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A House Divided: How Hitler Exploited the Politics of Weimar Germany

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A House Divided:

How Hitler Exploited the Politics of Weimar Germany

“The government will therefore regard it as its first and foremost duty to re-establish *Volksgemeinschaft* – the unity of spirit and will of our folk. It will preserve and defend the foundations upon which the power of our nation rests.”¹ The crowd in front of the Reich Chancellery listened in awe as Adolf Hitler shouted. With his typical showmanship, Hitler promised how he would absolve Germany of the sins of the Weimar Republic and return it to its former glory. He would throw away the weak Weimar democracy and usher in the thousand-year Reich.

The reasons for the Nazi capture of power are manifold and complex, but a few key themes tie together a larger narrative of defeat, fear, order, and ideology. The political fragmentation of the Republic combined with the German need for extreme nationalism was the perfect set-up for an authoritarian dictatorship. Hitler seized power because of the political instability of Weimar democracy coupled with Germany’s economic strife. After World War I, Germany faced hostility from the allied victors. Reparations and restrictions enforced by the Treaty of Versailles undermined the vulnerable Republic. While these factors played a role in destabilizing Germany, external forces were not the sole cause of the Nazis. Hitler used this exterior strife as a scapegoat for Germany’s problems, but ultimately the impediment to renewal lay with Germany itself. The Nazi Party brought together many elements of the German spirit so that they could enact their new reign.

There is much extant literature on the Weimar Republic. While a broad swath of scholarship focuses on World War II and the Nazis once they came into power, a good amount covers the Weimar period.² Two pillars of Weimar historiography are Detlev Peukert and Hans

¹ Adolf Hitler, as quoted in “Hitler’s First Address as Chancellor (1933),” Alpha History, accessed April 28, 2021.

² Regarding scholarship of the Nazis after 1933, see Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

Mommsen.³ Mommsen in particular advocated for the *Sonderweg* theory, which posited that the Third Reich was a culmination of all of Germany's past.⁴ It theorized that centuries of German history made it inevitable that an authoritarian dictatorship would come into power. *Sonderweg*, meaning 'special path', picked up steam after the 1960s, but faced criticism in the late twentieth century, most notably from British historians David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley.⁵ In recent years, *Sonderweg* has reentered the discussion, but with modifications and refinements.⁶

Weimar historians discuss the *Sonderweg* theory because it attempts to explain the formation of one of the most insidious governments in the last century. The literature of the Weimar Republic provides an analysis of the failure of human government. The Third Reich did not come into existence because of the unrest in 1920s Germany, but because there were underlying factors that the Nazi Party capitalized on. This does not mean that Germany was predestined to unleash Nazism upon Europe, but that the causes are complex and stretch back before World War I. Germany did not walk a 'special path,' but cause and effect still play a part.

Weimar culture produced beauty, and the people were confident in its government. However, this peace only lasted while times were good. The idealism the framers of the constitution had seeped out of the sleepy German town and into the rest of the nation. The Weimar period in Germany hosted great advances in art, architecture, philosophy, film, and

³ Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989); Hans Mommsen, *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*, trans. Elborg Forster and Larry Eugene Jones (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁴ Helmut Walser Smith, "When the Sonderweg Debate Left Us," *German Studies Review* 31, no. 2 (May 2008): 225-240.

⁵ The *Sonderweg* theory posits that an authoritarian dictatorship would naturally arrive in Germany as a matter of course due to Germany's history, and the Nazis are just a manifestation of this; David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁶ Jürgen Kocka, "Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of German Sonderweg," *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (February 1999); Annie Everett, "The Genesis of Sonderweg," *The International Social Science Review* 91, no. 2 (2015).

literature. Bauhaus architecture still inspires modern construction; scholars still study Thomas Mann and Martin Heidegger.⁷ After World War I, Weimar ushered in an incredible cultural renaissance for Germany. It is very easy to forget the brightness of interwar Germany in light of what came after, but the horrors of the Nazi Party should not eclipse the contributions of Weimar.

At the beginning of the first World War, mass nationalistic hysteria swept Germany. Germans were intensely proud to be Germans. They wanted to show all of Europe the might of the German Empire. Thousands across the nation filled public squares, city parks, and beer halls with demonstrations, parades, and flag waving. A carnival-like atmosphere pervaded society. Interestingly enough, it seemed to the people like this grand patriotism was unprecedented. This hysteria brought the German people together like never before.⁸ Rich and poor alike came out in droves to support Germany. Later, this phenomenon became known as the August Days, when the nation was united in one spirit.⁹ The August Days began to embody the spirit of *Volksgemeinschaft*, meaning ‘people’s community’.

As the warmth of August turned to the cold of December, so the war marched on. During hardships late in the war, the nation put on rose-colored glasses and remembered the August Days. Historian Benjamin Carter Hett theorized that this romanticized version of the August Days provided a self-defense mechanism for Germany, and that it preserved the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Later, politicians would exploit this narrative for their own agenda.¹⁰

World War I left Germany a beaten nation, buried in debt and facing a revolution. The

⁷ For further reading on the cultural contributions of Weimar, see Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick, ed. *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁸ Peter Fritzsche, *Germans Into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 30.

⁹ Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler’s Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018) 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

military high command, seeing that the war was in dire straits and wanting to preserve their power, handed control of signing an armistice over to a civilian government. Thus, they were able to preserve their reputation and use the mainly socialist parliament as a scapegoat when Germany lost.¹¹ After the war, the Treaty of Versailles shackled Germany with massive reparation payments and constraints. This perceived betrayal by politicians would later become known as the ‘Stab in the Back’ legend. As the politics in Weimar became more and more radicalized, the stab in the back grew to be a rallying cry for the Nazis against those who they said betrayed Germany, mainly Jews and communists.

Furthermore, a communist revolution swept through Germany in November of 1918. This led to civil unrest, labor strikes, and eventually the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II. This allowed the military elites to pin blame on those who weakened Germany from the inside. This contributed further to the Stab in the Back legend by placing guilt on the political left.¹² Additionally, the revolution contributed to a fear of violent communism in Weimar politics.¹³ This fear expanded to divide and radicalize Weimar politics; it drove a wedge between the left and the right, with both seeing the other’s actions as justification for their own violence.¹⁴

The revolution and formation of The Republic immediately following World War I drastically changed the political landscape of Germany. The greater populace now had a much more active role in government, especially because both men and women over the age of twenty could vote. Now, every political movement and agenda needed to persuade the general public, not just one class of people.¹⁵ The multitude of voices created a fractured political order. As

¹¹ Ruth Henig, *The Weimar Republic: 1919-1933* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ Weitz, 92.

¹⁴ Schumann, 43.

¹⁵ Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.

Fritzsche noted, “the new Germany can best be found in the humdrum mobilization of interest groups, veterans’ associations and... a hundred voices, libelous, illiberal, and chauvinistic as they may have been.”¹⁶ Also, the war made the German people realize that they were a political actor. The people remembered those bright August Days, and realized that the mob influenced the government.¹⁷

Political division marked the beginning years of Weimar. The first democratic election in 1920 saw the center parties erode to both the left and the right. This meant that the upper echelons of government no longer saw value in a republic.¹⁸ Additionally, the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II removed a sense of legitimacy from the government, and from the nation as a whole.¹⁹ The German population was divided politically as well as culturally, and many wanted a return of an authoritarian power.²⁰

Germany faced external conflict as well. The Allies forced the Treaty of Versailles upon the German people. The treaty was a reminder that Germany had lost the war. It famously required that Germany pay back massive sums to the allies as reparations, and introduced a clause demanding Germany to acknowledge its guilt in starting World War I. This War Guilt Clause, as people called it, was unpalatable for much of the nation. For the average German, World War I had been a war of self-defense.²¹ This unilateral hatred for the Treaty of Versailles, and the politicians who signed it, reunited much of Germany in those divisive times.²² In actuality, it was not that the treaty was so terrible, but that it was perceived as such.²³ It seemed

¹⁶ Fritzsche, 136.

¹⁷ Ibid., 59.

¹⁸ Henig, 27.

¹⁹ Fulda, 45.

²⁰ Weitz, 81; Henig, 2.

²¹ Henig, 19.

²² Richard Bessel, “The Nazi Capture of Power,” *The Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004), 173.

²³ Fritzsche, 151.

like an infringement on the German people. The treaty was so hated that Matthias Erzberger, one of the signatories, was vilified in the right-wing press, and ultimately assassinated.²⁴

In 1922, disaster struck. Extreme hyperinflation destroyed the German Mark and crippled the economy. Germany had borrowed heavily to fund the first world war. The military command bargained on German victory to pay back these loans.²⁵ When Germany lost, it left the nation saddled with debt. The massive reparation payments coupled with the economic burden of rebuilding a country after war pushed the economy of the Weimar Republic to the breaking point. During this time of crisis, fragmentation defined politics. Some right-wing newspapers advocated a rejection of democracy and a return to an authoritarian dictatorship.²⁶ This crisis also accelerated the trend of small, special interest parties gaining traction. The rollercoaster-like progress of the currency spawned a host of special interest parties committed to looking after their constituents' material interests.²⁷ These splinter parties did nothing to stabilize a government already paralyzed by division.²⁸ A parliament operating with a very slim majority does not bode well for the efficacy of that government.

The Weimar Republic faced its first presidential election in 1925. The National Assembly appointed the first president, Friedrich Ebert. He died on February twenty-eighth, 1925, and elections were set for March twenty-ninth. Historian Bernhard Fulda postulated that Ebert died of stress due to intense hounding and attacks in the right-wing press that left him physically debilitated.²⁹ The Right's candidate for the presidency was an old aristocratic war hero named

²⁴ Fulda, 58, 61.

²⁵ Henig, 6.

²⁶ Schumann, 132.

²⁷ Mommsen, 205.

²⁸ Donna Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 41.

²⁹ Fulda, 99.

Paul von Hindenburg. He had led the German army on the eastern front in World War I, and had severely defeated the Russians at several battles, leading to mass popularity and national renown.

Hindenburg was immensely popular with the common people. He was *Volksgemeinschaft* and German militarism brought to life. Author Dirk Schumann claimed that:

Thus, the moderate *Magdeburgische Zeitung* could issue an appeal in April of 1925 to bring about a 'bourgeois unity front' against the Weimar Coalition and its candidate, Marx, because Hindenburg - and this is where the second connotation of the unity idea comes into play - was in a position to 'unite the entire German people behind himself across all parties and classes.'³⁰

Hindenburg represented the spirit of the German people. He defeated the SPD's (Social Democrat Party) candidate Otto Braun and the Center Party's Wilhelm Marx, thus becoming Reich President. The role of the Reich President, albeit a new office in the Weimar government, was almost a call back to constitutional monarchy. Some even used the phrase *Ersatzkaisertum* (replacement emperor) to describe the office, as Mommsen explained.³¹ The election of Hindenburg illustrated Germany's desire for a strong leader who rectified their defeat in World War I.

From 1924 to 1928, the Weimar Republic enjoyed a period of relative peace and stability. This is when much of the cultural contributions that have come to be associated with Weimar took place. The Rentenmark, a replacement for the devalued Reichsmark indexed to the price of gold, stabilized the economy. Additionally, the United States loaned the Republic a great deal of money so that they could pay off war debts. Political tensions had been eased, as it was difficult to push people to extremes when there was not much causing outrage.³² It was, however, merely the calm before the storm.

³⁰ Schumann, 194

³¹ Mommsen, 57.

³² Henig, 41; Schumann, 158.

Throughout these peaceful years, a series of coalition governments controlled the Weimar parliament, as no one party ever won a complete majority. When Wall Street crashed, Germany once again faced a financial crisis. The American money dried up, and the German economy looked desperate. The Depression caused this already tenuous coalition, made up of the SPD, Center, and various right-wing parties, to crumble. Each party stopped trying to cooperate and started looking out for the interests of their constituents, and themselves.³³

Leading up to this, the NSDAP, National Socialist Democratic Worker's Party, or, Nazi Party, had been accumulating a following. Many Germans did not see the value in a democratic system; they wanted the Kaiser to return.³⁴ The Weimar parliament was not very effective, the governments could not form majorities, politics were too fractured, and most right wing politicians actually rejected democracy, seeing it as left wing and foreign intrusion.³⁵ Before, the Nazis were little more than an extremist fringe party, but during the economic crisis they marshalled popular support through mass media and public rallies.³⁶ The Nazis captivated the nation by preaching an ideology of national unity, of *Volksgemeinschaft*. "Much of the Nazi phenomenon took place in the subjunctive tense." Fritzsche pointed out.³⁷ The Nazis used ideology and romanticism as rhetoric; they fed people wishful thinking. Hitler did not try to persuade people factually, he played to the Germans' fears, hopes, and ideals. It was not entirely rational; it was an emotional, visceral response.³⁸ Hitler preyed upon the skepticism of the splintered Weimar party system. He conveyed that all parties would be dissolved into

³³ Weitz, 122.

³⁴ Fulda, 134.

³⁵ Weitz, 105.

³⁶ Fulda, 131.

³⁷ Fritzsche, 228.

³⁸ Hett, 13.

Volksgemeinschaft, and the NSDAP would assume all aspects of political life.³⁹ The Nazis were in sync with the people's desires. They were able to emphasize and cultivate the aspects of the zeitgeist that promoted their agenda. Fritzsche illustrated that what most middle, and some working, class people wanted was a nationalist, progressive, and united party. In a word, the Nazis.⁴⁰

Hitler used Stab in the Back rhetoric to build anti-Semitic feeling. He associated the politicians that allegedly betrayed Germany with an underground Jewish conspiracy. Anti-Semitism had existed in Germany for a long time, but Hitler weaponized it to discredit his political opposition and cut off the Republic from its citizens.⁴¹ Hitler always blamed an external burden on the shortcomings of Germany, but most of Weimar's problems lay within its borders.

In 1930, amidst the Depression and political turmoil, the coalition government headed by the SPD collapsed. Hindenburg, as a measure to further his anti-democratic aims, appointed Heinrich Brüning, a conservative member of the Center Party, as Reich Chancellor.⁴² If anything, this decision was made to decrease parliamentary power rather than save it. Additionally, President Hindenburg invoked article forty-eight of the Weimar constitution, which gave the chancellor the ability to govern by decree. In an egregious political faux pas, Brüning called new elections, in a "fairyland belief that he, a sitting chancellor in the midst of a depression, would win widespread popular support."⁴³ This election cost Brüning's government their majority, as both the NSDAP and the KPD (German Communist Party) made impressive gains. Brüning was then forced to rely on article forty-eight for power, as parliament was

³⁹ Mommsen 511.

⁴⁰ Fritzsche, 184; Mommsen, 374.

⁴¹ Mommsen, 28.

⁴² While the Reich President was the Head of State, the Reich Chancellor, appointed by the President, led the Reichstag, or parliament. The Chancellor was usually the leader of the majority party.

⁴³ Weitz, 123.

gridlocked. These measures constituted an effort to dismantle the Republic and return Germany to its pre-World War I glory.⁴⁴

At the same time, an intense fear of the left wing fractured the political landscape of Weimar even more. The radicalism of the KPD pushed those who might have fallen in the center farther towards the right.⁴⁵ Before 1930, the SPD, the largest party in Germany and the main bulwark of Weimar democracy, did not see the Nazi Party as a real threat, or even really acknowledge them. They were far more concerned with the actions of the KPD.⁴⁶

In addition, the media climate in the Weimar Republic did not lend itself to peaceful politics. The press on both sides reported in a partisan, sensationalized manner, making every event appear worse than it was.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the media also informed, or misinformed, politicians on current events, leading them to tailor their actions to what was being reported in newspapers, not what was really happening.⁴⁸ The NSDAP in particular was incredibly effective at using propaganda; they were able to radicalize the middle class and rural peasantry into anti-Communist hysteria.⁴⁹

It was this fear of the Left along with a desire for order and stability that sounded the death knell of the Weimar Republic. Both the elites at the top of German society and the average citizen wanted a peaceful, orderly nation.⁵⁰ As Brüning's government did not have a majority, it had to rely on the tolerance of the SPD for existence. The SPD tolerated the government because it wanted to keep Weimar society in a hard-won state of order, and because it feared the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁵ Henig, 44.

⁴⁶ Harsch, 63, 66.

⁴⁷ Fulda, 173.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁹ Mommsen, 554.

⁵⁰ Bessel, 186.

government that would take its place.⁵¹

During the elections of 1932, Hindenburg dismissed Brüning as chancellor and replaced him with Franz von Papen. Papen, an old Prussian aristocrat less committed to democracy than even Brüning, enjoyed almost no support in the Reichstag, causing him to dismiss parliament and call for fresh elections. The new elections in November saw Papen once again fail to win a majority, and Kurt von Schleicher, an independent, replaced him as chancellor. Schleicher then approached Adolf Hitler for talks of a coalition government, and Hitler agreed if he were to be appointed chancellor. Hindenburg acquiesced, and in January of 1933 Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor, signaling the end of the Weimar Republic.

Hitler's ascension to the chancellery was not a complete failure of democracy; it did not happen in ballot boxes. The decision to appoint Hitler was made entirely in closed meetings between men who did not respect democracy. By forgoing democracy, they renounced the safeguards it provided.⁵² The ruling elites saw parliament as a necessary evil that had to be endured so that one day, they could return Germany to its pre-World War I power.⁵³ However, this is not to say that the Third Reich was entirely the fault of Papen, Schleicher, and Hindenburg. Fritzsche described that although Hitler's appointment was ultimately because of backroom deals, he would never have been considered had he not been the leader of the largest right-wing party.⁵⁴ The German people voted for the Nazis. The Nazis marshalled the German spirit and cultivated a fear of communism, but the ones who let Hitler in the door were powerful men concerned with preserving their own hegemony.⁵⁵ The Nazi Party enticed most people,

⁵¹ Harsch, 150.

⁵² Mommsen, 561.

⁵³ Ibid., 508.

⁵⁴ Fritzsche, 210.

⁵⁵ Bessel, 187

whether it be from a fear of the revolutionary Left, a desire for true *Volksgemeinschaft*, or the need to restore Germany to its former militaristic glory.⁵⁶

The Weimar Republic lasted fourteen years almost to the day. From the quiet village of Weimar to the cacophony of Berlin, the Republic ran an exciting and turbulent race. It was founded with hope that Germany would recover from the war and turn over a new leaf, but as revolutions raged, currencies crashed, governments failed, the ones left in control of the Republic were bitter, cynical, and opposed to a democratic form of government. Germany remembered those hopeful August Days and wished for a return of that joyful *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Some of this was due to the strict restraints placed upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, but Weimar did not fall because of external stressors. Weimar fell from the inside. The Nazis persuaded both the German people and the politicians in control that their ideology was truth. They preached a message of national renewal, unity, and a return of German power.

Germans did not become Nazis overnight. It was a gradual build up. Initially, people were confident in the democratic prowess of the Weimar Republic. After all, there was beauty, cinema, art, and architecture. However, a combination of poor politics, economic disaster, and a desire to return Germany to its pre-World War I glory pushed Weimar democracy to the breaking point. One singular cause for Hitler's success in 1933 does not exist. Many factors contributed to Weimar's downfall. Ultimately, Hitler used a time of crisis and hatred to pounce upon a weak political system and take power.

⁵⁶ Fritzsche, 8.

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