

GERMANY'S FIRST REPUBLIC

Republik ohne Chance? Akzeptanz und Legitimation der Weimarer Republik in der deutschen Tagespresse zwischen 1918 und 1923. By Burkhard Asmuss. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994. Pp. 619. ISBN 3-110-14197-3. DM280.00.

Heinrich Brüning and the dissolution of the Weimar Republic. By William L. Patch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. 358. ISBN 0-521-62422-3. £42.50.

National identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the eastern border, 1918–1922. By T. Hunt Tooley. Lincoln, Nebraska, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Pp. 320. ISBN 0-803-24429-0. £53.00.

Reichswehr und Rote Armee, 1920–1933: Wege und Stationen einer ungewöhnlichen Zusammenarbeit. By Manfred Zeidler. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1993. Pp. 375. ISBN 3-486-55966-4. DM78.00.

The Weimar Republic had its origins in one kind of revolution and was dealt the coup de grace by another (i.e. Hitler's '*Machtergreifung*'). Some leading participants in both were uncomfortable with radicalism. The majority socialists of 1918–19 were often more interested in maintaining order than precipitating dramatic social change; the elite conservatives who helped Hitler into the saddle were reacting to communist threats to the status quo. These were years for difficult moral choices. What must have gone through the minds of socialists Gustav Noske and Otto Wels when they ordered *Freikorps* units into action against Spartacists? By necessity, the politicians who left a mark on the 1920s were often as complex as any before or since. The foreign policy of Gustav Stresemann hardly bears serious comparison with the crudity of what came afterwards (although you might think differently judging by some A-level courses which resolutely demand that his aims and strategies be compared to those of Hitler). The sophistication of Walther Rathenau's thinking about a Russia left destitute by war, revolution, and civil strife makes it instructive even for today's policy-makers. Given the wider changes that Germany experienced between 1918 and 1933, the country probably saw a 'social revolution' before the Nazis got near the chancellery, but the phrase tends to be reserved for discussion of the Third Reich.¹ The fact is established: the Weimar Republic was a complicated place populated by many individuals of considerable calibre. We should regret that this democracy has not exercised such a grip on the popular imagination as the millenarian cultism that followed. It is a particular pleasure to review four studies of the parliamentary period and ask whether they have done it justice.

The outbreak of the First World War marked the beginning of a quest to discover a popular German identity. During the uprising of 1918 all social groups tried with renewed vigour to redefine their membership of the nation.² The forces driving them

¹ See D. Schoenbaum, *Hitler's social revolution* (Doubleday, 1966), and I. Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship* (London, 1993), pp. 222–3.

² P. Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. 6–8, 28, 100, 113–4.

remained live as society battled for direction during the stormy period which followed. The interplay of popular expectations and high politics during the formative phase of the Weimar Republic was reflected in the media of the day and provides the backdrop to Burkhard Asmuss's *Republik ohne Chance? Akzeptanz und Legitimation der Weimarer Republik in der deutschen Tagespresse zwischen 1918 und 1923*. With almost six hundred pages of text and a marked enthusiasm for footnotes, this is a comprehensive examination of why democracy failed to put down roots at an early point. Publications analysed include *Völkischer Beobachter* (the Nazi mouthpiece with a circulation of about 11,000), *Münchener Neuesten Nachrichten* (a more traditionally conservative paper which sold about 120,000 copies), *Die Germania* (which expressed roughly the views of the Centre and had a readership of about 43,000), *Vorwärts* (the paper of the German socialist party which sold 82,000 copies), and *Rote Fahne* (the voice of Spartacism read by 70,000 people). In addition, the study covers the rather less clearly partisan *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* (250,000 copies), *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag* (200,000 copies), and *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* (around 70,000 copies). Asmuss provides a useful 'potted history' of each title.

The main text has six chapters which are structured chronologically and mechanically: each one deals with a single year. The chapter for 1918 is entitled 'War's end and revolution: national trauma', that for 1919 is 'The Versailles Treaty: forced signing', 1920 takes the Kapp putsch as its highlight, 1921 revolves around the murder of Matthias Erzberger, 1922 hinges on the assassination of Rathenau, and 1923 centres on the November coup attempt. Neat organization has been taken to its logical conclusion. Every chapter is subdivided into an introduction to the year, a separate discussion of each newspaper, and a final unifying summary. More flexibility would have enhanced the tracking of themes across years and have facilitated the juxtaposition of how different papers dealt with controversial issues.

None the less, good points are brought to light. Asmuss is correct to echo Arthur Rosenberg and wonder why the workers' and soldiers' councils of 1918–19 (which were directed more towards parliamentarianism than communism) did not generate a more active democracy. We may agree that as early as summer 1919 the real power in Germany lay with the *Freikorps* rather than the national assembly. It is refreshing to read that Hitler's success depended precisely on a readiness to state his ideas openly, not on supposed reticence. Hitler was pathological, but perhaps his context was too. Asmuss concludes: 'The *völkisch* movement was attractive even without Hitler'.³ The press of the radical right fulminated in anti-Semitic style against the state and helped alienate the public from its constitutional values, but it was only successful because the bourgeois press agreed with many of its criticisms. *Germania* used anti-Semitism too. *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* joined in calls for the deportation of Jews who had come to Germany from the east. And when the *Völkischer Beobachter* greeted the death of Rathenau as the demise of one of the biggest financial speculators around, the *Münchener Neuesten Nachrichten* added he had paid too little heed to the national interest.

The perpetual nagging of journalists, generally without a clear alternative political system in mind, helped prevent democracy stabilizing.⁴ Those who should have known better remained tied to political myth-making at a time when progressive and realistic thinking was needed.⁵ So to the question of whether Weimar began to see the growth

³ B. Asmuss, *Republik ohne Chance?* (Berlin, 1994), p. 569.

⁴ G. A. Craig, *Germany, 1866–1945* (Oxford, 1981), p. 480.

⁵ R. Bessel, 'Why did the Weimar Republic collapse?', in I. Kershaw, ed., *Weimar: why did German democracy fail?* (London, 1990), p. 127.

of a unified national political culture, Asmuss provides the following reply: it was happening, but took the form of agreement against democracy and its politicians.⁶

German identity has always been influenced by geography, not least because invariably Germans have lived in substantial numbers, and as influential minorities, beyond the strict political frontiers of their nation-state. But if Germany's borders have always been inexact with respect to her own population, they have been no less deceiving in connection with the distribution of Poles. In 1890 1 in 10 of those living in Prussia (nearly 3 million people) spoke Polish. They were concentrated in West Prussia, Pomerania, and Upper Silesia. Discrimination against them was institutionalized. During the 1870s, Polish language schools were outlawed. In 1885 all alien Poles resident in Prussia were expelled and in 1886 a secret decree forbade the appointment of civil servants whose mother tongue was Polish.⁷ In 1894, Hansemann, Kennemann, and Tiedemann founded the anti-Polish Association for the Advancement of German Nationality in the Eastern Marches. By 1914 it had 53,000 members. How would German–Polish tensions evolve as empire gave way to democracy? How would the Treaty of Versailles influence developments? What would the consequences be for Germanness? Here is the context for T. Hunt Tooley's monograph *National identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the eastern border, 1918–1922*.

According to the peace terms, Germany's borders in Schleswig, Allenstein and Marienwerder, and Upper Silesia were to be determined by plebiscite. At issue was the fate of 12,000 square kilometers of land and 3.3 million people. Over 2 million lived in Upper Silesia, and 60 percent of these were Polish.⁸ The idea of a plebiscite for the region was not so remarkable. An increasingly volatile situation on the ground demanded that something be done. Even German industrialists considered complete independence for Upper Silesia an attractive proposition: at least it would avoid the area's fragmentation and allow it to preserve a German character. Calls for some sort of independence became amplified when, on 29 November 1918, the Prussian Minister of Culture, Adolf Hoffmann, outlawed school prayers, religious school holidays, and religious instruction as an examination subject. Of people living in Upper Silesia 90 per cent were Roman Catholic. Within a month, the people's commissar responsible for the area was considering cultural autonomy. In due course the idea was addressed by the Reich cabinet.⁹

Germany's relationship to the region looked threatened when, in December 1918 and January 1919, Polish insurgents took over Posen province. Noske deployed a preventative force of 1,000 paramilitaries to Upper Silesia. He could do no more. One way or another, it looked as if the state would be changed by local initiatives and direct action rather than leadership 'from above'.

Article 88 of the Treaty of Versailles tried to sort out the mess. It said: 'The inhabitants will be called upon to indicate by a vote whether they wish to be attached to Germany or Poland.' Upper Silesia was placed under the control of the League of Nations. Over half the bureaucrats who came to the area were French, as were 15,000 of the League's 20,000 troops. Germans saw the inter-allied commission as a tool for a

⁶ J. W. Falter, 'The social bases of political cleavages in the Weimar Republic, 1919–1933', in L. E. Jones and J. Retallack, eds., *Elections, mass politics and social change in modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 371.

⁷ T. Hunt Tooley, *National identity and Weimar Germany* (Lincoln, Nebraska, and London, 1997), p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 19, and 140.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 108–9, 113, and 197.

pro-Polish French foreign policy. Popular unrest continued. Summer 1920 saw Germans being ousted from regions rife with Polish insurgents. By the end of August, eastern Upper Silesia was virtually in Polish hands.¹⁰ When the plebiscite came in March 1921, fully 97.5 per cent of those eligible voted. Of the 1,186,342 votes cast, 59.6 per cent were for Germany and the rest for Poland. But German votes predominated in the west and Polish in the east, so partition came on the agenda. By October, the League of Nations had decided Poland should receive Pless, Rybnik, two-thirds of the industrial triangle, and the districts of Tarnowitz and Lublinitz. Germany was left with 70 per cent of the land, but Poland got most of the industrial areas, including three-quarters of the coal mines, nine-tenths of the coal reserves, 97 per cent of the iron ore, most of the zinc and lead ore, plus most of the processing plants.¹¹ The loss helped neither Germany's capacity for post-war reconstruction nor her ability to pay reparations. Ethnically the loss was deeply felt. 946,000 people lived in the lands ceded to Poland and 25 per cent of them were German.¹²

Tooley gives the reader a mountain of information about these events. He tells us something about the way policy was created during a period of profound flux. But whether he has really provided a sustained investigation into German identity (as the title claims) is another matter. This was a time when individuals were subject to all manner of strains. Conservative German landowners had to make common cause with socialist governments. Bureaucrats with Polish names had to take a stand against Polish nationalists. During the plebiscite, fully 200,000 Poles voted to stay part of Germany. Apparently they equated Germanness with progress.¹³ Tooley introduces all of these points, but their analysis is less detailed than we would have hoped.

The peace settlement impacted on Germany in many ways. Not least, by denying the nation immediate entry into the League of Nations, it pushed Germany to seek accommodations wherever she could find them. Another 'outcast' was Russia and the relationship which grew up between the two horrified contemporary commentators. In 1932, C. F. Melville asserted (quite falsely) that there was a string of secret clauses accompanying the public face of the Treaty of Rapallo: German banks were set to take over the Ukraine, Hugo Stinnes was in charge of the Don basin's coal, Krupp would get all the oil from the Caucasus, and 25,000 Germans would be settled in Russia.¹⁴ But rumours of a burgeoning military relationship provoked the real paranoia. Melville said he wanted 'to bring to the notice of British public opinion the menace to the peace of Europe constituted by the secret military relations between the German and Soviet-Russian Governments'. He continued: 'the military chiefs are slowly but surely building up a new and formidable war machine in collaboration with the military chiefs of Soviet Russia'.¹⁵ The existence of military co-operation had already been known for several years. It was reported by both the *Manchester Guardian* and Philipp Scheidemann in December 1926. This was a circumvention of the Treaty of Versailles which banned Germany from owning poison gas, tanks, and military planes. There were restrictions on sending military missions abroad too. Manfred Zeidler has investigated the truth behind this sensational chapter of Weimar history. His *Reichswehr und Rote Armee, 1920–1933* is based on a doctoral dissertation which won the Moritz-von-Bethmann prize. It makes extensive use of Russian sources which only became available during the 1990s. The study is very impressive indeed.

The dust jacket shows the hero of Tannenberg and president of the republic, Field

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 189. ¹¹ Ibid., p. 258. ¹² Ibid., p. 261. ¹³ Ibid., p. 241.

¹⁴ C. F. Melville, *The Russian face of Germany* (London, 1932), p. 60. ¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 1–2.

Marshal von Hindenburg, greeting a Soviet military delegation at the autumn manoeuvres near Bad Saarow in 1932. Enemies had become 'friends'. The relationship reflected common interests which emerged during the early 1920s. In terms of economics, from 1919 industrial circles in Germany became concerned with regaining Russian markets; as of spring 1921 in Russia the New Economic Policy signalled a readiness for foreign co-operation. Shared antipathy towards Poland was important too. Significantly negotiations between military representatives began during the Russo–Polish war. By March/April 1921 the commissioner of the Soviet government in Berlin was reporting that German help should be sought in the reconstruction of the Russian war industry. The following December, a four man team of German officers went to Russia to investigate the matter. Within twelve months an agreement had been reached to lease Germany the Russo–Baltic works in Fili for the manufacture of military aircraft. The aim was to produce 300 planes per year and the Soviet government guaranteed to buy 150. By this time talks were also under way to permit the manufacture of gas on Soviet territory. By spring 1923 Germans were visiting possible sites for experimentation. Within three years, tests had been carried out near Moscow.

Agreements were reached on troop training. In April 1925 Lipeck was established as a key air base. 150 flights took place during three weeks of May the following year. By the end of 1927, between 44 and 46 officers from Germany were sent there for training. By early 1928, the site was becoming a laboratory for German flight technology.¹⁶ Between 1931 and 1932 exercises took place involving aircraft from both sides of the relationship. In 1925 it was agreed to develop a tank school too. A site was chosen at Kama, and by early 1927 tests were carried out using British vehicles. By 1929 the site was managed by 40 German staff aided by 50–60 Russian assistants. Between this year and 1933, 30 German tank men and at least 90 Russians were trained there. In 1928 a gas testing site was established at Tomka. By late summer that same year, 30 Germans were attending it. The site was active until 1931 testing gas grenades and techniques of gassing from planes.

Naturally there were limitations on German involvement in Russia. Many German firms (e.g. Krupp, Stinnes, and Albatros) were reluctant, at least initially, to get involved. German staff were horrified at the conditions of work they often had to endure. There was mistrust between the two sides, especially following a spy scandal in 1926. The Russians complained that the Germans were not using the highest technology and were disappointed when aircraft production figures consistently fell short of expectations. Characteristically in September 1929 General Voroshilov complained to Kurt von Hammerstein that the Germans were getting more out of Lipeck than they were putting into it. But in fact both parties did well out of the deal. During three years of production, the plant at Fili turned out 170 planes of which 120 went to Russia.¹⁷ The whole Soviet economy only made 264 planes in the economic year 1924–5. The Germans may have trained just 200 pilots and observers at Lipeck, plus maybe 30 tank men at Kama, but in the context of the limitations of Versailles, the aim was always qualitative not quantitative. In due course, the 43 Lipeck trainees of 1928 produced at least 20 generals of the *Luftwaffe*; the Kama tankers gave rise to at least a dozen generals of their own. Zeidel's conclusion is fair: through its secret military co-operation with Russia, the Weimar Republic provided vital prerequisites for the military expansion of the Third Reich.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 96–7.

With this said, the author leaves us wanting to know more. Military co-operation had unlikely political sponsors. In June 1927, Reich Chancellor Marx sanctioned the visit of 43 officers to Lipeck. In February 1928, Gustav Stresemann authorized *Reichswehr* Minister Groener to pursue further military ties. He even condoned 'participation in scientific gas testing' on Russian soil.¹⁸ If the secret relationship proved so important, how exactly was it understood by convinced democrats such as these? Precisely what part did it play in their wider politics? We have not finished with this topic yet.

Sooner or later, however, discussion of the Weimar Republic has to address the conditions of its demise. Did it fall or was it 'putsched'? Could different economic policies in the face of the Depression have made a difference? When did all hope for the republic end: with Hitler in January 1933, or as early as Brüning in March 1930? These issues are covered in William Patch's monograph, *Heinrich Brüning and the dissolution of the Weimar Republic*. The author's interest in the topic grew out of dissatisfaction with Brüning's memoirs, which were published in 1970. The man said he had always been interested in the restoration of the monarchy, but never once named a potential new head of state. Those he identified as sharing his ambitions all denied them resolutely. To separate fact from fiction, Patch has drawn on 7,000 of Brüning's personal letters found at Harvard, more correspondence in Germany's federal archives, and the record of the Christian trades unions. The result is a most comprehensive new view of Brüning.

He grew up as less than a convinced democrat. Before the First World War, Brüning supported the views of Martin Spahn, a man who believed parliamentarianism to be the worst form of government imaginable. In 1917 Brüning rejoiced in the declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare; in October 1918 he regretted Ludendorff's resignation since the army could still defend the borders; and in 1923 he wrote that any true Christian democrat had to hate the November revolution for plunging Germany into chaos. By the next year, this Catholic activist was one of only a few to recommend a parliamentary alliance between the Centre and the far right in the form of the German National People's Party. Attitudes like this helped bring Brüning to the attention of the reactionary clique around Hindenburg. He first met with Schleicher soon after Easter 1929 and was told that the president feared Germany's politics 'would sink in the mud'. Before he died, the old man wanted to create a viable association of the *Reichswehr* and the younger forces in parliament.¹⁹ But something did not work out. Brüning proved less than enthusiastic to undermine the republic. When he met Schleicher again in December 1929, Brüning defended the Great Coalition and stated that the use of Article 48 by a chancellor would not eliminate the need for close co-operation with the *Reichstag*. Acting as a 'republican by reason', during early 1930 he attempted to preserve parliamentary government, first by trying to hold the Great Coalition together, and then by recommending it be transformed into a more compact Weimar Coalition. Of course he failed, and within hours of Müller resigning Brüning was commissioned by Hindenburg (who was underestimating the independence of the man) to form a government 'without any fixed ties to parties'.²⁰

The new chancellor consistently showed good intentions. Under pressure to abolish the constitution, he never blamed it for the nation's ills but showed commitment to the rule of law. While campaigning in Cologne during the summer of 1930, Brüning actually formulated his position as follows: 'this is no struggle against parliament but

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁹ W. L. Patch, *Heinrich Brüning and the dissolution of the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 51.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

rather a struggle for the salvation of parliament!’²¹ Consistently he did his best to prevent ‘the Hitler gang’ gaining access to the Reich cabinet.²² In the economy, he undertook extensive efforts to bring industrialists and trades unionists together for the good of the nation. His financial strategies found agreement with the foremost expert of the day: John Maynard Keynes.

Unfortunately Brüning was hamstrung at every turn. He lacked personal charisma, had no parliamentary majority, and was devoid of loyal backers. Once it became clear that he really was a moderate, the cabal around Hindenburg withdrew its support. Schleicher began a concerted policy of rumour mongering. Those further away from power acted irresponsibly too. In autumn 1931 Kaas, of the Centre Party, contradicted Brüning and recommended that the Nazis be included in government. Even earlier, key industrialists, such as Fritz Thyssen, spoke out against state arbitration of wages and the chancellor never came close to creating a united front for action in industry. The economy ran out of control to such an extent that Brüning came to view its impact fatalistically.²³

Still, this chancellor comes out of Patch’s investigation rather well. He tried to deal with issues through co-operation and democracy, but was let down by all around him; he was a victim of circumstances which could not have been solved by the very best minds of the time. The author must be commended for stating the case in favour of Brüning so clearly.

Have these studies done justice to the history of Weimar? They are all worthy volumes which, most notably, tell us something important about the complexities of being German at this time (whether it is to do with the extensive susceptibility of society to *völkisch* ideology, the intricacy of defining the self in the borderlands, the challenge of coming to terms with a former enemy, or the mental transition a politician was called on to make as empire shifted to democracy). The texts by Zeidel and Patch in particular deserve to become standard sources of reference. All of these titles emphasize that there are fascinating stories to be told about republican Germany. There will be a good market of interested general readers for someone who can relate them with a light literary touch.

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²¹ Ibid., p. 97.

²² Ibid., p. 118.

²³ Ibid., p. 157.