



The Weimar Republic: The Fragility of Democracy

Overview by Paul Bookbinder

THE LEGACY OF WORLD WAR I

World War I, which was, to the generation of the 1920s and '30s, “the overwhelming catastrophe that dominated their epoch,” gave birth to the first German democracy, called the Weimar Republic. In the words of H. Stuart Hughes, this war “stacked the cards for the future.” Germans, who were suffering from the humiliation and loss of honor of unexpected defeat, cried out for vengeance. The Treaty of Versailles, which officially ended the war, contributed to the humiliation Germans felt. All Germans, no matter their political beliefs, regarded the treaty as unjust. It would remain a festering sore on the body of the new Republic. Yet, the anger, passion, hatred, and violence of the Weimar years were mixed with tremendous creativity and cultural excitement. In that dynamic environment, the viability of democracy was tested and failed. The struggles and even the failures of the Weimar Republic stand as warning signs and guides for future democracies.

WHY STUDY THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC?

- The history of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) illuminates one of the most creative and crucial periods in the twentieth century and serves as a significant case study of the critical issues of our own time. Many of the questions asked about the Weimar Republic are relevant to problems that individuals and societies face in the twenty-first century.
- Citizens and leaders of the Weimar Republic had to wrestle with the problems of a newly developing democracy: the creation of a new constitution and political culture and the need for institutional reform particularly of the judiciary, the police, and the educational system.
- The Weimar Republic experienced hyper-inflation and depression, gender and generational conflict, political violence and terrorism, conflicts dealing with the relationship between church and state, and racist antisemitism.

- The fourteen years of the Weimar Republic were a way station on the road to genocide, and yet they also witnessed the struggle of many decent, sincere people to create a just and humane society in a time of great artistic creativity.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC AND FOR TODAY:

- **If there is a need for a transitional period on the road to majority support for democracy, how does a democratic minority maintain itself in power until the majority can be educated for democracy?**

Democracy, which in its early stages is a fragile structure, came suddenly to Germany as a product of military defeat and the pressure of Germany's enemies. To many Germans, it came as an uninvited guest. Walter Rathenau, the first Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic, declared, "Now we have a Republic, the problem is we have no Republicans." How can a democracy function when there are few democrats? The National Socialists (Nazis-National Sozialists) claimed they were democratic because they had substantial popular support and by 1932 received more votes than any other political party. Otto Braun, the Prussian Social Democratic leader, argued that democracy was more than popular or even majority rule. He claimed it was the combination of representative government with the protection of basic civil rights for all. What does the term "democracy" mean today?

- **How does a democratic government deal with terrorism and violent radical political groups who desire to destroy the democracy?**

E. J. Gumbel, a statistician who supported the Weimar Republic, calculated that terrorists committed 454 murders in the early years of the Republic's existence. Gumbel documented that, while judges were brutally harsh in their treatment of the small number of left-wing assailants in terrorist attacks, the same judiciary's overt sympathy for right-wing terrorist violence seriously threatened the Republic. Were the pro-Weimar parties deceiving themselves in imagining that an apolitical judiciary was possible? Can a new democracy work with a fundamentally anti-democratic judiciary until a new one can be recruited and trained? Can democrats be too weak in their own defense? Can terrorism be successfully fought while maintaining broad civil liberties?

- **In a democracy, what is the proper role of nationalism with its symbols, uniforms, music, and poetry?**

Hermann Heller, a pro-Weimar lawyer, argued that nationalism was compatible with democracy and individual liberties. He believed that the Social Democrats, the largest of the parties supporting the Republic, should embrace nationalism. He argued that they could use nationalism to help to bridge the huge gaps between the classes in Germany. In an ironic comment on the reasons for the failure of the Weimar Republic, the diplomat and anti-Nazi, Erich Kordt, quipped that, had the Republic issued more uniforms and shown more flags, it could have survived. Could the leaders of the Republic have utilized nationalism and patriotism for positive democratic purposes and not yielded these powerful forces to anti-democratic elements?

- **How do governments encourage individuals and groups to compromise their immediate self-interests to the larger interests of society?**

During the years of the Weimar Republic, Germany experienced extreme economic inflation and depression. In November 1923 during the time of hyper-inflation, the German mark, which had traded at 4.2 to the American dollar in 1914, was trading at 4.2 trillion marks to the dollar. Individuals saw their life savings and their hopes for a comfortable retirement disappear overnight. In 1932 at the height of the depression 6 million Germans, one-third of the work force, was unemployed. Yet, these problems went unchecked or were at best belatedly dealt with and reached critical proportions because industrialists, labor union leaders, land owners, and members of the middle class were all caught up in their particular short term self-interests. The historian Charles Meyer argues that, had these various interest groups compromised some of their special interests, the leaders of the Republic would have been able to moderate substantially the effects of the inflation and the depression.

- **How does a democracy transform an anti-democratic teaching corps so that its schools can be schools for democracy?**

Teachers in the Weimar Republic undermined ideological and curriculum reform by clinging to anti-democratic ideas and older, more autocratic approaches to education. These teachers were products of a university and college system, which the historian Ferdinand Lilje believed was responsible for the “failure of German learning” and which the historian

Max Weinrich called the training grounds for “Hitler’s Professors”. What types of changes could have been made in the universities and colleges and specifically in the training of teachers so that they could have helped students to see the advantages of democracy and work to prevent its destruction?

• **What role do intellectuals play in a new democracy? Do they have a special obligation to be supportive and not overly critical of their new government?**

Weimar intellectuals, particularly those on the left such as Kurt Tucholsky, Carl von Ossietzky, and George Grosz, have been accused of being destructively critical of the new Republic. Walter Laqueur has argued that in crisis periods intellectuals should hold back on their criticisms and support their government particularly if it is fragile. Other scholars argue that free critical speech strengthens rather than weakens democracy.

• **How did Weimar Germans view America?**

Many Germans admired American productivity, wealth, and culture. They looked to Henry Ford as a hero for his revolutionary manufacturing innovations. American jazz and popular music swept Germany, and Paul Whitman’s band filled German ballrooms and theaters. However, other Germans believed that America represented crass materialism, low morals, and a culture dominated by Jews and “Africans”. What did most Weimar Germans really know about America? Which of their perceptions were distortions and the product of extremist propaganda?

• **How can new constitutional equality for women be translated into real equality that affects women’s lives?**

Women dominated the Weimar electorate. Out of a total population of 60 million Germans, two million young men between the ages of 18 and 34 had been killed in World War I and another two million had been so severely physically or mentally injured that they could play little role in governance. Although women had not been allowed to participate in any political organizations almost to the end of the pre-World War I period, they grasped the new opportunities that the war and its aftermath brought. In the earliest years of the Weimar Republic women voted in large numbers and supported the pro-Republican parties that had granted them the vote. Yet, in the last years of the Weimar Republic, women

deserted the political parties that had supported the Republic, and in the period from 1930 to 1932 they constituted the fastest growing group to support the Nazi Party. How can new female voters be empowered to assert their independence and vote their own interests? How can strongly entrenched, patriarchal traditions, which still influence civil and criminal codes, be modified to conform to the spirit of the new constitution?

• **What role does self-deception play in the way that many people evaluate their own social and political circumstances?**

In 1921 Kurt Tucholsky, a left-wing intellectual, claimed that “Germans had two passions: beer and antisemitism.” He added that “the beer was twenty-eight proof, but the antisemitism was a hundred proof.” Gershom Scholem, a German Jew who immigrated to Palestine in the mid-1920s, declared that his fellow co-religionists were deceiving themselves into believing that they had been truly accepted into German society. He charged that they were blind to the growing antisemitism around them and cited the numerous antisemitic publications that abounded in Germany including the notorious “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. The Russian secret police in the pre-World War I era had fabricated this account of a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. Alfred Rosenberg, a refugee from the Baltic part of the Russian Empire who became a Nazi leader, brought it to Germany. How did self-deception affect the ways Jews viewed their situation during the Weimar Years? Why did many Weimar Jews not recognize the danger of their situation?

• **How do people define their own identity and that of those they include or exclude from their group?**

The historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler claims that German history before as well as during the Nazi years was marked by pronounced polarization of the society into groups perceived as insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies. “Race”, in its distorted Weimar definition, became the primary criterion for defining identity. Racial anthropologists, hygienists, and doctors supported the pseudo-science of Eugenics and its racial classification system. In an effort to distinguish between Germans and those who were “inferior,” the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, a major scholarly center, sponsored research on prisoners first in detention camps in southwest Africa during the early part of the century then later in

concentration camps during the 1940s. Germans are still having problems defining who is a German.

• **What roles do grass roots organizing, propaganda, and technology play in the political processes of a democracy?**

In a society in which the political spectrum consisted of over thirty parties, why were the Nazis the most effective in getting their message across to the public through grass roots organizing, the automobile, the airplane, and the radio?

• **What role does hatred play in politics and in generating support for a political movement?**

Adolf Hitler and his propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels were great haters who believed that hatred could be used to create unity and gather support for the Nazi movement. The historian Daniel Goldhagen argues that many Germans' deep-seated and long-standing hatred of Jews was a wellspring that the Nazis tapped on their way to power and to the Holocaust. Hatred of Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) and homosexuals, attitudes already present in Weimar Germany, also turned deadly under the Nazis. How can the democratic forces in a society attack the prejudices and stereotypes that create hatred?

• **What role can religious leaders and institutions play in the political life of a society?**

The German intellectual Carl Amery has argued that during the Weimar years the churches concentrated on secondary virtues such as obedience, authority, and discipline while ignoring the primary religious virtues of love, brotherhood, mercy, and charity. Church leaders provided little support for the new democracy and rarely opposed the politics of racism and hatred that attracted increasing numbers of followers. The historian Michael Burleigh sees Nazism as a type of political religion. Was this political religion compatible with Christianity? What role should religious leaders play in a democracy? Is there a danger of blurring the boundaries between church and state?

• **What can citizens expect from those who govern them?**

The parties that supported the Weimar Republic, the Social Democrats, the Democratic Party, and the Center Party, promised higher wages, shorter working hours, lower taxes,

better schools and health care. While also supporting these benefits, the Communists and the Nazis, the parties on the extreme left and right, promised that they would transform society and create a new German man and woman. The historian Paul Bookbinder has contrasted the two types of Weimar politics: the limited, pragmatic approach and the transcendent movement. The politics of transformation has often led to totalitarian states and mass murder. How can the democrats combat the transformers?