



Forum: The Weimar Republic Reconsidered

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THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC RECONSIDERED: INTRODUCTION

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In the current political situation, recent discussions of the Weimar Republic in the United States have tended to focus on the collapse of the Republic and the transition to the Nazi dictatorship.¹ When the German Historical Institute decided to organize a lecture series to mark the centenary of the founding of the Weimar Republic in 1919 and to publish this special thematic *Bulletin* Forum on the Weimar Republic,² we, too, were at least in part motivated by the thought that lecture audiences and *Bulletin* readers would find the history of the Weimar Republic of special interest as many of us seek to learn more about the fragility of democracy and the threats it can face. At the same time, however, we were careful to assemble a diverse set of lectures, and then essays, that do not focus only on explaining the Republic's collapse but also examine the revolution of 1918/19 and the Republic's formative years, and that are attentive to the role of contingency not only in the Republic's making but in its subsequent history.

Interpretations of the Weimar Republic as a "gamble which stood virtually no chance of success" have a long history.³ The teleological argument that the Weimar Republic was doomed has been made in a variety of different forms. In the so-called *Sonderweg* interpretation of German history, the failure of the Weimar Republic was presented as a result of Germany's special path (*Sonderweg*) of modernization, which was claimed to have deviated from the supposedly standard path of Britain and France. Whereas Britain and France developed liberal democratic regimes, it was argued, the failure of the German revolution of 1848 revealed the weakness of German liberalism, which continued during the Kaiserreich. For *Sonderweg* historians, given this lack of a well-developed liberal and democratic tradition, the failure of the Germany's experiment with democracy during the Weimar era appeared virtually inevitable.⁴

A second strand of the teleological interpretation that Weimar was doomed from the start confines its analytical frame to the interwar period. This strand attributes the failure of the Republic to mistakes made at the Republic's inception. With varying emphasis, its adherents argue, among other things, that: the revolution of 1918/19 was

1 For important contributions by historians to this discussion, see, for instance: Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York, 2018); Christopher Browning, "The Suffocation of Democracy," *New York Review of Books* (Oct. 25, 2018).

2 This Bulletin "Forum" presents significantly revised contributions from the five speakers in the Spring 2019 GHI Lecture Series "The Weimar Republic Reconsidered," organized by David Lazar and Richard Wetzell, and one additional article, by James McSpadden, who was a Visiting Research Fellow at the GHI in 2018/19.

3 Quote from Gerald D. Feldman, "Weimar from Inflation to Depression: Experiment or Gamble?," in *Die Nachwirkungen der Inflation auf die deutsche Geschichte*, ed. Gerald D. Feldman (Munich, 1985), 385.

4 On the *Sonderweg* historiography, see: James J. Sheehan, "Paradigm lost? The 'Sonderweg' revisited," in *Transnationale Geschichte*, ed. Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz (Göttingen, 2006), 150-160; Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, 1984).

not radical enough; anti-republican elites were left in place; the Versailles Treaty burdened the Republic with unsustainable reparations; the Weimar Constitution (especially its infamous article 42 on emergency decrees) was fatally flawed. In this strand of interpretation, the middle years of the Republic are only a brief interlude between its turbulent beginnings and its equally turbulent dissolution from 1930 to 1933. Here, too, the demise of the Weimar Republic appears to have been foreordained.⁵

5 For a critical review of interpretations of Weimar as a doomed republic, see Anthony McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic: Authority and Authoritarianism, 1916 to 1936* (London, 2014), 1-3.

6 For recent overviews, see Anthony McElligott, ed., *Weimar Germany* (Oxford, 2009); Kathleen Canning, Kirsten Barndt, and Kristin McGuire, eds., *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York, 2010); Andreas Braune and Michael Dreyer, eds., *Republikanischer Alltag: Die Weimarer Demokratie und die Suche nach Normalität* (Stuttgart, 2017).

7 For a comprehensive overview of the German-language historiography, see Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung* (Berlin, 2013); see also Rüdiger Hachtmann, "Blick zurück und in die Zukunft: Die Sicht auf die 'Novemberrevolution' 1919 bis 2018 und mögliche Perspektiven einer kritischen Revolutionshistoriographie," *Sozialgeschichte Online* 23 (2018): 107-165; for an influential American historiographical overview, see Peter Fritzsche, "Did Weimar Fail?" *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 629-656.

8 Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung*, 163-201; for a classic statement of the early postwar interpretation, see Karl Dietrich Erdmann, "Die Geschichte der Weimarer Republik als Problem der Wissenschaft," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 3 (1955): 1-19, as well as Karl Dietrich Erdmann, *Die Zeit der Weltkriege* (=Gebhardt, Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte, 8th ed; Stuttgart, 1959).

For some time now, historical research on the Weimar Republic has pushed back against these teleological interpretations. Historians have demonstrated that despite the political, social, and economic struggles of the early postwar years, by 1924 the Weimar Republic had successfully established itself as a stable democratic regime. Recent historical work on the Weimar Republic has also emphasized the openness of the historical situation, the room for maneuver available to politicians, and the contingency of political decision-making, especially in the Republic's final phase.⁶

I. Revolution, democracy, and violence

The first two contributions to this *Forum* focus on the revolution of 1918/19, which was the subject of a wave of important historical research in the 1960s and 1970s, only to fall into neglect in more recent decades.⁷ The so-called revisionist research of the 1960s and 1970s challenged West Germany's prevailing postwar interpretation, according to which the revolutionary situation of 1918/19 was characterized by a stark choice between parliamentary government in alliance with the old elites, including the military, or a social revolution that would have installed a dictatorship of the proletariat on the Soviet model.⁸ By contrast, the revisionist historians argued that the *Rätebewegung* (the council movement) was not, in fact, dominated by communists but pursued a social revolution that was compatible with the SPD's commitment to democracy but would have pushed democratization further. Therefore, Ebert and the provisional government had been misguided in their hostility to the Councils and had missed an opportunity to cooperate with them to bring about a more thorough-going democratization.⁹ Although the mainstream

9 Key works of the revisionist turn included Eberhard Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik*

1918-1919 (Düsseldorf, 1962), Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution* (Düsseldorf, 1963),

and Reinhard Rürup, *Probleme der Revolution in Deutschland 1918/19* (Wiesbaden, 1968).

of the revisionists endorsed neither the polemical charge that Ebert and the SPD had “betrayed” the revolution¹⁰ nor the thesis that the revolution could have embarked on a “third path” between parliamentary government and Bolshevik dictatorship, critics of the revisionist thesis did not always observe these distinctions.¹¹ As a result, even though by the early 1980s the revisionist interpretation represented an almost complete consensus among specialists in the history of the revolution, it failed to prevail in many of the handbook accounts and general histories of the Weimar Republic as a whole.¹² Moreover, from the 1980s onward, the revolution became a rather neglected topic within the flourishing historiography of the Weimar Republic.¹³ In the last decade, however, since its ninetieth anniversary in 2008, the revolution of 1918/19 has again begun to attract the attention of historians.¹⁴

Kathleen Canning’s opening article in this forum moves beyond the debate between the revisionists and their critics by examining the invention of new forms of democratic participation and representation during the revolution. Canning, who has long been at the forefront of research on gender and citizenship in the Weimar Republic,¹⁵ argues that participation in the councils (*Räte*) was not limited to soldiers, sailors, and male workers, but had considerable resonance as an “experimental form of political representation” among women, intellectuals and artists, even among bourgeois opponents of the revolution. In the end, however, most municipal councils narrowed the parameters of participation by limiting voting to those employed for wages and thus ended up excluding most everyone except factory workers. As a result, it was the declaration of equal suffrage, which first took effect in the elections for the National Assembly, that opened up the “arena of popular mobilization for the invention of democracy,” which is so skillfully examined in Canning’s article.

The revolution’s popular mobilization and the contest over the revolution’s political forms and goals was not a peaceful process but one that was accompanied by considerable violence. In his article, Mark

10 For this argument, see Sebastian Haffner, *Die verratene Revolution* (Bern/Munich/Vienna, 1969), reissued in 1979, and thereafter, under the title *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19*; on related arguments within

the East German historiography, see Niess, *Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung*, 320-370.

11 See Reinhard Rürup, “Demokratische Revolu-

tion und ‘Dritter Weg’: Die deutsche Revolution von 1918/19 in der neueren wissenschaftlichen Diskussion,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9 (1983): 278-301.

12 Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung*, 259-319.

13 *Ibid.*, 371-406.

14 Helga Grebing, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* (Berlin, 2008); Volker Ullrich, *Die deutsche Revolution von 1918/19* (Munich, 2009); Alexander Gallus, ed., *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19* (Göttingen, 2010); Dietmar Lange, *Massenstreik und Schießbefehl: Generalstreik und Märzkämpfe in Berlin 1919* (Münster, 2012); Axel Weipert, *Die zweite Revolution: Rätebewegung in Berlin 1919/1920* (Berlin, 2015); Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott, Kirsten Heinsohn, eds., *Germany 1916-23: A revolution in context* (Bielefeld, 2015); Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19* (Berlin, 2017); see also Alexander Gallus, “Auf dem Weg zur Reaktualisierung durch Historisierung: Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19 Revisited,” in *Weimar als Herausforderung*, ed. Michael Dreyer and Andreas Braune (Stuttgart, 2016), 17-18.

15 See Kathleen Canning, “Claiming Citizenship: Suffrage and Subjectivity in Germany after the First World War,” in *Gender History in Practice* (Ithaca and London, 2006), 212-237; Canning, “The Order and Disorder of Gender in the History of the Weimar Republic,” in *Geschlechter(un)ordnung und Politik in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Gabriele Metzler and Dirk Schumann (Bonn, 2016), 59-79.

Jones, the author of a recent, widely discussed book on violence in the German revolution of 1918/19,¹⁶ offers us an “intimate history of violence” during the first five months of the revolution. Through careful analysis of a series of specific incidents of violence, Jones identifies the key turning points at which the capacity for the de-escalation of violence, which could still be observed at the outset of the revolution, was lost. After a chaotic confrontation between government forces and revolutionary sailors on December 23, 1918, Friedrich Ebert, the head of the provisional revolutionary government, abandoned his previous opposition to using force and permitted the government troops to use military force against leftist opponents. This decision led to the use of military force in Berlin on December 24, and to extremely violent military operations against rebels during the January Uprising, with a death toll of about two hundred, including civilian bystanders. The January Uprising also marked the first time that rebels who had been taken prisoner were killed by government soldiers. As Jones notes, “a taboo” had now “been broken”: Instead of condemning the killing of the rebel prisoners and bringing the perpetrators to justice, the government “continued to defend the conduct of soldiers and blame the Spartacists for *all* of the violence.”

Jones’s conclusions engage with the historiography in two important ways: First, Jones rejects the thesis that the revolutionary violence can be attributed to the brutalization of trench warfare, arguing instead that the causes for the escalation of violence must be found in the revolutionary situation. Second, at least implicitly, his analysis challenges the interpretation that the provisional government and its opponents on the radical left shared equal responsibility for an escalating spiral of violence.¹⁷ Instead, Jones stresses that the escalation of violence must primarily be attributed to the SPD-led provisional government rather than the government’s opponents on the revolutionary left. The Social Democratic Party, the government, and the Social Democratic and liberal press, he argues, had developed a justification of political violence that hinged on dehumanizing their political opponents.

16 Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (Cambridge, 2016).

17 On this point, see Rüdiger Hachtmann’s discussion of Jones’s book and its reception in Germany in: “Blick zurück,” 124-125.

II. Bringing together cultural and political narratives

There is a strange disjuncture in historical writing on the Weimar Republic. On the one hand, political histories of the Weimar Republic often tell a dispiriting story of missed opportunities, miscalculations, and mistakes that doomed the Republic to failure almost from the start; even less teleological accounts tend to stress the final dissolution

of democracy and the rise of Nazism. Weimar's political history is a grim tale. On the other hand, cultural histories of the Weimar Republic relate a fascinating story of cultural experimentation in a wide spectrum of fields, including literature, theater, dance, art, architecture, print media, radio, film and advertising; of the rise of a new type of consumer culture; and of the advent of new gender roles and sexual liberation, especially for women and homosexuals. In short, Weimar's cultural history, at least in Berlin and other urban centers, is usually told as the story of a flourishing culture of experimentation cut short by the Nazi seizure of power.¹⁸ These two historical narratives — the cultural history and the political history of the Weimar Republic — are most often left unconnected to one another. It is one of the great virtues of the essays by Laurie Marhoefer and Molly Loberg in this *Forum* that they seek to connect Weimar's cultural and political histories.

The essay by Laurie Marhoefer, the author of a pioneering study on *Sex and the Weimar Republic*,¹⁹ critically examines two historical interpretations that have drawn causal connections between the history of sexuality and the collapse of the Weimar Republic. The first interpretation, which was advanced by cultural conservatives after 1945, claimed that the “sexual decadence” of the Weimar Republic eroded social and moral norms and thereby helped to create an immoral climate that made the rise of Nazism possible. In other words, sexual immorality as practiced by Weimar homosexuals, promiscuous women, and sex workers supposedly set the stage for the mass murder perpetrated by the Nazis. Marhoefer rebuts what she calls the “Kit Kat Klub theory” (after the nightclub in the musical *Cabaret*) by pointing out that if this kind of “sexual immorality” had had any affinity with Nazi ideology, one would expect to find a substantial number of people with progressive views on sexuality among the supporters of the Nazi party; in fact however, the opposite was the case. The hostility of most Nazis to progressive sexual politics is at the core of the second interpretation critically examined in Marhoefer's essay. According to the “backlash thesis,” Weimar sexual politics — in particular the push for sexual liberation — was a destabilizing force that provoked a conservative cultural and political backlash from which the Nazis benefited. This thesis, too, Marhoefer shows, is not backed up by empirical evidence. After examining Weimar-era Nazi publications, she found no evidence that the Nazis highlighted sexual politics as a political issue in their press and electoral propaganda. One explanation for this reticence, she argues, is that SA leader Ernst

18 For a recent overview, see Sabina Becker, *Experiment Weimar: Eine Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands, 1918-1933* (Darmstadt, 2018).

19 Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German homosexual emancipation and the rise of the Nazis* (Toronto, 2015).

Röhm's homosexuality had become public in a scandal; a good reason to tread softly on the topic of sexuality. Furthermore, she contends, the backlash thesis overestimates the degree to which Weimar sexual politics upset conservatives. Instead, Weimar sexual reforms represented a compromise that was widely accepted by people with divergent views on sexuality and gender roles. In this arena, as in others, she concludes, Weimar functioned as a stable democracy; its collapse was not related to sexual politics.

The essay by Molly Loberg, the author of an important monograph on Weimar-era politics, consumption, and urban space, titled *The Struggle for the Streets of Berlin*,²⁰ also connects the cultural and political narratives of Weimar history. In this case the cultural aspect is that of consumer culture and the culture of the street. Berlin's streets, Loberg argues, functioned as "the most consequential mass medium of the era" because they were saturated with expression, in many competing forms, including shop window displays, advertisements, campaign posters, demonstrations, motorcades, and spectacles. The same modern shop design, with large display windows and self-service areas, that had aimed to make retail alluring also made it vulnerable. By the early 1930s, Berlin experienced a sustained wave of looting. This kind of property crime, Loberg suggests, must be understood as political violence, both in terms of its motivation and its effects. Regarding motivation, she notes that attacks on commercial sites increased, at least in part, because of growing restrictions on political demonstrations, such as "no protest zones" around Berlin's political institutions. Regarding its effects, Loberg argues that unrelenting waves of property crime targeting commerce increased the perception of crisis and undermined support for the state, not just among shopkeepers. The Weimar Republic, she concludes, was less tolerant of violence against property than of violence against people, a finding that provides a disturbing counterpoint to Mark Jones's account of how political violence against persons became legitimated during the Republic's founding phase.

20 Molly Loberg, *The Struggle for the Streets of Berlin: Politics, Consumption, and Urban Space 1914-1945* (Cambridge/New York, 2018).

21 The standard accounts are: Peter Krüger, *Die Aussenpolitik der Republik von Weimar* (Darmstadt, 1985); Gottfried Niedhart, *Die Aussenpolitik der Weimarer Republik*, 2d ed. (Munich, 2006). For the early years, now see also: Jörn Leonhard, *Der überforderte Frieden: Versailles und die Welt 1918-1923* (Munich, 2019).

III. The Weimar experiment in Geneva

The standard historical accounts of the foreign policy of the Weimar Republic have focused on the Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles, major rapprochements with other powers, the reparations issue, and the reintegration of Germany into the international system, for which Germany's admission to the League of Nations was a major milestone.²¹ James McSpadden's article in this *Forum*

takes a novel approach by asking whether the “eclectic experimentalism”²² that is said to have characterized the Weimar Republic, especially, but not only, in the cultural realm, might also have played a role in foreign policy. McSpadden, who is completing a book on “parliamentary networks and backroom politics” in interwar Europe, identifies an instance of such experimentalism in the composition and operation of the Weimar Republic’s delegation to the League of Nations in Geneva. Bringing together the historiography of the Weimar Republic with that of the League of Nations, he reveals that when Germany joined the League of Nations in 1926, its delegation to the League’s General Assembly included male and female parliamentarians, including parliamentarians from opposition parties such as the Socialists and the Conservatives. Although this inclusion of parliamentarians was part of an international trend, the reasons for including parliamentarians in the delegation were also rooted in domestic political contexts. While Gustav Stresemann’s decision to include parliamentarians (rather than cabinet ministers) effectively bolstered his own control of the delegation, the selection of particular parliamentarians usually derived from domestic political considerations. For the political parties, the participation of parliamentarians in the League’s General Assembly had the advantage of keeping them abreast of foreign policy developments. Some opposition parliamentarians, however, felt that they were being used as “fig leaves” for the government’s foreign policy, an argument that eventually led the SPD to refuse to allow its parliamentarians to serve on the delegation, a decision that spelled the end of the practice. McSpadden also calls attention to the role of the League of Nations in opening the door to women in the realm of international relations. Women were included in the national delegations to the General Assembly not only as parliamentarians but quite often as technical experts. And once a slot on the delegation had been filled by a woman, McSpadden shows, that slot often became institutionalized as a woman’s slot.

IV. Historiography

The forum’s closing essay, by Tim Müller, the author of a thought-provoking book on the “Lebensversuche moderner Demokratien,” the efforts of modern democracies to establish themselves after the First World War, addresses historiographical questions.²³ Among the essay’s wide-ranging reflections, three issues are particularly salient. The first concerns the *Sonderweg* interpretation of German history, briefly discussed at the beginning of this introduction. Although the

22 Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?,” 631.

23 Tim B. Müller, *Nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg: Lebensversuche moderner Demokratien* (Hamburg, 2014).

Sonderweg has lost its paradigmatic status for writing German history²⁴ — without, however, having been replaced by another research paradigm — its shadow lingers over the historiography of the Weimar Republic. Not least among the lingering effects of the *Sonderweg* is an often unspoken assumption that the failure of Weimar democracy stands in contrast to the success of democracy in Western countries, especially Britain and the United States, in the interwar years. This assumption, however, has become untenable in the face of research demonstrating that the interwar history of democracy in these countries was far from a linear success story and was, rather, characterized by fragility, ambiguity, and setbacks. The history of the Weimar Republic, Müller argues, should be embedded in the context of the history of interwar democracy in other countries, especially in Western Europe — but in a way that acknowledges that many of the challenges and struggles of Weimar democracy were far from unique.

Another salient issue in Weimar historiography is the definition of democracy. As Müller shows, some strands in the historiography have defined democracy according to an ahistorical norm of parliamentary democracy; as a result, attempts to strengthen the Republic's executive have often been interpreted as antidemocratic. Drawing on recent democratic theory, which stresses the improvisational and fragile character of democracy, Müller calls on historians to write the history of the Weimar Republic as that of an open-ended process of democracy in the making. A more process-oriented definition of democracy also entails the recognition that the dividing line between authoritarian and democratic rule is hard to draw, and that historians must therefore be sensitive to fluid transitions between the two. In the case of Weimar, this also means that historians should not be too quick to characterize the Brüning government as a decisive step on the road to authoritarianism; and that the question of when exactly Weimar democracy ended remains, for good reason, a difficult one.

No matter what subject they write about, historians always face the difficult task of explaining the course of events — why things happened the way they did — and, at the same time, conveying an understanding that, within certain constraints, the historical actors had the freedom to make choices, so that things did not necessarily have to happen the way they did. Because the Weimar Republic's collapse resulted in a murderous regime that unleashed unprecedented suffering, death, and destruction on the world, writing the Republic's

24 See Sheehan, "Paradigm lost?"

history without letting the historical outcome overwhelm the sense of historical contingency is particularly difficult. It therefore makes good sense to remind historians of the Weimar Republic, as Müller does, to avoid a one-sided focus on causal explanations of outcomes and make room for contingency.

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