

Was the Weimar Republic undermined by jazz, art and dancing girls?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

SOURCE 5.1 *The Waltz* by George Grosz; it was painted in 1921



Have you ever had an argument with your parents about any aspect of your lifestyle? If so, you might be able to understand the cultural clashes that occurred in Germany in the 1920s. The Weimar period saw an explosion of new cultural ideas, both in traditional forms of high culture (such as painting, literature and music) and in the newly developing mass culture. This atmosphere of innovation and democratisation was partly a general European trend, helped by technological developments, but it was particularly strong in Germany. Many welcomed a new culture that they thought would reflect and foster their infant democracy and so traditional values in culture came under attack. There was a general spirit of experimentation, whether in theatre or science or sexual behaviour. Many felt that the arts should both reflect and help shape a new world. In the age of democracy art should be accessible to the masses.

But for all those who welcomed the new cultural climate there were many more who hankered after the past, resented change and saw cultural experimentation as leading to Germany's cultural and national degeneration. The old order and traditions had already suffered the shock of military defeat and sudden political change, closely followed by economic crisis that had undermined traditional values such as hard work and thrift. To many traditional Germans, scenes like those in Source 5.1 were the last straw: they thought their country was doomed unless something drastic was done. For these people, the Weimar cultural explosion reinforced their hostility to the regime.

In this chapter we try to give you some insight into the cultural vitality of the Weimar period, and to examine the effect this had on the prospects for the new democratic regime.

TALKING POINTS

- 1 How do you think someone from the German middle classes, who had perhaps lost his or her savings in the economic crisis of 1923, would react to this painting?
- 2 'Culture reflects the society that produces it.' Do you agree?

- A** What kinds of cultural experimentation took place? (pp. 90–3)
- B** How did Germans react to cultural experimentation? (p. 94)
- C** Review: How significant was cultural ferment in weakening the Weimar Republic? (pp. 94–5)

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Study the material on pages 90–5 and use it to complete your own copy of the table below, noting evidence for each of the following aspects of Weimar culture:
 - A** A spirit of experimentation and challenge to traditional culture
 - B** An attempt to democratise 'art' by making it more accessible to the masses, and to make it reflect the spirit of the age
 - C** The development of new technology.

Aspect	Painting	Literature	Music/ opera	Theatre	Architecture	Film	Cabaret	Radio
A								
B								
C								

- 2 Use the information in this chapter to complete the culture section of your copy of the chart on page 60.

ACTIVITY

Research the careers of these famous people, who contributed to Weimar culture. Do their careers suggest that new cultural ideas won or lost support for the democratic regime?

- Bertolt Brecht
- George Grosz
- Walter Gropius
- Emil Nolde

A What kinds of cultural experimentation took place?

Traditional art forms

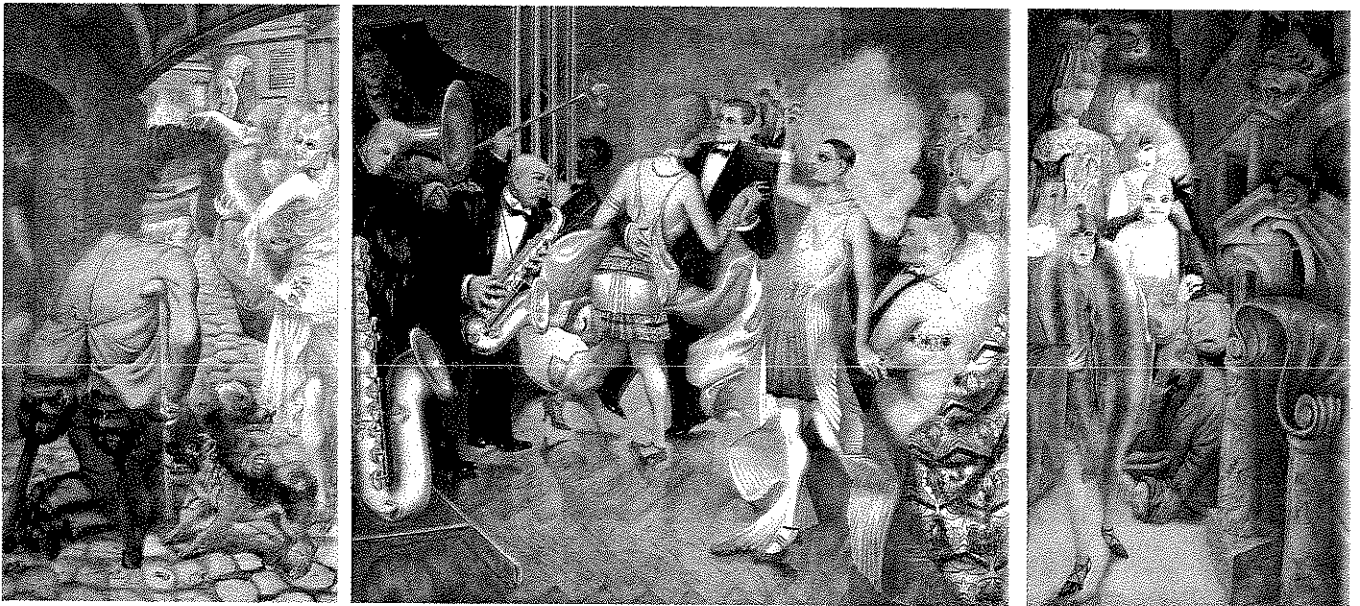
Painting

The visual arts saw an explosion of innovation in form and subject matter, with **EXPRESSIONISM** developing alongside a new emphasis on social comment. New media such as collage and photomontage developed. Artists such as George Grosz and Otto Dix were part of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity) movement, which believed art should comment on society and be understood by ordinary people.

SOURCE 5.2 *Pillars of Society* by George Grosz



SOURCE 5.3 *Big City* by Otto Dix



SOURCE 5.4 John Heartfield and George Grosz, *The Art Scab*, 1920. John Heartfield was a German artist who had changed his name in 1916 in protest against the extreme nationalism of the time

What is the worker supposed to do with art? Have painters given their works the appropriate content for the working people's struggle for liberation, the content that would teach them to free themselves from the yoke of a thousand years of oppression?

No, despite this disgrace they have painted the world in a calming light. The beauty of nature, the forest with the twitter of birds and evening twilight! Do they show that the forest is in the oily hands of the profiteer, who declares it far and wide to be his private property, over which he alone disposes, who chops it down when his wallet requires it, but fences it in, so that freezing people cannot fetch wood?

SOURCE 5.5 A still from the film of Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*



Literature

There was a reaction against writing linked to the personal experience of the author in favour of literature with a social and political purpose. The essential worth of writing was its usefulness. Such UTILITARIANISM itself provoked a reaction from both rightist writers and apolitical avant-garde writers, such as Gottfried Benn. Overall, however, there was an explosion of publishing, with bestseller lists, paperbacks and book clubs encouraging greater reading. Several major novelists wrote during the Weimar Republic, such as Arnold Zweig, Hermann Hesse and Thomas Mann. Erich Maria Remarque's anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* challenged the 'stab in the back' view of how Germany lost the war. Published in 1929, it sold half a million copies in three months and the American-made film was a popular success.

Music and opera

The experimental mood was also evident in music, with Schoenberg's use of atonality. Other musicians advocated *Gebrauchsmusik*, music with a practical purpose. They welcomed opportunities to reach a new mass audience with sound films, the radio and the gramophone. *Zeitopera* (opera of the time) developed, reflecting modern issues from a radical left perspective, notably at the famous Kroll Opera, Berlin.

Theatre

A new school of *Zeittheater* (theatre of the time) developed, employing realistic techniques, such as actors sitting on the toilet, to convey a generally critical message of bourgeois society, and seeking to involve the audience directly. Street theatre developed to take political drama to a mass audience. Drama became the most explicitly political art form, with many left-wing playwrights, most famously the Marxist Bertolt Brecht who believed that 'a theatre that makes no contact with the public is nonsense'.

SOURCE 5.6 Kroll Opera House

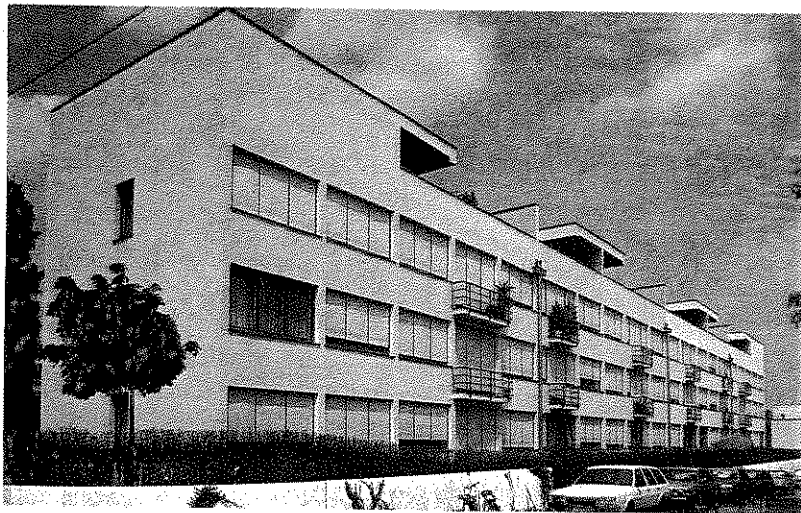


SOURCE 5.7 A scene from *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera) by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht. Based on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, an eighteenth-century satire of London society set in the world of pickpockets, prostitutes and highwaymen, *Die Dreigroschenoper* has a similar low-life setting which Brecht uses to satirise Weimar society. Kurt Weill's music, with its jazz rhythms and cabaret style, made the work an instant success



Architecture and design

SOURCE 5.8 This apartment block in Stuttgart was designed by Bauhaus architects



SOURCE 5.9 The Einstein Tower, designed by Bauhaus architect Erich Mendelsohn, was built in 1921 in a Potsdam suburb



SOURCE 5.10 A Bauhaus tubular chair



Architecture was one of the most innovative areas, with some architects seeing architecture as the spatial expression of a new age. Familiar materials were used in innovative ways: whole buildings were constructed out of concrete, for example. There was great stress on functionalism. The most famous school was the Bauhaus under Walter Gropius. Using the slogan 'Art and Technology – a new unity', members used new materials in bold new designs, seeking to unite art and craft in a utilitarian approach. Their work covered both architecture, especially public buildings, and design, especially furniture.

SOURCE 5.11 W. Gropius, *Programme of the Bauhaus*, 1919

The Bauhaus strives to bring together all creative effort into one whole, to reunify all the disciplines of practical art – sculpture, painting, handicrafts, and the crafts – as inseparable components of a new architecture. The ultimate, if distant, aim of the Bauhaus is the unified work of art – the great structure – in which there is no distinction between monumental and decorative art.

How did mass culture develop?

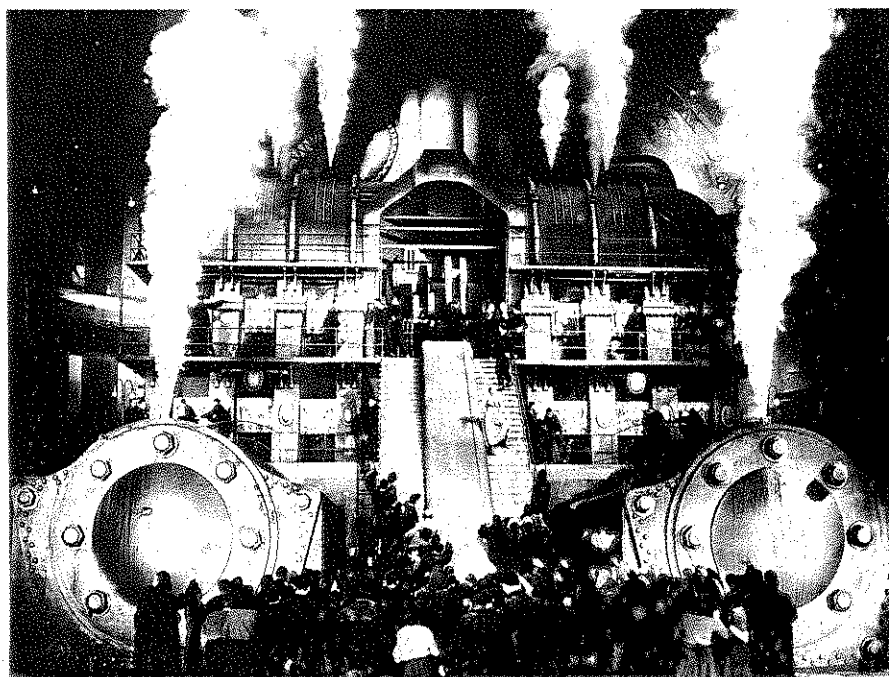
Germany's existing forms of popular culture, such as religious and folk festivals, largely reflected a rural world. Now urbanisation, the growth of consumer goods and new means of communication fostered a modern mass culture. The radio, gramophone and cinema allowed music, drama and new forms of artistic expression to reach ordinary people. Increased public funding of the arts, with subsidies for exhibitions, also helped to involve more people.

Spectator sport and consumerist attitudes were also part of this mass culture, much of which derived from the USA rather than from traditional German roots. Many looked to 'swinging twenties' America, with its mass production of consumer goods and advertising, its new musical forms, especially jazz, and its dazzling film industry, as the way to the future. There was a craze for all things American, from the Charleston to chewing gum, described by one commentator as 'the cheapest way to Americanise oneself'.

Other traditions, such as the subordinate position of women, were challenged. Some women broke traditional norms by smoking, having short hair styles and wearing modern, American-style dress, and they campaigned for sexual liberation. This accompanied a continued expansion of employment opportunities for women in the growing professional and service sectors. The 'modern woman' was becoming far more visible. However, although the Weimar constitution had given women the vote, the regime retained the criminal code against abortion and contraception.

Film

SOURCE 5.12 A scene from *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang's vision of the future, of a mechanised society in which the oppressed workers live a robotic life underground ruled by an upper class of Thinkers who make the plans but don't know how to realise them without the enslaved workers



During the 1920s the cinema developed as a form of mass entertainment. It was welcomed by many as a symbol of the new plebeian, democratic age, using modern technology to involve the masses in culture. By the end of the 1920s there were 500 cinemas in Germany. There was considerable variety in the films made for the German cinema, with a general shift from early expressionism to a greater stress on social reality. There was also a growth in American imports. Marlene Dietrich, flaunting her sexuality, became a worldwide star. The most famous German filmmaker was Fritz Lang, who produced *Metropolis*, a powerful critique of modern society. By the late 1920s, right-wing filmmakers were exploiting this new medium to produce stirring, patriotic films, such as *Fridericus Rex* (Frederick the Great), which Germans flocked to see.

Radio

Radio developed quickly as a form of mass communication. Radio broadcasts began in 1923, and were controlled by the state; by 1930 there were 4 million sets. Many people were enthusiastic over the opportunities this new medium gave to democratise culture, and new music and plays were specifically created for radio.

Cabaret and dance

Berlin, with its 40 theatres and 120 newspapers and magazines, challenged Paris as the cultural centre of Europe. Berlin became notorious for its nightclubs, where naked dancing, subversive songs and open homosexuality lured many, but horrified more. The Charleston became popular, reflecting the mechanisation and democratisation of life.

SOURCE 5.14 Stefan Zweig, in his autobiography *The World of Yesterday*, remembers Berlin in the 1920s

Bars, amusement parks, pubs shot up like mushrooms. Made-up boys with artificial waistlines promenaded along the Kurfürstendamm [one of Berlin's main streets]. In the darkened bars one could see high public officials and high financiers courting drunken sailors without shame. At the Berlin transvestite balls, hundreds of men in women's clothes and women in men's clothes danced under the benevolent eyes of the police. Amid the general collapse of values a kind of insanity took hold of those middle-class circles which had hitherto been unshakeable in their order.

SOURCE 5.13 Dancing girls





How did Germans react to cultural experimentation?

Many Germans welcomed the atmosphere of optimism and experimentation. For many others, however, social and cultural change reinforced fears that their world was collapsing. These fears of cultural decay were politicised by the Right and blamed on the lazy, un-German Weimar Republic. The Centre and nationalist parties campaigned against 'tides of filth'. Bodies such as the Nazi-supported *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur* were created to campaign against nudism, homosexuality, birth control, Americanisation and female emancipation, and in favour of traditional activities such as churchgoing and family prayers. The Nazis organised disruption of performances of 'unpatriotic' films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and decadent theatrical productions at the Kroll Opera House. The prominence of Jews amidst the cultural experimentation was seen by the Right as proof of the harm the COSMOPOLITAN Weimar Republic was doing to Germany.

Although it is always hard to judge popular opinion, particularly in such a diverse field as culture, it seems probable that more Germans reacted against many of the new cultural activities than were attracted by them. There are several indications of a growing reaction against Weimar cultural experimentation. As early as 1926 the Reichstag passed a law to 'protect youth from pulp fiction and pornography', and state governments drew up lists of publications not to be sold to under 18-year-olds, for example true crime, erotic magazines and sex education books. There are reports of audiences booing experimental plays and concerts. Public-spending cuts from 1929 onwards affected the arts: local government withdrew subsidies from avant-garde (experimental) productions, and theatres had to concentrate on more popular productions, relying on income from tickets not subsidies. The increased participation of conservative politicians in state governments after 1929 resulted in several measures against new cultural forms. Wilhelm Frick, who as Thuringian Interior Minister became the first Nazi in a state government in 1930, ordered modern art removed from museums and tried to restrict jazz performances.



Review: How significant was cultural ferment in weakening the Weimar Republic?

FOCUS ROUTE

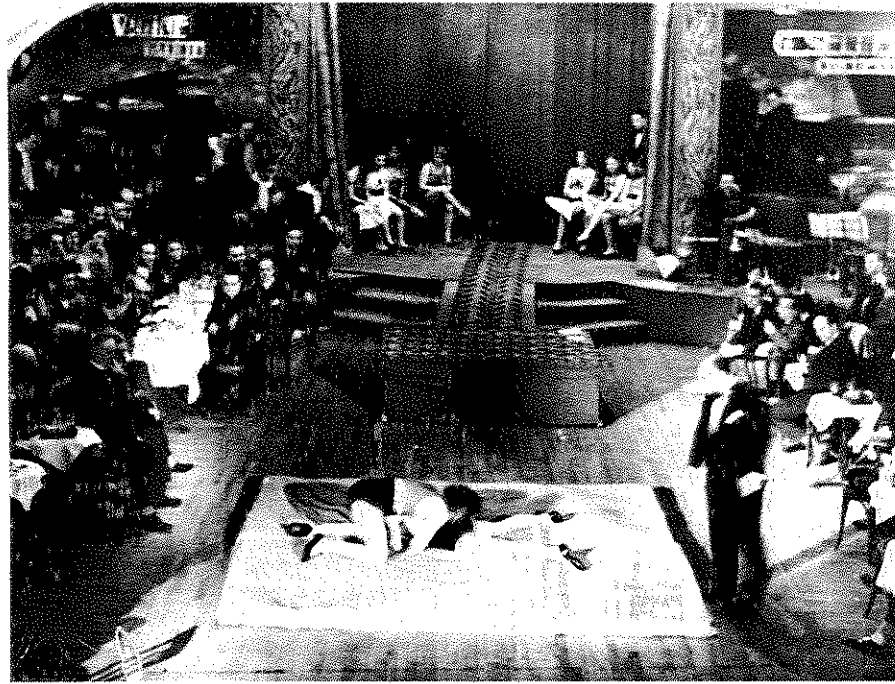
Complete the culture section of your copy of the table on page 60.

In many ways Weimar culture was very significant, as it contained artistic forms that were greatly to influence later cultural development, most famously the Bauhaus, which has been a major inspiration for modern architecture and design. However, here we are concerned with the short-term effects of cultural experimentation on the prospects for the Weimar Republic's survival. As Peter Pulzer has written in *Germany 1870-1945* (1997, p. 116): 'To most Germans ... the energy, the experimentation, the chaotic creativity which made Weimar culture the envy and Mecca of so many foreigners represented *Kulturbolshevismus* (cultural communism), the overturning of forms and values in a world in which too much had been overturned already. The predominant cry was in favour of ... "a conservative revolution".'

Many conservatives blamed the government for allowing traditional German culture to be undermined. This was further evidence of the unpatriotic nature of the new regime. But it was not only the Right that attacked the Weimar regime. Some left-wing artists criticised it as grey and uninspiring; some were attracted to more dynamic communism. In culture, as in politics, Weimar was assailed from both extremes. In return, the state used its control of the radio to limit radical programmes. George Grosz was fined for defaming the military, corrupting public morals and blasphemy.

It is also worth noting that the experimentation was largely confined to towns. In 1932, 46 per cent of households in large cities could receive radio, compared with just 10 per cent in small villages. More Germans continued to go to or take part in traditional forms of entertainment, such as church festivals, choral societies and beer halls, than attended new plays or watched cabaret. However, Weimar culture did reinforce many people's hostility to the regime. Weimar Germany was not ruined by female wrestlers or disfigured paintings, but such activities seemed for many Germans to symbolise all that was wrong with their country and so made them more likely to vote against the Weimar regime or simply not vote at all.

SOURCE 5.15 Women wrestlers



TALKING POINT

Do you feel that your study of Weimar culture has enhanced your understanding of the conflicts in Weimar Germany and the prospects of the regime's survival?

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 5: Was the Weimar Republic undermined by jazz, art and dancing girls?

- 1 Weimar Germany was marked by an explosion of cultural experimentation in various forms.
- 2 This reflected the new optimism, democratisation, challenge to tradition, excitement and modernism of the period.
- 3 Berlin, with its lively culture and night life, became the cultural centre of Europe.
- 4 There was also the development of a mass culture, with the growth of films, radio and consumerism.
- 5 Many Germans were horrified by what they saw as the collapse of traditional moral and cultural standards. This reinforced their hostility to the regime.