CITY STREETS AND CIVIL UNREST: THE COSTS OF VIOLENCE IN THE WEIMAR AND NAZI ERAS

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There are so many reasons to talk about the Weimar Republic right now. 2019 marks the centennial of the foundation of the Weimar Republic. Anniversaries provide a natural moment for reflection. There is also a sense of urgency. Newspapers and magazines regularly feature commentary from scholars, journalists, and politicians who draw comparisons between the early 1930s and our current moment. At universities, students are eager to discuss and debate such comparisons. As historians of the Weimar Republic, we cannot greet this surge of interest in our field with unqualified enthusiasm. It means that we are living in difficult and uncertain times.

Yes, there are many specific reasons to discuss the Weimar Republic right now. Yet, I would argue that the topic should never fade too far from view. It should remain with us both in times of apparent stability and obvious fracture. For historians, I can think of no more important case study in the collapse of a liberal democracy. And, as citizens, this should be part of our general civic knowledge. First, the collapse of the Weimar Republic is important because of the type of society in which it occurred: in the most powerful industrialized economy on the European continent, in a highly educated society, and in a place where citizens had demanded democracy for decades and won. Second, the Weimar Republic is important because, before its collapse, it demonstrated resilience. The Republic survived for fourteen years despite significant threats. It staved off the authoritarian turn longer than some of the other republics that arose and succumbed in the aftermath of the First World War. Finally and above all, the Weimar Republic is important because of the catastrophic consequences of its collapse: brutal dictatorship, world war, and the Holocaust.

Of course, I am hardly the first person to emphasize the Weimar Republic’s importance as a topic of study.1 This is particularly true for the Republic’s final years. This era, the late 1920s and early 1930s, was the first to draw the attention of historians. The topic of collapse formed the foundation of the field. Indeed, these inquiries began in

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the 1950s when historians were writing the history of living memory. Scholars identified these as the most consequential questions: How much agency did officials have in the final years of the Republic to avert collapse and dictatorship? Could its leaders have made different choices, other than declaring economic austerity and executing emergency powers? Would they have? To put it another way: Did the Republic succumb or was it murdered?

By the 1960s, the focus of historical debate shifted from the final years of the republic to its first years. This shift generated a new set of questions: Did the Weimar Republic ever have a chance to begin with? Was there a fatal flaw at the beginning that brought it down in the end? And which one? Historians advanced several possible contenders: a constitution that granted excessive emergency powers to the president, a proportional voting system that nurtured fringe politics, concessions to anti-democratic forces, and the use of violence as a convenient rather than necessary solution to insurgency. Yet, while historians shifted the chronology of their research to the beginning, their conclusions were still very much about the Republic’s end. To use a theater metaphor, the question was: Which gun introduced in the first act went off in the third?

In the decades since the 1960s, almost every major scholar of twentieth-century Germany has weighed in on these debates and offered their explanation for why and how Weimar ended. It is a privilege to work as a historian in this field because of the richness, nuance, and depth of our colleagues’ and predecessors’ work. So much so that the level of scholarship can feel overwhelming or even intimidating to new scholars entering the field. When I began my research as a graduate student, I shied away from investigating and intervening in the well-established debates about the collapse of the Weimar Republic, partly out of caution and partly out of enthusiasm for new themes. Historians of Germany began to contemplate consumer culture as a meaningful topic of research only during the 1990s. By contrast, studies of consumer culture had provided a significant focus for historical research on France, Britain, and the United States already since the early 1980s. These studies centered on questions such as: How did consumerism become a transformative and pervasive force in the modern world? How did it reshape economies, relationships in society, urban landscapes, and even notions of the self? As I began my dissertation, I aimed to transpose these questions to the study of Berlin, particularly to the iconic sites that heralded mass consumer
culture: opulent department stores, alluring advertisements, electrified boulevards, and exotic movie palaces. This approach seemed to fit well with calls from scholars in my chosen field to broaden the study of the Weimar Republic through alternative narratives and to expand cultural history beyond the doomed avant-garde.3

And yet, the deeper I delved into the sources, the more I found myself in a different place than I had intended: immersed in revolution, discontent, and violence. Bullets and bricks shattered the department windows and exposed them to looting. Rival election posters blotted out the alluring advertisements. The electrified boulevards and exotic movie palaces became the scene of demonstrations and riots. In other words, the sites of consumption that I had meant to study changed before my eyes as they became embedded into a much more complex and contentious urban landscape.

The inescapability of civil unrest when chasing stories about consumer culture revealed to me something both about the practice of historical research and the history of the Weimar Republic. If I had gone to the sources looking for violence, crisis, collapse, and had found it, this would have offered one kind of confirmation of the centrality of these narratives for the Weimar Republic. But it is a deeper kind of confirmation when you are not searching for these elements and find them nonetheless. It means that they are not simply significant but rather inescapable.

In the essay that follows, I will bring together narratives of consumer culture and political collapse. First, I will focus on violence in the late Weimar Republic. But rather than violence against people, such as the familiar street brawls between the Communists and Nazis, I will highlight violence against property. With examples like these, we see politics intrude, in often shattering ways, into the mundane activities of daily life, thus revealing the breadth and depth of societal fracture. I will then situate this violence within the larger context of the urban history of the Weimar Republic to show how struggles over Berlin’s streets — the scramble to occupy space and attention — affected how people understood the times in which they lived, in other words: how perceptions of crisis formed and why they mattered. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting how the lived experience of the Weimar Republic — the “lessons learned” — shaped both Nazi uses of the city, particularly Nazi attacks on so-called Jewish commerce, as well as the strategies that Jews used to defend themselves.

I. Violence in the commercial sphere

A good example of the collision of political violence and everyday consumption practices was the Kurfürstendamm Riot of September 12, 1931. It began as a typical autumn evening on Berlin’s west side. Moviegoers bought their tickets. Tourists enjoyed cake and coffee at cafes. Young couples strolled down boulevards illuminated by neon advertising. Suddenly, as many as one thousand SA men converged on the entertainment district. They marched through the streets for nearly an hour, smashing windows, tables, and chairs at cafes and restaurants. They assaulted roughly forty pedestrians, customers, and patrons. At first, many witnesses mistook them for Communists because the young men were dressed in regular street clothes and not uniforms. But eventually the rioters’ chants, cursing Rosh Hashanah and calling for Jewish injury and death, revealed them as Nazis. While the neon lights and bright display windows of the commercial district made a night rally possible in the first place, the illumination also allowed witnesses to recognize and identify Berlin’s SA leader, Wolf-Heinrich von Helldorf, as he gave instructions from a slow-moving car.

The Kurfürstendamm Riot took place within a broader context of civil unrest in the late years of the Weimar Republic. Many of the clashes were party-political in the sense that perpetrators and victims belonged to a political party or one of the paramilitary combat leagues. Brawls and assaults happened in obvious political spaces, outside city hall or speech venues. The Nazis or the Communists were the usual suspects.

But parallel to this overt political violence against people, there was also a surge in attacks on commercial sites. This violence targeted property. Berlin, for instance, experienced an unrelenting wave of looting in the early 1930s. The looting did not erupt within the


context of demonstrations. Rather groups of young men would enter stores and ransack them in broad daylight. Sometimes they smashed, sometimes they just grabbed things. Grocery stores, particularly chains, were the main target. Police suspected a Communist conspiracy behind the looting, but they could find little direct evidence of this. Instead, the evidence was circumstantial, based on the age and gender profile of the perpetrators, mostly young and male, as well as their presumed unemployed status. Few looters were ever caught. Instead, they emerged from and disappeared back into busy streets. Police complained that the streets, particularly in working-class neighborhoods, cloaked the perpetrators and foiled pursuit.

Cases like these remind us that while historians have given much attention to political violence against human targets in the Weimar Republic, property crime was actually far more pervasive. There are, of course, good reasons to focus on assassinations, attempted coups, and gang fights since this kind of political violence helps us to compare the Weimar Republic to other revolutionary examples, such as the French and Russian revolutions. It allows us to compare the Republic to its successor, the Nazi regime, since violence against human targets was perhaps the most salient characteristic of the Nazi dictatorship. Some historians have gone so far as to argue that political violence should be understood exclusively as violence against people. I would argue, however, that property crime during the Weimar Republic reached such a scale that it must be understood as political violence, in terms of motive, opportunity, or effect. From the end of the First World War, rates of property crime rose and peaked in 1923 at three times the prewar level. Statistics included the raiding of farmers’ fields and warehouses, pillaging of weekly markets, and the mass shattering and looting of shop windows that struck entire cities and towns. In 1920, debates in the National Assembly estimated property damage from civil unrest during the previous year as anywhere from 1 to 17 billion Marks. After a brief falling off period in the mid-1920s, the property crime rates climbed again dramatically with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. Retail thefts, for example, doubled.

Taken individually, some incidents resembled “normal crime,” that is, vandalism, theft, arson. Taken together, however, crime on this scale could not be separated from either economics or politics. Property crime gives us a street level view of the Weimar economy. These crimes depended on particular circumstances, such as spiraling

7 For discussions of political violence, see: Dirk Schumann, Political Violence in the Weimar Republic: The Fight for the Streets and the Fear of Civil War, 1918-1933, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York, 2009); Mark Jones, Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919 (Cambridge, 2016);

prices or spiraling unemployment. Moreover, the commercial sphere was riddled with hostility between rival businesses as well as between retailer and customer, both of whom felt exploited by the other.

Property crime also flourished in the context of an overburdened police force that had no strategies to deal with widespread economic desperation or political instability. The police seemed unable or reluctant to conceptualize crime in structural terms. Yet, even if they had, such a problem exceeded their capacities. Depression-era Berlin was a city with 130,000 unemployed young men, who loitered on corners, in courtyards, and in the parks of the city. Which one or group of them posed an actual threat? And what kind? These questions roiled the different detective divisions of the police department. Moreover, the police had tense relations with the public, who accused them of various failures including excessive force, political partisanship, and cowardly inaction.

The inability of security forces to curb property crime, in turn, had substantial political effects as this undermined government authority and legitimacy. In the early 1930s, “latent civil war” became a popular phrase. Politicians deployed it to describe clashes between parties, either in parliament or in the street. Depending on their position along the political spectrum, commentators used the phrase either to criticize the government or to argue for an expansion of its powers. Others, however, used the term “latent civil war” to describe a different experience: shopkeepers used it to encapsulate their experiences of lootings, vandalism, aggressive begging, and menacing boycotts. The Central Association of Retailers wrote the Ministry of the Interior: “The fight over political views runs riot in the streets and in the shops adjacent to them.” They spoke of an atmosphere of fear that caused “incalculable damages not just for retailers but for the entire economy.”

Shopkeepers had limited recourse against attacks. In the early Weimar Republic, they developed techniques to respond to moments of extreme civil unrest. They quickly closed, pulled down heavy iron shutters over their windows, and fled the area. As Betty Scholem wrote to her son Gershom, the renowned philosopher, in 1923, “At the slightest sign of a gathering crowd, all shops immediately close their shutters.” When they anticipated ongoing turmoil, retailers invested in riot insurance plans.

Such strategies could not work indefinitely. The modern shop design and retail practices that had emerged in the late nineteenth century — during a period of relative economic stability and

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9 Correspondence, August 1932, Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch) R 3101/13859.
10 As quoted in Michael Wildt, Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung: Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939 (Hamburg, 2007), 72.
peaceable streets — had aimed at making mass retail alluring and accessible; but they also made it vulnerable. Display windows stoked consumer desire; but glass provided a very fragile and expensive barrier. Piles of abundant goods beckoned to passersby, whether they had the means to buy them or not. The anonymity of chain stores facilitated higher profits for owners, cheaper prices for customers — but also easy escapes and failed identifications for looters.

All of these commercial innovations took civil order for granted. But what to do in a time of civil unrest? Shops could not survive for long with locked doors or shuttered windows. Moreover, in a depressed economy, retailers urgently needed to stoke consumer desire not deter it. The costs — in terms of security investments, damages, stolen goods — fueled shopkeepers’ resentments against government security forces. If the police could not suppress violence in broad daylight, what purpose did they serve? Because of their own precarious financial position, retailers felt entitled to more help from the state not less. They wanted the police to fully occupy and control the streets. If the police failed to preserve order and protect property, shopkeepers wanted the state to compensate them financially for their losses. At the same time, there were few political alternatives that held appeal for discontented retailers. The Nazis, for instance, might promise law and order but they also vilified department stores, retail chains, consumer cooperatives, and Jewish businesses of any size and type. Furthermore, Nazi activists also smashed windows, vandalized buildings, and harried crowds in shopping districts.

Analyzing attacks on commercial sites adds an important dimension to our understanding of political violence in the Weimar Republic. It shows how violence might strike in the midst of everyday life and ordinary routine: while people were shopping, going to a movie, eating in a restaurant, or doing business. A radical party member might reckon with confrontation, even seek it out in the way that an ordinary customer, pedestrian, or retailer would not. For many ostensibly apolitical citizens, this kind of disorder and violence felt more unfamiliar, disconcerting, and uncontrollable. It was a clearer sign of social collapse because it blurred the boundaries between politics and everyday life.

II. Perceptions of crisis

How had commerce, consumption, and politics become so intertwined in the streetscape of the Weimar Republic? At the core of my
work, I argue that both mass politics and mass consumption experienced their true breakthrough moment during the interwar period. By “breakthrough,” I mean multiple definitions of the word: sudden dramatic development, elimination of previous obstacles, and, most importantly, impact. Furthermore, urban space, particularly city streets, unleashed and entangled these forces on an unprecedented scale and to far-reaching and unanticipated effect. Streets became the most consequential mass medium of the era, functioning as both a place of expression and a site of reception at the same time. Unlike print, film, or radio, the street’s potential audience was not limited by price, taste, or political orientation.

Several factors caused this transformation. The Weimar Constitution opened up public space to political expression as never before. Citizens seized urban space in ways that both preceded and exceeded the freedoms granted by law. The Republic’s citizens saw public space as theirs. They believed that space had the power to serve both their political and economic goals. And they claimed it as a democratic right.

In doing so, Berliners transformed the appearance of the capital city. Streets were saturated with expression: walls, fences, and even shop windows were papered over with advertisements and campaign posters. Expression also flowed through the streets in the form of demonstrations, motorcades, and spectacles. Individuals and groups seized space for varied reasons as partisans and as entrepreneurs. They perceived a more liberated society and sensed opportunity in this. Of course, political parties and combat leagues such as the republican Reichsbanner and the conservative Stahlhelm laid claim to the streets — but so did sport and singing groups, dog enthusiasts, gardening clubs, automobile and motorcycle associations, and legions of advertisers. Over 5,000 open air events took place in Berlin in 1928 alone.12

At the same time, space was limited and the attention of urban dwellers even more so. As a result, Berliners used increasingly aggressive tactics to claim space and demand attention. A journalist in 1919 described the scramble. He witnessed the same choice spot near the Friedrichstrasse station pasted over 12 times in an hour, with dance halls advertisements blotting out anti-Bolshevik broadsides.13 To literally rise above the cacophony of signage, advertisers and partisans brought ladders to reach upper stories or overpasses. They scratched off or painted over the texts and images of rivals. When party activists went out at night on campaign, they brought brass knuckles, screwdrivers,

and knives. By the 1932 presidential campaign, they brought petroleum and set advertising columns on fire.

The competition for attention pushed commercial advertising and political campaigning to innovate rapidly: texts shrank, imagery intensified, spectacles disrupted urban movement and routine. Torchlight parades, later a favorite of the Nazis, were so popular with sports clubs that the police instituted special regulations to prevent fires and traffic jams.14 Political parties and commercial advertisers borrowed techniques from each other. The key point is that they learned these techniques in the streets.

As an unintended consequence of such intense demand, streets broadcasted not the single message of any one party or company but rather the fractures of society. When historians analyze any poster of the period, we would do well to remember the context of competition in which it appeared: the shared and contested urban geography. An election poster did not appear in a vacuum but rather as part of an unintentional, conflicted collage. A 1932 billboard to elect Hitler appeared next to one for Hindenburg and below a toothpaste advertisement promising white teeth. Moreover, this signage hovered above one of Germany’s busiest and most dangerous intersections, the Potsdamer Platz. There 300,000 pedestrians crossed everyday through a spinning centrifuge of automobiles, streetcars, motorcycles, bicycles, and even horse carts.

This leads to the question of how police and other government authorities responded to this outpouring of expression, whether they endorsed, tolerated, or condemned it. The answer is more complex than we might expect. On the one hand, government authorities instituted martial law at moments of acute civil unrest. Various bans on expression were in effect in Berlin for 43% of the Weimar era.15 On the other hand, there were also efforts within the Berlin Police force, particularly in the mid-1920s, to adopt a more democratic stance, to put down the saber and the gun, and to pick up the fire hose and tear gas bomb instead. Police described these as “gentler” means that


better suited a republic. Moreover, in this period of rising speeds and increasing urbanization, the Berlin Police developed principles of traffic regulation. These aimed not only to promote public safety but also to contain public expression. These new methods of regulation, however, were more costly than naked authoritarian techniques, that is, they required more police to issue permits and map parade routes, to monitor demonstrations and direct traffic, and to erect cordons and protect protestors from the opposition. Police cited cost as a key factor limiting their commitment to free expression. At the same time, the political and commercial groups who gravitated to Berlin’s streets did so for the sake of visibility and attention, which they saw as a matter of success, even survival. By inserting themselves into traffic, they found ready-made crowds. Causing a traffic jam was a sign of success.

A kind of cat-and-mouse game, therefore, unfolded in urban traffic. Police imposed greater restrictions. These restrictions had the unintended effect of quite literally blurring the boundary between politics and commerce and, in doing so, embedding politics more deeply into the urban framework and daily life. For example, after a 1920 demonstration in front of the Reichstag and the ensuing clash with police ended in forty-two fatalities, lawmakers established a “No Protest Zone” around Berlin’s government district. After the imposition of the ban, protestors would march full force toward the border of the banned zone and then scatter just before they transgressed it. They rode on the back of open trucks, so that if stopped, they could dispute the letter of the law on the grounds that they were riding not marching. Furthermore, groups demanded and were granted the right to demonstrate through business and residential districts instead.
As a result of geographic restrictions on protests, economic critiques moved to the foreground. The scene of a protest had to make sense. Communists marched through the streets of Berlin’s western part to draw attention to class inequalities. The Nazis menaced the same streets to expose the alleged Jewish infiltration of the capital. When police suspended the right to demonstrate altogether, protestors reacted with “flash demonstrations.” A crowd would form, agitate, and disperse before the police could intervene. Increasingly frustrated by the limits of peaceable methods of crowd control, police turned to military tactics and equipment such as armored vehicles. The consequences were deadly.\(^\text{16}\)

Because of growing fervor and restrictions, political action became more de-centralized, unpredictable, and, at the same time, more interwoven into the fabric of everyday urban life. This helps us to better understand the background of riots and looting in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It also explains why retailers in 1932 asked police to dramatically expand the “No Protest Zone” to encompass the city’s shopping districts, that is, to depoliticize the streets for the sake of commerce.

This analysis leads me to two methodological and historiographical observations. First, for decades historians have called for the integration of political and cultural narratives of the Weimar Republic. Even in synthetic works, however, these topics most often appear individually, as separate book chapters. Streets and other urban spaces, I would argue, provide an easy focus for this kind of integrated analysis in no small part because of the types of people who move through them and how they moved through them: partisans, police, government ministers, disgruntled citizens, lawyers, lobbyists, shopkeepers, customers, journalists, academics, novelists, painters, and photographers, and so on. These Berliners in the 1920s and 1930s did not divide their actions and perceptions into neat and distinct categories, nor do urban dwellers in general.

Second, in recent years scholars such as Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf have criticized the term “crisis” and the role it has played in Weimar historiography.\(^\text{17}\) Historians, they argue, have often treated crisis as a fact or a catch-all explanation for the collapse of the Republic, and have therefore often neglected the passionate supporters of the Weimar Republic as well as its promise and resilience. To be sure, this is an important corrective. We should not understand “crisis” as a simple fact or easy explanation. And yet, the perception

\(^{16}\) Actions against demonstrators around May Day 1929 resulted in at least 198 injured and thirty-three dead.

\(^{17}\) Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf, eds., Die “Krise” der Weimarer Republik: zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters (Frankfurt, 2005).
of crisis was ubiquitous during the period. This leads to a slightly different question: How did perceptions of crisis form? In Berlin, struggles over urban space connected and magnified impressions of fracture. These impressions were visible and physical. Moreover, the very breakdown of distinctions between politics, commerce, and consumption fed the sense of social collapse and a sense that nothing remained untouched by politics.

III. Lessons of the Weimar Republic in the Nazi era

By looking at lived spaces, we answer the question not just of what caused fracture, but how people experienced it and what they learned from the experience. Without the pre-history of property crime and the perception of crisis during the Weimar Republic, it is hard to understand the methods that the Nazi regime used to attack so-called Jewish commerce. It is perhaps even harder to recognize and comprehend Jewish strategies for self-defense.

In his 1932 memoir, Joseph Goebbels emphasized the significance of urban space. “The street,” Goebbels wrote, “is now the primary feature of modern politics. Whoever can conquer the street can also conquer the masses, and whoever conquers the masses will thereby conquer the state.” And Goebbels went on to attribute the growing success of the Nazi party to the effective use of urban space. But it is important to note that the Nazis did not build the stage for their political performances, nor did they invent the tools of mass communication. These had already taken shape in the context of monarchy, liberal democracy, and market-based capitalism. For actions like the April 1, 1933 boycott of Jewish businesses, the new Nazi regime drew upon the standard advertising techniques of posters, motorcades, and sandwich-board men. They mobilized the existing commercial infrastructure of the city such as display windows and advertising columns. They relied on established patterns of moving and looking in the city to reach the crowds. Because the Nazis used streets as a form of mass media, these messages reached a much wider circle than the party faithful who might attend a rally or read a party newspaper such as Der Angriff. The strategy of attracting attention by inserting politics into spaces not intended for those purposes was a lesson learned from the Weimar Republic.

But using such strategies of political messaging presented an inherent danger because these strategies recalled the disorder of the Weimar Republic and potentially disrupted the economy. For this
reason, high-ranking Nazi officials called for the boycott but set strict guidelines. The order forbade SA men from breaking windows, looting, or forcing closures. Because the national and international spotlight fell more brightly on Berlin, activists followed these orders more closely in its main shopping districts and thoroughfares than in its immigrant neighborhoods or outside Berlin, in the provinces. One of the more unsettling findings of my research is that the broader public often seemed to react more negatively to violence directed against property than against people. This seems to have been the case for a variety of reasons. In cases of violence against persons, many bystanders seem to have felt hostility, resentment, or apathy toward the victims. In cases of violence against property, by contrast, many bystanders responded as consumers by disapproving of the waste of resources, particular in times of want, scarcity, or rationing. Furthermore, middle-class observers expressed a general discomfort with displays of disorder. Hitler’s architect, Albert Speer, for example, felt no squeamishness about expropriating Jewish property after the 1938 November pogrom, which destroyed some 8,000 shops. When describing the visual impact of wreckage, however, he wrote: “The smashed panes of shop windows offended my middle-class sense of order.” As this quote illustrates, property damage was more visible to the general public, lingered for a longer period, and provoked more grumbling than violence against persons. It should come as no surprise perhaps that after the pogrom the regime quickly passed special laws like the November 12 “Decree for the Restoration of the Appearance of the Street around Jewish Businesses,” which required Jews to pay for the damages wrought upon them and to remove the evidence of the pogrom.

True, the Nazi regime took full advantage of its singular right to occupy and use the streets. The flagrant disregard for previous

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19 See SOPADE reports on public violence in 1935 and 1938, for example, Deutschlandberichte (Frankfurt a. M., 1980).

restrictions on demonstrations, including traffic and fire codes, added to the drama of the torchlight parade through the Brandenburg Gate and down Unter den Linden that was organized to proclaim Hitler’s appointment as chancellor on January 30, 1933. Anniversary celebrations repeated the effect. At the same time, many of the regime’s interventions into urban space projected consumer abundance and harmony rather than raw politics. Examples included public spectacles of consumption and leisure, such as Christmas Markets and the 1936 Olympics, which involved substantial collaboration between merchants and the government. In short, the Nazi party learned lessons from the Weimar Republic about how to channel violence, contain its impact on public space, and construct an appealing façade for the regime.

By the time of the April 1933 boycott, Jewish shopkeepers had already suffered a period of persistent insecurity. Like other retailers, many held memories of the acute disturbances and massive damages of the early Weimar Republic. All shopkeepers, whether Jewish or not, had learned that they could not rely on neighbors, crowds, or even police for help at such times. But even during the Weimar Republic, antisemitism played a role both in attacks and failed protection. During the 1923 hyperinflation, for example, a riot took place in northeast Berlin that targeted Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. As the violence spread from the streets to surrounding shops, some retailers posted signs reading “Christian Business” to distinguish their display windows from those of the presumed “Jewish” businesses around them. Moreover, in the aftermath, police officers were accused not only of failing to stop the riot but also of arresting and abusing Jewish veterans who had rushed to the scene to shield victims from attack. Already during the Weimar Republic, police had a mixed record regarding both protecting retailers and responding to
antisemitism. In February 1933, Hermann Göring deputized the SA as auxiliary police. Therefore Jewish shopkeepers certainly did not trust government declarations that the April boycott would remain an “orderly action.”

Jewish shopkeepers had learned lessons during the Weimar Republic about how to cope with civil unrest and applied these in response to the 1933 boycott. Many closed their doors, drew iron shutters down over the windows, and waited for the boycott to end. In other words, they treated it as another period of emergency. They were not unprepared. But the lessons and the historical comparisons were insufficient for coping with the changing circumstances, namely, a regime that viewed violence as redemptive when used against outsiders to the so-called “racial community” (Volksgemeinschaft) and that professed long-term goals of expulsion and elimination. Jewish shopkeepers might weather temporary civil unrest, but they could not survive the new regime.

IV. Reconsidering the Weimar Republic

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the title of the lecture series (and this Bulletin Forum), “The Weimar Republic Reconsidered.” I see great value in returning to central narratives even as we engage with them from new angles, in other words, to reconsider rather than reinvent the field.

First, I have pointed out the importance of political violence as a category but proposed a broader understanding of it. We have perhaps wrongly assessed levels of tolerance for violence. Weimar reveals a much lower threshold of tolerance for violence against property and a higher one for violence against people. This is a disturbing revelation.

Second, my research focuses on Berlin, the iconic place of Weimar cultural history. And yet, the Berlin that I write about feels unfamiliar. It was not just the site of glitz, glam, and avant-garde. Its streets were not only populated by flaneurs like Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Franz Hessel. It was not merely a metaphoric or discursive space. Instead Berlin’s streets beckoned with voice and power. Many claimants crowded into them. Diverse governments tried to tame them. Berlin had a unique status for observers both foreign and domestic, because it was seen as the bellwether of the nation, of democracy, and of modernity.
What does this mean for us today? Berlin’s interwar streets reveal to us that in a modern, highly connected, and centrally organized society almost every social structure can be turned toward an authoritarian purpose. These potentialities exist in something as mundane as traffic regulation, which was used to limit and contain protests in the Weimar period. In the 1930s, the Nazified police force harassed Jews with petty and heavy-handed enforcement of traffic laws to compel them to emigrate. Berlin’s streets remind us that authoritarian tendencies and potentialities are often latent and invisible. And this history also reminds us how easily the temptations and tactics of authoritarianism can manifest themselves when a society’s commitment to democracy or equality weakens. Because, as the Weimar Republic shows us, neither of these values is easy to attain, much less preserve.

Finally, I would like to note that I did not start my research with these central narratives about instability, violence, and collapse — but this is where my work took me. This is part of the unsettling effect of studying the Weimar Republic. We end up telling a particular story not because of the questions we pose to the past, but because of the questions that the past poses to us. The questions posed by the Weimar Republic remain among the most significant for life in a modern, democratic society.