THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Edited by

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and

BENJAMIN ZIEMANN

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The Oxford Handbook of the Weimar Republic has been three years in the making, and we would like to express our gratitude to the many colleagues who have supported us. Our thanks go to Christina Wipf-Perry, who commissioned the project, and to Stephanie Ireland and Cathryn Steele, who offered support and crucial advice right until the end. Katie Bishop helped us with the technical complexities of editing work, Jane Robson provided superb copy-editing, and Preethi Krishnan steered our book through production.

We are grateful to the contributors, leading experts on Weimar Germany, who have taken time from their other work to offer a concise, interpretive analysis of their respective topic. The chapters in this volume are neither historiographical overviews nor simple textbook glosses. They rather represent an attempt to combine the presentation of structured information with an invitation to reflect on key arguments, continuities, and the complexities of politics, culture, and society in Weimar Germany.

We would also like to thank Christine Brocks, who did the bulk of the translations and compiled the index, and those colleagues who were able to support the translation of their own chapter, or indeed the inclusion of one iconic image. The Department of History at the University of Sheffield and the Department of History at the University of Essex funded the translation of chapters, crucial help that is greatly appreciated. Special thanks go to Moritz Föllmer, who was not only the first to deliver his chapter, but also provided advice, insight, and moral support along the way. We are also grateful to Anthony McElligott, who offered invaluable criticism on our introduction. With great sadness we have to record that Sharon Gillerman, a distinguished scholar of the history of modern German Jewry, passed away shortly after she had submitted her draft chapter. Our thanks go to Paul Lerner and Mark Quigley who helped to finalize her important contribution.

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Nadine Rossol and Benjamin Ziemann
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33.2 Stadtarchiv Kassel, E7.2 no.1271
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ADGB  Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (General German Trade Union Federation)
AIZ  Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung (Worker’s Illustrated Journal)
ALV  Arbeitslosenversicherung (Unemployment Insurance)
Art.  Article
AVAG  Gesetz über Arbeitsvermittlung und Arbeitslosenversicherung (Law on Labour Exchange and Unemployment Insurance)
BdI  Bund der Industriellen (League of Industrialists)
BdL  Bund der Landwirte (League of Farmers)
BIZ  Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung (Berlin Illustrated Journal)
BNSDJ  Bund Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Juristen
BVP  Bayerische Volkspartei (Bavarian People’s Party)
BPRS  Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller (Association of Proletarian-Revolutionary Authors)
BArch  Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives)
CDI  Centralverband Deutscher Industrieller (Central Association of German Industrialists)
CDU  Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union)
CIAM  Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (International Congresses of Modern Architecture)
CNBLP  Christlich-Nationale Bauern- und Landvolk Partei (Christian National Peasants’ and Farmers’ Party)
CV  Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith)
DAP  Deutsche Arbeiter Partei (German Workers’ Party)
DDP  Deutsche Demokratische Partei (German Democratic Party)
DEWOG  Deutsche Wohnungsfürsorge AG (German Housing Company for State Officials and Workers)
DFG  Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation)
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>DGSO</td>
<td>Deutsche Gesellschaft zum Studium Osteuropas (German Society for the Study of Eastern Europe)</td>
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<td>DINTA</td>
<td>Deutsches Institut für technische Arbeitsschulung (German Institute for Technical Work Schooling)</td>
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<tr>
<td>dj 1.11</td>
<td>deutsche jungenschaft vom 1.11 (German Boyhood of 1.11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DKG</td>
<td>Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft (German Colonial Society)</td>
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<td>DKP</td>
<td>Deutsch-Konservative Partei (German Conservative Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DLV</td>
<td>Deutscher Landarbeiter-Verband (German Association of Agricultural Workers)</td>
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<td>DNVP</td>
<td>Deutschnationale Volkspartei (German National People's Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DStP</td>
<td>Deutsche Staatspartei (German State Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DVFП</td>
<td>Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei (German-Völkisch Freedom Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DVP</td>
<td>Deutsche Volkspartei (German People's Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVSTB</td>
<td>Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutz-Bund (German-Völkisch Protection and Defiance Federation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRG</td>
<td>Federal Republic of Germany</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<td>GDR</td>
<td>German Democratic Republic</td>
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<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Chamber of Commerce</td>
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<td>IMKK</td>
<td>Interalliierte Militär-Kontrollkommission (Military Inter-Allied Commission of Control)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRZ</td>
<td><em>Illustrierte Reichsbanner Zeitung</em> (Illustrated Reichsbanner Journal)</td>
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<td>JAD</td>
<td>Jüdischer Abwehrdienst (Jewish Defence Service)</td>
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<td>Jungdo</td>
<td>Jungdeutscher Orden (Young German Order)</td>
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<td>KAPD</td>
<td>Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (German Communist Workers' Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>KfdK</td>
<td>Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur (Combat League for German Culture)</td>
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<tr>
<td>KPD</td>
<td>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Party)</td>
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<td>KRA</td>
<td>Kriegsrohstoffabteilung (War Raw Materials Department)</td>
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<tr>
<td>M.A.N.</td>
<td>Maschinenfabrik Augsburg-Nürnberg AG</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSPD</td>
<td>Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCO</td>
<td>Non-Commissioned Officer</td>
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<td>NSDAP</td>
<td>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist Workers' Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NS-DÄB</td>
<td>Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Ärztebund (National Socialist League of Physicians)</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<td>NSDStB</td>
<td>Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (National Socialist German Students’ League)</td>
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<td>NSEP</td>
<td>Nationalsozialistischer Evangelischer Pfarrerbund (National Socialist Pastors’ League)</td>
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<td>NSFP</td>
<td>Nationalsozialistische Freiheitspartei (National Socialist Freedom Party)</td>
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<td>NSLB</td>
<td>Nationalsozialistischer Lehrerbund (National Socialist Teachers’ League)</td>
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<td>OHL</td>
<td>Oberste Heeresleitung (Army Supreme Command)</td>
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<td>PNF</td>
<td>Partito Nationale Fascista (Italian Fascist Party)</td>
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<td>POW</td>
<td>Prisoner of War</td>
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<td>RDI</td>
<td>Reichsverband der Deutschen Industrie (National Federation of German Industry)</td>
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<td>RFB</td>
<td>Roter Frontkämpferbund (Red Front Fighters’ League)</td>
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<td>RJF</td>
<td>Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten (Reich League of Jewish Front Line Soldiers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RKW</td>
<td>Reichskuratorium für Wirtschaftlichkeit (Reich Productivity Board)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RLB</td>
<td>Reichslandbund (Reich Rural League)</td>
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<td>RM</td>
<td>Reichsmark</td>
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<td>RSHA</td>
<td>Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Main Security Office)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RVG</td>
<td>Reichsversorgungsgesetz (Reich Pension Law)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Sturmabteilung (Stormtroopers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPD</td>
<td>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (German Social Democratic Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Schutzstaffel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TENO</td>
<td>Technische Nothilfe (Technical Emergency Support)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ufa</td>
<td>Universum Film A.G.</td>
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<tr>
<td>USPSD</td>
<td>Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany)</td>
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<td>VDA</td>
<td>Vereinigung Deutscher Arbeitgeberverbände (Federation of German Employers’ Associations)</td>
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<td>VOKS</td>
<td>Soviet All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad</td>
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<td>WP</td>
<td>Wirtschaftspartei (Business Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wumba</td>
<td>Waffen- und Munitions-Beschaffungsamt (Weapons and Ammunition Procurement Office)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZAG</td>
<td>Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft (Central Association of Employers and Employees)</td>
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The Weimar Republic conjures up any number of colourful and ultimately contradictory images. We see Weimar as a place of innovation across the arts, from the radical theatre of Bertolt Brecht, the modernist architecture of the Bauhaus, to the innovative photomontage of Hannah Höch. We see Weimar as a society in search for new practices of life, including the longing for community in the youth movement and the exploration of different gender roles. Weimar was a place of bold participatory experiments, with the introduction of universal suffrage for both women and men and a constitution that enshrined progressive welfare state policies into law. Yet the Weimar Republic also offers stark reminders about the fragility of modern society and democracy. It was home to rampant antisemitism and the incessant agitation of populists against parliamentary democracy. There was the greatest crisis of the capitalist economy in the twentieth century and the despair it entailed for millions. And then there was the Nazi party, emerging from its humble beginnings in post-war Bavaria to become the largest German party at the ballot box in 1932. After the appointment of Hitler as chancellor on 30 January 1933, Weimar’s democracy was quickly dismantled and Germany ushered in the brutal dictatorship of the Third Reich.

The history of the Weimar Republic from 1918 to 1933 is thus a crucial juncture in German and European history. The aim of this Oxford Handbook is to provide accessible, up-to-date information on the most relevant aspects of society, culture, and politics in this period, enabling the reader to make sense of the peculiarities and the contradictions of this era. Recent events have garnered renewed interest in the history of the Weimar Republic. The centenary of its founding in 2018 prompted attempts in Germany to see the first republic of the country as a milestone in the development of a democratic culture and thus as a reference point for a positive historical tradition. At the same time, the rise of right-wing populist parties in the Federal Republic, as in many other European countries, has triggered renewed concerns over the stability of democracies. Not only in the German context, the catchphrase ‘Weimar circumstances’ is a cipher for the dangers produced by the erosion of trust in the parliamentary system, and for the weaknesses of democratic governance vis-à-vis those who despise it and are able to whip up popular
resentment against it in times of economic upheaval.¹ We share widespread concerns about the populist tide in recent European politics and are acutely aware of the potential insights that historical comparisons can provide. Yet we also believe that the interest in using Weimar as a historical reference point for the current weaknesses of democracy has to be carefully balanced against one of the main aims of the historian, the attempt to understand the specific context of the past in its own right.²

Which picture of the beleaguered republic emerges when historians take the business of historicizing seriously? We will discuss this issue in more detail soon, but want to give some important pointers right away: certainly one that is less dependent on the stark, eye-catching juxtaposition between the ‘glitter’ of modernist culture and the ‘doom’ of economic crisis and rise of the Nazis, as each of these polar opposites should be seen in much more complex fashion and many other facets of Weimar Germany come to the fore.³ To historicize Weimar Germany also means to carefully reconstruct the ‘horizon of expectations’ of the contemporaries of the 1920s and early 1930s. Hindsight is often a handicap for the historian, and nowhere more so than in regard to the Weimar Republic. While some contemporaries considered 1933 to be the fulfilment of their dreams, it is crucial not to reduce the multi-layered history of Weimar to the mere precursor of the Third Reich.⁴ Otherwise we neglect those contemporary expectations that envisaged an entirely different ‘present future’, possible states of German society and politics that were anticipated in 1925 or 1930 when looking five or ten years into the future.⁵ A focus on the outcome in 1933 also limits the attention we pay to the scope for collective agency of Weimar contemporaries, and their ability to shape a future whose outcome they did not know. A thorough intellectual history of Weimar’s present futures has revealed a staggering degree of optimism about the future in contemporary thinking. This finding runs against the grain of the conventional argument that the carnage and devastation of the First World War had rung the death knell to the broad current of nineteenth-century optimistic liberal belief in progress.⁶ Belief in the ability to change the course of the future was one of the enduring elements of Weimar’s intellectual outlook, shared across the political spectrum both by the left and the radical right.

Historicizing Weimar also means considering multiple lines of continuity in German history that feed into different trajectories. Following in the footsteps of émigré historians such as Hans Rosenberg, social historians around Jürgen Kocka and Hans-Ulrich Wehler have developed the notion of a German Sonderweg or special path. They emphasize lines of continuity that, roughly defined, lead from the founding of the German nation-state in 1871 to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. In this view, the preponderance of the military and of popular militarism in Imperial Germany, the lack of parliamentary checks on the power of government, and the grip of the feudal landowners in the Prussian East on the village population were crucial preconditions for 1933. Unlike other Western European nations, the Sonderweg argument goes, Germany failed to develop a pluralistic culture of participation that would have allowed it to stave off the fascist onslaught against democracy. In that sense, 1933 was an overdetermined outcome.⁷ The notion of the Sonderweg has been often criticized as it limits multiple lines of continuity in German history to just one.⁸ If we consider 1918/19 as a beginning, through the
introduction of female suffrage and the codification of the Weimar Constitution, other lines of continuity come into view. From the vantage point of 1949, when the Federal Republic adopted the Basic Law as its constitution, and even more so from that of 1990, when a reunified Germany reaffirmed the Basic Law, 1919 appears as a foundational moment in the longue durée of German history: for the first time, a German nation-state was at the same time a democratic polity. In this perspective, Weimar is an important part of the prehistory of the current Federal Republic.⁹

In this chapter, we want to introduce our readers to some important strands of historiography that have framed thinking about the Weimar Republic from 1945 to the present. We will look at some of the seminal works by historians in the Federal Republic up till the early 1990s that had a lasting impact on the narratives that were and still are used to write the history of this era. Then we highlight differing agendas and questions that have come to the fore since the 1990s and led to a pluralization of approaches, vistas, and interpretations. Finally, we explain the structure of this volume and our selection of topics.

**Weimar’s Crisis: Interpretations from the 1950s to 1990**

In post-war Germany, the long shadow of the dying republic lingered over scholarly attempts to write the history of Germany from 1918 to 1933. During the early years of the Federal Republic, resentment against parties and parliamentary rule was still running deep among parts of the West German public. In this difficult political climate, political scientists such as Karl Dietrich Bracher and Kurt Sontheimer were among the first scholars to combine a critical analysis of the Weimar Republic with unequivocal normative support for parliamentary democracy. It was in 1956 that the Swiss journalist Fritz René Allemann coined the reassuring phrase ‘Bonn is not Weimar’, firmly establishing Weimar as a negative backdrop to the positive achievements of the Bonn Republic.¹⁰ In this political context, from the 1960s to the early 1990s, leading historians in the Federal Republic provided the key narratives that framed most other specialist scholarship and defined the field.¹¹

Up until 1990, the overarching imperative of Weimar scholarship was to explain the failure and ultimate dissolution of democratic governance. It is thus no surprise that all but one of the major synthetic monographs in this period prioritize political history and only briefly cover developments in the economy, society, and culture, or use them as a blunt explanatory tool to account for specific political developments. To be sure, approaches to political history can differ vastly, yet most of these accounts adopted a top-down approach that identified agency primarily among the political elites.

First published in 1989 as a summation of his own substantial research, Hans Mommsen’s account of the ‘squandered freedom’ that the republic provided places
the moral and political bankruptcy of the liberal bourgeois elites centre stage. To be sure, Mommsen was equally scathing in his critique of the obsolescence and ‘ossification’ of the social democratic leadership and its affiliated Free Trade Unions, and of the resulting ‘immobility’ of their politics in defence of the republic. Yet the full weight of Mommsen’s ire was clearly reserved for the middle classes, and here in particular for the academically trained members of the educated middle class, the so-called Bildungsbürgertum, consisting of physicians, lawyers, Protestant pastors, secondary school teachers, and, crucially, students and their academic teachers. Mommsen identified ‘status anxieties’ as the key menace that riddled this group during the 1920s and undermined its confidence, if not leading to a wholesale ‘dissolution’ of the Bürgertum altogether. At any rate, the Bildungsbürger abandoned their liberal views and turned to an ‘antiliberal’ political irrationalism. The abandonment of liberal principles by those whose historical task was to defend them played decisively into the hands of the Nazis and their quest for power.

For someone who also wrote pioneering articles on the social history of the working class, Mommsen staked a lot on the relevance of the Bildungsbürgertum, a social group that comprised less than 1 per cent of the German population in the 1920s.

Another major synthesis of Weimar’s history was published in 1993 by Heinrich August Winkler. Like Mommsen, Winkler put politics centre stage. He saw the main problems that explained the demise of democracy in its limited scope for decision-making. Winkler’s Weimar is, not unlike Mommsen’s, first and foremost an industrial society. Thus, it required a ‘class compromise’ between organized labour and the corporate interests of the bourgeoisie to facilitate reasonable governance in a context of intense economic pressure. After a promising start, with an agreement between employers and trade unions in late 1918, the so-called Stinnes-Legien agreement, the search for a ‘class compromise’ wore thin and was abandoned in the late 1920s. When the representatives of heavy industry decided in November 1928 to start a month-long lockout of a quarter of a million workers, they signalled a move to confrontation rather than compromise. This meant that a downward spiral of increasingly bitter conflicts paralysed democracy.

The books by Mommsen and Winkler were the summation of their decades-long research into Weimar politics. With Detlev Peukert’s book on Weimar as a ‘crisis of classical modernity’, first published in 1987, a relative newcomer entered the scene. As his book remains a key reference point for everybody who is interested in Weimar Germany, we want to consider its relevance in some detail. Peukert’s account was the first to provide a multi-faceted picture of society and politics from 1918 to 1933, devoting equal attention to mass culture, generational conflicts, and technocratic elements of the welfare state as well as to traditional themes like the impact of hyperinflation and the Treaty of Versailles. Peukert conceived of Weimar as a genuinely modern society, drawing the clear conclusion that the many crises of the era did not result from pre-modern elites or uneven modernization, but from the inherent instability of modernity itself.

It is important to see that Peukert understood modernity not simply as an industrial society in which labour versus capital was the main divide, as Winkler and
Mommsen did. Following ideas that the sociologist Max Weber had developed in his work on the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/5), Peukert identified formal rationalization as the key texture of modernity. According to Weber, formal rationality—essentially, the trend towards optimizing any action that is based on means/ends calculations—was first adopted in the economy, but then became a structural principle of other societal fields and ultimately a central feature of all life orders (*Lebensordnungen*) in modernity. Peukert traced its impact in Weimar society across many different fields. In the industrial economy, he focused on Taylorism, the mechanization of labour processes and the introduction of assembly line production as attempts to increase productivity. In the field of gender and sexuality, he highlighted attempts to promote sexual hygiene and the use of contraceptives. In the field of cultural production, Peukert emphasized the significance of the style of New Objectivity as it tried to create a new realism that incorporated ‘objective’ ways of seeing into art, informed by media such as film and photography. In the context of welfare policies, massively expanded in the 1920s, he detected traces of a ‘social engineering’ that not only tried to alleviate hardship, but to tackle exclusion more profoundly by educating lower class people and rationalizing their lifestyle. Welfare policies also provided a crucial example for Peukert’s general argument about the ambivalences and inherent contradictions of a rationalized modernity: when the vastly increasing welfare expenditure in the crisis of the late 1920s motivated policymakers to opt for retrenchment, the means/ends calculation of how to best spend the available funds led to a selection between clients who still deserved support and the ‘unworthy’ who did not. In Peukert’s view, a fundamental ambivalence of modernity was laid bare: that progressive policies could prepare the ground for the violently exclusionary policies of the ‘Third Reich’. Tracing the ambivalences and self-destructive effects of Weimar’s modernity, Peukert thus made a wider point. Weimar has relevance not only because the destruction of parliamentary democracy contains a warning for the present. More generally, it represents a vivid reminder of the dangerous potentials of modernity.

Peukert’s short book still represents a benchmark for any complex interpretation of Germany’s first republic. This does not mean that all his arguments are conclusive and that his conceptual framework cannot be adapted. It must suffice here to mention two problematic points. First, historians pointed out that a large chunk of welfare state expenditure in Weimar—across the Reich, the Länder, and local government—was not related to inherent problems of ‘modernity’, but rather to the remnants of total war in the guise of hundreds of thousands disabled veterans, war widows, and orphans who received payments. Historians remain also sceptical whether the eugenicist and exclusionary tendencies of welfare state provision up till 1933 really ‘helped to pave the way’ for subsequent Nazi policies. Second, Peukert had literally nothing to say about the presence of organized Christianity and practised piety in Weimar cultures. Like many other social historians during the 1980s, Peukert was not attentive to the enduring presence of religious culture and confessional conflict in Weimar Germany. Thus, he clearly overstated rationalization as the key signature of the era and downplayed the significance of life-worlds that did not conform to the imperative of formal rationality.
From Bracher to Peukert and Winkler, West German scholars provided the key synthetic works that framed debate on Weimar from the 1950s to the early 1990s. To be sure, some of the foremost experts on the social and political history of the Weimar Republic were historians in the US and UK, including, to name only three, the late Gerald D. Feldman, Larry Eugene Jones, and Cornelia Usborne. Yet their many path-breaking books and articles, informed by decades of archival research, analysed specific topics and did not provide an overall narrative of German history from 1918 to 1933. This situation only changed after 2000, when several British and US historians published books that offered a synthetic view of Weimar Germany. At this point, however, some established interpretive tropes had already come under scrutiny, and new agendas for research had come to the fore.

**Did Weimar Fail? Different Themes and Questions beyond the Crisis Paradigm**

From the 1950s to the early 1990s, successive generations of historians came up with different general interpretations of the Weimar Republic. While they identified different causes, they agreed on one point: that the foremost task of any historian of this period was to account for the failure and ultimate destruction of democracy. Historian Michael Stürmer summarized this approach in 1980, stating that Weimar’s history had to be seen as a ‘Sickness Unto Death’, quoting a formulation by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. In similar vein, Heinrich August Winkler argued that, in light of 1933 being one of the ‘great catastrophes of world history’, writing the history of Weimar had to be a form of ‘grief work’. This direction of historiography fundamentally changed with a landmark article by the American historian Peter Fritzsche, published in 1996 and provocatively titled ‘Did Weimar Fail?’ This was a passionate plea to embrace a history that was ‘strikingly open-ended’ and ‘remarkably contingent’, to develop new lines of inquiry, employ new conceptual categories, and to see the traditional theme of an embattled democratic system in a new light. Fritzsche’s article helped to frame attempts to reconsider Weimar from different angles that were already under way at this point. In the following, we discuss five distinctive, yet also related, themes that have attracted the attention of historians over the past two decades.

There is—first—a revision in our understanding of the notion of a ‘crisis’ of the Weimar Republic. This term is ubiquitously used in historical writing on Weimar Germany and usually implies a process in which unmitigated problems compounded, leading to the terminal decline of the democratic system. Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s usage is telling in this respect: he distinguished a ‘crisis of capitalism’, a ‘crisis of the state’, a ‘societal crisis’, in which the charismatic leader Hitler promised a way out of an ‘existential crisis’, thus deepening the ‘legitimization crisis’ of the republic. Amidst this ‘bundle of crises’, the fate of the republic was sealed. What these and other references to the ‘crises’
of Weimar have in common is their reification of the term; it is treated as an objective given that has only one implication: decline. The critical revision of this historiographical trope has operated at several levels. Historians have pointed out that, rather than being an "objective" description of a set of circumstances, the notion of 'crisis' has a narrative dimension. While crime rates, population statistics, or unemployment figures appear to be objective data, they only conjure up a crisis when they are embedded in narratives of decline. Empirical studies of crisis narratives in Germany from 1918 to 1933 demonstrate that, while contemporaries often invoked the term 'crisis', not all these narratives were marked by a pessimistic outlook into the future.\(^{30}\)

This puts the semantics of the concept 'crisis' into sharp relief. In line with the original meaning of the term, it denoted a moment of openness and decision-making about the future course of events. In his analysis of the different meaning of 'crisis' in Weimar discourse, Rüdiger Graf has highlighted the prevalence of optimistic readings of the term and of the expectations for the future that it encapsulated. Thus, Graf turns the narrative of a doomed republic on its head and opens our eyes to something Weimar contemporaries saw all along: that their present could be shaped and changed by individual and collective action, and was characterized by a deep belief in the malleability of society.\(^{31}\) While the traditional historiography of the Weimar Republic had established the narrative of a fundamental crisis leading to terminal decline so firmly that it hardly needed any further explanation, Graf suggests that 'it is difficult to find any prominent author, politician, intellectual, or journalist in Weimar Germany who publicly used the notion of crisis in a pessimistic or even fatalistic sense'.\(^{32}\) These revisionist insights into the semantics of 'crisis' in the Weimar Republic stand in a stark contrast to the findings of Richard Overy's magisterial study of public discourse on the future in inter-war Britain. Both diagnostic analyses by social-scientific experts as well as the dissemination of opinions by journalists, writers, and politicians displayed deep-seated anxieties, if not outright paranoia about the future. Public discourse in 1920s and early 1930s Britain was characterized by a thoroughly negative outlook on the future, framed and amplified by the notion of a wholesale crisis of civilization.\(^{33}\) If any Western European country around 1930 was gripped by an obsession with imminent decline, it was the United Kingdom, not Germany.

A second major field of debate relates to culture. The narrative of the doomed republic dovetailed with the celebration of Weimar's cultural highlights, mainly its metropolitan modernism, which shone more brightly the darker the political history of the young republic became. The catchy (but still false) suggestion that Berlin's population was partying to jazz music and cocaine while the Nazis seized power is rekindled whenever a historical anniversary or a new film production revives the notion of the allegedly wild and golden 1920s. Popular perceptions of this kind were also enshrined in historiography and remained surprisingly unchanged until well into the early 2000s.\(^{34}\) More recently, however, historians have urged the scholarly community to move beyond the false binary of 'bad' politics and 'good' culture, or, in other words, 'beyond glitter and doom'.\(^{35}\) What is needed to broaden our view of Weimar culture and to move away from these problematic binaries? The most important ingredient of a renewed history of
Weimar culture is to abandon the focus on a small sample of high-brow artists and their iconic productions, a perspective that Peter Gay inaugurated with his seminal account of the ‘outsider as insider’, first published in 1968. Moving away from the highbrow requires attention to previously overlooked areas. We need a more critical and deeply contextualized history of the contemporary audiences for high-brow as well as low-brow culture and its reception. In the literary field, this requires data on the overall output of books, the relevance of specific genres as well as the mechanisms that informed their distribution and reception. In film, a closer look at Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) reveals that it ‘was a box office flop’ that almost bankrupted its production company Ufa. While the film, with its images of a futuristic cityscape, has subsequently become ‘one of the icons of the 1920s’, it was basically ignored by cinema goers at the time of its production. We also need to rethink the proclaimed novelty of certain styles of art. The Bauhaus can serve as a key example here. The modernist design and architecture of its founders and key proponents depended on departures that dated back to the turn of the century, namely the work of the Deutscher Werkbund. Yet after Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and other leading Bauhaus figures had emigrated to the US, these connections to earlier strands of German modernism got lost, not least due to the clever self-marketing of Gropius. Up until 1933 only one and not even the most successful school of modernist architecture in Germany, the Bauhaus brand emerged as a major international success story only after 1945, and was only then seen as an iconic Weimar production. As a genre, war literature demonstrates how the focus on specific high-brow texts overlooks what proved successful with mass audiences. With *In Stahlgewittern* (*Storms of Steel*, 1920), Ernst Jünger produced one of the seminal texts in this genre and coined a metaphor that encapsulated the meaning of the front-line experience like none other. The book glorified the war in a way that contradicted the individual experiences of many soldiers, but at the same time offered a sense of collective meaning for suffering. Yet while *In Stahlgewittern* is a key text in Jünger’s oeuvre and perhaps the most important German book about the First World War, its circulation prior to 1928/9, when Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* transformed the literary field, was very limited. Among the most widely sold texts about the war, at least before Remarque’s book broke all records, were, however, two short pamphlets with no literary pretense—and certainly with no avant-garde qualities—by a school teacher and an anarchist agitator and author, respectively. Yet *Charleville* (1919) by Wilhelm Appens and *Etappe* *Gent* (*Rear Area Gent*, 1921/1928) by Heinrich Wandt quickly shifted hundreds of thousands of copies because they highlighted, from a left-wing perspective, a scandal that had agitated many German soldiers during the war: the moral corruption and sleaze that German officers in the rear area, at a safe distance from the dangers of the front, had practised. Ultimately, there was more to Weimar culture than just the avant-garde. A commercialized popular culture, including cinema, spectator sports, and pulp fiction, had emerged since around 1900. With technological innovations such as the introduction of radio broadcasts and sound film, the Weimar era witnessed the
proliferation of a media ensemble that comprised and in many ways connected—through reviews, advertisements, and cross-merchandising by media conglomerates—film, radio, popular music, and the daily press. For many educated observers from the Bildungsbürgertum, the spectacle of these mass media represented ‘bad’ culture, commercialized, devoid of higher meaning, and often sexualized, while cultural critics mainly on the left of the political spectrum were concerned about its allegedly depoliticizing effects. Yet the lamentations of these educated critics did not diminish the popular appetite for the different forms of mass culture in the slightest. We need to incorporate low-brow books, films, plays, and other cultural artefacts in our historical imagination of the era and to analyse the media ensemble of mass culture and its audiences. We should also abandon the use of ‘dancing on the volcano’ as a metaphor that is meant to encapsulate the allegedly carnivalesque and ecstatic feel of Weimar culture. This is a generalization that simply does not ring true.

Reconsideration is—third—required in regard to the scales of Weimar’s history, from the local via the national to the global. Historians of Imperial Germany have established that the newly founded nation-state was a key driving force behind the first major wave of globalization from the 1880s onwards. Migration, the high level of economic interconnectedness through exports and imports, German colonies in Africa, East Asia, and the Pacific, and the global reach of German missionary societies are only a few indicators of the extent to which the national and the global were mutually implied in Imperial Germany. Both the First World War and the following peace settlement severely disrupted patterns and pathways of migration, trade, and transnational communication. However, the post-war period cannot simply be described as an era of de-globalization. Even though important export markets were blocked for German industry by the trade measures of the Treaty of Versailles, key branches such as the chemicals industry and machinery construction managed to surpass their pre-war export volume by 1929. Not only in its economy was Weimar Germany substantially shaped by transnational exchanges. Industrialists, trade unionists, and journalists of different political leanings were keen to emulate the blueprints that both the USA and the Soviet Union offered for attempts to rationalize and reform society. Only very few practical models of Americanization were implemented from 1919 to 1933. But the widespread interest in the USA as a beacon of modernity indicates that societal reform was very much a transnational endeavour.

Expert cultures of professionals were another field of intensive transnational exchange, as demonstrated by the many architects and town planners from other European countries who shaped the practice of their German counterparts with their ideas and designs. The new functionalist designs of the 1920s, so typical of the Bauhaus school, were heavily influenced by the Dutch group of artists De Stijl, not least because Theo van Doesburg, one of the founders of De Stijl, taught at the Bauhaus in Weimar 1921/2. Transnationalism was, to give one more example, a key feature of all those activists who campaigned for progressive causes in the peace movement. To be sure, for the pacifists, re-establishing contacts, particularly with their French counterparts, was fraught with problems given the atrocities that the German army had committed in 1914 in Belgium.
and Northern France. Yet it was possible to rebuild mutual trust, and in 1927, two leading pacifists, Ludwig Quidde and Ferdinand Buisson, were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their contribution to French–German reconciliation and the spirit that had facilitated the 1925 Locarno Treaties.\textsuperscript{48}

While Weimar Germany was embedded in significant transnational exchanges in its economy and its networks of experts and activists, it was significantly curtailed in two other important fields of globalization, namely, migration and empire.\textsuperscript{49} Imperial Germany had literally been a society ‘on the move’, with extremely high levels of both internal horizontal mobility, seasonal labour immigration, and emigration. In the third and final great wave of nineteenth-century emigration, 1.8 million Germans had left the country between 1880 and 1893. Post-1918, migration peaked in 1923, when 115,000 Germans went abroad. The overall volume was much lower than prior to 1914, with only 600,000 Germans emigrating from 1919 to 1932, mostly to the Americas.\textsuperscript{50} But an even bigger shift occurred in immigration. Imperial Germany, with its booming economy and barely mechanized agricultural sector, had been highly dependent on the import of labour. By 1914, around 1.2 million foreign workers were employed in Germany. The forced deportation of Belgian civilians and the influx of POWs during the Great War increased this number even further. The end of the war in 1918 brought labour immigration to a halt. Most of the POWs and civilian labourers went home, and the republican state was keen to drive both permanent and seasonal migration down to an absolute minimum.\textsuperscript{51} By 1924, only 170,000 foreign workers stayed in Germany. Labour policy in the Weimar Republic was geared to secure the primacy of domestic workers over those from abroad, and border controls were much tighter than before 1914. As a result, peak immigration was reached in 1928 with a mere 236,000 foreign workers, and 100,000 of these only had a time-limited permit for seasonal labour.\textsuperscript{52} To be sure, about one million Germans who had lived in territories that were ceded to France and Poland under the Treaty of Versailles relocated to Germany.\textsuperscript{53} And after the defeat of the Whites in the Russian Civil War in 1920, Germany experienced a large influx of Russian refugees who fled from the Bolsheviks. Nonetheless, most of them moved to other countries, and by 1925 the overall tally stood at a much reduced 150,000.\textsuperscript{54} The upshot of all this is clear: during the Weimar Republic, Germany had a much more homogeneous and settled population than prior to 1914, and was less affected by emigration and immigration.

Between 1884 and 1899, Germany had amassed a sizeable colonial empire in Africa, East Asia, and the Pacific Ocean. It came to an end in 1919, when the Treaty of Versailles placed the German colonies under a mandate by the League of Nations. The loss of the colonies outraged many radical nationalists, but only very few of them were ready to join organizations that supported colonial revisionism. The most important of these, the German Colonial Society (Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft, DKG), saw its membership drop from c.43,000 in 1912 to only 21,420 by 1933. The Women’s League of the DKG fared better, increasing membership to 24,000 by 1932.\textsuperscript{55} However, compared to the membership figures and widespread local presence of other radical nationalist pressure groups, organized colonial revisionism was small fry. Hence, some historians argue that the real
significance of the former colonies in Weimar society did not lie specifically in the political realm, but in the proliferation of ‘colonial fantasies’, i.e. cultural imaginations and projections that reflected the desire for colonial domination over indigenous people. One medium for the discursive explication of colonial fantasies were ‘Africa books’, fictional and semi-autobiographical accounts in which the myth of the loyal Askari, black colonial soldiers who were committed to serving their German masters, provided the core narrative. A substantial analysis of this genre estimates that about 100 Africa books were published until the mid-1920s. Some of them became bestsellers. The relevance of these book-length accounts of colonial fantasies has, however, to be set against the backdrop of the overall literary market, with 6,000 books of fiction published in 1925 alone. Whether we look at colonial revisionism or at colonial fantasies: it appears that interest in the former colonies faded quickly, and that the overwhelming majority of Weimar Germans had other issues on their minds.

This brief survey indicates that the global entanglements and transnational connections of Weimar Germany should not be overestimated. Both the nation as an identity space and the nation-state and its capacity to shape the livelihood of millions had a much bigger relevance from 1918 to 1933 than was previously the case in the highly globalized Wilhelmine Germany. As we consider the scales of Weimar’s history, we also need to look at the level below the nation-state. The German nation-state, founded in 1871, was shaped by a long tradition of federalism that reserved powers for the individual states (Länder). Federalism changed its meaning with the shift to a parliamentary democracy, and the Weimar Constitution included some centralizing measures. Yet regional disparity had not only a political dimension, but also a social and cultural one. Regional differences, even within the Länder, were crucial markers of collective identity, shaped by historical traditions, geographical features, and sentimental longings to have a Heimat, a place where one belonged. Historicizing Weimar means to situate the German economy, society, and culture in its transnational, national, and subnational contexts and entanglements.

Important shifts have—fourth—occurred in our understanding of the Weimar political system. Conventional accounts of German political history from 1918 to 1933 focused on top-level decision-making in cabinets and party headquarters, which was analysed against the backdrop of the back-door lobbying of economic pressure groups that represented employers and businesses. What was lost in these accounts was not only the relevance of political mobilization at the grassroots level—including that for the Nazi party—and in different public arenas such as the workplace, the streets, and a associational life that revolved, in its bourgeois form, around the Stammtisch, a weekly gathering of like-minded members of an association who had reserved a table in a pub. But the traditional political history of the Weimar era was also deficient in conceptual terms as it interpreted the performative side of the political process—the theatrical elements of a politician’s speech, the display of flags and other symbols, the visualization of political groups and political scandals in illustrated journals—as a mere sideshow or façade behind which the actual power politics were to be found. More recent approaches to politics diverge from this assumption. They argue that the use of symbolic forms is
the very terrain on which the political process and its struggle over power is constituted, and that not only material interests, but also those in recognition, honour, and other values drive collective demands. From the many ramifications of this shift in perspective, only a few aspects can be highlighted here.

The new perspective implies a new look at the polity dimension of the political process, i.e. the written and unwritten rules that frame politics, and the institutions that provide its backbone. In this vein, historians have arrived at a reassessment of the revolution in 1918/19. Rather than being an outright failure, as often stated, the transition starting in November 1918 now appears as a successful project of ‘civic revolutionary mobilization’ that brought the mighty military machine of the Imperial system to a halt, based on the collective agency of the masses in the army and in many localized uprisings across Germany. Equally important, the revolutionaries decided with overwhelming majority to channel the transformation that they had inaugurated into a National Assembly, based on elections with a free, equal franchise for both men and women. The National Assembly, in turn, devised a constitution that provided a far-reaching framework for progressive reform. At the heart of the new democratic polity were the people, in whose collective will power rested, and the Reichstag, the national parliament, to which they delegated it in elections. A thorough analysis of the cross-party integration of the Reichstag deputies through rituals and different forms of symbolic interaction has not only revealed that inside the parliament a culture of pragmatic compromise mostly prevailed until 1928, but has also led to a positive re-evaluation of the role of parliament in the wider political process.

The focus on symbolic politics has led to a (re)discovery of those groups and forces that supported the republic wholeheartedly. It has often been suggested that Weimar was a ‘republic without republicans’, a trope that goes back to contemporary journalists and authors on the radical left who castigated the Social Democratic Party (SPD) for its lack of appetite for a more thorough social and economic transformation. Yet former politicians of the German Democratic Party (DDP) and SPD also contributed to the acceptance of this trope. Writing their memoirs in exile or after 1945, they claimed that the lack of a pro-republican narrative and symbols for the representation of the new polity had played a crucial role in its demise. Conveniently, these arguments excused them from any mistakes in political decision-making from 1918 to 1933. Yet recent studies have demonstrated that republican festivities, commemorations, rituals, and symbols were vibrant, colourful, and popular. Efforts to create an engaging set of symbolic republican practices, on a national level organized by the Reich Art Custodian (Reichskunstwart) as part of the Constitution Day, celebrated to commemorate the passage of the Weimar Constitution in the National Assembly on 11 August 1919, reached far beyond the capital and touched the everyday lives of millions. Local conflicts centred on republican symbols—flags, parades, commemorative activities—which were not just political decoration, but stood at the core of local identity formation. The recent understanding that Germany’s republicans and their organizations, most prominently the Reichsbanner Black-Red-Gold, were not a quiet minority, but actively, passionately, and visibly participating in the political landscape, has transformed
Weimar’s history by adding an important, and often overlooked, dimension to the political arena.  

The history of participation, democracy, and politics more generally in Weimar was highly gendered. A key caesura in this respect was the introduction of unrestricted female suffrage in the revolution, first practised in the elections to the National Assembly on 19 January 1919. The enfranchisement of women in Germany was not only progressive, not being limited by specific age restrictions or property qualifications such as for instance those stipulated by the Representation of the People Act in UK in the 1918. It was also transformative in that it provided women with citizenship rights, also enshrined in the Weimar Constitution, and thus allowed and encouraged sustained female involvement in the political sphere in the widest sense, through participation in elections and parties, but also in professional bodies and involvement in everyday political discussions. Yet it would be wrong to read women’s citizenship in Weimar through the lens of a progressive narrative of emancipation—a contested term anyway—and left-wing activism. Throughout Weimar elections at Reich and state level, female voters showed a consistent preference for parties that upheld Christian values, namely the German National People’s Party (DNVP) and the Catholic Centre Party. When we only count the male vote in the elections for the National Assembly, the socialist parties of the left, the SPD and Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), jointly achieved an absolute majority. If we only look at younger men born between 1887 and 1898 who had not been able to vote in the last Reichstag elections in 1912, this was most probably a two-thirds majority. Yet Weimar politics was not only gendered via different patterns of participation and (party) mobilization among men and women. Bodies and sexuality also had a political relevance. The struggle against §218 of the penal code, that is, the attempt to decriminalize abortion, was one of the most enduring political struggles of the Weimar era, deeply embedded in the everyday lives of the hundreds of thousands mostly working-class women every year who had an abortion performed. Male bodies were political, too, as the parties of the right, and especially the NSDAP and its paramilitary wing, the Stormtroopers, sought to reorganize a field of masculinity that had been disrupted by the trauma and mutilation many men had experienced during the war.

All this does not mean that it is no longer worthwhile to study the politics of interest and party formation; quite the contrary. A detailed reconstruction of the connections between party organization, political realignment at the local level, and the workings of pressure groups remains critical to understanding the reasons why the Nazi party was able to challenge and ultimately supersede the established parties of the German right. Yet all this relentless scheming and lobbying would have been neither plausible nor attractive, had it not been informed by symbolic ideas such as the notion of the people’s community and their performative enactment.

Important revisions haven taken place—fifth—in explanations for the rise of the National Socialists. Some older interpretations have lost currency, for instance the notion that the ‘victory of violence’ that they enacted on the streets catapulted the Nazis to power. Like the suggestion that the republic descended into a civil war in its final years, such arguments seem vastly overstated. Contrary to these assumptions, the use
of physical violence peaked at the beginning of Weimar, when it was used to crush revolutionary uprisings by the radical left in 1919/20. Another well-established argument explains the success of the NSDAP by the particularly innovative methods of its propaganda, the power of its slogans, leaflets, posters, and speeches by high-ranking party leaders. Yet the appeal of Nazi propaganda, and especially of the big rallies, has been exaggerated and never effectively proven. A more important factor to win over voters was the intensive organizational effort of the Nazi party at the local level. Hierarchically structured cells, going down to the level of street cells that comprised only a few blocks of houses, offered NSDAP members organizational routines and practices, a sense of belonging and, at points, a warm meal. They helped to anchor the party within the fabric of socially highly diverse local communities and allowed for a quick mobilization when it was needed. Another crucial factor for the increasing acceptance of the Nazi party was the influence of local opinion leaders, especially—but not exclusively—in tightly knit village communities in rural areas. Once Protestant pastors and teachers in villages, or well-respected business owners in small towns, came out as NSDAP supporters, the trust that members of the local population placed into them led many others to follow suit. All these findings corroborate a wider argument, first made regarding the small university town of Marburg: the Nazis were able to gather supporters in highly diverse social settings not so much by persuading and winning them over from the outside, but by converting them from the inside, as they participated in established networks and rituals of sociability like voluntary associations (Vereine) or the weekly Stammtisch (regulars’ table) where ordinary burghers met for a pint.

Another important argument for explaining the success of the Nazi relates to the ideological and symbolic appeal of the vision of a people's community or Volksgemeinschaft. The term itself was used by most political parties in the 1920s, including republicans in the SPD and DDP. One major exception remained the KPD, which, apart from brief moments as in 1923, refused to tap into the notion of national solidarity. But of all the parties, it was the NSDAP that ultimately best managed to connect their vision for a renewal of Germany to the longing for a national community that promised to cut across class and other social differences. Their interpretation of the Volksgemeinschaft, dovetailing with the focus on a strong leader, appeared to be the most convincing solution to Weimar's perceived problems and was also effective as a mobilizing tool. Closely tied to the emphasis on the solidarity of the national community was the exclusion of the Jews as 'others', outsiders who should and could not belong. Antisemitism in word and deed was widespread in the Weimar Republic, existed in different variations, was supported by many, and tolerated by most. The discursive use of exclusionary language in Weimar Germany shifted the boundaries of what was acceptable to say and write in favour of the radical antissemites. The fight against völkisch, racist antisemitism in Weimar Germany did not find enough unambiguous, wholehearted supporters. Ultimately, its ability to draw in socially diverse constituencies was a crucial factor for the success of the Nazi insurrection. This success was neither just the result of cynical manipulation nor of the economic depression. Rather, it depended on a complex process of political realignment that had already started in the mid-1920s and only accelerated...
during the Great Depression. The Nazis did not conquer German society from the outside, but rather immersed themselves in the fabric of small-town and rural sociability from the inside.

**The Structure of this Volume**

Our handbook provides up-to-date information and authoritative interpretations from an international team of experts. To ensure it is accessible to a wide range of readers, we offer different entry points to Weimar’s history depending on prior knowledge and interests. The first section offers a chronological overview with a focus on politics. Moving in four chapters from the German revolution 1918/19 to the dismantling of Weimar democracy in 1933, this section provides a basis for anyone who wants to establish or refresh their knowledge on key events and developments in Weimar Germany’s tumultuous history. The four periods delineated in this section (1918/19, 1920–3, 1924–9, and 1930–3) are not fixed entities, not least because they are predominantly defined by political developments, whereas other fields of society (social classes, religion, mass culture) followed a different pattern of periodization or indeed ran through the whole period as a bloc. It is particularly problematic to label the period from 1924 to 1928 as the stable years of the republic, as has been often done in the past. Whether through the proliferation of antisemitic discourse or because a national socialist consensus (in lower case letters) emerged in the nationalist-bourgeois milieu during these years, many of the detrimental forces that ultimately destroyed the republic came to the fore precisely between 1924 and 1928. The rest of our handbook is structured in thematic blocks, covering the three aspects of the political system (polity/politics/policies) (Part II), parties and their constituencies (Part III), economy and society (Part IV), and culture (Part V). While the chapters relate to each other, each one of them provides enough background information to make their topic accessible without any prior knowledge. Due to the lack of single-volume surveys in the English language that can match the extensive coverage of our handbook, we find it essential that this volume allows anyone who is interested to engage with the extraordinary history of Germany’s first democracy.

The structure of our handbook displays a strong focus on the political field in the broadest sense. We consider this justified because the new political framework of the Weimar Republic fundamentally altered how political decisions were reached and thus deeply impacted on the lives of Germany’s citizens. The Weimar Constitution brought new rights and freedoms, it promised social improvements, and reshaped the relation between state and citizen. Germans could engage in the political process through individual as well as collective action. Universal suffrage allowed German men and women equally to take part in the political process for the first time as voters and as candidates for political offices. Freedom of assembly and organization meant that collective actions and interests could be put forward through political parties and unions, but also by professional associations and lobby groups, on a much broader basis than prior to 1914.
Politics (domestic and foreign) played an essential role in Weimar Germany, not least because the rules of the political playing field had to be renegotiated. Political affiliation was an important part of both individual and collective identity formation, especially in a society that was so deeply politically divided as Weimar Germany. At the local level, supporters and opponents of the republic faced each other in conflicts over political symbols and material issues. In a time when the political framework had been torn apart and replaced with something radically new for Germany, politics mattered in every aspect of social life.

At this point we can briefly clarify an important aspect of nomenclature that is often misunderstood: the name of the Weimar Republic. When the National Assembly gathered in Weimar in early 1919, the official name for the new polity was one of the debating points. While the deputies for the SPD and USPD voted in favour of ‘German Republic’, the bourgeois parties, including the left-liberal DDP, agreed that the name Deutsches Reich should be retained. The liberal jurist Hugo Preuß, who had drafted the constitution, agreed on the grounds that the ‘name Reich’ linked the republic to the tradition of a unified nation-state that had been established in 1871. The republican constitution was thus called the ‘Constitution of the German Reich’ (Verfassung des Deutschen Reichs), and this official name prompted many pro-republican organizations such as the Reichsbanner Black-Red-Gold to incorporate the term Reich in their name. It is a bitter irony that the moniker ‘Weimar Republic’ was first used by those who rejected the democratic state on principle: it was none other than Adolf Hitler who, in a newspaper article in March 1929, provided one of the first recorded usages of this name, while continuing to rail against the republican ‘system’.

Our handbook includes chapters on topics that are rarely considered in detail, whether in most general histories of the era or in the existing multi-author companions. They include an analysis of regionalized structures and mentalities that shaped political culture. Often overlooked is also the role of religious cultures and of conflicts between the Christian confessions and vis-à-vis their critics in organized secularism. Absent from our historical imaginary of the Weimar Republic are also the peasants and agricultural labourers, even though almost a third of all gainfully employed Germans worked in agriculture. What these three topics have in common is that they force us to consider the regional variety and the spatial depth of society, culture, and political allegiances in Weimar Germany. Too often, the history of the Weimar Republic is seen through the lens of its bustling metropolis Berlin, with its modernist culture, flamboyant night life, and permissive sexuality, encapsulated in the—often exaggerated— notion of the New Woman and other cultural hallmarks of the allegedly ‘Golden Twenties’. But Berlin was not the Weimar Republic.

Even a collection as comprehensive as ours is, however, ultimately selective. Given the constraints on the overall length of the volume, we had to omit some topics that are relevant for the history of the Weimar Republic. One of them is schools and education, significant as educational reform was part of the wider progressive, participatory drive of the pro-republican parties, which implemented crucial changes such as extending
compulsory schooling from the age of 14 to that 18, and making the co-education of pupils of different confession in a so-called Simultanschule the norm (from which exceptions were permitted). Also not included is a separate chapter on a small, but still highly influential social group, the aristocracy, which comprised c.90,000 families or 0.3 per cent of the population. The nobility lost many privileges in the republican polity, including the holding of administrative and policing power in separate manorial districts (Gutsbezirke) in Prussia, which were disbanded in 1927. Yet they continued to rely on patterns of social deference in localized contexts, both in East-Elbian agrarian society and in other parts of Germany. Many members of the nobility openly supported the Nazi party, a crucial influence that particularly mattered in the final months of the republic. A final omission is more detailed information on the styles, innovative directors, and key works in Weimar cinema as an emerging mass medium of the republic. Those who cherish Weimar cinema, however, can turn to several helpful companions on this topic.

We think that the main purpose of a handbook like this is to frame and consolidate knowledge, rather than to enter speculative reflections on the meaning of the past in the light of current circumstances. We do not see much value in conjuring up ‘the ghosts of Weimar’, as an alarmist discourse that interprets the current problems of parliamentary democracy and the rise of right-wing populism in many European countries against the backdrop of Weimar’s predicament. The vast differences between then and now—for instance, the substantial presence of the agrarian sector in Weimar (as well as in many other Central-Eastern European countries) and its role in the rise of right-wing populism; the limited capability of state intervention in the economy in the early 1930s; and, considering the Federal Republic, the ways in which politicians, the police, and a wider public were and are painfully aware of the problem of containing right-wing extremism and thus drew important lessons from the past—place firm limits on the value of any comparison between the early 1930s and the present.

It is important to historicize the very notion of democracy and to emphasize its open-ended, permanently experimental nature, rather than measuring the deficiencies of Weimar’s parliamentary system against current normative benchmarks. The rise of right-wing populism and the erosion of trust in parliamentary governance were persistent problems that all European countries, including the UK, faced to differing degrees in the late 1920s and 1930s. To be sure, Germany was not the only country in which these problems facilitated the success of a right-wing dictatorship. Ultimately, the Weimar Republic poses questions about lines of continuity and what historian Helmut Walser Smith has called the ‘vanishing point’ of German history, that is, the focal point which different lines are approaching. Looking from 1918, 1933 was clearly not the only vanishing point of German history. Weimar’s democracy opened up different lines of continuity: to the founding of the Christian Democratic Union in 1946, which realized Weimar era attempts to overcome the confessional divide between Protestants and Catholics; to the West German Basic Law of 1949, which built on Weimar’s successes and failures by creating a participatory democracy; and to the burgeoning mass culture, then centred around a new addition to the media ensemble,
the television set, and the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Despite their focus on 1918 to 1933, several chapters in this handbook draw attention to continuities that extended well beyond 1933. Continuities and ruptures in Weimar history need to be carefully weighted. This holds especially true for the most problematic aspect of German history, the exclusion and persecution of the Jews. As one historian of the Holocaust observes: 'Before 1933, Jews fled to Germany rather than from it.'96 Historicizing Weimar thus requires us both to acknowledge that the formation of the Nazi dictatorship in 1933 was not a predetermined, but a contingent outcome, with alternatives open right up to the last minute on 30 January 1933, and to account for the developments that led to this outcome.

Notes


13. Ibid., 302–13, quotes 302, 303. For the ‘dissolution’ of the bourgeoisie by 1918 see Mommsen, ‘Die Auflösung des Bürgertums seit dem späten 19. Jahrhundert’, in Jürgen Kocka (ed.), *Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 288–315. The erroneous nature of this argument is obvious. What dissolved was not the middle-class per se, but Mommsen’s idealized notion of a middle class primarily characterized by liberal rationalism and harmonious sociability. See the chapter by Moritz Föllmer in this volume.


the time of publication. See the critique by Peter Jelavich, *Central European History*, 42 (2009), 163–5.


30. Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf (eds), *Die ’Krise’ der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2005). Helmuth Kiesel, *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur 1918–1933* (Munich: Beck, 2017), 90–1, points out correctly that the discursive construction of ‘crisis’ should not be turned into an absolute, and that Weimar’s crises were to some degree discursively ‘invented’, but also ‘experienced’.


34. See Weitz, *Weimar Germany*.


37. See the chapter by Helmuth Kiesel in this volume.


42. See the chapter by Jochen Hung in this volume.


45. See the chapter by Jan-Otmar Hesse and Christian Marx in this volume.

46. See the chapter by Mary Nolan in this volume.
47. See the chapter by Beate Störtkuhl in this volume.
60. This is not the same as talking about a general ‘de-globalization’ during the 1920s, which is the point of contention for many of the contributions in Christoph Cornelißen and Dirk van Laak (eds), *Weimar und die Welt: Globale Verflechtungen der ersten deutschen Republik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020). See for instance Gabriele Lingelbach, ‘Globalgeschichtliche Perspektiven auf die Weimarer Republik: Globalisierungs- und Deglobalisierungstendenzen in der Zwischenkriegszeit’, 23–49, here 25.
61. See the chapter by Siegfried Weichlein in this volume.

64. See the chapter by Chris Dillon in this volume.
65. See the erroneous remark by Evans, Coming, 80, that the Weimar Constitution ‘was essentially a modified version’ of Imperial Germany’s 1871 Constitution.
68. See the chapters by Nadine Rossol and Joachim Hähberlen in this volume, and Nadine Rossol, Performing the Nation in Interwar Germany: Sport, Spectacle and Political Symbolism 1926–1936 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).
70. A balanced account of women in Weimar politics in Helen Boak, Women in the Weimar Republic (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 63–133.
73. See the chapter by Ute Planert in this volume.
75. Evans, Coming, 266–88.
78. Evans, Coming, 229, 257–9, 263–5.


84. See the chapter by Susanne Wein and Martin Ulmer in this volume.

85. See the chapter by Thomas Mergel in this volume.


88. See the chapters by Siegfried Weichlein, Todd Weir and Udi Greenberg, and Benjamin Ziemann in this volume.


90. Some elements of education reform are covered in the chapter by Barbara Stambolis. For a thorough coverage of schools and pedagogical reform see the excellent volume by Dieter Langewiesche and Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (eds), Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte, vol. 5. 1918–1945: Die Weimarer Republik und die nationalsozialistische Diktatur (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1989).


BIBLIOGRAPHY

PART I

KEY EVENTS AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS
On Sunday 10 November 1918, the influential liberal newspaper Berliner Tageblatt greeted the overthrow of Kaiser Wilhelm II as ‘the greatest of all revolutions’. Like the reigning dynasties of the other German states, Prussia’s House of Hohenzollern had just been deposed by a popular uprising of soldiers and civilians. Political power was now vested in an all-socialist Council of People’s Delegates (Rat der Volksbeauftragten), co-chaired by veterans of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Just one week ago, reflected the Tageblatt editor, Theodor Wolff, ‘there was a military and civilian apparatus so fortified, so enmeshed and so deeply rooted, that its rule seemed assured for many ages’. Now it had been swept away on a single Saturday afternoon, in scenes reminiscent of the great paintings of the French Revolution. ‘Never before’, rejoiced Wolff, ‘was such a solidly built and fortified Bastille taken in one fell swoop’.

Wolff’s assessment may appear eccentric in light of subsequent events. The German Revolution of 1918/19 would dash the hopes of its most ardent supporters. It also disappointed generations of German historians, who fixated on its shortcomings and missed opportunities. But historical judgements are becoming more qualified, more inclined to reflect the dramatic changes experienced in 1918/19. The German Revolution delivered an armistice, a republic, parliamentary democracy, and the first-ever socialist government of an advanced industrial economy. In the context of the tumultuous post-war history of central and eastern Europe, it did so comparatively peaceably. As well as recognizing these achievements, this chapter advocates deeper engagement with the synchronicity of the German Revolution as a lived and contingent event. In the first weeks of November 1918, hardly any newspaper or commentator, regardless of political leaning, doubted that a genuine and historic revolution had taken place. The revolution unleashed the political imagination of its supporters and mobilized across class, gender, and generation. It was widely experienced, for better or for worse, as a political, social, and cultural rupture. A reappraisal of the revolution in these terms will register its societal penetration, its destruction of inherited patterns of authority, its generation of
new affiliations and antipathies, and its complex and contested legacy for the Weimar Republican project.

**A Revolution in Context**

At the end of September 1918, the German Army’s Supreme Command (OHL) concluded that the military situation on the western and Balkan fronts necessitated an immediate armistice. General Erich Ludendorff, the OHL’s Quartermaster General and driving force, called for a new government with democratic credentials to negotiate with the American President Woodrow Wilson. Hitherto scathing in his rejection of domestic political reform, Ludendorff hoped in this way to preserve the German army as a political force and to pass the buck for the peace terms onto civilian politicians.\(^5\)

Popular pressure for constitutional reform had been building since the much-vaunted ‘civic truce’ (*Burgfrieden*) declared on the German home front at the outbreak of war in 1914.\(^6\) The cumulative strains of mobilization for industrialized warfare had exposed and aggravated domestic fractures, as it had in all combatant nations.\(^7\) War bonds, casualty lists, and ration cards gave ordinary Germans a direct personal stake in the state’s economic and military decisions. The protracted duration of the war and increasingly desperate material shortages began to undermine the perceived legitimacy of Germany’s autocratic political system. The resultant accumulation of popular war-weariness and social grievances by no means amounted to a coherent revolutionary programme, but it did intersect with the critique and political language of increasingly vocal radical and socialist groups on the home front. This intersection was most visible in rising industrial militancy and appeared particularly menacing to the political order when an anti-war faction of the SPD peeled away to form the Independent German Social Democratic Party (USPD) in April 1917.

The most serious such expression of wartime dissent were the great munitions strikes of January 1918. These were characterized by Arthur Rosenberg, the pioneering historian of the Weimar Republic, as a ‘dress rehearsal’ (*Generalprobe*) for the revolution.\(^8\) A transnational phenomenon, the strikes began in Austria in protest against the Central Powers’ implacable stance during the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty negotiations with Bolshevik Russia. The annexationist demands made by the OHL offended socialist sensibilities and also starkly contradicted the *Burgfrieden* narrative that the Central Powers were waging a purely defensive struggle against Russian despotism. More than a million German workers downed tools in industrial centres across the Reich, demanding peace without annexations, the restoration of civil liberties, the end of military discipline in factories, and reform of the Prussian state parliament franchise that gave Prussian conservatives so much power under Bismarck’s 1871 Constitution.\(^9\) These demands were relayed via so-called workers’ councils (*Arbeiterräte*), factory-based committees first elected during industrial disputes the previous year. The terminology recalled the *soviets* (councils) of Russian revolutionary culture and signified the strikers’
repudiation of the traditional institutions of the German labour movement, which they regarded as compromised by participation in the *Burgfrieden*. The courts proceeded in draconian fashion against purported agitators and ringleaders. Around 50,000 strikers were drafted into the army, adding another combustible element to officers’ by now wavering authority at the front.

Until the summer of 1918, Ludendorff remained confident that military victory for the Central Powers would shore up Germany’s time-honoured political arrangements. But now, on 5 October, the relatively liberal Prince Max von Baden was appointed German Chancellor. Social Democratic ministers also entered the Cabinet for the first time. Most important of all, a constitutional amendment was passed requiring the Chancellor to enjoy the confidence of a majority of legislators in the Reichstag (the German parliament). To thunderous applause from his Reichstag caucus, the Majority Social Democratic Party (MSPD) leader Friedrich Ebert hailed the October 1918 reforms as the ‘birth of German democracy’. The October reforms and accompanying armistice request did seemingly address the primary causes of domestic disquiet. The course of the ensuing weeks, however, brings to mind Alexis de Tocqueville’s dictum that ‘the most critical moment for bad governments is the one which witnesses their first steps towards reform’. The reforms were at once too modest for the discontented and too extravagant for supporters of the Imperial German order. The infelicitous optics of appointing a prince to the position of democratic Chancellor were compounded by von Baden’s political ineptitude and unwarranted self-regard. The parliamentarization of German government had been won without a political spectacle to arrest the senses. Military authority remained ubiquitous and food shortages desperate: as Rosenberg put it, ‘the man on the street’ could not discern the change. In the newly empowered Reichstag, the normally dour USPD leader Hugo Haase demanded greater ambition and expressed the near millenarian horizon of expectation taking shape on the radical left. ‘We are convinced’, he enthused, ‘that out of all this misery there will finally emerge the complete emancipation of humanity.’

On the nationalist right, meanwhile, the mood was darkening. The Pan-German newspaper of record, *Deutsche Zeitung*, decried the October reforms as a ‘bloodless coup’ orchestrated by sinister Jewish forces. Hot-headed plans for a defiant *levée en masse* (*Volkskrieg*) against the armistice terms were entertained even by milder spirits such as the industrial tycoon and public intellectual Walther Rathenau. At the same time, the naval top brass was developing an ambitious scheme to launch the entire High Seas fleet towards Britain and rekindle domestic enthusiasm for the war through a stirring engagement with the Royal Navy. The orders were issued on 29 October, the day after the constitutional reforms were passed in the Reichstag. Within hours, the operation was abandoned as stokers and sailors in Wilhelmshaven mutinied at what they saw as a suicide mission. The uprising soon spread to the port city of Kiel. On 3 November, after military police fired into a crowd of sailors and civilians, leaving nine dead and twenty-nine wounded, the authorities lost control of the situation. When the MSPD’s military spokesman, Gustav Noske, arrived to negotiate with the mutineers, a
large crowd serenaded him with bullish, though as yet premature, cries of ‘glory to the Republic’.17

The sailors’ mutiny inspired similar uprisings across the other north German ports—Lübeck, Bremen, Cuxhaven, and, critically, Hamburg, Germany’s second largest city.18 A party of Kiel sailors arrived here by railway and would, in the ensuing days, participate as rail-borne revolutionary evangelists in upheavals throughout the Reich.19 Accounts of the November revolution frequently speak of its ‘spreading’ like a ‘fire’, ‘flood’, or even, in one case, an ‘avalanche’, from the Baltic Sea across Germany.20 But this fatalistic imagery does not capture the localized dynamics of a popular mobilization against war and authoritarianism. In the far south of the Reich, Bavaria’s venerable Wittelsbach dynasty was overthrown in Munich on 7 November even as the upheaval in Hamburg was unfurling. Although a contingent of sailors was stranded in the city due to the disruption in Kiel, they were not part of the Bavarian revolutionaries’ planning. The USPD propagandist Kurt Eisner, mindful that potentially de-escalating constitutional concessions were due to be introduced in Bavaria the following day, had already resolved to use a scheduled anti-war rally on the Theresienwiese as a springboard for revolution.21 In Frankfurt am Main, too, the presence of detachments of uniformed sailors was largely ornamental in a localized revolution where Independents and factory activists made the running.22 In Berlin, a latecomer to the revolution, von Baden’s final gambit of sealing off the capital’s rail connections failed because the driving force behind events there were local Revolutionary Shop Stewards (Revolutionäre Obleute). This network of militant factory activists had formed in opposition to the Burgfrieden politics of the trade union movement and played a leading role in the wartime munitions strikes. The defection, on 9 November, of the Berlin-based Naumburg Rifle Battalion, reputedly unmatched in its devotion to the Hohenzollern dynasty, sealed Wilhelm’s fate. Without even consulting him, von Baden announced the Kaiser’s abdication. Berlin’s enterprising press ensured this bombshell news was circulated in print within fifteen minutes.23

On the same day, von Baden ceded his office of Reich Chancellor to Ebert as the MSPD leader. A transitional Council of People’s Delegates was formed from three members each of the MSPD and USPD, co-chaired by Ebert and Haase. The hope that this symbolized a healing of the wartime schism in the Social Democratic movement was widely shared on the German left. The People’s Delegates were endorsed in office by an assembly of representatives from Berlin workers’ and soldiers’ councils. Ebert’s dual role as Chancellor and co-chair of the People’s Delegates made him the key figure. But his authority was, in practice, ambiguous. The handover of the Chancellorship violated Article 15 of the Imperial Constitution, according to which only the Kaiser could appoint the Reich Chancellor.24 ‘The Berlin councils’ claim to speak for a national council movement was, at best, tenuous. Their assembly on 9 November, moreover, made demands for the socialization of industrial sectors and for the restoration of diplomatic relations with Bolshevik Russia which strayed beyond Ebert’s presumptive caretaker mandate.25 The most important measures of the revolution were simply inaugurated by proclamation on 12 November. These were the restoration of civil liberties, the abolition of laws that restricted rural workers in their personal freedom and contractual
arrangements, and the promise of universal suffrage. On 15 November, the introduction of an eight-hour working day, a long-standing demand of the labour movement, was announced as part of the so-called Stinnes-Legien Pact, following negotiations between German industrialists and trade unions. These were major and enduring achievements. They did not, however, heal the rifts on the German left. Rival declarations of a new republic on 9 November by the MSPD’s Philipp Scheidemann, from the Reichstag, and by the radical Karl Liebknecht, from the extra-parliamentary venue of the Royal Palace, augured ill for the harmony of the revolutionary movement. The British Prime Minister David Lloyd George warned his War Cabinet the following day that events were ‘taking a similar course in Germany to that which had taken place in Russia’.

**Revolutionary Mobilizations**

‘No other popular event in German history’, judges one historian, ‘had filled the national stage so completely or had enrolled so many participants as had the November Revolution’. The revolution generated a civic energy which astonished observers. To Ben Hecht, the well-connected Germany correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*, every day ‘was like a presidential pre-election eve at home . . . All was politics, revolution, antirevolution’. The diarist Victor Klemperer felt similarly. The revolution was ‘always there, from morning to evening . . . day in and day out’, he recorded. Activists like Toni Sender, a female firebrand in Frankfurt, worked around the clock, mortgaging their health to the revolutionary cause. By March 1919, jaded by months of upheaval, the renowned sociologist Max Weber despaired of ‘the general vain and bustling inclination to participate in everything’. The crowds on the streets in early November 1918 betokened a period of intense political mobilization and contestation which would echo throughout the history of the new republic. The council movement that had emerged from industrial disputes during the war flourished across Germany, assuming diverse forms and enrolling new social constituencies. Weber himself was, early on, an enthusiastic participant in Heidelberg. Elections called in December 1918 for a constituent National Assembly inspired feverish campaigning across the political spectrum. Beyond the formal institutions of public life, too, social venues and the everyday were politicized. Urban centres teemed with demobilizing soldiers expecting state recognition of their sacrifice in the post-war reconstruction. Horizons of hope and foreboding, expectations raised and dashed, would shape the course of the German revolution in powerful and unpredictable ways.

In early November 1918, power was vested in the streets. The crowds of the revolution were the spearhead of a popular counter-mobilization against militarism and autocracy. These crowds are less storied than the multitudes of August 1914 who greeted the outbreak of war with jubilation in German cities. But their visual record is more impressive. The November 1918 crowds were more diverse and their aesthetic less choreographed by a learned patriotic repertoire. Photographs and newspaper
reports register organized radicals, striking workers, sailors and soldiers, women, teenagers, and curious onlookers of all backgrounds. These crowds performed the November revolution as political theatre and spectacle. Their usurpation of public space defied wartime restrictions on freedom of assembly and the relationship between participants and observers was liminal. The near-universal unwillingness of police and military assets to disperse crowds rendered the collapse of state authority unsparingly visible. Never before, in decades of ebullient political rallies, had protestors milled around freely on Berlin’s Unter den Linden, the grand stage of Imperial pageantry. All across Germany, town halls, police stations, prisons, barracks, newspaper offices, train and telegraph stations were rallying points for a mass performance of popular sovereignty. Above all, the crowds signified the triumph of a social protest movement rather than a transfer of political power building on the October reforms. This explains why they somewhat unnerved the Council of People’s Delegates, the high political beneficiaries of the revolution. Schooled in the SPD’s elaborate organizational structures, Ebert and Scheidemann were left feeling queasy and exposed by the unpredictable politics of the pavements. Ebert’s very first ‘Appeal to German Citizens’ on 9 November admonished them to ‘clear the streets!’ ‘Calm and order’ (Ruhe und Ordnung) were the anointed watchwords of the MSPD’s revolution. The new government, nevertheless, drew populist legitimacy from the memory of the November 1918 crowds, and the streets would remain critical sites of political assertion and contestation. The quiescence of urban public space was closely monitored by an excitable news media as a barometer of order and ‘anarchy’. Radical spirits on the left, in particular, discerned in this as an opportunity to exert pressure on the Ebert government.

Similar ambivalence attended the relationship between the government and a rival claimant to popular democratic sovereignty, the council movement. The Council of People’s Delegates welcomed the endorsement of Berlin’s councils on 9 November. But its MSPD contingent, in particular, viewed the council phenomenon with grave misgivings as a Russian import alien to the traditions of the German labour movement. The councils also soured relations between the MSPD and bourgeois political groups for whom they were, at best, a waste of public funds and, at worst, instruments of Leninist class dictatorship. The MSPD was committed to convoking a democratic constituent assembly, which was unlikely to deliver a socialist majority, as soon as the demobilization of the army permitted. From this perspective, the councils seemed likely to be purely a transitional instrument until the National Assembly settled Germany’s constitutional arrangements. Much ink has been spilled over the decades by historians debating whether or not this was a missed opportunity for the young republic. The councils, in this reading, might have been deployed strategically to enforce a more thorough democratization of the economy and state administration. These debates have generated invaluable empirical research, but their contours are drawn by counterfactual speculations which diminish the synchronic integrity of the 1918/19 revolution as a lived historical event. In the following, the council movement will be read instead as a form of civic revolutionary mobilization.
By the time the revolution began in Berlin on 9 November, workers’ and soldiers’ councils had been formed in every west German city and the movement stretched deep into the south. Indeed, the council scene was especially lively in Bavaria, Germany’s second largest and southernmost state. Labour movement activists throughout Bavaria responded with enthusiasm to Prime Minister Kurt Eisner’s inaugural invitation to ‘take part in the construction of a new world!’ A far more adventurous spirit than Ebert, Eisner was attentive to revolution’s need for spectacle and charismatic example. He enthused to Theodor Wolff on 22 November that the Bavarian revolution was ‘a magnificent piece of theatre’. More than any other politician of the era, Eisner grasped the propaganda potential of the council movement as a performance of transformation. He cast the Bavarian councils as pedagogic instruments of a direct, substantive democracy which would complement and ultimately supplant the stale formalism of ‘bourgeois parliamentarism’. Within a fortnight of his triumph in Munich, the council movement had reached every town and perhaps a majority of villages in Bavaria. In the provinces, citizens gathered in public space at the invitation of left-wing activists for the constituent meeting of a workers’ council. Sometimes this was a festive occasion, accompanied by music. Almost always there were hortatory speeches extolling the historic moment at hand with paens, so characteristic of the German Revolution, to maintaining ‘calm and order’. The councils’ members, voted in by acclamation, tended to be veterans of the labour movement with the necessary experience in committee work. It is important to note that, even in Bavaria, this first generation of council activists broadly supported elections for a national constituent assembly as soon as possible.

Throughout Germany, soldiers’ councils were formed in quick succession to workers’ councils if the local garrisons had not already constituted one of their own accord. In contrast to neighbouring Austria, where the two types of council remained discrete, they usually assumed joint authority as a workers’ and soldiers’ council. Enconced comfortably in town halls or district offices adorned with red flags, the workers’ representatives busied themselves with social issues such as unemployment assistance and equitable food distribution, while the soldiers’ councils were responsible for public order. Majority and Independent Social Democrat council activists continued to disagree vehemently about wartime Burgfrieden politics, but generally worked companionably to address the administrative challenges they had inherited. The councils waged a constant struggle against hoarding and the black market by ensuring existing directives were enforced, relishing any ruffled feathers this caused. They compiled registers of landlords with spare rooms to ameliorate a housing crisis that was already severe in towns bloated by wartime manufacturing and that worsened throughout the demobilization. Their deliberations and proclamations were communicated through the local press, where they were accorded prominence by editors. One distinguished historian contends that these quotidian council activities were ‘valuable’ but ‘entirely non-political’. This assessment rests on a very narrow, statist conception of the political. For the German Revolution was made by feverish activity from below as well as high political drama. Weber celebrated the civic spirit he witnessed on the Heidelberg Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council, which had done ‘things splendidly and without any idle talk’.

The topos of the aloof Wilhelmine
bureaucrat was a guiding anti-type for council members, who held surgeries for those seeking support and were inundated by citizens offering advice. They often dealt brusquely at first with local dignitaries and bureaucracies. Municipal elites throughout the Reich, from elected officials, bureaucrats, and army officers to priests, pastors, and newspaper editors, had, almost without exception, acted as cheerleaders for the war effort and its cult of ‘holding out’ (Durchhalten) in dire material adversity. In this respect, the council movement from below was a perpetuation of the politicized wartime peace movement. The evaporation of monarchical and, as it seemed, military authority exposed local elites to the sobering claims of popular sovereignty. The councils empowered new political actors to challenge a patrician hierarchy previously insulated by restrictive property-based communal franchises. This lent their formation something of the character and dynamics of local insurgencies in a world turning ‘upside down’. In Hamburg, for example, despite a strong local labour movement, city governance had been in the hands of wealthy senators elected for life. On 12 November, the new Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council marched into the Senate and curtly dismissed its members at gun point. ‘All bridges between the present and the past are burned’, the senators were informed.

In practice, the complexities of addressing Hamburg’s troubled public finances soon prompted a retreat from this revolutionary maximalism. The Senate was permitted to reconvene with four council representatives added to its ranks with the power of veto. This strategy of supervising, rather than replacing, municipal institutions became typical across Germany. Although it disappointed the more radical elements of the council movement, the political symbolism of supervision should not be overlooked. In Frankfurt, for example, the youthful Toni Sender sat as a council delegate on the city’s dusty and geriatric Board of Aldermen. She was also elected as a USPD delegate to the city council. It is indicative of the civic invigoration brought by the revolution that its public galleries, deserted during the Kaiserreich, were now packed to the rafters. The extent to which council delegates were able to remove recalcitrant officials varied greatly. The Council of People’s Delegates and the governments of the German states were anxious not to disrupt public administration and fought to minimize dismissals and resignations. The struggle was particularly unequal in conservative East Prussia, where only 15 of 105 Landräte (county administrators) were removed from their posts. It was bleaker still in the areas of the Rhineland occupied by Allied soldiers on 1 December 1918 under the armistice terms. The military occupiers did not recognize Rhineland councils. Despite loudly stated war aims of democratizing the German state, Allied officers worked solely through the Wilhelmine administrative apparatus. The US army explained that this gave them access to ‘thoroughly capable officials’ rather than ‘appointees of Workingmen’s Councils whose selections were made during the hysteria of revolution’. The French army, which had already dissolved councils formed in Alsace-Lorraine, took an equally hard line on those in its zone of occupation. The Communist International concluded bitterly that ‘the Allies are strangling the revolution in the occupied areas’. The prospect of council radicalism and ‘Bolshevism’ provoking Allied military intervention on a still broader scale would remain a structural constraint throughout the revolution.
The German council movement also diverged from the Russian precedent in its organizational diversity. While rural Russia was slow to engage with the soviet phenomenon, peasant councils (Bauernräte) emerged rapidly in parts of agrarian Germany. There were spontaneous and radical peasant councils in Upper Silesia and Bavaria, regions with traditions of rural populism. More typical of German peasant councils, however, were those sponsored by the old Agrarian League (Bund der Landwirte) as a conservative counterweight to urban trade unions and workers’ councils. These were characterized by a defensive, anti-democratic outlook. Rather more engaged were the middle-class councils (Bürgerräte) formed in towns and cities throughout Germany to broker bourgeois interests in the reshaped political fray. Their political tenor was anti-socialist but not necessarily anti-revolutionary. Indeed, there was an insurgent quality to the middle-class councils’ independence from the traditional, patrician institutions of bourgeois political culture. The mobilization of middle-class occupational interests in the Bürgerräte was nevertheless distasteful to many activists of the workers’ movement, for whom the councils were instruments of emancipation rather than privilege. Addressing an assembly of workers’ councils in Berlin on 19 November, the Revolutionary Shop Steward leader Richard Müller declared: ‘Comrades, be aware! We already have “landlords’ councils.” What’s next? “Millionaires’ councils”? Such councils we don’t need.’

One social constituency that was, in contrast, extremely poorly represented by the council movement was women. German women had grown ever more visible in wartime public life as teachers, nurses, postal workers, and tram conductors, as well as in the charity and welfare sectors. Even allowing for the tendency of police and officialdom to linger in their reports over female contributions to domestic unrest, it is clear that women were central to the public articulation of social dissent during the war. Women led the hard-pressed German pacifist movement and were prominent in industrial disputes both as strikers and shop stewards. The enfranchisement of German women, long demanded by the SPD, was arguably the single most transformative measure of the revolution. At a stroke, the nascent German democracy rested on an electorate in which females outnumbered males by some two million. On 17 November 1918, the Women’s Suffrage Society and the SPD held a celebratory event in Frankfurt’s Paulskirche. The revered site of the National Assembly of the 1848 revolution, it signified the fulfilment of that earlier revolution’s emancipatory ideals. The socialist women’s magazine Die Gleichheit (‘Equality’) rejoiced that German women were now ‘the freest in the world’. The Munich suffragists Lida Gustav Heymann and Anita Augspurg likened the advent of revolution to ‘a beautiful dream’ and recalled ‘winter months full of work, hope, and happiness’.

Much of their work focused on the political education of women in preparation for the National Assembly elections. On Eisner’s insistence, a Section for Women’s Rights was created within the new Bavarian Ministry for Social Welfare. In Braunschweig, Minna Faßhauer became Germany’s first-ever female government minister when she was appointed People’s Commissar for Education. The socialists Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg, the outstanding intellectual force on the radical left, were influential advocates of a second, social revolution. On the political right, German
women promoted conservative and maternalist values. In most German states, nevertheless, women had been barred from formal politics until 1908 and were often still treated as intruders into a masculine sphere. On 19 November, Heymann brought a packed beer hall in Munich to its feet when she warned that forces were stirring to roll back women’s hard-won equality. The scholar and social reformer Dr Rosa Kempf was heckled when she became the first women to address Bavaria’s revolutionary Provisional National Council the following month. She reported attending political meetings which routinely descended into violence and feared that a general atmosphere of menace inhibited other women from participating in the revolution. The thirty-seven female legislators returned to the National Assembly in January 1919 also faced a mixed reception from male colleagues. But at 8 per cent of the total deputies, female participation in the Assembly comfortably outshone that of the supposedly radical council movement. At the first Reich Congress of Workers and Soldiers’ Councils in December 1918, just two of the 489 delegates were women.

**Counter-Revolutionary Mobilizations**

This dismal showing was congruent with a broader masculinization of the revolution by the turn of the year. The demobilization of the German army, which began in late November, was decisive. The orderly return of front-line units was celebrated at a lavish homecoming parade in Berlin, whose streets teemed, for the first time since the revolution, with army officers, garlands, and with the old black-white-red flag of Imperial Germany. At the largest of these events, on 10 December, Ebert lauded the troops’ ‘manful’ fortitude and maintained that ‘no enemy has overcome you’. The vast majority of soldiers, once they had crossed the Rhine, thought only of getting home to their families. They were not the brutalized, vengeful veterans of later nationalist mythology. By mid-February 1919, almost the entire eight million-strong army had been demobilized. German women bore the economic brunt, losing their jobs to returning veterans in what the feminist journal Die Frau characterized as ‘an all-out backlash against working women in general’. Irrespective of the subjective outlook of the soldiers themselves, their return to German soil fired the counter-revolutionary imagination. Right-wing forces re-emerged emboldened under the cover of the army. On 6 December, a group of mid-ranking army officers attempted to arrest Richard Müller’s Executive Council and to install Ebert as dictator. Ebert politely demurred and the scheme quickly collapsed. But news of the attempted putsch reached a demonstration in north Berlin organized by the Spartacist League, a far-left faction led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. A unit of sixty loyalist soldiers was dispatched to intercept the Spartacists near a tram stop. Seemingly in a state of panicked excitement, these troops opened fire on an incoming tram at the cost of sixteen civilian fatalities. The most lethal episode of violence in the revolution to date, it set the scene for six weeks of violent unrest in the capital.
This incident was not the German army’s first intervention in revolutionary politics. On 10 November, the very day that Theodor Wolff celebrated the demise of Prussian militarism in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, Ludendorff’s successor Wilhelm Groener spoke to Ebert. He assured him of the OHL’s support, subject to the preservation of the officer corps and the convocation of a constituent assembly. The significance often attached to these pleasantries as a ‘pact’ is exaggerated. For one thing, the ability of either party to shape events remained limited. On 16 December 1918, the Congress of Councils convened in the Prussian State Parliament. Although it voted by 400 to 50 votes in favour of January elections for the National Assembly, the Congress also passed, unanimously, the so-called Seven Hamburg Points which demanded the elimination of military rank and abolition of the standing army. It also became clear over Christmas that Groener lacked dependable military resources to support Ebert. For some time, relations had been souring between the government and the People’s Naval Division (Volksmarinedivision), a unit created primarily from Kiel sailors after 9 November. On 23 December, the division revolted against the withholding of its pay and kidnapped the Berlin MSPD city commander Otto Wels. Ebert requested the Prussian War Minister to send in troops, who began shelling the division’s base on the morning of Christmas Eve. But the assault ended in crushing humiliation for the government and OHL soldiers, who lost fifty-six men to the rebels’ eleven.

This debacle, dubbed ‘Ebert’s Bloody Christmas’ by the Spartacists, had two important consequences. The USPD withdrew from the Council of People’s Delegates in protest at the use of military violence against sailors whom it honoured as heroes of the revolution. Its left wing, already chafing at the Congress of Councils’ vote for a National Assembly, was now in the ascendency. Second, the government and OHL redoubled their search for robust military assets to protect the state against the far left and to guard the Assembly. At the beginning of January, to ease the demobilization process, the War Ministry announced that soldiers unable to find work could volunteer to remain in the army until they did so. It was largely from this pool of men that the Freikorps, the shock troops of the counter-revolution, were initially recruited. On 4 January, Ebert and Gustav Noske, who had joined the government when the Independents departed, inspected the first of these new formations at Zossen, an army base near Berlin. Impressed by their masculine bearing, Noske reportedly slapped Ebert on the shoulder in delight.

These volunteers did not have to wait long to wage counter-revolution. A few days previously, in an atmosphere of bitter recrimination on the left, the German Communist Party (KPD) had been formed. Its founding delegates voted overwhelmingly against participating in the National Assembly elections. The resolution, which implied a preference for putschist adventure, was passed against the express wishes of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. This dynamic was echoed often in the following months, as the leaderships of the Communists, shop stewards, and USPD either lost control over or deferred to revolutionary impulses within the membership. The best-known instantiation of spontaneous insurrectionism is the January 1919 uprising in Berlin. Its popular descriptor of the ‘Spartacist Revolt’ is highly misleading, because it was neither planned nor led
by Spartacists. The January uprising was provoked by the dismissal of Berlin police chief Emil Eichhorn, a USPD radical and a thorn in the side of the Council of People's Delegates. The KPD, USPD, and shop stewards called for protest demonstrations the following day and were caught completely off guard by a huge turnout running into the hundreds of thousands. Events soon got out of hand when small groups of armed hotheads occupied the premises of the hated MSPD newspaper Vorwärts and of liberal publishing houses. Overestimating the appetite for a second, social revolution both inside and outside the capital, Liebknecht and other radicals declared support for the occupations and called for a general strike to overthrow Ebert and prevent the National Assembly elections. In reality, this was a muddled and far-fetched scheme which would likely have petered out of its own accord had it not been for a partisan Berlin media baying for blood. The MSPD, already revelling in a self-righteous posture of protecting order and press freedom, discerned an opportunity to reassert the authority of the state after the humiliation of 'Bloody Christmas' and to cement relations with the bourgeois camp in the future National Assembly. Noske was only too eager to seize the initiative. On 11 January, loyalist soldiers began shelling the Vorwärts building and quickly overran the occupiers. Noske now called in his Freikorps to cleanse Berlin's streets of radicals. At least 150 purported Spartacists, many of them simply ordinary strikers, were killed; 400 were arrested, at least nine of whom were murdered in captivity. Now in hiding, Liebknecht wrote that the German Revolution had been 'drowned' by a 'horrendous counter-revolutionary mudslide from backwards elements of the people and the propertied classes'. He was hunted down and soon reported to have been 'shot while attempting to escape', a transparent fiction hotly defended by the MSPD and its collaborators in the media. Luxemburg's corpse was fished out of a canal several months later. Ebert was impressed by the Freikorps' performance. As he remarked to a meeting of the governments of the German states on 31 January, 'if one has sufficient means of force, then governing is easy; it has been very difficult to create a military force; finally, we have succeeded'.

Ebert was as good as his word and the violence in Berlin echoed across the Reich. Socialist or council-based republics were declared at Cuxhaven and Bremen in January 1919, in Mannheim and Brunswick in February, and in Bavaria in April. In every case, the declarations were impetuous and improvised, and in every case exemplary counter-revolutionary terror brought the escapade to a bitter conclusion. One protagonist in this peripatetic campaign of state violence likened it to a 'crusade'. Bremen's council republic, at twenty-five days, lasted the longest. A free port city with a tradition of labour radicalism, its workers' council was controlled by communists and USPD radicals who had refused to recognize the Congress of Councils' call for National Assembly elections. On 10 January, in solidarity with the Berlin uprising, the communists proclaimed an 'Independent Republic of Bremen'. The Bremen Senate was deposed, and local citizens informed that counter-revolutionary activity would be dealt with by firing squad. In practice, the wind was quickly taken from the revolutionaries' sails by the withdrawal of bank credit and by National Assembly elections which revealed little public appetite for radical adventures. Threatened with military intervention by Berlin, the Republic's
leadership offered to resign in order to avoid bloodshed. On 4 February, nevertheless, Noske's troops marched in alongside a local Freikorps and deposed the Republic at the cost on both sides of 75 dead and 200 wounded, among them many civilians. A state of siege was declared and surviving council activists rounded up via prepared arrest lists. Some thirty years later, Noske still looked back with pride on the didactic ‘example’ he had set in Bremen.

These measures against the radical left further shook the MSPD’s hold over a labour movement already disenchanted with the returns of the revolution since the decrees of November 1918. The composition of the National Assembly, which returned a non-socialist majority, pointed towards still further compromise with bourgeois forces. The MSPD won 165 of its 423 seats and the UPSD just 22, leaving the notional socialist bloc well short of control. This meant that there was little prospect of the councils securing a meaningful role in the new constitution. The British blockade, which remained in place to ensure German compliance with the future peace treaty, also soured opinion against Entente liberalism. The leadership of the socialist Free Trade Unions, tarnished by its wartime Burgfrieden politics, proved unable to contain labour radicalism. Metal workers, in particular, led a spontaneous mass protest movement which repudiated the Stinnes-Legien Pact and championed the immediate socialization of industry.

Conceptions of ‘socialization’ varied extensively. A floating signifier, it could denote the full-fledged nationalization of the commanding heights of industry, the syndicalist takeover of specific enterprises, or simply improved wages and conditions. This polyvalence was an asset. ‘The idea of socialization,’ lamented the Merseburg district President in February 1919, ‘has completely turned the heads of the great mass.’

Workers’ councils moved in a radical direction with the demobilization of the generally moderating soldiers and soldiers’ councils. In the Ruhr area, a hotbed of revolutionary activism, early tremors of unrest in late December 1918 developed into a full-blown general strike which ravaged the economy. In central Germany, strikes in chemicals and mining sectors were suspended only after government commitments to introduce workplace councils (Betriebsräte) as instruments of economic democracy and to nationalize the coal industry. In Berlin, workers’ councils proclaimed a general strike in early March 1919, demanding a formal institutionalization of the council movement and the fulfilment of the Seven Hamburg Points, now updated to include the dissolution of all Freikorps. The government opted for military action in Berlin and the Ruhr. Noske declared a state of siege in the capital and sent in 30,000 Freikorps men kitted out with tanks, howitzers, and military aircraft. On 9 March he issued an infamous, and unlawful, ‘Order to Execute’ (Schießbefehl) under which anyone caught with weapons was to be summarily shot. The carnage lasted until 12 March and resulted in over a thousand lives lost, the majority of them unarmed strikers. Both Vorwärts and Wolff’s Berliner Tageblatt endorsed the conduct of Noske’s troops.

This was not the end of the counter-revolutionary ‘crusade’. In Bavaria, the political mood had turned against Kurt Eisner with his publication of Foreign Ministry documents highlighting Germany’s role in the outbreak of the war. His government’s anticlerical school policies were also unpopular and jolted the powerful Catholic
establishment out of fatalistic apathy.\textsuperscript{90} Yet the advent of a second, council-driven revolution in February still caught most observers off guard. Capital had been fleeing to Bavaria in recent months as a safe haven from the tumult elsewhere in the Reich.\textsuperscript{91} The trigger was Eisner's assassination by a right-wing university student on 21 February. The ensuing political chaos crested in the successive declarations of two council republics, the second led by communists. The Munich police were disarmed, and a Red Army of communists, demobilized soldiers, and prisoners of war raised, equipped, and paid for in part through extortion and plundering of the city's wealthier quarters. In poorer districts, posters were put up inviting inhabitants to seize the flats of the well-to-do, while the communist leader Eugen Leviné, a veteran of the 1905 revolution in Russia, pondered starving bourgeois children who otherwise would 'grow into enemies of the proletariat'. A torrent of idealistic decrees socialized mines, banks, universities, and the press. Even the somber mind of the Munich-based novelist Thomas Mann foresaw council socialism spreading triumphantly from Bavaria across Germany to the Entente countries.\textsuperscript{92}

In fact, the council regimes' penetration was too shallow for such projects and the whole initiative would doubtless soon have collapsed if left to its own devices. The OHL and MSPD, once again, were not prepared to wait. The deposed Bavarian government of the MSPD Prime Minister Johannes Hoffmann appealed for local Freikorps to crush the 'Russian terror' in Munich. Its haul of 15,000 Bavarian volunteers was complemented by a similar number of troops dispatched south by Berlin.\textsuperscript{93} Once again, an Order to Execute was issued to the counter-revolutionary troops. Their thirst for revenge was spurred by the revolutionaries' execution of ten hostages in a Munich school, among them a Bavarian countess. This senseless act became the most notorious atrocity of the entire German Revolution, dominating its public memory in the Weimar and Nazi eras. Yet it was far outmatched by the murderous violence of the Bavarian Freikorps and Noske's troops. Well over 600 people were killed in the military assault on Munich, many, as in Berlin, executed after capture.

The Freikorps campaign of 1919 was a calculated and lethal performance of authority by the German state.\textsuperscript{94} It assured the army a prominence in the political life of the future republic out of all proportion to its thinned ranks after the Versailles treaty. The military operations were, however, merely part of a much broader counter-mobilization by pre-revolutionary institutions against the settlement of November 1918. An unreconstructed German judiciary pursued revolutionary activists with unexampled resolve, holding 5,000 trials in Bavaria alone. It stayed notoriously partisan in its counter-revolutionary sympathies long into the republic.\textsuperscript{95} German universities remained strongholds of romantic nationalism and of lurid 'stab-in-the-back' conspiracy theories which cast the German Revolution as the cause, rather than consequence, of military defeat.\textsuperscript{96} The Christian churches, too, were soon redoubts of an expansive counter-revolutionary milieu. Their traditional role of legitimizing the political order from the pulpit had drawn them deeply into the war effort and the resultant need to account spiritually and theologically for defeat bred an institutional sympathy for stab-in-the-back legends which cast socialists, liberals, and Jews as false
The Protestant churches, nationalist in temper, faced a further crisis of legitimation with the disappearance of the German monarchs, their worldly figureheads and patrons. Article 137 of the Weimar Constitution, which declared ‘there is no state church’, marked for them a traumatic end to the historic union of throne and altar. Even before the National Assembly met, an anti-revolutionary piety had been fanned by Prussian state decrees banning religious observance in schools. Similar measures by the Eisner regime in Bavaria were denounced as a fresh ‘culture war’ by Archbishop Michael von Faulhaber, who thundered a few years later that the 1918/19 Revolution had been ‘perjury and high treason . . . forever branded with the mark of Cain’. Neither of the German churches would distinguish itself in articulating democratic values during the republic.

On the anniversary of his ecstatic welcome for the revolution, Theodor Wolff penned a reflective editorial in the Berliner Tageblatt. This one was less upbeat. Wolff conceded that ‘much of the spirit of the monarchical state’ still obtained in republican Germany. Drawn, once again, to comparison with the French Revolution, he bemoaned the German revolutionaries’ lack of a ‘Beauvarcharsais to poke fun at the departed’ or a ‘Marseillaise to lift the spirit’. The prominent socialists Ernst Däumig and Oskar Maria Graf made the same point. The lament was misplaced. The young republic was, after all, hardly lacking in gifted satirists, while the Russian revolutionaries of 1917 had found the Marseillaise perfectly serviceable as inspiration. It was paradigmatic of German revolutionaries’ self-flagellation for having staged a revolution which was purportedly, in Däumig’s words, ‘lame in the loins’ compared to that of France or Russia. Yet disappointment was baked into the comparison. The social and political order of Germany, an advanced industrialized state, was incongruent with revolutionary programmes devised in agrarian economies. Its institutions were more resilient and deeply woven into the social fabric. As the USPD discovered in the National Assembly elections, there was little public appetite for further revolutionary upheaval. Those elections indicated that even participants in the popular upheavals of November 1918 considered the revolutionary mandate to have been discharged through the armistice, the eviction of the German monarchies, and the convocation of a constituent assembly. They were content to leave the details to be thrashed out between the new democratically elected politicians. The Assembly’s record suggests that, on balance, they were vindicated. Although its delegates found only a token role for councils in the new political arrangements, long-standing social democratic goals were fulfilled in the confirmation of universal suffrage, parliamentary democracy, unfettered freedom of association, comprehensive welfare provision, and the separation of church and state. These were clearly achievements of the revolution: as Wolff noted in his 1919 editorial, it was hard to envisage them all being delivered by von Baden under the October reforms, with Ludendorff lurking behind the scenes. By any objective measure, they have a more compelling claim to sit centre stage in accounts of the revolution than the curiously peripheral Spartacists whose fate so captivates the historical imagination. This does not mean that the counter-revolutionary violence of 1919 was peripheral in historical terms, any more than that its many atrocities can be cordoned off from the record of German social democracy as the
work of rogue Freikorps reactionaries. This state violence ensured that the German Revolution was brought to an end in 1919, just as the MSPD and OHL intended. To be sure, some chronologies of the revolution extend to 1920, or even 1923, to encompass ongoing labour militancy and attempted insurrections from both right and left. But the German Revolution as a constitutional question reached its conclusion with Ebert’s swearing-in as Reich President on 21 August 1919. As Harry Kessler, one of our most astute guides to the era, noted in his diary, the banality of that ceremony belied the historic profundity of the moment. A glance eastwards towards the bloodshed and civil war which ravaged huge swathes of the former Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman Empires after 1918 throws the accomplishment into sharp relief. The ensuing struggles of the successor democracies created in central and eastern Europe also alert us to the fundamental vitality of the Weimar Republic as an experiment in popular sovereignty. The German Revolution of 1918/19 delivered a boisterous, disputatious, pluralistic, and sophisticated democracy with all the potentialities attendant upon that government form. It should not be read, ahistorically, through the prism of the republic’s eventual demise.

Notes

2. Ibid.
13. Rosenberg, Imperial Germany, 255.
26. The National Archives, CAB 23/14, Minutes of the Meeting of the War Cabinet 10 November 1918, 299.
43. For a detailed survey of localities, see Carsten, *Revolution*, 144–209.
63. Boak, Women, 63.
64. Lida Gustava Heymann and Anita Augspurg, Erlebtes—Erschautes: Deutsche Frauen kämpfen für Freiheit, Recht und Frieden 1850—1940 (Frankfurt am Main: U. Helmer, 1992), 178.
65. Helen Boak, 'Women in the German Revolution,' in Gaard Kets and James Muldoon (eds), The German Revolution and Political Theory (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 25–44, here 34.
67. 'Frauenversammlung,' Münchener Post, 20 Nov. 1918.
75. Wette, 'German Demobilisation,' 183–4. On these much-mythologized formations see Hagen Schulze, Freikorps und Republik, 1918–1920 (Boppard am Rhein: H. Boldt, 1969).
76. Stephenson, Final Battle, 311.
78. The best account of the uprising is Jones, Founding Weimar, 173–209. A generous assessment of the MSPD's role is offered by Winkler, Long Road, 348–50.
83. Jones, Founding Weimar, 246.
85. Ibid., 13.
87. Feldman, *Disorder*, 123.
89. Ibid., 270–1.
97. Ibid., 35–6.
100. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 10 Nov. 1919.

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In research on the Weimar Republic, it is common to refer to the years from the time after the revolution until the start of hyperinflation and the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 as a period of inflation. After the revolution, economic issues and the repercussions on politics, society, and culture played an increasingly important role for contemporaries. ‘The economy is our fate’, as the industrialist Walther Rathenau, who later became foreign minister, stated in 1921.  

Recent research has emphasized the successes of the republic in the demobilization of the million-strong army, the reinitiation of the peace economy, and the reduction of unemployment. However, political life remained almost permanently in a post-revolutionary crisis mode, with internal and external uncertainties, including reparations and later hyperinflation, playing a major role.

**Dubious Stabilization**

The Reichstag elections on 6 June 1920 marked a turning point in the history of the young republic and the revolutionary developments from November 1918 onwards. Particularly the MSPD (Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany) and the DDP (German Democratic Party), and to a lesser degree the Catholic Centre Party, suffered electoral defeat. This was a significant watershed as these parties, constituting the Weimar Coalition, had embodied the alliance since the peace resolution in 1917 between the labour movement, political Catholicism, and democratic bourgeoisie. While they had won 76.4 per cent of the vote at the elections to the National Assembly in January 1919, their share now dropped to 43.6 per cent. The winners of the 1920 elections were the conservative bourgeois parties DVP (German People’s Party) and DNVP (German National People’s Party), on the one hand, and the left wing of the labour movement with
USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany), on the other, while the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) remained marginal with 2.1 per cent. The subsequent elections were to confirm the decline in popularity of the liberal democratic parties and in 1920 reversed a trend that they had enjoyed since the later years of Imperial Germany. Rather, the Conservatives were on the rise—proven by the 1924 elections—as well as the headline-grabbing and strident antisemitic and anti-republican völkisch groups.

The 1920 election result was indicative of the political polarization and change of mood that occurred in summer 1919. One of the fateful constellations of the early Weimar Republic was that the signing of the peace treaty and the adoption and entry into force of the constitution took place at about the same time. Even the majority parties of the Weimar Coalition signed the treaty only reluctantly and under massive international pressure on 28 June 1919, after the cabinet of Philipp Scheidemann (SPD) had resigned in protest shortly before. The new cabinet of Gustav Bauer (SPD) was a temporary solution. A few weeks later, on 31 July, the Reichstag, with an overwhelming majority, voted in favour of the Weimar Constitution, albeit without the votes of USPD, DVP, and DNVP. This did not bode well. The rejection of the constitution subsequently caused severe problems in forming political coalitions with the DVP, and even more so with the radically oppositional DNVP. This was particularly true for Reich politics where reparations played a prominent role, and to a lesser extent for the states. The DNVP, consisting of former Conservatives, Christian Socialists, Völkische, and National Liberals, did not oppose parliamentarianism per se, which had been practised before. Rather, they had reservations about new forms of democratic, parliamentary politics based on rules and power relations different to those of Imperial Germany.

For good reason, the Weimar Constitution is considered a victory of liberal democratic powers, as it allowed for many new future prospects. One of them was the promise of a welfare state and the possibility of transferring private businesses to public ownership. The freedom of association gave workers and employees the right to form political and economic associations and ‘cooperate, on an equal footing, with employers in the regulation of wages and of the conditions of labour, as well as in the general development of the productive forces’ (Art. 165). Political democracy was to be underpinned with economic rights. While the revolutionary mood of the first half of 1919 gradually died down and the number of political strikes swiftly declined, starting in 1920, the fight for wage increases became fiercer. Social-political reforms were presented as alternatives to socialization, including the Works Councils Act (Betriebsrätegesetz), which had been brought forward as a draft bill in August 1919, granting trade unions much more influence at shop floor level than before. When the DDP sided with the employers, the Bauer government almost collapsed in winter 1919. USPD and left-wing trade union groups called for a protest gathering in front of the Reichstag building on 13 January 1920, against the watering down of the proposed law. The degeneration of this demonstration into a storming of the Reichstag was not part of the plan. An exchange of fire between protesters and security troops, consisting of Reichswehr units and Freikorps fighters, resulted in forty-two deaths and more than a hundred wounded. Based on Article 48 of the Weimar
Constitution, Reich President Friedrich Ebert imposed a state of emergency on large parts of Germany. These events fuelled deep-seated resentments of the left against the MSPD and the hated armed forces. This applied similarly to the radical political right that blatantly expressed their hatred for the Weimar Republic, risking a showdown in spring 1920. This began with a war of words. In addition to stab-in-the-back accusations linking the military defeat and the revolution, a corruption campaign was launched against Minister of Finance Matthias Erzberger (Centre Party), and other politicians, among them Friedrich Ebert. Erzberger was a target for many reasons: his involvement as co-initiator of the peace resolution of 1917, as signatory of the armistice in November 1918, and as a high-profile democratic politician, but also because of his plans to implement drastic taxes on higher incomes and wealth, including the ‘Reichsnotopfer’, a onetime and substantial tax to consolidate state finances. The campaign against the prominent Centre Party politician was fought out in the press and in court and damaged him (and, in fact, Philipp Scheidemann) so severely that he finally resigned. But the confrontation went beyond words. While the first assassination attempt on Erzberger in January 1920 failed, the next one on 26 January 1921 eventually cost him his life.

Mid-March 1920 saw the decisive showdown over the so-called Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, caused by both fundamental and self-serving interests. The much-hated Versailles Treaty required the army size to be reduced to 100,000 men, necessitating the dismissal of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and Freikorps members. With striking hubris, General von Lüttwitz issued an ultimatum, demanding not only that President Ebert stop the reduction of troops but also that he and the government resign, to be followed immediately with a snap election. When Lüttwitz was dismissed shortly afterwards, he and his followers staged a coup on 13 March against the government and appointed Lüttwitz’s fellow campaigner Wolfgang Kapp, a high-ranking East Prussian civil servant, as Reich chancellor. All putschists came from circles around the annexationist Fatherland Party of the First World War, including figureheads like Kapp and the World War General Erich Ludendorff. They set their hopes on von Lüttwitz, who was in command of Central German and East Elbian Reichswehr units and large parts of the Freikorps, among them the Freikorps Ehrhardt, known for their helmets emblazoned with swastikas. During the night of 13 March, the revolting troops occupied Berlin. Several members of the Reich government and the President were forced to flee to Stuttgart. However, after only a few days, it became obvious that this poorly planned and executed putsch had failed.

The events were a disaster for all involved. This is particularly true for the putschists, who overestimated the support from the military and the civil service and underestimated the resistance of the labour movement. However, the government under Gustav Bauer (SPD), with the already controversial Minister of Defence, Gustav Noske (SPD), and even President Friedrich Ebert (SPD), were also duped. Prior to the events they had already showed gross negligence in dealing with the ringleaders. This resulted in the fall of the Bauer government. Even the successful nationwide general strike, declared immediately at the beginning of the coup, was an ambivalent victory for
the labour movement. It showed the power of the labour movement not only in the cities but also in rural areas. Any resistance was swiftly quelled. Yet at the same time, the general strike also opened a Pandora’s box of militarization. In many places, trade unions established workers’ self-protection units. The Red Ruhr Army, with about 50,000 workers, was particularly forceful, bringing large parts of the Ruhr area under its control in March 1920. When many of these units did not disband, the new government under Hermann Müller (SPD) deployed the Reichswehr and Freikorps squads, including some that had revolted against the government shortly before. Under the conditions of the declared state of emergency, the government forces and Freikorps units cracked down on the Bolshevists—as they called the protesters—with rampant hatred, committing atrocities such as executions and blatant murders, which were in no way less violent than the events in spring 1919. It was not a surprise that the Brigade Ehrhardt, which had previously supported the putschists, randomly shot at protesting workers, killing twelve people and injuring several dozens, when they marched through the Brandenburg Gate on their orderly retreat from Berlin on 18 March.  

These events confirmed existing resentments that the left had against the—in their eyes—reactionary and counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie and the capitalist class. For the supporters of the USPD and the KPD, the MSPD was the party of class treason and repression. They particularly targeted the state government of Carl Severing (SPD) in Prussia that had been established in the course of the Kapp putsch and that took strong action not only against Kapp putschists but also against the left-wing opposition, particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of the events at the Ruhr.  

Initially, the mood among Conservatives was gloomy. The republic had prevailed, putsch attempts were clearly nothing to write home about, and foreign political revision receded dimly into the distance. There was a lack of suitable personnel. The Emperor was discredited even though Prussian monarchists did not tire of conjuring up old Imperial splendour. Only in Bavaria was the Kapp putsch successful. Here, the Bavarian ‘Ordnungszelle’ (Cell of Law and Order) under Minister President Gustav Ritter von Kahr (BVP) became the hope of nationalist reactionary circles, including the military, and would keep German politics in suspense in the years to follow. Despite general discontent and the sympathy harboured for the Kapp putschists among the military, they ultimately failed because the leadership of the Reichswehr neither wanted to shoot their own troops nor supported the putschists. The agreement between the Reich President and the military, forged during the revolution, lasted. The Chief of the Army Command, General Hans von Seeckt, came to the conclusion that a revision of the Versailles Treaty was possible only with, rather than against, the new state.  

Despite the surprisingly swift demobilization of the army of millions and the beginning of the transition from war to peace production, the economic situation remained tense until the summer of 1920, which resulted in much discontent. The end of the British naval blockade after the signing of the peace treaty in July 1919 only gradually improved the economic situation. Notwithstanding a huge excess demand for consumer goods, there was a shortage of all kinds of raw materials, particularly coal. Infrastructure was in a dire state. The lack of foreign currency impeded the import of American food
products, and the free floating of exchange rates from September 1919 drove inflation up and caused substantial price increases.

Supply shortfalls and inflation ruled everyday life in Weimar. Just like during wartime, national and municipal offices were in charge of allocating food based on ration books and fixed maximum prices. In addition, there were comprehensive price controls of many everyday products. This already inadequate system increasingly fell apart over the course of the revolution. Rationed food alone hardly guaranteed survival, which in turn fuelled the black market. The departure from the state-controlled war economy promised a way out of this situation, but it initially resulted in a further increase in already high prices and, consequently, in even more indignation. In some cases, fields and shops were looted. Antisemitic voices made themselves heard among the protests, insinuating a connection between inflation and shortages and the role of Jews in the economy and state administration.\textsuperscript{16}

The departure from the state-controlled, subsidized public food provisions also aimed to limit public debt. The war had been funded predominantly by printing money rather than collecting taxes. This did not change much in the post-war period, as internal burdens resulting from the war mounted. These included expenditures for war invalids and dependants as well as for refugees and expelled persons, who crowded into Germany from areas that were separated from the Reich and who had to be provided for and compensated for their lost assets. The protracted demobilization further required high sums. Strikes and unrest crippled the economy in many places and thus brought about a decline in tax income. Public debt was unambiguous in its implications: in March 1919, at the end of the fiscal year 1918/19, public debt amounted to 156 billion marks, while at the end of the following budget year it was 184 billion marks.\textsuperscript{17} That was a significant increase, even considering the currency devaluation that had occurred in the meantime.

In order to consolidate public finances, Reich Minister of Finance Matthias Erzberger took drastic measures.\textsuperscript{18} They included a squeeze on the taxpayer and a fundamental reform of the tax system and the finance administration that passed into the hands of the Reich. The problem was that, even under the condition of moderate money devaluation, taxes were often payable in arrears (particularly by affluent taxpayers)—in other words, they were paid with devalued money.

The other side of this consolidation strategy was to limit public spending. Yet this was almost harder than increasing taxes, owing to the growing inflation and the acute social hardship suffered by the poorer sectors of the population. Social protests against spending cuts were greatly feared. Such cuts would have hit officials as well as white- and blue-collar workers of the country’s inflated civil service. Like workers and employees of the private sector, these groups were highly unionized, insisted on salary increases, and did not shy away from strikes to fight for their demands.\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, public investment, particularly in railway and road construction as well as hydroelectric energy production, was urgently needed, given how badly the infrastructure had been damaged during the war. The state control of the housing market brought the private housebuilding sector to a standstill, so that state and municipalities had to step in. Last but not least,
reparations had to be paid. The Versailles Treaty of 1919 postponed the final settlement to a later date. However, substantial payments in kind, including coal and locomotives as well as initial monetary payments, were due on 1 May 1921, and the victorious powers demanded the payment of 20 million in goldmark rather than in (paper) mark. These costs burdened the national budget.

Many other countries also put on their reform agendas the consolidation of public finances and the stabilization of the currency, accompanied by the return to the gold standard. This required drastic steps of budgetary consolidation and credit restrictions of the central banks everywhere, resulting in rising unemployment and a growing number of bankruptcies. In the British Isles, trade unions responded with large-scale general strikes, which prompted government to impose temporary states of emergency. This demanded a strong state, at least a government capable of acting to enforce such a policy against the resistance of its own constituencies. At stake were more than economic issues: the return to the gold standard was accompanied by the commitment to return to the political, social, and economic normality of the pre-war period.20

Germany only adopted this austerity policy towards the end of hyperinflation. The historians Gerald D. Feldman and Carl-Ludwig Holtfrerich attributed this decision to economic political reasons, connected with the reparations: first steps towards such a policy of budgetary consolidation in winter 1919–20 did in fact improve the external value of the mark, but in return they bogged down the economy and caused unemployment. A moderate inflation proved to be a ‘lubricant’ that kept the wheels of the economy moving and ensured full employment. Production in Germany was cheaper than abroad, and the country attracted the interest of the international financial world. Particularly American banks became increasingly involved on a large scale with Germany. Small domestic investors in the United States were lured with the argument that Germany would catch up with the industrial powers and the mark would recover, which sparked hopes for speculative profits.21

Did this phase of inflation help ‘save German democracy’, as Gerald D. Feldman has argued?22 Revolutionary energies soon died away. A good indicator for this was the first split within the USPD in October 1920 and thus the beginning of the party’s collapse, even though this party, more than any other, embodied the political resistance against Imperial Germany and the revolutionary movement on shop floor level. The majority of the party leadership and Reichstag members had switched to the SPD by 1922, leaving the remaining USPD a shadow of its former self. This is particularly striking because the majority of the USPD members still saw themselves as supporters of a Marxist party that refused to cooperate with bourgeois parties. The SPD shifted to the right with its Görlitz programme of September 1921. It no longer referred to the class character of the state or maintained its traditional hostility towards the state, committing to the ‘democratic people’s state’ instead.23 This would subsequently cause many party internal controversies within the—generally strengthened—SPD. They all referred to the fiercely contested formation of coalitions with bourgeois parties, particularly the DVP, and cutbacks in the social-political achievements of the revolution.
At the same time, former USPD members who switched to the KPD turned this party into a mass membership party for the first time in its history. In 1921, the KPD, under the leadership of Karl Radek and the Comintern, miscalculated its power following this new surge in membership and instigated the so-called March Action in the Central German industrial region, a stronghold of the left since the war and the revolution. It aimed at sparking a broad national uprising, which failed miserably, not least because the Prussian government took rigorous measures to counter it by deploying police units. It is striking that it was not the KPD that made headlines but the charismatic Max Hötz. Hötz was a member of the KAPD, an anarcho-syndicalist group which had split off from the KPD. He became famous for his violent actions such as arson, lootings, bank robberies as well as the bombing of and attacks on trains, committed in a Robin Hood style. In 1921 and again in 1923, the revolutionary mobilization of the masses was a ‘revolutionary illusion’, as Curt Geyer, who returned to the SPD in 1922 after having switched to the USDP and the KPD, stated in retrospect.

The increasing number of assassinations left an alarmingly bloody trail through the post-war period, highlighted by the murders of Kurt Eisner, Rosa Luxemburg, and Karl Liebknecht. In his book *Vier Jahre politischer Mord* (*Four Years of Political Murder*), published in 1922, the mathematician and publicist Emil Julius Gumbel from the University of Heidelberg listed 376 political murders between 1919 and 1922, of which 354 could be ascribed to the right side and 22 to the left side of the political spectrum. In August 1921, Matthias Erzberger was killed and in June 1922 Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau (DDP). Rather than single perpetrators, radical right-wing gangs of murderers were responsible for these deeds. The assassins could be traced to Bavaria and the Bavarian Ordnungszelle, which held its protecting hand over this culture of radical right-wing and nationalistic movements. Adolf Hitler with his NSDAP was only one of several leading figures and beacons of hope. They all shared the view that the enemy stood on the left, meaning not only the Marxist SPD but also Democrats and other bourgeois politicians. They believed they were fighting a war after the war, whether over issues of rearmament, in border fights such in Upper Silesia in 1921 or in Memel Territory in 1923, or in general against the ‘November criminals’ and the Versailles Treaty. A highly differentiated media landscape provided a plethora of mouthpieces for these groups.

Contrary to expectations, the murder of Rathenau produced a strong pro-republican mobilization. There was widespread outrage at this political murder, which temporarily overshadowed political differences. The Foreign Minister was granted the first state funeral since Bismarck. Like after the Kapp putsch, the radical right was temporarily paralysed. The republic bared its teeth by enacting the Law for the Protection of the Republic of 21 July 1922. This new legislation allowed bans on political parties, restrictions of the freedom of the press and freedom of opinion, and trials for high treason. On 11 August 1922, the first celebration of the constitution took place in the Reichstag, thus starting a tradition; it was, as Reich Minister of the Interior Adolf Köster (SPD) stated, ‘a powerful demonstration of republican Germany’.
If we take the value of the mark as an indicator for stability, it becomes obvious that economic confidence in the republic decreased from summer 1922 onwards. Germany was on the brink of hyperinflation: while in early 1922 a dollar cost 45 mark, it was 75 mark in June, 270 mark in August, and 1,807 mark in December—after that, the German currency was in free fall. This development was closely linked to decisions on reparations and foreign policy. After being postponed in 1919, the issue of reparations increasingly took centre stage at the 1920 conference in the Belgian town of Spa. Both the amount and German economic capability were discussed. The reparation claims that the Allies put on the table in January 1921 were, from the German perspective, still exorbitant, even after they were reduced by half after protests. After heated debates they issued the London Ultimatum on 5 May 1921: 132 billion goldmark with 2 billion annual interest and repayment charges, in addition 26 per cent of the annual export value; all as payments in kind and money. The first billion was due in late August 1921 and issued with an ultimatum: in the event of non-compliance the Allies threatened to occupy the Ruhr area. In order to reinforce their claims their troops occupied Düsseldorf, Duisburg, and Ruhroort as ‘sanction cities’. Payment was made promptly.

It is not that the Allied demands, particularly the annual payments, could not have been fulfilled. However, political and diplomatic conflicts caused a high degree of uncertainty, which in turn affected confidence in the German currency. In May 1921, the Fehrenbach government (Centre Party) collapsed because the DVP refused to support its policy towards reparations. The new government under Joseph Wirth, again a minority government of Centre Party, SPD, and DDP, was fragile. Did the reparation claims overstrain Germany’s capability? Would the so-called ‘policy of fulfilment’ ruin the country and fuel currency devaluation? The British economist John Maynard Keynes supported such assumptions of the impossibility to meet the demands. The Wirth government used the defiant slogan of ‘policy of fulfilment’ in the same vein— which the political opposition then took up, polemically referring to the ‘fulfilment politicians’. Subsequently, inflation became, to some extent, a self-fulfilling prophecy: Germany’s former war enemies could be blamed for the monetary and economic plight. German filibustering was not without success. In 1922, the first reparation charges in form of cash payments were suspended and replaced by payments in kind in the form of coal, steel, and timber. German wishes for a temporary suspension of reparation payments were unlikely to succeed. If anything, a reduction might have been possible, yet this hope was dashed over the course of 1922. The formation of the cabinet under Raymond Poincaré in February 1922 impeded an agreement with France while, at the same time, the German position hardened: ‘First bread, then reparations!’ became the slogan of the Wirth government in summer 1922.

Against the backdrop of the reparations, much attention was given to Germany’s rapprochement policy with the young and internationally isolated Soviet Union and the Treaty of Rapallo in April 1922, under which both countries renounced all reparations and other claims. The news of the treaty struck like a thunderbolt during the conference in Genoa where the former belligerent countries negotiated the post-war financial and economic system and, in doing so, the future reparations. For outsiders the political
machinations of the parties, in which the Reich President was involved to a significant extent, was inscrutable. After much ado, the grand coalition with the DVP in the end did not materialize. Instead, in November 1922 a centre-right government without the SPD under the independent but decisively conservative Wilhelm Cuno was formed.\textsuperscript{36} The former manager of the HAPAG shipping company took up the slogan ‘First bread, then reparations!’ and went even further in filibustering reparations by also refusing to meet payments in kind in the form of coal and timber. This was, as the Reparation Commission decided, a breach of treaty provisions. France and Belgium carried out their threat, responding with the military occupation of the Ruhr area, including adjacent regions, on 11 January 1923 as a productive pledge. An army of 100,000 soldiers were to secure the transport of the pending reparation payments in kind. In return, the German government stopped all reparation payments and called for passive resistance on 13 February 1923, supported by an overwhelming Reichstag majority. Originally intended as a brief demonstration of power, this situation dragged on for months, leading the whole of Germany into the chaos of hyperinflation.

With the so-called ‘Ruhr campaign’ (\textit{Ruhrkampf}), Germany found itself fighting a ‘war after the war’.\textsuperscript{37} Small- and large-scale businesses, state offices, civil servants, miners, and, not least, railway workers went on strike. The occupation forces countered with arrests, severe penalties through martial courts and the expelling of 180,000 persons. In some cases, passive resistance turned into violent acts of sabotage: the demolition of bridges, track, and channel systems as well as direct attacks on representatives of the occupation forces and German collaborators. When 29-year-old Albert Leo Schlageter, a former Freikorps soldier and member of the NSDAP, was tried for espionage and bombings and executed in late May 1923, he became a martyr and was put on a pedestal, even by the Communists.\textsuperscript{38}

Only to a certain extent did the pledge prove ‘productive’ for France and Belgium, and the deployment of large numbers of troops turned out to be rather expensive. However, the human and economic costs of the Ruhr occupation were much higher for Germany. Wages and salaries were continued to be paid in the occupied areas, businesses received compensation, and vast amounts of money disappeared into dubious channels of subsidized companies, trade unions, and the bureaucracy. Eventually, Germany was forced to buy coal from abroad with its scarce foreign currency by expanding the budget deficit: money printing machines ran hot. Trust in the German currency waned once and for all, domestically and abroad. The German people got used to handling thousands, from summer onwards millions, and from October even billions of mark in everyday life. Despite a good harvest, famine loomed because inflation halted economic exchange and people stockpiled goods of all kinds.

In the summer of 1923, the Cuno government faced a political and economic disaster. France refused any concessions, the issue of reparations was still unsolved, and economic problems mounted. Passive resistance was no longer broadly supported. The only question remaining was when, how, and under whose leadership the chaos could be stopped. The termination of passive resistance was a bitter admission of defeat with imminent domestic implications, all the more pronounced because the political stand-off
The Period of Inflation, 1919–1923

over the reparations issue had to be resolved. The first victim was the Cuno cabinet. The grand coalition of DVP, Centre Party, DDP, and SPD under Gustav Stresemann (DVP), formed on 13 August 1923, terminated passive resistance on 26 September, heralding a long struggle over the currency reform. In October 1923, the Deutsche Rentenbank was founded: its reserves were mortgaged against agricultural, manufacturing, and other industrial real estate, that is, material assets that had not suffered from hyperinflation. On 15 November the so-called Rentenmark was introduced on this basis at a rate of 1 Rentenmark to equal 1 trillion Papiermark and an exchange rate of 1 US dollar to equal 4.2 Rentenmark. It is often overlooked that the currency reform was by no means a foregone success and was not concluded until late August 1924, when the Rentenmark was finally replaced by the Reichsmark.

Inflation: The Silent Property Revolution

While people had talked for years in general about rising prices (Teuerung), the term inflation entered everyday language during 1923. Its repercussions were contested right from the beginning. According to the Hamburg-based banker Max Warburg, Germany was ‘a country divided into three classes of society: one that suffers and goes under in decency; another that profiteers cynically and spends recklessly; and another that writhes in desperation, and wishes to destroy in blind fury whatever is left of a government and a society that permits such conditions’.

Such depictions of publicly exhibited wealth, particularly of the newly rich, on the one hand, and the poverty of the urban population with impoverished middle-class families, war cripples, homeless people, and prostitutes, on the other, were widespread. Even today, they continue to influence our view of this particular year, alongside the depictions of people exchanging paper money with an exceedingly high nominal value that could buy next to nothing. But this was only one side of the coin. Indeed, during the first half of the year 1923, not only industry and trade but also the arts still flourished. Unemployment was low, pubs, cafes, cinemas, and theatres were well attended, and leisure activities such as sports and hiking experienced a heyday due to the eight-hour day. As it was not worth one’s while to save money for the future, it was spent quickly and freely.

These conflicting images of the Weimar Republic that are largely due to different perspectives on the phenomenon of inflation can still be found in historiography and literature. Economic historians in particular have taken a critical look at the—traditionally—negative assessment of the repercussions of inflation, recalling the difficult economic point of departure after four years of war. In 1920, industrial production had reached only little more than half and German national income at best two-thirds of pre-war levels. Even without reparations, war-induced burdens were enormous. The currency devaluation kept the economy going and caused a redistribution of wealth.
The state had piled up debt, but the currency devaluation decreased the real value of these debts in goldmark or US dollar terms. At the end of inflation, public budgets were largely free of debt. In other words, the currency devaluation had the same effect as a wealth tax that was paid by a broad audience—albeit not by all to the same extent.

Similarly, many businesses emerged stronger from the inflation period. The ratio of nominal capital in 1913 to nominal capital in 1924 in the iron and steel industry was 100:134, in the mining industry 100:136, and in the chemical industry even 100:227. It was, however, a different picture for trade and banking, where the ratio was 100:30. Thus, industry, trade, and banking were unequally affected; banks and insurance companies had lost an enormous amount of capital. Thousands of small and medium-sized businesses in all sectors went bust in 1924. The transition from war to peace production, the loss of former import and export markets as well as the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty were huge challenges for all businesses. All balance sheets were overshadowed by inflation, which impeded secure accounting and kept many, even defunct, companies alive. Businessmen who had access to the credit market and were open to taking risks—that is, who adopted an inflation mentality—could borrow money at ridiculously low interest rates that could later be repaid at a hugely decreased value. Contemporaries spoke of Inflationsblüten: unsound businesses and businessmen who thrived thanks to the inflation and often went bankrupt with the currency reform. The Ruhr industrialist Hugo Stinnes, who had established a highly complex corporation operating in the field of heavy and electrotechnical industry since the war, has long been regarded a prime and scandalous example of using cheap financing options together with the devaluation of debts as an economic strategy. Indeed, there were numerous entrepreneurs, often surprisingly young ones and many of them self-made men, who were Stinnes’s equals in pursuing this inflationary economic strategy.

Many blue- and white-collar workers as well as large sections of the bourgeoisie, among them civil servants, doctors, and solicitors, were economically worse off than before the war. Especially in phases of rapid inflation when prices rose dramatically, their incomes lagged behind. One can discern a discrepancy between the fact that hourly wages, especially of workers, remained relatively high but lagged when calculated on a weekly and monthly basis; this has to do with the introduction of the eight-hour-day, which reduced weekly working time. Those organized in trade unions and employed by (large-scale) industrial companies were in a relatively favourable economic situation. A good example of this is the large group of miners who, in 1923, by way of the Reichsknappschaft, also received a separate, privileged public health insurance and pension scheme. Even during the hyperinflation, the trade unions were able to negotiate an inflation compensation for their members. This is the reason why historians often speak of an ‘inflation consensus’. By this they mean a kind of inflation mentality that was widespread, a way in which individuals, economic groups, and the state came to terms with and adapted to the currency devaluation.

A specific characteristic of inflation was the levelling of income, which had already started during the war and accelerated afterwards. Put simply, this meant, for instance, that the income of higher earners among white-collar workers, civil servants, and skilled
workers moved closer to that of lower paid income groups. Across all occupations, it was the higher income groups that suffered the greatest income losses. Strikingly, the general trend in women's income was, in comparison, better across all sectors during the post-war inflation period. White-collar workers and civil servants in particular regarded this levelling of income as a form of social and economic proletarianization and a threat to the **Mittelstand**, which is certainly one reason for the negative assessment of the inflation period. But more than any other group, this levelling process affected owners of capital assets. It goes without saying that inflation destroys monetary assets, including savings, state bonds, insurance, and endowment capital, even without hyper-inflation. For those living off their savings the currency devaluation posed a dramatic form of—silent—property expropriation. The so-called **Kapitalkleinrentner**—that is, people who had until then lived off their savings—among them many women, became the contemporary epitome of inflation losers. Yet this group was only the tip of the iceberg. Large parts of the bourgeoisie were affected, not least the educated middle class, including doctors, solicitors, and other members of the free professions. For example, the economist and university professor Werner Sombart, who made a name for himself with his historical analysis of modern capitalism in the pre-war period, lost large parts of his fortune because of several bad financial decisions. This fuelled resentment everywhere. The liberal economist Moritz J. Bonn noted in hindsight that the business world developed ‘a capitalist variant of communist expropriation’: ‘They robbed not their class enemies, but the broad mass of their own supporters.’ These and similar remarks were driven by conflicts and battles over the distribution of wealth within a society that was already fragmented into classes, status groups, and political convictions. They also reveal experience and expectations that had changed since the war and were often compared with idealized descriptions of *The World of Yesterday* (Stefan Zweig), that is, with the pre-war time of alleged certainties.

Against the backdrop of hyperinflation, many authors and contemporaries stated that the world had turned upside down as a result of the ‘witches’ sabbath of devaluation’ (Elias Canetti). A prime example is the scholar of Romance literature and diary writer Victor Klemperer, who felt he was being drawn into the maelstrom of inflation and insecurity despite his long-desired appointment as tenured professor at the University of Dresden in 1920. In his diary, he constantly lamented the shortage of money and financial problems, described initially small, later larger speculative transactions in foreign currency and shares, and was obsessed with food and prices, including worst excesses of ‘profiteers’. These utterances, which he himself regarded as ‘pathetic’, stopped promptly after the currency reform and appeared again in 1930. Despite his everyday frustrations over the economic situation, Klemperer also enjoyed some small successes in his speculative transactions that came as a surprise for him and helped him and his wife make ends meet. ‘I even feel excitement and pleasure in the dash of Bohemian life-style of our [uncertain] way of living and the uncertainty of the overall situation’, he wrote in 1923.

As many other contemporaries, Klemperer was well aware that the old ways no longer held sway: That ‘the time is out of joint’ was the seemingly trivial expression that can be seen as a metaphor of experiencing modernity with its vanishing values.
One aspect of this modernity was the increasingly worthless paper money that was no longer based on the gold standard, which the much-maligned inflation profiteers with their bad business morality were able to exploit. The so-called ‘rentiers’, as well as ‘many intellectual workers’—the economist Alfred Weber referred to ‘rentier-intellectuals’—who lived off their savings seemed to be boldly anachronistic in this modern society. The new social figurehead was the white-collar worker and their specific leisure culture including sport, cinemas, and weekends. New forms of lifestyle spread in all areas. The artistic avant-garde flourished under the conditions of inflation during the early 1920s. Many of them targeted the ubiquitous mediocrity of the everyday world of money. But just like shares, coins, and other valuables, art works were in high demand in the flight to real assets. Artists such as George Grosz threw their portfolios on the market, signed or unsigned, with or without hand-colouring, on cheap or on high-quality paper, suitable for any group of buyers. Klemperer wrote about a university colleague who bought art works and books as ‘dividend investment’ and spent hundreds of thousands of marks to bind books in the most beautiful fashion, ‘all very refined and cultured. Still, a bitter and unconceivable feeling remains over this excessive and industrialized way of earning money.’ This was a modernity where it seemed that ‘everything solid melts into air’. Many retrospective descriptions of these turbulent times have consolidated this image.

**Currency Stabilization, State of Emergency and Dictatorship in Autumn and Winter 1923–4**

In late November 1923, the publisher Ludwig Feuchtwanger wrote to his author Carl Schmitt that, in light of recent events, ‘every day offers visual and practical instructions on general political science’. He continued that the much-read masters of the past, such as Machiavelli, Bodin, and Hobbes, had now become ‘disconcertingly alive’. Schmitt answered dryly that this was particularly true of Hobbes. Contemporaries of the inflation period often referred to the image of the ‘war of everyone against everyone’, together with the demand for dictators, ‘strong men’, and a ‘strong government’. The winter of 1923–4 was the training ground of the state of emergency. Germany had seen debates on dictatorship since the war and the revolution, but in late autumn 1923, when money increasingly lost its function as a medium of exchange and state authority seemed to be dissolving, these only accelerated. Newspapers reported on lootings and unrest over rising prices throughout Germany, in which the participants were women, youth, unemployed people, but also political activists of the left as well as antisemitic and völkisch groups. They looted shops and sold the confiscated goods at ‘decent prices’. Pogrom-like riots in the Berlin Scheunenviertel in early November, which started as protests of unemployed people and snowballed into excesses against the Jewish population.
of this and other Berlin boroughs, were only the tip of the iceberg. Here, a rampant antisemitism came blatantly to light.\textsuperscript{57} Even today it is still not known how many people were killed nationwide in these lootings (which, however, were largely not driven by antisemitism)—not least due to the deployment of security forces, including military units. Signs of anarchy could be observed in Prussian Rhineland and Bavarian Palatinate in the west of the country, where German separatists supported by France scaled up their activities, occupied public buildings and proclaimed ‘autonomous republics’. This resulted in civil war-like conditions when self-declared separatists faced also violent opposition of broad sections of the population.\textsuperscript{58}

Did these events not bode well for a ‘German October’ (by analogy with the Russian October of the Bolsheviks in 1917), as representatives of the KPD and the Communist International such as Karl Radek were suggesting?\textsuperscript{59} Moscow also assumed that the chaos of hyperinflation had created a revolutionary situation. Soviet money and military experts helped establish the so-called Proletarian Hundreds (Proletarische Hundertschaften), a paramilitary body, which soon had more than 50,000 members. The KPD accelerated the establishment of (price) control commissions that were to undertake self-help action against usurers, black-marketeers, and unreasonably high prices and to confiscate goods and food products.\textsuperscript{60} The aim was to create a broad, united proletarian front. Part of this strategy was that the KPD joined the SPD governments in Saxony and Thuringia during the first half of October.

The political course of the KPD remained contested. As the majority of the delegates of left-wing trade unionists, Communists, and Social Democrats stated at a meeting in Chemnitz on 21 October, the financial hardship caused by hyperinflation did not bode well for a general strike. As a result, the isolated KPD leadership under Heinrich Brandler cancelled the planned actions. A local riot in Hamburg on 23 October ended in bloody clashes. The Communist revolutionary slogans were grist for the mill of those who nursed plans for a ‘national dictatorship’, and pointed to the looming danger from the left. They brandished the spectre of an imminent civil war, a state of anarchy that could only be resolved by the power of a dictator.

Indeed, 26 September marked the end of passive resistance when Reich President Ebert, in consultation with the Stresemann government, declared a nationwide state of military emergency based on Article 48, Section 2, of the constitution.\textsuperscript{61} Fear of riots and protests against the end of passive resistance—a second stab-in-the-back, as some suggested—was only one reason for this step. The key factor was that the Bavarian government had pressed ahead by declaring a state of emergency for Bavaria (based on Article 48, Section 5), pre-empting the Reich government and thus forcing the hand of both Stresemann and Ebert. The appointment of Gustav Ritter von Kahr as Bavarian state commissioner general made clear which way the wind was blowing. Von Kahr, who became Minister-President of Bavaria in March 1920, was the great hope of the conservatives in the Bavarian People’s Party. He maintained manifold relations with the Reichswehr and combat leagues, including those around Ludendorff and Hitler, who increasingly became competitors in the political arena. The Bavarian state of emergency, first imposed after the quelling of the council republic in 1919, turned into a trademark
of the Bavarian Ordnungszelle under von Kahr. This involved cracking down on left-wing parties (including the SPD) and their members, the excessive use of Schutzhaft (protective custody), bans on public meetings, and civil rights restrictions on left-wing party members. At the same time, institutions of a security state, such as the state police, Reichswehr, and combat leagues, were expanded. This was a blatant criticism of the grand coalition with the Social Democrats in Berlin and the Social Democratic Reich Minister of the Interior. In November 1923, von Kahr initiated the internment and expulsion of so-called ‘Eastern Jews’ from Germany.\textsuperscript{62}

With the state of emergency in September 1923, the executive power was given to the Minister of the Reichswehr, Otto Geßler (DDP), who delegated his authorities to the regional military district commanders. As a result, they obtained extensive powers vis-à-vis the state governments and authorities. Even before and particularly after the failed Hamburg uprising, the minister of the Reichswehr and the chancellor put more pressure on the left-wing state government in Saxony under Erich Zeigner (SPD). They issued an ultimatum that demanded the exclusion of the KPD from the Saxon government and threatened with a Reichsexekution, that is the takeover of political control by the Reich government and the military occupation of these states (based on Article 48, Section 1 of the constitution). When the left-wing Saxon government did not comply with this order, the Reich execution was put into force on 28 October: authorized by President Ebert, Chancellor Stresemann deposed the members of the Saxon government as well as the leadership of regional and municipal authorities. On the next day, the Reichswehr occupied Saxony and put the police forces under Reichswehr command. The Proletarian Hundreds were banned and disarmed. After 6 November, similar steps were taken against the government in Thuringia. Civil Reich commissioners (Reichskommissare), in cooperation with representatives of the Reichswehr, took responsibility for state government affairs. It was thanks to President Ebert that this course of action remained only a brief interlude. As early as 31 October, the Saxon diet elected a newly formed Social Democratic government, and in Thuringia a bourgeois government supported by the Völkische was elected by the diet. In 1923, many in Germany, including the military, wished for a general political cleansing, for instance governments without the participation of Social Democrats, including in Prussia. In December, the new Saxon government protested that ‘a general who dares to declare all Social Democratic civil servants unreliable and suspend them from office based only on their party-political view defies democracy.’\textsuperscript{63}

Resentment ran high among Social Democrats. On 3 November they left the Stresemann government in anger. The SPD was embittered not only by the events in Saxony but also by those in Bavaria, where the Reich government and Reichswehr bought time for opportunistic reasons despite the fact there were enough good reasons to impose a Reich execution here as well. In Bavaria the Reichswehr refused to comply with orders from Berlin and sided with State Commissioner von Kahr. This was a form of high treason. The leadership of the Reichswehr under von Seeckt made it very clear that it would not support a Reich execution against Bavaria.

Following the events in Saxony, Thuringia, and Bavaria, and the SPD leaving government, various plans on setting up a dictatorship and staging a ‘national revolution’
mushroomed that had been germinating over the weeks and months during the state of military emergency. One such plan was to have a directorate independent of parliament and vested with extraordinary powers (echoing Napoleonic France). The exponents were politically involved industrialists and politicians with connections to the Agrarian League (Bund der Landwirte, BdL) and the Pan-German League (Allddeutscher Verband), whose members were intermeshed with DNVP and DVP. Ebert was aware of these plans, in particular because the initiators assumed that such a directorate could only be formed by using the emergency powers of the Reich President. However, it remained an open question who was deemed suitable to fill the posts in such a directorate. In September, Stinnes already told the US Ambassador to Berlin: ‘Such a man must speak the language of the people and be a member of a bourgeois party, and such a man is available right now.’ It is fair to assume that he was thinking of von Kahr rather than of Hitler.

From the outset, the chief of the Reichswehr, Hans von Seeckt, played a major role in these dictatorship plans. Many in the military had high hopes for him. The fact that all these plans came to nothing was, to some extent, due to his personality, but in particular to the events in Bavaria. Since the founding of the NSDAP in February 1920, it had become an influential power in this state. Its leader, Adolf Hitler, was known as a ‘drummer’ of the national cause. Despite a great deal of distrust and suspicion, governmental authorities, police, and Reichswehr regarded the young movement with favour. Since the occupation of the Ruhr and passive resistance, Hitler had become a power in Bavaria that could no longer be ignored. In autumn, von Kahr, Hitler, and his allies in the völkisch camp fought for the leadership of the national movement. The events came to a head on the eve of the anniversary of the November revolution on 9 November 1923 at a large meeting in the Munich Bürgerbräukeller. Right in the middle of von Kahr’s speech, which was fraught with invectives against Marxism and Berlin, Hitler, armed with a pistol, stormed onto the stage, interrupted von Kahr and declared the dismissal of the Bavarian and the Reich government—to the cheers of the bourgeois audience. He then promised the formation of a ‘national government.’ Von Kahr and his allies, taken completely by surprise, withdrew their forced commitment to the coup, and within hours the Bavarian police forces quelled the putsch in front of the Feldherrnhalle in Munich by firing a volley of bullets.

Also during the night of the putsch, Friedrich Ebert placed executive powers directly in the hands of von Seeckt (instead of Minister of the Reichswehr Geßler): the general was, as a result, able to ‘take all necessary measures for the safety of the Reich,’ as the first public statement read. By this means, the military was closer to power than ever before. However, hopes of a ‘dictatorship Seeckt’ were quickly dashed. By transferring the power to von Seeckt on the night of the putsch, the Reich President made the general dependent on him: von Seeckt’s first task was to implement law and order in Bavaria. As it turned out, the ‘military dictator’, ordered by Ebert, acted within the framework of the constitution and under the leadership of the President. Nevertheless, the measures von Seeckt took are of major importance, particularly in the light of the following years. They consisted, among other things, of party and newspaper bans, the repeal of civil rights
and increase of penalties, including military protective custody as well as interventions in economic life.\textsuperscript{67}

At the core of all these events was the objective of restoring public order and safety. Other occasions when the state of emergency was declared concerned the remedy of economic and fiscal hardship based on Article 48. By these means the President authorized the government to make extensive decisions on economic issues without consulting the Reichstag. Parliament could have vetoed it but did not, even when the SPD had left the government and was in opposition. In the same vein, the Reichstag passed several enabling laws and, in doing so, delegated its legislative powers to the governments (and indirectly to the state bureaucracies)—and prorogued itself. This was intended to enable the government to ‘take those measures it regards as necessary and urgent in view of the distress of the people and of the Reich’, as the enabling law of 8 December 1923 stipulated.\textsuperscript{68} This was in fact nothing else than a ‘naked dictatorship law’—in this case issued by the Reichstag.

For half a year, military, state bureaucracy and Reich government governed with Article 48 for the restoration of law and order and with economic emergency decrees and enabling laws. Similar arrangements were made in the individual states. A plethora of decrees and laws were issued that would never have passed the Reichstag without the state of emergency, particularly with such speed. The issue was extremely contested and resulted in some bitterness because important achievements of the revolution such as the eight-hour day were put up for negotiation, which the SPD was reluctant to agree to for a long time.\textsuperscript{70} One of these measures was the gradual staff reduction in the public sector by 25 per cent, which was decided on 17 October 1923. As a result, 400,000 civil servants, employees, and workers of the public sector were laid off before 1 April 1924, among them a disproportionately high number of women. Salaries and wages were reduced to 60 per cent of the pre-war level, and the eight-hour day was watered down while taxes and duties increased. Reichsbahn and Reichspost were no longer subsidized.\textsuperscript{71} The harshness of this austerity policy was due to efforts to revise some of the social and political gains of the revolution (like the eight-hour day), but even more so because for a long time it remained uncertain whether or not the currency reform would be successful or the country would bounce back into inflation. On 15 February 1924, the last fixed-term enabling law expired, and a few days later the Reichstag convened again. When Social Democrats, Communists, and German Nationals attempted to amend the austerity measures issued by the government, the Reich President, following a request from the government, dissolved the Reichstag on 13 March. Snap elections were scheduled for 4 May, which gave the government some further breathing space.

After the winter of 1923–4, German society was weary. Images of huge amounts of worthless paper money that had been burnt or given to children as play money became deeply entrenched in collective memory, not least thanks to media coverage. The currency reform was experienced in connection with utmost material hardship, numerous bankruptcies, a high unemployment rate, and extremely low incomes. The gloomy economic situation improved only during the second half of 1924 when US credit flowed
into Germany in the context of an agreement, known as the Dawes Plan, that was reached with regard to the reparations question.

The DNVP emerged as the winner of the Reichstag elections in May 1924 more clearly than it had four years earlier. As an opposition party that had not participated in any government coalition it could tap into the discontent of bourgeois strata, the rural population, and German National employees, workers, and civil servants. Social protest was, quite literally, German National, accompanied by an underlying rampant antisemitism. It resonated with the public when German Nationals blamed the revolution of 1918–19, the democratic republic, and the reparations for the consequences of inflation that were uniformly regarded as negative. To many it appeared obvious that the new state as well as powerful economic interests had shed their debts at the expense of broad sections of the population. The DNVP became deeply absorbed in the topic of currency revaluation, that is, a tax-funded financial compensation for savers and holders of private and public bonds. The Kapitalkleinkrentner were the symbol of this moral fight for justice, a fight that dragged on for years. The topic was particularly explosive because judges of the Reich Court in Leipzig reviewed the issue of revaluation and threatened not to recognize the recently adopted laws. In their words, it was a fight of the ‘people’s sense of justice’ against unjust laws. This was an unknown, even revolutionary, assumption of judicial review in the German constitutional tradition. When the DNVP, as a party in government, abandoned its former position on this matter, the protest of the ‘sense of justice against the laws’ drifted off to the Völkische.

From 1924 onwards, contemporaries took stock of the inflation situation, identifying the losers and winners. As we have seen, statistically this was a mixed picture, putting many (self-)assessments into perspective: the Mittelstand was not ‘destroyed’, the system of social inequality based on access to societal and political power and status via education, habitus, and social position was largely marked by continuities, notwithstanding political and social caesuras. Despite the levelling consequences of inflation, Germany was still a class society. In contrast to many expectations, capitalism had prevailed, even though its representatives complained bitterly about high social burdens, taxes, and state interventions. The country was deeply divided, not only politically but also, thanks to inflation, socially: between urban and rural communities, consumers and producers, house owners and tenants, creditors and debtors, as well as workers, farmers, and the bourgeoisie. Even contemporaries saw the reason for the breakdown of social contract relations in the dominance of particular interests. This applied not least to the bourgeois liberal parties that always tried to reconcile and integrate different interest groups of their bourgeois base.

There was, however, a broad consensus regarding the negative assessment of inflation winners and ‘inflation blossoms’ that were targets of criticism and denounced as the cause of inflation. This became obvious in several political, financial, and economic scandals. Many different topics were negotiated in this context: hardship and waste, the alleged corruption of republican politicians, and not least excesses of speculative capitalism that had actually happened during the inflation period but were now caricatured and attacked as ‘Jewish capitalism’. Was this capitalism obliterated? Racist
antisemitism and anti-capitalism, which have always gone hand in hand, developed an explosive power with disastrous results after the beginning of the Great Depression. The question was whether the specious prosperity had revealed remaining structural economic problems. Were the—perhaps not sufficiently radical—austerity politics that had started with the currency reform to be continued under the conditions of the Great Depression?\footnote{75}

The enthusiasm and spirit of optimism that marked the revolutionary period had faded in 1924, being replaced by soberness and a new sense of reality. Putsches and uprisings had failed, the republic prevailed as political form of rule. It looked like the republicans were in control. Politicians, military, and bureaucracy had practised the state of emergency with many variations, be it to combat social and political unrest, economic and fiscal emergencies, or to protect the republic. This had created significant practical precedents that became important again under the changed political conditions after 1930 and were finally directed against the republic.

It is much harder to determine the medium- and long-term psychological repercussions of the inflation, especially hyperinflation. They include the recurrent fear of inflation in Germany, with repeated references to the year 1923, even today. And then, there is the point raised by the novelist Elias Canetti that ‘a crime of such an extent’ as experienced during the Nazi period would have been unthinkable without inflation as a ‘mass phenomenon’ with its severe devaluation processes. ‘It would have been hardly possible to push them [the Nazis] that far’, Canetti has written, ‘if they had not experienced a few years earlier an inflation in which the Mark was worth a billionth of the original value. And it was this inflation as a mass phenomenon they unloaded on the Jews.’\footnote{76}

Translated from German by Christine Brocks.

Notes

