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Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin

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The linkage of suicide and crisis was a prominent feature of Weimar Germany's cultural landscape. In films as different as Bertolt Brecht and Slatan Dudow's *Kuhle Wampe* or Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, suicide appears as a reaction to the darker aspects of urban modernity: an individual's answer to capitalist exploitation or personal drama in an otherwise smoothly functioning metropolis. In a number of contemporary novels the possibility of a suicide is disturbingly present. In Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel*, one character asks himself, "My God, does everyone now have his tea cup of veronal ready?"[1] Tales of suicide also surfaced in the tabloid press which presented them as human interest stories. Partisan papers supported their respective stances by tying individual actions to political narratives, a strategy pursued by both Nazis and Communists as well as liberal reformers. Even schools' reports on pupils who had taken their own lives and farewell notes themselves echoed a general feeling that suicide was a sign of the times.

These frequent and powerful references have prompted some historians to reify the linkage between suicide and crisis. In his landmark survey *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, Detlev Peukert, avowedly influenced by the attention to the darker side of modernity in the 1980s, argued that cultural crisis was closely related to the economic and political crises of the period. In the early 1930s, this culminated in a "total crisis" unique to Germany, which on a subjective level amounted to a climate of hopelessness and despair. Peukert declared:

> It seemed to Germans that there was no sure path leading out of this all-embracing crisis. The familiar processes of social and political action offered no solution, nor did the individual's pursuit of his private destiny. Comparative statistics of suicides provide dramatic evidence of this helpless

This article has benefited immensely from my long-standing exchange with Christian Goeschel on the history of suicide in Weimar and Nazi Germany. See his *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). I would also like to thank Sean Forner, Rüdiger Graf, Jason Hansen, Daniel Magilow, Susan Morrissey, and the two anonymous reviewers for *Central European History* for their most helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

[1]Vicki Baum, *Menschen im Hotel* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2007), 187.

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state of mind. In 1932 there were 85 suicides per million inhabitants in Great Britain, 133 in the United States, and 155 in France. In Germany there were 260.[2]

Since recent authors have also explained suicides in Weimar Germany by referring to a deep and specific crisis,[3] it may be worth pointing out that German suicide levels had already been higher than the ones in Britain and France for much of the nineteenth century and that generally speaking, such comparisons reflect differences in reporting and compilation practices rather than in the actual number of suicides.[4] Between 1929 and 1932, the German suicide rate rose by 11.9 per cent, undoubtedly symptomatic of mass unemployment and welfare cuts.[5] But this is nowhere near the drastic rise at the end of the Second World War, particularly in the German east and Berlin, and certainly not enough to serve as "dramatic evidence" for a desperate state of mind. Depression-era suicides constituted (as in other periods and contexts) an exceptional reaction to hardship. It was more "typical" of the German unemployed to muddle through in sectors such as street vending, aggressively to demand support from welfare institutions, or to take part in the political struggles of the period.[6]

In the light of recent research, disorientation and hopelessness do not seem an adequate characterization of Germans' attitudes and behavior during the late Weimar period. Contemporary discourses of "crisis" have undergone a similar historiographical reassessment. Cultural historians have demonstrated that, rather than reflecting pessimism or even despair, the notion was used by numerous commentators to dramatize their present and press for radical change. Right-wing authors emphasized the need for decision in an existential,

[2]Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (London: Lane, 1991), 271.

[3]Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod. Die Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 2001), 323–47 (the chapter is entitled "Die Permanenz der Krise") and my own previous article "'Good-bye diesem verfluchten Leben.' Kommunikationskrise und Selbstmord in der Weimarer Republik," in *Sehnsucht nach Nähe. Interpersonale Kommunikation in Deutschland seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Moritz Föllmer (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2004), 109–25.

[4]Christian Goeschel, "Suicide in Weimar and Nazi Germany" (Ph. D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2006), 25; Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 14–5.

[5]*Statistik des Deutschen Reiches* 393 (1929), 137; ibid., 495 (1932–1934) I, 170; Baumann, *Vom Recht*, 326. On the connection between unemployment and suicide, see Victor Bailey, *"This Rash Act": Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 161–2, 206, 230–1, 244–5.

[6]Gideon Reuveni, "Reading Sites as Sights for Reading. The Sale of Newspapers in Germany before 1933: Bookshops in Railway Stations, Kiosks, and Street Vendors," *Social History* 27, no. 3 (2002): 273–87, here 286; David Crew, *Germans on Welfare From Weimar to Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79–88, 157–65; Pamela E. Swett, *Neighbors and Enemies: The Culture of Radicalism in Berlin, 1929–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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all-or-nothing situation; Communists predicted the imminent downfall of capitalism as the prerequisite for a proletarian revolution; Social Democrats and liberals used the notion of crisis to opt for reform in a spirit of democratic humanism. For all these voices, the present was dire but the future yielded many opportunities, provided it was ushered in soon.[7] Against this background, the linkage between suicide and crisis loses its objective, taken-for-granted status. Instead, it seems worth exploring how the two were connected and how this connection fits into the broader cultural and political context of the period.

The present article aims to address these questions through an extensive analysis of the press, including partisan newspapers with strong ideological agendas as well as tabloids replete with human interest stories. It also discusses individual cases as documented by the police or school administrations, for the crisis discourse had direct implications on how people interpreted their own or others' suicides. Farewell notes in particular need to be read contextually rather than transhistorically, as Ursula Baumann has recently done, contending that they make manifest a "basic structure of human freedom."[8] Work on early modern and nineteenth-century Europe has already demonstrated how the study of suicide can shed light on constructions of the self, on interpersonal conflicts, and on public attitudes toward social and moral change.[9] This opens promising fields for historians of the "Age of Extremes,"[10] not least those interested in one of its most emblematic sites: Berlin in the first half of the twentieth century.

While several cultural historians have already explored the productive and destructive aspects of modernity in the German metropolis,[11] a convincing

[7]See Peter Fritzsche, "Landscape of Danger, Landscape of Design: Crisis and Modernism in Weimar Germany," in *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia: Camden House, 1994), 29–46; Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf, eds., *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik. Kritik eines Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2005); Rüdiger Graf, "Optimismus und Pessimismus in der Krise—Der politisch-kulturelle Diskurs in der Weimarer Republik," in *Ordnungen in der Krise. Zur politischen Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands 1900–1933*, ed. Wolfgang Hardtwig (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007), 115–40.

[8]Baumann, *Vom Recht*, 347.

[9]See Andreas Bähr, *Der Richter im Ich. Die Semantik der Selbsttötung in der Aufklärung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002); Vera Lind, *Selbstmord in der Frühen Neuzeit. Diskurs, Lebenswelt und sozialer Wandel am Beispiel der Herzogtümer Schleswig und Holstein* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); Anderson, *Suicide*; Bailey, *"This Rash Act"*; Susan K. Morrissey, *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[10]Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994). For existing attempts, see Kenneth M. Pinnow, "Violence against the Collective Self and the Problem of Social Integration in Early Bolshevik Russia," *Kritika* 4, no. 3 (2003): 653–77; Christian Goeschel, "Suicide at the End of the Third Reich," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (2006): 153–73.

[11]For micro-historical approaches, see Thomas Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik. Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin 1900–1914* (Bonn: Dietz, 1995); Belinda Davis, *Home Fires*

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study on suicide is missing thus far. Many observers asserted a relationship between the suicides and the crisis-ridden situation not only in Germany, but specifically in Berlin. It is no accident that the aforementioned films, novels, and newspaper reports are all set in the capital. The history of suicide thus engages the media landscape, the political culture, as well as the subjective experiences of Weimar Berlin. In particular, this article reconstructs how conservative, Nazi, Communist, and liberal newspapers gave a sense of urgency to their respective agendas by invoking suicides. At the same time, it analyzes how suicide was connected to broader concerns about urban modernity. It then focuses on how some people who took their own lives shared assumptions about crisis and how conflicts preceding the suicides of two reform school pupils as well as two working-class women relate to that issue. Finally, the article seeks to illuminate the broader relevance of the relationship between suicide and crisis for our understanding of Weimar Berlin.

Mediatizing and Politicizing Suicide

The media landscape in Weimar Berlin was notoriously heterogeneous, dynamic, and contested. By the turn of the century, the commercial press had already begun to compete for the short-spanned attention of a metropolitan public.[12] In the 1920s and early 1930s, the competition for readers only intensified. Despite the economic difficulties of the period, Berliners spent significant amounts of money on information and entertainment. On top of the already existing tabloids *B.Z. am Mittag* and *8-Uhr-Abendblatt*, the highbrow papers *Vossische Zeitung* and *Berliner Tageblatt* (all liberal) or the middle-brow and conservative *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, new tabloids such as Ullstein's liberal-leaning *Tempo*, Alfred Hugenberg's conservative *Berliner Illustrierte Nachtausgabe*, and the unorthodox Communist Willi Münzenberg's *Die Welt am Abend* appeared; Joseph Goebbels's *Der Angriff* was modeled on tabloids as well. A commercial dynamic tied in with the intense struggle for political predominance in the Weimar period. Democracy was more firmly rooted in the capital than elsewhere in Germany but in the late 1920s, this began to change. According to one historian, the more confrontational political climate was due to the

Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Swett, *Neighbors*. For a focus on the media, see Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Moritz Föllmer, "Die Berliner Boulevardpresse und die Politik der Individualität in der Zwischenkriegszeit," in *Ordnungen in der Krise*, ed. Hardtwig, 293–326; and Daniel Siemens, "'Vom Leben getötet.' Die Gerichtsreportage in der liberaldemokratischen Presse im Berlin der 1920er Jahre," in ibid., 327–54. For a combination of both, see Sace Elder, "Murder Scenes: Violence in the Public Culture and Private Lives of Weimar Berlin" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2002).

[12]Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900*.

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erosion of the material foundations of municipal democracy, as well as to a deep spiritual and moral crisis.[13]

From our perspective, we need to add that this crisis was not an objective phenomenon but the result of an intense and partisan effort of cultural construction. Bernhard Fulda has persuasively demonstrated how German Nationalists, Nazis, and Communists used their print media to combine sensationalism and agitation by creating and fuelling scandals.[14] Given the commitment by liberal mayor Gustav Böß as well as municipal welfare officials to attend to the situation of every individual in the city,[15] suicides were particularly attractive entry points for such attacks. They served to hammer home the Nazis' and Communists' mantra that the present "system" in Berlin and Germany as a whole was generally an unlivable environment, ultimately forcing its victims to kill themselves. Alongside such attacks from the political extremes, however, the liberal highbrow papers and the Social-Democratic *Vorwärts* drew on suicides as well, highlighting the detrimental effects of an authoritarian pedagogical style on high-school pupils. Moreover, newspapers, particularly the liberal-leaning tabloids, were interested in suicides for less partisan reasons. They often made for good stories that reflected contemporary concerns about the tension between the individual and a modern life that was increasingly perceived as problematic.

The following analysis thus has to distinguish between different political milieux and other motivations of media interest. Conservatives, to begin with, could draw on an older view of suicide as the culmination of a crisis narrative built on feelings of uneasiness about individualization. According to this interpretation, when the erosion of religion and family reached a tipping point individuals were no longer prevented from killing themselves.[16] In the Weimar context of defeat, revolution, Republican system, and economic depression, their moral integration seemed even more at risk. Conservatives frequently drew on the notion of crisis to describe this situation;[17] it was against

[13]Alexander Wilde, "Republikfeindschaft in der Berliner Bevölkerung und der Wandel der kommunalen Selbstverwaltung um 1931," in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Berliner Demokratie 1919–1933/1945–1985*, ed. Otto Büsch (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1986), 97–142, here 111; for the social and political context, see also Otto Büsch and Wolfgang Haug, *Berliner Demokratie 1919–1985 I. Berlin als Hauptstadt der Weimarer Republik 1919–1933* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987); Henning Köhler, "Berlin in der Weimarer Republik (1919–1932)," in *Geschichte Berlins Bd. 2. Von der Märzrevolution bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Wolfgang Ribbe (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 3rd ed., 2002), 795–923.

[14]Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and "Industries of Sensationalism: German Tabloids in Weimar Berlin," in *Mass Media, Culture, and Society in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Karl-Christian Führer and Corey Ross (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 183–203.

[15]See, for instance, Gustav Böß, *Die sozialen Aufgaben der Kommunalpolitik* (Berlin: Sieben Stäbe, 1928); and several contributions in *Berliner Wohlfahrtsblatt* 5, no. 1 (January 6, 1929).

[16]This pattern of explanation is very well analyzed by Baumann, *Vom Recht*, 227–304.

[17]Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 220–53; see also Martin H. Geyer, *Verkehrte Welt. Revolution, Inflation und Moderne: München 1914–1924*

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this background that suicides were interpreted. The Berlin-based Protestant pastor Gerhard Füllkrug thus wrote widely on the relationship between suicide and urban modernity, stressing that family and religion had lost their binding force.[18] He also founded the *Permanent Commission for the Observation and Prevention of Suicide* in 1925, which campaigned against suicide and tried to assist suicidal people.[19]

While not advocating an openly religious interpretation, the conservative press also tended to interpret suicides as a consequence of an exaggerated and uprooted individualism. This could ultimately lead to relationship problems and psychological difficulties while eliminating moral barriers against killing oneself.[20] Such an out-of-bounds individualism was also seen as the root cause of adventurous speculation and financial crime which, when discovered, led some perpertrators to take their own lives.[21] A runaway boy who threw himself in front of a train after being caught underscored the problematic consequences of the youth's quest for freedom; the same goes for another one who robbed a woman in the upper-class district of Zehlendorf and then shot himself as a result of his fascination with adventure novels and games.[22] Since they had forgotten about their own youthful struggles, adults were in no position to advise uncompromising teenagers. A pupil even claimed in a letter to the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* that by preaching a right to self-fulfillment, youth experts produced broken personalities who could not compete and thus became tired of life early on.[23]

In contrast to conservatives, Nazis did not merely accuse modern individualism of destroying social bonds. They directly attacked the political system and

(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); Cornelie Usborne, *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany: Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1992).

[18]Gerhard Füllkrug, *Der Selbstmord. Eine moralstatistische und volkspsychologische Untersuchung* (Schwerin: Bahn, 1919), 154; Füllkrug, *Der Selbstmord in der Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit. Eine moralstatistische Untersuchung* (Schwerin: Bahn, 1927), 27, 32, 132.

[19]On Füllkrug's crusade against suicide, see Baumann, *Vom Recht*, 333–5.

[20]"Dokumente von Selbstmördern. Aus welchen Motiven sie in den Tod gehen," *Berliner illustrierte Nachtausgabe*, March 31, 1930; "Mit ihrer Tochter in den Tod. Wegen eines gelösten Verhältnisses," *Berliner illustrierte Nachtausgabe*, July 13, 1932.

[21]"Selbstmord eines ungetreuen Kassierers. Der Geflüchtete bei Breslau tot aus der Oder gezogen," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, March 1, 1930, evening edition; "Wegen geschäftlichen Zusammenbruchs in den Tod gegangen? 200 000 M. Schulden eines Berliner Schuhfabrikanten," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, July 1, 1930, morning edition; "Massenbestellungen auf sein eigenes Fabrikat. Die Hintergründe zu dem Doppel-Selbstmordversuch in Nizza," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, March 2, 1932, morning edition.

[22]"Ein Sechzehnjähriger wirft sich vor einen Stadtbahnzug," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, March 18, 1930, evening edition; "Selbstmord des vermissten Tertianers. Nach missglücktem Überfall in einer Zehlendorfer Villa," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, December 3, 1930, morning edition.

[23]Lucy Cornelßen, "Die Welt der Frau. Die Schule war es nicht . . . ," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, March 30, 1930, Sunday edition; "Briefe an den Lokal-Anzeiger. Jugend protestiert!" *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, November 23, 1932.

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dramatized the necessity of an imminent and drastic change in a life-or-death situation.[24] According to Nazi propagandists, national weakness and particularly the reparation payments that Germany had agreed to in the Young Plan had direct personal consequences, causing a despair that prompted people to kill themselves.[25] More particularly, the Social Democratic Party was targeted for prioritizing the personal interests of its politicians to the point of corruption, rather than preserving German strength and delivering on its promise of freedom, beauty, and dignity for ordinary people.[26] To illustrate this accusation of social and national treason, Goebbels's *Der Angriff* vividly described how the unemployed's bodies and souls suffered the effects of the reparation payments as well as frequent humiliation at the welfare office.[27] Under the heading "The happiness of this life in beauty and dignity could no longer bear . . ." the paper regularly listed the names of people who had killed themselves.[28]

An article in the first issue of 1931 showed how suicide could be central to a scenario of apocalypse and rebirth.[29] It imagined a hypothetical New Year's scene, highlighting the destructive consequences of the Young Plan, which allegedly enslaved Germans through long-term reparation payments. According to the author, the picture would have to include confetti and champagne corks flying in the air, as well as drunk and fat men dancing with half-naked women in the garish light of music halls. Outside, "on the screaming streets," half-starved "Young slaves" in rags would get ready to end their lives under the crushing tires of huge buses, while in cramped and cold apartments the sizzling gas tap would sing its "Young lullaby," announcing the impoverished tenants' deaths. In the upbeat neighborhoods, bourgeois Berliners would sleep on their sofas, deliberately ignoring the impending doom surrounding them. In contrast, the picture would have to show a march of determined brownshirts, their eyes looking toward the "Third Reich."[30]

In this surreal image of New Year's Eve in Berlin, suicides served to underscore the climate of despair for which moral decay, bourgeois indifference, and the Republican "system" were held responsible. In contrast to such imaginary scenarios and the listing of suicides' names, *Der Angriff* rarely thematized

[24]Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik. Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen im politisch-kulturellen Diskurs in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), 163–4; Gerhard Paul, *Aufstand der Bilder. Die NS-Propaganda vor 1933* (Bonn: Dietz, 1990), 213–52.

[25]For examples, see Goeschel, "Suicide in Weimar and Nazi Germany," 51–2.

[26]Paul, *Aufstand der Bilder*, 223–30.

[27]"'Arbeitslosigkeit frißt an der Gesundheit des Körpers und der Seele . . .' Die Auswirkungen der Youngsklaverei," *Der Angriff*, March 31, 1931; "Sind Erwerblose Menschen 2. Klasse? Unerhörte Zustände bei den Arbeitsämtern," *Der Angriff*, September 12, 1932.

[28]Paul, *Aufstand der Bilder*, 226.

[29]On this motif, see ibid., 251–2.

[30]"Totentanz der Silvesternacht. Sekt, Selbstmörder, Totschlag und Donnerschläge," *Der Angriff*, January 2, 1931; Kampmann, "Der Erwerbslose," *Der Angriff*, September 9, 1931.

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actual cases.[31] This absence reflected the utter disinterest of the Nazis in the fate of weak and desperate individuals as well as their focus on those aspects of the present that already embodied the future, above all the marching brownshirts. In one exception, the suicide of an ex-pilot who wanted his son to use the life-insurance money to save their family farm in Brandenburg was interpreted as a honorable deed, invoking the standard contrast between corrupt Jewish capitalism and the plight of German peasants.[32] Another story took an unemployed stormtrooper's suicide as further evidence of the Young Plan's dire consequences.[33] But it was of course deemed much better to continue the fight for a renewed Germany and not be discouraged by personal circumstances. The model was the stormtrooper who, facing an overwhelming majority of Communists, briefly thought that it was "pure suicide" to enter the assembly hall but nevertheless did it because his comrades needed every single man.[34]

In some respects, Communist discourse followed an analogous pattern: it identified the Weimar system, understood as a mere function of capitalist exploitation, with the crisis it inevitably produced. But compared to the Nazis, the Communist press gave more attention to the plight of ordinary people, using their experiences to dramatize the necessity of revolution. This had to do with a concerted attempt in the years around 1930 to appeal to workers and the unemployed beyond the already converted. Particularly among women, Communists had to counter a perception that they neglected personal matters for the sake of ideological purity and the party apparatus; this was one reason that they campaigned so vividly (if somewhat uneasily) for legalizing abortion in 1931.[35] Moreover, their propaganda paper *Die Rote Fahne* was widely considered to be too unappealing for metropolitan readers, who clearly expressed a desire to be informed and entertained rather than lectured at. This is why Münzenberg and his journalists ran a tabloid, *Die Welt am Abend*, which soon sold ten times as many copies as the dry party organ.[36] Beyond providing entertainment they attempted, of course, to win readers over and motivate them to join the movement. The way to bridge the gap between the ideology of class

[31]This claim is based on a reading of about forty percent of *Der Angriff* issues between 1930 and 1932.

[32]"Für die Ehre," *Der Angriff*, January 17, 1931.

[33]Van Rey, "Einem toten Kameraden. Walter Bürkner ein Opfer der Youngversklavung," *Der Angriff*, January 15, 1931.

[34]Gerhard Fischer, "Der unbekannte S.A. Mann. Als Saalschutz in Karow," *Der Angriff*, February 9, 1930.

[35]Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 223–230; Atina Grossmann, "Abortion and Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign against Paragraph 218," in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 66–86.

[36]Fulda, *Press and Politics*, 26–7, 33–4; Helmut Gruber, "Willi Münzenberg's German Communist Propaganda Empire, 1921–1933," *Journal of Modern History* 38, no. 3 (1966): 278–97, here 287–90.

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struggle and the experiences in working-class neighborhoods of the early 1930s was to tell stories of personal hardship and injust treatment. Thus the *Welt am Abend*'s pages were populated by unemployed men beaten by the police, families who faced eviction from their apartments, or typists who seemed prematurely aged because they could not find a job.[37]

Suicide cases were particularly effective for hammering home the message that capitalism was ultimately irreconcilable with human life and that federal, state, and municipal welfare policies were as insufficient as they were repressive. The story of an unemployed man who swallowed cyanide at a labor office, allegedly because of "chicanery by the authorities," is a case in point, as is the claim that three suicides directly resulted from the Papen government's pension cuts in July 1932.[38] Tales of the descent of proletarian men culminated in suicide. Thus a head of a family put an end to a spiral of long-term unemployment, ever scarcer welfare support, and increasing depression; a former boxing champion blinded by his fame could not cope with having to return to manual labor, became unemployed and paranoid, and finally threw himself down a light shaft in the Technical University.[39] In more general articles, the *Welt am Abend* pointed out that the quantity of suicides in Berlin was highest in the proletarian Wedding district and presented it as an "epidemic," suggesting that this life-threatening problem would spread unless the capitalist system was transformed.[40]

At the end of the Weimar period, similar perceptions were widespread among the Communists and the unemployed. A story of conflict in a Wedding boarding house exemplifies how the linkage of misery, injustice, and suicide resonated beyond the pages of the press. The Communist tenants' committee attempted to mobilize the neighbors by dramatizing a number of suicides or attempted suicides, portraying them as a result of imminent eviction or other forms of bureaucratic harassment. The committee's appeal focused on a sober and quiet fifty-seven-year-old who had attempted to find work for ten years and only had ninety-five Pfennig left when he killed himself—after having announced that he could no longer stand the violation of human dignity that was life in the boarding house. Now that seventy-six more tenants faced eviction, the time had come to confront

[37]"Misshandlungen auf Polizeirevier 251," *Die Welt am Abend*, November 29, 1930; "Das Leben der Frau Hoffmann. 'Ich kann meine Kinder nicht hungern sehen,'" *Die Welt am Abend*, July 13, 1931; Erich Peters, "Junge Mädchen ohne Arbeit. Gespräche mit Stenotypistinnen vor dem Arbeitsnachweis," *Die Welt am Abend*, May 4, 1932.

[38]"Selbstmord in der Arbeitsvermittlung," *Die Welt am Abend*, January 14, 1931; "Selbstmord wegen Rentenkürzungen. Die Folgen der Notverordnung," *Die Welt am Abend*, July 2, 1932.

[39]"Flucht vor dem 'kleinen Übel.' Verzweiflungstat eines Familienvaters," *Die Welt am Abend*, March 1, 1932; Fred Ostermoor, "Max Beeskows Glück und Ende. Ein furchtbarer Selbstmord und seine Vorgeschichte," *Die Welt am Abend*, May 14, 1932.

[40]"Der Wedding von heute," *Die Welt am Abend*, May 10, 1932; "Selbstmordepidemie in Berlin. Sieben Selbstmorde an einem Tage," *Die Welt am Abend*, March 31, 1932; "Selbstmordepidemie in der Stadt. Grauenhafte Zahlen klagen an," *Die Welt am Abend*, May 30, 1932.

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a profoundly unjust administration with their existential despair: "Our dead accuse them! *We don't believe in a human conscience anymore, this is our disappointment, this is our saddest experience from our year-long tenants' movement!*"[41]

As the case of the tenants' committee shows, invoking suicide was not only a way to dramatize hardship and accuse the guilty, but also a call to action. In Communist discourse, "crisis" stood for a decisive situation in which the future of the working class was imminently at stake.[42] Stories of poor people who saw no other way out than suicide were intended to motivate potential followers to join the movement, by eliciting either compassion or the fear that they might one day find themselves in the same situation. Communist interest in proletarian misery thus was limited. Suicides were understandable in the cases of an impoverished actress whom welfare bureaucrats had refused a decent apartment or of a blind and desperate father of five.[43] But they were also explicitly depicted as a prime example for a misguidedly individualistic course of action: "Suicide is not the answer," admonished the *Welt am Abend*. "Only the struggle of the working people following the example of the Soviet Union will bring bread and work to all. And nobody is allowed to withdraw himself from this struggle."[44]

Given the well-known attacks of both Nazis and Communists against the Weimar Republic, it may come as a surprise that there also was a fair amount of liberal self-confidence in the second half of the 1920s and even the early 1930s. Despite the shrinking fortunes of the German Democratic Party at the federal level as well as in Prussia, the liberal public in the capital was still sizable and influential, somewhat relying on the assumption that the backward provinces east of the Elba would sooner or later follow suit. When attacking conservative authoritarianism by pointing out its individual impact, the *Vossische Zeitung* and the *Berliner Tageblatt* were in line with a broader reformist current and also with the electorally much more powerful Social Democrats. Thus, the liberal papers confidently argued for a reform of the courts by claiming a "crisis of confidence in the justice system" brought about by the contrast between the imperial judges' outdated approach and the new age of personal rights and a democratic transparency.[45] Similarly, both liberals and Social

[41]Appeal of the tenants' committee of the bachelors' home on Brunnenplatz, June 3, 1931, LAB, A Rep. 001-02, no. 174 (emphasis in original).

[42]See Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik*, 165–6.

[43]"Die Hölle in der Auguststraße. Der erschütternde Selbstmord einer völlig verarmten Schauspielerin," *Welt am Abend*, July 1, 1931; "Blindentragödie im Berliner Osten. Vater von fünf Kindern erhängt sich," *Welt am Abend*, July 3, 1931.

[44]"Selbstmordepidemie in der Stadt. Grauenhafte Zahlen klagen an," *Die Welt am Abend*, May 30, 1932.

[45]See Daniel Siemens, "Die 'Vertrauenskrise der Justiz' in der Weimarer Republik," in *"Krise" der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Föllmer and Graf, 139-63; Henning Grunwald, "Die 'Vertrauenskrise der Justiz' in der Weimarer Republik. Justizkritik als Krisendiagnostik," in *Krisis! Krisenszenarien,*

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Democrats diagnosed a crisis resulting from authoritarian and bureaucratic schooling as well as from excessive pressure to achieve that parents and employers put on pupils.[46]

Suicides provided the ideal rhetorical device for dramatizing these criticisms and pressing for changes. Liberal and Social Democratic papers pointed to the fatal consequences that the harsh punishment still meted out by many parents could have on their fearful children.[47] They moreover drew on the suspicion that a rigid school system could not be sufficiently attentive to sensitive pupils—a motif that had already been formulated and linked to suicides in Hermann Hesse's novella *Under the Wheel* and other prewar publications.[48] "The teacher is no bureaucrat," one author wrote, adding that the observation of pupils' souls and the comradely cooperation with them through walking tours and sporting events should become the guiding pedagogical principles.[49] Commenting on two suicide attempts, *Vorwärts* criticized that parental pressure to acquire a diploma at any price translated into problematic pedagogical practices: "Our current school system with its formal ideal of education has no space for pupils with burning fantasy."[50]

This reformist critique clashed with conservative views on education after Josef Adler failed his final exam at a Berlin-Friedenau high school and shot himself the same night.[51] His mother was convinced that the school principal, Professor Karl Pflug, was to blame for an unexpectedly tough and even unfair procedure. She asked the celebrated theater critic Alfred Kerr for help in mobilizing liberal public opinion. Kerr agreed and attacked the principal in a series of articles in the *Berliner Tageblatt*. As a former deputy to the Prussian parliament for the German Nationalist People's Party, Pflug was a particularly apt target for highlighting the detrimental impact that conservative teachers with their combination of authoritarianism and formalism could have. Thus, another

Diagnosen und Diskursstrategien, ed. Grunwald and Manfred Pfister (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), 177–99.

[46]On Weimar reformism in pedagogical thinking and educational politics, see Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, "Pädagogisches Denken," in *Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte, Vol. V 1918–1945*, ed. Tenorth and Dieter Langewiesche (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1989), 111–53; Marjorie Lamberti, *The Politics of Education: Teachers and School Reform in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2002).

[47]"Die dritte Schülertragödie," *Vossische Zeitung*, September 27, 1928, evening edition; "Die Tragödie der Vierzehnjährigen," *Vorwärts*, February 2, 1928, morning edition.

[48]On this continuity, see Joachim Schiller, *Schülerselbstmorde in Preußen. Spiegelungen des Schulsystems?* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992).

[49]"Ein Geheimerlaß für die Schulen," *Vossische Zeitung*, February 25, 1928, morning edition.

[50]"Tragödie unseres Schulsystems. Die Elternversammlung in der Königsstädtischen Oberrealschule," *Vorwärts*, September 28, 1928, evening edition. See also "Janssen tot aufgefunden," *Berliner Tageblatt*, September 30, 1928, morning edition; "Schülerselbstmorde und 'Berechtigung,'" *Vossische Zeitung*, October 20, 1928, evening edition.

[51]See the account in Schiller, *Schülerselbstmorde*, 308-66, which largely follows the liberal version of the story.

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school principal and longtime liberal opponent of Pflug echoed Kerr's charges in the *Vossische Zeitung*. He pointed to severe pedagogical mistakes: after having given Josef largely positive feedback, Pflug subjected him to a tough oral exam, bombarding him with detailed questions on military history. Josef was denied his degree, despite the fact that he received passing or good grades in most other subjects, wrote a very good German essay, and demonstrated personal maturity. To add insult to injury, Pflug had publicly blamed family problems for the pupil's difficulties and even hinted at homosexuality.[52]

With the education and the very life of human beings at stake, the shortcomings of Pflug had become a matter of public interest. Since cases like this jeopardized parents' and pupils' confidence in the school system, the school administration was called to investigate and enforce changes. The accused school principal disputed nearly every feature of the story: Josef Adler had not had all passing grades, the positive judgment had been in a letter of recommendation, the oral exam had been fair, and the outcome had taken into account the pupil's performance in all subjects as well as his character. Moreover, Josef had voiced suicidal thoughts long before the exam. The conservative *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* supported Pflug and accused the liberal papers of destroying the bond of trust between teachers and pupils at the school through a politically motivated campaign.[53] Pflug's opponent, however, stuck to his version and kept criticizing his conservative colleague for giving the pupil false security, subjecting him to an unfair procedure, and then failing him on formalistic grounds.[54]

Behind the attacks on the school system or on particular teachers loomed a broader concern for the individual that was prominent in much of the liberal and even conservative press since the turn of the century.[55] Now it received even stronger emphasis. Did public institutions, urban life, and the capitalist economy attend sufficiently to personal needs? Could Berliners, despite the claims and insinuations of Nazis and Communists, survive as individuals in the metropolis? The answers to these questions highlighted a variety of problems and possible solutions. The tension between the individual and modern life in its various aspects tied in with the boom in human interest stories fuelled by journalists seeking to gain the upper hand in a combative market. The liberal-leaning

[52]Prof. Paul Hildebrandt, "Selbstmord eines Abiturienten. Wo bleibt die Aufsichtsbehörde?" *Vossische Zeitung*, March 12, 1932, morning edition; Prof. Dr. Paul Hildebrandt, "Offener Brief an Herrn Oberstudiendirektor Professor Dr. Pflug," *Vossische Zeitung*, March 19, 1932, morning edition.

[53]Karl Pflug, "Zum Fall Adler," *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, March 13, 1932; "Der Friedenauer Schüler-Selbstmord," *Vossische Zeitung*, March 19, 1932; "Leichenfrevel," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, March 5, 1932, evening edition.

[54]Prof. Dr. Paul Hildebrandt, "Der Selbstmord am Friedenauer Gymnasium," *Vossische Zeitung*, March 16, 1932, morning edition; Prof. Dr. Paul Hildebrandt, "Offener Brief an Herrn Oberstudiendirektor Professor Dr. Pflug," *Vossische Zeitung*, March 19, 1932, morning edition.

[55]For the years around the turn of the century, see Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900*, 121–22.

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tabloids took a lead in this realm, but similar stories were told in the pages of other newspapers as well. According to the press, Berliners could fail economically or lose self-control, be hit by a car or mugged in the street, or misjudge their fellow citizens or clash with them in public space.[56] Suicides in particular stood for the moments when this latent tension escalated dramatically. For instance, some people could disturb the well-regulated life of the city by throwing themselves in front of a subway train and thus shocking, delaying, or even jeopardizing passengers and staff.[57] The metropolis was thus depicted as a smoothly functioning machine, which suicides managed to disrupt through their very last act.

In other accounts, individuals appeared to kill themselves because modern life itself assumed an overwhelming quality. This motif was particularly prominent at a time of discontinuity. The press highlighted how the steady rise of Germany's and Berlin's prewar fortunes had given way to a period of short-term ruptures: spectacular successes and sudden downfalls were equally possible, with the latter clearly dominating the early 1930s. This crisis-ridden, all-or-nothing quality of Weimar modernity held a positive fascination for many intellectuals,[58] but in the Berlin press, frightening stories about those unable to cope with the new circumstances loomed large. Thus a Reich civil servant killed himself because he had been laid off and believed himself too old to find another job.[59] A promising police officer who had run over a girl with his car committed suicide even though he had caused only minor injuries.[60]

Economic dislocation produced psychological crisis, claimed the press. Some businessmen were driven first into bankruptcy and then into suicide, including the last surviving speculator of the 1870s and a director who was prosecuted because he had continued to accept payments shortly before closing his bank.[61] Papers also reported how the suicide of Ivar Kreuger, an enigmatic

[56]For an extensive treatment of this discourse, see Föllmer, "Berliner Boulevardpresse." In the early 1930s, reports on suicide in the tabloid press rapidly increased way beyond the actual rate for Germany or Berlin; see Goeschel, "Suicide in Weimar and Nazi Germany," 61.

[57]"Stadtbahn fuhr noch schneller," *B.Z. am Mittag*, May 23, 1930; "Ein Sechzehnjähriger wirft sich vor einen Stadtbahnzug," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, March 18, 1930, evening edition; "Selbstmord auf der U-Bahn. Schreckensszene auf dem Bahnhof Breitenbachplatz," *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, March 30, 1932, morning edition.

[58]See Fritzsche, "Landscape of Danger"; Michael Makropoulos, "Krise und Kontingenz. Zwei Kategorien im Modernitätsdiskurs der Klassischen Moderne," in *"Krise" der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Föllmer and Graf, 45–76.

[59]"Die Tragödie eines 'Abgebauten.' Aus Gram über seine bevorstehende Entlassung Selbstmord auf den Schienen verübt," *8 Uhr-Abendblatt*, February 5, 1924.

[60]"Tragischer Tod eines Polizeioffiziers. Selbstmord nach einem geringfügigen Autounfall," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, November 30, 1930.

[61]"Wie der große Spekulant in den Tod ging. Das Ende des 'letzten Gründers,'" *B.Z. am Mittag*, March 8, 1930; "Selbstmord des Direktors Braun. Der Zusammenbruch der Handelsbank," *Vossische Zeitung*, March 4, 1932, evening edition.

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Swedish entrepreneur who could no longer find loans for his conglomerate, caused turbulences on the New York, London, and Berlin stock markets.[62] For the press, such high-profile cases had a disturbing fascination because they stood for the fall from grace of determined bourgeois men. The same people who had dominated the decades before the war and even the 1920s now seemed dangerously outdated, overwhelmed by the complexities and ruptures of an economy that seemed beyond personal control.

In addition to their emphasis on Berliners overwhelmed by sudden misfortune, the papers also suggested that suicidal situations were crucial moments in a struggle for love. How to reconcile "rational," matter-of-fact relationships between men and women with the equally important quest for emotional authenticity was a crucial theme in their pages.[63] Against this background, some suicide stories had a particular value because they revealed that even in modern times, there was still a place for romantic sacrifice. Readers learned about two sixteen-year-old girls who committed suicide after having fallen in love with the same boy, who rejected both of them.[64] Another story introduced two young lovers who killed themselves after their parents had forbidden them to meet.[65] The case of a nurse who followed her patient, a moribund professor, into death illustrated personal commitment. The same goes for the story of an impoverished count who wrote a letter to the *B.Z. am Mittag* before killing himself, appealing to the readers to support his widow.[66] Couples who committed suicide together ultimately demonstrated the possibility of love until and beyond the very end.[67] According to one journalist, the ultimate proof of mutual trust for a couple was to kill themselves in separate rooms, because this isolation eliminated the usual element of control: "They did not need the consoling proximity of the partner . . . Since their life was so completely one, they were able to separate in death. Because they held each other completely

[62]"Selbstmord Ivar Kreugers. In seiner Pariser Wohnung erschossen aufgefunden. Der Tod bis zum späten Nachmittag verheimlicht," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, March 13, 1932; "Kreuger und sein Konzern. Nur zwei Augen, aber: Zündholz-Zellulose-Erz-Telefon-Banken," *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, March 13, 1932. On the international economic repercussions, see "Kreuger-Weltecho," *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, March 15, 1932.

[63]See Moritz Föllmer, "Auf der Suche nach dem eigenen Leben. Junge Frauen und Individualität in der Weimarer Republik," in *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Föllmer and Graf, 287–317, here 305–13.

[64]"Liebestragödie zweiter 16-jähriger Mädchen. Die unglückliche Leidenschaft zum Sohn ihres Chefs," *B.Z. am Mittag*, November 1, 1924.

[65]"Weil die Eltern gegen ihre Ehe waren. Selbstmordversuch nach dem Schuß auf den Bräutigam," *B.Z. am Mittag*, March 4, 1930.

[66]"Professor Dr. Ritter in den Tod gefolgt. Selbstmord der Krankenschwester," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, November 15, 1932, evening edition; "Die Tragödie des Grafen Baudissin. Erfolge der Hilfsaktion für die Witwe," *B.Z. am Mittag*, March 28, 1931.

[67]See "Das Ende eines Gelehrtenlebens. Selbstmord Prof. Auerbachs und seiner Gattin," *Vossische Zeitung*, March 1, 1933, morning edition.

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captive, they could give themselves the last freedom. Ancient heroism in these times!"[68]

In sum, the connection between suicide and crisis was pervasive in the Berlin media of the Weimar period. Some of this fascination dated back to the years before the war, but a lot of it had to do with the intense political and commercial dynamic of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The press drew on a demand for human interest stories, which included an attention to personal plight as well as a broad feeling that the survival of individuals in the metropolis was at risk. Due to their emotional appeal, suicides were ideal for partisan interpretations from different sides of the political spectrum: conservatives blamed the loosening of moral bonds and the corresponding rise of secular individualism; Nazis invoked them to claim that Germans were doomed as "slaves" of the Young Plan and could thus only survive through national rebirth; the Communists argued that capitalism crushed workers and that solidarity marked the only path to a strong self; and liberals and Social Democrats, more assertively reformist in the capital than elsewhere, pointed to the potentially lethal repercussions of authoritarian and bureaucratic pedagogies on fragile pupils.

Less partisan newspapers and articles were interested in suicides because they seemed to epitomize the personal impact of a crisis-ridden modernity. In this view, short-term ruptures such as the breakdown of banks, an unexpected lay-off, or a car accident could all prompt people to kill themselves. In turn, suicides demonstrated how individuals could disturb the functionality of the metropolis, if only briefly. They also suggested the possibility of strong emotions and unconditional commitments even in otherwise "rational" times. Thus, the widely asserted connection between suicide, crisis, and the metropolis had more to do with the dynamics of a highly diverse and contested public sphere than with the suicide rate or the contours of individual cases. It would be misleading, however, to claim that it "only" existed in the realm of the media. For suicides themselves as well as the authorities who dealt with them often assumed that suicide and crisis were connected. In order to elucidate this phenomenon, we must look closely at individual cases.

Suicide Cases and the Appropriation of Crisis

Weimar Berlin presents us with a heterogeneous social landscape—from working-class districts such as Wedding or Neukölln, which were heavily hit by unemployment during the Depression, to the affluent western parts of the

[68]"Die Tragödie des Ehepaars von Pidoll. Ein heroischer Freitod," *B.Z. am Mittag*, October 29, 1930.

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city, with their bourgeois neighborhoods and entertainment venues.[69] The city was the site of intense political struggle and conflict, most prominently the clashes between Communists and Nazis. Moreover, it was home to a variety of institutions that aimed to discipline, educate, or support Berliners. Classical upper-level high schools such as *Gymnasien* and *Oberrealschulen* coexisted with reform institutions such as the School Farm on the Scharfenberg Island in the Tegel Lake. Welfare offices and confessional charities were confronted not only with disabled war veterans but with a steeply rising number of unemployed people.

In all these settings, suicides occurred and, if sufficiently documented, offer us fascinating glimpses of life and death in Weimar Berlin. Both tensions between individuals and institutions and conflicts between family members are important here. These conflicts consisted of, and resulted in, acts of communication. Communication between family members or between individuals and institutions was in turn often influenced by contemporary notions of crisis. Assumptions about economic decline and political commitment; feelings of entitlement to welfare support; middle-class concerns about fragile boys or superficial girls; interiorized norms of strength, purity, and heterosexuality; and working-class expectations of family loyalty in times of economic hardship all played a role in individual suicides.

Suicide notes are a last opportunity to communicate thoughts and feelings to others. Usually, they are addressed to family members and reflect the desire to explain their lethal decision, for instance by pointing to incurable illnesses or highlighting marital conflict. In Weimar Berlin, however, many suicide notes explicitly mentioned or were even addressed to state authorities. They echoed a widespread assumption that collective trends had immediate personal effects and a pervasive self-perception as victims fuelled by veterans' and pensioners' organizations.[70] A small businessman saw himself ruined by the "decline of our economy, unfair competition, and high taxes."[71] An aristocrat declared that he was a "German to his very core and a monarchist" and "fanatical devotee of Bismarck," and as such he could no longer live in a period that required so much "toadying and pussyfooting [*Liebedienerei und Leisetreterei*]."[72] Finally, a sick pensioner felt let down by authorities and emphasized that he could "not sing the praise of public welfare."[73]

[69]See, in addition to the literature referenced in footnotes 11 and 13, Ruth Glatzer, *Berlin zur Weimarer Zeit* (Berlin: Siedler, 2000). David Clay Large, *Berlin* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 41–79.

[70]See Greg A. Eghigian, "The Politics of Victimization: Social Pensioners and the German Social State in the Inflation of 1914–1924," *Central European History* 26, no. 3 (1993): 375–404.

[71]Farewell note by Max Leucht, July 15, 1930, LAB, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, Tit. 198 B, no. 1940.

[72]Self-authored obituary notice by Count Ernst von Luisi, 1927, LAB, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, Tit. 198 B, no. 1939.

[73]Ernst Riedel to his children, September 17, 1930, LAB, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, Tit. 198 B, no. 1939.

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Given the widely postulated connection between welfare institutions and individual fates, it is not surprising that suicides would refer to the state in their explanations. This, it was hoped, would draw attention to particular social causes of suicide and thus create momentum for their eventual relief. These eleventh-hour communications exploited the widespread perception of a dramatic social crisis and expectation that public institutions should solve it. A former prison guard and doorman pointed out that in spite of his efforts, he had not found a regular job in more than two years of searching. He sought to prevent the welfare office from forcing him to work for his unemployment compensation: "before I go into forced labor, I will rather disappear to a foreign country or end my life. The state will suffer: it will have to care for my wife and child."[74] Other people wrote to pastor Füllkrug and threatened to take their own lives if he did not give them money.[75]

While high expectations toward public institutions were a crucial feature of the Weimar period, they could also be directed inward and prompt personal crises. Not all contemporaries blamed their difficult situation on social developments or public institutions; some interpreted their plight as the consequence of their own shortcomings. They had internalized the Social Darwinist view of life as a struggle and at some point concluded that they could not live up to the corresponding ideals of personal or physical strength. Following an individualistic logic, they blamed themselves for their problems. Thus seventeen-year-old Erwin Dreibrodt was unable to cope with long-term feelings of inferiority. As he explained in a letter to the left-wing doctor and sex reformer Max Hodann, he had internalized his parents' high expectations and, after an excellent start, finished school with a mediocre diploma and an untrained body. Afterward, he had trouble finding an apprenticeship as a draftsman. He was then treated as inferior at every occasion and failed in his attempts to become more athletic by joining a sports club. On top of that, he was anxious about how his three-year-long masturbation habit affected his health: "You may not be able to understand how a seventeen-year-old who has hardly entered life can make such a decision. What can I still expect from life? . . . I will look death in the face and not scream when the wheels of the express train crush me."[76]

Similarly, the engineering student Wilhelm Hagemann explained his suicide by pointing out that he was overwhelmed by the expectations of, and his obligations toward, family and friends. His easy-going but strong-willed, academically successful public persona had made it impossible to reveal his other,

[74]Max Idahl to Berlin welfare office, January 10, 1929, LAB, A Rep. 001–02, no. 361.

[75]See Goeschel, "Suicide in Weimar and Nazi Germany," 62–66.

[76]Erwin Dreibrodt to Max Hodann, July 8, 1929, LAB, Pr. Br. Rep. 30 Tit. 198 B, no. 1939. See also the letter of a secondary school pupil who saw himself as an "unusable person," "incapable of anything," lacking the "force to steer his fate": Kurt Wegener to his parents, July 2, 1924, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 934.

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pessimistic and inactive, self to anyone. Recently, feelings of depression and indecision had increased and kept him from completing an important assignment. Even if he could bring himself to jump this hurdle, he was convinced that the problem would soon return and felt unable to cope with it himself: "Certainly, it may continue like this for a while but then, disappointments would come; I would be unable to maintain myself in the struggle of life and all hopes and expectations would be void." Due to the high expectations that his public persona had created, he foresaw disappointing his family who depended on his support, the German National Academic Foundation which had supported his studies, and the German nation to which he had just recently pledged allegiance. His belief that only a strong self was legitimate clearly reinforced his suicidal tendencies: "I am becoming weak and I must not! I have to be strong and now draw the consequences."[77]

In other cases, high expectations led to suicide as an act not of self-abandonment but of existential self-expression. Making a strong personal statement by ending one's life or risking it fascinated prominent writers[78] as well as less well-known Berliners, particularly boys and young men. Suicide could be the consequence of a rejection of social convention, eschewing prudence, compromise, and pragmatism.[79] A seventeen-year-old nationalist pupil thus committed suicide after his father had prohibited him from joining the *Grenzschutz*, a paramilitary organization that fought its Polish counterparts in the eastern borderlands after the war's end.[80] On the opposite end of the political spectrum, three dedicated young Communists first talked about suicide and then shot themselves in November 1927. It is unclear to what extent they were suddenly drawn in by the initially playful idea to take their own lives together, as the only survivor suggested; deeply disappointed with the state of their movement ten years after the Russian Revolution as claimed by the police report as well as Social Democratic and conservative papers; or had individualistically deviated from the party line and read too much Nietzsche, as the *Rote Fahne* retorted.[81]

[77]Suicide note by Wilhelm Hagemann, July 9, 1929, LAB, Pr. Br. Rep. 30 Tit. 198 B, no. 1940.

[78]See Godfrey Carr, "'The Golden Age or Nothingness': Some German Intellectuals and the Idea of Suicide," in *The Weimar Dilemma: Intellectuals in the Weimar Republic*, ed. Anthony Phelan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 92–109; Benjamin Robinson, "'Ist Knastschieben denn schön?' Hans Fallada und die Krise des Willens in der Weimarer Republik," in *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Föllmer and Graf, 347–64.

[79]Michael Wildt even speaks of an "unconditional generation" and convincingly demonstrates the later importance of this mentality for the SS officers who prepared and carried out the Holocaust. See his *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003).

[80]Kaiser Wilhelms-Realgymnasium Berlin to Provincial School Administration, March 14, 1919, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 934; for a similar case in the Brandenburg town of Guben, see Gymnasium Guben to Provincial School Administration, December 31, 1919, ibid.

[81]Assistant Physician Ruse to Police Head Office Berlin, no date; Report of the Kriminal-Inspektion A, November 7, 1927, LAB, Pr. Br. Rep. 30 Tit. 198 B, no. 430; "Gemeinsamer

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In any event, and remarkably enough, political and philosophical discussions and the flirt with a firearm had suddenly amounted to a deadly combination.

An existential, all-or-nothing mentality also featured in cases without a strong political valence. High school pupil Peter Schumann threatened to shoot other people and himself in the classroom. Then, he ran out with his revolver and locked himself in a toilet until the police eventually overwhelmed him. A few weeks prior, the talented but excitable teenager had attached an appeal to the school's bulletin board in which he protested against what he saw as a meaningless educational system. He demanded that the school reduce the number of lessons, abolish punishments, and fire incapable teachers. According to the principal, Peter perceived himself as a reformer and could not bear the discrepancy between his ideal and the realities surrounding him.[82]

In another case, sixteen-year old Heinz Jaworski justified his suicide by explaining that he was "fed up with being bored six hours a day, wasting one year after another with math": "School has taken the last bit of my self-confidence. Good-bye to this goddamn life." The report brought out that the pupil did not suffer from parental pressure or resent individual teachers. He rather rejected the school as an institution and generally the regulated nature of bourgeois life.[83] Finally, the nineteen-year-old Günther Scheller shot a friend of his sister and himself, after indulging in heavy drinking and composing a "suicide pact" with his friend Paul Krantz. Krantz had procured the revolver from a nationalist youth organization but refrained from killing himself and Scheller's sister during the suicidal night. He was tried at court first for murder and then as an accessory to murder.[84] More than four decades later, Krantz could not understand how he could have taken part in such a lethal mix of undigested philosophy, erotic illusion, and pathetic alienation.[85]

The Berlin media widely agreed that the "Steglitz pupils' tragedy" of Günther Scheller and Paul Krantz reflected a larger crisis of youth. They portrayed Krantz as a victim and expressed considerable sympathy for him.[86] In less prominent cases as well, the perceived crisis of youthful individuality influenced how school authorities, teachers, and sometimes even parents interpreted suicide.

Selbstmord dreier Kommunisten," *Der Tag*, November 7, 1927; "'Den politischen Glauben verloren . . .?' Das Rätsel um den Selbstmord der Drei in Köpenick," *Vorwärts*, November 8, 1927.

[82]Schiller, *Schülerselbstmorde*, 272–274; "Tragödie unseres Schulsystems. Die Elternversammlung in der Königsstädtischen Oberrealschule," *Vorwärts*, September 28, 1928, late edition.

[83]Leibniz Oberrealschule Berlin-Charlottenburg to Provincial School Administration, March 11, 1929, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 937.

[84]See the account in Schiller, *Schülerselbstmorde*, 194–204.

[85]Ernst Erich Noth (=Paul Krantz), *Erinnerungen eines Deutschen* (Hamburg: Claassen, 1971), 101.

[86]See the summaries of the debate in Schiller, *Schülerselbstmorde*, 180-251; Thomas Lange, "Der 'Steglitzer Schülermordprozeß' 1928," in *"Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit." Der Mythos Jugend*, ed. Thomas Koebner et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 412–37.

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Here, gender stereotypes played an important role: girls allegedly killed themselves or attempted to do so because they were "psychopathic." They tended toward "the theatrical gesture" and had an "addiction to boasting." They were labelled unstable, overly sensitive and capricious, or possessed of a strong propensity to "smoke, fashion [themselves], seek attention, and have contact with boys."[87] In another case, the fact that a girl came from an actors' family accounted for her "addiction to seeking attention" and ultimately for her lethal act.[88]

The stereotyping of suicidal girls shows that at a time when gender norms were increasingly challenged by women, they were all the more strictly applied to girls who attempted to expand the narrow boundaries of legitimate female subjectivity.[89] In turn, boys' suicides were not accounted for as easily, reflecting a contemporary insecurity whether male frailness required a harsh treatment or a more understanding attitude.[90] The explanations brought forward ranged from a mother's observation that "youth now has no Emperor, no god, and thus no footing anymore" to a school principal's critique that the parents of a suicide had "not exactly . . . attempted to make the young man tougher and to strengthen his character."[91] But when a boy had "a soft disposition," he required parental sensitivity instead of being beaten by his mother in public.[92] No parallel concern for the personal development of fragile girls emerges from the school authorities' reports on suicides, which display little inclination to inquire carefully into their prehistory. We are thus left with brief reports that hardly lend themselves to detailed historical analysis.

Further evidence of how explanations for a suicide were influenced by gender stereotypes and crisis assumptions can be gained from two particularly well-documented cases that happened at the School Farm Scharfenberg Island. This institution was a showcase project of the pedagogical reform movement that gained force during the Weimar years. On an island in Tegel Lake,

[87]Gymnasium zum Grauen Kloster to Provincial School Administration, December 6, 1926, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 935; Clara Schaefers Gemeindeschule XXXIII Charlottenburg, report on pupil Luzia Stepanski, January 9, 1928, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 936; Schillerlyzeum to Provincial School Administration, August 18, 1927, ibid.

[88]Cäcilienschule Berlin-Spandau to Provincial School Administration, February 17, 1928, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 936. The report quotes the girl's parents here.

[89]See Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), 179–80, 185.

[90]The controversies whether psychologically damaged veterans should be treated as hysterical or as traumatized men are a case in point. See Paul Lerner, *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 193–208.

[91]Reformgymnasium und Oberrealschule Berlin-Weißensee to Provincial School Administration, September 15, 1919, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 934; Leibniz Oberrealschule Berlin-Charlottenburg to Provincial School Administration, March 11, 1929, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 936.

[92]5th Oberrealschule to Provincial School Administration, August 13, 1927, BLHA Potsdam, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 936.

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around seventy boys lived under the tutelage of Wilhelm Blume, by all accounts a committed teacher and impressive personality. Remote from the influences and temptations of metropolitan life, they led a simple life, worked physically as well as intellectually, and were taught to develop their own selves in interaction with their teachers.[93] But as the diary of pupil Heinz Link reveals, education at the School Farm also had problematic aspects. Heinz was troubled by homosexual relations, difficulties of integrating into the school's social life, and the impossibility of living up to the personal demands of being a "Scharfenberger." Moreover, he had a difficult relationship with his parents and could not expect much help from the principal, either, since Blume only admonished him to develop his personality in a more serious way. Heinz began indulging in suicidal thoughts: "my life arguably was no more than a failed experiment."[94]

When the pupil talked publicly about killing himself two years later, his principal did not take him seriously. And when he finally committed suicide, Blume came up with a simple explanation: Heinz had been a pleasant and intelligent but superficial, dishonest, and unstable pupil, ultimately unfit for "the natural way of life out here." Although he did some voluntary work for the school library, he frequented the fairgrounds and cafes in the center of Berlin and lied about these trips afterward, received expensive gifts from his parents, talked to his classmates about stock market speculation, and volunteered for female roles in school plays. Blume did not even consider whether the school could have done more to help Heinz cope with his problems—despite the fact that the pupil had written him a farewell letter and explained that he had never trusted him or felt at home at Scharfenberg. For the principal, Heinz was a profoundly inauthentic person of dubious masculinity, a player of various roles who was unwilling to resist the influence of his family background and of metropolitan consumer society. Reading this self-righteous account, one cannot help but conclude that Blume used Heinz Link's suicide to confirm rather than question his pedagogical principles.[95]

One and a half years later, there was another suicide on the School Farm, but this time, the case was very different and briefly provoked doubts in Wilhelm Blume. Unlike Heinz Link, seventeen-year-old Bruno George had been a model pupil who did well in the classroom, rarely left the island, cultivated his own garden, and cared for the school's poultry. Moreover, he developed his personality according to Blume's methods. His autobiographical writing

[93]See Dietmar Haubfleisch, *Schulfarm Insel Scharfenberg. Mikroanalyse der reformpädagogischen Unterrichts- und Erziehungsrealität einer demokratischen Versuchsschule im Berlin der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2001).

[94]Diary of Heinz Link, November 1, 1925–April 29, 1926, quote: April 29, 1926, LAB, E Rep. 200–42, Wilhelm Blume papers, no. 3.

[95]Principal of the Schoolfarm Scharfenberg Island to Provincial School Administration, January 12, 1928; farewell letter of Heinz Link to headmaster Blume, no date; Provincial School Administration to Minister of Education, April 20, 1928, all in BLHA, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 936.

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was remarkable for "its coherence and the touching openness of its confessions." Since Bruno was a quiet person, Blume received his "steps toward a freer way of being" all the more positively. His friendship to a classmate had taken on a "somewhat overenthusiastic form" but did not violate "purity." But then, the principal noticed that something was troubling his pupil. When his writings revealed passion and sensuality, Blume recommended more "orderliness,"[96] but he failed to recognize the seriousness of Bruno's personal problems. In his diary, the pupil described suffering from the discrepancy between the desire to be by himself and the necessity to interact with classmates, between longing to be pure and strong and feeling dirty and weak due to his homosexual encounters. Moreover, the expectation to be "the most lively, most productive" pupil conflicted with his recurring feelings of mediocrity. Blume's admonishments, criticisms, and attempts to gain access to his pupils' inner life were not much help, and Bruno soon fell under the influence of his boyfriend's suicidal thoughts.[97]

When this relationship began to sour, Bruno became increasingly desperate. His eventual suicide caught Blume by surprise. The principal now suffered under the bitter realization that his attempts to monitor and direct the inner development of his model pupil had failed utterly: "Even the greatest pedagogical optimism is shaken; for this [the diary] was written by a boy whom, despite his principled unconventionality that always wanted to stand alone on its own two feet, we did not think capable of having *such* convulsions destroying his strength."[98] Thus, the pedagogical reformer Blume reacted in a wholly different way to Bruno George's suicide than to Heinz Link's. The former case shattered his self-confidence after the latter had strenghtened his convictions.

Without denying the unprecedented space for individual development opened at Scharfenberg and the positive impact this had on the lives of numerous alumni,[99] there was a highly problematic nexus between Blume's project and contemporary crisis discourses. Because Scharfenberg pupils were supposed to develop their true selves away from the crisis-ridden metropolis, a boy such as Heinz Link who frequently sneaked off to the center of Berlin could not hope for help and understanding. Moreover, both he and Bruno George had interiorized the principal's high expectations of developing a perfectly "pure"

[96]Principal of the School Farm Scharfenberg Island to Provincial School Administration, July 22, 1929, BLHA, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 937.

[97]Diary of Bruno X [George], September 14, 1928–July 4, 1929, quote: April 21, 1929, LAB, E Rep. 200-42, Wilhelm Blume papers, no. 3.

[98]Principal of the School Farm Scharfenberg Island to Provincial School Administration, July 22, 1929, BLHA, Pr. Br. Rep. 34, no. 937 (emphasis in original).

[99]See the positive interpretations by Haubfleisch, *Schulfarm Insel Scharfenberg*, and Wolfgang Keim, "Zur Aktualität reformpädagogischer Schulmodelle. Das Beispiel der Schulfarm Insel Scharfenberg," *Jahrbuch des Archivs der deutschen Jugendbewegung* 16 (1986/87): 295–320.

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self and were thus unable to cope with ambivalences and disappointments. And because Blume was so convinced of his ability to monitor his pupils' inner development, he was blind to actual personal crises, particularly in the event of a homosexual relationship that he considered impossible between true Scharfenbergers.

Despite the way in which gender stereotypes determined the attention of teachers and school authorities and thus the archival evidence available to historians, we need not confine ourselves to middle-class boys in our analysis of individual cases. Police officers carefully investigated the circumstances of suicides whenever they were at first unable to exclude the possibility of murder.[100] Take the case of Elly Ambrosius, a fifteen-year-old girl, who drowned herself in a canal in working-class Neukölln in spring 1926. Questioning of family members and acquaintances revealed that Elly liked to go to the fairground or dance on the street.[101] She invented stories of meeting her first love and of working in a printing shop, of accompanying silent movies on the piano, and attending a masked ball as a "Spanish girl." These stories prompted other teens in the neighborhood to ridicule her and her mother to doubt her credibility. Johanna Ambrosius earned money as a porter and by delivering the *Vorwärts*. She expected her daughter Elly to help her in her work and to abide by "strict discipline in the house." Reacting harshly to fairground excursions and breaches of curfew, she threatened to send her daughter to a reformatory and frequently hit her.[102] Elly often complained about this harsh treatment. Instead of serving as a maid, she wanted to work in a factory and thereby gain some freedom.[103] Her interactions with other teens offered little consolation. But she liked to be with her friend Frida Neumann who lived with her uncle and aunt. One evening, Elly even told Frida's aunt that she considered her a second mother—days after being hit by her own mother on the street.[104] When Frida's uncle later sent her home, she threw herself from the bridge.

At first glance, the fifteen-year-old's suicide seems to have resulted from a purely private conflict, as in many other cases from the Weimar period. But even in the absence of an explanatory note, the prehistory of her suicide points to larger issues of the times. Elly Ambrosius's demand for factory work and her excursions to the fairground testify to her desire to lead a life of her own. Her imaginative stories about attending masked balls or playing the piano in a movie theater expressed dreams of an extraordinary existence

[100]Goeschel, "Suicide in Weimar and Nazi Germany," 69.

[101]For the following, see LAB, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, Tit. 198 B, no. 427.

[102]Statement by Johanna Ambrosius, May 7, 1926, ibid. It was not unusual for working-class mothers to expect their daughters to contribute to the family economy, even though Johanna Ambrosius interpreted her role in a particularly rigid way. See Christina Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen. Arbeitermädchen in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1999), 77–96, 107–10.

[103]Statement by Johanna Ambrosius, May 7, 1926, LAB, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, Tit. 198 B, no. 427.

[104]Statement by Frida Neumann, May 6, 1926, ibid.

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instead of delivering newspapers and respecting a strict curfew. Her quest for parental understanding and trust is equally clear: she called Frida's aunt a "second mother" but realized that such a surrogate family was also inviable when she was eventually sent home. The contrast between these expectations and her own mother's priority on enforcing discipline in times of economic scarcity could hardly have been stronger. It ultimately led to Elly's suicide. Johanna Ambrosius was certainly no anxious middle-class woman, but her views correlated to the discourse on youth crisis in that she was only willing to grant her daughter's subjectivity a very narrow space. In this sense, Elly Ambrosius's suicide tells us something about the family conflicts that fuelled the perception of generational difference and were in turn shaped by it.

Another case leads us even further away from the focus on middle-class boys. Wilhelmine Voigt, a sixty-four-year-old pensioner, killed herself in October 1931.[105] Her thirty-six-year-old son Paul was a petty criminal who had served several prison sentences and led an unsteady life, working occasionally in the central market. During the Depression, he, like many others, could not find a regular job. When he moved into his mother's apartment in an eastern Berlin working-class district, conflicts over money soon broke out. Wilhelmine Voigt expected her son to contribute to household expenses. Since he did not do so, she became aggressive, throwing pots at him, attacking him with a knife, and finally threatening to commit suicide. By October 14, her monthly pension money had almost run out. After a day at the market during which he made three Reichsmark, Paul came home. He denied that he had earned anything and went off to buy some tobacco. Wilhelmine Voigt now realized that her son had lied to her. When Paul returned with his cigarettes, he found his mother hanged.

Wilhelmine Voigt's situation attests to the poverty of working-class pensioners highlighted over and over again in the Communist press. But her suicide does not directly reflect socio-economic factors. Rather, it demonstrates how hardship undermined trust and exacerbated preexisting family tensions to the point of provoking acts of violent desperation. Wilhelmine Voigt had placed high expectations of financial and personal solidarity on her son's presence in her home. When he let her down, she communicated the seriousness of these expectations with her suicide threat. In eventually killing herself, Wilhelmine Voigt drew the conclusions from her despair and conveyed her deep feeling of isolation to her son.[106] Her situation approximates the futility of familiar

[105]For the following, see statements of Paul Voigt and his sister Meta Siemßen, October 15, 1931, LAB, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, Tit. 198 B, no. 506.

[106]Bailey, *"This Rash Act,"* 258-66, plausibly criticizes Emile Durkheim's classical, broad-sweep argument that suicide reflected a crisis-ridden modernity, but agrees with his emphasis on personal isolation.

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solution and loss of future perspective highlighted by Peukert but represents only one of several contemporary variants of suicide.

Berliners from different walks of life drew upon crisis notions to make sense of suicide. Some pointed to the fate of the middle class or the German nation and believed that these collective experiences impacted them directly, crushing their personal lives. Others voiced the high expectations typical of the Weimar period, demanding the assistance of the welfare office or castigating themselves for failing to be strong, determined, and successful. Still others engaged in an emphatically masculine attitude. They killed themselves or threatened to do so because they could not bear the discrepancy between their respective ideals and a reality that seemed shallow or oppressive. "Crisis" also influenced how adults interpreted teenagers' suicides in that they perceived youthful personalities to be severely at risk. There was a clearly gendered contrast between the concern for boys' personal development reflected in Wilhelm Blume's despair over his model pupil Bruno George and the stereotypes that conveniently explained the suicides by girls or by a boy of dubious masculinity such as Heinz Link. Finally, Elly Ambrosius's case highlights how a girl's quest for a subjectivity of her own clashed with her working-class mother's emphasis on discipline. This demonstrates how family ties could be strained by some features of the Weimar period. So does poor pensioner Wilhelmine Voigt's conflict with her son over a few Reichsmark.

Suicide, Crisis, and the Self in Weimar Berlin

The analysis of suicide cases has brought out a diversity that may seem bewildering. It is hard to find much common ground between impoverished pensioners, disgruntled welfare clients, or Bismarck devotees, and fragile or idealistic young men. This diversity of situations even in the small sample of suicides that are sufficiently documented says in itself something about Weimar Berlin. The stories recounted here are snapshots of a heterogeneous metropolis that included Wedding boarding houses and the streets of Neukölln, the busy roads and subway stations of the city center, the schools of affluent Friedenau and Zehlendorf, as well as Wilhelm Blume's project to ban urban life from the Scharfenberg Island. As for the press, the different efforts to account for suicides through notions and scenarios of crisis reflected larger, often politically motivated attempts to assign a clear sense to the complexities of the metropolis. Since they were part and parcel of a highly diverse and contested public sphere, no interpretation could impose itself before 1933; instead, several understandings of suicide and crisis coexisted.

"Crisis" is thus not a useful category for the historical analysis of Weimar suicides, since it obscures rather than elucidates the complexities of the subject and the period. But can we nevertheless go beyond juxtaposing cases

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and discourses and emphasizing diversity? I would offer three closely related conclusions: first, it is striking to what extent the contemporaries agreed that suicides were a sign of the times. For them, larger trends and phenomena such as capitalist exploitation, national weakness, authoritarian pedagogies, and mass culture had direct personal repercussions, which is why they were so quick to explain individual cases. Types such as the impoverished welfare client, the desperate "slave" of the Young Plan, the sensitive boy, and the superficial girl are reflective of this broad tendency and were all seen as potentially suicidal. A number of suicide notes show that their authors joined this chorus and related their own situation to larger problems. Correspondingly, there was a remarkable belief that individuals with their deeds could and should have a direct political impact. This was displayed by the pupil who demanded an immediate reform of the school system, the one who absolutely wanted to join the paramilitary troops at the Polish border, and the engineering student who felt guilty about letting down his fatherland.

The latter case leads me to the second conclusion, which highlights the dynamics created by high expectations.[107] The linkage between suicide and crisis and the belief in direct personal repercussions of larger trends and phenomena suggested a strong sense of urgency. Whatever was perceived to be the root cause of suicides, since it brought people to kill themselves, it had to be remedied quickly and drastically. Ending capitalist exploitation or national treason, reforming education, or creating a more livable city were not seen as long- or even medium-term projects but as matters of life or death. Correspondingly, individual cases often reflect an expectation of immediate and drastic change for the better which then led to disappointments. This could be an expectation of help from the welfare office or through family solidarity. It could also mean that the demands of parents, reform-minded teachers, or the German nation were interiorized and thus created strong pressure. In several cases, high self-expectations reinforced feelings of failure and weakness, making it impossible to deal with such feelings step by step.

Interiorized expectations of strength or purity point to a third aspect, namely the contested boundaries of legitimate subjectivity. The often described experimental life of artists, gays, and "New Women" in Weimar Berlin should not obscure just how difficult it could be even in the metropolis to expand these boundaries. Boys and young men who felt physically and mentally weak,

[107]See the apt title of Thomas Mergel, "High Expectations—Deep Disappointments: Structures of Public Expectations Toward Politics in Weimar Germany," forthcoming in *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s*, ed. Kathleen Canning et al. (New York: Berghahn, 2009). Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, brings out well the contemporary sense of urgency and the problem of disappointed expectations. It is only toward the end of his book that the questionable notion of a "total crisis" resulting in disorientation and despair predominates.

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depressed and passive, or attracted by the same sex had to confront prevailing norms of a strong, active, and heterosexual masculinity. While the reform-minded school principal Wilhelm Blume encouraged sensitivity and introspection, his norms of purity remote from urban influences could be highly repressive as well. Imaginative girls who were interested in fashion or neglected their household duties over dreams about masked balls and movie theaters had to face their teachers' and parents' narrow conception of what kind of self was acceptable for them. Contemporary assumptions about crisis were thus part of a cultural effort to stabilize and defend the boundaries of legitimate subjectivity. The unsuccessful struggle to transgress these boundaries could have suicidal consequences.

Connections between larger trends and personal situations, high expectations by and toward individuals, and the contested boundaries of subjectivity raise broader issues of a history of the self in Weimar Germany. Existing treatments, so far mainly by literary scholars, emphasize two related aspects: on the one hand, an emphatic ideology of "life" clashing with rigid "forms" was ubiquitous in contemporary discourses; on the other hand, these forms were themselves uprooted in a highly dynamic and contingent society.[108] Perceptions and narratives of suicide reflect both the widespread quest for a somehow different, more substantial life than the prevailing norms and institutions allowed for and the view that the family, the welfare state, the school system, or the capitalist economy could no longer provide a stable framework. This feeling of a twofold disjuncture between the ambitions of subjects and the norms and institutions they were confronted with fuelled the widespread sense that everything was in flux and urgently required a transformation. It was thus a key aspect of the Weimar "crisis" and explains why this crisis was so prominently linked to suicide.

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[108]Martin Lindner, *Leben in der Krise. Zeitromane der Neuen Sachlichkeit und die intellektuelle Mentalität der klassischen Moderne* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994), 8-10; Walter Delabar, *Was tun? Romane am Ende der Weimarer Republik* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999), 7–27.

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