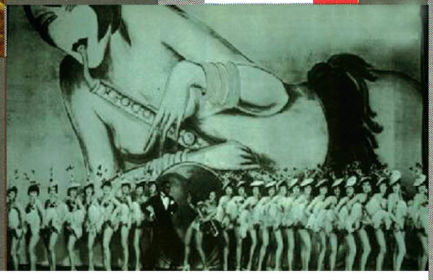
WEIMAR

A Cultural History



Walter Laqueur

With a new introduction by the author

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Contents

Introduction to the Transaction Edition

The present book first appeared almost forty years ago and the way we now consider Weimar, its reception, has changed in some significant ways. Weimar was the first truly modern culture and it was not surprising that it should have been of great interest in this country as well as in many others. But it should always be recalled that it was not the culture of all of Germany in the period between the end of World War I and Hitler's rise to power, as I tried to stress early on. It was only one strand in German culture in that period and it was by no means universally accepted, let alone liked. There was very little of "Weimar" in German academic life during that time (least of all among university students) and a towering figure such as Thomas Mann was not really part of "Weimar," even though he supported the republican order which many intellectuals did not.

What fascinated many in the United States about "Weimar Culture" was above all its politics rather than its innovative literary and artistic features. The Frankfurt School with its "critical theory" found many adherents both here and in Germany and the plays of Brecht were widely performed and admired as much as the Bauhaus, to provide but a few examples. In this respect there certainly has been a change. This was not surprising because intellectual fashions (even very superior ones) do not last forever and the various postmodern movements wanted to have their own moment. They had their moment and we now have moved beyond into uncharted waters.

This observation refers as much to Weimar entertainment as to high culture. The wonderful Comedian Harmonists were

rediscovered in the 1980s and found a wide and grateful public. But the well-deserved boom last for a decade and then faded. The change in the contents of journals like *Telos* and *New German Critique* which did much to deepen interest in Weimar culture in this country seem to bear out my argument. True, there have been in recent years monumental biographies of Adorno and Walter Benjamin, but this had probably to do more with their aesthetics than their politics and there have been equally long and impressive biographies of Carl Schmitt and Stefan George (who were anything but standard bearers of leftwing ideology, not to mention the Heidegger cult).

There were in recent decades exaggerated and misleading invocations of "Weimar" whenever democracies faced a major crisis—for instance in the case of Russia during glasnost and after. But such comparisons were anything but helpful, the Weimar constellation was unique and what happened in Germany in the early 1930s does not shed light on the course of events in other countries.

But if the interest in the politics (or, to be precise one specific strand of politics) of Weimar culture has declined, if Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse are now only infrequently invoked and the plays of Brecht less often performed, this is certainly not true with regard to other features of Weimar culture. When Ernst Ludwig Kirchner died in 1938 his widow counted herself lucky to get a few hundred marks for "Street Scene in Berlin." By 1970 German expressionism had been discovered in Europe and America, there were exhibitions and considerable interest, but it was still limited compared with, for instance, French post-impressionism. But when this picture came on the market in 2006 Christie sold it for $36 million. And the same is true for the pictures of Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and quite a few others which were once considered specifically German and of no great interest to the rest of the world.

German music of the twenties is now less in demand, while the level of performance was very high indeed the cradle of modern music was in Vienna rather than in Berlin, and Vienna was no Weimar even though many in America have failed to grasp the difference. Generally speaking, the image of Weimar was a bit misleading. Weimar was not really Berlin as Christopher

Isherwood experienced it, nor was it *Cabaret*. What was it then? The reports of Joseph Roth are probably a little closer to historical reality even though Roth was a Jew from Galicia who spent his formative years in Vienna.

What greatly intrigued me over the years was the selective memory of Weimar, the fact that certain ideas, philosophers, writers, and artists were rediscovered and had a revival while others, equally interesting and deserving had not. I do not quite know how to explain this, partly it was no doubt a matter of accident, the fact that some influential critic generated interest in a specific person or phenomenon, whereas others fell into (or remained) in oblivion. This is true, for instance with regard to German literature of the twenties, not only high brow writing but also to the bestsellers of the period.

Alfred Döblin was lucky, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* recently found new publishers (and so has Hans Fallada), but mainly perhaps because it was the emblematic Berlin novel and it had more to do with the Berlin underworld than with Weimar culture. But the bestsellers of the 1920s the books found in the library of every self respecting educated middle class family—where have they disappeared to. Arnold Zweig, Heinrich Mann, and Lion Feuchtwanger, and above all Jakob Wassermann, about whom Thomas Mann wrote, perhaps with a little envy that he was the greater storyteller. Without disrespect to contemporary German literature—the novels of the twenties were not only on a higher level but also more readable. But it is true that they are part of a bygone period whereas Böll and Grass belong to a different generation with other life experiences and preoccupations, closer to the interests and sentiments of the postwar reading public.

The impact of cultures, to repeat once again, does not last forever. There were ages in the annals of history when even classical periods such as ancient Greece and the Renaissance were half forgotten. It was only owing to the pioneering work of Johann Winckelmann in the eighteenth century that classical art was truly rediscovered and became of paramount importance so much so that it led as some saw it to the "tyranny of Greece over Germany" (and much of Europe). The great achievements of the past are bound to be remembered and remain influential and generate abiding interest.

Weimar culture was not a classical period and there is no danger of a tyranny of any sort, but it was certainly a most interesting one and as such it has entered the "canon" of the cultural history of the world.

Walter Laqueur
Washington, May 2010

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Preface

This introductory survey of Weimar culture was written to stimulate interest among general readers in what was, for better or worse, the first truly modern culture. I hope I shall not be criticized for failing to accomplish something which I did not want to achieve in the first place: namely to provide a full, definitive history of Weimar culture. While the purpose of this book is modest it was not easy to write. A general survey has to cover far more ground than a specialized study. It is not too difficult (to give but one example) to discuss the German literature of the 1920s at a leisurely pace within the framework of five hundred pages. To deal with the main trends in thirty or forty pages is of necessity a *tour de force* unlikely to be appreciated; experts will have no difficulty in faulting it on various counts, whereas the uninitiated may be confused by an abundance of references to unfamiliar authors and their books. It was a risk that had to be taken.

The term 'Weimar Culture', while now generally accepted, is in some respects unsatisfactory, if only because political and cultural history seldom fully coincide in time. Expressionism was not born with the defeat of the Imperial German army, nor is there any obvious connexion between abstract painting and atonal music and the escape of the Kaiser, nor were the great scientific discoveries triggered off by Scheidemann's proclamation of the Republic. In short, 'Weimar Culture' antedates the Weimar Republic by at least a decade.

It was a fascinating period but not at all easy to come to grips with, precisely because it was so rich in content and so contradictory in character. In recent years there have been excellent

monographs devoted to specific aspects of the period, such as the generational conflict which figured prominently in the early postwar years, or the literary politics of the left-wing intelligentsia, and the ideas of the right-wing critics of the Republic. But selective preoccupation with certain topics may lead to the neglect of others, and thus to a distortion of the general perspective. It would no doubt be easier for the historian if the cultural history of Weimar were identical with the plays and theories of Brecht, the creations of the Bauhaus and the articles published by the *Weltbühne*. But there were a great many other individuals and groups at work, and whether the historian likes them or not, he cannot afford to ignore them, or their ideas and activities.

The heritage of Weimar culture is an important subject in itself but it has been dealt with only in passing in the present study, which is concerned primarily with the question *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*. The fact that Brecht is more widely performed now than all his contemporaries put together, and that Hermann Hesse has since his death found many more readers all over the world than in his lifetime, is no doubt of great significance with regard to the cultural history of the 1950s and 1960s. It is less certain that this should be our starting-point in studying the 1920s. The fact that Marlene Dietrich is remembered in 1974, while most of her contemporaries have been forgotten, does not necessarily mean that future historians of the cinema will share the prejudices and predilections of our age.

The realities of Weimar culture comprise the right as well as the left, the universities as well as the literary intelligentsia, and it would not be complete without occasional glances beyond avant-garde thought and creation. Unfortunately it is much easier to make a convincing case for approaching Weimar culture in its totality than to adhere to these principles in practice. For once one accepts the fact that not all intellectuals were on the left, that most of them, in fact, disliked the Republic, that the cultural history of the Weimar period cannot be limited to those who frequented certain cafés within a stone's throw of the *Gedächtniskirche* in Berlin, a study of Weimar culture ceases to be a well-defined concept and turns into the cultural history of the first German republic, which is a different proposition altogether. Such an approach has the advantage of conveying a

more accurate picture of the *Zeitgeist* but it also means that it has to cover more ground, and that it cannot deal in adequate detail with any of the individuals, groups and disciplines which were part of that culture. There is no way of avoiding the problem of selectivity. Some of the persons and problems mentioned in a sentence or two in the present volume could be satisfactorily treated only if a whole book were devoted to them; an entire library would be needed to do justice to the various manifestations of Weimar culture.

I am indebted not for the first time to the staff of the Institute of Contemporary History and Wiener Library. I refrained from interviewing 'Old Weimarians' for the purpose of this book; anyway I have been listening to them for as long as I can remember.

London, 1973

I
Between Potsdam and Weimar

On 30 September 1918 Ludendorff and Hindenburg told the Kaiser at Supreme Headquarters at Spa that the war was lost. It was more than a century since Germany had suffered a military defeat, and its rulers were no longer familiar with the procedure to be adopted in such circumstances. Instead of bowing out in more or less dignified fashion, the Kaiser hung on, hoping that something would turn up which would make abdication unnecessary. Perhaps he preferred not to think about the future; responsibility and foresight had not been the outstanding characteristics of Wilhelm II and the courtiers surrounding him. Under his rule 'Prussianism' had become a synonym for aggressiveness and arrogance, for a society in which the military caste enjoyed the highest social prestige; while the landed aristocracy was still the ruling class although it had outlived whatever social, political and economic functions it had once possessed. It had become, in other words, an intolerable anachronism.

Once upon a time the Prussian spirit had different connotations; it stood for service, for selfless work, incorruptibility and other sterling qualities. But a whole world divided the age of von Stein, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau from the imperial braggart who had ruled Germany with the help of mediocrities for more than two decades. And yet, even in his time and despite his rule, there had been a great deal of progress; Germany before 1914 exuded confidence and optimism to a remarkable degree. Almost the only dissonant voices came from a few

Kulturpessimisten of the left and right, such as could be found in every age, as well as from a few eccentric writers and painters who predicted impending chaos and ruin, and whose inchoate mutterings were not taken seriously. Burke said of pre-revolutionary France that the unbought grace of life had gone for ever. The outstanding feature of prewar Germany was certainly not its grace of life, but it had known a sense of security such as subsequent generations were never even remotely to experience. What Stefan Zweig wrote about his native Austria applied equally to Germany. There had been in that 'world of yesterday' a state and a parliament, as well as a reliable currency based on gold; men of property could calculate without undue difficulty how much they would receive from their savings or investments in the years to come, children inherited the parental home, every family had its budget and knew how to live within its limits. It has been said that such latterday nostalgic reflections merely mirrored the sadness of an impoverished middle class. Was it not true that the great majority of the people inherited nothing, had no investments, enjoyed no security, and that a substantial part lived in dire poverty? Was it not also the age of slums, of long hours and low wages? All this is true, but it is also a fact that even if the economic position of the working classes and most of the peasantry was less than rosy, it was steadily improving; these classes too shared the general mood of optimism. It was not just weakness of character – as Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg seemed to believe – which made gradualists of the erstwhile revolutionaries who led German social democracy. On the contrary their attitude accurately reflected the mood of the rank and file. Once a small group of outcasts, they had within three decades built Germany's strongest political movement. In 1912, in the last general election before the war, their party had polled more than 70 per cent of all votes in Berlin, more than 60 per cent in Hamburg, Germany's second city. The prevailing electoral system did not give them proportional representation. Was there not every reason to assume that the reactionaries would not be able to hold out for ever against the irresistible advance of the masses? Marx, after all, had demonstrated that as the socio-economic basis changed, the legal-ideological superstructure was bound to follow suit. The belief in progress, enlightenment and reason was deeply

anchored in both the middle and the working classes. Technical innovations, such as the growing use of electricity, symbolizing the victory of light over the forces of darkness, seemed to justify their expectations. Paul Lincke, the famous light orchestra conductor and darling of the Berlin public, had just composed a song dealing with this very topic, which was hummed by young and old, rich and poor. He compared the newly invented electric bulb to a glow-worm's light, and the verse which eventually acquired world-wide popularity ended:

Glühwürmchen, Glühwürmchen, flimmere, flimmere
Glühwürmchen, Glühwürmchen, schimmere, schimmere
Führe uns auf rechten Wegen
Führe uns dem Glück entgegen.

(Glow-worm, glow-worm, glimmer, glimmer
Glow-worm, glow-worm, shimmer, shimmer
Lead us on the right path
Lead us on to happiness.)

Happiness was the goal and, a few extremists apart, no one believed that violence would be needed to attain it. There had been no major war in Europe for more than four decades nor had there been any large-scale civil disorder. Wilhelmian Germany was certainly not a free country by West European or American standards, but it is useful to recall from time to time that there are degrees of oppression. It was no cruel dictatorship: there was a constitution and there were laws which had to be observed by rulers as well as ruled. In comparison with the dictatorships that were to emerge in Europe after the war, Wilhelmian Germany was a permissive country to an almost bewildering degree. Political murders were unknown, as was arrest and trial without due process of law. The Emperor himself was openly criticized in the press, as in the *Daily Telegraph* affair; and if an officer assaulted a civilian, as had happened in the little Alsatian town of Zabern, this became a *cause célèbre* all over Germany. Workers on strike were not shot, censorship was applied only in extreme cases of *lèse-majesté* and blasphemy, and it is doubtful whether justice could have been flagrantly perverted as in the Dreyfus case

Whoever chooses to ignore these facts about pre-1914 Germany is bound to be baffled by the intensity of the widespread

postwar nostalgia for the 'good old days', not just among the aristocracy, which was insignificant in numbers anyway, but among wide sections of the middle classes. If it had been a matter of 'class interest' *tout court* they would certainly have identified themselves with the liberal-bourgeois republic which had been proclaimed by the Social Democrats only with some reluctance – mainly because they were afraid of being overtaken on the left by the Spartacists. If the middle classes in their majority did not welcome the Republic, it was partly because life under the Kaiser had by no means been intolerable, and on the other hand because, having to choose between order and freedom, they would almost certainly opt for the former.

There had at one time been a fairly strong democratic tradition in Germany, but in recent generations it had grown progressively weaker. In 1918 at any rate the Republic came to Germany as a foreign importation. Parliamentary democracy was considered un-German in right-wing circles, suitable perhaps for the Americans or the French, but not for a nation which had always striven for wholeness and unity. Political parties were regarded at best as a necessary evil – evil because they expressed only part of the popular will, had a divisive effect, and restricted the operations of a strong executive without which few could envisage a state functioning. And even if it did somehow manage to muddle through, it would certainly not be able to pursue a determined, purposeful foreign policy which, according to the Bismarckian tradition, should always have primacy over domestic affairs.

The intelligentsia was by and large conservative, but even those who accepted the Republic did not feel enthusiastic. 'One serves the Republic but one does not love it', wrote the eminent historian Hans Delbrück. Thomas Mann, once a fervent believer in the justness of the war (having preached the merits of German 'culture' as against Western 'civilization'), was one of the few converts to democracy. But the only advice he could offer the middle classes and the intelligentsia was not to be obstinate, not to shy away from the term 'republic' which (he thought) was what irritated them most. ('Don't consider the Republic the domain of some sharp young Jews. Take the wind out of their sails.')

What distressed the enemies of the new political system was

not so much its name: they had no faith in parliamentarism, in the popular will. They were unhappy about the absence of a central idea and a strong authority. For the new rulers they had nothing but scorn and ridicule. It was in a way quite characteristic that the very idea of 'loving' democracy or the Republic should have been an issue at all, as if a political system was evil unless it evoked emotions of this kind. The thought itself would have struck Frenchmen and Englishmen as absurd, an exalted romantic notion. But many Germans were romantic in their attitude towards the state, and since the Republic was so unromantic, it was *mal-aimeé.*

Certain ideas had been axiomatic in Germany before 1914. These concerned the civilizing mission of the German people, the evil intentions of its rivals, the need to secure for Germany a place in the sun. Above all, there was the deep-seated belief in German military superiority. Astounding victories had been won in 1914–16 against a 'world of enemies'; the fact that the last and decisive battle had been lost was, with all its implications, impossible to accept. Hence the readiness to believe that the German armies, undefeated in battle, had been stabbed in the back by the domestic enemy. This allegation, made by among others Hindenburg, the future president of the Republic, was not just factually untrue. It was the grossest slander, for the 'home front' had for more than four years accepted without grumbling countless sacrifices simply because it had been told to do so by military leaders of indifferent quality. Nevertheless the 'stab in the back' legend was to play a central role in anti-republican propaganda during the years to come.

There were other myths concerning the 'November criminals' – the men who had signed on Germany's behalf the shameful Versailles treaty. Many were only too willing to believe in the existence of a 'hidden hand', of all-powerful forces which had brought about Germany's ruin. Millions had been killed and wounded in the war, many more had been hit by economic disaster. Such suffering gave rise to a great deal of brooding and political speculation, a search for the cause of the catastrophe. How could one explain the fact that institutions which it had been thought would exist forever had disappeared overnight without trace, and that the old masters were suddenly replaced by new men with wholly unfamiliar names? Where had they

come from? What foreign interests did they serve? How could an Ebert and a Scheidemann, let alone an Eisner or a Rathenau dare to take the place once filled by Bismarck? Wide credence was given to 'documents' such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which proved beyond any shadow of doubt that it was not the Germans who were to blame for the apocalyptic events which had occurred in their country, but foreign plotters and agents who for a long time had been at work to bring about its downfall.

The armistice was signed at Compiègne on 11 November 1918. It should have borne the signatures of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the military leaders responsible for the defeat. Instead it was signed by Erzberger, a Catholic civilian, thus providing a convenient alibi for the high command. The new regime was off to a bad start in more senses than one: the war was over but peace had not returned. Political and social unrest, *coups d'état* and political assassinations, were to mark the next five years.

In January 1919 the extreme left staged a rising in Berlin, which was suppressed within a few days. A similar attempt in Munich in April the same year was initially more successful and lasted longer but likewise ended in defeat and bloody repression. 1920–1 were the years of the right-wing Kapp putsch and of local communist risings in the Ruhr and Central Germany. In 1922 galloping inflation set in, reaching its climax in 1923 – which was also the year of the Hitler putsch. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had been killed by right-wing terrorists in January 1919, Erzberger in August 1921, Walther Rathenau, the foreign minister of the Republic, in June 1922; but these were only the best-known names in a long list of political assassinations. There were more than 2.5 million unemployed in the winter of 1923–4. The currency was stabilized early in 1924, and it was during the next five years that the Republic had its first and only respite.

The Kaiser abdicated, having been told that the loyalty of the troops could no longer be relied upon, while the sailors of the high seas fleet were in open rebellion. All over Germany authority was rapidly disintegrating. There was revolutionary ferment, but there was no revolution. The question of political succession remained wide open. Only one group knew exactly

what it wanted – the radical left, which demanded a socialist republic, based on workers' and soldiers' councils. But this was the smallest group of all and its appeals for mass support fell on deaf ears. True, the Bolsheviks had also been a small minority in the summer of 1917, but the conditions for the spread of their influence had been incomparably more favourable; Berlin and Munich simply were not Petrograd and Moscow. If the communist bid for power in Germany failed, it was not just because of the absence of capable and determined leaders.

The Social Democrats, the strongest party in Germany, were the obvious candidates for the succession. But power was something they had never enjoyed and, worse, they lacked the instinct and the craving for it. Their theoreticians had written about it, to be sure, but the political leadership had long ceased to be revolutionary. They were radical democrats, they opposed the Wilhelmian establishment; but their education and experience, their whole mental make-up, had conditioned them to expect peaceful change, not revolution. 'Violence is always reactionary', declared Ebert, the future president, at a mass demonstration in Berlin in December 1918. When in doubt, the Social Democrats always chose the line of least resistance, in foreign and domestic policy alike. This is not to say that they were cowards or traitors; their freedom of manoeuvre was, in fact, much more limited than their left-wing critics would allow. Perhaps it had been a mistake to sign the Versailles treaty in the first place, thus accepting responsibility for a war which had been unleashed by the old regime. This had laid them open to charges of lack of patriotism, if not outright treason. A little less responsibility on their part would have been advisable; by refusing to sign the treaty they would probably have procured better conditions with regard to reparations, for instance. But such wisdom after the event ignores the immediate difficulties facing the country, the danger of mass starvation, of total economic breakdown, of French and Polish forces occupying additional parts of Germany. In 1918–9 there was a real danger that the German state would cease to exist. The Social Democrats would have been better statesmen had their sense of duty been less pronounced.

Equally, on the home front, it is easy to blame them for accepting the aid of right-wing military units against the

extreme left. By so doing, they paved the way for the 'nationalist restoration' and made the very existence of their government in a time of crisis dependent on the goodwill of a military force which was neutral only in theory; by tradition, outlook and interest, the Reichswehr was oriented towards the right. All this is true, but it is not easy to point to an alternative. In what way could the Social Democrats have defended themselves against those who tried to overthrow them: by abducting some of their leaders and threatening to shoot them? Unlike the Spartacists, the Social Democrats had no armed units at their disposal; perhaps this was their main sin of omission. Lacking the sense for power, they failed to realize that there are moments in history when the talking has to stop and when only bayonets and machine-guns count. To blame them for having betrayed the German revolution is at best an over-simplification. Even if they had not opposed the Spartacist onslaught, the revolution would have fallen prey to the units of the old army which were still intact.

This does not absolve Ebert and Noske, Scheidemann and Wels, from the charge of failing to act decisively. During the first few months after the defeat, the right was in a state of disarray. Just as the Social Democrats had pushed through important social legislation within a few days, they could have carried out far-reaching political reforms, such as purging the state apparatus of reactionary elements. Once they were more firmly in the saddle they could have tried to democratize the army, to make it a loyal servant of the Republic. But, afraid of acting alone, they were from the very first day almost desperately looking for partners to share the responsibility for running the state. The fact that the party was split was yet another source of weakness. Yet a determined effort could have been made to heal the rift with the Independents (USPD), whose ranks included those who had come to oppose the war. But there was no room between the Social Democrats and the Communists for yet another left-wing party. Within three years the USPD was to disappear from the political scene; some of its members joined the Communists, others re-entered the SPD. By that time, however, the damage had been done.

The next stage in the unhappy history of the Weimar Republic was reached with the elections in January 1919 to the

Constituent Assembly. The Communists boycotted them because they assumed, correctly from their point of view, that they would not come out well. But for the Social Democrats, too, the results were a bitter disappointment; together with the USPD they polled only 45 per cent. Under the old (plurality) voting system which they had just abolished, the Socialists would have obtained a majority of seats in parliament. Proportional representation, while in theory the most democratic of all systems, resulted in a proliferation of parties and made stable government difficult and, towards the end of the Republic, altogether impossible. To claim that proportional representation ruined the Weimar Republic is a gross exaggeration; it is not at all certain that the Social Democrats would have been able to act boldly even with the support of a parliamentary majority. Equally, there is no doubt that proportional representation further aggravated the existing weakness and confusion. The results of the 1919 elections showed that while the great majority of the workers had voted for the Social Democrats and the Independents, the SPD had not been able to effect a breakthrough from a class to a national party. Nor were they to improve their position; their vote remained fairly stable throughout the fourteen years of the Republic, but it was never again to reach, let alone exceed, the results of 1919.

The other main pillar of the Republic was the Democratic Party, liberal and slightly left-of-centre in outlook, progressive but not too much so, in favour of reform but afraid of going too far and too fast. Everything that has been said about the SPD applies *a fortiori* to this party. Its leaders were decent people, a little timid perhaps, but firmly opposed to a dictatorship from left or right. They were neither better nor worse than the French Radical Socialists or the British Liberals, but they never exerted a similar attraction on the educated middle class. They had quite a few professors among their leading supporters and also some bankers and industrialists, but for the majority of the academics – and for the middle classes in general – the sober, matter-of-fact approach of this party was quite unacceptable. It preached understanding with France and Britain at a time when such a policy was anything but popular. The very essence of its philosophy, liberalism, was outside the mainstream of German thought. The decline of this party,

which polled 16 per cent in 1918 and 1 per cent in 1932, symbolizes the decline of German democracy. Twentieth-century bourgeois parties are never militant, almost by definition; the German Democratic Party was perhaps the least militant of all.

These two forces were the only ones whose support for the Republic was unqualified. The German People's Party, while not rejecting the new state *tout court*, certainly had never wanted it; at best it was willing to give it a try. It participated in various coalition governments and had some capable leaders such as Stresemann and Schacht; electorally it fared no better than the Democrats and all but disappeared towards the end. The attitude of the Catholic Centre Party towards the new republic was ambivalent: it collaborated with the Social Democrats, but not without serious misgivings. The influence of right-wing nationalist elements was predominant in its counsels; it was bitterly opposed to the cultural and educational policy of the Social Democrats. It saw its main task in the preservation of the Christian (Catholic) values in public and private life; to such a party a 'Marxist' republic, however innocuous, was bound to be less acceptable than a monarchy which regarded religion as one of the main pillars of the state.

Up to the rise of Nazism in 1930 the traditional right found its political home in the German National People's Party. At first it suffered from the shock of the defeat and the unpopularity of the monarch, the military caste and the reactionary leaders of industry and agriculture who had constituted the backbone of the Conservative Party before 1918. In the elections for the Constituent Assembly they polled no more than 8 per cent of the total, but within the next five years, following the constant political and economic crisis, its vote almost tripled. At the other end of the political spectrum the advance of the Communists (KPD) was even more striking; having attracted a mere 400,000 voters in 1921, they received almost ten times as many by early 1924. After that date, as the postwar crisis receded, electoral support for them, as for the extreme right, decreased substantially until, towards the end of the Republic, its fortunes again changed for the better.

These were the main political forces shaping the fate of the Weimar Republic during the first ten years of its existence. National Socialism was at the time just one of many splinter-

groups resulting from splits among the major parties. The Weimar Constitution put a premium on freedom and justice rather than on stability; given the specific German situation, this betrayed a lack of judgment. Those who had conceived it wanted it both to be modern and to embody the spirit of the nineteenth-century German democratic tradition; in some respects it was modelled on the American Constitution. It struck a note of compromise, not always successfully, between conflicting social, religious and regional interests. Though the SPD was the strongest party at the time, its influence on shaping the constitution and carrying out its provisions was not decisive; the nationalization of key industries and agrarian reform outlined in the constitution remained, by and large, a dead letter. The constitution was neither better nor worse than other such documents; it was certainly conceived in an admirable spirit of tolerance and compromise. It worked so badly because it was predicated on a general consensus, on the readiness to accept the new political order. But from the first, such a consensus was insufficiently developed and it grew weaker as the years passed. At a time of crisis it was bound to collapse altogether.

For the extreme left the constitution was a betrayal of radical socialist ideals, since it was not based on the idea of workers' and peasants' councils, let alone the dictatorship of the proletariat. For the extreme right it was an act of treason, an attempt to impose a system alien to the German spirit. The extreme right stood for strong, authoritarian rule with a minimum of parliamentary debate. It is one of the ironies of history that the Republic might well have survived if the Social Democrats had followed this course and adopted a firmer, more authoritarian style with some patriotic admixture while carrying out the political and social changes they had advocated all along. They should have realized that it was fruitless to strive for a full consensus and that freedom did not necessarily mean a free hand for the enemies of democracy. But they lacked the necessary toughness and inspiration; they left patriotism to the right and thought that patient work, a rational policy, free of any pathos and demagogic slogans, would sooner or later bear fruit.

They could not have been more mistaken. Theirs was an admirable approach for quieter times and for mature people

who, whatever the internal conflicts, basically accepted the democratic ground-rules. Furthermore the Kaiser and the Junkers, however anachronistic their entire behaviour, however arrogant and stupid their speeches, however damaging their policies, had possessed style. The symbols of their regime were respected even by most of its critics and thus contributed towards national unity. The old state had authority; the new order conspicuously lacked it. Those who created the Weimar Republic and supported it manifestly failed to generate any enthusiasm. Again, it is not certain whether resolute and dynamic leadership would have succeeded against such heavy odds. But this is a hypothetical question, for there was no such leadership.

The parties were not the only factors to shape the political life of the Republic. During its early years the trade unions were not a force to be belittled, as the right-wing conspirators in Berlin and elsewhere found to their cost; a general strike put an end to the Kapp putsch within a few days. The trade unions could count two million members before the war; in 1920 their number had risen to almost eight million. The clerical and shop workers, who had their own associations, also became much more powerful. But the German trade unions no longer exerted a great deal of influence on their members. Much water had flown down the Rhine and the Elbe since the early, heroic, illegal days. Their leaders were decent, honourable men, devoted to the cause of workers and employees; in ordinary circumstances they would not have dreamt of using the power of the unions to influence the political struggle. Routine work over many years had transformed them into little bureaucrats who were lost at a time of crisis. The grave economic situation undermined their position as mass unemployment further reduced the power of their organizations.

Outside the trade unions it was difficult to find substantial support for the Republic. The Churches were officially neutral in the political struggle. The Protestants, though more numerous, had far less cohesion than the Catholics, who exerted much more influence on their flock through a great many social and cultural associations. It had been traditional church policy to be on good terms with the powers that be, but there was not the slightest doubt that the monarchy had been much more to their

liking, quite apart from the fact that it had also been so much stronger and more awe-inspiring than the Republic. They would never have dared to attack the Emperor and his ministers in the way they felt free to criticize the leaders of the Republic. The political outlook of most church leaders was conditioned by their social background and their upbringing. True, there were a few Social Democratic sympathizers among Protestant churchmen, and the Catholic Church at one stage excommunicated the Nazi leaders. But the overwhelming majority of both priests and lay leaders in the two churches were politically conservative and regarded the Republic as an unsatisfactory form of political organization.

When the Social Democrats came to power they made a few new appointments affecting the senior ranks of the state bureaucracy; by and large they left it untouched. The bureaucracy on its part served the new masters without going out of its way to support the democratic regime. Its role was important, for while minister followed minister, often in rapid succession, the permanent officials remained; and in the absence of firm control they had wide freedom of action. Some of them were in fact, if not in name, shaping the policy of their respective departments. The state bureaucracy had a reputation for competence and incorruptibility which was not undeserved. It also had a way of doing things which, to put it mildly, did not make it universally popular. The arrogance of the old regime had been infectious and had worked its way downwards. The bureaucracy represented the state; the idea that it also owed a duty to the public was considered outlandish. There was some change in the climate after 1918, but progress was agonizingly slow. The bureaucracy was not so much anti-democratic as a-democratic. The great majority was willing to do its duty to any master; it accepted the Republic as it later accepted the Nazis. On the whole the Republic had the cooperation of the bureaucrats, and it would have been unrealistic to expect more.

There were some important exceptions. The behaviour of many judges was simply outrageous. It was not just that extremists of the right could, quite literally, get away with murder, whereas those of the left had to face the full severity of the law. Even the leaders of the Republic, moderate men by any standard, could not hope for a fair trial however grievously

they had been libelled. Instead of appointing democratic judges who could be trusted to honour the constitution, the Social Democrats out of misplaced respect for the independence of the judiciary did not dare to touch this bastion of the reactionary forces. Thus the Republic was undermined from within and comfort provided for its enemies.

When asked by the Social Democratic leaders whether the Reichswehr was reliable so far as the Republic was concerned, von Seeckt, its commander, used to answer: 'This I do not know, but it certainly obeys me.' Within the Reichswehr there were various shades of opinion. Some officers were openly hostile to the Republic, whereas others were willing to co-operate, albeit without enthusiasm, on condition that there was no civilian interference in military affairs and that they obtained all the financial and political support they needed. Most members of the new German army were by no means active supporters of Nazism; only towards the end of the Weimar period did some of them fully identify themselves with the Hitler movement. But by its whole tradition and outlook, the Reichswehr was anything but a pillar of the Republic. The captains, majors and colonels of the old Imperial army were its commanders; they were imbued with a spirit of militant nationalism and they found the leaders of the Republic wanting in this respect. On the other hand, the Social Democrats' attitude towards the professional army was one of suspicion. As they were indebted to the Reichswehr for its help in the early days of the Republic, they did not dare to reform it by manning key positions with republican officers. Where, anyway, would such officers have been found? It would have taken a long time to train a military counter-establishment; it would have faced violent opposition and the Social Democrats shied away from any head-on collision. They had no clear concept of how to run the army. Some of them were inclined towards pacifism; others, probably the majority, would have preferred an army run more or less on the lines of a militia. But this was clearly impractical in view of the development of modern warfare. Thus the Reichswehr remained the power in the background, the great political question-mark at a time of crisis, tolerating the Republic but unwilling to defend it against its internal enemies.

The Weimar police force was more loyal to the new state. In many cases it was commanded by Social Democrats who had no inhibitions about its reform. The police corps was traditionally more 'proletarian' in character, its officer corps much less exclusive, for a career in the police force had not been deemed an occupation suitable for gentlemen. Such loyalty to the Republic did not, of course, prevent the police from serving with equal zeal the Nazis, who took it over lock, stock and barrel, having ousted the Social Democratic appointees. As in other democratic regimes, the political police was not powerful and thus not in a position to counteract the activities of the Republic's enemies.

During the early days of the Republic the Free Corps was a factor of some political importance. Subsequently, its role was to some extent taken over by the veterans' organizations and the paramilitary formations of the big political parties. The Free Corps was composed of remnants of the old army, some young idealists, some criminal elements and, above all, young officers who could not find suitable civilian employment. They proclaimed that they would save Germany, though in fact most of their energies were devoted to combating the internal enemy (the left) rather than the external one (mainly the Poles). The veterans' organizations, such as the Stahlhelm, constituted the reserve army of the right. They were unalterably opposed to everything the Republic stood for, and the 'stab in the back' theory found its most fervent supporters in their ranks. The reception which had been accorded to the returning officers and NCOs had not been forgotten: they had been chased through the streets and spat at, and their epaulettes had been torn off. For a while many of them had been compelled to hide. The Free Corps was disbanded by 1921–2, whereas the paramilitary organizations, above all the SA, the Nazi stormtroopers, gathered strength only a decade later.

In strictly military terms the paramilitary organizations did not represent a serious threat, but the psychological impact was tremendous. The torchlight processions, the rallies, the mass parades with sometimes hundreds of thousands of participants, seemed to presage the arrival of an irresistible force and thus the beginning of a new era. The republican forces never succeeded in arousing similar enthusiasm among the younger generation.

Their leaders maintained that Germany would neither be awakened nor saved by marching columns, by demagogic speeches, by ruthless attacks on political opponents. Such sensible advice was unfortunately quite out of touch with the mood of an activist younger generation, instinctively longing for a *Führer* (not, to be fair to them, necessarily the one who ultimately emerged). This generation preferred drums to speeches and parades to long and inconclusive discussions; eventually it decided that the elected leaders were incapable of coping with the crisis.

These developments reached their climax during the last years of the Republic, but the underlying mood had existed well before. It was reflected in, for example, the development of the German youth movement, the *Wandervögel* and the *Bünde*, and their political offshoots such as the *Tat* circle and the Young German Order (*Jungdo*). These minority elitist groups, limited almost entirely to middle-class youth, were a specifically German phenomenon which had no parallel in other countries. The youth movement had its origins in the prewar period, and was distinguished by a great deal of romantic and cloudy idealism. Politically these bodies were naive, uncommitted to any of the existing parties, and ultimately an easy prey to demagogic leaders. As the crisis deepened, they began to make radical social demands; but theirs was an unthinking, aimless radicalism which could with equal ease turn left or right or lead nowhere at all. The common denominator was contempt for 'the system' with its vested interests, cliques and party caucuses. They talked a great deal about 'responsibility' and 'duty', and the longing for a great leader deepened. For the raucous jingoism of beer-hall parties they had nothing but contempt. They saw the prospects for a better Germany not in terms of political action; the new Reich of which they talked was, like Stefan George's, not of this world. They saw it as their task to educate a new elite to cultivate a new, inward love for the fatherland and the *Volk*. The Republic was certainly not their spiritual home and most of them eventually accepted Nazism without serious qualms, even though the advent of Hitler meant the dissolution of the youth movement.

In their overwhelming majority, the German educated classes gravitated towards the right. The Weimar Republic

certainly did not correspond to their idea of a well-run, effective state commanding the loyalty of its citizens. There were exceptions; a substantial number of educated Catholics supported the Centre Party, and the Jews, rejected by the right as alien elements detrimental to the German spirit, gravitated towards the democratic parties or further left. But they were a small minority, and while some of them had leading positions in the mass media, they had no political influence. On the contrary, the presence of some Jews in key positions provided a convenient target for anti-semitic attacks. The universities were one of the main strongholds of the anti-democratic forces during the Weimar era. The nationalist ideology had been deeply rooted among students and teachers alike, and the shock of defeat was therefore all the more acutely felt in these circles. Immediately after the war there was a great deal of talk about 'revolution', albeit in a vague and abstract way, and about a new and more just social order, but two years later this mood of confusion and contrition had already disappeared, and Ernst Troeltsch and other observers noted a new upsurge of the right. It was symbolic, in more ways than one, that the president of the German Republic was told by the rector of Berlin University that he would not be welcome to address the students, and the Republic took this insult, like so many others, lying down. (Berlin, incidentally, was by no means the most reactionary of German universities.) Initially the right-wing militants were a minority but they met with hardly any resistance. Towards the end of the decade, their influence grew by leaps and bounds and the Nazis emerged as the strongest party in the universities well before they did so in the country at large. Their political activities included violent attacks on pacifist, socialist and Jewish professors; the attitude of the authorities was one of studious non-intervention.

The number of students grew rapidly (from 80,000 in 1925 to 126,000 in 1931) and their chances of finding suitable employment worsened as the economic situation deteriorated. The image of the well-to-do student engaged in duelling and other more harmless pastimes, such as falling in love with the daughter of his Heidelberg landlady – the subject of countless operettas and films – was far removed from the harsh realities of German student life. Economic factors were admittedly not the

only ones, and often not the decisive ones, underlying the radicalization of university life. Nor was it a foregone conclusion that material deprivation and the loss of hope would necessarily drive these students towards the extreme right. But given the general climate of the Weimar Republic and the fact that the extreme left had so little attraction for these circles, it is not difficult to understand why the students found a radical movement of the right more congenial.

The directors of industry and the managers of the big banks rarely appeared in the limelight, but they played a not unimportant role in the history of the Weimar Republic. Harry Graf Kessler, in a lecture at Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 1923, characterized them as follows:

> These German captains of industry are rarely the owners of their works; often nothing but their leading technicians. Many of them have risen from the ranks and have never become, even after long and successful careers, true capitalists. With a jealousy and harshness which sometimes borders on fanaticism, their eyes are centred on the big factory which they have nursed into greatness, and to which they have devoted their lives. Some of them, even at the height of their careers, look more like trade union officials or well-to-do laborers than like millionaires. They do not play golf! They do not even care much for money, looking on it but as a sort of concentrated fuel with which to set new furnaces ablaze.*

The picture was slightly overdrawn. It is true that Stinnes, for example, who emerged after the war as Germany's leading industrialist (his empire crumbled soon after his death in 1924) was not a man of extravagant tastes. But there was also Ottmar Strauss of Cologne, a *bon vivant* second to none, not to mention a whole host of *nouveaux riches* (*Raffkes*), whose style of life and ostentatious spending provided an inexhaustible source of inspiration for journalists and cartoonists.

Among the industrialists there were extreme authoritarians and rightists such as Kirdorf, whereas others, such as Bosch, had a more developed social conscience and showed an active interest in the wellbeing of their employees. A few industrialists, such as Rathenau (of the big electrical concern AEG), Cuno

*Count Harry Kessler, *Germany and Europe*, New Haven, 1923.

(on loan from a big North German shipping company) and Helfferich, director of the Deutsche Bank, took a prominent part in politics. But most of them had no political ambitions, and even their interest in politics was strictly limited. That they were opposed to any form of nationalization goes without saying, and they tried to counteract, not without success, the growing influence of the trade unions. As the economic depression deepened, they insisted on reducing and, whenever possible, stopping social benefits because, they claimed, the country could not afford it. They represented a powerful lobby on some issues but quite frequently failed to agree among themselves on the policies to be advocated; there were marked conflicts of interest between the various branches of the economy. The big landowners had played an important role under the monarchy but they did not recover their influence in the Republic. It was only towards the end of the 1920s that they emerged again as a political pressure-group of some consequence, demanding a protectionist policy and government subsidies.

Wilhelmian Germany had been governed more or less autocratically by a clearly defined elite; it was far more difficult to define with any degree of accuracy the identity of the new republican establishment. Some sections of the old elite had survived, but they had to share power with new forces. Political power was far more widely spread. There was a fragile and complicated balance of power with frequent changes and fluctuations, and public opinion played a much greater role than in the old Reich. The new establishment ruled a country which was in some respects quite different from prewar Germany. It was smaller and poorer, having lost under the provisions of the Versailles treaty 13 per cent of its territory and almost 10 per cent of its population as well as all its colonies. In economic terms the losses were even more substantial; 26 per cent of Germany's coal production and 75 per cent of its iron ore. German heavy industry, which had been the backbone of the country's stormy economic development during the preceding decades, thus found itself severely weakened in comparison with its competitors in world markets. The country had also lost all its big merchant ships, half of the smaller ones, one quarter of its fishing fleet, one fifth of its river fleet, 5,000 loco-