



Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19-1933

Beginnings: War and Revolution

The Weimar era was a turbulent, energetic, exciting, chaotic, liberating, and frightening period in German history. In strict terms, the Weimar Republic lasted from the summer of 1919, when the Constitution was passed, to the Nazi seizure of power on January 30, 1933. But the revolutionary period that began in late October 1918 with the sailors' mutiny in Kiel and continued through the winter and spring of 1919 decisively shaped the character of the Republic.

Four years of war had taken a huge toll on the German population. The massive death toll at the front affected nearly every German family. A large portion of the population suffered from hunger and malnutrition on account of food shortages, and from exhaustion from fourteen-hour days in the munitions factories that fueled the war machine. In 1916, strikes were already breaking out over wages, hours, and provisions. By 1917, the strikes had taken on a more political edge, and came with demands for an end to the war and, sometimes, with calls for the removal of the Kaiser. Women rioted in marketplaces and in shops. At times, the police even expressed sympathy for them and for all of the families in need of food and coal. But a combination of repressive tactics – e.g., sending striking workers directly to the front – and concessions surrounding wages and provisions kept the overall situation in check. Until the autumn of 1918.

A dual process of transformation developed in that dreary season marking the fourth year of war. On September 29, 1918, the supreme commanders of the German military, Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff, informed Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor von Herling that Germany no longer had the resources to pursue the war. In their view, the country had to request a cease fire and power had to be transferred to the Reichstag. The Kaiser still held to the illusion that Germany would triumph in the war. After all, the German

army still occupied vast stretches of Eastern Europe, far into Russia, a large swath of French territory, and all of Belgium. In the Ottoman Empire, German troops were spread over Anatolia and into the Caucasus.

But the Kaiser had to give in to his generals, who had abandoned the illusions of victory that they themselves once fostered. On October 3, 1918, Prince Max von Baden was appointed chancellor. For the first time in German history, Social Democrats joined the government. Prince Max initiated a reform process that amounted to a very significant democratization of the political order. At the same time, the government exchanged a series of notes with the United States government on the terms of the armistice. The Germans were banking on American generosity and President Wilson's claim that the war would result in a long-lasting democratic peace. The Americans, however, were proving not to be as magnanimous as Germany had hoped.

None of this was happening fast enough for the many Germans who had been so painfully affected by the war, and they directed their anger at the very institutions that had dragged Germany into the war in the first place: the military and the monarchy. Rank and file soldiers and sailors had come to resent the privileges accorded their officers, who were fed and quartered in finer circumstances. When sailors at Kiel were given orders to set out to sea – when everyone knew the war was drawing to a close – they wondered what kind of last-minute, pointless heroics the naval command had in mind. The sailors mutinied, touching off a revolutionary uprising that spread from Kiel to cities large and small throughout Germany. The workers' and soldiers' councils were the most important invention of the Revolution. These grassroots democratic organizations designed to represent the interests of workers and soldiers became the main vehicle for popular demands for an end to the war, the establishment of democracy, better living conditions, and Socialism. They were loosely structured, often chaotic, but they gave workers and soldiers – and as well as artists and the many others who would soon form their own councils – a sense of power and possibility, and the confidence to take matters into their own hands.

It goes without saying that revolution is a turbulent affair. In the first days of November, soldiers began to stream back from the front, workers went out on strike, crowds gathered in demonstrations, and workers' and soldiers' councils met for hours on end. The situation was spinning out of control, and still there was no armistice. By that time, it had become clear that

the United States would only agree to an armistice if the Kaiser abdicated. The popular movement that had mobilized within Germany was also demanding his removal. It fell to the newly appointed Quartermaster General, Wilhelm Groener, to inform the Kaiser that he and the entire royal and imperial family would have to abdicate. Prince Max turned over his office to the Social Democratic leader, Friedrich Ebert, who formed a new government composed of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the more radical Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). Ebert's second, Philipp Scheidemann, proclaimed the German Republic from the balcony of the Reichstag building. A couple of hundred meters away, Karl Liebknecht, the radical Socialist and soon-to-be co-founder of the Communist Party of Germany, proclaimed a socialist republic from the balcony of the royal palace. With a new government in place, the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918.

This marked the start of a three-way power struggle that occurred amidst ongoing popular unrest and the full-scale demobilization of the armed forces and the economy. The new government, the Council of People's Representatives undertook a bracing democratization of the political system. But would Germany become a parliamentary republic, as the Social Democrats desired, or a council republic [*Räterepublik*], as more radical workers and the USPD demanded? And what would be the position of the old elites, the officers, business owners, large landholders, and high state officials who had dominated the Imperial system? Ebert drove hard for quick elections to a constitutional assembly, thereby hoping to marginalize the advocates of a council republic. Looming over him was a fear of Bolshevism, a sentiment shared by many Germans. Order had to be reestablished. "No experiments" was the SPD slogan. Ebert concluded a series of deals that, in essence, involved elite recognition of the new government and concessions in economic and social matters in exchange for the SPD's commitment to maintain the status, power, and privileges of the elites. Workers won trade-union recognition and the eight-hour work day in industry (seven and one-half hours in the mines). The army explicitly agreed to support the government; business and the state bureaucracy did so implicitly. In return, the government agreed to accept the existing order of command in the military, the sanctity of the civil service, and property rights. It was a devil's bargain that secured the Republic in 1918-19, but since the power of the old elites remained intact, it contributed to its destruction fourteen years later.

In 1918-19, Ebert triumphed. Amid serious unrest, including the Spartacist Uprising of January 1919 and the government's unleashing of the army and paramilitaries against radical workers,

the country went to the polls and elected a constitutional assembly, which set at its task throughout the spring of 1919. The Weimar Coalition, comprised of the SPD, the Catholic Center Party, and the liberal German Democratic Party, formed the government. The economy began to revive, fed by an inflation-fueled export boom.

But the country remained in an anxious state. Near-civil war conditions reigned in some industrial areas, and no one knew what the final settlement of the war would entail. The victorious allies had convened outside of Paris to draft the final treaties that would formally end World War I. At the time, Germans still harbored the illusion that they could negotiate with the Allies. But when the terms of the treaty were ultimately revealed, Germans were uniformly shocked. The territorial losses were severe, the restrictions on the size of the armed forces deemed unfair. Germans viewed the loss of their colonies as unjust; they saw the seizure of their undersea telegraph cables as evidence of Allied vindictiveness. Worst of all, they were being forced to accept sole responsibility for the outbreak of the war, and this provided the basis for reparations, the sum of which had not yet been named.

The country was in shock, yet it had no choice. On June 28, 1919, five years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Germany's representatives signed the peace treaty in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles, the very same place where the German Reich was proclaimed in 1871. Six weeks later, on August 11, 1919, the Weimar Constitution came into force. It was a model liberal constitution, providing Germans with the most democratic political structure and the widest political and civil rights they had ever known. Despite all the upheavals of the preceding twelve months, Germany was at peace, the country intact, and it now had the legal basis for a functioning, liberal political order. Under dire conditions, Germans had overthrown the imperial system and had taken hold of political power. It should have been possible, on the verge of autumn 1919, for Germans to breathe a collective sigh of relief. But too many people still refused to accept the legitimacy of the Republic, too many political movements were chafing to challenge the constitutional order.

Politics and Economy

Weimar's subsequent political and economic history may be divided into three periods: 1919-23, 1924-29, and 1930-33. From 1919-23, the Republic was dominated by the Left and Center. The

social and political gains of the Revolution remained in force, though many were eroded by the inflation. Still, the devaluation of Germany's currency made its goods cheaper on the world market, which led to a general expansion of the economy. But in 1923, that turbulent and fateful year, France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr, one of Germany's major industrial regions, because Germany had reneged on its reparations obligations. The government declared a policy of passive resistance, and the economy in the Ruhr ground to a virtual halt. Galloping inflation became hyperinflation, which destroyed any and all possibility of rational economic calculations. On the Left, the KPD gained political momentum, as did a myriad of extremist organizations on the Right. Both the KPD and the National Socialist Workers Party (NSDAP, or Nazi Party) attempted revolutions in October 1923 (the Communists had tried one earlier as well). Both failed.

Having finally recognized the futility of passive resistance, the government ended the policy on September 26, 1923. The way was now open for negotiation with the Allies, especially since France and Belgium had come to recognize the futility (and high cost) of the occupation. On November 15, 1923, the government issued a new currency, the Rentenmark. The result was immediate currency stabilization, but at the cost of effectively expropriating those Germans who had saved money. Complicated negotiations over the course of 1924 finally led to a French and Belgian withdrawal from the Ruhr in exchange for a schedule of reparations payments that Germany committed itself to meeting.

Meanwhile, the SPD withdrew from the government, and the entire political landscape shifted to the Center-Right. Business managed to roll back many of the social gains won in the Revolution, notably the eight-hour work day. With the active support of the Weimar government, owners reintroduced the prewar, twelve-hour work shift in factories (eight and one-half hours in the mines). A series of strikes failed to halt the effort.

But in spite of collapsing coalitions and changing party alliances, the middle years of the Weimar Republic were remarkably stable. The loans extended by American banks helped fuel a major economic recovery and helped Germany pay its reparations debt. The parties on the extreme Left and Right lost ground. In the 1928 Reichstag election, the SPD's electoral fortunes revived and a Grand Coalition government, composed of the SPD on the Left and the German People's Party (DVP) on the Right, took office. A comprehensive unemployment insurance law, passed in 1927, marked a notable broadening of the social welfare state, as did a law that

protected women's jobs six weeks prior to and six weeks after childbirth (though without pay). The Reich government arbitrated many labor disputes and brought work shifts back down, closer to the hallowed eight-hour day. However, the rationalization movement that had taken hold in industry resulted in long-term structural unemployment, especially among youth.

The rancorous disputes over the war's settlement eased as well. In the Locarno treaties, signed on December 1, 1925, Germany, France, and Belgium renounced the use of force to alter the borders between them. A year later, on December 10, 1926, Germany was admitted to the League of Nations. The key political figure in all this was Gustav Stresemann of the DVP, who occupied the post of foreign minister for much of the Weimar period. He represented the "spirit of Locarno" and the "policy of fulfillment," which promised that Germany would fulfill its reparations obligations and at the same time strive to alter the terms of the Versailles Treaty – but only by diplomatic means.

But the Republic needed a long period of political stability and economic growth in order to win the popular legitimacy it deserved. The KPD and both the extreme and the more traditional Right kept up a steady drumbeat of attacks on the Republic, even in the middle period marked by Locarno and economic expansion. It is possible to imagine that, given those conditions, the parties and movements that deprived the Republic of legitimacy would have eventually been marginalized. The Republic had lost the middle class in the hyperinflation and much of the working class in the stabilization. With peace and prosperity, they might eventually have been brought into the republican fold.

The "golden years" of the Weimar Republic, as the middle period from 1924 to 1929 has been labeled, came crashing down with the onset of the world economic crisis in October 1929. The impact of the stock market crash in the United States quickly spread to Germany. By spring 1930, its economy was in free fall as American banks called in their short-term loans to German businesses, and local, state, and national governments. Capital evaporated, leading to a rapid decline in production and, finally, a demand crisis as both consumers and businesses lacked the resources to enter the marketplace. By mid-1932, the depth of the crisis, fully one-third of the paid labor force was unemployed. Even the previously sacrosanct civil service faced salary and pension cuts and dismissals. In a single generation, Germans had lived through total war and hyperinflation. Now they faced a depression the likes of which had never been known before.

The political ramifications were immediate. The Grand Coalition fell apart over the issue of unemployment insurance. The drafters of the 1927 law had established a fiscal reserve for the fund that would tide workers over through periods of episodic joblessness. No one had imagined mass, long-term unemployment on the scale of the Great Depression. The unemployment insurance fund quickly went bankrupt. Social Democrats and reform-minded Catholics demanded increased payments to protect workers from a crisis for which they bore no responsibility. Conservatives, following the standard economic thinking of the day, demanded substantial cuts in unemployment benefits so that the state could remain solvent. The government fell and President Paul von Hindenburg named a conservative Catholic, Heinrich Brüning, to the chancellorship in March 1930.

From that point until the Nazi seizure of power on January 30, 1933, Germany was ruled as a presidential dictatorship. Germans still had an impressive range of political liberties. Freedom of speech, assembly, and the press were still protected, and Germans made full use of the liberties afforded them. But deep ideological conflicts fractured the parliamentary system, making Germany virtually ungovernable, and Nazis and Communists deliberately created disorder in the streets. No effective parliamentary majority could be formed, especially after the Nazis won 18.3 percent of the popular vote and 107 seats in the Reichstag election of September 1930. Brüning invoked Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution to govern by decree. While his legacy remains controversial, he did want to use the crisis of the depression to pursue the goals of the conservative Right: overthrow the Weimar system and the Versailles peace treaty. He sought to make Germany overtly Christian, conservative, authoritarian, and imperial. His successors, Franz von Papen and General Kurt von Schleicher, pursued the same course and were even more willing to traffic with the Nazis in order to destroy German democracy. All the while throughout 1932, the economic crisis continued, providing a reservoir of support for those parties hostile to the Republic.

It was the Nazis who made full use of the opportunity. They invented nothing in ideological terms. Their virulent anti-Semitism, general racism, deep hatred of the Republic and all it represented, strong desire for a powerful leader, and determination to dominate Europe and beyond drew on long-standing sentiments on the German Right. But the Nazis were innovative political organizers. They put the new media of the 1920s, film and radio, to effective use. Hitler barnstormed the country by airplane, the first German politician to take to the skies. Nazi organizers went everywhere, staking out the most isolated villages and the most hostile

working-class neighborhoods. They contributed to the creation of modern politics as spectacle with their mass rallies, street theater, and violent, confrontational tactics.

Whether popular support for the Nazis was due to their anti-Semitism is another point that remains controversial. Jewish life had flourished in Germany, including during the Weimar Republic, even though anti-Semitic attacks became more frequent in the 1920s. In response, some Jews formed self-defense organizations. Overall, the Jewish community remained committed to Germany and the freedoms offered by a liberal political system. The Nazis systematically intensified German anti-Semitism, making out of Jews the cosmic racial enemy. Only through the destruction and removal of Jews, the Nazis claimed, could Aryan life flourish – what Saul Friedländer has labeled the Nazis' "redemptive anti-Semitism." For many Germans, Nazi anti-Semitism was at least acceptable. Even if they rejected the more radical expressions of hostility toward Jews, many Germans had come to believe that Jews played too large a role in German politics, society, and culture, and that their influence had to be in some way curtailed. Still, it was more the economic and political crisis of the Republic than anti-Semitism as such that secured popular support for the Nazis among the electorate.

Ultimately, the Nazis brought together the established and the radical Right. The more traditional elements thought they could use the Nazis to destroy the Republic. The Nazis thought they could use the established Right to come to power. On January 30, 1933, President Hindenburg, acting at the behest of a small clique of army officers, high state officials, landowners, and businessmen, named Hitler to be chancellor Germany. The assumption of power occurred in a legal, constitutional manner. Many Germans were reassured that the new government contained only three Nazis – Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring and Wilhelm Frick – while the other cabinet members were conservative bureaucrats and political figures. Inhibited by none of the established mechanisms in politics and society, the Nazis would easily triumph over their erstwhile allies.

The Weimar Republic did not collapse. The Republic was destroyed by the alliance of the established and the radical Right, who despised the Republic's emancipatory promise and were determined to bring it down.

Culture

In spite of all the political and economic turbulence between 1918 and 1933, Weimar Germany experienced a cultural efflorescence that still resonates to this day. The legacy is profound and extensive – the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Ernst Bloch, the novels of Thomas Mann and Alfred Döblin, the theater of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, photography and film, radio and phonograph recordings, the music of Kurt Weill, the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, the architecture of Erich Mendelsohn, Bruno Taut, and Walter Gropius, the photomontages of Hannah Höch, the essays of Siegfried Kracauer. The list goes on and on. Weimar was a culture of restless questioning – particularly of what it meant to live in modern times. At their best, Weimar’s artists searched for new forms of expression suitable to the cacophony and pace of modern life and a belief in the possibilities of the future. But despair and cynicism were rampant, too. One sees it in the paintings and drawings of Georg Grosz, Otto Dix, and many others. But there was also idealism and joy – in Bruno Taut’s cityscapes, Walther Ruttmann’s films, and in the lively eroticism that permeated Weimar culture.

Sex and sexuality became topics of broad public interest in the Weimar period. Sex was talked about more freely and openly than ever before. Sex reformers spoke in crowded lecture halls and published books and manuals that sold in the hundreds of thousands. Public health clinics dispensed advice about sex and counseled men and women on birth control. For the reformers, most of them liberals, Social Democrats, or Communists, many of them Jewish, most Germans lived in “sexual misery.” Democracy, the reformers believed, should emancipate men and women sexually; and fulfilled sexual lives (for some that meant homosexuality as well) were an important component of a well-functioning democratic society. Sexuality – and the “new woman,” who symbolized female independence and sexual emancipation – became a focal point of deep political conflict. For many thousands of Germans, Weimar’s emancipatory promise played out in the bedroom as well as the halls of governance. But more conservative Germans, the advocates of the sober, restrained sexuality of Christian family life, were appalled by all the sex talk. For them, the Republic fostered immorality and sinfulness.

The cultural and sexual awakening of the Weimar period was not just the result of the war, as is so often asserted. Certainly, the war destroyed the old order, and not just its politics, but also its very legitimacy in the eyes of so many Germans. The Imperial system brought the country untold misery, the hundreds of thousands of deaths on the battlefield, and overwork,

malnutrition, and illness at home. Even substantial segments of the Right demanded not the restoration of Imperial Germany and the Hollenzollerns, but fascism, a new, highly dynamic, far more dangerous right wing. On the Left, Socialists and Communists argued that the scourge of total war could only be prevented in the future through the establishment of democracy or Socialism or Communism, or some combination thereof.

Not just an aftereffect of the war, the Revolution also inspired and impelled many of the progressive cultural and social achievements of the Weimar period. Germans rebelled; they chased out the Kaiser and established a democratic political order. In so doing, they unleashed their political, social, and cultural imagination. The destructiveness of total war and the creativity of revolution animated the work and thinking of Germany's artists and intellectuals and of those who sought a freer, more tolerant existence – politically, socially, sexually. Sadly, Weimar's potential was not to be fulfilled on a permanent basis. Ultimately, the forces of reaction destroyed its promise. We still look back on those turbulent times with wonder and admiration – but also with dread of the violent, hostile reaction that Weimar democracy also spawned.

Overview

The first section includes documents on the end of World War I and the German Revolution. They range from retrospective accounts by major and minor participants to the revolutionary demands raised by sailors and workers and the pronouncements of artists who aligned themselves with the Left. Included are important documents, such as the little-known Mudros Armistice, which ended hostilities between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire; the key provisions and articles of the Versailles Treaty and the Weimar Constitution; and the testimony of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg before the Parliamentary Investigatory Committee in 1919, in which he propounds the “stab-in-the-back” legend.

The “Politics” section contains excerpts from major political party programs, as well as commentary by Arnold Brecht, a high-ranking state official during the Weimar years.

“Economics and Society” covers the major economic trends of the period. Among the more interesting documents are the reflections of George Mosse and Felix Gilbert, both esteemed historians who spent their youth in Weimar Germany but ended up in the United States after

fleeing the Third Reich. Betty Scholem, the mother of the great German-Jewish scholar, Gershom Scholem, was also an astute observer of German society.

“Foreign Policy and International Relations” includes excerpts from major international agreements, many of them dealing with reparations. A number of documents offer contemporary commentary on international affairs.

“The Problem of Civilization” provides insight into the confrontation with modernity. The pieces are authored by prominent writers, political figures, intellectuals, and journalists from the Right and the Left. Few sing the unalloyed praises of the modern world, and all of them are concerned about American influences on German mores and morals.

In the 1920s Germany experienced an architectural renaissance. Modernist architects deployed new materials like steel I-beams, reinforced concrete, and plate glass to create lighter, airier buildings. These unabashed affirmations of modernity were not universally admired. More traditionally-minded observers rejected them as “un-German” and “Jewish.” “Architecture and Urban Life” presents a range of opinions on the new architecture of the Weimar period.

“Sound and Image” explores the new media of the 1920s – film, radio, photography, and phonograph recordings. The cacophony and chaos of sounds and images struck some artists and observers as liberating, others as debasing.

The image of the “new woman,” propagated in films and magazines, discussed from the pulpit and even in parliament, presented the hopeful prospect of liberation to some, and the frightening decline of morals and the family to others. “Bodies and Sex” presents a range of contemporary views on the matter, as well as retrospective accounts by Mosse and Gilbert.

As the documents in “High and Low Culture” illustrate, jazz, new dances, and illustrated magazines were signs of mass culture and American influence that were welcomed by some and despised by others. Despite the new fads and the political and economic turmoil of the Weimar years, Germany retained its stature as a center of scientific research and higher learning in general. Physicists, historians, philosophers, and others flocked to German universities. “Education and Research” documents these developments.

Jewish life flourished in Weimar Germany even as anti-Semitism increased. Although Gershom Scholem emigrated to Palestine in 1923, his mother remained in Germany and ran the family business. Like many Jews, she vastly underestimated the Nazis, as did George Mosse's father, Rudolf Mosse, who headed the Ullstein publishing empire. Their voices, and many others, convey both the vibrancy and the dilemma of Jewish life.

The final sections document the rise of the Nazis and the destruction of the Weimar Republic. They illustrate how the Nazis attracted mass support and forged an alliance with the established Right. The volume ends on January 30, 1933, the day Adolf Hitler assumed his chancellorship.

Eric D. Weitz

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