

Handout

Which Political Party?

Which political party—the Social Democrats, the Communists, or the Nazis—would be most likely to appeal to each German citizen* described below in 1932?

Before deciding, review the party platforms in the reading “Hard Times Return” in Chapter 4 of *Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Support your conclusion by connecting details from the biographies to the party platforms and to other information you have encountered about life in the Weimar Republic. Think, too, about the variety of factors that might persuade a voter to choose one party over another. What effect might such emotions as fear and pride have on the decision to support one party over another?

* Biographies are of fictional German citizens created for this activity.

Hermann Struts

Hermann Struts, a lieutenant in the German army, fought bravely during the war. He comes from a long line of army officers and is himself a graduate of the German military academy. Struts has always taken pride in the army’s able defense of the nation and its strong leadership.

Yet Struts is bitter about the fact that he has not had a promotion in over ten years. Few soldiers have, mainly because the German army was so drastically reduced by the Treaty of Versailles. In the old army, Struts would have been at least a captain by now and possibly a major. The treaty, he argues, has done irreparable harm not only to Germany’s honor but also to his own honor as a soldier. He feels that if the civilian government had refused to sign the treaty and allowed the army to fight, both he and Germany would be better off.

Elisabeth von Kohler

Elisabeth von Kohler, a prominent attorney who attended the University of Bonn, has a strong sense of German tradition. She believes that her people’s contributions to Western civilization have been ignored. Von Kohler would like to see the republic lead a democratic Europe. She disapproves of the methods the Weimar Republic often uses to repress extremist parties. Her sense of justice is even more outraged by the way the Allies, particularly France, view Germany. She would like to prove to the world that the Germans are indeed a great race. She is proud to be an attorney and a German woman in the Weimar Republic.

Otto Hauptmann

Otto Hauptmann works in a factory in Berlin. Although his trade union has actively worked for better conditions and higher wages, it has not made many gains. Hauptmann blames this lack of success on the 1923 inflation and the current depression. He believes that the union would be more successful if the economy were more stable. Still, it is the union that has kept him employed. At a time when many of his friends have been laid off, his union persuaded the owners of his factory to keep men with seniority. In factories with weaker unions, managers kept only the young, claiming they are more productive.

Hauptmann worries about some of the ideas his fellow workers have expressed recently. They argue that when the owners are forced to cut back production, they take it out on the workers. So the only way to end the depression is to let the workers control the factories and the government. Hauptmann disagrees. He thinks that the workers do get fair treatment as long as they have a strong union. Moreover, he believes that managing the factories and government should be left to those who understand these complicated jobs.

Eric von Ronheim

Eric von Ronheim, the owner of a Frankfurt textile factory, is very concerned about the depression. Sales are down and so are profits. If only Germany had not been treated so ruthlessly at Versailles, he argues, the nation would be far better off. Instead the government has had to impose heavy taxes to pay reparations to its former enemies. As a result, Germans are overtaxed, with little money to spend on textiles and other consumer goods. The worldwide depression has made matters worse by eliminating possible foreign markets for German products. Even if the depression were over, von Ronheim does not think taxes would come down because of reparation payments.

Von Ronheim considers the Communists a serious threat to Germany. He fears that if they set up a government like the one in the Soviet Union, capitalists like him would receive no mercy from the workers. He also thinks that Germany would become subservient to its old enemy, Russia.

Karl Schmidt

Karl Schmidt is an unemployed worker who lives in the rich steel-producing Ruhr Valley. Like so many men in the Ruhr, he lost his job because of the depression. Yet Schmidt notes that the owners of the steel mills still live in big houses and drive expensive cars. Why are they protected from the depression while their former employees suffer? Although the government does provide unemployment compensation, the money is barely enough to support Schmidt, his wife, and their two children. Yet the government claims that it cannot afford to continue even these payments much longer.

Schmidt feels that the government would be in a stronger position to help people if it cut off all reparations. But he also knows that if the government did so, the French might occupy the Ruhr Valley just as they did in 1923. What is needed is a government that is responsive to the workers—perhaps even one that is run by the workers, as some of his friends maintain. And he is convinced that Germany needs a government strong enough to stop reparation payments.

Albert Benjamin

Albert Benjamin is a professor of mathematics at the University of Berlin. While his grandparents were religious Jews and so are his three brothers, Benjamin is not religious. He is very proud of his German heritage, and he even volunteered to serve in the German army during World War I. After the war, Benjamin married Eva Steiner. Eva is Protestant and they are raising their three children as Christians. Benjamin is concerned because prices have gone up while his salary as a professor has not. His family can no longer afford vacations and special presents for the children. His wife worries that if the economic problems continue, the family might have to cut back on spending for food.

Wilhelm Schultz

Wilhelm Schultz works with his father on the family farm in East Prussia. The treaty has had a profound effect on Schultz and his family. The treaty turned part of East Prussia over to Poland. So now his uncle, whose home is just a few miles away, lives in Poland rather than Germany. Schultz's grandfather lives in Danzig. Although it is still part of Germany, it cannot be reached without traveling through Poland. As a result, the family cannot visit him without a passport and other official documents. That does not seem right to Schultz. As a child, he was taught to admire Germany's heroes, some of whom fought the Poles. So he is dismayed that his government signed a treaty that has subjected many Germans, including his uncle, to Polish rule. He is also bothered by what he sees as greed and corruption in government leaders. This is not the way Prussians should act.

Schultz also worries about the Communists. Neither he nor his father wants a system that would eliminate private property. Both are proud to own their own land, and anyone who wants to take it away is the enemy.

Gerda Munchen

Gerda Munchen is the owner of a small Munich grocery store started by her parents. For years, her parents saved to send her to the university. But Munchen chose not to go, and the money stayed in the bank. In 1923, she had planned to use the money to pay for her children's education. But that year, inflation hit Germany. Just before her older daughter was to leave for the university, the bank informed the family that its savings were worthless. This was a blow to Munchen, but even more of a blow to her daughter, whose future hung in the balance.

Munchen does not think she will ever regain her savings. With so many people out of work, sales are down sharply. And Munchen's small grocery is having a tough time competing with the large chain stores. They can offer far lower prices. She and her children question a system that has made life so difficult for hardworking people.

Reading 7

The Beginning of the Nazi Party



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Thousands of men returned home from the war bitter and angry. Many blamed military leaders and politicians for wasting so many lives in the name of national pride. Others, believing in the “stab in the back” myth, were outraged over the nation’s defeat, the terms of the armistice, and the Treaty of Versailles (see Reading 2, “Rumors of Betrayal”).

Adolf Hitler, a corporal originally from Austria, was among those angry veterans. Like many of his comrades, he felt that fighting in the war had given him a sense of purpose and a way of distinguishing himself. Bitterly disappointed by the outcome of the war, many men like him vowed to continue the fight for Germany by entering politics. Some joined the Communists, while others, including Hitler, turned to various extreme nationalist parties. (Nationalists believe that their nation and its people are superior to all others and deserving of their undying devotion.) Hitler joined the German Workers’ Party.

By February 1920, the party had a new name and a platform. The new name was the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*—or *Nazi*, for short). The name was meant to convey nationalism and socialism at the same time, although the socialism in the Nazi platform benefited only the members of an ever-narrowing definition of the German nation. The platform, proclaimed by Hitler at the first large party gathering in Munich that month, included the following provisions:

Nazi Party Platform

- We demand the unification of all Germans in a Greater Germany on the basis of the right of national self-determination.
- We demand equality of rights for the German people in its dealings with other nations, and the revocation of the peace treaty of Versailles . . .
- We demand land and territory (colonies) to feed our people and to settle our surplus population.
- Only members of the nation may be citizens of the state. Only those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be members of the nation. Accordingly, no Jew may be a member of the nation.
- Non-citizens may only live in Germany as guests and must be subject to laws for aliens.

- The right to vote on the State's government and legislation shall be enjoyed by the citizens of the State alone. We demand therefore that all official appointments, of whatever kind, whether in the Reich, in the states or in the smaller localities, shall be held by none but citizens.
- We demand that the State shall make its primary duty to provide a livelihood for its citizens. If it should prove impossible to feed the entire population, foreign nationals (non-citizens) must be deported from the Reich.
- All non-German immigration must be prevented. We demand that all non-Germans who entered Germany after 2 November 1914 shall be required to leave the Reich forthwith.
- All citizens shall have equal rights and duties.
- In view of the enormous sacrifices of life and property demanded by a nation by any war, personal enrichment from war must be regarded as a crime against the nation. We demand therefore the ruthless confiscation of all war profits.
- We demand profit-sharing in large industrial enterprises.
- We demand the extensive development of insurance for old age.
- The state must consider a thorough reconstruction of our national system of education (with the aim of opening up to every able and hard-working German the possibility of higher education and of thus obtaining advancement). The curricula of all education establishments must be brought into line with the requirements of practical life. The aim of school must be to give the pupil, beginning with the first sign of intelligence, a grasp of the notion of the State . . .
- The State must ensure that the nation's health standards are raised by protecting mothers and infants, by prohibiting child labor, by promoting physical strength through legislation providing for compulsory gymnastics and sports, and by extensive support of clubs engaged in the physical training of youth.
- . . . To facilitate the creation of a German national press we demand:
 - (a) that all editors of, and contributors to newspapers appearing in the German language must be members of the nation;
 - (b) that no non-German newspapers may appear without express permission of the State. They must not be printed in the German language;
 - (c) that non-Germans shall be prohibited by law from participating financially in or influencing German newspapers . . .
- We demand freedom for all religious denominations in the State, provided they do not threaten the existence nor offend the moral feelings of the German race.

The Party, as such, stands for positive Christianity, but does not commit itself to any particular denomination. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit within and without us, and is convinced that our nation can achieve permanent health only from within on the basis of the principle: The common interest before self-interest. . . .¹

1 Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919–1945: A Documentary Reader*, vol. 1: *The Rise to Power 1919–1934* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1998), 15–16.

Reading 20

Hard Times Return

German leaders, like their counterparts in other countries, looked for ways to end the depression. And like other leaders in 1929, they failed. The chancellor of the Weimar Republic that year was Hermann Müller, a Social Democrat. When he was unable to steer the country toward prosperity, President Paul von Hindenburg named a new chancellor a year later. This time, he chose Heinrich Brüning of the Catholic Center Party.

Brüning convinced President Hindenburg to invoke Article 48 (see Reading 3, “Creating a Constitutional Government”) to suspend the constitution so that the chancellor would be able to act quickly and decisively, without consulting the Reichstag, to address the severe economic crisis. Even so, Brüning could not pull Germany out of the depression.

To an increasing number of Germans, democracy appeared unable to cope with the economic collapse, and only the most extreme political parties seemed to offer clear solutions to the crisis. The Communist Party won support with their argument that to end the depression, Germany needed a government like the communist one in the Soviet Union. They said that the government should take over all German land and industry from capitalists, who they claimed sought only their own profit. Communists promised to distribute German wealth according to the common good. The Nazis, on the other hand, blamed the Jews, Communists, liberals, and pacifists for the economic crisis in Germany. They promised to restore Germany’s standing in the world and Germans’ pride in their nation. They also promised an end to the depression, campaigning behind slogans such as “Work, Freedom, and Bread!”

Many saw the Nazis as an attractive alternative to democracy and communism. Among them were wealthy industrialists who were alarmed by the growth of the Communist Party. They liked the Nazis’ message: it was patriotic, upbeat, and energetic. Both the Communists and the Nazis made significant gains in the Reichstag elections in 1930.



Teach **Choices in Weimar Republic Elections**
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This German election poster from 1930 says, “Work, Freedom, and Bread—Vote National Socialist!”

Number of Deputies in the Reichstag, 1928–1932

Party	1928	1930	July 1932	Nov. 1932
Social Democrat	153	143	133	121
Catholic Center	78	87	98	90
Communist	54	77	89	100
Nazi	12	107	230	196
German National	73	41	37	52

In 1932, Hitler became a German citizen so that he could run for president in that year's spring election. His opponents were Ernst Thälmann, the Communist candidate, and Paul von Hindenburg, the independent incumbent. In the election, 84% of all eligible voters cast ballots. One observer noted that as voters went to the polls, each saw the war behind him, "in front of him social ruin, to his left he is being pulled by the Communists, to his right by the Nationalists, and all around him there is not a trace of honesty and rationality, and all his good instincts are being distorted into hatred."¹

Each voter had to figure out which party offered the best solution to the nation's problems. To understand those choices, compare the platforms of the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party with that of the Nazi Party, which can be found in Reading 7, "The Beginning of the Nazi Party."

Social Democratic Party Platform

We are committed to maintaining the Republic and a policy that will allow Germany to take its rightful place among the free governments of Europe.

- We will support the present German Republic so that freedom, democracy, and justice will live in the hearts of our German countrymen.
- We will honor all of Germany's obligations, political and financial, in order that Germany's honor and respect will not be decreased in the eyes of the world.
- We plan to create more jobs by undertaking an extensive program of public works.
- We will provide unemployment compensation for up to six months.
- We will cut government expenditures to lower taxes.
- We believe in the right of those who disagree with the party to speak and write on those issues without interference.

Communist Party Platform

We are committed to the overthrow of the presently existing, oppressive Republic and all of its economic and social institutions. We favor:

- The abolition of private property.
- The establishment of land reform programs, so that the government can take over the land and distribute it for the common good.
- Government ownership of all industrial productive forces, so that they can be run for the benefit of the people rather than the capitalists.
- A foreign policy that regards the Soviet Union as an ally against capitalism.

To the German people: The cause of your misery is the fact that French, British, and American capitalists are exploiting German workers to get rich themselves. Germans, unite to get rid of this terrible burden.

¹ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 142.

The German voters re-elected President Hindenburg, with Hitler finishing second. But in elections for the Reichstag held in the months after the presidential election, the Nazis' popularity increased even more.

1932 Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage
Paul von Hindenburg	Independent	19,359,983	53.0%
Adolf Hitler	Nazi	13,418,517	36.8%
Ernst Thälmann	Communist	3,706,759	10.2%

What issues decided the elections? In considering the question, historian Peter Fritzsche focuses on two kinds of lines—one of “anxious men in front of the labor exchange” and one of “storm troopers in parade formation.” In the first three months of 1930, 3.3 million people were unemployed; a year later, the number was nearly 5 million, and it jumped to 6.1 million in early 1932. In 1928, 800,000 voters supported the Nazi Party; the number jumped to 6.4 million in 1930 and then to 13.4 million in 1932. Fritzsche writes: “At the height of the crisis, in the winter of 1932, more than 40 percent of all workers in Germany were unemployed. Most of these had long since exhausted their claims to unemployment compensation and barely subsisted on the dole.”²

Was it only the depression that led increasing numbers of Germans to support the Nazis? Historian Richard Evans believes the appeal of the Nazis was more than their pledge to end the depression. He writes that German voters in 1930 were

protesting against the failure of the Weimar Republic. Many of them, too, particularly in rural areas, small towns, small workshops, culturally conservative families, older age groups, or the middle-class nationalist political milieu, may have been registering their alienation from the cultural and political modernity for which the Republic stood. . . . The vagueness of the Nazi programme, its symbolic mixture of old and new, its eclectic, often inconsistent character, to a large extent allowed people to read into it what they wanted to and edit out anything they might have found disturbing. Many middle-class voters coped with Nazi violence and thuggery on the streets by writing it off as a product of excessive youthful ardour and energy. But it was far more than that, as they were soon to discover for themselves.³

Having studied voting patterns in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s, historian Dick Geary writes: “The Nazi Party was . . . without doubt a *Volkspartei* [people’s party]: recruiting its members and its voters across a broad range of social groups, from both sexes and from the older as well as the younger generation.”⁴ Yet, Geary notes, the Nazis were never able to win a majority of the seats in the Reichstag.

2 Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 155.

3 Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 265.

4 Dick Geary, “Who voted for the Nazis?,” *History Today* 48, no. 10 (November 1998), accessed March 23, 2016.

Connection Questions

1. Which political parties in Germany gained and lost seats between 1928 and 1932? Why did some parties become more appealing as the depression took hold?
2. Was the Weimar Republic a success in 1928? By whose standard? What does it mean to measure the success of a nation or its government?
3. Is it significant that the Nazis never held a majority of the seats in the Reichstag? How could other parties have worked together to keep the Nazis from controlling the government? Use the data in the charts in this reading to support your answer.