

Weimar Germany (1918/19–1933)

Introduction

This volume explores the developments in Germany during the Weimar Republic, beginning with the Republic's proclamation on November 9, 1918, and concluding with Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. The intervening 14 years witnessed the formation of a democratic system in Germany that enfranchised women; lowered the national voting age to 20; and replaced Germany's hereditary emperor with a directly elected president. In the area of social policy, the Weimar Republic expanded unemployment benefits, institutionalized cooperation between workers and employers, and mandated an eight-hour workday. Reformers and activists promoted gender equality and a liberation of the body in terms of dress, physical activity, and sexual expression. Artists and writers shaped the liberated spirit of the new era, too, in pathbreaking films, photo montages, architectural designs, and frank commentaries on modern life and the aftermath of war. At the same time, this era also nurtured longstanding local traditions and deep-seated beliefs, especially in rural areas and in the realm of religious faith, and the volume draws attention to these often-overlooked continuities, as well. It also examines politics and the economy, of course, which witnessed such turbulent and paradoxical developments during this time and have lent the adjective "Weimar" an ominous quality that lingers to this day.

Overview: Weimar Republic, 1918-1933

The documents, images, maps, and media clips in this volume reveal some of the many and varied developments in Germany during the Weimar Republic, between 1918 and 1933. Take a closer look, for instance, at the spellbinding canvas "Evening over Potsdam," which graces the top of this very page. Completed in 1930 by the German-Jewish artist Lotte Laserstein, it depicts a gathering of friends on a terrace overlooking the steeples and towers of Potsdam, a historic city on the southwestern outskirts of Berlin. Less than three years later, the newly installed Nazi government used that very same city as the backdrop for a tableau of a radically different kind—the pomp-filled "Day of Potsdam" on March 21, 1933, a ceremony that symbolically enshrined Hitler's chancellorship in a long succession of powerful German rulers and sealed the end of the Republic. That later image might tempt us to interpret the expressions of Laserstein's friends as ones of foreboding, an early premonition of things to come. Laserstein saw the Nazis' growing popularity in 1930, after all, and she herself would later flee the country in 1937, never to set foot in Germany again.

Laserstein and her body of work conjure far more about this period than just the political and economic anxieties of its last three years, however, and that makes "Evening over Potsdam" such an intriguing document. Laserstein developed her artistic vision within the vibrant atmosphere of the Republic and in dialog with its many transformations. As a child in Wilhelmine Germany, Laserstein's aunt taught her to paint, but Laserstein only received formal training upon admission to the highly selective Berlin Academy of Fine Arts in 1919, a beneficiary of the new opportunities for women, Jews, and artists that had opened in the midst of the country's revolutionary changes. Among its many measures, the Republic had removed the censorship of cultural expression, guaranteed women the right to vote, and enabled a greater degree of self-determination. Laserstein furthered these changes through her own paintings, which often depicted variations of the "new woman," a figure conveying autonomy and athleticism, qualities that Laserstein herself embodied. The year 1930 witnessed not only her completion of "Evening

over Potsdam,” moreover, but also her first solo gallery exhibition, as she charted a path in a male-dominated medium. Situating the painting within the context of Laserstein’s own growing artistic reputation, as well as that of the Nazis’ first big electoral breakthrough, suggests the contradictory nature of the Weimar Republic: the historical context that had enabled a party like the NSDAP to emerge and thrive had also enabled someone like Laserstein to do the same.

Recommended Citation: Erik Jensen: Weimar Germany (1918/19–1933). Introduction, published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:introduction-6>> [March 16, 2026].