

WHAT EFFECT DID THE FIRST WORLD WAR HAVE ON GERMANY?

IN EARLY 1918 the German people were celebrating. After years of stalemate the First World War was going their way. On the Eastern Front Russia had been defeated. The Bolshevik government had been forced to sign a humiliating peace treaty giving Germany a quarter of its best land and three-quarters of its iron ore.

A breakthrough!

German divisions were now transferred from the Eastern Front to the Western Front. They made a massive breakthrough all along the Western Front in the Ludendorff Offensive. German divisions were now, at last, advancing quickly through Belgium and northern France. Their leaders encouraged the German people to believe that victory would soon be theirs.

Reversal!

However, the Allies were stronger, and Germany weaker, than it seemed. The USA had entered the war in 1917. Every month it was sending fresh soldiers and equipment to build up the Allied forces. The German army had lost many of its best officers in earlier battles, and its soldiers were poorly supplied after years of the British naval blockade of its ports.

In **June 1918** the Ludendorff Offensive slowed, then ground to a halt.

Disaster!

In **August 1918** the Allies counter-attacked. The German army had little strength left to resist. Within a few weeks the Allies had recaptured all the land that the Germans had gained in the past three months. German territory itself was threatened.

Their army's fortunes had changed so quickly that it was difficult for most Germans to accept they were losing the war, but by **September 1918** it was clear that Germany had to make peace. All enthusiasm for the war had long since gone. Over a million German soldiers were dead and civilians faced starvation. Germany was in a desperate state, as you can see from Source 1. It could not and did not want to fight on. The Allies offered peace but on the condition that the Germans got rid of the Kaiser whom they blamed for starting the war. What would happen next?



Political effects

Germany had had political problems before the war. The Reichstag was weak. Working-class and even middle-class people had little say in the way Germany was run. There was no effective opposition to the Kaiser.

During the war this situation got worse. Opposition leaders were imprisoned. Germany was ruled as a military dictatorship by the Kaiser and his army leaders Ludendorff and Hindenburg. This weakened the Reichstag further.



Anarchy

Germany was extremely unstable. Armed demobilised soldiers were returning home, and joining in violent demonstrations against the war and the Kaiser.

Physical effects

Farming was disrupted because farm workers were drafted into the armed forces. By 1918 Germany was producing only 50% of the milk, and 60% of the butter and meat, which had been produced before the war. It could not make up for this by importing food because in the last two years of the war the British navy blockaded German ports, successfully preventing any food getting in. Many German people faced starvation. In the winter of 1916-17 the supply of potatoes ran out and there were only turnips left. In their weak condition civilians were vulnerable to disease. Probably three-quarters of a million German citizens died from the combined effects of hunger and disease.



Psychological effects

Before the war the Germans had been proud and ambitious for their country. They were prepared to work hard for its success. The experiences of war made many Germans bitter and angry. All the hopes of the pre-war years had been dashed. They looked around for someone to blame for defeat in the war. A society that had been famous for its unity and the obedience of its people now became famous for its squabbling and conflict.



SOURCE 1 How Germany emerged from the First World War

Was there really a revolution in Germany in 1918?

Stage 1: Getting rid of the Kaiser

It was a condition for peace that the Germans got rid of the Kaiser, but he refused to abdicate. This is how events moved during October and November 1918.

25 October 1918

Naval commanders at Kiel decided to send their ships out to fight the British fleet in one last suicidal bid for glory. Sailors mutinied.

26 October-5 November

The Kaiser and his government did not try to send the army to crush this mutiny and it was quickly followed by strikes and demonstrations against the war and the Kaiser all over Germany. Soldiers mutinied and joined the protests.

6 November 1918

By now soldiers' and workers' councils had taken control in many cities. Their main aim was to end the war, but to the politicians looking on there seemed a real danger of a total revolution, like the one which had taken place in Russia the previous year.

SOURCE 2 Gustav Noske, a Social Democrat leader, in a telephone call, 6 November 1918

“ [The situation is] almost hopeless. General chaos is imminent and power is slipping more and more into the hands of the revolutionary sailors. ”

The Social Democrats were the leading party in the Reichstag. They were the party that the workers traditionally voted for. In theory they were socialists, committed to social change. In practice they were cautious and conservative. Their leader, Friedrich Ebert, even wanted to save the Kaiser, but his colleagues knew that if they did then more extreme left-wing revolutionaries would take over.

7 November

Social Democrat leaders sent an ultimatum to the Kaiser that unless he abdicated they would join the revolution.

9 November

There was a general strike in Berlin. Armed workers and soldiers roamed the streets.

The Social Democrats were afraid that the extremists would gain control of the revolution, so one of Ebert's colleagues announced the abdication of the Kaiser and the setting up of a German Republic which they would run in coalition with other socialist parties.

Ebert took over as Chancellor.

10 November

Kaiser Wilhelm fled into exile in Holland.

11 November 1918

An armistice was agreed between Germany and the Allies.

TASK

Look at Source 3. Imagine one of the people in this picture has asked you, 'Why has this happened?' Write out your answer, explaining the events that led to the abdication of the Kaiser and the setting up of the German Republic in November 1918.



SOURCE 3 After the Kaiser's abdication, some of his servants, no longer needed, leave his palace in Berlin

Stage 2: Who would control Germany?

With the Kaiser gone, the Social Democrats were in charge, but they were not in control. Germany was extremely unstable. As we have seen, armed demobilised soldiers were returning home from the front and joining in the demonstrations and violence on the streets. And there was still the threat from the extreme left-wing revolutionaries.

The left-wing revolutionaries

For left-wing revolutionaries, getting rid of the Kaiser was just the beginning. Now they wanted a real social revolution like the Russian Revolution of the previous year. They did not trust Ebert and the Social Democrats to look after the interests of working people.

The main group of revolutionaries was known as the Spartacus League, named after a famous Roman gladiator who had led a revolt in ancient Rome. The Spartacists disagreed among themselves about how to achieve the next stage of the revolution. Their leader, Rosa Luxemburg, thought that they would need to wait until workers in Germany were disillusioned with Ebert's government. But many members of the League wanted to try to seize power from the Social Democrats straight away while Berlin was still in turmoil.

SOURCE 4 A poster made by the Spartacists, entitled 'What does Spartacus want?' It shows how they intended to deal with rising militarism (*Neuer Militarismus*), capitalism (*Kapitalismus*), and the landowners (*Junkertum*)



Rosa Luxemburg was a revolutionary who had fled from Poland. She came to Germany in 1898. So that the police would not deport her she married a German socialist colleague, but parted from him straight after the ceremony.

She was a brilliant speaker and writer, and by the time of the First World War she was a leading socialist in Germany and had an international reputation as 'Red Rosa'.

In 1914 she split with the moderate German socialists when they expressed support for the war. She was soon imprisoned for spreading anti-war propaganda. In November 1918 she was released from prison and returned to Berlin to lead the Spartacists.

SOURCE 5 Rosa Luxemburg, Spartacist leader, speaking in 1918

"The Revolution will be great and strong as long as the Social Democrats don't smash it up."



SOURCE 6 Rosa Luxemburg speaking at a socialist meeting in 1907

The Social Democrats

For the Social Democrats, getting rid of the Kaiser was the end of the revolution. Even that step had been too extreme for many of them. Their speeches were full of Marxist ideas, and they called each other 'comrade' as the Bolsheviks did. But they were actually very moderate and certainly did not want a Communist-style revolution. They were too afraid of losing the support of the rich ELITE – the landowners and industrialists who had been so important to Germany's success before the war. Their problem now was how to keep control of Germany and prevent the more extreme left-wing revolutionaries from taking over.

In a famous telephone call an army leader, General Groener, promised Ebert the support of the army in maintaining order inside Germany, and in suppressing left-wing revolutionaries. Ebert willingly accepted this offer. He also organised ex-soldiers into 'Freikorps' (volunteer corps) to help keep control. Many left-wing Independents who had supported the Social Democrats left them in protest at this.



SOURCE 7 Members of the Freikorps. These were mostly unemployed ex-soldiers with extreme right-wing views



SOURCE 8 Friedrich Ebert (right), leader of the Social Democrats and first President of the Weimar Republic from 1919 to 1923. Born in 1871, Ebert was a tailor's son and himself became a saddler. He later became a Social Democrat journalist, and then a member of the Reichstag in 1912

TASK

Work in pairs. One choose Ebert, the other Luxemburg. Write out how your character might have answered the following questions:

- Are you glad that the war is over?
- Was it a good idea to get rid of the Kaiser?
- What do you think of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia?
- What is the best thing that can happen in Germany now?

Compare your answers with those of your partner:

- a) Do they agree about anything?
- b) What is the most serious disagreement?

The Spartacist rising: January 1919

Through December 1918 there were regular clashes between the government and the revolutionaries. Then in January 1919 some Spartacist members staged an attempted revolution in Berlin against Ebert's government.

On the night of 5 January the Spartacists captured the headquarters of the government's newspaper and the telegraph bureau, but they did not capture any other buildings. In fact, the whole uprising was badly prepared and had no hope of success. They did not get the support of the other left-wing groups. The Spartacist leaders only supported the action when it had already started.

The rising was easily crushed by the Freikorps. On 10 January they took over the Spartacist headquarters. By 15 January the Spartacists were crushed. A hundred Spartacists were killed compared to only thirteen Freikorps.

Most importantly, the Spartacist leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were murdered. These murders robbed the Communists of their leaders and the movement did not recover.

Over the next four months the Freikorps crushed left-wing uprisings in many cities. They killed thousands more Communist supporters.

Ebert had succeeded in dealing with the threat to the Republic from left-wing revolutionaries, but at a high price. He had put his government into the hands of the army and the Freikorps, neither of which could be trusted to be loyal, and he had fatally undermined the position of the Social Democrats as the representatives of the working classes.



SOURCE 9 Spartacists defend the captured newspaper offices behind barricades of rolls of paper

TASK

Write an essay to explain whether you agree or disagree with Source 10. Use the information on pages 11–14. In your answer you should refer to the following:

- change of governments
- 'revolutionary noises'
- the return to the status quo.

SOURCE 10 Imanuel Geiss, a German historian, writing in 1968

“According to many textbooks, a revolution is said to have taken place in Germany in November 1918.

Indeed there was turbulent change of governments in that period, there were revolutionary noises all over the place, but once the dust had settled, it soon emerged that precious little had changed in Germany.”

Who was to blame for the murder of Rosa Luxemburg?

After they were arrested, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were interrogated at the Freikorps' Berlin headquarters at the Eden Hotel and then taken away, supposedly to prison. As they left the hotel, they were hit on the head by a rifle butt wielded by a soldier named Runge and then dragged into separate cars.

Liebknecht was forced out of the car as it passed through the Tiergarten (a park), and was shot for 'trying to escape'. His body was then delivered to a mortuary without any information to identify it.

Luxemburg was shot by a Lieutenant Vogel and her body thrown into a canal, where it remained undiscovered until May.

When Ebert heard of the murders he was, according to eye-witnesses, sincerely horrified and angry. He had not even been informed of the arrest of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. Only that day he had issued instructions for Liebknecht's wife – another revolutionary – to be released.

Ebert ordered an investigation into the murders.

TASK

You have been asked to investigate the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. You know who actually killed them, but your task is to decide if anyone else should share the blame. Use Sources 11–16 and the information on the past three pages to answer the following questions:

1. Were the Freikorps acting on orders from the government?
2. Did the government in any way encourage the Freikorps to murder Rosa Luxemburg?
3. Were the Spartacists themselves to blame for the murders?

SOURCE 11 A declaration by the government's Minister of Defence, early January 1919

“Workers! The government has entrusted me with the leadership of the republican soldiers. You know me and my history in the Party . . . I promise that no unnecessary blood will be spilt. I am to cleanse, not destroy. With the new republican army I want to bring you freedom and peace. The working class must stand united against the Spartacists if democracy and socialism are not to be lost.”

SOURCE 12 Rosa Luxemburg's instructions to the Spartacists, January 1919. Luxemburg was actually not in favour of a revolution at this stage. However, at meetings the Spartacists gave revolutionary speeches which worried the government greatly

“Act! Act! Courageously, decisively and constantly . . . disarm the counter-revolution, arm the masses, occupy all positions of power. Act quickly!”

SOURCE 13 From an article in a government newspaper, early January 1919

“The despicable actions of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg soil the revolution and endanger all its achievements. The masses must not sit quiet for one minute longer while these brutal beasts and their followers paralyse the activities of the republican government and incite the people more and more to civil war.”

SOURCE 14 The opinion of German historian H. Heiber in his book *The Weimar Republic*, 1993

“The government had not only given its approval to the forming of the Freikorps, but had participated actively in forming them. Those troops who were available for the purpose were for the most part men who had no homes and no jobs to go to, or who were reluctant to return to civilian life. All these Freikorps pursued their own policies, and very soon ceased to take any notice of the military leadership. They certainly took not the slightest notice of the despised democratic ministers.”



SOURCE 15 Members of the Freikorps at the Eden Hotel on the day after Luxemburg's murder. One of her murderers, Runge, is sitting at the table (centre), with the dark moustache



SOURCE 16 Spartacist demonstrators carrying placards showing their murdered leaders, January 1919

Lieutenant Vogel was convicted of failing to report a death and of illegally disposing of a corpse. He had no difficulty in obtaining a false passport and crossing the Dutch border. After waiting in Holland for a few months he returned to Germany. He was never imprisoned. Private Runge served a sentence of several months for 'attempted manslaughter'.

Why did the Germans hate the Treaty of Versailles so much?

JUST FOUR DAYS after the Spartacist Uprising was crushed Germany held a general election. In the new National Assembly the Social Democrats were the largest party, and Ebert was the first President of the new Weimar Republic. It was called this because the government met in the town of Weimar – the capital Berlin was considered too unstable a place for it to meet.

As you have already seen, the Social Democrats had their work cut out just keeping control of Germany. But they also had another big problem – negotiating a peace treaty to end the First World War.

What kind of treaty were the Germans expecting?

After the First World War the Germans knew they would have to pay a price for peace. However, they had several reasons for hoping that the peace treaty would not be a harsh one.

The Kaiser had gone: Germany had a new democratic government

One of the Allies' conditions for peace was that the Kaiser be removed and democratic government be brought in. By January 1919 the Germans had already fulfilled that requirement. The revolution had overthrown the Kaiser. The new government was democratically elected. It could not be blamed for the war.

The new republic needed support

The Social Democrat leaders expected they would have great problems settling Germany down after the chaos of war and revolution. They assumed that the Allies would want to help them and give their new government a good chance to establish itself. A harsh treaty would make it far more difficult for them to create a stable government.

President Wilson believed in a fair treaty

President Wilson of the USA was to be the main force in the treaty negotiations. He believed that the treaty should not be too harsh on Germany. He said that if the treaty punished Germany too greatly it might one day recover and want revenge. He had declared 'Fourteen Points' that he believed should be features of a just and fair treaty.

Germany was not to blame for the war

Most Germans felt that all countries should bear equal blame for the First World War. In their view, Germany had been forced into war by the way it was treated by other countries. They did not expect to be punished as if they were the guilty party.

What kind of treaty did the Germans get?

When the Allies assembled at Versailles in 1919 to draw up the treaty, it soon became clear that the Germans were not going to get what they hoped for. Despite Wilson's hopes the emphasis seemed to be on punishing Germany. The French, in particular, wanted a peace which would weaken Germany so much that there would be no chance of it attacking France in the future.

Germany was not invited to the negotiations. The treaty was agreed by the Allies and then presented to Germany for signing. When the Germans refused to sign it they were told that if they did not sign, war would start again.

Finally, Germany had no choice but to accept. On 28 June 1919 the German representatives reluctantly signed the Treaty. But they called it 'the shameful diktat of Versailles'. Source 1 shows the terms of the Treaty.

■ ACTIVITY

To most Germans, these terms were humiliating and unfair. It is 29 June 1919. Plan out a full-page feature for a German newspaper, summarising the main points and explaining why these terms are unfair to Germany.

SOURCE 1 The terms of the Treaty of Versailles

War guilt



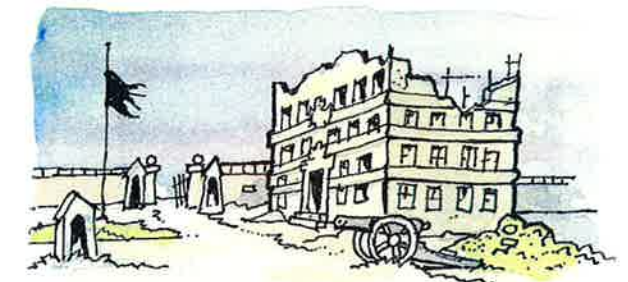
Article 231 of the Treaty said that Germany was to blame for causing the war. This was the term that the Germans most resented. To them the war had been one of self-defence.

Reparations



As Germany was held to be responsible for the war, the Allies could claim REPARATIONS (compensation) for damage caused by the war. In 1921 a special commission fixed a sum of £6600 million to be paid in annual instalments. Given that the Treaty also took away from Germany around 10% of its industry and 15% of its agricultural land, there was great doubt as to whether Germany could actually afford this.

Military restrictions



The French desire for security meant that the German armed forces had to be drastically reduced.

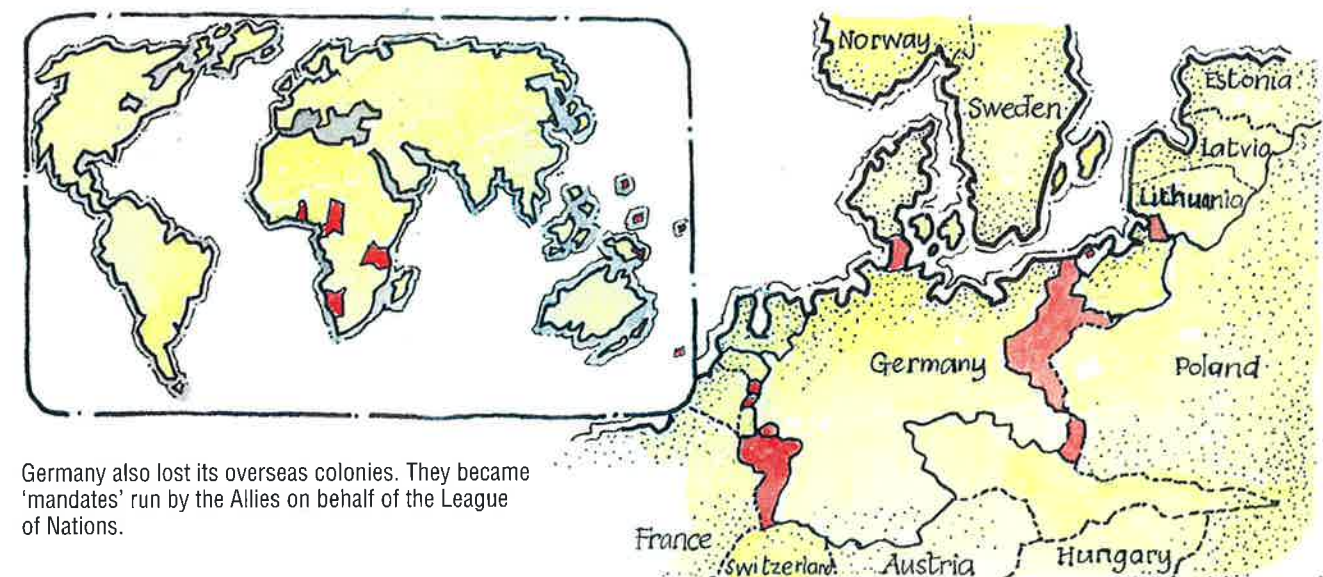
- The air force had to be disbanded
- The army was limited to 100,000 soldiers
- The navy was limited to 15,000 sailors, only six battleships and no submarines
- The Rhineland would be occupied by the Allies for fifteen years, and no German troops allowed in the area.

For a great power like Germany, these changes would reduce its armed forces to a humiliatingly low level.

Territorial losses

Germany lost 13% of its land, which contained about six million of its people.

- Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France
- West Prussia and Posen (the Polish Corridor) were lost to Poland
- After PLEBISCITES (votes) in 1920–21 by the people who lived there, the following areas were also lost:
 - Eupen and Malmedy to Belgium
 - Northern Schleswig to Denmark
 - Part of Upper Silesia to Poland
 - Danzig was taken over by the League of Nations as a free city
 - Memel was taken over by the League but was eventually taken by Lithuania in 1923
 - The Saarland was taken over by the League of Nations for fifteen years. There would then be a plebiscite to determine its future.



Germany also lost its overseas colonies. They became 'mandates' run by the Allies on behalf of the League of Nations.

How did Germans react to the Treaty?

WHEN THE TERMS of the Treaty first became known, the German government refused to sign it, and resigned. It was a hopeless gesture. The Allies made it clear that if the Germans did not sign, they would resume the war.

A new government was formed which did agree to sign the Treaty. It did not believe that the Treaty was fair any more than the previous government did, but knew it had no choice. As responsible politicians they had to sign. To allow war to restart would be suicidal for Germany.

But from the moment the Treaty was signed, many promised to do all they could to overthrow it.

The 'Stab in the Back' myth

The Treaty of Versailles greatly weakened the new government of Germany. It suited many Germans to believe that Germany had never really lost the war. Army leaders like Ludendorff encouraged this view. He said the army would have fought on to preserve Germany's honour, if only weak politicians and Communist revolutionaries had not demanded peace.

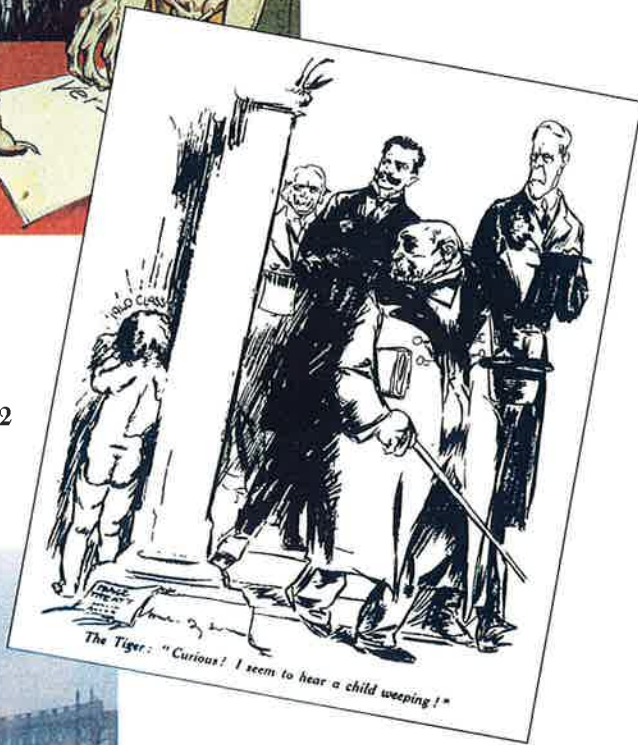
A powerful myth developed which said that the army had been 'stabbed in the back' by weak politicians. Right-wingers who looked back fondly to the pre-war days when Germany was powerful were happy to blame the new democratic government for making peace.

The Treaty became a symbol of Germany's humiliation and defeat. As you can see from Sources 1-8, it aroused strong feelings.



SOURCE 1

SOURCE 2



SOURCE 3

SOURCE 4

"Today in the Hall of Mirrors [at Versailles] the disgraceful treaty is being signed. Do not forget it! The German people will, with unceasing labour, press forward to reconquer the place among the nations to which they are entitled."

SOURCE 5



The aftermath of the Treaty – the Kapp Putsch

From the start, many Germans resented the Treaty. This resentment posed a great threat to the stability of the Weimar Republic. Of all the groups in Germany who were unhappy with the Treaty, the army was the most important. It hated the restrictions placed on it, and blamed the government for having agreed to them. The army was reduced, but many of the demobbed soldiers simply joined the Freikorps.

By early 1920 the Allies were getting worried by the size of these unofficial forces. They put pressure on Germany to disband them, so as to obey the limit of 100,000 men required by the Treaty. In March 1920, when the government tried to do this, Freikorps units led by Wolfgang Kapp marched into Berlin and declared a new national government. The army did not stop them.

Ebert's government had returned to Berlin after its success in the first elections following the founding of the Republic. Now it was forced to flee to Dresden. Realising that they would not be saved by the army, politicians appealed to the workers to help them.

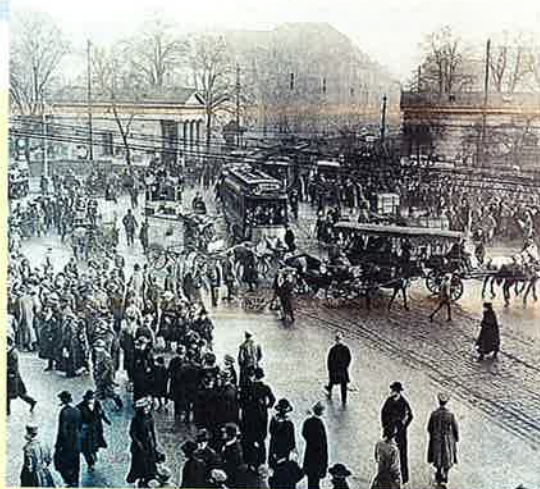
SOURCE 9 An appeal by the Social Democrats, March 1920

“ We refuse to buckle under to this military pressure. We did not bring about the revolution to make this bloody Freikorps regiment legal.

Workers! Comrades! . . . Go on strike, put down your work and stop the military dictatorship. There is only one way to prevent the return of Kaiser Wilhelm II: shut down the economy! ”

This general strike was so successful that Kapp's PUTSCH collapsed within days as public services ground to a halt. However, those who had participated in the putsch were never punished for their actions. Without the support of the army, the government could do little against them.

SOURCE 10 The Kapp Putsch. Putsch troops on the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin wearing helmets with swastikas



SOURCE 11 Transport chaos caused by the general strike in Berlin, 1920

TASK

The government faced opposition from extremists on both the right and the left wing. To deal with left-wing extremists they used right-wingers, to deal with right-wing extremists they used left-wingers.

1. Find an example of each of these approaches on pages 13–20.
2. Do you think this was a good policy? Explain your answer.