The Past in Weimar History

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Abstract

This article examines Weimar Germany's public controversy about the Republic's place in German history. In a period that was seen by many contemporaries as a time deprived of historical context, all political parties tried to legitimise their actions and aims through the construction of very different historical traditions. Based on a wide range of primary sources, the article seeks to analyse this 'battle over the past' within the broader context of Weimar's political culture and the Republic's struggle for survival.

I

On 21 October 1928, a cold and rainy Sunday, the Weimar Republic witnessed a political demonstration of considerable size and remarkable purpose. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the first anti-socialist law passed by the Reichstag on 18 October 1878, the Berlin Social Democratic Party (SPD) instigated a protest march against Otto von Bismarck, a man who had been dead for twenty years when the Weimar Republic was founded in 1918–19.[1] Almost 100,000 people gathered in the Berlin Lustgarten park to decry the Iron Chancellor as the repressor of the masses, and to celebrate 'their' victory over his discriminatory legislation. 'Bismarck is dead', read the slogan on their banners, 'but Social Democracy is alive!'[2]

The SPD's occupation of the highly symbolic square between the Hohenzollern town castle and the Berlin cathedral (the site of Bismarck's official memorial service in 1898) did not remain uncontested for long. At around 4 p.m., some 40,000 Communist Party (KPD) protesters marched from the Brandenburg Gate towards

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1 'An alle Sozialisten, Gewerkschafter und Republikaner Berlins', Landesarchiv Berlin, Acc. 1788/007.

2 *Vorwärts*, 22 Oct. 1928, morning edition. All translations are by the author.

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the Social Democratic gathering. Led by a later president of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Wilhelm Pieck, the protesters shouted, 'Bloodhound Noske, Bismarck's pupil',[3] a slogan no less pointed than the KPD's demonstration motto: 'From Bismarck to Müller. From police sabre to armoured car! The system of the suppressers remains, only the methods have been modernised'.[4]

Few contemporary observers were surprised that, despite the pouring rain, the Berlin local leadership of the two working-class parties had mobilised a total of 140,000 people to march in commemoration of a piece of legislation that had been abandoned long before most of the protestors were born. The reason for the lack of astonishment displayed both by the German press and the Prussian police was obvious: intense public competition for suitable historical traditions was the norm in Weimar, not an exception. The public 'invention of tradition' took various forms, ranging from the left-wing parties' annual marches to the graveyard in Berlin-Friedrichshain of the revolutionary heroes of 1848,[5] to the 1925 'Hermanns-Run' near the Arminius memorial in Detmold, when more than 130,000 young Germans from 6,000 sports associations jogged in commemoration of the Battle of Teutoburger Wald, which had taken place almost two thousand years before.[6]

All these events are examples of what will be the subject of this article: the omnipresence of 'the past' in Weimar Germany, a period most commonly perceived as the culmination point (and crisis years) of classical modernity.[7] Recent scholarship has reinforced rather than challenged the image of Weimar as a period characterised (and often overwhelmed) by remarkable scientific–technical progress and a high degree of social, political, economic and cultural experimentation 'designed to manage (however deleteriously) the modern condition'.[8] Although the historiographical focus on Weimar as a 'laboratory of modernity' has many merits (most notably that of overcoming the narrow focus on Weimar's political failure in favour of a more open-ended interpretation of the period), it has largely neglected the extent to which the

3 *Rote Fahne,* 23 Oct. 1928.

4 Ibid., 21 Oct. 1928.

5 The KPD's demonstrations were usually matched by those of the SPD and the DDP, whose followers arrived at the graveyard two hours later to avoid violent clashes. See Daniel Bussenius, 'Eine ungeliebte Tradition. Die Weimarer Linke und die 48er Revolution, 1918–1925', in Heinrich August Winkler, ed., *Griff nach der Deutungsmacht. Zur Geschichte der Geschichtspolitik in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2004), 90–114, at 105.

6 Lorenz Pfeiffer, 'Hermannsfeier und Hermannslauf der Deutschen Turnerschaft im Jahr 1925', *Stadion. Internationale Zeitschrift für Geschichte des Sports*, 12–13 (1986–7), 137–42.

7 Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic. The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (London: Allen Lane, 1991).

8 Peter Fritzsche, 'Did Weimar Fail?', *Journal of Modern History*, 68 (1996), 629–656, at 631. See also Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephan Brockmann, eds., *Dancing on the Volcano. Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Camden House, 1994); Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Gabriele Wesp, *Frisch fromm fröhlich. Frau und Sport zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Königstein: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 1998). For a recent survey of historiographical trends in Weimar scholarship, see Dieter Gessner, *Die Weimarer Republik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), esp. 55–65.

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debate about the Republic's historical identity (and the lack thereof) was an important element of Germany's political and cultural life after 1918.[9]

Despite the multi-faceted nature of Weimar's engagement with 'the past', scholarly interest in Germany's 'collective memory' after 1918 has largely been confined to the legacy of the Great War.[10] It is therefore well established that, between 1918 and 1933, controversies about the commemoration and representation of the Great War played a central role in Weimar's political and cultural life. Memoirs as varied as Ernst Jünger's *Storms of Steel* and Arnold Zweig's *Erziehung vor Verdun* contributed as much to keeping the war ever-present in interwar Germany as did the cinematic adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and the countless memorials which served as reminders of the fallen soldiers and lost glory. As Jay Winter has suggested in his stimulating study on war commemoration after 1918, the military conflict prompted a revival of traditional modes of aesthetic expression that stood in strong and visible contrast to the culture of modernism. Far from discrediting the classical, romantic and religious themes of the prewar world, the traumatic experiences of 1914–18 strengthened the desire for a return to the familiar, comforting cultural imagery of the past.[11]

Yet, despite the undeniable centrality of the years 1914–1918 to interwar Germany's collective memory, the scholarly focus on the Great War and its representation after 1918 has largely overshadowed the complexity of Weimar's desire for a 'reconnection with the past'. It was, for example, no coincidence that historical films such as *Die Nibelungen* (1924), *Fridericus Rex* (1922–3) and *Bismarck* (1925–7) ranked among the most successful productions of the 1920s.[12] Radio programmes on the Wars of

9 Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), preface, at xvii. Although the editors of the *Weimar Republic Sourcebook* have acknowledged that the Weimar experience consisted of a 'kaleidoscopic shuffling of the fragments of a nascent modernity and the remnants of a persistent past', the intense postwar debate about Weimar's place in history is not reflected in any of the selected documents.

10 The most notable exception to this general trend is the edited collection of essays, Detelf Lehnert and Klaus Megerle, eds., *Politische Identität und nationale Gedenktage. Zur politischen Kultur der Weimarer Republik* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989), 159–80. Recent publications on the legacy of the Great War are far too numerous to be listed here in detail. See, e.g., Christine Beil, 'Der ausgestellte Krieg. Die Präsentation des Ersten Weltkrieges zwischen 1914 und 1939', Ph.D. thesis, Tübingen university, 2002; Stefan Goebel, 'Re-membered and Re-mobilized. The "Sleeping Dead" in Interwar Germany and Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39 (2004), 487–501; Benjamin Ziemann, 'Republikanische Kriegserinnerung', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 267 (1998), 357–98; Ulrich Schlie, *Die Nation erinnert sich. Die Denkmäler der Deutschen* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 2002); and Meinhold Lurz, *Kriegerdenkmäler in Deutschland*, 6 vols. (Heidelberg: Esprint Verlag, 1985), IV: *Weimarer Republik*. Particular attention has been paid to three myths that emerged from the war, the 'stab in the back' legend, the myth of the 'spirit of 1914' and the Hindenburg myth. See, e.g., Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration. Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1933* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2003); Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914. Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Anna-Maria Menge, 'Hindenburg – the Politics of a Myth 1914–1934' D.Phil. thesis, in progress, University of Oxford.

11 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

12 See in particular Helmut Regel, 'Die Friedericus-Filme der Weimarer Republik', in Axel Marquardt and Heinz Rathsack, eds., *Preußen im Film* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 1981), 124–34. See also

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Liberation, the Prussian reform era and the German unification of 1871 reached ever-growing audiences in the age of mass culture.[13] The Weimar Republic was also a 'golden age' of popular historical biographies and historical novels.[14] Books such as Walter von Molo's *Fridericus* trilogy (1918), Hermann Schmöcke's *Martin Luther* (first published in 1916) and Emil Ludwig's *Napoleon* (1925) ranked among Weimar's best-selling publications and testify to a remarkable public interest in 'the past'.[15]

The widespread hunger for historical purpose and meaning after 1918 had various causes, but it certainly owed much to the unexpected collapse of the *Kaiserreich*. Although the end of the war was widely welcomed in Germany, it was also felt that the revolution had created a *Verkehrte Welt,* a world in which hitherto unquestionable norms and values, social hierarchies, institutions and authorities had suddenly become obsolete.[16] The rapidity of these changes fostered the widespread impression that 'nothing was certain and everything possible', which in turn generated a deep-seated sense of disorientation.[17] The highly fragmented nature of German society ensured that the search for historical identity led to a fundamental public controversy in which various traditions were constructed and invoked in order to legitimise present-day policies and to determine Weimar's place in history.[18] In a period that was seen by many contemporaries as a time deprived of historical context, the various socio-political milieus in Weimar searched for reference points in the past in order to imbue their political actions with meaning.

That images of history can become political weapons in the struggle of ideologies is not, of course, a new insight. Several studies in recent years have investigated how political beliefs in different countries have shaped the ways in which societies think about (and represent) their pasts, while at the same time drawing attention to the autonomous weight that traditions and interpretive frameworks exert on political life.[19] All of these empirical investigations have confirmed Jacques Le Goff's theoretical

Katherine Roper, 'Friedericus Films in Weimar Society: Potsdamismus in a Democracy', *German Studies Review*, 21 (2003), 493–514.

13 Joachim-Felix Leonhard, ed., *Programmgeschichte des Hörfunks in der Weimarer Republik*, 2 vols. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), I, 193–200, 607–12.

14 Christoph Gradmann, *'Historische Belletristik'. Populäre historische Biographien in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 1993). See also Bettina Hey'l, *Geschichtsdenken und literarische Moderne. Zum historischen Roman in der Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer Verlag, 1994).

15 See Donald Ray Richards, *The German Bestseller in the 20th Century. A Complete Bibliography and Analysis 1915–1940* (Berne: Herbert Lang Verlag, 1968), 55, 58, and 61.

16 Martin H. Geyer, *Verkehrte Welt. Revolution, Inflation und Moderne, München 1914–1924* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 19. See also Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Zeit der Ideologien. Eine Geschichte des politischen Denkens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1982), 145.

17 Reinhard Koselleck, 'Neuzeit. Zur Semantik moderner Bewegungsbegriffe', in *idem*, ed., *Studien zum Beginn der modernen Welt* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1977), 264–99, at 285. On the 'rapidity of change' as a hallmark of the period, see also Walter Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut (1933)', in *idem*, *Gesammelte Schriften* 21 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 213–19, at 214. Second quotation: Fritzsche, 'Did Weimar Fail?', 633.

18 On the broader issue of 'legitimacy', see the recent special edition of *Contemporary European History*, 13, 4 (2004), esp. 377–88.

19 See, e.g., Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 1999); Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven and London:

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contention that the battle for history, the contest to win final ownership of a usable past, is a common element of pluralistic societies.[20] The lesson that emerges from the recent scholarly engagement with 'invented traditions' and the politics of memory is that few political movements in history have failed to attempt a justification of their aims through often contested historical traditions. Whereas in authoritarian societies the state tends to dictate an official reading of the past, pluralistic societies usually witness a competition of various interpretations of history for the broadest possible acceptance.[21] The closer a political movement or social milieu comes to establishing its own view of the past as universal, the closer it gets to a position of cultural hegemony.[22]

While these general insights have influenced scholarly works on different periods in German history (most notably with respect to attempts to master the Nazi past after 1945 and the construction of a historical identity in the Federal Republic), Weimar's deeply divided collective memory remains a remarkably under-studied field.[23] This neglect is surprising, since Weimar is a particularly extreme example of a society in which rival groups constructed fundamentally different images of the past with the aim of legitimising their present-day political agendas.

To say that Weimar witnessed a particularly uncompromising battle over the past is not to deny the fact that controversy over the Reich's historical identity had featured prominently in German intellectual discourses long before the Republic's birth out of military defeat and revolution. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attempts to define what was distinctively German and how Germany's historical traditions differed from those of other European nations, remained a major preoccupation of intellectuals and politicians alike, but the deep divisions within German society along the lines of class, religion, regional identity and political beliefs prevented the emergence of a universally acceptable historical master-narrative that could satisfy Germany's search for a historical identity.[24]

Yale University Press, 1994). See also the recent special issue of *French History* on Napoleon and his changing image in French and European collective memory: *French History*, 18 (2004), 349–483. On 'new spectacular modes of historical representation' in the age of modernity, see Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past. Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

20 Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 109.

21 Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichte als Waffe: Vom Kaiserreich bis zur Wiedervereinigung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 6. Martin Sabrow, *Verwaltete Vergangenheit: Geschichtskultur und Herrschaftslegitimation in der DDR* (Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 1997).

22 Winkler, 'Einleitung', in *idem*, *Griff nach der Deutungsmacht*, 7.

23 See, e.g., Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997); Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1988); Norbert Frei, *Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 1996); and Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999).

24 See Wolfgang Hardtwig, 'Erinnerung, Wissenschaft, Mythos. Nationale Geschichtsbilder und politische Symbole in der Reichsgründungsära und im Kaiserreich', in *idem, Geschichtskultur und Wissenschaft* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1990), 224–63. See also Andreas Dörner, *Politischer Mythos und symbolische Politik. Der Hermannmythos: Zur Entstehung des Nationalbewußtseins der*

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The unexpected military defeat and the subsequent revolution substantially exacerbated the long-standing divisions within German society and helped to create a political climate in which consensus about Weimar's place in history was impossible to achieve. Weimar witnessed what the chief editor of *Vorwärts*, Friedrich Stampfer, described as a civil war of memories, a clash of conflicting, ideologically charged interpretations of the German past that – according to the liberal Reichstag MP Gertrud Bäumer – constituted 'the strongest and perhaps most notable symptom that we have lost the heritage of 1871, namely unity'.[25]

From the days of the German revolution in 1918–19, the historical profession was heavily involved in this public controversy. Inspired by Nietzsche's criticism that history was becoming a science instead of serving the needs of everyday life, many historians devoted their time and energy to the popularisation of the 'lessons of the past'.[26] While some, such as Friedrich Meinecke, accepted that the Reich of 1871 'one day had to confront its majestic decline' because 'its accumulated failings had to become so evident that it could no longer be maintained', others rejected the Republic as a historically illegitimate and 'un-German' state that had destroyed the 'organic' constitution of 1871.[27] Criticism of the Republic's apparent lack of legitimacy was very common among Weimar's historians.[28] In 1922, for example, one of the period's leading medievalists, Johannes Haller, published his widely read book *Epochen der deutschen Geschichte* through which he wished to contribute to the search for 'historical meaning' in a seemingly meaningless present.[29] Haller's 'search for meaning' was supported by the vast majority of German historians whose active participation in the public controversy over 'the past' was often driven by a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the political and cultural realities of life in the Weimar Republic. Thomas Mann perceptively described this common notion through the thoughts of his protagonist, the history professor Abel Cornelius, in *Disorder and Early Sorrow* (1926):

> He knows that history professors . . . hate a revolution like the present one, because they feel it is lawless, incoherent, irrelevant, in a word, unhistoric; that their hearts belong to the coherent, disciplined, historic past. For the temper of timelessness, the temper of eternity – thus the scholar

Deutschen (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1996). On notions of 'cultural crisis' before 1914 see Barbara Besslich, *Wege in den Kulturkrieg. Zivilisationskritik in Deutschland 1890–1914* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), 4–5.

25 Stampfer, *Vorwärts*, 18 Jan. 1931, morning edn; Bäumer: *Die Hilfe*, XXVII (1921), 18–19.

26 Kurt Nowak, 'Die "antihistoristische Revolution." Symptome und Folgen der Krise historischer Weltorientierung nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg in Deutschland', in Horst Renz and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, eds., *Umstrittene Moderne. Die Zukunft der Neuzeit im Urteil der Epoche Ernst Troeltschs* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1987), 133–71.

27 Friedrich Meinecke, 'On German History', *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 Nov. 1918. On the latter position, see, e.g., Max Lenz, 'Knechtschaft: Rede gehalten in Hamburg am 18. Januar 1921', in *idem*, *Wille, Macht und Schicksal*, 3rd edn (Munich and Berlin: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1922), 172–83.

28 The best account of Weimar historiography remains Bernd Faulenbach, *Ideologie des deutschen Weges: Die deutsche Geschichte in der Historiographie zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 1980).

29 Johannes Haller, *Epochen der deutschen Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1922), foreword (not paginated).

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communes with himself when he takes his walk by the river before supper – that temper broods over the past; and it is a temper much better suited to the nervous system of a history professor than are the excesses of the present. The past is immortalised; that is to say it is dead; and death is the root of all godliness and all abiding significance.[30]

To 'use the authority of the past in the face of a threatening present and a gloomy future' became a major preoccupation of Weimar historiography.[31] The 'shock to German historical consciousness' caused by the defeat in the Great War drove scholars to search for 'the exemplary' in history.[32] But Weimar's debate about the past was by no means exclusively academic. Politicians, novelists and public intellectuals alike engaged in the search for historical meaning. The intensity with which all those involved claimed the correctness of their particular interpretation of history grew from one simple realisation: only those who had the past on their side could claim legitimacy for their present-day policies. And legitimacy was desperately needed after the establishment of a political system without precedence in German history. Often the debates about the legacies of the past were only a pretext for the fundamental question of Weimar's historical legitimacy. Was the Republic, as the Weimar right maintained, the result of a 'stab in the back' inflicted on the otherwise victorious German army, executed by an unholy and anti-national alliance of Social Democrats, left Liberals and centre Catholics? Was it the outcome of a belated act of revenge by the 'internal enemies of the Reich' against their former persecutor, Otto von Bismarck? Or, as the Republicans argued to the contrary, had the constitution of 1919 brought about the fulfilment of those democratic ideals for which the revolutionaries of 1848 had unsuccessfully fought? Inflamed by questions such as these, this public debate mirrored a fundamental problem of Weimar's political culture: the lack of any basic consensus about the past, present and future of the German state and society.

II

The question remains as to which historical traditions and myths in particular were contested by Weimar's political camps. Although it is impossible in this context to do full justice to the diverse range of historical *topoi* and traditions that were invoked in order to stabilise or de-legitimise the Weimar Republic, one can, at the risk of simplification, identify a number of pre-eminent master-narratives concerning Weimar's place in history. These master-narratives were specific to (although not always uncontested within) the socio-political milieus that dominated the discourse

30 Thomas Mann, *Early Sorrow. A Story*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Martin Secker, 1929), 29.

31 Hans Herzfeld, 'Staat und Nation in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung der Weimarer Zeit', in *Veritas-Iustitia-Libertas. Festschrift zur 200-Jahrfeier der Columbia-University New York, überreicht von der Freien Universität Berlin und der Deutschen Hochschule für Politik* (Berlin: Colloquium-Verlag, 1954), 129–43, at 134. On general political tendencies within Weimar historiography, see Bernd Faulenbach, 'Nach der Niederlage. Zeitgeschichtliche Fragen und apologetische Tendenzen in der Historiographie der Weimarer Zeit', in Peter Schöttler, ed., *Geschichte als Legitimationswissenschaft 1918–1945* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), 31–51.

32 Hans Rothfels, ed., *Bismarck und der Staat. Ausgewählte Dokumente*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1953), ix.

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over the past in Weimar: the right, the republican camp, political Catholicism and the radical left.

Despite the often fundamental political differences that existed between the highly heterogeneous right-wing movements after 1918, the Weimar right was generally united in the belief that the Republic had consciously dissociated itself from the allegedly great traditions of the German past.[33] The 'un-German' revolution of 1918 had violently ruptured a 'glorious past' which progressed from Arminius's victory over the Romans in the Battle of Teutoburger Wald via Frederick the Great and the Wars of Liberation, before finding its crowning glory in Bismarck's creation of the German Reich in 1871.[34]

While Weimar's historical illegitimacy was undisputed within right-wing circles after 1918, there was, of course, significant disagreement about the lessons that were to be learnt from Germany's 'glorious' past. Protestant monarchists within the German National People's Party (DNVP), for example, firmly believed that only a return to the constitutional principles of 1871 could restore historical legitimacy. As one of the leaders of the monarchist DNVP, Kuno Count Westarp, argued in 1920, 'the German Republic of 9 November ... will prove to be a transitory period in our history ... On the very foundations of that which was created on 18 January [1871 – the day of the Imperial Proclamation in Versailles], Prussia and Germany will rise again'.[35] Whereas Westarp and many of his party colleagues viewed Weimar as a temporary deviation from the historical path that Germany had adopted in 1871, neo-conservative intellectuals such as Oswald Spengler, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Edgar Julius Jung rejected any demands for a simple return to the morally 'decadent' bourgeois culture of prewar Germany.[36] Both the protagonists of the 'Conservative Revolution' and representatives of the *völkisch* right insisted that the Reich of 1871 had merely been the highest point of Germany's national development *to date*, the 'starting point for Germany's great future'.[37] There was little consensus as to the exact shape and constitutional form of the future Reich that would 'inevitably' replace the historically illegitimate Republic. Yet, as long as Weimar democracy existed and the question of Germany's future form of state remained purely theoretical, *all* right-wing movements and parties in Germany were united in their determination to use 'the past' as a positive template against which the unpalatable features of Weimar could

33 On the Weimar right see Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik: Die politischen Ideen des deutschen Nationalismus zwischen 1918 und 1933*, 4th edn (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1994).

34 For variations of this theme by leading representatives of the Weimar right, see, e.g., Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Die Deutschen*, 2 vols. (Minden: Bruns Verlag, 1933), II, 168–195. See also Kuno Count Westarp, 'Preußen und die Hohenzollern', *Hallesche Zeitung*, 21 Dec. 1920; *idem*, 'Zum 9. November', *Kreuz-Zeitung*, 9 Nov. 1919; and Heinrich Class, 'Bismarck's Schatten', *Alldeutsche Blätter*, 27 Mar. 1920.

35 Kuno Count Westarp, 'Der 18. Januar', *Die Tradition*, 17 Jan. 1920.

36 Moeller van den Bruck, *Das Dritte Reich*, ed. Hans Schwarz, 3rd edn (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1931), 231; Oswald Spengler, *Preußentum und Sozialismus* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 1920), 6; Hans Freyer, *Das politische Semester: Ein Vorschlag zur Universitätsreform* (Jena: Diederichs Verlag, 1933).

37 Heinrich Class, 'Zum achtzehnten Januar', *Alldeutsche Blätter*, 22 Jan. 1921.

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be offset.[38] Although the unity of the Weimar right displayed during the annual anti-republican celebrations on 18 January and 1 April (Bismarck's birthday) was more apparent than real, such events were attended by movements as diverse as the Bavarian monarchist 'League for the Commemoration of Ludwig II', the Nazi Party and the Patriotic Leagues.[39]

Contrived as this right-wing 'invention of tradition' against the 'un-historic' Republic may seem, there can be little doubt of its popular appeal. When, for example, in 1923, the Vaterländische Verbände revived the nineteenth-century tradition of patriotic *Turnerfeste* with a three-day celebration in Munich, up to 24,0000 people attended the festivities which culminated in a play evoking scenes from Germany's 'glorious' past.[40] In comparison with this 'glorious' past, the Republic could be no more than a transitional period, a momentary nadir in history without legitimacy, which it was the self-appointed duty of the right to surmount.

To illustrate the argument that the revolutionaries of 1918 had betrayed Germany's past, the right used a popular motif: the stab in the back.[41] The legend of the stab in the back derived from a widely known historical narrative, the Nibelungen Saga. Just as the villain of that legend, Hagen von Tronje, had killed the Germanic hero Siegfried from behind, the home front had betrayed Germany's 'undefeated' army. It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the popularity of the legend of the stab in the back (and the success of its underlying concept of 'negative integration') without seeing it in a broader context.[42] Those allegedly responsible for Germany's defeat were exactly the same groups which Bismarck, the father of the German nation-state, had identified as the 'internal enemies of the Reich'. From this perspective, history suddenly made sense: in a belated act of revenge against their former persecutor Bismarck, the 'unpatriotic' circles within Germany had prevented his Reich from growing stronger through military victory in the First World War.[43]

The prime intentions of the myth-makers of the right were thus to associate the Weimar Republic with the odium of treason and to question the new state's historical birthright. In order to restore the historical legitimacy which the democratic state was allegedly lacking, the Republic would have to be replaced by an 'organic' form of state deeply embedded in the great traditions of Germany's mythical past. As the neo-conservative intellectual Paul Ludwig Landsberg suggested in his book *Die Welt*

38 See, e.g., Victor Klemperer's account of the 1931 Reich Foundation Day celebrations in Munich, in Victor Klemperer, *Tagebücher 1929–1932*, ed. Walter Nowojski (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2000), 214.

39 See, e.g., *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten*, 2 April 1928.

40 Geyer, *Verkehrte Welt*, 127.

41 See most recently Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden*, as well as Gerd Krumeich, 'Die Dolchstoß-Legende', in Etienne François and Hagen Schulze, eds., *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, 3 vols. (Munich: Beck Verlag, 2001), I, 585–99.

42 On the concept of 'negative integration' see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire 1871–1918*, trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985), 52–118.

43 Very revealing in this respect is Gottfried Traub's (DNVP) proposal for a monument 'in honour' of the Weimar Constitution. The monument was to show the Jewish intellectual and father of the Weimar constitution, Hugo Preuss, stabbing Bismarck in the back, a very drastic visualisation of Weimar's apparent lack of historical legitimacy. See *Eiserne Blätter*, 9 (1927), 581.

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des Mittelalters und wir (1922), this 'organic' system could only be established through a 'conservative revolution', a revolution of the 'eternal' values of the past against those of modern society, which had found its most extreme expression in the Republic of Weimar.[44]

That Weimar was historically illegitimate was a conclusion which German communists could subscribe to unreservedly. Naturally, the KPD's criticism of the Republic emerged from an entirely different perspective. In particular, the communist community strongly disputed the idea that the Weimar Republic had brought about any real improvement for the proletariat. *Rote Fahne*, for example, suggested that 'twelve years in the Kaiserreich equals 1,000 years in prison, but ten years in the Republic equals 45,000 years of imprisonment'.[45] Just as in 1848, or so the KPD leadership maintained, the moderate revolutionaries had betrayed the working classes in January 1919 by making common cause with the bourgeoisie, a betrayal that had culminated in the assassination of the Spartacist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg herself had laid the foundations for this interpretation when in January 1919, only a few days before her assassination, she maintained that the 'wretchedness of the German March revolution was the ball and chain hindering Germany's entire modern development'. Luxemburg insisted that the roots of the SPD's 'treacherous' behaviour in 1918–19 could be traced back to the 1848 revolution.[46]

By cultivating the narrative of the SPD's betrayal through annual commemoration marches and the creation of a *lieu de mémoire* (the Liebknecht-Luxemburg memorial in Friedrichsfelde designed by Mies van der Rohe and completed in 1926), the communists established their own version of the stab in the back myth which fulfilled exactly the same purpose as its right-wing counterpart: it integrated the left-wing enemies of democracy and defined them against a system that was represented as a transitory period without historical legitimacy, a period which had to be overcome to give history meaning.[47] To overthrow the bourgeois German Republic and to erect upon its ruins the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was what Ernst Thälmann called the 'historical mission' of the KPD, the fulfilment of the 'century-old' dreams and aspirations of Germany's working classes.[48]

Naturally, such interpretations of Weimar as the low point of German history clashed violently with the perception of forces loyal to the Republic. Leading representatives of the SPD and the left-liberal German Democratic Party (DDP) in particular countered the nationalist and communist deployments of the past with

44 Paul Ludwig Landsberg, *Die Welt des Mittelalters und wir. Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über den Sinn eines Zeitalters* (Bonn: Friedrich Cohen Verlag, 1922), 112. See also Otto Gerhard Oexle, 'Das Mittelalter und das Unbehagen an der Moderne. Mittelalterbeschwörungen in der Weimarer Republik und danach', in *idem*, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus. Studien zu Problemgeschichten der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 137–62.

45 *Rote Fahne*, 23 Oct. 1928.

46 Ibid., 14 Jan. 1919.

47 Gilbert Badia, 'Rosa Luxemburg', in François and Schulze, *Erinnerungsorte*, II, 105–21.

48 Ernst Thälmann, '10 Jahre KPD', in *idem*, *Geschichte und Politik. Artikel und Reden 1925 bis 1933* (East Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1973), 126.

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their own historical narratives – narratives which at least up until the publication of the draft peace treaty in May 1919 had every chance of gaining the support of a majority of Germans. When Friedrich Ebert maintained during the opening of the National Constituent Assembly in Weimar that the Republic had corrected the 'deviant' path which Germany's development had taken after the failure of the 1848 revolution, the majority of delegates greeted his speech with considerable applause. According to Ebert and the 'father' of the Weimar Constitution, Hugo Preuss (DDP), reactionary policies after 1848 had divided Germany both socially and ideologically, a process that culminated in the establishment of the Kaiserreich, a 'feudal' deviation from the older democratic traditions in German society. The constitution of 1919, on the other hand, had fulfilled the legacy of a better German historical tradition, a liberal-democratic tradition that had begun with the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon and the Prussian Reform era, and which had found its most glorious moment in the March revolution of 1848.[49]

What Ebert and Preuss offered their audience in the National Assembly, was a relatively coherent narrative in defence of the Republic's historical legitimacy, a narrative that temporarily seemed to bridge (at least on a symbolic level) the significant programmatic and ideological differences that existed between the liberal DDP and the Marxist SPD. However, despite the continuous propagation of this narrative through political speeches, democratic newspapers and the democratic Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, its credibility was heavily undermined by political and economic realities after 1918 which made it difficult to convince the public that Weimar was indeed the fulfilment of Germany's 'better' historical traditions. Furthermore, the republican master-narrative in defence of Weimar's historical legitimacy was severely compromised by the fact that, particularly in 1918–19, leading Social Democrats tended to adopt the language of their political enemies in their evaluation of Germany's military defeat as well as in their rejection of the Treaty of Versailles. Whether Ebert encouraged the myth-makers of the right by publicly emphasising that the German army had remained 'undefeated' in the Great War or whether Philipp Scheidemann declared that 'the hand may rot which signs this treaty [of Versailles]', the two leading representatives of German democracy essentially subscribed to an interpretation of current events that was detrimental to the republican master-narrative of Weimar's historical legitimacy.[50] Instead of using their position of relative strength (after all, the Weimar coalition was backed by nearly three-quarters of the National Assembly's delegates) for a thorough rejection of nationalist irrationality, Ebert and Scheidemann encouraged the common belief that Weimar's birth was tainted by treason and that the peace treaty was the result of an international conspiracy against the German people.

49 *Verhandlungen der Verfassunggebenden Deutschen Nationalversammlung. Stenographische Berichte* (NV), 326, 2–3 (Ebert,) and 292 (Preuss), 6 Feb. 1919.

50 Friedrich Ebert, 'An die heimkehrenden Truppen' (10 Dec. 1918), in *idem*, *Schriften, Aufzeichnungen, Reden,* 2 vols. (Dresden: Carl Reisser Verlag, 1926), II, 127–130, 127. Scheidemann, NV, 327, 1086, 12 May 1919.

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Despite these grave setbacks, Social Democrats and left-liberals continued to uphold their interpretation of the German past according to which the Republic had 'corrected' the 'false path' which Germany's historical development had taken since 1871.[51] During the presidential elections of 1925, for example, the republican Volksblock campaigned with a poster emphasising this basic narrative of historical legitimacy: 'What our ancestors thought in '48, their grandchildren have achieved! Who wants to betray the banner [an allusion to the black, red and gold flag on the poster] which Grimm and Uhland unfurled?'[52]

The choice of this campaign motto to support the presidential candidacy of the Catholic Centre Party's chairman, Wilhelm Marx, against Paul von Hindenburg is highly intriguing, because it suggests that there was a common interpretation of the Republic's historical legitimacy by the Weimar coalition parties (the SPD, the DDP and the Centre Party) across political and confessional divides.[53] This 'unity', however, never really existed. In reality, the third pillar of the Weimar coalition, the Centre Party, was faced with a serious dilemma. On the one hand, most spokesmen of the Catholic community rejected Weimar's birth out of defeat and revolution as an unfortunate and historically illegitimate act. Few went as far as the archbishop of Munich, Cardinal Michael Faulhaber, who, at the 1922 *Katholikentag*, famously stigmatised the revolution as 'high treason' carrying the 'mark of Cain'.[54] However, the Catholic press generally left little doubt about its overwhelmingly negative attitude towards the events of November 1918. As the Catholic *Kölnische Volkszeitung* phrased it, 'There will be no paintings of the likes of Anton von Werner's Imperial Proclamation to announce the birth of the new Germany; it will simply be good when the memory of those dark, grey, ugly November days is erased once and for all . . .!'[55] On the other hand, however, the Centre Party firmly committed itself to the Republic as a political reality, a commitment illustrated by the fact that it participated in all of the many coalition governments of the 1920s. In an attempt to reconcile divergent positions on Weimar's historical legitimacy within the Centre Party, the leading Catholic newspaper, *Germania,* suggested a compromise solution:

> Our attitude towards the events of 9 November does not permit us to commemorate this day in a festive way and we strongly reject the idea of celebrating 9 November as our national holiday. However, we will not join in the chorus of those who deny the fateful character of this day, who always talk about the 'November criminals' and who forget how large the old state's responsibility was in bringing about that day . . . The Republic created after 9 November is as historically legitimate as a state can possibly be. Our lives and our work are devoted to this state and with our hearts and our hands we will lead it into a happy German future.[56]

51 Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, NV, 326, 69 (14 Feb. 1919).
52 Lothar Gall, ed., *Aufbruch zur Freiheit* (Frankfurt: Nicolai'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1998), 270.
53 On political Catholicism after 1918 and Germany's religious divide see Heinz Hürten, *Deutsche Katholiken 1918–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 1992). See also the introductory overview in Robert A. Krieg, *Catholic Theologians in Nazi Germany* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 24–7.
54 *Schulthess' Europäischer Geschichtskalender*, 63 (1922), 107.
55 *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 19 Jan. 1924.
56 *Germania*, 9 Nov. 1928.

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What exactly this 'happy future' entailed and how it would be historically justified remained, of course, a highly controversial issue within the Catholic community. Whereas the Berlin-based *Germania*, for example, repeatedly rejected the widespread nostalgia for 'better times' in the past while emphasising the 'successful' crisis management of the Weimar Coalition as a historical achievement in its own right, the Bavarian *Regensburger Anzeiger* frequently professed its hope for a resurrection of the Holy Roman Empire.[57] Such references to the Holy Roman Empire were by no means isolated phenomena. Particularly after the onset of the Great Depression, the metaphysical idea of a revival of the *sacrum imperium* and its unity of Christianity, Church and state, experienced a remarkable renaissance within the Catholic community, particularly outside Prussia.[58] In his widely read book *Das Reich des Abendlandes*, the Bavarian monarchist Fritz von Haniel-Niethammer demanded a return to the 'organic' principles of the medieval Holy Roman Empire which were to form the foundation of Germany's future: 'The flag of the Reich will bear the symbol of the Cross . . . , because it is the duty of the Reich to oppose the purpose-driven tyranny which emanates from America and Russia with the occidental idea of Christianity'.[59] But hopes for the revival of a Christian empire were not confined to the Catholic right. Even the predominantly pro-republican journal *Stimmen der Jugend* articulated its conviction that 'it is not a sign of lofty romanticism, when we confess our belief . . . in a Christian Mitteleuropa under a German leadership, a revival of the "Holy Roman Empire"'.[60]

Despite the often fundamentally different attitudes towards the legitimacy of Weimar's birth, the new state's historical identity and the future of the political community, there was a common reference point for *all* of the parties of the Weimar coalition: the nineteenth-century dream of *Grossdeutschland* as a binding legacy for the present. The Anschluss of Austria was a demand that was supported unambiguously by the DDP, the SPD and the Centre Party. Enthusiasm for Anschluss was certainly not restricted to the republicans, but for them the struggle for *Grossdeutschland* became one of the most important means of establishing historical legitimacy for the Republic.

III

The idea of Anschluss, frequently debated following the publication of Friedrich Naumann's book *Mitteleuropa* in 1915, took centre stage in the republicans' attempts to legitimise the new state after the collapse of the Kaiserreich and the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire.[61] On the occasion of the opening of the German National

57 See, e.g., *Germania*, 18 Jan. 1921; on the *Regensburger Anzeiger* see Georg Kotowski, 'Auf dem Boden der gegebenen vollendeten Tasachen! Der politische Katholizismus', in Lehnert and Megerle, eds., *Politische Identität*, 159–80.

58 Klaus Breuning, *Die Vision des Reiches. Deutscher Katholizismus zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur 1929–34* (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1969).

59 Fritz von Haniel Niethammer, *Das Reich des Abendlandes* (Munich and Berlin: Oldenbourg, 1932), 149–50.

60 *Stimmen der Jugend* (1928), as quoted in Breuning, *Vision des Reiches*, 88.

61 Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 1915).

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Constituent Assembly in February 1919, the leader of the majority Social Democrats and designated president of the republic, Friedrich Ebert, called on the Assembly to authorise the Anschluss of Austria. The Republic would thereby return to the democratic and *grossdeutsch* traditions of the first half of the nineteenth century, traditions which Ebert and many of his colleagues saw as embodied in the 1848 revolution.[62]

There were several reasons why Ebert and many other representatives of the newly founded Republic were pushing for Anschluss in the spring of 1919. Faced with the difficult consequences of an unprecedented military defeat and an unwanted revolution, they were well aware that the Republic had not 'come into being as the result of an heroic act, or of an act which national mythology could represent as heroic; it was not conceived as a brave new world'.[63] Against this background, the Anschluss of the Austro-German rump state that had emerged from the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire was intended to demonstrate that, despite Germany's military defeat, the Republic was capable of the greatest imaginable foreign policy success: the *grossdeutsch* enlargement of the German Reich. The idea of 'reintegrating' the German-speaking parts of Austria into the Reich was overwhelmingly popular – both in Germany and in Austria.[64] In the eyes of the vast majority of Germans, the disintegration of Austria-Hungary provided a unique opportunity to compensate for military defeat by creating an ethnically homogeneous *grossdeutsch* Reich.[65]

Furthermore, the commitment to the Anschluss movement enabled the parties which had come to power unexpectedly in October 1918 to demonstrate the Republic's attachment to the historical traditions of the German past. The republicans' commitment to Anschluss was a concerted effort to create an undeniable historical legitimacy for the newly founded Republic at a time when both the political right and the extreme left disputed Weimar's historical birthright. Leading republicans such as Ebert, Scheidemann and Preuss knew that Weimar had to be presented as a continuation of older democratic *and* patriotic traditions if the Republic was not to be perceived as a form of government which had only come into existence as a by-product of Germany's defeat in the war. The measures that were undertaken to achieve this aim ranged from the introduction of the black, red and gold banner as the Republic's national flag to the choice of Weimar, home of Goethe and Schiller, as the 'birthplace' of the new democratic constitution. As the DDP's expert on constitutional law, Wilhelm Schücking, pointed out, the makers of

62 NV, 326, 2 (6 Feb. 1919).

63 Peukert, *Weimar Republic*, 6–7.

64 Following the official proclamation by the German-Austrian National Assembly of 12 November 1918 that Austria was 'a constituent part of the German Republic', the German National Assembly paved the way for Anschluss in Arts. 2 and 61 of the Weimar Constitution (both of which were adopted without opposition). See 'Gesetz über die Staats- und Regierungsform Deutsch-Österreichs', in Ernst R. Huber, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte seit 1789*, V: *Weltkrieg, Revolution und Reichserneuerung 1914–1919* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1978), 1175, as well as *Die Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches vom 11. August 1919*, ed. Gerhard Anschütz, 2nd edn (Berlin: Stilke Verlag 1921), 30 (Art. 2), 119–20 (Art. 61).

65 Robert Gerwarth, 'Republik und Reichsgründung', in Winkler, *Griff nach der Deutungsmacht*, 115–34.

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the constitution should look 'back to Uhland, Schiller and the Baron vom Stein' to find the historical models that would guide Germany towards its democratic future.[66] Historians have often interpreted statements such as this as an expression of Weimar's idealism. In fact, they were quite the opposite. They constituted a conscious and very pragmatic attempt to satisfy the public's hunger for historical roots. Following Ebert's insistence that '9 November 1918 is a continuation of 18 March 1848', Hugo Preuss consequently presented his constitutional draft as an 'updated form' of the ideals of the 1848–9 Paulskirche parliament.[67] These ideals included both the implementation of a liberal democracy and the creation of a *grossdeutsch* fatherland.[68]

The Allies' explicit ban on Anschluss in May 1919 was therefore a disaster for the republicans' struggle for legitimacy.[69] Ebert and other leading representatives of the new regime had repeatedly accused the Kaiserreich of being *kleindeutsch* and thus 'unfinished' or 'incomplete'.[70] As late as 18 March 1919 *Vorwärts* had maintained that 'the *grossdeutsch* idea of 1848 ... will be fulfilled in our days under the black, red and gold banner, the revolutionary flag of 1848'.[71] The decisive rejection of Anschluss by the Allied powers thus exposed an internal political flank which right-wing propaganda immediately exploited. The conservative weekly publication *Tradition* had already denounced the plans for a peaceful revision of the *kleindeutsch* borders as unrealistic at the beginning of April 1919: 'If empires could be founded on words and eager German hearts alone, then the idealists of the Frankfurt Paulskirche would have presented us with a greater German fatherland from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic seventy years ago'.[72] After the Allies' ban on Anschluss, the editor of *Kreuzzeitung* and later chairman of the German Nationalist Party, Kuno von Westarp, saw this criticism being confirmed. He remarked that the 'fathers of the [Weimar] constitution have not succeeded in their plan of achieving a *grossdeutsch* Germany, for which they regarded themselves as so superior to Bismarck at the opening of the [constitutional] negotiations'.[73]

The relief which lay in Westarp's words was only too comprehensible. With the failed attempt to create a *grossdeutsch* Republic, the supporters of Weimar had lost

66 NV, 326, 476 (3 Mar. 1919).

67 Preuss: NV, 326, 292 (24 Feb. 1919). Ebert: ibid., 3 (6 Feb. 1919). Preuss's draft of the constitution is printed in *Deutscher Reichs- und Preußischer Staatsanzeiger*, 20 Jan. 1919. See also Ludwig Richter, 'Die Nachwirkungen der Frankfurter Verfassungsdebatten von 1848/49 auf die Beratungen der Nationalversammlung 1919 über die Weimarer Verfassung', in Heiner Timmermann, ed., *1848. Revolution in Europa. Verlauf, politische Programme, Folgen und Wirkungen* (Berlin: Dunker & Humblot, 1999), 441–466; and Hermann Oncken, 'Die deutsche Nationalversammlung 1848 und 1919', *Recht und Wirtschaft*, 8 (1919), 3–10.

68 *Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches*, 30 (Art. 2), 119–20 (Art. 61).

69 See Art. 80, *Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1919), 51, and the almost identical Art. 88 in *Der Staatsvertrag von St. Germain* (Vienna: Staatsdruckerei, 1919), 58.

70 See, e.g., Foreign Minister Brockdorff-Rantzau, NV, 326, 69 (14 Feb. 1919).

71 *Vorwärts*, 18 Mar. 1919.

72 *Die Tradition*, 1 (1919), 19–20.

73 Kuno Count Westarp in *Kreuz-Zeitung* (7 Sept. 1919), printed in Kuno Graf von Westarp, *Konservative Politik im Übergang vom Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik*, ed. Friedrich Freiherr Hiller von Gaertringen (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2001), 272.

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their strongest and most popular argument against the right's accusation that Weimar was historically illegitimate. The parties of the Weimar coalition were well aware of this dilemma, and proved reluctant to concede that their *grossdeutsch* ambitions had foundered. That the promise of Anschluss was utterly unrealistic in the face of international opposition did not put an end to the republican cult of 1848. The Weimar coalition parties continued to depict 'their' state as the legitimate heir to the democratic and *grossdeutsch* legacy of 1848.[74] Spreading this myth was, in fact, the main preoccupation of the republican paramilitary organisation Reichsbanner. Its journal often printed portraits of prominent 1848 revolutionaries and organised commemoration marches to the graves of Ferdinand Freiligrath and Ludwig Uhland, the poet laureates of the March revolution.[75] Even in 1924, with no hope of *Anschluss* in the foreseeable future, the chairman of Reichsbanner, Otto Landsberg, declared that 'this Republic will be *grossdeutsch* or it will cease to exist, and then it will have deserved its demise'.[76] Statements such as these were naturally dangerous for the republican cause, since the *kleindeutsch* reality of Weimar made it easy for the enemies of democracy to convince the public that, just like the revolutionaries in 1848, the Republic had failed to achieve its ultimate objectives when the realisation of these objectives had allegedly been possible.

To be sure, the attempts to establish historical legitimacy for the Republic also included the invocation of other allegedly 'democratic' traditions, among which the Wars of Liberation and the Prussian reform era had a central significance.[77] Republican politicians publicly appealed to prominent authors and journalists to popularise a new reading of history.[78] Their appeal did not fall on deaf ears, as, for example, Paul Wiegler's biographical series on the 'forerunners' of German democracy demonstrates. His appraisals of men such as Thomas Münzer, Daniel Schubart, Georg Forster and Karl Marx, published in *Literarische Welt* in 1927, were a conscious attempt to establish historical legitimacy for the Republic.[79]

Yet many democrats increasingly realised that historical figures such as Goethe, Freiligrath and Münzer were unsuited to inspiring the masses. Peter Gay has argued that 'in the battle of historical symbols the republicans were at a clear disadvantage from the start: compared with Bismarck and other charismatic leaders, at once superhuman and picturesque, the models available to Weimar were pallid and uninspiring: the Goethe of modern Germany was a benign, ineffectual cosmopolitan, full of memorable observations about *Humanität*, whom everyone quoted and no one followed'.[80]

74 See, e.g., Paul Löbe, NV, 327, 1117 (22 June 1919). See also Dieter Rebentisch, *Friedrich Ebert und die Paulskirche. Die Weimarer Demokratie und die 75-Jahrfeier der 1848er Revolution* (Heidelberg: Stiftung Reichspräsident-Friedrich-Ebert-Gedenkstätte, 1998).

75 Karl Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner Schwarz Rot Gold. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Struktur der politischen Kampfverbände zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1966).

76 *Das Reichsbanner*, 1 (1924), 3.

77 See, e.g., *Berliner Tageblatt*, 18 Jan. 1921, morning edition.

78 See, e.g., Willy Hellpach's editorial in *Vossische Zeitung*, 17 Aug. 1926.

79 *Literarische Welt*, 7 Jan. 1927.

80 Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 87–8.

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That the past was a battlefield on which the Republic could only lose did not escape the attention of observant contemporaries. This insight increasingly led to the belief that the establishment of a parliamentary democracy in Germany should be celebrated as a historical achievement in itself. In 1921 the centre-left coalition government under Joseph Wirth consequently introduced annual commemoration ceremonies on Constitution Day to celebrate the signing of the Weimar Constitution on 11 August 1919.[81] The organisation of these celebrations was one of the central tasks of the art historian Edwin Redslob, who had assumed the responsibility of *Reichskunstwart* in 1920.[82] Popular festivities were organised on 11 August and the republican press made every effort to establish both a positive foundation myth and an emotional bond between the Republic and its citizens.[83] As Wilhelm Sollmann proclaimed in August 1929,

> we have experienced Germany's most severe collapse in history; we have wandered through the darkest years of our country's existence. The Republic has prevented the Reich from its dissolution; she has coped with a devastating decade. A state of such strength will master the entire century. The Republic has saved Germany; she will lead her to freedom and she will ensure the renewed ascent of the German people.[84]

The editor of *Berliner Tageblatt,* Theodor Wolff, came to a similar conclusion: 'Looking at the storms we have weathered in the past, our determination to master those of the future is strengthened'.[85]

When Sollmann and Wolff wrote these lines in August 1929, they had every reason to assume that the Republic had indeed weathered the worst storms and that the democratic system had proved its legitimacy by deed. It was impossible for them to foresee that soon the Republic's ability to master the present would be tested beyond its ability and that the most heated debates about Weimar's historical legitimacy were yet to come.

IV

Only a few months after the public celebrations on Constitution Day 1929, the Weimar Republic found itself trapped in the most severe crisis since its foundation. The death of Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann on 3 October 1929 deprived the Grand Coalition government of its most important advocate, and the economic

81 Arnold Brecht, 'Die ersten Verfassungsfeiern', *Der Heimatdienst*, 15 (1929), 274–5.

82 See the autobiography by Edwin Redslob, *Von Weimar nach Europa. Erlebtes und Durchdachtes* (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1972). See also Nadine Rossol, 'Visualising the Republic – Unifying the Nation. Constructing Republican Identity and National Culture in Weimar Germany', Ph.D. thesis in progress, University of Limerick.

83 Juliane Ossner, 'Die Reichsgründungs- und Verfassungsfeiern in Wetzlar und Gießen 1921 bis 1933', *Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte*, 49 (1999), 151–77; Friedrich Stamp, 'Verfassungsfeiern in Goslar in der Weimarer Republik', *Unser Harz*, 48 (2000), 63–6; Klaus-Dieter Weber, 'Verfassungsfeiern in der Weimarer Republik', in Gerhard Henke-Bockschatz, ed., *Geschichte und historisches Lernen. Jochen Huhn zum 65. Geburtstag* (Kassel: Jenior Verlag, 1995), 181–208.

84 *Reichsbanner*, 10 Aug. 1929.

85 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 11 Aug. 1929, morning edition.

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consequences of the Wall Street Crash of 24 October hit Germany particularly hard.[86] The doomsday atmosphere that emerged in the wake of the Great Depression allowed the enemies of the Republic to agitate successfully against it by portraying the crisis as a consequence of the democratic 'system'. The accusation of Weimar's lack of historical legitimacy, which had lost some of its intensity during the Republic's more stable years, suddenly took centre stage again. The Stahlhelm leader Franz Seldte, for example, used the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Reich's foundation in 1931 for a speech in Magdeburg in which he demanded that it was imperative for the Germans to overcome the 'un-German *Zwischenreich*' embodied in the Weimar Republic, a transitory period in German history that had adopted a 'foreign' form of state and thus had rejected its historical roots.[87]

Seldte's speech on Reich Foundation Day 1931 expressed a key demand of right-wing agitation: the Republic should be replaced by a non-democratic, authoritarian 'Third Reich' deeply embedded in the 'great' traditions of Germany's past.[88] The new political explosiveness of the debate about Weimar's place in history alarmed democratic circles. *Germania*, for example, immediately rejected the basic assumptions of Seldte's speech and underlined that his views were not shared by political Catholicism: 'This Reich in which we live today is not a *Zwischenreich*, and indeed not – as the Stahlhelm declares in its abusive paper – an "un-German *Zwischenreich*" which should be replaced by a mythical "Third Reich".'[89]

Germania's forceful rejection of Seldte's speech was designed to counter the argument of Weimar's historical illegitimacy. In the light of the economic depression and the subsequent political radicalisation, however, fewer and fewer people were willing to 'deploy all forces for the benefit of the Reich' as long as this Reich was a Republic. Germany was in the middle of a major crisis, and the inability of Weimar democracy to solve this crisis encouraged its enemies in their belief that the 'decisive phase of the struggle' against the Republic had begun.[90]

The man who profited most from the increasingly popular perception of Weimar as a historically illegitimate state was Adolf Hitler, whose propaganda before 1933 relied heavily on the use of 'mythic and utopian symbols' that were designed to counter the 'arid language of democracy and rational discourse'.[91] In the light of Weimar's intensified crisis of legitimacy after 1929, Hitler and other representatives of

86 On the Great Depression in Germany see Harold James, *The German Slump: Politics and Economics 1924–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

87 See *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, 18 Jan. 1931, Sunday edition. On Seldte see Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm. Bund der Frontsoldaten 1918–1935* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966), 69 ff.

88 The 'idea of the Reich' experienced a remarkable renaissance in the political rhetoric of the early 1930s. It combined romantic notions of a glorious past with anti-democratic, anti-Western and anti-communist sentiments. See Lothar Kettenacker, 'Der Mythos vom Reich', in Karl H. Bohrer, ed., *Mythos und Moderne. Begriff und Bild einer Rekonstruktion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983), 261–89. See also Herfried Münkler, 'Das Reich als politische Macht und politischer Mythos', in *idem*, *Reich-Nation-Europa. Modelle politischer Ordnung* (Weinheim: Athenäum Verlag, 1996), 11–59. For Catholic concepts of the 'Reich' see Breuning, *Vision des Reiches*.

89 *Germania*, 18 Jan. 1931, morning edition.

90 *Bismarck-Blatt*, July 1930, 52.

91 Gerhard Paul, *Aufstand der Bilder: Die NS-Propaganda vor 1933* (Bonn: Dietz Verlag, 1990), 13.

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the Nazi Party consciously appealed to the manifest public desire for the restoration of continuity. The Nazis insisted that the German people's current path 'through the hell of Weimar' would ultimately lead to the national rebirth of Germany in a mythical 'Third Reich', a catch-phrase which seemed ideal to represent both their concept of a radical break with Weimar democracy and the re-establishment of historical continuity.[92]

As Hitler made clear in *Mein Kampf*, 'history' had a primarily instrumental purpose for the movement.[93] To Hitler, history was important both as a political weapon against his opponents and as a means of justifying his own political beliefs.[94] And Hitler knew how popular such a strategy would be. When he referred to a forthcoming 'national revolution' he meant a revolution that would reconcile the past with the present on the rubble of Weimar democracy. He knew that whoever could satisfy the seemingly paradoxical but nevertheless widespread thirst for continuity *and* change could be sure of finding wide approval from the electorate.[95] It was this conviction which led Joseph Goebbels to make the statement that

> National Socialism has every right to claim that it embodies the idea of Prussia. Wherever in Germany we National Socialists may stand, we are Prussians. The idea we promote is Prussian. What we fight for is the modernised version of those ideals pursued by Frederick William I, Frederick the Great and Bismarck.[96]

Goebbels's instrumentalisation of the Prussian past in April 1932 was certainly influenced both by his role as *Gauleiter* of Berlin and the forthcoming Prussian *Landtag* elections (in which the Nazis managed to increase their representation from nine to 162 seats). Neither Goebbels nor any other leading National Socialist would ever have invoked images of past Prussian glory to promote the aims of the Nazi Party in Bavaria, Saxony or Wurttemberg. Yet Goebbels's statement is highly indicative of the Nazis' demagogic ability to use 'the past' against Weimar in different contexts, thereby tailoring their messages to the specific beliefs of their regional audiences.[97] When, for example, the Nazis campaigned in the local elections in Lippe-Detmold in mid-January 1933, they addressed the electorate as the '*Hermannsvolk*' which once again had the opportunity to pave the way for Germany's national liberation.[98]

92 *Deutsche Zeitung*, 18 Jan. 1931, morning edition. The catch-phrase was invented by Moeller van den Bruck, *Das dritte Reich*.

93 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy, 2nd edn (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1939), 110.

94 Ibid.

95 See Martin Broszat, 'Soziale Motivation und Führerbindung des Nationalsozialismus', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 18 (1970), 392–409. On the importance of historical continuity and the impact of a 'hero cult' for the National Socialist movement, see Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden. Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole* (Vierow: SH-Verlag, 1996).

96 Goebbels, as quoted in Manfred Schlenke, 'Nationalsozialismus und Preußen/Preußentum', in Otto Büsch, ed., *Das Preußenbild in der Geschichte* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1981), 247–64, at 248.

97 On National Socialism and regionalism see Horst Möller, Andreas Wirsching and Walter Ziegler, eds., *Nationalsozialismus in der Region. Beiträge zur regionalen und lokalen Forschung und zum internationalen Vergleich* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996).

98 See Jutta Ciolek-Krümper, *Wahlkampf in Lippe. Die Wahlkampfpropaganda der NSDAP zur Landtagswahl am 15. Januar 1933* (Munich: Verlag Dokumentation, 1976), 226–33.

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The Nazis further exploited the widely entertained hope for a strong political leadership which would encapsulate the traditions of German history and commit itself to the fulfilment of the historical 'world mission' of the German people. Hitler was particularly quick to recognise the intense public demand for a saviour-like charismatic leader, the creator of a new but historically legitimate Reich. He promised the Germans that in order to recapture their 'freedom', he was willing to run the same degree of risk as the 'greats' to perform exceptional historical deeds: 'Was, say, the decision of Frederick the Great to undertake the first Silesian war not linked with any risk? Or was the unification of Germany by Bismarck without danger? No, and a thousand times no!'[99] By taking risks similar to of those Frederick II and the Iron Chancellor, Hitler promised to bring what they had begun to a triumphant conclusion.[100]

That such promises were taken seriously by a substantial part of the German population cannot be doubted. When Hitler was appointed as Chancellor many Germans voiced the opinion that the new regime would re-establish the historical legitimacy that Weimar had lacked. The historian Otto Westphal, for example, triumphantly proclaimed the end of a historically illegitimate system when he emphasised that Germany was currently witnessing a 'revolutionary transformation with deep historical sympathies'.[101] Hitler himself encouraged these beliefs when on 5 March 1933 he announced a decree for a new flag over the radio. In conjunction with the swastika banner, the black, white and red colours of the Kaiserreich would once again become the national flag of the German Empire: 'These flags', Hitler declared, 'combine Imperial Germany's glorious past and the powerful rebirth of the German nation'.[102]

The change in the flag was a prelude to Potsdam Day on 21 March 1933 and the subsequent celebrations of Bismarck's birthday on 1 April 1933. In a speech broadcast nationwide on 1 April 1933 from the Bismarck Memorial on the banks of Lake Müggel in Berlin, Joseph Goebbels underlined the historical legitimacy of the Nazi-led government by emphasising that 'Bismarck was the great political revolutionary of the nineteenth century, Hitler is the great political revolutionary of the twentieth century ... We want to promise the great dead man and his name: the Reich is in safe hands with us!'[103]

99 *Hitler's Second Book. The Unpublished Sequel to 'Mein Kampf'*, ed. Gerhard L. Weinberg, trans. Krista Smith (New York: Enigma, 2003), 130. See also Hitler's speech in Coburg on 18 Jan. 1931, in *Hitler. Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen, Februar 1925 bis Januar 1933*, IV: *Von der Reichstagswahl zur Reichspräsidentschaftswahl, Oktober 1930–Juni 1931*, Part 1: *Oktober 1930–Juni 1931,* ed. Constantin Goschler (Munich: Saur Verlag, 1996), 175–6.

100 On Hitler and Frederick II see Konrad Barthel, *Friedrich der Grosse in Hitlers Geschichtsbild* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977). On Bismarck and Hitler see Robert Gerwarth, *The Bismarck Myth. Weimar Germany and the Legacy of the Iron Chancellor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 128–44.

101 Otto Westphal, 'Bismarck und Hitler', *Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, 23 (1933), 469–81, at 471, 478 and 481.

102 *Schulthess*, 74 (1933), 56–66.

103 Goebbels as quoted in *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 2 Apr. 1933.

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The importance which leading Nazis attributed to the past in consolidating their rule immediately after their 'seizure of power' can only be properly understood in the context of Weimar's obsession with the past. That the initial consolidation of the Nazi regime would partly depend on his ability to master the past was a lesson from Weimar which no one understood better than Hitler.

V

It has been argued in this essay that the political culture of Germany's first democracy can only be imperfectly understood if Weimar's search for historical roots and the struggle for legitimacy which strongly affected cultural and political life between 1918 and 1933 are not considered. Contemporaries frequently commented on the omnipresence of the past, which they perceived as a characteristic feature of Weimar culture. In a letter published in 1926 and addressed to an anonymous reader in the year 1985, for example, Kurt Tucholsky wrote that 'it makes me grin to think that if I mention Bismarck you might have to think twice who he was. You would not believe how proud the people around me are of his immortality'.[104]

Of course, one could argue that *every* pluralistic society witnesses a competition between different interpretations of history for universal acceptance, and that political myths did not only prevail during the first German democracy. It is, however, perhaps fair to say that Weimar's historical birthright was *particularly* contested. In consequence, Weimar witnessed a fierce and uncompromising controversy about its historical purpose and its place in German history. All sides involved in this controversy knew that the perceived legitimacy of their policies would depend on their ability to master the past. In this respect, the legacy of the past limited political choices as the electorate demanded historically 'sensible' political decisions.

This situation created a particular problem for the defenders of Weimar. As opposed to the Weimar right, the democratic left suffered acutely from a lack of widely cherished traditions upon which a positive republican tradition could be founded. The rather inglorious revolution of 1848 which the republicans chose as their major historical reference point was a tradition held in high regard only by a minority of Germans. In the eyes of most Germans, the 1848 revolution had been a disastrous failure, a failure that had proved once and for all that parliaments were incapable of successful policy-making.

In addition, the Republic lacked a convincing foundation myth. In the public perception, the birth of the new state was anything but a glorious, identity-forging event which could have helped to create an emotional bond between the republican state and its citizens. 'Though November 1918 meant the end of the war', Sebastian Haffner described in his memoirs, 'it recalls no sense of joy, only a bad mood, defeat, confusion and terrible weather'.[105] In 1918–19, the situation had still been different. When Friedrich Ebert promised the Germans the fulfilment of the legacy of 1848 by

104 Kurt Tucholsky, 'Gruß nach vorn', in *Ausgewählte Werke* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1965), 8.

105 Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler. A Memoir*, trans. Oliver Pretzel (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002), 19.

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creating a *grossdeutsch* Republic in early 1919, the public echo was overwhelmingly positive. Ebert suggested that the Anschluss of Austria would demonstrate the Republic's capacity to achieve the most 'comprehensive' solution to the German question ever.

However, the publication of the draft of the Versailles peace treaty, which explicitly ruled out the *Anschluss* of Austria, deprived Ebert's promise of implementing the legacy of 1848 of its credibility. From this point on, the republicans were at a clear disadvantage in the battle of historical traditions. After 1919 the right could convincingly argue that the Weimar coalition parties had broken with the traditions of the past without succeeding in their ultimate objective: the establishment of a *grossdeutsch* republic that could rightfully claim to stand in the tradition of 1848. However, the conservative demand for a simple return to the 'ideas of 1871' was as unlikely to convince the majority of Germans as the communist aim of a more radical break with Germany's 'autocratic' past. That Hitler was to become the beneficiary of Weimar's perceived lack of historical legitimacy was partly due to the fact that he understood the seemingly paradoxical nature of Weimar Germany as a society in search of novelty *and* historical roots.

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