The German Right in the Weimar Republic

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The Weimar Republic has long been synonymous in the public mind with political instability, economic crisis and cultural ferment. In recent years this image has been cemented as Weimar has been co-opted by many commentators in the United States and Europe as a benchmark for 'crisis', an exemplar of failure against which the political and economic uncertainties of our times are measured in order to judge the level of their calamity. But the persistence of this image of Weimar as 'the mother of all political failures' in the 21st century is curious given that over the past 20 years historians have convincingly challenged the view of the republic as a doomed democratic experiment. Inspired by Peter Fritzsche's seminal 1996 review article in the *Journal of Contemporary History* ([1](#)) a generation of scholars have argued persuasively that rather than being 'weak', 'unloved' or 'doomed', the Weimar Republic was in fact the home to a vibrant, if fractious, political culture with levels of political engagement that most western liberal democracies today can only dream of.

This sense of the highly contested political and ideological culture of Weimar is to a great extent the central paradigm explored in this stimulating collection of essays edited by Eugene Larry Jones. Moving away from older interpretations that saw a direct line of continuity between the 'old Right' of the *Kaiserreich* and the 'alliance of elites' who engineered Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in January 1933, Jones instead situates this collection within 'the new master narrative of the Right in the Weimar Republic' (p. 3). In this interpretation, the shared opposition to the new republican order of the right-wing milieu provided only an illusion of unity that hid the varying aims, tactics and ideologies espoused by the multiplicity of parties, discussion groups, paramilitary organisations and secret societies that made up the German Right. Faced with the challenges of 'stabilisation' in Weimar's middle period and then the catastrophe of the Great Depression, cracks began to appear in this façade of right-wing unity, leaving a weak and fragmented Right unable to do anything to prevent the more dynamic National Socialists from encroaching on their territory and poaching their supporters. According to this view, 'the disunity of the Right was every bit as important as a prerequisite for the establishment of the Third Reich as the schism on the socialist Left or the fragmentation of the political middle' (p. 2). It is with the aim of 'underpinning' this interpretation 'with examples of some of the most recent scholarly works on right-wing politics in the Weimar era' that this collection has been put together (p. 3).

It largely succeeds in this aim. The ten interesting and sometimes provocative essays collected here provide an excellent show-case for recent work being done on right-wing politics in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s and clearly demonstrate that there are still valuable new insights to be gained from such study despite all the work that has previously been done on the German Right. Each of the chapters looks at a different aspect of the right-wing milieu of the Weimar period and they can be read individually or taken as a whole. The Pan-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*, ADV), the only one of the nationalist pressure groups that proliferated in Germany in the first years of the 20th century to survive the First World War, is perhaps overrepresented here with three chapters dedicated to different aspects of its membership, tactics and relationship to National Socialism. In contrast, the German National People's Party (*Deutschnationale Volkspartei*, DNVP), the most important conservative-national political party in the Weimar era, is discussed at length in only one chapter, two if one counts the essay on Count Kuno von Westarp, its leader from 1926 to 1928. Other essays examine antisemitism within the paramilitary *Kampfverbände* (Combat Leagues) and the Catholic Right, the place of eugenic ideas within the social thought of Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, director of the Bethel home for the mentally ill in Bielefeld from 1910 until 1946, as well as discussions of the relationship of individuals such as the jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt and Germany's wartime 'dictator' and second President, Paul von Hindenburg, with the German Right.

The collection opens with an excellent contribution from Wolfram Pyta which in many ways turns the common view of Hindenburg as the archetypal Prussian conservative on its head. Pyta argues that to view Weimar's second president as a stolid and unimaginative conservative of the old school, the embodiment of the motto '*mitt Gott für König und vaterland*', is 'a serious mistake' (p. 29). Rather than being the 'prototypical German conservative' who embodied the traditional conservative values of 'devotion to the monarchy and the monarchical form of government ... respect for God, and an unwavering sense of duty' (p. 26), Hindenburg is here shown to have demonstrated a readiness during the First World War 'to arrogate to himself the rights, powers and privileges to which, from the perspective of the traditional conservative viewpoint, only Wilhelm II could legitimately claim' (p. 29) and therefore place himself 'outside the orbit of classical conservatism' (p. 31). Furthermore, Pyta concurs with Anna von der Golz [\(2\)](#) in giving more agency to Hindenburg than many historians have tended to do. Instead of the doddery and disengaged president manipulated by the coterie of aristocrats and military men who formed his inner circle, Hindenburg is here shown to be a shrewd politician with a vision, even a programme, of his own. In Pyta's analysis, Hindenburg's goal from 1914 onwards was 'the inner unity of the German nation' (p. 36) with himself as the custodian of 'the will of national unity', the so-called 'spirit of 1914' made manifest during the early stages of the First World War (p. 37). He believed that true national unity could only be achieved with the removal of internal 'saboteurs' and *Reichsfiende* (enemies of the state), but his vision of national unity also encompassed a more inclusive element. As President Hindenburg showed himself willing to work with any and all parties (except the Communists and only reluctantly with the Social Democrats) and appointed politicians from across the political spectrum, for which he was lambasted by the Right. He was always careful to adhere to the letter of the constitution and present himself as being an embodiment of the 'national will' that transcended the petty squabbles of party politics. Pyta sees the years 1925–30 as a period in which Hindenburg 'experimented' with an inclusive *Volksgemeinschaft* 'in order to test' if it could be achieved under Weimar. However, by 1930 the republic seemed more divided than ever and as the Reichstag seemed to exemplify this Hindenburg decided to try a more authoritarian approach in which 'the corrupting influence of the parties would be minimised' and the political powers of the presidency increased (pp. 40–1). This led to the hollowing-out of Weimar democracy which only exacerbated the republic's problems by forcing political debate out of parliament and onto the streets. Pyta argues that from this point onwards Hindenburg became convinced that dis-unity in the German Right was the chief obstacle to the realization of his dream for a 'spirit of national unity' and from 1931 sent clear signals that he wanted the Right to unite behind him. This aim seemed to have been achieved when the long desired 'cabinet of national concentration' was formed in January 1933. The chapter provides a cogent analysis of Hindenburg's political ideas that genuinely challenges the usual characterisation of the man and his role in politics, though it does leave some questions unanswered. Chief amongst these is why, if Hindenburg had been so keen to

achieve a 'concentration' of all the right-wing forces in German politics (including the Nazis) since 1931, he proved so resistant to Hitler's appointment to the Chancellorship until all other options had been exhausted? Was this merely the social contempt of the East-Elbian *Junker* for the 'Bohemian corporal', and if so does this suggest that in some ways the President was a conservative of the old school after all?

Pyta's analysis of Hindenburg's values and relationship with the Right is followed by a chapter on another key figure in German nationalist politics, but one that is much less well known to English readers. Count Kuno von Westarp was the Prussian civil servant and politician who as leader of the conservative-nationalist DNVP's parliamentary faction (and party chairman between 1926 and 1928) sought to pursue a more centrist course and whose career, as Daniela Gasteiger argues, highlights the fracturing of traditional conservative networks and organisations as much as the broader 'transformation' of the German Right itself during the Weimar period. The essay begins with a brief precis of Westarp's career, before going on to examine his relationships with the *völkisch* politician Albrecht von Graefe-Goldebee and with the Central Association of German Conservatives (*Hauptverein der Deutschonkonservativen*) in order to show how the political manoeuvrings within and between the network of interests and organisations for which the DNVP provided an umbrella 'offer a rich insight into the intellectual and organizational processes of reorientation and redefinition that took place on the German Right during the Weimar Republic' (p. 71).

Gasteiger shows how after the old German Conservative Party (*Deutschkonservative Partei*, DKP) was subsumed within the DNVP in 1918 Westarp acted as a key intermediary between the traditional Prussian conservatives of the Central Association of German Conservatives and the broader Nationalist Right as represented by the DNVP. He thus walked a tightrope between the conflicting forces of the German Right. His rise to leader of the DNVP in the Reichstag led to hopes that the party would be steered in a more traditional conservative (and monarchist) direction, but in the end only highlighted his 'divided loyalties' which became 'increasingly unbearable' and led to his resignation as chairman of the Central Association of German Conservatives in April 1925 (p. 66). The decision of the DNVP (under Westarp's leadership) to enter governing coalitions in 1925 and 1927 and agreement to abide by the constitution were the occasion for the final split with the Central Association. While Westarp recognised the need to work within the existing political system, albeit with the restoration of the monarchy as a long-term goal, the reactionaries within the Central Association would accept nothing short of unconditional opposition to the democratic state and system. When conservatives in key electoral districts (including Westarp's own) endorsed the radical Völkisch-National Bloc rather than the DNVP during the Reichstag elections of 1928 Westarp broke with the Central Association altogether. Shortly afterwards Westarp, under increasing pressure from radicals within his own party led by Alfred Hugenberg, retired as party chairman and the following year he resigned as leader of the DNVP's parliamentary faction, ceding both positions to Hugenberg. Increasingly alienated from the party's strident opposition to the republic he resigned from the DNVP in 1930 to form the short-lived Conservative People's Party (*Konservative Volkspartei*, KVP). Westarp comes across here as an almost tragic figure struggling against the odds to nudge the political development of the republic in a conservative direction by working within the system and keenly aware of the contradiction that this presented with his own commitment to a restoration of the monarchy. At the same time, the chapter also illustrates how highly contested the very notion of what constituted conservatism was during the republic.

Another 'thread that ties together all but one of the essays' is the examination of the importance of antisemitism for the German Right during the Weimar period. Three of the chapters in the collection deal explicitly with differing forms of anti-Semitic prejudice and the degree to which it was an important factor in various right-wing groups and organisations. In particular these chapters focus not on anti-Semitism as an ideology, but instead look at it as a means of practical political mobilisation. Larry Jones' chapter on Conservative antisemitism uses the DNVP as a lens through which to look at the nature of antisemitism during the Weimar period, and argues that the party's position on the so-called 'Jewish question' was much more ambivalent, nuanced and inconsistent than has previously been recognised. Jones demonstrates how the importance of anti-Semitic ideas and personalities within the DNVP fluctuated throughout the Weimar period, resulting in what amounted at times to 'an almost schizophrenic contradiction in the party's self-image' (p. 81) as it faced attacks from the racist Right for being soft on the Jewish question while at the

same time using anti-Semitic rhetoric as a means of mobilising mass support, particularly in rural areas. The expulsion of the leaders of the racist wing of the party at the national party congress at Görlitz in October 1922 marked 'a major victory for ... those in the DNVP party leadership who perceived of the DNVP as a party of loyal opposition modelled more or less after the British Tories' (p. 85), but this soon proved to be a temporary triumph. Only two years later the racists were in the ascendancy and a resolution was passed banning Jews and those married to Jews from the membership as the DNVP sought to compete with and woo support from *völkisch* groups. There then followed a period in which the racist faction was increasingly marginalised as Westarp sought to pursue 'a conservative agenda on the basis of the existing political system' (p. 89) but in 1928 the racists joined forces with the Pan-German League to oust Westarp and replace him as party chairman with the press magnate Alfred Hugenburg. Nevertheless, Hugenburg's central principle was anti-Marxism and 'for someone who clearly tolerated anti-Semites among his closest advisors, Hugenburg's speeches and private correspondence were remarkable for their lack of explicit references to the Jewish question' (pp. 91–2). Even after the DNVP ramped up its racist rhetoric after their drubbing by the Nazis in the July 1932 elections, 'issues related to race and the Jewish question were clearly subordinate to those of a social and economic nature' (p. 94).

Brian E. Crim's chapter on 'situational antisemitism' in the right-wing Combat Leagues takes a similar line in arguing that while 'antisemitism pervaded Weimar politics, the Right was hardly united when it came to deciding how much importance to attach to the issue' and that 'situational antisemitism as practiced by the Stahlhelm and the Young German Order in particular reveals the ephemeral nature of anti-Semitic politics in the German Right' (p. 195). Crim argues persuasively that while some right-wing organisations and individuals were genuinely obsessed with race, others merely 'co-opted the coded language of antisemitism' in order to compete in the crowded field of right-wing politics. Organisations such as the Stahlhelm (Germany's largest veterans association and paramilitary organisation with between 450,000 and 500,000 members by 1928) and its nearest rival in terms of membership the Young German Order (*Jungdeutscher Orden* or *Jungdo*) had little internal consistency when it came to antisemitism and their attitudes and rhetoric changed with circumstances. Crim thus suggests that the question to ask of the German Right of the Weimar era is not was it anti-Semitic, but rather how anti-Semitic was it, and under what circumstances? (p. 214)

Ulrike Ehret's contribution to the volume raises the interesting question of the intersection during the Weimar period between religious antisemitism and the newer brand of 'scientific' antisemitism grounded in pseudoscientific notions of race and heredity popularised during the 19th century. The 1920s are usually seen as a period in which the racial antisemitism of the *völkisch* Right outstripped traditional religious antisemitism, but as Ehret shows here there were many groups and individuals whose views straddled both forms of racism. Amongst these was a distinct group, identified here as the Catholic Right, made up of wealthy and well-connected Catholics who opposed the republic and espoused a Christian-nationalist vision of the state with the primary aim of healing the centuries' old confessional divide in Germany and creating a monarchical or authoritarian *Volksgemeinschaft* based on Christian values. Antisemitism was an integral part of the Catholic Right's worldview, but was diverse in character. The anti-Jewish prejudices expressed by members 'ranged from nineteenth century theories of a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy to the racial characterisations of Jews' (p. 225). Even if, as Ehret contends, 'their "solutions" to the Jewish problem ultimately did not differ much from the measures of the medieval Catholic Church that sought to segregate Jews and Christians and keep the former isolated from Christian society' (p. 236) it was a world away from mainstream Catholic opinion and meant that it was only first with the *völkisch* Right and then with the Nazis that the Catholic Right was ultimately most at home.

If antisemitism forms a thematic link between these chapters, those by Rainer Hering, Björn Hofmeister and Barry A. Jackisch are united by their focus on the Pan-German League. Rainer Hering examines the role played by the League in the development and spread of right-wing ideas with particular reference to the roles played by academics, using the Hamburg *Ortsgruppe* (local chapter), the second largest in the country, as a case study. He argues that membership of the ADV provided German academics with a sense of self-respect and belonging at a time when they felt increasingly insecure and under threat from the socio-economic changes wrought by revolution, hyperinflation and economic depression. On the whole, the chapter does a

good job of showing how the ADV provided a forum for the spread of right-wing *völkisch* ideology, though the section on the life and career of the geographer Siegfried Passarge, a prominent supporter of the ADV in Hamburg and an outspoken anti-semitic, could be more closely related to the broader themes explored in the chapter. Chapters five and six address similar themes regarding the relationship between the Pan-German League and the emerging 'new' Right of the Weimar Republic. Björn Hofmeister looks at how the ADV went from being the driving force of the radical Right under the Kaiserreich to 'an increasingly antiquated association of right-wing *Honoratioren* after World War I' (p. 136) and questions the extent to which the traditional narrative which sees the ADV as a key link between the 'old' and 'new' Right is convincing. In many ways this is a stronger chapter than Hering's: Hofmeister does a good job of demonstrating that despite its rhetoric of national unity and rebirth the ADV like many of Weimar's political parties 'remained hopelessly trapped in its own milieu and failed to articulate a vision of national unity' that could mobilize mass support (pp. 156–7). However, there is one curious error here: Hofmeister says that the Crown Prince of Prussia died in 1925, but Wilhelm II's eldest son, Crown Prince Wilhelm, survived until 1951. His eldest son, another Wilhelm, (who Hofmeister says the Pan-Germans pinned their hopes on for a restoration) was killed in action during the Nazi invasion of France in 1940 (p. 137). It is therefore not clear to which potential pretender to the German throne Hofmeister is referring. Barry A. Jackisch's contribution draws heavily on the unpublished memoirs of the chairman of the Pan-German League, Heinrich Claß, and on the archives relating to the League held in the Bundesarchiv in order to give 'a detailed picture of the relationship between the growing Nazi movement and the Pan-German League that has not been fully appreciated in the historiography' (p. 186). He shows that the traditional stress on the links between the ADV and the Nazis oversimplifies the ideological and organisational relationship between the two groups/movements that was actually much more complex than has previously been appreciated.

While Ulrike Ehret looked at the Catholic Right, Edward Snyder focuses on the other side of Germany's confessional divide. In his chapter he uses the case study of the Protestant theologian Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, who was director of the Bethel Institutions in Bielefeld from 1910 until his death in 1946, to examine evolving attitudes amongst German Protestants towards eugenics and the reasons why so many Christian social workers not only came to embrace eugenic theories during the Weimar period but also to take up positions that tallied with Nazi views on mental illness and physical disability (p. 245). Although the pressures placed on charitable organisations to modernise in the face of the expansion of Weimar's welfare state (and the growing dismay of Christian charities over the secular character of this welfare provision) played an important part in this, Snyder suggests that the experiences of Bodelschwingh and his colleagues during the First World War are the key to understanding this change of attitudes. Bodelschwingh estimated that around 300 people in his care died of starvation each year between 1916 and 1919 and this led to a reappraisal of notions which, for all Bodelschwingh's interest in modern 'scientific' principles, had before 1914 been seen as incompatible with the Bethel Institution's commitment to providing healing and care within a framework of Christian ethics. After the war it was increasingly felt that 'Rather than stretch further already thin supplies of food with the result that everyone had to suffer, social workers began to wonder whether or not it would be more humane to deny the severely disabled aid so that healthier individuals would have a better chance of survival' (pp. 247–8). Such concerns were particularly acute once the Great Depression meant that millions of Germans again were forced to turn to charitable organisations once the meagre state and municipal welfare provisions available to them ran out. Although they rejected euthanasia and enforced abortion, the Inner Mission (an umbrella organisation of evangelical Protestants) adopted surgical sterilization at the Treysa conference in 1931 on the grounds that 'the economic crises had created a scenario where the Inner Mission no longer had the resources to meet the challenges it faced' (p. 253). Furthermore, it offered a theological justification on the grounds that 'mental illness was a form of sin and ... social welfare providers thus had a moral obligation to eradicate it at its root' (p. 254). However, Snyder also notes that such views were not universally held. Interestingly, in an argument that challenges some of the recent scholarship highlighting the links between the racist attitudes that underpinned German (and more broadly European) colonialism and the embrace of eugenic and eliminationist ideas in the interwar period, Snyder argues that the principal opponents to the adoption of eugenic principles within the Bethel Institutions were missionaries recently returned from former German colonies. Unlike their European

colleagues they had been insulated from the most traumatic aspects of Germany's war experience and as such continued to espouse an older model of care that stressed work therapy combined with spiritual care, pointing out that 'eugenics was at best a partial solution because it focused exclusively on the biological component of the illness. Furthermore ... eugenics promised only to eliminate future generations of the mentally disabled. It did nothing to care for individuals already suffering' (p. 254).

Finally, Joseph W. Bendersky adds to the enormous – and growing – body of scholarship concerning the jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt by examining Schmitt's complex relationship with the political Right during the Weimar period. Since the turn of the century Schmitt's ideas have attracted a huge amount of interest from jurists, philosophers, theologians and political scientists, not least because of the links drawn between some of his ideas and contemporary political debates in the United States. Here, however, Bendersky situates Schmitt firmly in the context of the political and intellectual life of the Weimar Republic and shows very effectively that Schmitt had a complex and uneasy, but nevertheless important, relationship with German Right. Schmitt emerges here as a complicated and contradictory figure: a longstanding 'cultural pessimist' who bemoaned the materialistic and relativistic culture of industrial modernity while remaining outside the mainstream of German anti-modernism with its 'racial mysticism' and glorification of war; a nationalist deeply opposed to the Versailles Settlement who was also a cosmopolitan who drew inspiration from abroad and rejected the chauvinism of many on the nationalist/conservative Right; a lifelong anti-Semite who maintained close personal relationships with many Jews; an advocate of a strong executive who rejected the Right's vision of the *Reichspräsident* as an *Ersatzkaiser*; and a critic of modern mass democracy (and the Weimar political system in particular) on the grounds that it hampered the state in the performance of its essential function of providing stability and security for the nation as a whole who nevertheless rejected a conservative/nationalist concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Berensky argues that because of this Schmitt's defence of constitutionalism (despite his misgivings about the Weimar system) was mostly adopted by pro-democracy campaigners and Republican writers and he was neither personally nor intellectually associated with the Right. However, from 1929 onwards he increasingly moved in radical right-wing circles – associating with prominent right-wing intellectuals such as Wilhelm Stapel, Albert Erich Günther and Ernst Jünger – and was drawn into active politics, becoming friendly with several of the inner circle of General Kurt von Schleicher. His theories were used to justify and legitimise the use of presidential government under Brüning and his successors and in 1932 he was asked to help justify Papen's *Preußenschlag* to the supreme court, though his private diaries and correspondence reveal that he had little sympathy for Papen's plans to use the crisis as a means to institute an authoritarian reform of the constitution, instead hoping that his intervention would help to stabilise the situation and 'prevent the suicide of the Weimar Republic' (p. 282). Schmitt is here portrayed in a largely sympathetic, almost tragic, light. Even so, Bendersky does not let him off the hook entirely, concluding that whatever his personal feelings his work 'rarely corresponded to the progressive hopes and promises of those who had established Weimar and had such high expectations for it' and 'clearly contributed to an intellectual, psychological, and political climate favourable to the Weimar Right' (p. 285).

It is in the very nature of books of this sort that some of the essays collected here will have greater appeal than others to readers, depending on their area of interest or level of expertise. On the whole the essays work well together and complement one another, though as is inevitable with such collections some chapters are more solidly connected to the general themes of the book than others. One general criticism that might be levelled against the book as a whole is that all the topics discussed here tend to give the impression that the German Right in the Weimar Republic was an overwhelmingly male milieu. Although Jones notes in his essay that the flame of racism and antisemitism was kept alive during the four years of Westarp's leadership by female activists from the National Women's Committee of DNVP, who saw themselves as guardians of the nation's racial wellbeing (pp. 89–90), the chapters in this book do little to consider the role of women in Germany's right-wing politics either as active participants (voters, politicians, activists) or in more supportive roles behind the scenes. Indeed, the focus on figures such as Hindenburg, Westarp, Heinrich Claß and Carl Schmitt or on organisations such as the DNVP and the Pan-German League tends to give a sense of the Weimar Right as a much more socially homogeneous grouping than was surely the case. This might be

considered to fly in the face of the central argument of the book concerning the complexity and diversity (if that is the right word) of the German Right in the Weimar Republic.

Such criticisms, however, are perhaps a little churlish. The book never makes any claim to present a comprehensive account of the German Right in the Weimar period and therefore should not be reproached for not doing so (if, indeed, such a task is even possible). One of the admirable things about this collection is that many of the chapters underline the intersections between political, social and cultural spheres that have been noted by a number of historians in the past few years.⁽³⁾ When taken altogether the essays contained within this volume do much to enhance our understanding of the diverse nature of right-wing politics in the Weimar Republic and there is much to recommend it to both students and scholars interested in the evolution of the German Right and in the political history of Weimar more broadly. If nothing else the chapters by Pyta, Hofmeister, Ehret and Gasteiger make available to Anglophone readers an excellent selection of some of the most recent research being undertaken on Weimar political history by both established and emerging historians working in German universities. Above all this collection demonstrates that the study of the political history of the Weimar Republic is very much alive and likely to continue to furnish us with new insights and directions of study in the future.

Notes

1. Peter Fritzsche, 'Did Weimar fail?', *The Journal of Contemporary History*, 68, 3 (1996), 629–56.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Anna Menge, 'The Iron Hindenburg: a popular icon of Weimar Germany', *German History*, 26, 3 (2008), 357–82 and Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth and the Rise of the Nazis* (Oxford, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, the essays collected in *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s*, ed. Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt and Kristin McGuire (New York, NY, 2010) and the articles in *Central European History*'s special issue on the culture of politics and politics of culture in the Weimar period (*Central European History*, 43, 4 (2010)).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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