

# The Weimar Republic and the Rise of Nazi Germany

## Student Text



CHOICES  
PROGRAM  
BROWN UNIVERSITY

*The Weimar Republic and the  
Rise of Nazi Germany*

**Student Text**

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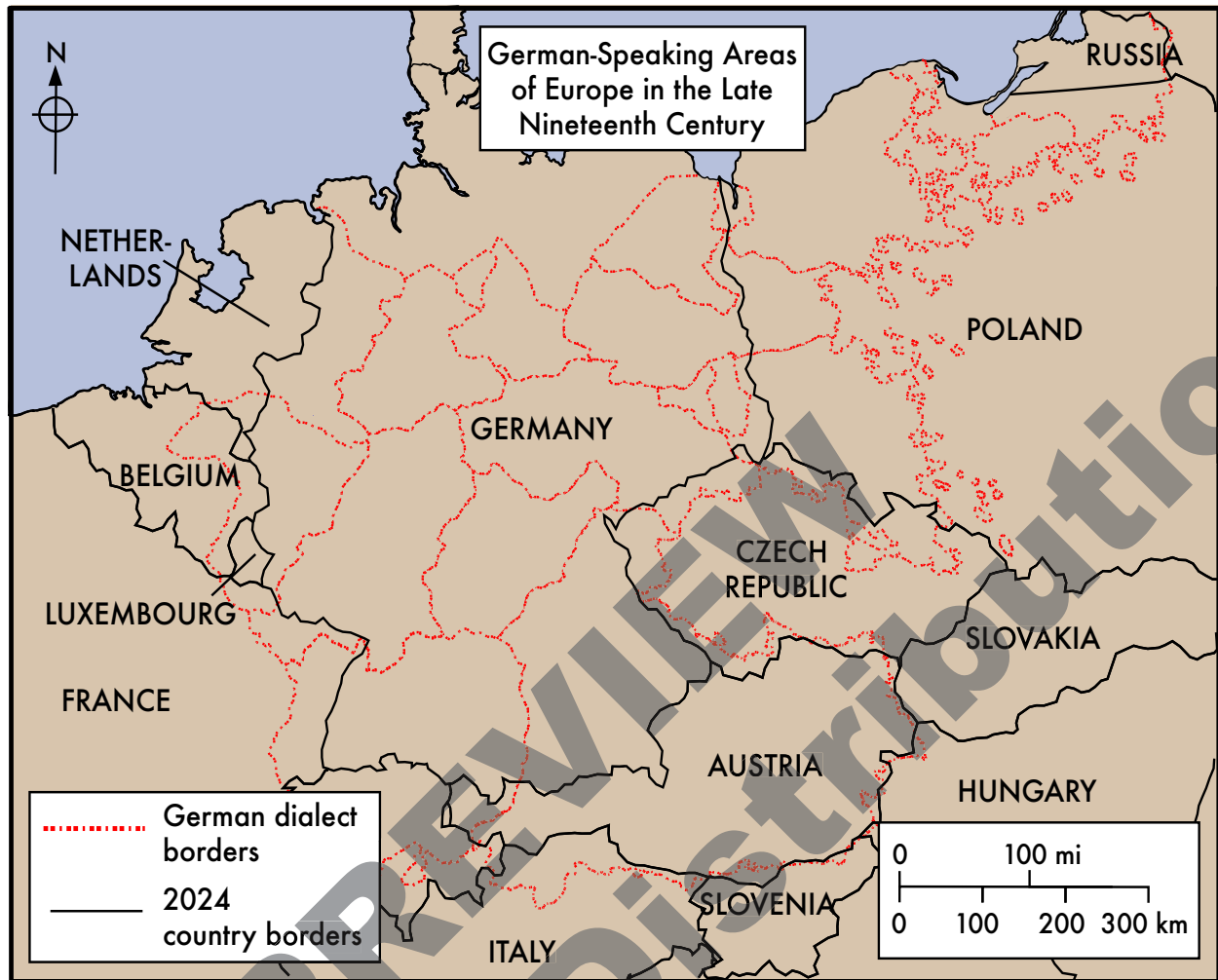
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Germany was not a unified state until the late nineteenth century. Speakers of German dialects (regional language variations) lived in many different lands that had a variety of cultures, political systems, and economies. German speakers lived in areas that are now part of present-day Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Hungary, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Before the idea of German nationalism took root, people whom we call “German” today understood their identity based on their region, religion, or class—rather than their “nationality.” In 1871, many German-speaking lands joined together to form the first unified German state—the German Empire.

### Note about Disturbing Content

This period in history is marked by oppression and violence and it has had lasting repercussions for many groups. Please be advised that this text includes firsthand accounts of violence and descriptions of warfare. It also includes detailed discussions of antisemitism and racism, and supports these discussions with primary source evidence. As you read about this difficult history in the coming days, it is important to be sensitive to your classmates and the ways in which this history might be a hard topic to study.

## Introduction: Dancing on a Volcano

The Weimar Republic is named for the city of Weimar, where German citizens wrote their first fully democratic constitution in 1919. The constitution was written shortly after World War I (1914-1918) ended. World War I had a devastating impact on German people and it had a lasting influence on German culture and politics.

Around the world, World War I also affected many people's ideas of how their societies should be governed. In Germany, one response to the war was the German Revolution of 1918, which established a parliamentary republic (a type of democracy) for the first time in Germany.

The Weimar Republic witnessed surges in creativity, new freedoms, and political engagement. It introduced Germans to constitutional democracy, sparked new artistic movements, and brought about long-lasting social reforms. It was also marked by surges in antisemitism, conspiracy theories, economic disaster, feelings of despair, and extremism.

### “We are dancing on a volcano.”

—Gustav Stresemann, later the German chancellor and foreign minister, speaking in Germany's parliament in 1923 about the political and economic turmoil in Germany during the Weimar period

The Weimar Republic lasted until 1933. It ended when dictator Adolf Hitler and his racist and antisemitic political party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), also known as the Nazis, came to power.

The Nazi Party's rise to power ultimately led to the outbreak of World War II (1939-1945) in Europe, a war even more destructive than World War I. In 1939, Nazi Germany's military invaded Poland, beginning a war of conquest and expansion. Within months, nearly all of Europe was at war. Over the next six years, the Nazi regime systematically murdered six million Jews, hundreds of thousands of Roma, and an additional six million other civilians in a genocide. The Nazi genocide against Jews is referred to as the Holocaust. The additional six million civilians the Nazis targeted and

### Introduction Definitions

**Democracy**—Democracy is a political system in which the population holds political power. Citizens participate in government decisions, either directly or through elected representatives.

**Antisemitism**—Antisemitism is hatred and discrimination directed at Jews or people perceived to be Jewish.

**Genocide**—Genocide is widespread murder and other acts intended to destroy—in whole or in part—a national, racial, religious, or ethnic group.

**Totalitarianism**—Totalitarianism is a system of centralized government run by a dictatorship, in which the people are subject to the government's total control.

**State**—A state is a country with a government that is recognized by its citizens and other countries. A state has sole control over its own territory and military.

**Dictatorship**—A dictatorship is a system of government in which one person, or a very small group of people, holds all the power. There are no checks and balances and no opposition political parties. Elections either do not exist or are unfair.

killed were people the Nazis considered inferior, including Belarusians, Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Serbs, Slovenes, people with disabilities, gay men, communists, and others.

The Nazis referred to their plan to eliminate the Jewish population as the “Final Solution” to what they called the “Jewish Question.” For decades, historians have worked to explain how the Nazis' genocide of the Jews could have happened. Meanwhile, individuals and societies continue to seek lessons from the history of the Holocaust, often vowing “never again.”

This reading will explore how the Nazis came to power. It will also introduce you to people, places, and events before the Nazi era. You will

investigate how the Weimar Republic ultimately led to the horrors of the Nazi era. But you will also investigate the Weimar Republic in its own right, as an era in which individuals were shaped by their experiences, beliefs, and the places they lived. You will see that people living in the Weimar Republic did not know the Nazis would ultimately seize power. They also did not know that World War II or the Holocaust were on the horizon.

***How can studying German individuals and cities help us better understand the Weimar era?***

As you examine the history of the Weimar Republic, you will also encounter personal stories about the different experiences and perspectives of ordinary Germans. These perspectives will help deepen your understanding of how the political and social changes of the Weimar Republic affected the lives of German people.

In addition to personal stories, you will explore historical developments in three German cities in greater detail. Exploring historical transformations at the local level allows us to consider differences within and between places. These differences reflect people's varying perspectives on the German republic, democracy, and modern life. Recognizing these variations can help us understand the complexity of social, political, and cultural changes during the Weimar Republic. Remembering that people had choices helps us to see that events in history were not inevitable.

***What is this reading about?***

This reading focuses on the history of Germany between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. Before the Weimar era, Germany was an empire. After Weimar, it was a totalitarian state that unleashed the devastation of World War II and the Holocaust.

In the following pages, you will explore how democracy emerged in Germany after World War I, only to ultimately transform into a dictatorship. In Part I, you will read about political and economic shifts in Germany that led to and characterized the Weimar Republic. Part II addresses the social and cultural changes of the period by exploring the experiences of people who lived in three different German cities—Berlin, Essen, and Munich. Part III



Albrecht Dürer created this engraving, called *Knight, Death, and the Devil* in 1513. Over the centuries, many Germans, including Hitler, have celebrated Dürer's image of the brave, steadfast German knight riding through treacherous terrain past fearsome monsters. They associated the monsters with Germany's enemies and considered the knight to be a symbol of German nationhood.

examines the end of the Weimar Republic, the rise of the Nazi Party, and the widespread antisemitism that led to the Holocaust.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- How did the devastation of World War I—and the Treaty of Versailles ending the conflict—affect Germany and the rest of Europe?
- How did people of different religions, classes, genders, sexualities, geographies, and racial groups experience and shape this time period?
- How did the changes of the Weimar era influence Germany and the rest of the world—then and now?
- Why were many Germans hostile to democracy during the Weimar Republic?
- What were some of the primary causes of the Nazis' rise to power in Germany?

# The Weimar Republic and the Rise of Nazi Germany

## Teacher Resource Book

TEACHER RESOURCE BOOK

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Not for Distribution

## Analyzing Interwar Photomontage: Art and the Weimar Era

### Objectives

**Students will:** Analyze art from the Weimar era as a historical source.

Understand interwar photomontage as an art form.

Explore how photomontage in Weimar-era Germany reflected and expressed social, political, and cultural views and beliefs.

Assess the value and limitations of art as a historical source.

### Required Reading

Students should have read Part II of the reading and completed “Study Guide: Facts and Information—Part II” (TRB 21-22) or “Study Guide: Analysis and Synthesis—Part II” (TRB-23).

### Resources

“Three Steps for Analyzing a Photomontage” (TRB-33)

“Additional Information for Teachers about Each Image” (TRB 34-35)

“Interwar Photomontage” slideshow available at <[www.choices.edu/weimar](http://www.choices.edu/weimar)>

### Videos

The short videos for use with this lesson are available at <[www.choices.edu/weimar](http://www.choices.edu/weimar)>.

- “What can art reveal about history or current events?” (Ian Alden Russell)
- “How did some artists in Germany respond to World War I?” (Professor Frances Tanzer)
- “How do you go about analyzing a work of art?” (Ian Alden Russell)

### In the Classroom

**1. Essential Question**—Write the essential question on the board: “What can art reveal about history or current events?” Play the video of Ian Alden Russell answering the question, “What can

art reveal about history or current events?” Ask students to explain what they think Russell means when he says, “And those images weren’t simple, truthful representations of fact. They were interpretations. They were expressions.”

Encourage students to explore the idea of art as “interpretation” or “expression” of history or current events. How can students tell when a piece of art has a political or social perspective? Can students give an example of a work of art that is an expression or interpretation of history? Encourage them to think about art in their local environments (such as murals, public art, etc.), in addition to art they may have seen in a museum or on the internet. (You may wish to project an image on the screen of a work of art that is an expression or interpretation of history, especially if you have a relevant local mural or public art project.)

**2. Establish Historical Context**—Ask students to recall Part II of the reading. What did they learn about artistic changes and new artistic movements during the Weimar Republic era? What new technologies were available to artists, and how did they use them? What events or new experiences were artists responding to? What was artistic “modernism,” and what distinguished it from previous artistic movements?

Play the video of Professor Frances Tanzer answering the question, “How did some artists in Germany respond to World War I?” Tell students to record three details from Professor Tanzer’s video in their notes. Revisit the clip at 0:52, and encourage students to explain in their own words what Professor Tanzer means by the phrase “new modes of representation.” What historical event does she say led artists to seek “new modes of representation”?

**3. Analyze a Work of Art**—Tell students they will examine examples of a “new mode of representation” from the Weimar Republic era—the photomontage. Project the “What is photomontage?” slide from the “Interwar Photomontage” slideshow onto the screen and review its contents with students.

Next, tell students they will learn a method of analyzing art used by art historians to better prepare them to analyze the photomontages. Play the video “How do you go about analyzing a work of art?” by Ian Alden Russell. You may wish to play the video a second time, pausing to review each of Russell’s three steps (**Describe**, **Deduce**, and **Speculate**) to analyze a work of art. “Deduction” (to reach conclusions based on observation and basic reasoning) and “Speculation” (to formulate potential explanations, or hypothesize) may be challenging words for some students, so you may wish to review their definitions as well.

**4. Analyze Photomontages**—Analyzing interwar German photomontages may feel challenging for students, so we have structured this lesson so that teachers lead the class through the more difficult steps of “Deduction” and “Speculation.”

First, decide which photomontage artworks you wish to analyze together as a class. Time permitting, we recommend analyzing at least three. Distribute one copy of “Three Steps for Analyzing a Photomontage” for each artwork you plan to analyze to each student. Next, project the unannotated first photomontage artwork onto the screen and tell students to record the artist’s name and the title of the artwork on the worksheet. You may wish to briefly review the artist’s background with students as well. Instruct students to spend several minutes quietly recording (at least) six unique details about the image in the first “Step 1: Description” box.

Next, lead the class through “Step 2: Deduction” and “Step 3: Speculation,” instructing students to record major takeaways from the teacher-led class analysis on the handout. Repeat the three steps for each additional image you analyze as a class.

For assistance in guiding students through the process of analyzing the artworks, use “Additional Information for Teachers about Each Image”

(which provides historical background and analysis drawn from art historians) and the annotated images located in the “Interwar Photomontage” slideshow (which provide specific guiding questions focused on “Deduction” and “Speculation” that you may wish to use during the lesson).

**5. Concluding Discussion**—Ask students to reflect on the three steps for analyzing a work of art. What did they find easy? What was most challenging? How so? Were students able to identify clear political, social, or cultural “messages” in the photomontages on their own? If not, what did they find particularly challenging about it?

Next, ask students to reflect on photomontages as a historical primary source. On the one hand, what do students think are some of the limitations of using photomontages as primary sources? On the other hand, what did they learn about Weimar society from photomontages that text sources might not have been able to show? Conclude by reviewing with students some of the major takeaways from the teacher-led analysis of the artworks and how they relate to Weimar-era society.

### Homework

Students should read Part III and complete “Study Guide: Facts and Information—Part III” (TRB 36-37) or “Study Guide: Analysis and Synthesis—Part III” (TRB-38).

### Extra Challenge

Ask students to create their own photomontages. Either digitally or on paper, have students use the techniques of photomontage to create an artwork that reflects or comments on their own time and place. Ask them to consider perspective, audience, and ways to manipulate images and texts to convey a tone and a message. Have students write artist statements that explain their process, the choices they made, and their intended message.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Three Steps for Analyzing a Photomontage

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*Instructions:* Examine the photomontages from the Weimar era and follow your teacher’s directions. List at least six details about the artwork in “Step #1: Description.” For “Step 2: Deduction” and “Step 3: Speculation,” record major takeaways from the class discussion analyzing the artwork.

Artist’s name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title and year of work: \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 1: Description

What do you see? In the space below, provide at least six details about the image. Be specific!

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

### Step 2: Deduction

What can you conclude about specific elements in the artwork based on observation and reasoning?

### Step 3: Speculation

What political, cultural, or social ideas do you think the image is trying to show? What do you think is the artist’s message?

## Additional Information For Teachers about Each Image

**Note:** For each image, there is information about the artist and the artwork as well as some possible interpretations of the work. Like all art interpretation, these comments are subjective and not intended to exclude other interpretations.

### Slide 1: Marianne Brandt, *Our Unnerving City*

Marianne Brandt was a painter, metalworker, designer, and artist who attended the Bauhaus School. Brandt's sleek metal designs—lamps, teapots, and other housewares—are famous, but her photomontages are not. This collage presents a fragmented and unsettling vision of a city. Disparate architectural elements—from towering recently-built skyscrapers and modernist housing developments to ancient caves—are juxtaposed. This juxtaposition highlights the differences and creates a sense of disorientation. The positioning of the various image fragments draws both the eyes of the viewer and the subject matter toward the center of the canvas. This may reinforce the image's overall “unnerving” feeling.

A “New Woman” with a short haircut stares out at the viewer. This stands in contrast to a group of (likely) African (nation unknown) children and a dancer with a feathered costume—both of whom gaze downward or into the center of the image. This contrast may serve to highlight the artist's views on the intrusive nature of German colonialism in Africa, or comment on how German perspectives on “modernity” were influenced by Germany's colonizing projects. Brandt selected images from architecture magazines and other Weimar-era magazines that discussed the post-World War I dismantling of Germany's colonial empire. The placement of the images that Brandt selected may convey a sense that the buildings and architectural elements are holding the city—and thus modernity—together. At the same time, however, bicycles, planes, and a car with its top down seem poised to “escape” the image, indicating that modern transportation technologies may eventually break down barriers between societies. Finally, a single figure of a skydiver being sucked downward toward the “unnerving city” may represent the confusion and ambivalence of modernity.

### Slide 2: Alice Lex-Nerlinger, *Work, Work, Work*

Alice Lex-Nerlinger was born and worked in Berlin. A member of the KPD (Communist Party of Germany), Lex-Nerlinger saw her role as a voice for workers. She rejected other forms of art that were popular at the time in favor of using photography in new ways to make social statements. In her memoir she wrote, “All of [my] work was concerned with the idea of bettering the lives of people. Nothing seemed more senseless to me than painting abstract pictures for snobs at a time when the masses were suffering more than ever.” She designed her works to illustrate the plight of workers earning low pay for repetitive jobs that allowed for very little humanity. In “Work, Work, Work”, for instance, images of a faceless laborer tightly grasping a piece of bread are positioned in a circle around an image of factory machinery. A more relaxed, leather-gloved hand holding a stopwatch—likely representing industrial capitalists or factory managers—hovers ominously over everything, implying workers' ability to eat (and house and clothe themselves, etc.) in a capitalist system was at the whim of industrial and financial elites who prioritized profits over people.

### Slide 3: John Heartfield, *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute: Little Man Asks for Big Gifts*

John Heartfield was a member of the KPD since its founding in 1919. He was also an early member of the Dada movement. Heartfield created this image for the front cover of the popular *Workers' Illustrated Magazine* and it is one of his most famous anti-fascist and anti-Hitler pieces. The difference in size of the two figures in the image emphasizes the idea that Hitler was beholden to the wealthy industrial capitalists who helped finance his campaigns. Many of these same industrialists owned the factories where much of the magazine's working-class readership worked. Moreover, Heartfield's portrayal of Hitler as a “small figure” served to challenge Hitler's self-constructed image as a powerful figure. The suggestion that the “meaning” of Hitler's open-handed Nazi

salute was, in fact, a bid for money from wealthy capitalists likely resonated with many readers of the magazine—many of whom were, like Heartfield, members of the KPD.

#### **Slide 4: John Heartfield, *Germany, Germany Above All***

Heartfield and his brother opened a publishing house in 1917. For many years Heartfield was responsible for the design of book covers they published. This cover illustrates a book that Kurt Tucholsky wrote and John Heartfield illustrated with photomontages. The book, called *Germany, Germany Above All*, was a satirical guidebook to Germany. “Germany above all” was also a phrase in the German national anthem, “The Song of Germany.” Especially during the Nazi period, these words suggested a call for domination of other countries. Tucholsky, like Heartfield, was an anti-fascist. Both likely hoped this book would help convince readers of the dangers of fascism, militarism, and social injustice, and thereby influence them to vote against fascist parties like the Nazis. The book criticizes what Tucholsky saw as the anti-republican elements of Weimar society. These included wealthy elites (symbolized by the top hat), militarists (symbolized by the helmet under the top hat and the medals at the figure’s neck), and the bourgeoisie (symbolized by the tie and collared shirt). The black, white, and red flag of the German Empire hides the figure’s face, perhaps implying nationalists “hid” their real motivations behind the “colors of the flag.” Tucholsky’s book was initially very successful. However, many of Tucholsky’s books were later burned during Nazi-led book burnings in 1933.

#### **Slide 5: Raoul Hausmann, *Tatlin At Home***

Raoul Hausmann, born in Vienna, moved to Berlin while a teenager and helped develop the Dada movement. Hausmann wrote frequently for the Weimar art magazine *Der Sturm* (*The Storm*) and worked closely with John Heartfield, among others. Like other Dadaists, Hausmann criticized militarism and the bourgeoisie, but he frequently also addressed the effects of modern technology on humanity by attaching mechanical devices to heads in his artwork. The Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin served as inspiration for “Tatlin At Home.” Hausmann found the image of the central figure in “Tatlin At Home” in an American magazine. He later wrote that it made him think of Tatlin—but that he was not sure why—and that he was inspired to replace the man’s head with machines.

The mechanical-human figure in “Tatlin At Home” is surrounded by a jumble of seemingly random elements—a map, a man emptying his pockets, and internal organs. These elements may represent the imagined thoughts of the “Tatlin” figure. Another interpretation is that these seemingly unrelated elements are connected by their status as “cut-and-pasted” images taken from mass-media productions (such as magazines). This perhaps implies that Tatlin’s identity, like others in the modern world, is forged through consumption of mass media. Still another interpretation is that this artwork as a whole is “anti-art,” a term used by Dadaists to describe their attempts to create “meaningless” art in order to challenge the authority of leading art figures and institutions to define the meaning of art. Dadaism can also be seen as a broader criticism of powerful figures and institutions for their roles in causing the destruction of World War I.