

Weimar Germany and the Fragility of Democracy

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Over one hundred years after the German Revolution of 1918/19 and the founding of the Weimar Republic on August 11, 1919, “Weimar” continues to resonate all across the political and cultural spectrum. It stands as the premier example for the breakdown of democracy. Its brief, fourteen-year history is etched into the popular and academic imagination by hyperinflation, economic depression, endless street battles, louche sexuality, parliamentary paralysis, and the Nazi victory on January 30, 1933, which utterly vanquished German democracy. Germany and Germans, it seems, were not ready for democracy. Only utter defeat in World War II and American guardianship, so goes one line of thought, turned Germans into willing democrats.

Weimar is the celebrated symbol of alternative lifestyles as well as the dread warning signal of moral degeneration. A simple internet search for “Weimar” turns up thousands of links to articles, books, and websites. The conservative American pundit Patrick Buchanan, who is truly obsessed with Weimar, blames the collapse of the Republic on rampant homosexuality, and warns that America is on the same path unless there occurs a clear-cut reckoning with the forces of immorality.¹ Others offer accolades to the “degenerate chic” style of downtown New York City clubs precisely because they echo the nightlife of Berlin in the 1920s.² One website, depicting the 2017 racist demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, links the slogan “Unite the right” with warning signals of “Weimar America.”³

In Germany especially it has proven very difficult, nearly impossible, to offer a full-throttle recognition of Weimar’s achievements. In one of History’s grand tricks, comparable to Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both dying on

* Professor Weitz passed away July 1, 2022, after completing this chapter but before its publication, and was not able to personally review the proofs of his contribution.

¹ See, for example, the quotes in Ed Brayton, “Pat Buchanan’s Bizarro History,” *Patheos*, October 30, 2011, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/dispatches/2011/10/31/pat-buchanans-bizarro-history/>.

² *New York Times*, arts section, July 17, 2007. See also Eric D. Weitz, “Not Just a Cabaret, Old Friend,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2007.

³ “Unite the Right Rally 2017: Weimar America,” Know Your Meme, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/videos/173466-2017-unite-the-right-rally>.

the Fourth of July, November 9 occurs four times as a momentous occasion in Germany's twentieth century. Working backward, in 1989 it was the date that the Berlin Wall came down as thousands of East Berliners crossed over to the West, signaling the effective collapse of the German Democratic Republic and opening the path to German unification. In 1938, November 9 was the date of Reichskristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, the vast, state-sponsored pogrom in which thousands of Jews were beaten and sent off to concentration camps, their homes, shops, and synagogues ransacked and destroyed. In 1923, it was the date of Hitler's first attempt to seize power, the so-called Beer Hall Putsch. And in 1918, it was the spark-date of the German Revolution. As thousands of soldiers, sailors, and workers demonstrated in cities and towns all across the country, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated the throne. From the balcony of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed the German Republic. A few hundred meters away, in front of the royal palace, the former Social Democrat now Communist Karl Liebknecht proclaimed a Socialist Republic.

Two grand democratic achievements (1918 and 1989) coupled with one farce (1923) and one very grim episode (1938), a prelude to the Holocaust. Nonetheless, it should be possible to memorialize the disaster of Nazi rule and the persecution of Jews at the same time one affirms the progressive and democratic traditions that have also been a part of German history since the late eighteenth century and came to fruition in the Revolution of 1918/19 and the Weimar Republic. Yet November 9 is always a muted affair in Germany. It is not even celebrated as the Day of German Unity. The government proclaimed October 3, the date when the formal unification of East and West Germany took place, as the national holiday. The requisite speeches are pronounced, appropriate lessons delivered in schools. But on neither October 3 nor November 9 is there anything quite like the popular celebrations of Bastille Day in France or the Fourth of July in the United States or many other such commemorations around the world.

Lost in all of this frantic mining of the past for today's cultural and political conflicts are the substantive achievements of the Weimar era, which were founded on Germany's 150-year-long humanistic and democratic tradition. It is worth providing some details here because so many people believe that Nazism was simply a fulfillment of German history in its entirety, as if the German tradition was only conservative and authoritarian.

We can start in Weimar, the city that gave its name to the Republic, because the constitution drafters retreated there while Berlin, in 1919, lay in virtual civil war. But the drafters' choice of the city was also symbolic. Weimar holds a revered place in German history because it was the site, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, of the great flourishing of German culture. Goethe, Schiller, Herder, Fichte, and many others lived there for extended periods,

patronized by the Grand Duke, and produced their poems, plays, philosophical discourses, and scientific studies. However varied were the ideas expressed by these luminaries, along with Kant and many others, all were deeply impressed, at least for a time, by the French Revolution. For all their limitations—notably with Kant around the issue of race—all of them believed in the possibilities of a more expansive and freer human existence than had existed under the royal and princely regimes of the eighteenth century.

The humanist and democratic philosophical stream continued into the nineteenth century with early Socialists like Moses Hess and, of course, Marx and Engels, along with many others. In politics it was manifest in the Revolutions of 1848, both in Paris, where many German artisan émigrés lived, and in the many German states that experienced revolution. The failure of the German revolutions—an indelible theme in German history—did not, however, destroy liberal and Socialist ideas in Germany, while the many '48ers who went into exile strengthened those movements throughout the Americas, North and South.

These democratic and humanistic ideas influenced the creation of the German Reich in 1870/71.⁴ Otto von Bismarck's famous "revolution from above" was both authoritarian and liberal with strong social components, the latter a response to the democratic and Socialist movements in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The Reich as engineered by Bismarck had universal manhood suffrage and an electoral participation rate that puts the contemporary United States to shame.⁵ The anti-Socialist laws from 1878 to 1890 could not prevent the continual rise of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which by 1890 had become Germany's largest party by electoral count and in 1912 had the largest number of delegates in the Reichstag. (Gerrymandering had delayed that accomplishment.) A lively press and popular culture and the commitment to the rule of law (the famed German *Rechtstaat*) made the Kaiserreich anything but a straight-line dictatorship.⁶ Bismarck's famed social welfare programs did nothing to dent the rise of the SPD and the trade unions, as he had hoped. In fact, one can argue that they only strengthened the movements, because the trade unions especially began to train functionaries who could advise workers and operate within the welfare state. The SPD in particular demanded a democratization that went far beyond the constitutional order of 1871. For so many of its partisans, democracy and Socialism were inextricably entwined. Germany was (and is today) a federal

⁴ For the view that the empire embodied only authoritarian elements, see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985).

⁵ See Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Popular Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁶ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

system, and in some localities and states social reform and democratization went far beyond what existed at the national level.

In the years between the turn into the new century and the outbreak of World War I, the SPD, Progressive Party, and Catholic Center Party—the three parties that would form the Weimar Coalition—sought to strengthen parliamentary control of the state, though there were countermoves on the emergent extreme right and in the military, both of which fostered plans for something like a Bonapartist coup. That came to naught as World War I created, initially, a national consensus in favor of war. (Though there were always dissenters in local SPD organizations and on the streets who opposed the war.) The military dictatorship of the war years exercised severe repression. But by 1917, wildcat strikes in critical war industries and bread riots in many cities offered a prelude to the much more expansive popular activism that would emerge in the Revolution of 1918/19 and the Weimar Republic. As World War I dragged on, the three liberal and left-wing parties increasingly collaborated, leading to a peace resolution in 1917 and various other efforts, ultimately in vain, to bring the war to a negotiated close.

The democratic and humanistic tradition in Germany ran deep, even in the semi-authoritarian German Empire, its accomplishments substantial and hard-won. And that tradition served as the foundation for the vast expansion of democracy, social reform, and cultural efflorescence in the Weimar years.

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The Revolution of 1918/19 began with a sailors' mutiny in Kiel in the last days of October 1918. The end to the war was in sight. Everyone knew that negotiations were underway between the United States and Germany. The sailors had no intention to join whatever last-minute heroics their officers were planning, especially not after suffering miserable rations for four years while their commanders enjoyed fine dining on linen tablecloths. So they refused orders to stoke the boilers so the ships could head out to sea. Instead, many sailors headed home from Kiel on the railroad, spreading the word of their mutiny and their demands for an end to the war and better conditions when back on board ship. Their mutiny sparked a popular revolution the likes of which Germans had not seen since 1848. Strikes and demonstrations spread like the proverbial wildfire.

The popular mobilizations forced the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and all the other kings and princes who ruled the German states. The German Reich, forged by Bismarck in 1870/71 as a union of dynastic families and the territories they ruled, was gone, overthrown by the vast pressure exercised by soldiers, sailors, and workers (male and female) who took to the streets in great numbers to demand an end to World War I and an open and more democratic (and sometimes Socialist) system in Germany. The actions they took and the

institutions they forged, like the workers and soldiers councils, however fleeting, gave common people a sense of purpose and achievement, the power to mold the political order under which they lived.⁷ Along with wage improvements, they forced the implementation of the eight-hour day, six and a half hours in the mines, a vast improvement over the twelve- and ten-hour days that prevailed before 1914. These councils were inspired, in part, by the Russian Revolution, but they were also an almost natural outgrowth of popular protest in the classic age of high industrialization. Similar institutions emerged in 1918–1919 in Italy, Hungary, Austria, and many other places. In Germany, the grandest hopes of some of the councils' supporters, for a Socialist democratic system, could not be sustained, but the councils did give people the experience of popular democracy.

Parallel with the popular insurgency, democratic reforms were underway at the top. Notably, in late September 1918, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff, in a fit of panic, had gone to the Kaiser and told him that Germany no longer had the resources to prosecute the war and had to seek an armistice. A series of exchanges ensued with American president Woodrow Wilson and his advisors. The Americans made clear they would not negotiate with the Kaiser and his generals. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were only too happy to throw the responsibility of defeat onto a civilian government. So on October 3, 1918, the Kaiser called the liberal Prince Max von Baden to the chancellorship. Prince Max brought two Social Democrats into the cabinet, the first time the SPD was represented in the government. He freed political prisoners, including the inspiring radical Rosa Luxemburg, who began making their way to Berlin and other centers of the popular movement. Prince Max also eased censorship and instituted other democratic reforms. Notably, the new government established Germany as a constitutional monarchy and began to dismantle the inequitable suffrage systems that prevailed in Prussia and some other German states (though not at the national level).

Too little, too late. The popular movement surged forward. Germany would be a republic, that much was at least clear; what kind of republic was not. Germany entered the period of "dual power," as Leon Trotsky dubbed the months between the first Russian Revolution in March 1917 and the Bolshevik Revolution the following November. Would Germany be a liberal or a Socialist republic or something even more radical, perhaps akin to Soviet-style Communism? The issues were debated and fought out in the workers and soldiers councils, in the streets, in the various Socialist-led governments that took power at the national and individual state levels, and in the parliaments. The issues facing the country were enormous. Representatives of the SPD-led government had signed the

⁷ The groundbreaking work is Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1963).

armistice on November 11, 1918, but a final peace treaty lay months in the future. The army had to be demobilized and returned from its far-flung places of occupation, including France, Belgium, and Russia, along with the troops stationed in Germany's ally, the Ottoman Empire. The economy had to be demobilized and revved up for peacetime production. Hundreds of thousands of the war-wounded had to be treated. Would women continue to work in the factories in such large numbers? To Germany's east national wars, civil wars, and class and ethnic conflicts raged on until 1923, contributing to a great sense of insecurity.

On the same day the armistice was signed, the SPD leader Friedrich Ebert formed a coalition government with the more radical Independent Social Democratic Party. Ebert's slogan was "No Experiments!" The slogan was shouted and printed time and again. According to Ebert and his fellow SPD leaders, now was not the time to create Socialism. The tasks at hand were too great and Germany had to be placed on a steady course. People had to be fed and kept warm, and the winter of 1918–1919 was harsh. The country needed the expertise of the old regime. So Ebert moved quickly to sideline the workers and soldiers councils, his radical partners in the government, and the still more radical ex-SPD members like Luxemburg and Liebknecht who founded the Communist Party of Germany on January 1, 1919. Ebert's government called for elections in mid-January to establish a new government and a constitutional convention. The electorate gave the SPD a significant plurality, and it established a government, the Weimar Coalition, consisting of the SPD, Catholic Center Party, and liberal German Democratic Party (the former Progressive Party), reprising the war-time collaboration among the three. Both before and after the elections, Ebert also unleashed the regular army and paramilitaries on radical workers, resulting in a virtual white terror through the spring of 1919. Well-known radicals like Luxemburg, Liebknecht, and Kurt Eisner were assassinated, and many hundreds of lesser known workers and other radicals were killed.

The constitution drafters left Berlin for the more peaceful circumstances of small-town Weimar. They worked for over six months and produced a document that established the most democratic conditions under which Germans had ever lived. Globally, the Weimar Constitution was probably *the* most democratic constitution of its time. All the political rights enshrined in founding constitutions since the American, French, and Latin American revolutions of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were written into the document, like freedom of speech, assembly, and press, and security of person and property. Men and women were declared equal under the law. The Constitution provided for universal suffrage and the recognition of trade unions. The population gained social rights as well, at least rhetorically. Notably, workers achieved the right to participate in the regulation of wages and conditions of labor.

The Weimar Constitution was a grand achievement. Its meaning lay not just in its specific words and strictures. Like the Revolution, its democratic spirit percolated through society. All during the 1920s people took to the streets in demonstrations, a lively if chaotic expression of democratic rights. Although the authorities sometimes shut down Communist newspapers, by and large Germany had an extremely active free press in the 1920s. Many localities, especially those led by the SPD or the Weimar Coalition parties, spearheaded social reforms. Local governments, trade unions, churches, and cooperatives, sometimes all together, built public housing with indoor plumbing and gas lines for cooking and heat. “Light, air, and sun” was the motto. Public housing, modern, sleek (for its day), and, most important, outfitted with running water, indoor toilets in each apartment, and gas for heating and cooking, greatly improved the living circumstances of those fortunate enough to gain entry to the new buildings. Public health clinics provided care and counseling of all sorts, not least about sex. A new openness prevailed regarding sex, including homosexuality. Jewish life flourished, despite the rise of anti-Semitic movements. Jews had far greater opportunities in business, culture, and society than at any previous time in German history, even if the state bureaucracy and army remained largely closed to them.

The democratic spirit of the Revolution and the foundation of the Republic also stimulated Weimar’s lively and creative culture, which has endured down to the present day. The democracy existed not only in the formal political order but in culture and society as well. Writers, artists, and composers, along with activist workers, believed that they were creating a new world, a more open and progressive, modern world. New theatrical forms pioneered by Bertolt Brecht, among many others; the collages of John Heartfield and Hanna Höch; the extraordinary modernist buildings designed, not only by Walter Gropius but also lesser known (today) yet just as bracing and innovative architects like Erich Mendelsohn and Bruno Taut; the novels of Thomas Mann; the sculptures of Käthe Kollwitz; the philosophical reflections of Martin Heidegger; filmmakers like Walter Ruttmann and Billy Wilder, the latter among many who would go on to legendary Hollywood careers—these are just a few examples of the creative spirit that defined Weimar. Most of these individuals had begun their productive work prior to World War I. But it was the disaster of total war coupled with the Revolution and Weimar democracy that propelled them forward among the greatest of twentieth-century creative individuals. All of them, the luminaries and the lesser known, wrestled in their work with the meaning of modernity, its life-enhancing possibilities and its underside marked by alienation and the human wreckage of war. Despite popular understanding today, Weimar culture was never one-sided, never exclusively about fear, disaster, and bodily destruction. It was also about creating a better, sometimes utopian future.

These were some of the grand achievements of Weimar democracy. The supporters of the Republic were, by and large, Socialist workers, Catholic reformers and liberal professionals. But even the most fervent backers of the Republic would find their loyalties tested by the constant attacks from the right and the sheer volume and depth of the crises that consumed Weimar democracy.

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The constraints on the Republic were great. Another inheritance, different from the democratic and humanistic one, rippled through the German landscape of the 1920s, and it was highly authoritarian. The Bismarckian unification of Germany had democratic elements, but it also remade for the modern era powerful conservative institutions and ideas. Power was embedded in the Kaiser, to whom both the military and the civilian cabinet answered. Neither institution was controlled by Parliament. Bismarck was largely able to manage his sovereign until Wilhelm II assumed the throne in 1888, leading ultimately to the chancellor's dismissal in 1890. Bismarck's less able successors and Wilhelm II's mercurial and not so bright personality lent something of an aura of instability or at least uncertainty to the system in the next two decades, which left more of an opening for the military cabinet to influence foreign policy. The three parties that would go on to form the Weimar Coalition—Progressive (later the German Democratic Party), Catholic Center, and SPD—struggled to assert parliamentary control and had some successes, but never could completely democratize the political system.

Within the state ministries strong conservative elements prevailed. The Foreign Office in particular was a bastion of the old nobility, and chancellors typically served as foreign secretaries as well. The economic ministries were tightly linked both to Junker (Prussian noble) agriculture—as unprofitable as most estates had become—and the coal and steel barons, along with the newer, somewhat more bourgeois sectors of chemicals and production and electric power generation. The infamous *Herr-im-Hause* (lord of the manor) ideology still dominated labor relations in industry, while the highly repressive, early nineteenth-century *Gesindeordnung* (rules of conduct governing servants) continued to determine life on the agricultural estates. (The latter would be one of the first laws abolished by the revolutionary government in 1918–19.) The Justice Ministry was also a reactionary bastion.

This old-style conservatism was both complemented and challenged by two developments from 1890 onward. The first was Kaiser Wilhelm II's self-proclaimed *Weltpolitik* (world policy), which threw off the restraints of the Bismarckian era. Germany, too, had a place in the sun, the Kaiser had determined. The result was the pursuit of imperial ambitions, especially in the Ottoman Empire, and a more forthright colonial policy. The series of reckless

comments and provocative actions that stemmed from the throne added layers of tension to the international order. More specifically, it destroyed the prospects of an Anglo-German alliance, something most observers had thought natural in the 1890s.⁸

At the same time, radical right-wing movements with a pronounced popular dimension emerged.⁹ It goes too far to call them fascist. Most were steered by old-line officers or nobles, as was the case with the Naval League, the Agrarian League, and many others. But they certainly represented a politics that went beyond the limits of Bismarckian authoritarianism, including a potential hostility to the crown itself. A direct line runs from this kind of right-wing populism, significant though kept in check before 1914, to the more virulent and extensive right-wing radicalism of the Weimar years.

World War I brought all the authoritarian elements to the fore. Nationalist sentiment surged through Germany—though not completely so, as is often believed. In the last days of July and the first days of August 1914, numerous antiwar demonstrations occurred in cities throughout the country. The SPD's ultimate vote for war credits was determined by the party's long-standing fear of Russia, the continent's most autocratic power; a concomitant fear of repression and exclusion if the party placed itself outside the national chorus; and the nationalist sentiments that so much of the party leadership and rank and file felt deeply. No one anticipated the long, drawn-out, catastrophic war that ensued. Nor did anyone think (and why they did not is rather strange) that the *political* power of the military would only be enhanced as the country quickly came under martial law. In 1916, the third Supreme High Command under Field Marshal von Hindenburg and General Ludendorff constituted the virtual dictatorial power in Germany, surpassing even the Kaiser's authority.

Revolutions are never pretty. They are chaotic and bloody. But they also offer the possibility of profound and meaningful political and social transformation. As mentioned, the SPD-led governments continually pronounced the slogan "No Experiments!" Over the winter of 1918–1919 those governments limited the scope of revolution and in the process left in power the conservative elements that were hostile not only to Socialism but also to democracy.

In the winter of 1918–1919 all sides had their gaze firmly fixed eastward, on revolutionary Russia. No longer the feared giant, the autocratic power, Russia now signified Communism, terror, and chaos. All the conservative forces in Germany quaked at the thought that such conditions might spread to Germany. They were prepared to make compromises and accept the SPD-led governments

⁸ See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980).

⁹ Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

because they seemed the best bulwark against Bolshevism. The Social Democrats thought the same. For them, the gradual path to Socialism lay through representative democracy and the rule of law. They feared Bolshevism as much as the conservatives with whom they compromised. But the traditional conservatives would back the Republic only so long as they feared something more radical. Within months, for some even weeks, they would start to rescind their support.

The compromises with the old, conservative elites were embedded in a series of agreements over the winter of 1918–1919. In the most infamous, the Ebert-Groener Pact in November 1918 between the SPD chancellor and later first president of the Republic Friedrich Ebert and Quartermaster General Wilhelm Groener (Hindenburg and Ludendorff having more or less abdicated their power as well, if not their titles), entailed the army's recognition of the government in return for the SPD's promise not to challenge the order of command in the army. In other words, the old Prusso-German officer corps and its control of the armed forces would be left untouched by the revolutionary and Weimar governments, however restricted the army would be by the terms of the armistice and the Versailles Peace Treaty. The Stinnes-Legien Agreement between the head of the industrial association, Hugo Stinnes, and the trade union leader, Carl Legien, entailed business's recognition of the unions and, implicitly, the latter's support of private property rights. The government refused to conduct purges of the state bureaucracy in return for the civil service's tacit acceptance of the SPD-led governments. And no one was going to touch the influence of the churches, Catholic and Protestant. A more radical Socialist plan to ban religious education in the schools quickly ran aground in the spring of 1919.

The SPD's fear of "Bolshevik conditions" in Germany is understandable, although in retrospect a Russian-style revolution was hardly likely in Germany. Yet the SPD could have been far more adventurous in its political thinking. It had a brief window over the winter of 1918–1919 when it could have drawn on the popular uprising to institute more radical changes. It could have purged the officer corps and the state bureaucracy, assuring a more loyal army and state. It could have established a constitutional role for the workers and soldiers councils that would have granted them some power within the factories and mines, thereby limiting what would become, after 1923, a revival, at least to some extent, of the *Herr-im-Hause* method of domination. (The factory council law that was passed in March 1919 was essentially a sham.)

Revolutionary moments are rare and precious. In a society with strong authoritarian institutions, they can be used to radically reshape the political order, even though such reforms will always be less than what the most radical revolutionaries demand. But an overly cautious policy bears its own dangers. The limits of SPD thinking, the lack of political imagination in 1918–1919, kept in power those who were not just anti-Socialist but fundamentally antidemocratic

as well. They would go on the attack as soon as possible. The SPD's failures in 1918–1919 lay the seeds for the destruction of the Republic in 1933.

And then there were the Allies, who had their own limited political imagination. The problems with the Versailles Peace Treaty are well known and do not need here to be rehearsed in detail.¹⁰ John Maynard Keynes laid them out already in 1919 in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, an immediate best-seller in Germany.¹¹ One can understand the French and Belgian desire for revenge and reparations. The British too needed reparations to fund the repayment of war debts to the United States. But the plain fact was that the Allies burdened the Republic, not the now-dead Kaiserreich, with the consequences of the war. The Allies should have nurtured the new German democracy, cultivated ties with similar-thinking republican elements in Germany. Instead, the stab-in-the-back legend became a leitmotif of German politics. It had its origins even before the end of the war, when Ludendorff and Hindenburg, in conversations with the Kaiser, threw the burden of defeat on traitors at home, notably Jews and Socialists. The Catholic Center politician Mathias Erzberger signed the armistice agreement on November 11, 1918. The representatives of the SPD-led government signed the Versailles Treaty on June 28, 1919. Every succeeding negotiation over reparations, even when they reduced the burden on Germany, was signed by representatives of the Republic. In negotiations the Allies gave the Weimar Republic almost nothing that it could take home and claim a victory (despite the efforts of the long-serving foreign secretary, Gustav Stresemann, whose public pronouncements always rang a bit hollow).

In that way, foreign affairs intersected with domestic German politics. Rather than supporting the Republic, the Allies gave its attackers ever more ammunition, even when they reduced the amount of reparations payments in the Dawes Plan (1924) and the Young Plan (1929). In the annals of international political failures, the Allied treatment of the Weimar Republic has to rank among the very top.

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The right-wing attack on Weimar democracy began already in late winter and early spring 1919. It was unrelenting and took multiple forms. A series of radical worker and Communist uprisings in 1919, 1921, and 1923 were repressed by the army, militarized police, and paramilitary forces. A veritable white terror reigned at times in Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and the Ruhr, three of Germany's important industrial regions. SPD functionaries often commanded the militarized police forces or allowed

¹⁰ Most recently, Jörn Leonhard, *Der überforderte Frieden: Versailles und die Welt 1918–1923* (Munich: Beck, 2018).

¹¹ John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

them and the paramilitaries to operate with impunity. Political assassinations became rampant, those of Kurt Eisner, the head of the Bavarian revolutionary government in 1918–1919; the Catholic political figure Mathias Erzberger; and the Jewish industrialist, public servant, and *litterateur* Walter Rathenau only the most renowned. The security forces—army, police, and paramilitaries—gained new leases on life through their active suppression of working-class radicalism. As a result, radical workers became increasingly alienated from the Republic. All around the world the Bolshevik Revolution resulted in an angry division between Socialists and Communists. In Germany, the divide ran deeper than anywhere else precisely because the Republic was associated with the SPD and because SPD-led police forces often led the repression of radical workers. In the state of Prussia, for example, the Social Democrat Carl Severing headed the Ministry of the Interior for virtually the entire period of the Republic, while just below him the many conservative holdovers from the Kaiserreich remained in place, only too happy to join in the brutal suppression of the radical left.

Weimar's many economic crises gave conservatives other openings to attack the Republic. In the Revolution, as mentioned, workers had won trade union recognition, the eight-hour day (six and a half in the mines), and higher pay. The hyperinflation of 1923 undermined all those achievements. In that year of extraordinary chaos, including the Nazis' first attempt to seize power, a botched Communist revolution, and the utter devaluation of the German mark, any wage gains won by workers quickly lost meaning, let alone the savings that a few skilled, well-paid workers had been able to accumulate. To reduce a complicated set of developments to their bare essentials, the government introduction of a new currency in November 1923 marked the effective expropriation of large segments of the population. In negotiations among German industrialists and U.S. bankers (both as proxies for their governments), along with representatives of France, Belgium, and Great Britain, the French and Belgians agreed to withdraw from their occupation of the Ruhr, Germany agreed to meet reduced reparations in a timely manner, and American bankers opened their coffers to provide loans to Germany. German business used the weakened position of workers to reinstitute the prewar working day of twelve hours in the factories and eight and a half hours in the mines, an enormous blow. One of the signal achievements of the Republic was destroyed, leading to a crisis of legitimacy among even its most fervent supporters. True, over the next few years of economic growth, the Ministry of Labor, led by reform-minded Catholics, gradually pushed back the working day. Still, the Republic would never fully recover from the effects of both hyperinflation and stabilization.¹²

¹² For the most complete account, see Gerald D. Feldman, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914–1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Conservative sentiments were manifest not only on the estates of the nobility, the manors of industrial barons, and the offices of the state bureaucracy. They were present in popular culture as well, in the many *Kaisertreue* (loyal to the Kaiser) people from all classes and the indelible image of the male bicyclist, his head always bowed, a metaphor for the submissiveness of large segments of the population. Throughout the Weimar years, the annual conferences of the Catholic and Protestant churches provided major fora for the expression of hostility to the Republic, the fount, so the argument went, of moral dissolution, corruption, and political ineptitude. A cacophony of slogans and smears deprived the Republic and its leading exponents of legitimacy. *Schieberrepublik* (usurious or exploitative republic), *Schmährepublik* (republic of defamation), and *Judenrepublik* (Jew republic) were just a few of the insults hurled at Weimar in the popular press, presided over by the magnate Alfred Hugenberg, as well as in the publications of various radical right groups. The *Überfremdung* (foreign flooding) of Germany was another common expression. A photo of a paunchy Friedrich Ebert, president of the Republic, in a bathing suit, standing along with another SPD leader, Gustav Noske, in the waters of the Baltic, did not humanize him (Figure 5.1). Germans, accustomed to the pomp and circumstance of the House of Hohenzollern, the House of Wittelsbach, and so on, found only someone to ridicule. The photo “went viral” as much as the media landscape of the 1920s allowed. More seriously, libel and treason charges against Ebert, Erzberger, and other leaders of the Republic sapped their energies and demoralized them. The drive on the part of conservatives was not to capture or co-opt democratic institutions, but to destroy totally their legitimacy.

The emergence of the radical right was the new factor on the political scene. There were literally hundreds of such organizations in the 1920s. All espoused racial anti-Semitism, the abolition of the Socialist and Communist parties, the revival of Germany’s great power status (meaning first of all the overthrow of the Versailles system), and the destruction of the Republic. Their popular activism and penchant for street violence marked them off from the traditional conservatives. Their supporters were a ragtag combination of displaced World War I veterans, disgruntled teachers and shopkeepers, some workers, and Protestants and Catholics appalled by the supposed immorality of the Weimar Republic.

Only gradually were the Nazis able to establish their hegemony over all these groups. Only gradually also did the traditional right and the radical right come to a rapprochement. Old-line conservatives considered the Nazis uncouth and unreliable, too low class. In the Golden Years of the Republic, 1924–1928, they could largely be ignored. But in the context of the ultimate crisis of Depression,

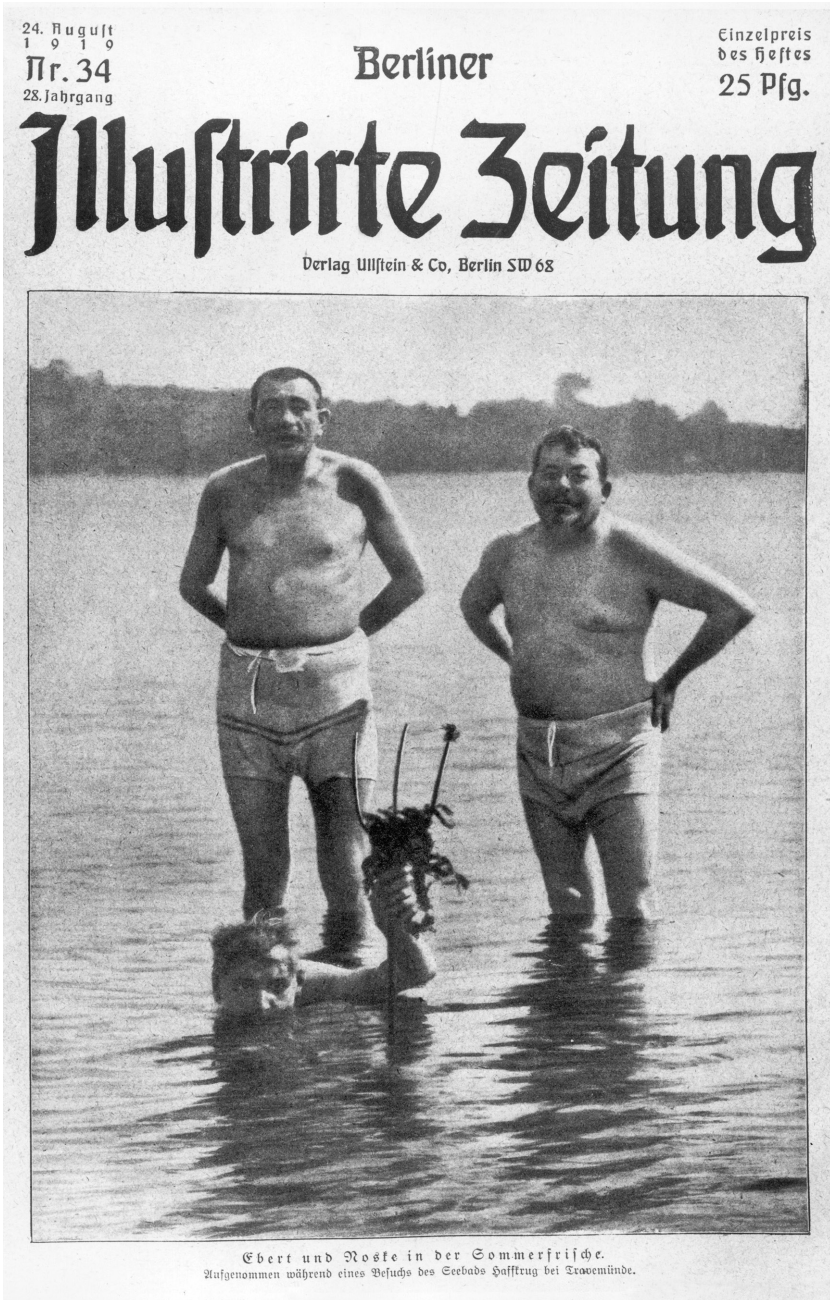


Figure 5.1 President Friedrich Ebert is on the right, his colleague Gustav Noske on the left.

Source: Bildagentur/Art Resource, NY.

when Chancellor Heinrich Brüning's policies only drove the economy deeper into the depths and political paralysis gripped the Parliament, the Nazis, as we shall see, increasingly became an attractive option for the old-line conservatives.

Still, when we look at Germany in 1928, we see glimmers of hope for the long-term stability of the democracy.¹³ During the Golden Years, the living conditions for many people improved. The stabilization measures of 1924 had been harsh, but they did contribute to economic recovery. The diplomatic situation eased as the foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann, pursued the "policy of fulfillment," which meant that Germany would try to get the Versailles Treaty revised while adhering to its strictures and meeting the country's reparations obligations. The Nazis were a marginal political movement, a worry for the security forces but hardly a credible political threat. In the 1928 Reichstag elections, they won only 2.6% of the vote, while the SPD's share of the electorate increased significantly, to 29.8%, over its tallies in the early 1920s. (However, the SPD would never subsequently come close to the 37.9% of the electorate it won in 1919.)

* * *

And then came the world economic crisis, which hit Germany probably harder than any other country, including the United States. Right after Black Friday American banks quickly called in their loans to Germany. A financial crisis very soon became a demand and then a production crisis. Brüning, a highly conservative member of the Catholic Center Party, pursued a deflationary policy that only made matters worse. By 1932, one-third of the German labor force was unemployed.

The Great Depression finally destroyed the prospects for the stabilization of the democracy, prospects visible in 1928. A society already battered by the battlefield and home-front disasters of World War I, the difficulties of the transformation to a peacetime economy, the harsh strictures of the Versailles Treaty, and, especially, the results of hyperinflation and stabilization, now experienced another huge social and economic crisis.

Modern democracies have to deliver to their constituents. They have to provide order in society such that people feel a sense of personal security. They have to ensure that most people have opportunities to pursue gainful employment with the prospect of improving their personal and familial well-being. They have to guarantee that the institutions of state and economy are run with some quantum of fairness and thereby earn the respect or at least toleration of the population. On all these counts, Weimar, for all its great achievements, failed. Even

¹³ For a cultural-historical perspective, see Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik: Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918 bis 1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008) and Moritz Föllmer und Rüdiger Graf, eds., *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmuster* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2005).

during the Golden Years, constant street demonstrations from right and left created an aura of instability. The judiciary, a bastion of old-line conservatives, meted out stringent punishments to Socialists and Communists and let off right-wing activists with minimal or no sentences. And worst of all, the Republic could not master the economic crises it faced. Probably no democratic political order would long survive this litany of economic disasters, including reparations, hyperinflation and stabilization, and the Great Depression. Together, they blasted open a huge entryway for the traditional and radical right to launch their final assaults on the Republic.

In some ways, the Republic was already overthrown in 1930. A grand coalition government had been cobbled together after the 1928 election. It was never a model of cohesion, and it quickly fell apart after the Great Depression hit Germany. The central issue was unemployment insurance. A nationwide program had been passed by the Reichstag in 1927, a landmark piece of social legislation. It was envisaged as a way to ease the effects of temporary unemployment. No one imagined the massive employment crisis that ensued with the Great Depression. Quickly, the program's coffers emptied out. The Social Democrats demanded an increase in unemployment benefits and higher taxes on the wealthy. Chancellor Brüning, a member of the Catholic Center Party, called for a reduction in benefits in order to balance the budget. Brüning, in general, pursued the orthodox deflationary policies, akin to Herbert Hoover's in the United States, that only worsened the economic crisis. Moreover, like many conservatives, he wanted to use the economic crisis to accomplish two overarching goals: to overthrow both Weimar democracy and the Versailles Treaty.

So in one of the great political miscalculations of any democratic order, Brüning decided to call an election, confident that he would win enough popular support to carry out his program. Only hubris can explain why a sitting chancellor or prime minister could imagine that people would vote for him amid an economic disaster. In the Reichstag election of 1930, the Nazi vote suddenly soared to 18.3%. The shock cascaded through society and all the political parties. Even the Nazis were surprised. Nearly a dozen minor political parties together won 14%. The political order became even more fractured, helped along by a proportional voting system that set a very low bar for parties to win representation. The fracturing at the national level was replicated in most states; in some, the Nazis scored an even higher proportion of the votes.

Brüning remained chancellor, although it proved impossible to reach any political consensus. Between 1930 and 1932, Germany was governed by a presidential dictatorship. President Hindenburg, never a supporter of democracy, continually invoked emergency powers under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution. The drafters had envisaged Article 48 as something to be used in rare and extreme circumstances; they were thinking of something like a

Bolshevik Revolution in Germany. Now it became a regular means of governance because a parliamentary majority could not be won for any piece of legislation, minor or major. By invoking Article 48, the president gave Brüning the power to legislate, which he did. His deflationary policies, even allowing the firing of individuals from the once-sacrosanct civil service, only worsened the economic crisis. Moreover, the two years of this presidential dictatorship further delegitimized the Republic all across the political spectrum. The SPD, fearing worse, adopted an official policy of toleration of the Brüning government, which alienated many of its own supporters. For the right, Brüning never went far enough in his attempts to destroy the democracy and the Versailles system.

Three major elections in 1932 only underscored the incapacity of the political system to deal with the immense crisis facing the nation. The first was a presidential contest. A host of parties, including the Nazis, fielded candidates. No one captured a majority, leading to a run-off between Hindenburg and Hitler. Hindenburg was by this point nearly eighty-five years old. He was a man of the nineteenth century, his mental capacity on the decline. Calculating that he was the lesser of two evils, the SPD threw its support behind him, a position that once again alienated radical and even moderate workers. Hindenburg prevailed in the election. For the Nazis, this second effort to seize power—the first being the 1923 putsch—led to internal dissension and, for Hitler, a personal crisis. He probably had a breakdown of some sort. He had not wanted to run, fearing a loss to the revered military leader Hindenburg, and did not know what to do once the loss had registered. But Hindenburg was convinced to dispose of Brüning and called to the chancellorship the still more conservative Franz von Papen. Two Reichstag elections and a succession of governments over the remaining nine months of 1932 only heightened the sense of governmental ineptitude and of the Weimar Republic in general. In the July 1932 election, the Nazis won 37.4% of the vote, the highest they would ever win in a free election. In November 1932, their tally declined to 33.1%, setting off another internal crisis within the party.

Indeed, it is possible to imagine the disintegration of the Nazi Party in these circumstances. Ultimately, Hitler and the Nazis were saved from oblivion by a small clique of powerful men around President Hindenburg. These noble estate owners, bankers, businessmen, and army officers, with Papen in the lead, prevailed upon the president to appoint Hitler chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. This deal marked the ultimate alliance of the traditional and radical right. The traditionalists shared with the Nazis a visceral hatred, not just of Socialism and Communism, but of democracy itself. They both wanted to destroy the left and rebuild Germany's great power status. The more traditional right was also anti-Semitic. If not murderously so like the Nazis, old-line conservatives also believed that Jews exercised overweening influence in Germany and that their power had to be curbed—despite the fact that Jews counted for all of 0.75%

of the German population. The traditional conservatives believed they could use the Nazis to overthrow the Republic and the Versailles system. The Nazis believed they could use the traditional conservatives to achieve the same goal and more. We know who won.

* * *

Weimar did not collapse like the proverbial house of cards. Nor was it a victim of too much “mass”—mass democracy, mass culture, mass society.¹⁴ According to this viewpoint, too many people were constantly out on the streets demonstrating, too many political parties were active, too many demands were placed on the system. The underlying perspective in all of these works is that Germany (and, by implication, every society) needed a managed or administered democracy, not an overly popular democracy, to survive.¹⁵

The overwhelming issue, however, is that the Republic was systematically and relentlessly destroyed by the right, both the old-style conservatives and the dynamic Nazi Party, which represented something entirely new on the political scene.¹⁶ The refusal of the SPD in 1918–1919 to purge the institutions of power—army, state, churches, business—of conservative elements hostile to the Republic proved a huge and tragic failure. From these bases, the old-line conservatives quickly withdrew their support for the Republic. Largely because of the Depression, the Nazis then proved capable of gathering in all those people and forces that despised democracy and Socialism, blamed Jews for Germany’s defeat in World War I and everything else that had gone wrong in their lives, and thought that Germany needed to be, once again, a great power on the European stage. The attacks sapped the Republic of energy; even its supporters, by the end, were weary, beaten down by the intense, unstoppable hostility of Weimar’s enemies and their own inability to master yet another set of economic and political crises.

¹⁴ The sense of mass overload is present even in the classic, highly detailed account of Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik: Eine Studie zum Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie* (Stuttgart: Ring-Verlag, 1955). See also S. William Halperin, *Germany Tried Democracy: A Political History of the Reich from 1918 to 1933* (1946; New York: Norton, 1965). For more recent studies along these lines, see Heinrich-August Winkler, *Weimar, 1918–1933: Die Geschichte der ersten deutschen Demokratie* (Munich: Beck, 1993) and Ursula Büttner, *Weimar: Die Überforderte Republik, 1918–1933. Leistung und Versagen in Staat, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft und Kultur* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008).

¹⁵ This perspective is also evident, if *sotto voce*, in Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). Gay was close to and influenced by the older generation of German émigrés who were writing in the 1950s.

¹⁶ See Hans Mommsen, *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, trans. Elborg Forster and Larry Eugene Jones (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), as well as Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, 3rd Weimar Centennial edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Weimar is a warning sign for today, over one hundred years after the Revolution and the founding of the Republic, of what can happen when the institutions and personnel of a democracy are subject to unrelenting and often vicious attack; when politics becomes a war for total domination by one side; when certain groups are vociferously condemned and marginalized; when traditional conservatives traffic with the radical and racist right, granting it a legitimacy it would never be able to achieve on its own. And it is a warning signal that democracy is always a fragile thing. Democracies cannot prevail solely on commitment to the idea of popular participation. Democracies have to deliver, have to provide personal security, economic well-being, and political stability to their constituents. Otherwise it is all too easy for extreme nationalist and racist parties to gather support, blaming everything that has gone wrong on “outsiders,” the minorities within and the migrants at the border gates.