Conclusion

It is a staple of historical scholarship on inter-war Europe to argue that German war veterans were, at least in comparison with their peers in France, overwhelmingly nationalist or reactionary, and that their war experience had turned them into natural supporters of right-wing or extreme right-wing political parties. Such a comparison is problematic with regard to the chosen reference point, the veterans' movement in the French Third Republic up to 1933/4. To be sure, none of the main veterans' leagues in France 'explicitly condemned the Republic as a regime'. But they consistently voiced their reservations about key institutions of parliamentary democracy, not least parliament itself, and developed a discourse that portrayed themselves as the flag-bearers of a 'true' republican spirit against the backdrop of the perceived deficiencies and corruption of the political system. As political instability persisted throughout the 1920s, with many short-lived governments following each other in quick succession, the main French veterans' leagues demanded a move towards a 'strong government', and developed a clear preference for a more authoritarian style of politics.[1] Such an interpretation does not deny the relevance of their patriotic pacifism for the collective identity of French veterans of the Great War. But it points out that the political repercussions of their activism were much more fluid and ambivalent than their republican public rhetoric suggests.

The standard comparison between French and German war veterans, and between the commemoration of war in these two countries more generally, is also problematic in that it grossly underestimates the presence and activism of pro-republican war veterans in Germany. Throughout this book, we have seen how moderate socialist war veterans in the Social Democratic Party (SPD), sometimes in collaboration with more radical pacifists and left-liberal democrats, developed republican memories and narratives of the war experience. These veterans

[1] See Millington, *From victory to Vichy*, pp. 220f.

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intervened at all levels of the debate over the meaning and legacy of the war: staging public mass rallies and commemorative rituals at war memorials; contemplating the meaning of their war memories in newspaper and journal articles, booklets and novels, as well as in personal documents of self-reflection; rejecting right-wing mythologies such as the *Dolchstoß* myth. They also held the radical nationalist purveyors of heroic war narratives to account, while at the same time establishing international contacts with French war veterans in the pursuit of reconciliation and disarmament; and, last but not least, republican veterans pointed out the strategic blunders of the Imperial Army leadership, and of Hindenburg and Ludendorff in particular.

In all these different endeavours, the German republican war veterans were driven by a set of moral values that reflected both their socialist worldview and the key lessons they had drawn from their war experiences. They were committed to a basic humanism that condemned the destructive consequences of the war; refused to accept that national enmity had to be its natural consequence, even in the light of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles; and concluded that a moderate pacifism was the key lesson to be learnt from the militarism and chauvinism that had driven Germany into the war. Most importantly, these war veterans were adamant that the democratic system of the Weimar Republic was the logical consequence of the corruption and incompetence of the Wilhelmine elites for which they had seen tangible evidence both at the front and, perhaps even more so, in the *Etappe*. The republicanism of these veterans resulted from their first-hand knowledge about the moral and political bankruptcy of the imperial system in the autumn of 1918.

Not all republican war veterans felt the need to engage with these issues in a more coherent fashion, or to feed their recollections into an organisational framework of remembrance by joining one of the veterans' leagues. But the level of mobilisation among them was high, and while the size of the different leagues is no exact measure for the success of one of the contested commemorations, it is certainly more than just a vague indication of their relative strength. And on that count, the fact that pro-republican veterans in Weimar were at least as numerous as their conservative and reactionary counterparts cannot be overlooked. The Social Democrat Reichsbund was by far the largest representation of disabled veterans, war widows and orphans. Among former POWs, the breakaway group of the Vereinigung ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener (VeK) established itself in 1925 as a pro-republican alternative to the more conservative Reichsvereinigung. While the exact strength of these associations cannot be established, it seems obvious that both faced dwindling membership

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figures during the late 1920s, with the Reichsvereinigung stabilising at about 30,000.[2] And despite being a latecomer on the scene of veterans' leagues, the Reichsbanner was one of the often forgotten success stories of the Weimar Republic, clearly outnumbering its immediate competitors in the right-wing camp: the Stahlhelm and Jungdo.

It has been suggested that we should conceptualise the alleged 'brutalisation' of German society through the war experience using a broader approach, which looks beyond the immediate effects on the veterans and takes more general changes in the political culture into account.[3] But even if we accept his proposition – and there are many good reasons to do so – the brutalisation thesis is unconvincing as a substantial historical argument about Weimar Germany. Republican war remembrances had a tremendous presence at least until the late 1920s, and their humanist and internationalist values had repercussions throughout German society, affecting many working-class youth until the Great Depression and, considerably less so, in the following years. In a variety of cultural forms and practices, these remembrances de-legitimised the notion of a heroic sacrifice for the nation as the cornerstone of the 'war cultures' that had fostered mobilisation during the war.[4] Thus, they contributed to a substantial cultural demobilisation of German post-war society.

Commemoration also had, to be sure, another important element to it, as it expressed the meaning of violent death and offered consolation to grieving relatives and comrades of the fallen soldiers. In his seminal book *Sites of Memory*, Jay Winter has forcefully argued that war memorials and other commemorative practices have to be seen as expressions of bereavement and as 'sites of mourning'.[5] Grief and mourning were not entirely absent from the republican cult of the fallen soldiers. In their rituals at war memorials, Reichsbund and Reichsbanner paid tribute to the fallen, and tried to interpret their death as a call for international reconciliation. In the Reichsbund, the bereaved families of the fallen soldiers also had their place and their say, and, particularly during the final years of the Republic, female functionaries of the league stressed the significance of mourning for their work. Yet overall, the more intimate aspects of remembrance – the need to come to terms with the loss of friends and relatives – played a much less prominent role in the republican disourse of the Reichsbanner than one might have expected. As the written recollections by Fritz Einert demonstrate, personal relations and the loss of

[2] Pöppinghege, 'Kriegsteilnehmer', p. 405.
[3] Beaupré, *Das Trauma*, pp. 230–6.
[4] Horne, 'Kulturelle Demobilmachung', p. 132.
[5] Winter, *Sites of Memory*, pp. 78–116.

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former friends and comrades did indeed matter for republican veterans. But their absence was not primarily perceived as a reason to mourn their death. At least for Einert, much more important about the fallen soldiers was that they were missing in his political struggle against the nationalist camp, and that he had to speak out on their behalf in order to prevent their legacy from being distorted. In that perspective, mourning was almost a luxurious indulgence.

The public commemoration of war by Reichsbund and Reichsbanner was first of all a performative celebration of republican citizenship. Thus, it made a tangible contribution to this important field of politics, which underpinned and strengthened the new democratic polity.[6] Yet despite all these efforts, the National Socialist onslaught on the Republic finally prevailed. Even before the Nazi seizure of power in January 1933, radical nationalist representations of the front-line experience had become hegemonic, as is clearly evidenced by the sales figures of war books that presented heroic narratives. How can we understand the relation between the relative strength of republican war memories and their ultimate failure to offer a hegemonic reading of the war amidst the intensive political battles of the 1930s? Any more systematic attempt to address this issue has to go beyond a mere quantitative roll call of the pro- and anti-republican forces. It makes perfect sense to gauge the relative strength of the respective camps through an assessment of membership figures and organisational capacities, but ultimately, the appeal and success of republican commemorations of war did not depend on whether the Reichsbanner staged more rallies or commemorative rituals than the Stahlhelm and Jungdo.[7] Such an approach would demonstrate a lack of understanding of how the use of symbolic politics is able to frame popular expectations and to shape politics in the age of mass democracy.[8] Thus, a proper historical analysis of republican war remembrances has to scrutinise the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the symbols and narratives different collective actors employed. Weimar society is best described as a forest of symbols, which were used to mark, elaborate and support competing political positions, and to accumulate symbolic capital that could be translated into power.[9] And in this regard, not only the quantity

[6] Rossol, *Performing the Nation*; Achilles, 'Performing the Reich'.
[7] This is, however, *mutatis mutandis* the argument suggested by Weitz, 'Weimar Germany', p. 588.
[8] Thomas Mergel, 'Überlegungen zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Politik', *GG* 28 (2002), 574–606.
[9] Andreas Dörner, *Politischer Mythos und symbolische Politik. Der Hermannmythos: Zur Entstehung des Nationalbewußtseins der Deutschen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1996), pp. 13–62.

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but also the inherent qualities of these symbols mattered. This was highlighted in the final years of the Republic, when the intensive political struggles also led to renewed conflicts over symbols. The Iron Front adopted the symbol of three downward-facing arrows, literally crushing National Socialist symbols such as the swastika. This symbolism was used in posters, graffiti and other outlets.[10] When National Socialists turned these arrows into umbrellas, or mocked them by other symbolic means, the Reichsbanner devised detailed measures to counter this effect.[11]

Any convincing answer to this conundrum of symbolic politics requires both a systematic and a chronological approach. Some of the more systematic ambivalences of the republican commemorations of the Reichsbanner have already been highlighted in previous chapters. They include the fact that the Reichsbanner aimed to offer an inclusive, egalitarian form of republican activism, but did not admit women as members, and also marginalised female experiences in the representation of the war. The situation differed in the other big veterans' league of the republican camp, the Reichsbund. Not only did it include war widows and female orphans as a matter of course but, particularly during the early 1930s, it also gave female functionaries, of whom it had a considerable number, a clearly distinguishable voice in its commemorative rituals. Nevertheless, the basic fact remains that the republican camp did not systematically engage women in the commemoration of war, despite its inclusive rhetoric. Such a self-imposed limitation stood in stark contrast to the right-wing camp, in which an intrinsic female contribution to the renewal of the nation was part and parcel of nationalist politics, and in which the Stahlhelm – to give just one example – made sure to organise women in a separate, highly successful Bund Königin Luise.[12] To be sure, representations of wartime masculinity among republican veterans differed from the hegemonic forms of the nationalist right. But the self-imposed neglect of female participation weakened the republican appropriation of war remembrances, and thus republican activism more generally.[13]

[10] Voigt, *Kampfbünde*, pp. 459–61.

[11] Reichsbanner *Gau* Hanover to all local branches, 5 July 1932, appendix: NHStAH, Hann. 310 II, no. 25, fo. 143.

[12] Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar', pp. 551f.; Christiane Streubel, *Radikale Nationalistinnen: Agitation und Programmatik rechter Frauen in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Campus, 2006), pp. 114f.

[13] As a self-critical acknowledgement of this negligence, in direct comparison with the Bund Königin Luise, see Berta Jourdan, 'Frauen an die Front!', *RB* no. 34, 22 August 1931.

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Another, second ambivalence stemmed from the use of military symbols by republican veterans. Contrary to the claims by some historians, the Reichsbanner did not contribute to an overall militarisation of Weimar's political culture. Even though most of its members supported a moderate pacifism, they had to wear uniforms and military decorations in order to represent their claims. It was nigh impossible to make claims with regard to one's own military service in the public arena without displaying at least some military insignia. Yet even the moderate and rather subdued way in which the Reichsbanner members presented themselves in marching columns and wore their military decorations still alienated radical pacifists and socialist working-class youth in the Socialist Labour Youth (SAJ) in equal measure. The latter by and large felt that the *Soldatenspielerei* of the Reichsbanner directly contradicted their well-established patterns of peace pedagogy.[14] At the same time, these paramilitary elements did not prevent nationalist observers from claiming that the pacifist Reichsbanner veterans weakened the overall readiness for defence, or *Wehrhaftigkeit*. And even the introduction of the more intensively trained Schutzformationen in late 1930 did nothing to improve the actual ability of the Reichsbanner to withstand or even stop any coordinated attack against the republican institutions by the Nazi Stormtroopers and the Reichswehr. In such a case, it would be simply 'impotent', as critical observers from the radical left of the SPD correctly concluded.[15]

These two ambivalences in the symbolic representation of republican war narratives already weakened any attempt to maximise their thrust in the political arena. Two further, even more general inherent problems of republican war remembrances came on top of that. The first relates to the ways in which the wartime soldiers were presented as individual and collective actors in the recollections of the front-line experience, and how these recollections were connected to the kind of citizenship that the republican veterans aimed to foster after 1918. The key tenet of Reichsbanner and Reichsbund members was that they supported the new republican polity precisely because they had observed the corruption and ultimate collapse of the imperial system

[14] See Hirche, *Immer in Bewegung*, p. 357 (Hirche was himself a committed Reichsbanner activist); and the exchange in 'Wir und "Reichsbanner Schwarz–Rot–Gold"', *Sozialistische Jugend: Mitteilungsblatt der Sozialistischen Arbeiter-Jugend West-Sachsen* 1 (1924), pp. 58f., 72–4. Other SAJ members greeted the Reichsbanner's focus on 'symbols' and 'outward appearance' (*Äußerlichkeiten*), because working-class youth embraced it, and the Republic had neglected it so far. See 'Noch einmal: Reichsbanner Schwarz–Rot–Gold', *Jugend-Echo Mittelelbe* 8 (1924), no. 8, 37f.

[15] Helmut Wagner, 'Das Reichsbanner: Die proletarische Wehrorganisation?', *Jungsozialistische Blätter* 8 (1929), no. 2, 39–42 (quote on p. 40).

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first-hand. In that sense, even Social Democrats on the right wing of the party such as Erhard Auer claimed collective ownership of the revolution in 1918. As late as December 1932, a Catholic observer could correctly state that 'millions of front-line soldiers' would 'still own up to the November revolution'.[16] But in their war remembrances, these republican veterans never claimed any collective agency for themselves in their roles as front-line soldiers, apart from the Christmas truces in 1914 and 1915 when they had actively engaged with their counterparts on the other side of no man's land. Rather, they consistently tapped into a victimisation narrative that portrayed ordinary soldiers as the overpowered, innocent victims of a brutal war machine reliant on technology and oppression to keep checks on the men in the front line. In many respects, these narratives were similar to those used in the publicised eyewitness accounts of French veterans during the inter-war period, except that the Germans could not close their narratives with at least some sort of vindication through military victory.[17]

Like their counterparts among the French war veterans, the socialist veterans of the Reichsbanner were particularly eager to highlight the plight of those soldiers who had become the victims of the court-martial system. There was no significant German equivalent to the spectacular case of the *fusillés*, those *poilus* who had been sentenced to death and executed mostly in the wake of the mutinies that had laid bare a major crisis of motivation in the French army in the spring of 1917.[18] Nevertheless, the *Reichsbanner* journal paid particular attention to the court-martial system as a gross example of how 'militarism' had victimised ordinary people. The court martial had not only been a 'remnant of the darkest medieval age': like French socialist veterans, Reichsbanner members highlighted its arbitrary nature, which reflected the fact that its wilful and relentless use was meant to cement the class rule of the elites. In their indictment of victimisation through court martial, the German veterans also directly referred to the French debates on this issue during the 1920s.[19] Even a centrist Social Democrat such as Philipp Scheidemann, who had announced the Republic from the

[16] Ferdinand Muralt, 'Der "Stahlhelm" und die Große Politik', *Hochland*: *Monatsschrift für alle Gebiete des Wissens, der Literatur und der Kunst* 30 (1932/3), 193–204 (p. 198).

[17] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 106–47.

[18] Nicolas Offenstadt, *Les Fusillés de la Grande Guerre et la mémoire collective (1914–1999)* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1999), pp. 17–46, 110–17.

[19] 'Die Verbrechen der Kriegsgerichte', *RB* no. 46, 30 December 1928; Hans Reich, 'Exekution: Eine Kriegserinnerung', *RB* no. 40, 5 October 1929; see Offenstadt, *Les Fusillés*, pp. 73–8.

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balcony of the Reichstag on 9 November 1918, denounced the death sentences against the mutineers in the German navy in the summer of 1917 as a case of 'judicial murder'.[20] Writing in the *Reichsbanner* journal in 1926, he thus took up a cause that was usually associated with the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), whose founding member, Wilhelm Dittmann, had used similar rhetoric during the war.

Victimisation narratives were not only prevalent in the publicised war remembrances of the republican war veterans; they also pervaded the personal recollections of Reichsbanner members, as the example of Fritz Einert demonstrates. In letters to his parents during the war, Einert had repeatedly conveyed his despair about the ways in which the lives of so many young people 'are sacrificed' as mere 'cannon fodder'. For his own – and at the end of the war quite downtrodden – sense of victimisation he used the metaphor of life in a 'Prussian prison'.[21] Throughout the self-reflexive recollections he penned in 1926, Einert returned to this theme, stressing in a variety of ways how oppression through the military system and its disciplinary apparatus had turned front-line soldiers into slaves. These examples should suffice to illustrate the point that the almost exclusive focus among the Reichsbanner members on victimisation narratives certainly reflected one of the dominant motives of their own war experiences. Yet this focus on the soldier as a victim of overwhelming external forces made it difficult, if not impossible, to employ wartime memories as a springboard for the empowerment of these republican veterans. Basically remembered as someone who was fenced in by a rigid, oppressive system, the front-line soldier could not serve as a role model for the collective agency of democratic citizens in the Weimar Republic. Thus, in the wider field of Reichsbanner *Geschichtspolitik*, the barricade fighters of the democratic revolution in March 1848 had to fulfil this role. They were remembered as heroes and martyrs, whose example served to inspire Reichsbanner members for their fight in defence of the Republic.[22] The victimisation narratives of war remembrance helped to fuel popular resentment against the Hohenzollern monarchy and thus underscored the legitimacy of the Republic. But they did not inject a strong sense of agency and historical optimism into Reichsbanner members, who, as the case of Fritz Einert shows, felt they had reasons to complain that economic dependency had turned them again into *Untertanen*.

[20] Philipp Scheidemann, 'Justizmorde im Kriege', *RB* no. 4, 15 February 1926.
[21] Letters dated 6 October and 22 November 1916, 11 May 1918, quoted in Ziemann, 'Gedanken', pp. 227, 232
[22] Eric Bryden, 'Heroes and Martyrs of the Republic: Reichsbanner *Geschichtspolitik* in Weimar Germany', *CEH* 43 (2010), 639–65.

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A final systematic ambivalence of republican war remembrances was the imprecise nature of their republicanism itself. In its celebration of Constitution Day on 11 August, the Reichsbanner employed a rhetoric that was intended to be as inclusive as possible, stressing the equality and active participation of all citizens of the Republic. Particularly on the tenth anniversary of the constitution on 11 August 1929, the spatial integration of the nation was highlighted as well: the Reich, as the Republic was still called, consisted of people from all districts, including the border regions in the East and West. Ultimately, integration was also celebrated in terms of social cohesion. Based on the cooperation between Edwin Redslob as Reich Art Custodian and the Reichsbanner, which provided the participants for mass gatherings and demonstrations, Constitution Day celebrated the unity of the Republic in terms of a *Volksgemeinschaft*, in the inclusive, egalitarian reading of the term.[23] Yet in the commemorative celebrations at war memorials, and on all the other occasions at which the Reichsbanner remembered the war, the rhetoric differed quite fundamentally from that employed on Constitution Day. Some bourgeois representatives of the league, to be sure – usually members of the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP) – also invoked the notion of a *Volksgemeinschaft*, as did Social Democrat mavericks on the right wing of the party, such as former major Karl Mayr.[24] But these were rare exceptions.

More generally, the war narratives of the Reichsbanner and Reichsbund were confrontational, not integrative. They denied the legitimacy of some of the most pertinent nationalist war narratives; they described the situation in the wartime army basically as a class confrontation between the officer corps, which was recruited from the Wilhelmine elites, and working-class private soldiers; and they claimed the legacy of the fallen for socialist labour, including its quest for a positive internationalism in exchanges with the former enemies. While firmly supporting the Republic, these were basically moderate socialist war remembrances. And as the organisational history of the Reichsbanner illustrates, the Social Democrat underpinnings of this commemorative discourse became even more pronounced over the years. Socialist rhetoric offered a firm basis for the thorough inclusion of Social Democrat workers into this discourse, and as such certainly explains the huge organisational success of the Reichsbanner. However, such a focus on the socialist rhetoric of class was also bound to exclude

[23] Rossol, *Performing the Nation*, pp. 60, 62, 70, 75.
[24] 'Bericht über den Verlauf der Kundgebung des Reichsbanners', 22 February 1931: StAM, Pol. Dir. 6886.

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sizeable groups of potential supporters, not least Catholic workers, who would have surely expected a Christian symbolism of consolation and redemption alongside the republican elements of commemoration.[25] In that sense, the massive organisational edifice of the Reichsbanner, one of the biggest success stories of the Weimar Republic, also included a substantial failure. It failed to deliver on one of its core promises: to strengthen and protect the Republic from a non-partisan perspective of *Überparteilichkeit*. And nowhere in the political discourse of Reichsbanner ideas was this failure more obvious and tangible than in its performative display of war remembrances.

After this brief résumé of the most important shortcomings and ambivalences of leftist anti-war remembrances, their relative strength should also be assessed in a chronological overview. In the immediate aftermath of the war, nationalist–revisionist narratives of the war experience had very little traction. When Franz Seldte gathered a circle of like-minded former army comrades in Magdeburg in December 1918 to found the Stahlhelm, they agreed basically to support the new republican system. Only after the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were announced in May 1919, and the government accepted them in June, did the Stahlhelm swiftly move to the anti-republican right.[26] Surely, the harsh terms of the treaty had a considerable impact on the national camp, and locked it into a revisionist mindset.[27] Yet the progressive democrats and moderate socialists among the veterans were not agitated or even severely disappointed by the Treaty of Versailles. They accepted it as a payment for the underlying catastrophe they had experienced first-hand: the utter failure of the expansionist ambitions of imperial Germany, and the brutal treatment it had meted out against civilians in the occupied territories and its own working-class subjects alike. Fuelled by their ire against the lost years of wartime service, republican war veterans drove home their own version of the 'stab-in-the-back' myth: corruption and betrayal of the Wilhelmine elite had turned defeat into political liberation, and rightly so, as the Kaiser – going into exile in the Netherlands – had committed an act of desertion

[25] Catholic war remembrances in Weimar Germany have yet to be studied in detail. For Austria, see the important study by Überegger, *Erinnerungskriege*, pp. 127–80, 203–18. For a comparative perspective, see the forthcoming monograph by Patrick Houlihan.

[26] Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm: Bund der Frontsoldaten 1918–1935* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966), pp. 13f., 18ff. Writing in 1932, Muralt, 'Stahlhelm', p. 193, was astonished by the early commitment of the Stahlhelm to the new state.

[27] Judith Voelker, '"Unerträglich, unerfüllbar und deshalb unannehmbar": Kollektiver Protest gegen Versailles im Rheinland in den Monaten Mai und Juni 1919', in Dülffer and Krumeich, *Der verlorene Frieden*, pp. 229–41.

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in a difficult moment for the nation. During the 'short period of insight' (Franz Carl Endres) from 1919 to 1922, these ideas resonated widely not only among committed Social Democrats, but also among many left-liberal bourgeois democrats.

French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr, the industrial heart of Germany, in January 1923 shifted the terms of the debate to the right. While the government proclaimed a policy of passive resistance, it was not only the right-wing media that whipped up a frenzy of national enmity against the French. Young Socialists and left-liberals, who had previously been busy indicting the moral decay in the Imperial Army, also now praised the superior values of the German nation. The political upheaval of 1923, culminating in the Hitler putsch in November, prompted Social Democrats to pursue an approach that had already been practised at a local level since the Kapp putsch in 1920. They aimed to gather committed war veterans in self-defence leagues against the street politics of the right-wing combat leagues, and the Stahlhelm in particular. The founding of the Reichsbanner in 1924 fundamentally consolidated the representation of republican war remembrances. Quickly, a coherent set of narratives, symbols and performative rituals for the commemoration of the war was established. Even political setbacks, such as the election of former general Paul von Hindenburg as Reich president in April 1925, did not negatively affect these war remembrances. When it was mentioned during a Reichsbanner meeting in Munich that Hindenburg had sworn his oath on the constitution, rank-and-file members heckled, accusing him of perjury.[28] As the former head of the Third Army Supreme Command, Hindenburg could not command respect among Social Democrats, and particularly not among Reichsbanner members.[29]

The republican war remembrances of the Reichsbund and Reichsbanner were fostered and transmitted as a form of collective memory as defined by Maurice Halbwachs. Their strength rested on the tightly knit sociability among working-class people in local communities: on the daily interactions and conversations between Social Democrats who had themselves experienced the war, and who – contrary to some intellectual commentators at the time – never really

[28] 'Mitgliederversammlung des Reichsbanners Schwarz–Rot–Gold am 8.6.1925 im Kolosseum', PND no. 509: StAM, Pol. Dir. 6886. The Reichsbanner certainly did not claim 'ownership of the Hindenburg myth', as Goltz, *Hindenburg* asserts (p. 126), based on a single pictorial source.

[29] Hirche, *Immer in Bewegung*, p. 361.

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stopped talking about it.[30] Yet there were clear limits to this form of sustaining recollections of front-line service. As the war youth generation, those born between 1900 and 1910, reached the age of adulthood and entered the political scene in their droves in the late 1920s, a new challenge for the anti-war discourse of moderate socialists arose. Simply reiterating the popular catchphrase 'No more war!' ad nauseam no longer sufficed. Even male working-class youths from socialist households proved susceptible to the allure of novels and films that represented the war as a big adventure story.

The intensive public debate about first the book and then the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* from late 1928 to 1930 laid bare the problems of the republican camp in its relation to media representations of the war. Republicans rushed to the defence of Remarque's work, even though the book itself carefully avoided any explicit political statement and could be also read, with its praise for the comradeship among the soldiers, as a nationalist war novel. With the massive presence of books and films on the war since the late 1920s, the texture of war remembrance had changed, forcing the republican camp to embark on an uphill struggle in the defence of those few releases that they could identify with their cause. The overall political circumstances of the years from 1930 to 1933 – economic crisis, political instability and the rise of the Nazis to a mass movement – obviously did not help Social Democrats in their attempts to maintain the thrust of their war remembrances in the public sphere. More and more often, they were forced to defend their wartime record in acts of defiance against slander by ruthless radical nationalists, rather than to elaborate in a more complex manner on the meaning of the war experience. Yet only with the Nazi seizure of power in early 1933 were republican war memories effectively silenced and suppressed.

Throughout this book, I have described the representation of republican war remembrances as an intervention in a highly contested field. Moderate pacifists and socialists developed their narratives of the war experience in direct confrontation with the nationalist right-wing camp. The Weimar Republic never developed a national style of war remembrance, and that is, after all, the biggest comparative difference

[30] See for example Walter Benjamin's famous remark that 'men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience'; Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskow' (1936), in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., Vol. III, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press, 2002), pp. 143–66 (pp. 143f.). See Chapter 3 in this book.

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to countries such as France or the UK. Thus, contestation is surely the most relevant aspect of war remembrances in post-war Germany. But there is also another important story to be told, which is perhaps best described as expropriation by stealth. We have analysed key elements of this process in previous chapters, but never brought them to the forefront. Now is the time to do this. When pacifists, Social Democrats and radical democrats started in early 1919 to offer relentless criticism of the injustice and mendacity of the Imperial Army, they employed the 'worm's-eye perspective' as their default point of view. The inevitable and liberating nature of the military collapse was told from the perspective of the ordinary front-line soldier, and this vantage point was defended as the best position for an assessment of all aspects of the war.[31] At this time, the political right still privileged the perspective of generals and high-ranking officers.

Yet in subsequent years, the nationalist camp learned to adopt the worm's-eye view for its own political purposes. Confronted with the hegemony of leftist anti-war remembrances in the early 1920s, the Reichsarchiv devised a series of popular battlefield narratives that privileged the soldier's perspective. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler presented himself as a battle-hardened soldier, even though he saw battle action only once and subsequently served as a dispatch-runner. More importantly, he used the worm's-eye view to criticise the 'big-mouths' of the parliamentary elites, as if his humble position had offered him any privileged insights into the nature of politics, which he claimed to despise.[32] In his speeches and election campaigns from the late 1920s onwards, Hitler went even one step further in the expropriation of the worm's-eye view for political purposes, which the left had pioneered. Presenting himself in populist fashion as the 'unknown soldier' who had come to save the nation, Hitler imagined himself as the living embodiment and epitome of the German war remembrance. In 1933, the expropriation of the worm's-eye view by the extreme nationalist right had come full circle. Speaking in public on 10 May 1933, Hitler explicitly referred to Karl Bröger's famous words about the 'poorest citizens' who are also the 'most loyal ones' of the German nation, and stressed that he had closely encountered these 'poorest sons' of the nation for four years during the war.[33] Meanwhile, Bröger himself, the worker, poet, prolific journalist, Social Democrat and tireless Reichsbanner leader, was violently

[31] Ulrich, 'Perspektive'.
[32] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), p. 152; see Thomas Weber, *Hitler's First War: Adolf Hitler, the Men of the List Regiment, and the First World War* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 156.
[33] Quoted in Müller, *Für Vaterland und Republik*, p. 159.

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removed as a city councillor in his native Nuremberg by Nazi thugs on 28 April 1933. On 30 June, he was detained in the Dachau concentration camp.[34]

Overall, the republican war veterans of the Reichsbund and Reichsbanner have a more general significance for our understanding of the Weimar Republic. Not many historians would today support the notion that Weimar was a 'Republic without republicans'. Yet there is an ongoing debate over the extent and nature of pro-republican engagement from 1918 to 1933.[35] Based on the evidence presented in this book, there are many reasons to stress the extent to which the republican system could rely on the massive presence of people who supported it not merely out of reason, but with their hearts and souls. These devoted republicans and moderate socialists injected a strong sense of historical optimism into the new polity.[36] And they did not only do so during the allegedly stable period of the Republic from 1924 to 1928, but were also keen to keep up their commitment during the following turbulent years. The future of the Republic was not sealed before the Nazis employed brutal force and physical violence to destroy its political system in 1933.

[34] *Ibid*., pp. 158, 160.
[35] Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar', p. 568.
[36] On journalists and highbrow intellectuals see Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik*.

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