

Weimar Prussia, 1918–1925

The Unlikely Rock of
Democracy

DIETRICH ORLOW

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For my parents

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Because of the upheavals of twentieth-century German history, primary source material is located in a wide variety of institutions and that in turn requires a considerable amount of travel. Research activities are also made more difficult by the dispersal of what were once single sets of papers. (The Otto Braun papers, for example, now reside in three different archives.) I would like to express my gratitude to the numerous institutions which I visited in the course of researching this study (listed in the bibliography). The staffs of all of them were unfailingly helpful and generous in making the materials in their custody available to me.

Unlike our colleagues who work in earlier periods of the past, we who do research in contemporary history are fortunate in having the insight of those who participated in the events themselves at our disposal. In the case of the political history of Prussia, I was able to interview two men who played major roles in the latter years of Weimar Prussia, Professor Herbert Weichmann, in the 1930s Otto Braun's personal assistant and later the lord mayor of Hamburg, and Ernest Hamburger, a former member of the Prussian legislature. In addition, John Caspari who was during the Weimar years the *Landeshauptmann* of Brandenburg, generously answered written questions.

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Needless to say, whatever errors and shortcomings remain are my responsibility.

Weimar Prussia, 1918–1925

Introduction

Germany's defeat in the Second World War ended the existence of both the German Reich and the state of Prussia. The Reich, stripped of much of its former territory, was divided first into four zones of Allied occupation and eventually transformed into present-day West and East Germany. The state of Prussia, which especially in Anglo-Saxon eyes had long epitomized the negative aspects of the German nation,¹ was quite literally legislated out of existence. On February 25, 1947, the Allied Control Council issued Law no. 46: Prussia was abolished, its institutions dissolved, its assets confiscated.²

Actually, the Allies' decision was redundant. By 1947 Prussia had ceased to have any significance as a government entity, and the later rulers in East and West Germany had no interest in resurrecting the state. Indeed, for some thirty years after World War II the *finis Borussiae* seemed total. Professional historians and other specialists continued to debate Prussia's past significance, but public interest in the two Germanies and outside their boundaries in things Prussian was virtually nonexistent.

Recently, however, there has been a remarkable change, as an avalanche of publications, exhibitions, and films on the history and culture of Prussia has provided evidence of nostalgia and renewed attention in both East and West Germany.³ In the summer of 1981 a major multimedia exhibition in West Berlin sought to provide a balanced assessment of Prussia's contributions to German and European civilization.⁴ On the other side of the border, the East German press for the first time in many years began referring to King Frederick II as "Frederick the Great," while GDR television featured a mini-series celebrating the Prussian reform era in the early years of the nineteenth century.

The revival of interest in Prussia and its history in the two Germanies was not entirely accidental. As the political systems in East and West Germany mature, both the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic face the problem of national continuity and identity. Neither is possible without confronting the problem of Prussia in the evolution of Germany. For much of its history, the Reich's largest state was far more than a medium-sized territory with an industrious, if somewhat dour population. "Prussia" was also, for better or worse, an idea and an ideal. To be "Prussian" epitomized a particular mindset and a way of life that, especially after the middle of the nineteenth century, came to be increasingly identified with Germany itself.

Prussia's political history must be addressed in the context of the "German problem," that is, the cause and course of modernization in Germany.⁵ Students of recent German history constantly confront the problem of the Reich's peculiar patterns of development in evolving from a predominantly agrarian society to a highly industrialized country. The process of modernization has been, of course, a universal phenomenon in European history, but it has become axiomatic to regard Germany's development as unique in at least two ways. On the one hand, the transformation of German society was extremely telescoped—that is, the process took place over a very short time—and on the other, modernization seemingly stopped after altering only part of Germany's premodern social structures and values. Historians have pointed out that especially during the time of the Second Empire (1871–1918) and to a lesser extent during the years of the Weimar Republic as well, German society evolved modern forms of organization and values in economics and technology, while its political structures and value patterns remained typical of preindustrial times.

Contemporary historiography has done much to explore the anomalies of Germany's modernization processes. Specifically, analysts have sought to find the reasons why Germany—in contrast to its major West European neighbors—lagged behind in evolving a viable democratic political system. Debate on the reasons for the "modernization warp" continues, but most researchers would agree that, in addition to such factors as the profound differences in the level of economic development in the eastern and western regions of the country, and the religious split between north and south, the role of Prussia in German history played a major part in shaping the country's paths to modernization.⁶

Especially after the Reich became united in 1871 through the force of Prussian arms, Germany's largest state was essentially a Reich in miniature. Prussia's territory and population made up roughly three-fifths of the Reich as a whole, the state's borders to the east and west were the same as the national frontiers, and Prussia's social structure paralleled that of the Reich. Since after 1871 Prussia's authoritarian political structures also dominated the Reich's political institutions, many historians have treated German and Prussian history before and after 1918 as essentially identical.⁷

There are some good reasons to justify such an approach. At least since the middle of the nineteenth century, German federalism has had both an offensive and a defensive character. For the most part, the German states were "defensive" in their relations with each other and with the central government, anxious to protect their territorial and political autonomy against the encroachments of larger neighbors and whatever Reich authority existed. This form of federalism is perhaps best exemplified by the fear of the southern German states (notably Bavaria) that they would lose their cultural and politi-

cal independence if the central government were to acquire powers beyond those characteristic of a loose confederation. In contrast, Prussia's attitude toward federalism was more "offensive." After their defeat of the revolution of 1848, the state's Conservative political leaders increasingly identified Prussia's interests with those of the Reich, and they sought to dominate the central government. The ruling Junkers believed that Germany's largest state had a paradigmatic role to play in the future history of the Reich: Prussia was to defend political authoritarianism in all of Germany against the subversive influence of democracy and political pluralism.

The identification of Prussian authoritarianism and the evolution (or lack of it) of German political life seemed so close that most treatments of modern German political history have struck a quasi-deterministic note, a sort of negative historicism. In consequence, both the collapse of 1918 and the later Nazi seizure of power seem inevitable results of ossified structures and rigid mindsets by the Prusso-German political leaders. With the empire and the Weimar Republic acting as precursors with "prefascistic structures"⁸ which could not escape their "anonymous fate,"⁹ Nazi totalitarianism in many accounts appears as the only logical outcome of modern German history. And with the outcome axiomatic, the historian's task becomes primarily a quest to explain why the tragedy was as inevitable as it has been declared to be.

The search has produced a variety of answers. Many analysts have concentrated on the weakness of the German party system and the inadequacies of the Bismarckian and Weimar constitutions as reasons for the failure of political democracy in Germany. Among the political groups, scholars have understandably focused on the shortcomings of the moderate bourgeois parties and the right-wing Socialists, since it is generally agreed that any significant changes in the authoritarian political structures established after 1871 could come only through the cooperative effort of these reformist forces. It is certainly true that until 1918 profound ideological differences and strong class antagonisms negated all efforts toward systematic cooperation between the moderate bourgeoisie and the working classes, and limited their working together to momentary tactical arrangements.¹⁰ In addition, for the most part neither the moderate bourgeois parties nor the Social Democrats actively sought governmental responsibility before World War I, so that when executive power fell into their hands in November 1918 they were ill prepared for the role forced upon them in the years of the republic. Finally, the bourgeois parties had essentially remained aggregations of notables rather than evolving into organizations capable of mobilizing mass support.¹¹

The revolution of 1918, or rather the reasons for its failure, occupies a prominent place in the historiography of modern Germany.¹² Most interpretations of the political changes that shook Germany at the end of 1918 fall into two categories. There is the older school, begun by Karl Dietrich Erdmann,

which argues that the revolution forged a union of moderate and traditional political forces in Germany that alone was able to prevent bolshevism from seizing power in the country.¹³ In contrast, the so-called critical school denies the validity of this interpretation and holds instead that it was precisely the alliance of reformers and authoritarians that prevented a radical (and needed) restructuring of German society, enabling the old ruling classes to continue their successful efforts to prevent political modernization and democratization of the Reich. The critical school goes back to a seminal work by Arthur Rosenberg, although his thesis did not receive solid evidentiary support until the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴ The anti-Erdmann group has concentrated on exploring the possibility of the “third way.” These historians postulate that the revolution provided Germany the opportunity for pursuing a genuine alternative between the stale and unproductive ideas of the right-wing Socialists and their bourgeois allies on the one hand, and the supporters of Leninism on the other. While the majority Socialists showed excessive concern for preserving lines of continuity between the empire and the republic,¹⁵ and the Spartacists (later Communists) rigidly applied the Russian revolutionary model to quite different political conditions, there were, according to the proponents of the “third way,” many in the Socialist parties who demanded both a radical break with Germany’s authoritarian and militaristic past and the establishment of a genuine German—not Russian—form of socialism.

In recent years, the view that German history from 1871 to 1933 proceeded in a rather straight line from the Second—Wilhelminian—to the Third Reich has come under increasing criticism in a number of revisionist studies. Particularly the picture of imperial Germany as a protofascist society subject to the unquestioned domination of Prussian reactionaries has been called into question. Manfred Rauh has recently demonstrated that the political structures of Wilhelminian Germany were far less rigid than had previously been assumed. The Bismarckian constitution as the bedrock of reactionary rule was a “transitory phenomenon” which even before 1914 had been significantly eroded, especially at the Reich level, in favor of de facto parliamentarism.¹⁶ Further developments in the course of the First World War only gave the system its *coup de grâce*.

The viability of the “third way” during the revolution of 1918–19 has also been questioned. Numerous documentary and analytical studies, mostly by scholars who set out to support the “third way” school of interpretation, have unwittingly disproved much of the original thesis. It is becoming increasingly clear that despite considerable popular appeal, the Independent Socialists, the primary support of the “third way,” were an organizationally weak and ideologically divided party and thus a poor base on which to build a new political and social system in Germany.¹⁷ Similarly, the Independents’ institutional

strength, the system of workers' and soldiers' councils, was not strong enough to serve as an alternative to the established institutions of government and legislation. This development should not have come as a complete surprise. Gerald Feldman has reminded us that the workers' and soldiers' council movement after World War I was a short-lived phenomenon in all areas of Europe with the exception of Soviet Russia.¹⁸

To date, revisionism has left the traditional picture of the Weimar Republic largely untouched. Interest in the Weimar Republic among historians continues to focus on its negative, "prefascistic" characteristics. The picture of the Weimar Republic as a "democracy without democrats" is still commonplace,¹⁹ and research on the history of the German Republic remains dominated by the question of why it failed. Again, its shortcomings cannot be denied. A number of factors have been cited for the chronic difficulties faced by the republic. In addition to the long-term structural problems of German political life, there were problems with the constitution, particularly in the provisions for excessive proportional representation and the direct, popular election of the president. In addition, the republic never fulfilled its early promise of societal reforms. The interaction of economic difficulties and international complications (such as hyperinflation and the Treaty of Versailles) prevented the republic from taking credit for either economic prosperity or national successes.

There were also the inherent weaknesses in the German political party system.²⁰ Cooperation among the middle-of-the-road parties that supported parliamentary democracy (the SPD, the Center party, and the DDP, and, with reservations, the DVP) never became routine. Much of what had divided them before 1914 continued to drive them apart after the revolution. Among the bourgeois parties, which still did not evolve into true mass parties, a longing for a quasi-anthropomorphic political structure with a bourgeois head and a Social Democratic body prevented cooperation with the workers' party on the basis of genuine equality.²¹ The SPD was not confronted with these difficulties, but it had other, no less serious, barriers to overcome. The right-wing Social Democrats did have a strong mass organization, enabling them to become the leading political party throughout most of the Weimar years, and they certainly did not long to return to the days of imperial Germany, but their strength was seldom optimally used. The SPD was a very cumbersome organization,²² increasingly subject to what its critics derisively identified as *Verbonzung*, *Verkalkung*, *Verbürgerlichung* (bureaucratization, calcification, and bourgeoisification). Moreover, the party persisted in attempting to avoid political responsibility as a partner in coalition governments. The SPD's leadership always felt defensive about sending ministers into the Reich government, feeling that it had to justify such straying from the line of pure

socialism to rank-and-file party members.²³ As a result, for much of the Weimar era the strongest party in the Reichstag refused to join the government and occupied the opposition benches instead.²⁴

I will argue in the course of this study that our traditional picture of the Weimar era as a brief interlude in which democracy failed needs to be revised because most of the simplistic generalizations about Weimar Germany do not apply to the state of Prussia, which made up three-fifths of the country. Far more than their counterparts at the national level, the moderate parties in Prussia were able “to work together toward getting things done.”²⁵ Pragmatists rather than ideologues dominated the state’s political scene.²⁶ Prussian ministers for the most part had been leading members of the state legislature before assuming their executive posts; the Reich was often forced to select “nonpartisan” civil servants and businessmen as cabinet ministers because the national parliament could not come up with a majority for political appointees. The Reichstag was able to complete only one full legislative session; in all other legislative periods deadlocks forced early elections. The Prussian Landtag was never dissolved because it was unable to fulfill its parliamentary function. Coalitions encompassing the political spectrum from the SPD on the left to the DVP on the right held office for only a few months in the Reich, but in Prussia a grand coalition, as it was called, governed the state from November 1921 until the end of 1924, a period that included such momentous events as the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr region and Hitler’s Beer Hall Putsch. The comparisons could be continued, but the conclusion seems clear: while parliamentary democracy may not have functioned well at the Reich level, the state that formed the greatest part of the Reich enjoyed consistent political stability under the same political system.²⁷ In fact, as will become apparent, to a large extent the viability of democracy in Prussia enabled the Weimar Republic as a whole to survive its first six turbulent years.

Our somewhat distorted view of the Weimar years derives, I believe, at least in part from a curious neglect of the role of Prussia in German political history after 1918. After being portrayed as the *deus ex machina* of German history before 1918, the state is largely ignored in accounts of political dynamics during the republican years. Typical is Golo Mann’s assessment of Prussia’s significance during the Weimar era: “a pale sequel to a sequel.”²⁸ Only in recent years have a full-scale biography of the long-time prime minister of the state, Otto Braun, a study of the Center party’s delegation in the Landtag, and an analysis of the state’s territorial administration, righted the balance somewhat.²⁹ Nevertheless, to date there is still no overall analysis of the workings of the parliamentary system in Weimar Prussia.

This neglect of Weimar Prussia is unfortunate. The state demonstrated its resilience as early as the revolutionary upheavals of 1918–1919, when the

question of Prussia's dissolution became a hotly debated political issue. There were no clear political divisions among Germany's new leaders on this question. Radical centralists, who demanded the immediate dissolution of Germany's largest state in order to strengthen the Reich's authority, could be found in all political camps. At the same time, the reverse was true as well. There were leaders in the various parties who hoped to use a strong Prussia as the foundation of the particular political system they advocated for Germany as a whole.

Uncertainties about the future of the state were not shared by Prussia's own leaders. Regardless of their political orientation, the Prussian spokespersons during the revolution immediately and vigorously pushed to retain the state's political and territorial integrity. The new rulers of the state did not share the conservative goals of their predecessors, but they too held fast to the idea of Prussia's paradigmatic mission. Only the political orientation had changed: for the state's republican leaders, Prussia was to serve as a model not of authoritarianism, but of the viability of parliamentary democracy in Germany.³⁰

To a large extent, that decision was confirmed by the provisions of the Weimar constitution. Prussia remained by far the largest and most populous state in Germany. At the same time, the Weimar constitution decisively altered the balance of power in German federalism. The framers of the constitution substantially increased the powers of the Reich government. Taxation, economic policies, and foreign affairs were all largely decided at the Reich level, and the states' rights to influence their determination was reduced to indirect action through the *Reichsrat*, the second chamber of the national legislature composed of representatives appointed by the state governments. Adjusting to the new federal realities was particularly difficult for Prussia, which under the Bismarck constitution had dominated executive and legislative decisions in the Reich.

Still, the Weimar constitution stopped halfway in the "federalization" (in German bureaucratese, the term is *Verreichlichung*) of political power. It transferred a great deal of legislative power to the federal government, but very little administrative capacity. The Reich civil service, while growing rapidly in the Weimar years, remained small compared to the territorial administrations of the states, notably Prussia's. As a result, for those aspects of public life that in Germany have traditionally been regarded as the most political—party coalitions, cabinet formation, and the organization and composition of the territorial administrative apparatus—Prussia remained an important component in German political history.

Finally, although post-World War II developments are beyond the scope of this study, Weimar Prussia fulfilled an important function in establishing patterns of continuity from 1918 to the years after 1945. The Weimar era in

Prussia links the forces attempting to secure democracy in Germany after 1918 with their successors in the present-day Federal Republic of Germany. In this sense, it is indeed a mistake for today's Germans "to deny Prussia."³¹ The state's history is an undeniable component of the German national identity, but, as this study will suggest, Prussia should be identified not only with the authoritarian state of the Junkers and Wilhelminian militarism, but also with successful parliamentarism and fruitful cooperation between the moderate bourgeois parties and Social Democracy.

The subtitle of this work is taken from a Social Democratic campaign pamphlet issued before the December 1924 Prussian state elections; it described Prussia as "the democratic . . . solid rock." (*Der Preussische Landtag 1921–1924*, ed. Paul Hirsch [Berlin, 1924], p. 13.)

PART ONE
1918—1921

Political Parties in Prussia, 1914–1921

Prussia's political domination of the Reich from 1871 until the fall of the empire in 1918 led to a virtual identification of state and national politics. Ideologically and organizationally, parties developed largely along parallel lines in the state and the Reich.¹ All major German parties functioned under the same names in the Reich and in Prussia, and there were no political groups that restricted their activities to the state, as was true of such regional political groups as the Bavarian People's party (BVP) in Bavaria. Since both the national and state legislatures (the Reichstag and the Landtag) met in Berlin, many political leaders served as delegates in both bodies. Similarly, during the years of the empire most Reich cabinet ministers served as Prussian ministers as well.

As we shall see, the situation changed in the course of World War I and especially after the Weimar Republic was established in 1918. Prussian parties and politics became increasingly self-contained; the state's political leaders no longer dominated the national parties. To take but one example, in the SPD, the largest German party, only three of the twelve functionaries elected to the executive committee at the party's 1919 national congress were closely associated with Prussian politics, and none of the ten members of the party's Central Commission played a leading role in the state.

When the Prussian party leaders lost their grip on the levers of national decision making, the consequences were not without benefits for the evolution of pluralist politics in Germany's largest state. Since it was unlikely, especially after 1918, that a seat in the Prussian parliament would serve as a launching pad for a Reich-level career, politicians with national ambitions were seldom attracted to state politics. As a result there were fewer abrasive personalities in the state parliament (Landtag), and the representatives were generally more willing than their colleagues in the Reichstag to follow party discipline. More harmonious intraparty relations in turn helped reduce tensions between the executive and the party caucuses in the legislature.²

Until 1918 Prussian politics and parties were governed by the constitution of 1851. This document, drafted by the victorious counterrevolutionary forces after the revolutionary upheavals of 1848–49, was designed to make the state a bulwark of political authoritarianism and prevent the rise of parliamentary democracy. The constitution mandated the infamous three-class system of

voting that became the cornerstone of Conservative preeminence in Prussia. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the three-class system effectively condemned 82 percent of the eligible voters of the largest German state to political impotence. The severe distortion of the parties' popular vote strength and their parliamentary representation is evident from the figures for the last prewar state election, held in June 1913. (See table 1.)

Table 1. State Election, June 1913

<i>Party</i>	<i>Popular Vote</i>	<i>% of Total</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
Conservatives	402,988	14.8	147	33.2
Free Conservatives	54,583	2.0	54	12.2
National Liberals	370,575	13.56	73	16.5
Progressives	183,452	6.7	38	8.6
Center party	451,511	16.5	103	23.3
National minorities	215,506	7.9	12	2.8
Social Democrats	775,171	28.4	10	2.3

Source: Statistisches Jahrbuch für den preussischen Staat, ed. Königl. Statistisches Landesamt (Berlin, 1915), 12:632, 638.

The most reactionary of the Conservative groups, the German Conservatives, received only 14.8 percent of the popular votes cast, but 33 percent of the seats in the legislature. Their slightly more enlightened colleagues, the Free Conservatives, obtained 2 percent of the votes and 12 percent of the seats, the National Liberals 13.56 percent of the popular vote and 16 percent of the seats, and the left-wing Liberals (Progressives, or FVP) 6.7 percent of the votes and 8.6 percent of the seats. The Catholic Center party, too, benefited from the electoral rules. In contrast, the Social Democrats, with 28.4 percent of the popular vote but 2.3 percent of the parliamentary seats, were glaringly underrepresented.

Long before the First World War, the Social Democrats, the Progressives, and the national minorities (Poles and Danes) had made reform of the three-class system a perennial campaign issue.³ The National Liberals and the Center party, however, remained firmly wedded to cooperation with the Conservatives, and rejected any meaningful changes either in the Prussian governmental system or the mode of electing the legislature.⁴ The efforts of the groups demanding the complete abolition of the three-class system and the transformation of the authoritarian Prussian state into a modern democracy remained unsuccessful. Lacking influence in the legislature, they had neither a common plan of action nor any interest in forming a long-term alliance to achieve their aims.⁵

The situation changed dramatically with the outbreak of World War I in 1914, when the question of the electoral franchise became a component of the

Reich government's "intramural peace" (*Burgfrieden*) policy and Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's "politics of the diagonal."⁶ The policy of "intramural peace," which meant essentially that all political parties would agree to cease airing domestic controversies for the duration of the war and unite in face of the Reich's foreign enemies, had entirely different political implications in Prussia and the Reich. In the Reich, freezing the domestic political *status quo* satisfied, at least for a time, both the government and those advocating further reforms, since for some years before 1914 the power of the national parliament had been growing and Bethmann Hollweg's wartime policies continued this trend. The chancellor attempted to hold the divergent wings of his coalition together by the "politics of the diagonal," that is, simultaneous concessions to those at opposite ends of the political spectrum: he agreed to far-reaching territorial annexation demands made by the Conservatives, but also seemed to support some domestic reforms advocated by the Liberals and Social Democrats. Unfortunately, Bethmann Hollweg's *Burgfrieden* policy in the state resulted in exactly the reverse of what the chancellor sought to achieve. As long as the three-class electoral system remained in effect in Prussia, the chancellor's concessions at the Reich level had little impact on the political rights of the larger part of the German population. By 1917 domestic tensions had stretched the diagonal alliance too far; deserted and mistrusted by Conservatives and reformers alike, the chancellor was dismissed in August.

Many factors contributed to Bethmann Hollweg's—and eventually the empire's—fall, but there is no doubt that the Prussian electoral system had become a focal point of controversy in the debate over Germany's and Prussia's political future. It was the one Prussian issue that polarized the nation. For the Conservatives and the military leaders of the Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) Prussia with its three-class electoral system was the bulwark that would prevail against the "international democratic flood."⁷ The Prussian National Liberals agreed, but that party's Reichstag leader, Gustav Stresemann, favored reforms.⁸ For the Social Democrats, as we shall see, disagreements over the best tactical approach to reform politics in Prussia was the crucible that helped to divide reformists from revolutionaries.⁹ But in 1918 all of these questions had become moot. The advent of mass politics forced all of the Prussian parties to make fundamental organizational and programmatic changes.

The Right: from Conservatives to the German National People's Party (DNVP)

Two conservative parties, the German Conservative party (DKP) and the Free Conservative party (FKP), dominated prewar Prussia.¹⁰ Like all bourgeois parties, the prewar Conservatives were not mass parties in the modern

sense of the term, but groupings of notables. It is true, however, that the parties' close ties to mass-membership interest groups such as the Agrarian League (Bund der Landwirte) and the Naval League (Flottenverein) gave the Conservatives a larger popular base than was true of other non-Marxist parties. Before 1918, of course, a mass base was not necessary to maintain political power in Prussia. The three-class electoral system guaranteed these parties numerical control of the lower house of parliament and the close meshing of personnel between party functionaries and the ruling elites in economic and social life, public administration, the military, and the Protestant church further buttressed the base of Conservative rule in Prussia.

With the outbreak of the revolution, the Conservative parties lost not only their power base, but also their *raison d'être* as electoral machines and parliamentary pillars of the existing governmental system. They were forced to pursue their political goals under radically altered conditions. Consequently, a genuinely modern mass party, the German National People's party (DNVP) appeared in place of the old elitist associations.¹¹ The DNVP was a "symbiotic association" of the old Conservatives and various groups supporting the new or revolutionary conservatism.¹² Indeed, supporters of racist (*völkisch*) ideas and the Pan-German Association (Alldeutscher Verband, ADV) became increasingly influential in the DNVP.

The conflict between old and new Conservatives was reflected in the membership, voter configuration, and continuous disputes over political goals and tactics within the party. The majority of the party's members and voters were now drawn from the middle classes, workers in cottage industries, and women. These social strata replaced the large landowners and high-ranking civil servants, who had dominated the prewar conservative parties. As a result of the realignment, the Prussian and especially the East Elbian influence in the party was reduced. At the same time the party's ties to the German National Union of Retail Clerks (Deutschnationaler Handlungsgehilfenverband [DHV]) significantly strengthened the white-collar workers' element in the DNVP.¹³

The first public announcement of the new party was a "Founding Proclamation" (*Gründungsaufruf*) which appeared in the November 24, 1918, issue of the *Kreuzzeitung*.¹⁴ The authors of the proclamation were obviously still influenced by the shock of the revolution. The party presented itself as a moderate group that was willing to cooperate in bringing about necessary changes in Germany's political and economic structures. The DNVP endorsed the parliamentary form of government, stressed the importance of civil liberties, and called for the protection of private property. At the same time, it indicated support of some land reforms, expansion of welfare programs, and the right of workers to form and join labor unions. The only part of the

program that specifically concerned Prussia was a demand for the preservation of the state's territorial and political integrity in any future Reich.¹⁵

The initial program, however, had little effect on the party's future development. Beginning with the second national congress in October 1920, the DNVP adopted a political platform that stressed its opposition to democracy, the republic, and parliamentary government, demanding instead the return of an authoritarian monarchy under the Hohenzollerns. The party now also rejected any economic or land reforms. The only remnant of the 1918 program was the DNVP's stand on the Prussian question: the vast majority of DNVP members supported a strong Prussia as the nucleus of a resurrected monarchy.

The reorganization of the conservative camp enabled a number of newcomers to enter Prussian political life. There were only fourteen members of the old Landtag (ten Conservatives, three Free Conservatives, and one *völkisch* representative) among the forty-nine members of the caucus elected to the Prussian Constitutional Convention (Verfassungsgebende Preussische Landesversammlung) on January 26, 1919. The social structure of the parliamentary group showed the reduced influence of the old agrarian bloc. The majority of representatives were civil servants; twenty-seven members listed their occupations as bureaucrat, minister, teacher, or professor—all occupational groups that in Prussia belonged to the civil service—while only four considered themselves farmers.¹⁶ The party's leadership, however, remained in the hands of prewar Conservatives. The state and provincial leaders came for the most part from the ranks of the large landowners. The caucus chairman was Oscar Hergt, a former minister of finance in Prussia who had been close to the Free Conservatives' position before the war.¹⁷

Lacking a unified party program and hampered by organizational problems, the DNVP faced an uncertain future in Prussia. The traditional leaders were increasingly challenged by those in the party who rejected even the concept of cooperation with other middle-class parties.¹⁸ It was clear from the results of the first postwar elections (see table 2) that without the aid of the three-class system the DNVP would not be able to dominate the state legislature, but needed to cooperate with other parliamentary groups to retain its influence in the state;¹⁹ yet the party's leadership was subjected to constant pressure from those who wanted to use their parliamentary position purely for demagogic attacks on democracy and the republic. Hergt was forced, often against his wishes and better judgment, to play the role of a hot-blooded rabble rouser, or to see his rudimentary steps toward cooperation disavowed.²⁰

The ideological and tactical controversies within the DNVP led the party to pursue an erratic and unpredictable course in 1919 and 1920. Party publicists used the national debate over the Treaty of Versailles to give full vent to

Table 2. Election for the Prussian Constitutional Convention,
January 1919

<i>Party</i>	<i>% of Popular Vote</i>	<i>No. of Representatives</i>
Social Democrats (SPD)	36.4	145
Center party (Z)	22.3	94
German Democrats (DDP)	16.2	66
People's party (DVP)	5.7	21
German Nationalists (DNVP)	11.2	50
Independent Socialists (USPD)	7.4	23

Source: Statistisches Jahrbuch für den Freistaat Preussen (Berlin, 1920), 16:422–23.

“stab-in-the-back” and anti-Semitic demagoguery.²¹ But in September 1919 Hergt seemed to offer a hand of cooperation to the moderate bourgeois parties, notably the Center. His “program of order” contained a series of reform proposals, which as the Center party representative Brust pointed out, largely paralleled the proposals of the Weimar coalition parties.²² The potential partners remained suspicious (as one Center party representative put it, “I hear the message, but I can’t believe it”),²³ but Hergt’s initiative was in any case effectively undermined by members of his own party. The acts of violence by groups sympathetic to the DNVP demonstrated support for the hard-liners who rejected all collaboration with moderate forces.²⁴

The DNVP’s efforts to seize power in the Reich and Prussia by violent, extraparliamentary means reached a climax in the spring of 1920 with the party’s role in the preparation and execution of the Kapp Putsch.²⁵ There is no doubt that among the political parties the DNVP was most deeply involved in planning the putsch. Prominent DNVP leaders maintained close contact with the military leaders of the rebellion, and even participated in drawing up Kapp’s political program. Similar patterns of cooperation developed between the conspirators and several of the DNVP’s provincial organizations and their affiliated pressure groups.²⁶ When the mutinous troops occupied Berlin, the DNVP’s leaders issued a public statement that heaped criticism upon the old, constitutional cabinet while accepting the “Kapp government” as a fait accompli. The official DNVP pronouncement avoided specific recognition of Kapp’s regime, but the German Nationalists were obviously prepared to allow the insurgents to rule until they saw fit to call new elections.²⁷ In addition, during the few days of Kapp’s control in the capital, the DNVP’s leaders worked to make Kapp and Lüttwitz acceptable to the bourgeois parties in order to facilitate the establishment of Reich and Prussian bourgeois cabinets that were closely allied with the rebellious military.²⁸

The collapse of the Kapp Putsch demonstrated that violent coup attempts had no chance of success. Recognizing this political fact of life, the German

Nationalist leaders after March 1920 concentrated on mobilizing mass support at the ballot box. They were quite successful in both the Reichstag elections (June 1920) and the Prussian Landtag elections of February 1921. (see table 3.)

Table 3. State Constitutional Convention Election, January 1919, Reichstag Election, June 1920, and Landtag Election, February 1921

Party	State Constitutional Convention (January 26, 1919)		Reichstag Election (June 5, 1920)		Landtag Election (February 20, 1921)	
	% of Popular Vote	No. of Delegates	% of Popular Vote	No. of Delegates	% of Popular Vote	No. of Delegates
SPD	36.4	145	21.7	102	26.3	114
Z	22.3	94	13.6	64	17.2	84
DDP	16.2	66	8.3	39	6.2	26
DVP	5.7	21	13.9	65	14.2	58
DNVP	11.2	50	15.1	71	18.1	75
USPD	7.4	23	17.9	84	6.6	28

Source: *Statistisches Jahrbuch für den Freistaat Preussen* (Berlin, 1920, 1921), 16:422–23, 17:430–33; *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich* (Berlin, 1921), vol. 41.

The DNVP's appeal for opposition to the Weimar Republic clearly struck a responsive chord among many voters. The party did spectacularly well in both the Reichstag elections and the Prussian Landtag contest held in February 1921. Campaigning on a platform of subsidies for agriculture and small business, demands for a return to the principles of "Christian and patriotic education," and an "undivided and undiminished Prussia" as well as stressing antidemocratic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic themes, the DNVP became one of the big winners of both contests.²⁹

The satisfaction over the party's good showing at the polls could not, however, hide the DNVP's dilemma as to what use the German Nationalists would make of their new parliamentary strength, particularly in Prussia. The moderates continued to work for simultaneous *Bürgerblock* cabinets (coalitions among the middle-class parties) in the state and the Reich,³⁰ but their influence was increasingly eroded by the growing strength of the Pan-German and *völkisch* elements within the DNVP. To be sure, a few responsible party leaders, such as Siegfried von Kardoff, then a member of the Prussian Constitutional Convention, and Victor Brecht, the future head of the Economics party (WiP), resigned from the DNVP when the leadership refused to repudiate the raucous racist and radical anti-Semitic groups within the party's

ranks.³¹ But such individual protests had little effect upon the growing radicalization of the rank and file.³²

The political and tactical program of the *völkisch* and Pan-German groups within the DNVP was vague and contradictory. Their propagandistic appeal was to “purely negative anti-Semitism,” while tactically they put more faith in weapons, acts of violence, and conspiracies than in the ballot box.³³ The radicals were also far less interested in Prussia than were the DNVP’s traditional leaders. Because of the ascendancy of the *völkisch* elements in the party, the Conservatives became increasingly “de-Prussianized.”³⁴ Their percentage of votes in Prussia sank from 25.6 percent (1912) to 14.1 percent (1920), while their strength outside the state increased. Indeed, after the Kapp Putsch, the radicals looked with considerable interest to developments in Bavaria to further their Prussian and national aims. The Escherich Organization (Organisation Escherich, or Orgesch), a brainchild of the Bavarian forestry official Escherich, posed as a strictly civilian instrument of law and order, but it was in reality a successor organization to the Ehrhardt Brigade which had been the primary military unit involved in the putsch. The Orgesch supported the authoritarian Kahr regime in Bavaria and maintained conspiratorial contacts throughout Europe. A number of prominent DNVP figures and many among the rank and file were joint members of both the party and the Orgesch.³⁵ The radicals hoped that in cooperation with the Bavarian far right they would enhance the chances of a “law-and-order state” in Prussia, which would then apply a “vice grip” to the Reich in partnership with the rightist Bavarian government.³⁶ (There was a glaring difficulty here, since all elements in the DNVP also favored restoration of Prussia’s dominant position in the Reich, a demand rejected by every Bavarian Conservative.)

By the end of 1921, the Prussian DNVP faced an unhappy paradox. The strength of the radicals within the party was gaining, but their plans for a violent seizure of power had no realistic hope of success. At the same time, the party’s chances for joining a parliamentary coalition with the middle-of-the-road parties was greater than at any time since November 1918. In April 1921, for the first time since the revolution, a bourgeois cabinet without participation by the SPD governed Prussia. (This will be discussed later.) The new prime minister, Adam Stegerwald, a member of the Center party, needed the parliamentary support of the DNVP to remain in power. In addition, the DNVP-affiliated Union of Retail Clerks, whose leaders represented the majority of workers in the DNVP, was a corporate member of the non-Marxist German Labor Union (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB), chaired by Stegerwald.

That the moderate bourgeois parties, and especially the Center party, nevertheless rejected a coalition with the DNVP was in no small measure the result of their distrust of the growing influence of the *völkisch* and Pan-

German elements in the DNVP. By the fall of the year, at least a few of the extremists in the DNVP had added individual terror to their arsenal of destabilizing tactics. A series of political murders reached a climax in August with the assassination of the former Reich finance minister (and prominent leader of the Center party) Matthias Erzberger. Such political murders widened the gap between the DNVP and potential political partners still further and even the head of the Pan-Germans, Heinrich Class, denounced individual acts of terror as politically senseless and counterproductive.³⁷ Still, the DNVP's third national convention, which met in Munich at the beginning of September, 1921, defeated a resolution expelling the virulent *völkisch* groups from the party. When the fourth party congress (at the end of October, 1922, in Görlitz) finally divested the party of them, the opportunity to join a bourgeois government and thus regain part of the Conservatives' position of power in Prussia had passed.

The Center Party

Among the major Prussian parties, the Center party went through the most profound political metamorphosis as measured against its prerevolutionary stance. Before 1918 the party saw itself as a bulwark against liberalism and socialism.³⁸ Until a few months before the end of the war, it rejected meaningful reforms of the three-class electoral system in favor of cooperation with the Conservatives in the Prussian legislature.³⁹ In contrast, during the Weimar years, the Center party became a solid pillar of support for the left-of-center coalitions in the state.

There was a pattern of consistency underlying these seemingly opportunistic turns of political orientation. The common denominator remained securing Catholic influence in cultural and particularly educational affairs. Prussian Catholics, a minority of the population in a state whose pre-1918 elite was proudly and aggressively Protestant, had always felt excluded from their rightful share of political power and influence. Since the end of the *Kulturkampf*, however, the Center party as the political arm of Prussian Catholicism had cooperated with the ruling elite in the state in order to safeguard and defend Catholic rights and institutions. It was, to be sure, a defensive alliance of unequals. The pattern of cooperation also meant that until 1918 the Center party in Prussia was dominated by its right wing. During the war, locals of the extreme right-wing Fatherland party (*Vaterlandspartei*) in Catholic areas were often founded by members of the Center party.⁴⁰

With the introduction of universal suffrage and the establishment of the parliamentary form of government, further reliance on the tactics of the past would have meant political suicide.⁴¹ Power and influence now rested upon success at the polls, and in this area the Center party had fallen short of its

goal. There remained a substantial pool of potential voters that the Center party was not able to tap; typically the party received 50 percent of the eligible Catholic votes. It was also clear that most of these potential supporters were Catholic blue-collar workers, especially in the Rhenish-Westphalian industrial region, that is, voting blocs who sympathized more with the position of the SPD than the DNVP.⁴²

After the revolution the Prussian Center party reversed political direction, opening the party to left-of-center coalitions with the Social Democrats and left Liberals. Remarkably, the shift was accomplished with a seemingly high degree of continuity in personnel; the old party leaders nominally remained in office after 1918. The Center caucus in the Prussian Constitutional Convention was headed by Felix Porsch (age 66), and Carl Herold (71), both of whom had seen long years of service in the prewar Prussian legislature.⁴³ The actual party leadership, however, increasingly fell to two younger men, Joseph Hess (41) and Adam Stegerwald (45). In this duo, Hess, who was by profession a schoolteacher, was largely responsible for cultural and educational affairs, while Stegerwald acted as spokesman on social policies. Stegerwald dropped out of the Prussian political limelight in 1921, but Hess during his long years of parliamentary service in Prussia (he died in 1930) developed a smoothly functioning partnership with his counterpart in the Social Democratic caucus, Ernst Heilmann. Hess's task was also facilitated by the fact that most delegates in the Constitutional Convention were political newcomers. Few of the party members who had opposed the reform of the suffrage laws in the Landtag of 1913 managed to remain politically alive in Weimar Germany.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the socially heterogeneous composition of the Prussian Center party made it difficult at times for Hess and the other leaders to maintain the party on its new left-of-center course. The party's agricultural wing (with which the nominal head of the party, Herold, identified himself) and the Catholic clergy remained suspicious of cooperation with the Socialists and favored exploring the possibilities of a partnership with the Conservatives instead.⁴⁵ The Center party accommodated such pressures through its political propaganda. In its campaign rhetoric of 1919 and 1921, the Center party made no distinction between left- and right-wing socialists and blamed "the Social Democrats" for the revolution and its educational policies.⁴⁶ Yet following the election, as will be discussed later, the party did not hesitate to enter into coalition negotiations with the SPD.

The Reichstag elections of June 1920 (see table 3) demonstrated the rapid polarization of German politics that had profound implications for the future of parliamentary democracy. Above all, the election results underscored the key position occupied by the Center party. For the next twelve years it would become impossible to form a government without Center party participation in the Reich or Prussia.⁴⁷ Consequently, the Center party faced the necessity

of deciding whether it should use its influence to establish a right-of-center or a left-of-center coalition. The national party organization turned increasingly to the right, but the Prussian party did not follow the lead of the national party. A key factor strengthening the Prussians' resolve to reject a turn to the right was the Kapp Putsch, since for many Prussian Catholics Kapp and his followers personified the anti-Catholic conservatism of prewar Prussia.⁴⁸

A curious and potentially dangerous challenge to the Prussians' center-left course emerged in the fall of 1920 when Adam Stegerwald proposed the formation of a new national party. At the October 1920 national congress of the Catholic union movement (DGB), Stegerwald made an impassioned plea for the establishment of a new "comprehensive middle-of-the-road party," that is, a mass party using the DGB and the Center party as its political and organizational basis. The plan, which actually originated with Stegerwald's assistant, Heinrich Brüning, was designed to establish a "strong political center" in Germany, but from the beginning the efforts were entangled in contradictions. For all his avowed interest in creating a centrist party, Stegerwald tended to emphasize only the dangers from the left. He regarded Marxism as a pernicious force among the German working classes, and consequently saw the SPD, the largest Marxist party, as the primary obstacle to his long-range plans. The Catholic labor leaders' relationship to right-of-center groups was considerably more cordial; Stegerwald wanted to be remembered as the political leader who brought the middle-of-the-road and the rightist parties together.⁴⁹

The response to Stegerwald's speech from all sides was disappointing. The left-wing parties rejected the initiative out of hand, but the rightist parties were also skeptical. The DVP ignored the effort, and even the labor wing of the DNVP, which had close affiliations with the DGB, voiced apprehensions that the new party might be dominated by Catholics.⁵⁰ Precisely the opposite fears contributed to the cool response from within the Center party. While Prussia and Prussian politics had no major part in the development of Stegerwald's plans, the Prussian wing of the Center party did play a decisive role in their demise. The left wing of the Center's Prussian parliamentary group argued that the key to political stability lay in cooperation with the SPD and the maintenance of the Weimar coalition. The members of the clerical-conservative wing disliked cooperation with the Socialists, but here memories of the *Kulturkampf* remained strong. The *Kulturkampf* convinced particularly the clerics in the Center party that only if the party remained an exclusively Catholic interest group could it serve as a real bulwark protecting the Catholic minority against Protestant excesses.⁵¹

The reaction of the Center party's leadership indicated where German political Catholicism did not want to go, but its leaders remained deeply divided over the future of the unreconstructed party.⁵² From mid-1920 to the

summer of 1921, the party remained divided despite the conciliatory efforts of its new national chairman, an inoffensive Rhenish judge, Wilhelm Marx.⁵³ Only the tragic murder of Matthias Erzberger in August 1921 brought a clarification of sorts. The assassins were allied with the *völkisch* wing of the DNVP, and their deed completely discredited any efforts to move the party toward intensified cooperation with the German Nationalists.⁵⁴ In Prussia the Center party in November 1921 agreed to a grand coalition that included the SPD, but excluded the German Nationalists.

The formation of the grand coalition completed the political reorientation of the Center party in Prussia. Starting as silent partners of the Conservatives before the war, the party became an uneasy associate of the Social Democrats after the revolution. Until the end of 1921, the Prussian Catholics went through a period of deep internal strife, but then the actions of radical-right terrorists persuaded the party to take its place permanently in a left-of-center coalition.

The National Liberals and the German People's Party

The right-wing liberal party, the National Liberals, was not a major political factor in prewar Prussia. True, they held almost a fifth of the seats in the legislature (16.5 percent in 1913), but the National Liberals were regarded as loyal confederates of the Conservatives without a real profile of their own. The party's role became crucial, however, during the war. With the failure of Bethmann Hollweg's "politics of the diagonal" and his successor's inability to stabilize the domestic situation, the leader of the National Liberals in Prussia became a key element in the development of de facto parliamentarism. When Georg Michaelis, who followed Bethmann Hollweg as Reich chancellor and Prussian prime minister, proved incompetent after only a few months, his successor, Georg Hertling, left the task of governing Prussia to others. As a man of advanced age who had spent his entire public career outside of Prussia, he had neither the qualifications nor the time seriously to concern himself with Prussian affairs. Instead, Hertling agreed to the selection of the National Liberal leader in Prussia, Robert Friedberg, as his deputy and de facto prime minister of Prussia.

Except for his ethnic background, Friedberg was in many ways a typical representative of Wilhelminian right-wing liberalism.⁵⁵ After his conversion from Judaism to Christianity in 1884, he pursued an academic career teaching political science at the University in Leipzig. He was elected to the lower house of the Prussian parliament in 1893, and named chairman of the National Liberal delegation in 1913. His liberalism primarily took the form of anti-clericalism; in other aspects of political life, his opinions tended to be quite conservative.⁵⁶ Friedberg distrusted the Social Democrats; in the spring of

1914, he still looked upon them as a "rabid cancerous growth in the German body politic."⁵⁷ For most of the war years he remained a reactionary chauvinist. As late as July 1917, he threatened to resign all of his party offices if the National Liberal Reichstag delegation voted for Erzberger's peace resolution, and Friedberg did not support any reform of the Prussian electoral system until just before he assumed his executive post.⁵⁸ Despite all this, Friedberg was not an uncompromising and dogmatic fanatic, but a politician of considerable tactical skill. And like the national leader of the right-wing Liberals, Stresemann, he had a much more realistic eye for the deteriorating domestic situation than for Germany's military weaknesses. Friedberg still expected a military victory in the summer of 1918.

Electoral reforms became the crucible of Friedberg's future political career. In accepting the post of deputy prime minister, Friedberg had in effect agreed to support speedy enactment of meaningful reforms. In the case of the Progressives, an atmosphere of trust was quickly established, but Friedberg's relationship to the Center party and even more so to the SPD remained strained.⁵⁹ More significantly, the deputy prime minister also faced serious opposition within his own party: one-third of the National Liberal lawmakers voted with Conservatives and Center against any significant reform of the electoral laws, blocking the enactment of electoral reform legislation until the end of the war.⁶⁰

The opposition within his own party undoubtedly made it easier for Friedberg to turn his back on his colleagues when the liberal parties were reorganized after the empire's collapse in November 1918. Stresemann and Friedberg had originally sought to preserve the National Liberal party organization as a rallying point for right and left Liberals, but by mid-December 1918, Friedberg, in contrast to Stresemann, regarded this attempt as futile; he saw no further place for a National Liberal party in republican Germany.⁶¹ Instead he joined the successor organization to the Progressives, the German Democratic party (DDP).

At first, political developments seemed to support Friedberg's assessment of the situation. Stresemann was able to create a successor organization to the National Liberal party, the German People's party, but it appeared that the new party had been politically stillborn. It could not even run a full slate of candidates in the Prussian elections of January 26, 1919, and the election results reflected the right Liberals' organizational and political weakness. The DVP received only 5.7 percent of the vote and twenty-one parliamentary seats (5.2 percent). (In 1913, it will be recalled, the National Liberals had received seventy-three seats, or 16.5 percent.) Moreover, the Prussian DVP suffered from leadership problems after 1918. The small parliamentary delegation was composed mostly of holdovers from the prewar Landtag under the nominal leadership of a man, von Krause, whose passion was hunting rather than