



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany. by Richard Bessel; E. J. Feuchtwanger

The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis. by David Abraham
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Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany. Edited by Richard Bessel and E. J. Feuchtwanger. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1981. Pp. 297. \$27.00.

The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis. By David Abraham. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. Pp. xvi, 366. \$30.00 cloth, \$12.50 paper.

The essays in Richard Bessel and E. J. Feuchtwanger's volume focus on the social and economic determinants of Weimar politics. It is an uneven collection but not without some fine contributions that break new ground.

Writing on the German Revolution of 1918–1920, Wolfgang Mommsen challenges received political interpretations of the upheaval, arguing that the potential posed by the workers' and soldiers' councils of the period for the full democratization of German society has been drastically overestimated. In Mommsen's view, what had begun as a rebellion against the monarchy and the military apparatus was overtaken in the mass strikes that rocked Germany in 1919 and 1920 by what may be best characterized as a social protest movement, resisting party organization and control and seeking immediate material and social objectives. On this account, the famous "error" of the Majority Social Democrats was less a failure to realize the movement's democratic potential than an unwillingness to appreciate and rectify the profound worker dissatisfaction it revealed. Indeed, argues Mommsen, none of the competing leftist parties properly understood the prepolitical character of the movement, the violent suppression of which contributed powerfully to decisive polarization of the German working class during the next decade.

In an essay on German rearmament and politics, Michael Geyer surveys the development of the *Reichswehr* between the wars. He argues that common emphasis on the preservation of a Wilhelmine officer corps and the remoteness of the army from civilian institutions as sources of Weimar instability is misplaced. Instead rearmament saw the consolidation after 1924 of a modern professional army (albeit with important reservations of power by the old guard), and the erosion of barriers between military and civilian spheres. It was not the Junker aristocrats of the past but the professionals of the self-proclaimed *Zukunftisarmee* who accelerated Weimar's demise, through budgetary demands and the comprehensive reordering of national life thought necessary for waging modern war.

Dieter Gessner offers a thoughtful account of agricultural policy and the political organizations of the estate holders, peasants, and rural labor, and assesses the importance of the agriculture question to Weimar economic planning and electoral coalition building. Larry Eugene Jones traces the dissolution of the political party

system that preconditioned the Nazi rise, offering a stage model of progressive disintegration, the proliferation of narrowly interest-based organizations unable to speak to a broad electoral audience, and failure to resurrect the bourgeois middle class.

Elsewhere in the volume, Frank Domurad details the enduring vitality of the artisan class in the late Republic period, focusing on its ambivalent attempts at political organization and abiding hostility to parliamentary democracy; David Southern analyzes the legal system's response to the great inflation and the redistributive problems it posed; Eve Rosenhaft examines neighborhood politics and the "battle for the streets" between Communists and Nazis in Berlin; Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann assesses German-Russian economic relations in the context of the debates over the relative "primacy" of domestic versus foreign policy; and Helen Boak explores the female vote for the NSDAP, asking why Nazi mobilization among women was so spectacularly successful despite the party's rigid antifeminism.

Taken as a whole, the Bessel-Feuchtwanger collection is a spirited and worthwhile contribution to Weimar studies, but without a common conceptual framework. The essays vacillate between social history and occasional economic analysis. With some notable exceptions, few connections are made between economic variables and social and political mobilization. More troubling, several of the articles give new meaning to the old saw that in the writing of history there are many approaches, but few arrivals. Boak, for example, begins by asking an apparently important question about female mobilization by the Nazis, but she concludes that despite different rates of male and female recruitment by the NSDAP women voted Nazi for the same reasons as men. Southern's long analysis of inflation does not challenge the conventional view that it bore most heavily on the middle and working classes, yet he concludes with a bald assertion that inflation (and material interests generally) played little role in Hitler's rise. And so on.

Far more ambitious in its sweep, and successful in achievement is David Abraham's *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*. Like almost all commentators on Weimar, Abraham attempts to locate the sources of the regime's notorious political instability and collapse into fascism. Unlike almost all others, he has effectively cracked the Weimar riddle by carefully assessing the competition between different fractions of business and agriculture for dominance within the constraints of an electoral system. The basic analysis is straightforward enough. From the material interests of blocs within industry and agriculture and their relative strength as electoral mobilizers came coalitions to dominate state and public policy. Within industry, the most important blocs were between protectionist, labor-intensive, cartelized heavy industry (iron, steel, coal) and the export-oriented, capital-intensive, decentralized dynamic industrial sectors (machine, electrotechnical, chemical, and textile producers). Within agriculture, divisions were evident between grain growing estate holders and the dairy and livestock producing peasantry, although their political consequences were muted by many factors, and until close to the end of the Republic the estate holders remained capable of delivering the peasant vote. Between agriculture and industry were additional strains posed by the historic subsidies to noncompetitive grain producers, the high cost of imported beef and dairy goods, and the drag on industrial development the subsidies and domestic underproduction entailed. Conditioning all the conflict among the dominant classes of Weimar was the balance of power between business and labor, and the electoral condition imposed by a newly democratic regime.

One of the great strengths of Abraham's work is its attention to detail and sense of the contingency of political coalition building. Theoretically informed and exhaustively researched, with extensive and intelligent use of archival materials, the depth and nuance of his analysis cannot be adequately conveyed here. But at its core, Abraham's account of the sequence of Weimar politics may be seen schematically in the rise and fall of three sets of coalitions between dominant and dominated classes. During the 1922-

1924 period an “anti-socialist right bourgeois bloc” featured heavy industry as a hegemonic faction, in coalition with estate owners, family peasants, and an often dissenting export industry. The coalition drew some support from the petite bourgeoisie. Rural labor, salaried employees, and the proletariat were all in opposition. It was succeeded by the “class compromise bloc” of the 1925–1930 period in which (given the defeat of revolutionary working class organization, a massive influx of American capital, and industrial expansion) a relatively more powerful export faction emerged as a hegemon able to “afford” coalition with the urban proletariat. Rural labor, salaried employees, and portions of an unenthusiastic heavy industry were part of this coalition as well. The peasantry, estate owners, and petite bourgeoisie lost out. The final crisis of Weimar, precipitated by world economic crisis, huge reparations costs, and the increasingly aggressive and successful demands of the organized working class (including maximum hours–minimum wages legislation, binding compulsory arbitration, sectoral wage gains, and an expansive *Sozialpolitik*) squeezed this fragile coalition. Suffering severe losses, heavy industry, estate agriculture, and eventually the dynamic export faction itself attempted a concerted rollback of wage and social legislation gains, and sought to redefine Weimar government as an executive-centered state removed from democratic constraint. By 1932 a new bloc had formed with heavy industry as the hegemon, in coalition with the estate owners and export faction. But the final bloc had no mass base and thus was not sustainable under formally democratic conditions.

The middle class—long excluded—was fragmented, and the dominant classes could not forge an enduring coalition with broad electoral appeal. Democracy in Weimar thus expanded and contracted with the strength of the export industry and labor coalition. Industry’s assault on labor beginning in 1929 insured the failure to achieve accommodation within a shrinking economic universe. A precondition of fascism, it led to the “baseless bloc” of 1932, the final mobilization of the middle class by authoritarian populism, and the unification of industry and agriculture on a program of lowest common denominators: hostility to the working class and imperialist expansion of the market.

Collapse of the Weimar Republic is not the last word on the subject. I wish Abraham had said more about the role of the army and that he had been more attentive to industrial conflict and political action at levels of aggregation below that of whole industrial sectors or political blocs. But what has been provided is a powerful, systematic account of the core of the Weimar politics and the dimensions of stability and regime transformation in capitalist democracies generally. This is a stunning achievement, and surely the most important single work on interwar Germany since Arthur Rosenberg’s *Geschichte der Weimarer Republik*.

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