The Weimar Republic and the Rise of Hitler

Read the following and summarize each section in 2-3 sentences. As you read this identify (1) 2-3 reasons that democracy failed in the Weimar Republic (2) 2-3 Ways that the Treaty of Versailles hurt Germany, and (3) explain the main causes of the great depression in your own words.

Unrest in the New German Republic
After the war the new German government signed its constitution in Weimar, Germany and thus this period in German history is dubbed the Weimar Republic. Prior to the war Germany had been a weak constitutional monarchy. The German parliament, the Reichstag, was ineffectual as the Kaiser made almost all of the decisions about domestic and foreign policy. After the war many political parties entered this nascent (newly born) democracy, to fight for supremacy. As a result of the many political parties no one single party could gain a majority in the Reichstag and the government would have to form coalitions. This made the democratic process extremely slow and bogged down trying to form coalitions. This did not help the new government who already had many enemies. The communists of Germany launched an uprising in 1919 known as the Spartacists Uprising. They believed that post war Germany was ripe for revolution because conditions were so terrible for people after the war. Their uprising failed but street fighting (often with guns) continued between communist and anti-communist forces for the first few years after the war. Many troops that came back from the war did not know what to do with themselves. They had been fighting for so long that is all they knew. Some of them joined an armed militia called the Freikorps (Free Corps). The Freikorps were extremely nationalistic, very anti- democracy, anti-communist, and especially anti-Weimar government. They fought against the communists and attempted to over throw the government in 1920 in what was known as the Kapp Putsch (Putsch = coup) named after the General who attempted the coup. Germany was politically unstable for the first few years after the war and the reparations put on them by the treaty of Versailles did not help the situation.

Ruhr Crisis, Hyperinflation, and the Dawes Plan
The new German government was in a financial hole before it even began. After the treaty of Versailles, where the Germans were told they had to pay war reparations, the allies decided on a total of $34 Billion in reparations. Germany was also struggling economically as a result of the damage from the British Naval Blockade, which continued until 1919 (until the Germans signed the Treaty of Versailles) causing thousands of deaths. The German government continually had trouble making their payments to allied countries. As a result of this the French invaded and occupied the Ruhr region of northwest Germany in 1923. The Ruhr was one of the industrial arteries of Germany. The German government advocated a policy of passive resistance to the people of the Ruhr. They stopped working and refused to do what the French soldiers wanted them to do. The industrial standstill caused the German government to lose more money. The German Government refused to increase taxes and began to print more money to pay for the reparations. As a result by 1923 Germany began to experience hyperinflation, because so much money was in circulation people money was worth considerably less. For example a train ticket cost over one million marks (German currency) and a loaf of bread in 1923 could cost as much as 400,000 marks. As a result of this food became scarce and unemployment soared, the people of Germany blamed their new republican government for losing the war and for the economic crisis. The election of new Chancellor Gustav Stresemann began to make reforms that would put Germany on the path to recovery. One thing that helped the German recovery in a major way was the Dawes Plan. This was a loan given to Germany by the US. These loans helped the German economy enjoy stability from 1924-1929.
The Nazi party and the Beer Hall Putsch
In post-war Germany many new political parties and groups began to spring up. One of them was called the German Workers’ Party later to be called the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (aka the Nazi Party). The Nazi party’s platform was extremely nationalist and anti-Jewish. One of the main tenants pushed by the Nazi party was known as the "Stab in the Back" (Later the Stab in the Back Myth), this maintained that WWI had been lost by as a result of a conspiracy of Jews and Communists that were now running the government. Their rationale was that the war had not touched German soil so how could they lose? The soldiers were stabbed in the back by the communists and Jews that were now in the new government. The Nazi party had a small following when an army spy joined their ranks in 1920. The government was suspicious of many of the new political parties in the Weimar Republic so they sent spies to make sure that they were not being too radical. The spy sent to the Nazi Party was a man named Adolf Hitler. When Hitler joined the Nazi Party he was member #555, there were actually only 55 members in the Nazi party but they started at 500 to make their numbers seem greater. Hitler liked the message of the Nazis and he stopped spying and became a full member. He climbed his way up to the top of the Nazi Party, becoming Fuhrer (leader) of the Party in 1921. In November 1923 he decided to try and topple the Weimar government. In a beer hall in Munich, the capital of Bavaria, Hitler rallied his fellow Nazi followers and they took to the streets to try and overthrow the Bavarian government. The police opened fire on the putsch plotters and many Nazi’s were killed. The Beer Hall Putsch failed miserably and the Nazi party went back into obscurity. Hitler was jailed for 9 months. He should have been jailed for longer but the judge in his trial was sympathetic to his cause. In jail Hitler wrote his book Mein Kampf, which espoused Nazi ideology like the supremacy of the "Aryan" Race (basically northwestern Europeans), the inferiority of the Jewish people, and the need for Germany to expand and gain lebensraum (living space) to make their empire greater. Hitler would not step on the scene again in a meaningful way until 1932-33.

"The Spirit of Locarno"
After the atrocities of WWI the European powers wanted to have assurances that war was not going to be a problem in the future. People in Europe began calling on their governments to reduce armaments and take a more peaceful approach to diplomacy. One of the outcomes of this desire for peace resulted in the Locarno Treaties in October 1925. This meeting called by German chancellor Gustav Stresemann ended in multiple treaties being signed by leaders of Germany, Britain, Italy, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France. The major powers at the conference signed a treaty that solidified the boarders of Belgium, France, and Germany as stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles. Germany signed an agreement with France that they would not Remilitarize the Rhineland, as stated in the Treaty of Versailles. There were also mutual defense pacts signed by France and Czechoslovakia and France and Poland guaranteeing that each country would come to the defense of the other if they were attacked by Germany. As a result of these meetings Germany was allowed to become a member of the League of Nations. The Locarno Treaties represented a renewed hope for a lasting peace in Europe. In the "Spirit of Locarno" 15 nations, including the U.S., Great Britain, and Germany signed the Kellogg- Briand Pact in 1929. This pact renounced the use of war as national policy, meaning none of the countries that signed the pact would use war a political tool to get what they wanted from other countries. According to the pact war was only acceptable as a defensive measure. These treaties had their shortcomings, but they both signaled a genuine effort by countries to avoid war at all costs and hopefully not have a repeat of World War I.
The Flourishing Weimar Republic
One of the other results of the Germans signing these treaties was that their reparation payments were scaled back. From the years of 1924-1929 Germany experienced peace and stability. Employment improved and Germany truly began to rebuild. The capital, Berlin, was the cultural center of Europe and people flourished. Musicians, playwrights, and artists flooded Berlin. People were drawn to the cabarets (restaurants that would put on musical shows) of Berlin. Germany industry boomed as a result of the reduced reparation payments and the U.S. loans from the Dawes Plan. Everything seemed to be improving in Germany. It seemed like the war was behind them and they were progressing rapidly, but disaster was around the corner.

Great Depression
After the war the United States emerged as the world economic power. This role was previously occupied by Great Britain and Germany, but after the war their economies were weakened. The U.S. funded the Dawes loans that were then used by Germany to pay reparations to other European nations. In essence every country in Europe that was receiving reparations from Germany was tied to the U.S. The U.S. prospered during the 1920’s. Farmers were producing at high volumes, as there was a high demand for their services in Europe and abroad. In the industrial sector many believed that if people were able to supply goods there would be a demand for them. This led to two problems: one was that the wealth of the U.S. was consolidated in the hands of a few people who were able to prosper from the increase in production. By 1929 200 corporations owned over half of all American industry and the top 0.1% of the population had an income equal to the bottom 42% of the population. One of the major reasons for this was that production was rapidly outpacing the wages of workers. This led to a decrease in demand among the masses of people because they could not afford to buy the goods being produced. This decrease in demand created a second problem: overproduction. Overproduction means that there is more of a product created than there is money to pay for it. This means that businesses and farmers who overproduced their products eventually began to lose money because they were making more supply than there was demand. Since they were not producing as much they did not need as many workers so people were laid off and by the end of the 1920’s businesses and agriculture began to slump. Thus the American economy was dependent on the small number of wealthy to invest and buy large amounts, if they could not do this the economy would collapse. The wealthy few would be hit hard by the Stock Market Crash of 1929. On Tuesday, October 29, 1929, also called "Black Tuesday" the stock market fell dramatically (though many point to this day as the day the stock market crashed it had been falling at a steady rate for the past few weeks). Many Americans were taking advantage of the prosperity of the 1920's and were investing massive amounts in the stock market. Some people were buying stocks on margin, which is buying stocks on credit. Basically if you were to buy a stock that was worth $50 dollars you would only spend $10 and the stockbroker would lend you the rest of the money. This works well as long as the stocks go up, but if they start to go down people lose their money and the money that the bank loaned them to buy the stocks. Stock prices started to drop drastically the week prior to "Black Tuesday" and as a result people began to withdraw their money from the stock market. When everyone began to pull their money out stock prices plummeted and businesses and banks lost substantial amounts and began to collapse. People made "runs on the banks" demanding their money which the banks could not give them. Now, let’s be clear about something, the stock market crash did not cause the Great Depression. It exposed weaknesses in the American financial system and exacerbated them greatly. There were already major issues with the American economy before the stock market crash.

Since the U.S. was funding many of the European countries, especially Germany, the Great Depression spread all across Europe and the industrialized world like a virus. In Germany agriculture, which had been struggling since 1927, took a substantial hit and unemployment soared. The U.S. had to halt Dawes Plan loans to Germany and its economy took a nosedive. The German's
looked to their democratic government to fix their economic catastrophe, but they could not. This led the German people to look to a new party to take them out of the storm.

**Reichstag Elections of 1932 and Hitler's Ascendancy to Chancellor**
The National Socialist German Workers’ Party fared terribly in the Reichstag elections of 1928 earning a little over 2% of the popular vote, gaining them 12 seats in the Reichstag. During the 1920’s no single party could bolster the support necessary to gain a majority in the Reichstag. This led to the formation of coalition governments, where many parties joined forces to create a majority. Coalitions mean that parties have to compromise their values in order to get other parties to join their coalition. This makes it much more difficult to accomplish things, it dramatically slows the democratic process. This crippled the nascent German government and kept it in a constant state of crisis, threatening its stability. The years of 1928-30 were the beginning of the end of German democracy. The German peoples’ desire for a dramatic change after the depression began led them to desire new leadership and the Nazi Party fit their bill. The Nazis played to the frustrations of the rural poor and the unemployed and those that feared communist takeover of the government. Their racial and nationalist propaganda began to show dividends when in the 1932 presidential election Hitler ran against the war hero and incumbent president Paul von Hindenburg. Hitler lost the election, but he earned a substantial 13 million votes to Hindenburg's 19 million. The German people saw Hitler as a way to return to a past and prosperous Germany. Many were willing to look past the anti-Semitic message of the Nazi party because of the party’s economic ideas, nationalist message, and their overt disdain for communism. The Nazis viewed the Weimar government as something not natural to the German people, something alien, something posed on them by the "Diktat of Versailles" (the name give to the Treaty of Versailles proposing it to be a dictatorship from outside). They also openly called for an end to the Reichstag and democracy in Germany. The democratic process that heard all voices and all opinions was seen instead as a source of disunity for the German people. The Nazi’s capitalized on this distrust of democracy and the economic downturn to gain 37% of the votes and 230 seats of the Reichstag in the 1932 election. Hindenburg was at odds with the leadership of the Reichstag over who would become the next chancellor. No one, except the Nazis, wanted Hitler to become chancellor. After all he had never stepped foot in the Reichstag and they believed that he was too radical. After much conflict between Hindenburg and the Reichstag leadership they decided that the only way to end the leadership crisis would be to allow Hitler the chancellorship, his party did have the most seats after all. Other leaders of the Reichstag believed that they would be able to control Hitler and get the government back on track. Hitler was named chancellor on January 30, 1933. This was to be the end of German democracy until after WWII.