

A Golden era?

The history of the Weimar Republic between 1923 and 1929 is sometimes referred to as 'The Stresemann Era'. This reflects Gustav Stresemann's importance in the politics of the period. His reputation, however, has been widely debated since his death in 1929.

Stresemann's time in office coincides with the 'successful' period of Weimar Germany, when things seemed to be going well, when the threat from Left and Right seemed to have subsided. Nevertheless these opposition movements did still exist, however small and ineffective, and Weimar society was still split.

Task outline

You are going to use sources to investigate Stresemann's life and achievements. You will then write two obituaries for him, as they might have appeared in the German press in October 1929. One will be written from the perspective of a Nazi newspaper, the other from a Communist newspaper. For each of Stresemann's key achievements you will need to think carefully about how the Nazi and Communist Parties would have viewed these.

Guidance: writing your obituary

An obituary is written after someone dies, and usually emphasises the good things they have done.

1. Read carefully through:

- Nazi and Communist beliefs
- Key events in Weimar Germany 1923-1929
- Sources about Stresemann (pages one – three).

2. Colour code the evidence from these using the following key:

	Stresemann's words/actions that the Nazi party would have agreed with
	Stresemann's words/actions that the Nazi party would have opposed
	Stresemann's words/actions that the Communist party would have agreed with
	Stresemann's words/actions that the Communist party would have opposed

3. You should now have some ideas about what to include in your obituaries. Remember, both parties would have been keen to use the popularity of Stresemann to their advantage but would also have wanted to make it clear how their policies were different – they had elections to fight!

Extension

How do you think Stresemann should be remembered today? Was he the 'Saviour of Weimar Germany?' Try to write a balanced answer which includes evidence on both sides and an overall conclusion.

Nazi and Communist beliefs

Nazi party beliefs in the 1920s and 1930s

1. The master race

The Aryans were the Master Race, the most important in the whole world, and therefore superior. All other races were inferior. Only the fittest would survive in the battle between the races, therefore it was important that Germans should only marry Germans, and thus ensure the Aryans would remain the Master Race.

2. A people's community (Volksgemeinschaft)

All Germans should work together, not for the good of individuals, but for the good of the state. All Germans, those in Austria, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, were part of this Community. All must work together, rich and poor, urban and rural, to make the Volk, the state, stronger.

3. Nationalism

There should be a Greater Germany, at first tearing up the Treaty of Versailles and then expanding eastwards to obtain the 'lebensraum' (living space) Germany needed, and deserved. This, and strong leadership, would make Germany a superpower again.

4. Anti-Communism

As communism was an international movement Hitler was opposed to it. He also opposed all 'left-wing' parties, believing them to be too democratic. He quickly came to focus on the 'Jewishness' of Communism, and thus saw Russia as the main enemy.

These views were not very popular in the 1920s whilst Stresemann was in power. The Nazis had very little electoral success at this time.

Communist party beliefs in the 1920s and 1930s

Communists believed in the teachings of Karl Marx, that the workers of the world would unite, lead a revolution and take power for themselves. They were therefore opposed to the Weimar Republic, which they saw as being controlled by big business and the traditional landed aristocracy of Germany.

The German KPD was formed in 1918 by the Spartacus League, and led a series of revolts in an attempt to copy Russia and turn Germany into a Communist country. They accused the Government of favouring the middle classes and capitalists, and thus not caring about the workers. They wanted higher wages, shorter hours and better social benefits, like sick pay and unemployment insurance. Their main aim was to overthrow Weimar and set up a workers' state in Germany, with the help of Russia.

These ideas had enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the crisis years after WWI, but they were not very popular while Stresemann was in power.

Key events in Weimar Germany 1923-1929

Stresemann's actions	Their significance
September 1923 <u>Passive resistance</u> was called off.	This paved the way for international negotiations.
November 1923 A new currency called the Rentenmark was introduced. Each Rentenmark was exchanged for one trillion old marks and the supply of new currency was strictly limited.	The currency was stabilised.
January 1924 The Dawes Plan confirmed that German <u>reparations</u> were 132,000 million marks. Repayments were spread out, with annual payments of 1 billion marks until 1929, and 2.5 billion marks thereafter. An Allied loan of 800 million marks was given to Germany.	This was the first sign that the Allies were prepared to take Germany's plight seriously and offer constructive assistance. Reparations were paid on time. The German economy seemed to be beginning to recover, but was heavily dependent on foreign loans.
October 1925 The Locarno Pact involved a series of treaties with Britain, France, Belgium and Italy. Stresemann accepted Germany's western borders. All countries <u>renounced</u> the use of invasion and force, except in self-defense.	Germany was reassured that there would be no further French invasion, such as had happened in 1923. It was clear that Germany's eastern borders, however, were still an issue.
April 1926 Stresemann signed The Treaty of Berlin with the USSR. The treaty helped to develop good relations between Germany and the USSR.	Stresemann showed that he was prepared to co-operate with the East, as well as the West, to further his goals. He was able to put mild pressure on the West to improve its relations with Germany, through fear of Germany moving closer to the USSR. Germany was able to continue rearming in secret, beyond the restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles.
September 1926 Germany joined the League of Nations. It was given Great Power status on the League Council with veto power.	Germany used its position to raise matters of German interest. Germany seemed committed to international peace, Stresemann was awarded the <u>Nobel peace prize</u> .
August 1928 In the Kellog-Briand Pact Germany renounced the use of force along with over 60 countries, including both America and Russia.	This agreement was seen as strengthening the League of Nations. It seemed to represent a moment of genuine international goodwill. For the first time all major powers were involved.
June 1929 In the Young Plan the total sum of reparation to be paid was reduced to 37,000 million marks. Annual payments were reduced and spread over 58 years.	In effect, due to the start of the <u>Great Depression</u> , the Young Plan was overtaken by events.

Sources about Stresemann (page one)

A: A brief biography of Gustav Stresemann

Gustav Stresemann was born in 1878, the son of a Berlin publican. He studied economics at university and went on to enjoy a successful business career. He became the youngest member of the Reichstag in 1907. He supported the monarchy and was a co-founder of the right-wing DVP in 1918. Although not a natural supporter of the Weimar Republic at first, he believed it to be the best alternative available to left- or right-wing dictatorship. Stresemann's abilities, as speaker and administrator, and the assassination of other leaders, meant that he emerged as the most effective Weimar politician. In August 1923 he was appointed Chancellor to deal with the economic crisis. He lost the Reichstag's confidence as Chancellor in November 1923, but remained as Foreign Minister from 1923 until his death in October 1929. In 1926 Gustav Stresemann was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his diplomatic work.

B: Part of a letter written by Stresemann to the ex-crown prince in 1925

'There are three great tasks which confront German foreign policy. Firstly, the solution of the reparations question which is essential for the recovery of our strength. Secondly, the protection of Germans abroad, those 10 to 12 million of our kindred who now live under a foreign yoke and in foreign lands. Thirdly is the readjustment of our Eastern frontiers - the recovery of Danzig, the Polish corridor, and a correction of the frontier in Upper Silesia. In the background stands our union with German Austria, although this seriously complicates the problems of the German Reich.'

C: Gustav Stresemann, from a speech on the Locarno Treaty, made in December, 1925

'... The sacrifices made by our continent in the World War are often measured solely by the material losses and destruction that resulted from the War. Our greatest loss is that a generation has perished from which we cannot tell how much intellect, genius, force of act and will, might have come to maturity, if it had been given to them to live out their lives. But together with the convulsions of the World War, one fact has emerged, namely that we are bound to one another by a single and a common fate. If we go down, we go down together; if we are to reach the heights, we do so not by conflict but by common effort.

For this reason, if we believe at all in the future of our peoples, we ought not to live in disunion, we must join hands in common labour. Only thus will it be possible to lay the foundations for a future ... based on a rivalry of spiritual achievement, not of force. In such co-operation the basis of the future must be sought. The great majority of the German people stands firm for such a peace as this. Relying on this will to peace, we set our signature to this treaty. It is to introduce a new era of cooperation among the nations. It is to close the seven years that followed the War, by a time of real peace, upheld by the will of responsible and far-seeing statesmen, who have shown us the way to such development, and will be supported by their peoples, who know that only in this fashion can prosperity increase. May later generations have cause to bless this day as the beginning of a new era.'

Sources about Stresemann (page two)

D: Unemployment in Germany

1921	346,000
1922	215,000
1923	818,000
1924	927,000
1925	682,000
1926	2,025,000
1927	1,312,000
1928	1,391,000
1929	1,899,000
1930	3,076,000

From Stephen Lee: *The Weimar Republic*

E: William Shirer, an American journalist, describes the mood in Germany during the Stresemann years. He lived and worked in Germany between the two world wars and wrote a book about his experiences.

'A wonderful ferment was working in Germany ... Most Germans one met struck you as being democratic, liberal, even pacifist. One scarcely heard of Hitler or the Nazis except as jokes.'

G: Stresemann, in a speech he made in Germany after signing the Locarno Treaty

'A nation must not adopt the attitude of a child who writes a list of his wants on Christmas Eve, which contains everything that the child will need for the next fifteen years. The parents would not be in a position to give all this. In foreign policy, I often have the feeling that I was confronted with such a list.'

H: Stresemann speaking in 1927

'In the course of my life I have come to believe that nothing great and permanent has ever been done in the world without give and take, compensation and compromise.'

I: Reichstag election results 1924-1928			
Party	Seats in May 1924	Seats in Dec 1924	Seats in 1928
KPD (Communist party)	62	45	54
SPD (Social Democratic party)	100	131	153
DDP (German Democratic party)	28	32	25
Zentrum/BVP (Bavarian people's party)	81	88	78
DVP (German people's party)	45	51	45
DNVP (German national people's party)	95	103	73
NSDAP (National socialist German workers' party)	32	14	12
Others	29	29	51

Was Gustav Stresemann the 'Saviour of Weimar Germany'? Source investigation

Teaching notes

This is a challenging activity for KS4 students which might also be appropriate for some KS5 courses. Students are asked to reflect on the legacy of Stresemann by reviewing a range of primary evidence. From this basis they then consider how Stresemann might have been viewed in the late 1920s by Nazi and Communist party members. The suggested outcome task is to write two alternative obituaries for Stresemann, one from the point of the Nazi party, one from the point of view of the Communist party.

Note: page three of the sources about Stresemann is attached as a separate PDF due to copyright restrictions on the image.

Differentiation suggestions

An alternative approach would be to use p.3 and the accompanying Matching task to first establish the measures which Stresemann took and their impact/limitations. Students could then highlight the sources for Stresemann's achievements and limitations and complete the suggested extension task on p.1 rather than the obituary task.

A word-bank is included below to assist students in interpreting some of the more complex language. This may be useful if you wish to set the enquiry as an independent task.

Term	Meaning in this context
chancellor	the leader of Germany – its most influential politician
compensation	money paid to make up for a loss/injury which you have caused
compromise	when two or more groups settle a dispute by each giving up some of their demands
ferment	excitement
the Great Depression	a period of world economic decline started by the Wall Street Crash
'material losses'	loss of money and property
monarchy	rule by king or queen on a hereditary basis
Nobel peace prize	an important, international prize awarded each year to a person thought to have promoted world peace
'our kindred'	family/relations
pacifist	someone who is against all war
passive resistance	when the German government asked workers in the Ruhr to refuse to work in order to prevent France from taking industrial products during its invasion of the region.
Reichstag	the German parliament
renounced	abandoned
reparations	compensation payments
'under a foreign yoke'	ruled by another country