whole nation and made national decisions, while the upper house (the Reichsrat) represented the regions.

A major break from the undemocratic tendencies of Bismarck's constitution can be seen in relation to the Reichsrat. Unlike the Prussian dominated pre-war Bundesrat, the Reichsrat were now subservient in all respects to the Reichstag. The people elected the president and the politicians who sat in parliament by direct vote. Germany was established as a federal state with regional states (Länder), retaining much autonomy.

The head of state was the Reich president, to be elected by popular vote every seven years. He was the commander of the armed forces and was considered to be a ceremonial president or more of a figurehead, supposedly removed from the day-to-day running of the country. But he had the authority to dissolve the Reichstag and to nominate a chancellor (prime minister), who could command the support of the majority of the Reichstag. But in a crisis he could rule alone, since, under Article 48, the president could declare a national state of emergency and rule by presidential decree. He was also empowered to veto any Reichstag that he disapproved of.

The parliament was elected every four years using PR. This made it virtually impossible for one party to get an overall majority (more than half the votes). There were twenty separate coalition governments between 1919 and 1933, with the longest-serving government surviving two years. This instability caused many Germans to be dismayed by the new democratic system and played into the hands of those who opposed the Weimar Constitution. But the democratic credentials of the Weimar Constitution were strong.

Unlike the unrepresentative nature of the parliaments in the German Empire between 1870 and 1918, forty political parties were represented in the Reichstag, and they embraced groups and opinions from all sides of the political spectrum; but they also differed in their degree of support for, or opposition to, the democratic constitution.

The constitution also outlined individual freedoms in a Bill of Rights guaranteeing personal liberty, the right to free speech, religious freedom and conscience, the prohibiting of a state Church, no censorship and equality of the law for all Germans. A Supreme Court was created in order to settle different interpretations of the law.

Inter-party squabbling soon led to difficulties in passing legislation and to weakened, indecisive government. So alternative parties with more extreme ideas evolved. But this fragmentation of political power was only partly due to the peculiar parliamentary system adopted by the Weimar Republic; it was also due to economic challenges facing both German democracy and the wider world. President Ebert reminded people what the country had endured and argued for the permanent establishment of liberal democratic traditions in German government.

But since PR made the decision-making process very slow and divisive, people started to resent the system of government. In the public mind, the constitution became linked to the surrender in 1918. Its politicians became the 'November Criminals' – men who had betrayed the fatherland by surrendering to the Allies. Little wonder then that some of the older aristocratic families, army generals, judges, industrialists and academics longed for 'the good old days', with one strong leader running the nation, as was voiced by one old soldier in Source A.

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**Proportional representation (PR):** a system of electing a government that allocates seats in parliament in proportion to the number of votes cast by the electors.

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## Germany

## SOURCE A

Politicians! What is this democracy? We never used to have democracy. We had strong leaders like the Kaiser. We never voted for him and was Germany ever so weak under the Kaiser? I spit on freedom – it's the patriotic thing to do!

*From the BBC series History File: Nazi Germany, in A. Wilkes (2006), Germany 1918–45, Haddenham: Folens Publishers, p. 11.*

## QUESTION

How did people feel towards the new Weimar Republic and its constitution? What problems might this lead to when it was in government?

KEY CONCEPTS  
ACTIVITY

**Change and Continuity:** Re-read this section, then draw up a chart to summarise the main differences between the constitutions of imperial Germany and that of the Weimar Republic. Indicate where change or continuity is represented.

In Unit 2.2, an examination of the challenges and opposition to Weimar Germany will show that this fledgling democracy survived its troubled birth, and from 1924 to 1929, enjoyed a period of relative stability and limited prosperity. Indeed, this period of democracy lasted longer than Hitler's Nazi dictatorship, although its democratic credentials were highly compromised after 1930 when President Hindenburg used the Weimar Constitution to invoke Article 48, by which he could declare a state of emergency and rule by decree without the Reichstag.

## The significance of the Weimar Constitution

Historians have different views on the Weimar Constitution. A.J. Nicholls sees it as a true democratic advance for Germany, bringing a more representative democratic system into being. Conversely, Gordon Craig views it as part of an 'aborted revolution' that failed to change basic political attitudes. Eberhard Kolb views the constitution as a halfway point between progressive political ideas and protecting more traditional elements, noting that the provisions for presidential rule by decree in Article 48 might be seen as making the president 'a kind of "ersatz emperor"' and reflected the mistrust that the fathers of the Weimar Constitution felt towards a fully parliamentary system on a democratic party basis.

The constitution had its weaknesses; for example, Article 48 – also the relationship between the president and the Reichstag – and then the potential pitfalls of PR. But it was a not fatally flawed document and Germany was transformed into a democratic republic. It offered a new approach and as such it was passed in the Reichstag in July 1919 by 262 votes to seventy-five. What the constitution could not control were the circumstances in which it had to operate, but it was a remarkable attempt to fashion out of defeat a constitution that would be the antithesis of authoritarian imperial Germany. Weimar Germany was initially seen as the most progressive democracy in the world and in the vanguard of constitutional modernity, where democracy had fallen into the lap of a shattered nation.

## Democracy and sovereignty: Germany 1945–55

Following the end of the Second World War in Europe and the unconditional surrender of Nazi German military leaders in May 1945, Germany was badly damaged by Allied bombing campaigns and military battles. Its economic infrastructure had collapsed, as transport systems and factories almost ceased to function. Sovereign authority had passed to the victorious occupying Allied powers and would not be restored until 1955 to the western part of Germany.

The US, Britain, France and the USSR divided Germany into four zones (see Figure 2.2), with Berlin, the former capital, part of the Soviet zone, but partitioned into four sectors

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**Figure 2.2** Germany divided into four occupation zones, 1945

for administrative purposes and placed under the joint authority of the four powers. Soon, growing differences between the Soviets and the Western Allied powers inevitably led to the permanent division of Germany; and by 1947 it was evident that the USSR would not allow free, multiparty elections throughout the whole of the country. Alarm bells had sounded when, in the previous year, SPD leaders in the Soviet zone opted to amalgamate with the Communist Party, a move condemned by the SPD in the western zone. Consequently the Americans and the British merged the administration in their occupation zones in order to create greater efficiency and hopefully encourage speedier economic recovery. This resulting unit was called Bizonia, and its federal structure would serve as the prototype for the West German state, with the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats soon establishing themselves as the major political parties. Then, in an attempt to halt growing political and fiscal integration between the western zones, the USSR blockaded western Berlin between June 1948 and May 1949. During this period, politicians from western Germany began to draft a new constitution and ultimately the Basic Law was passed on 23 May 1949. This law ratified a new constitution for the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesrepublik Deutschland, BRD) and so heralded the start of the second German democracy in the 20th century. The Basic Law, or Grundgesetz, stipulated that it was designed only for interim purposes, to provide a temporary but authoritative guideline until all the German people had agreed to its provisions and freely adopted it. But this democratic constitution was ultimately enacted only in one half of Germany. The eastern part of Germany became the DDR – a one-party communist state operating within the Soviet sphere of influence – and this split brought to an end the unified state created in 1871, until the reunification of 1990.

**QUESTION**

What type of problems were going to be created by the geographical division of Germany among the four Allied powers?

## 2

**Germany****The Bonn republic and its constitution**

The Constitution of the BRD is called the Basic Law or Grundgesetz and was drawn up in Germany after the Second World War. The new constitution of the BRD specifically sought to avoid repeating the experience and problems of the Weimar Republic Constitution and tried to correct those defects. The Basic Law was conceived under unusual circumstances, since it was drafted under Allied occupation and with the Allied powers' influence.

It was drafted on the heels of the disaster of Nazi rule but, most significantly, it was drafted under the circumstances of the territorial division of Germany that occurred after 1945, with disagreements between the Western Allied powers and the Soviet Union, in their respective zones of occupation. Until German reunification in 1990, the Basic Law applied only to West Germany. The eastern part was under the DDR, in effect a one-part communist state and Soviet satellite.

The city of Bonn was selected as the capital of the BRD, and the head of state was to be a largely ceremonial president, elected for five years by parliament and allowed no more than two terms in office. Parliament was made up of two houses: the Bundestag (federal parliament) and the Bundesrat (upper house). The electoral system no longer comprised just PR, but allowed for 50 per cent of the Bundestag to be elected by a majority vote. The new constitution helped the BRD to lay the basis for the creation of a stable democracy at the second attempt.

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## 2.2 What role did leaders and political parties play?

The nature and structure of democracy in Germany were shaped at various times between 1870 and 1955 by key political parties and leaders. In this section, these political forces and important personalities will be examined.

**The Social Democrats in imperial Germany**

Political parties in pre-1914 Germany had a limited role. A political party is usually defined by its constitutional ability and readiness to assume power and achieve its aims through the political structure present in that society. Political parties also usually have outstanding or instantly recognisable leaders. This did not really apply in Germany, since political parties had limited opportunities to exercise power. The Kaiser and his government largely operated independently, and governments were frequently unrelated to the strength of political parties as expressed at elections. Historian Peter Nettl states that 'the political parties in Germany before 1914 can better be described as politically organised interest groups, attempting to exert pressure on the Government in order to gain sectional advantages'.

From 1870 until Bismarck's resignation in 1890, the Reichstag was dominated by either the Liberal Party or the Centre Party.

The Liberals were traditionally the party of economic and political liberalism and represented bankers and industrialists who shared Bismarck's desire for a centralised state; but they were at variance with him in their support for progressive social and constitutional legislation.