

Part I: Verdicts on the Constitution

Source A: From a speech by Hugo Preuss, the liberal lawyer who headed the Commission that drew up the constitution, to the Weimar Assembly, April 1919.

I have often listened to the debates with real concern, glancing often rather timidly to the gentlemen of the Right, fearful lest they say to me: 'Do you hope to give a parliamentary system to a nation like this, one that resists it with every sinew in its body? Our people do not comprehend at all what such a system implies.' One finds suspicion everywhere; Germans cannot shake off their old political timidity and their deference to the authoritarian state.

Source B: Gustav Stresemann, DVP leader, talking to a German ambassador

The ordinary people have no affection for Ebert. The truth is, the Germans do not want a president in a top hat... He has to wear a uniform and a fistful of medals.

Source C: During the debates on the constitution, a USPD deputy, Cohn, warned of possible dangers under Article 48.

...if some henchmen of the Hohenzollerns [the royal family], a general perhaps, were to be at the head of the Reich.

Source D: A. Nicholls, *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler*, 1979, p. 128

Whatever problems faced the Weimar Republic they were not attributable to the democratic nature of the Constitution, which were a brave statement of liberal and democratic principles.

Source E: K. Fishcher, *Nazi Germany. A New History*, 1995, pp. 56-9

...The final document... was in many ways a mirror image of the social dissonances of [lack of harmony in] German society. The Weimar Constitution was a hodge-podge of principles drawn from Socialist and liberal agendas; it represented so much confusion in regard to economic was stymied [impeded] from the beginning...

[It was] one of the most democratic documents in the world. In 1919, however, it was doubtful whether such a democratic constitution objectives and unresolved class conflicts that German democracy could work in the hands of a people that was neither psychologically nor historically prepared for self-government.

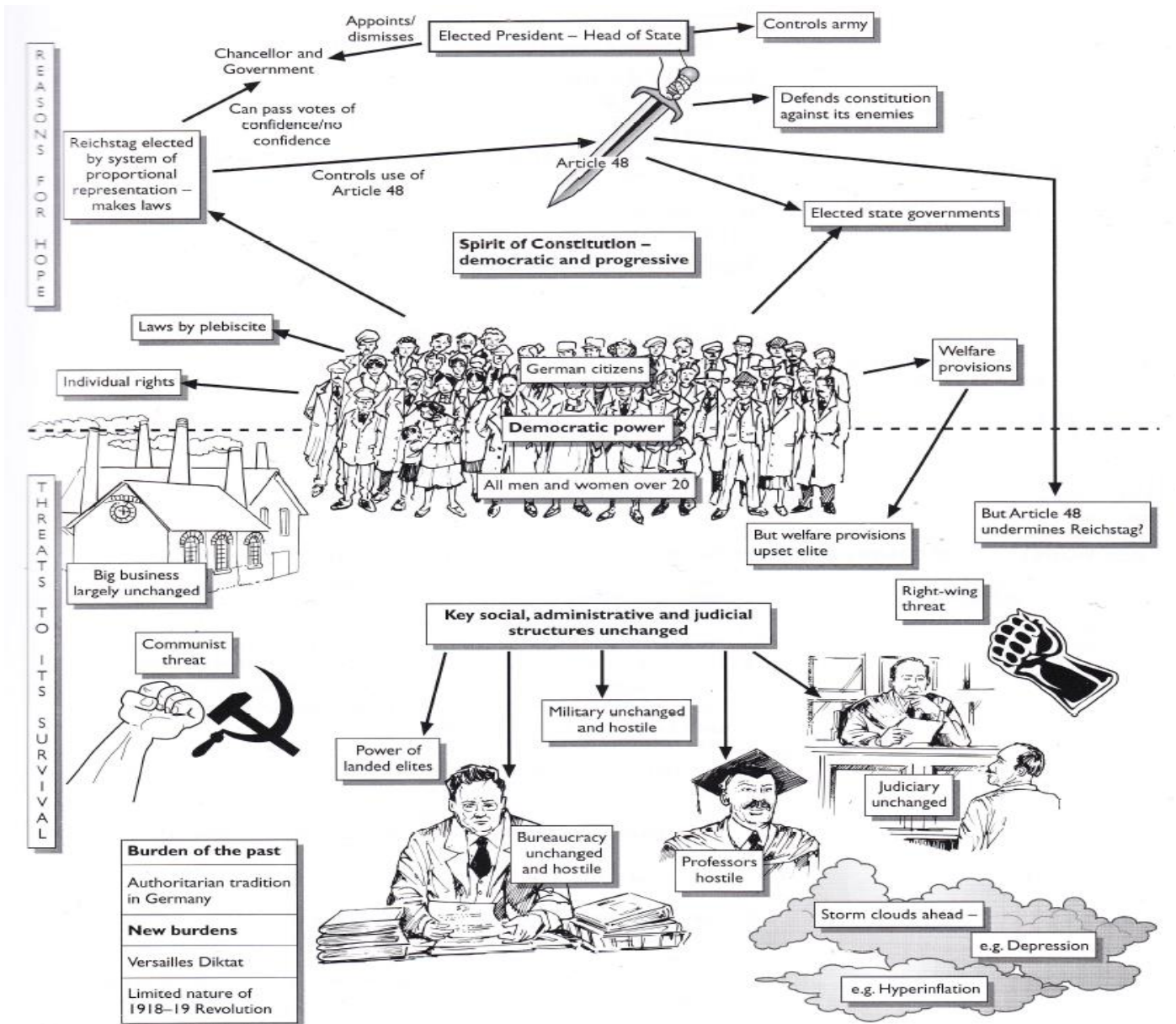
Source F: D. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 1991, p. 50

Despite its imperfections, the Weimar Reich constitution provided an open framework for an experiment in democracy which would have been quite capable of further refinement under more favourable circumstances. It brought different groups into the new order; enduringly so in the case of the old 'enemies of the Reich' in the Social Democratic labour movement and Catholic political groups, temporarily so in the case of sections of the middle class. It offered new CORPORATIST ways of attempting to reconcile basic social divisions, and it laid down the foundations for an expansion of the welfare state. Finally, it was signally successful, by international standards, in helping make possible the transition to a peacetime economy.

ACTIVITY 1

1. Read the contemporary accounts in Sources A-C. What problems for the survival of democracy in Germany do these comments suggest?
2. Read the verdicts of historians in Sources D-F.
 - a. What strengths do they identify in the Weimar Constitution?
 - b. What weaknesses do they identify?
3. Do they think that the constitution itself was a strong basis for democracy or a recipe for chaos?

Part 2: Was the Weimar Republic doomed from its very beginnings?



ACTIVITY 2

- Study the chart above. List the strengths and the weaknesses of the Weimar democratic system set up in Germany in 1918-19 (you may like to do this as a table like below), under the following headings:
 - Germany's political tradition
 - The nature of the 1918 Revolution
 - The Weimar Constitution
 - The overall context of 1918-19, especially Germany's defeat in 1918.

Groups	Strengths	Weaknesses
Germany's political tradition		
Nature of the 1918 Revolution		
Weimar Constitution		
Other reasons e.g. defeat in WW1		

- German Reconstruction Minister Walther Rathenau said in 1919: 'Now we have a Republic, the problem is we have no republicans.' Explain what you think he meant.
- Do you think Germany's new democracy was 'fatally flawed?' Explain your views.
- Explain why the prospects for the survival of the new democratic regime were not great.