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## REVIEW ARTICLES

### **GUSTAV STRESEMANN: NEW LITERATURE ON THE SAXON SYNDIC AND WEIMAR POLITICIAN\***

by Karl Heinrich Pohl

EBERHARD KOLB, *Gustav Stresemann* (Munich: Beck, 2003), 128 pp. ISBN 3 406 48015 2. EUR 7.90

JONATHAN WRIGHT, *Gustav Stresemann: Weimar's Greatest Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xvii + 569 pp. ISBN 0 19 821949 0. £30.00

JOHN P. BIRKELUND, *Gustav Stresemann: Patriot und Staatsmann. Eine Biografie*, trans. by Martin Ruf and Ilse Utz (Hamburg: Europa Verlag, 2003), 528 pp. ISBN 3 203 75511 4. EUR 29.90

Three new biographies of Gustav Stresemann were published in 2002 and 2003, and the immediate response is to ask why studies of Stresemann are still being written when there are already over a dozen works on him, some of them very good? Have we not yet reached a final verdict on this subversive Saxon syndic and Weimar politician? Has Stresemann not entered the Valhalla of 'good' twentieth-century Germans, as his early admirers always wanted? Perhaps it is just the date, 2003, the 125th anniversary of his birth, that has given rise to such a plethora of books?<sup>1</sup> These questions are all the more pressing as there does not appear to be any cogent reason from a methodological or theoretical perspective.<sup>2</sup> Quite the

\*Trans. by Jane Rafferty and Angela Davies.

<sup>1</sup> A first, positive response is provided by Wolfgang Michalka, 'Stresemann im Lichte seiner gegenwärtigen Biographien: Stresemann aus deutscher Sicht', in Karl Heinrich Pohl (ed.), *Politiker und Bürger: Gustav Stresemann und seine Zeit* (Göttingen, 2002), pp. 267–89.

<sup>2</sup> A good survey of the current state of biographical research (in Germany) is provided by Christian Klein (ed.), *Grundlagen der Biographik: Theorie und Praxis des biographischen Schreibens* (Stuttgart, 2002).

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reverse, in fact, as biographical research seems to have hardly anything innovative to offer at the moment, apart from a few indications of pioneering approaches which could, to some extent, have been 'tried out' on Stresemann and have made him into the subject of a lively academic debate.

Then there is the man himself. Is not Stresemann almost the case of a politician who has actually been 'over-researched'? There are no new sources, as there are, for instance, in the case of Rathenau, and it is unlikely that there will be any more.<sup>3</sup> Apart from anything else, there seems to be no need for new sources to shed even more light on his life. His papers alone are so extensive that they answer any questions – or at least so it seems. The verdict on Stresemann and his foreign policy during the Weimar Republic, on his personality, and not least on his role for Europe in the 1920s seems, quite rightly, to have been reached long ago, the chapter 'Undiscovered Stresemann' to be finished.

But this was not always the case and the image of Stresemann has gone through many changes, starting immediately after his death in 1929.<sup>4</sup> These ranged from the admired statesman with early European ambitions<sup>5</sup> to the despised forerunner of the Third Reich;<sup>6</sup> fluctuated between incorrigible annexationist<sup>7</sup> and active and deliberate peace-maker;<sup>8</sup> vacillated between Saul and Paul. The same applies to assessments of his personality. On the one hand he was described as a warm-hearted, sensitive, but straightforward emotionalist; on the

<sup>3</sup> All the more so as some of his private papers not previously available to the public (esp. personal letters to his wife) have been accessible in the Political Archive of the German Foreign Office in Berlin since the end of 2003.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of the discussion on Stresemann cf. Pohl (ed.), *Politiker und Bürger*, which also contains references to further literature.

<sup>5</sup> This was the line taken by the early biographies written in co-operation with Stresemann himself. Cf. Rochus Freiherr von Rheinbaben, *Stresemann, der Mensch und der Staatsmann* (Dresden, 1928) or Antonina Vallentin, *Stresemann: Vom Werden einer Staatsidee* (Leipzig, 1930).

<sup>6</sup> This was the tenor of the biography by Wolfgang Ruge, *Stresemann: Ein Lebensbild* (Berlin (O), 1965).

<sup>7</sup> Annelise Thimme, *Gustav Stresemann: Eine politische Biographie zur Geschichte der Weimarer Republik* (Hanover, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Martin Göhring, *Stresemann: Mensch, Staatsmann, Europäer* (Mainz, 1965).

other he was exposed as a sly tactician with no backbone, to many the very archetype of the 'ugly' German.<sup>9</sup>

About fifteen years ago, however, this ambivalence seemed to have been overcome. In the biographies by Manfred Berg and Kurt Koszyk, Stresemann is presented unanimously as a person who, though admittedly as hard to pin down and analyse as ever, was none the less overwhelmingly positive.<sup>10</sup> The dispute as to whether Stresemann was a sly deceiver or became a reformed republican seemed finally to be over. According to the new, widely accepted interpretation Stresemann developed from a wild war-monger into a foreign policy realist who, from 1923 onwards, preferred peaceful forms of foreign interaction, gave internationalism precedence over national concerns, was more interested in compromise than confrontation, and put general agreement ahead of unilateral bullying. Thus he is seen today as one of the few middle-class politicians who tried to change Germany's foreign policy fundamentally, to some extent to 'civilize' it, and to re-structure it on the basis of peaceful agreements in line with a grand liberal plan.<sup>11</sup> Here these new assessments link up with that by Arthur Rosenberg, who, as early as the end of the Weimar Republic, had attributed an outstanding role to Stresemann and described him as one of the few German politicians who knew what they wanted in terms of foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

There is, indeed, much to be said for such a positive verdict, in particular, the fact that in the sphere of foreign policy, in which he had the greatest impact during the Weimar Republic, Stresemann does seem to have gone through a long learning process. He developed new forms of foreign policy in which economic factors were particularly important. This policy was intended to preserve peace while securing German interests. For his achievements on the world

<sup>9</sup> For the positive image of Stresemann see esp. the book by his son, Wolfgang Stresemann, *Mein Vater Gustav Stresemann* (Frankfurt, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Manfred Berg, *Gustav Stresemann: Eine politische Karriere zwischen Reich und Republik* (Göttingen, 1992); Kurt Koszyk, *Gustav Stresemann: Der kaisertreue Demokrat. Eine Biographie* (Cologne, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> This is also the view of Christian Baechler, *Gustav Stresemann (1878-1929): De l'impérialisme à la sécurité collective* (Strasbourg, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Rosenberg, *Geschichte der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Kurt Kersten (11th edn.; Frankfurt, 1970), p. 162.

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stage he was, quite rightly, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize of 1926.<sup>13</sup> To sum up this point of view, therefore, Stresemann never completely lost sight of national interests during the 1920s but recognized that national (not nationalist) objectives could be achieved only by means of international agreement. For this reason he preferred a policy of peaceful co-operation to power politics – and not only because it was a clever political move, but also from inner conviction. He thus played a crucial role in establishing a new peace-time order for Europe.<sup>14</sup>

This is why Stresemann, as a political figure, was identified with a better, democratic, and peaceful Germany after the collapse of 1945. He was the obvious political role model for future generations of Germans.<sup>15</sup> This was not just wishful thinking, but had a basis in political reality. He was, after all, already being referred to during the Adenauer era as a great European, ‘in the sense of a politician striving for European unity, who wanted to leave the “dark days” of national policy behind’.<sup>16</sup> Thus Stresemann has long since been commandeered as a good political example and has entered public consciousness (with or without help) as one of the few politicians who can embody democratic continuity in German history.

### I

Thus, to repeat the question, why three more Stresemann biographies? The new international constellation from 1989, and the far-reaching changes it has brought in the international system since the last major Stresemann biography was published should be men-

<sup>13</sup> This and the following is a brief summary of the arguments of Peter Krüger, ‘Zur europäischen Dimension der Außenpolitik Gustav Stresemanns’, in Pohl (ed.), *Politiker und Bürger*, pp. 194–228.

<sup>14</sup> This is also the view put by Gottfried Niedhart, ‘Außenminister Stresemann und die ökonomische Variante deutscher Machtpolitik’, *ibid.* pp. 229–42, at p. 232.

<sup>15</sup> On this and the following cf. Andreas Körber, *Gustav Stresemann als Europäer, Patriot, Wegbereiter und potentieller Verhinderer Hitlers: Historisch-politische Sinnbildungen in der öffentlichen Erinnerung* (Hamburg 1999).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, ‘Der Stresemann-Film in der öffentlichen Erinnerung an Gustav Stresemann’, in Pohl (ed.), *Politiker und Bürger*, pp. 229–66, at p. 266.

tioned here.<sup>17</sup> Since then German foreign policy has once again become the foreign policy of a united Germany. It has been restored as a strong nation-state in the centre of Europe, in contrast to the first forty years after the Second World War. The unadulteratedly 'national', and 'the' German nation are regaining their status. Certainly German hegemonic aspirations are not likely, as historical developments and present attempts to integrate the nation-states into Europe suggest. But Germany's neighbours still to some extent fear such aspirations. The notion of the 'German nation', which has hitherto had negative connotations because of the Nazi past, has become socially acceptable again, as has a heightened German national consciousness, which is no longer confined to the far Right. This lack of historical inhibitions—to put a positive gloss on it—now extends to views of German history. And this, in turn, has consequences for how the Weimar Republic is seen, for Gustav Stresemann, and his revisionist policies.

The idea of European integration has had to undergo similarly far-reaching changes. It has lost much of the allure that still surrounded it thirty or forty years ago and influenced the way in which Stresemann's *Westpolitik* was viewed. Then the Germans 'fled' from their 'black national history' to an unbesmirched European history—now virtually the reverse has happened. Detailed descriptions of German suffering during and especially after the Second World War, starvation, Allied terror bombing, and especially the expulsion of Germans from the East are dominant themes, and are often not even put into historical context. Their purpose is generally to counter-balance German guilt.<sup>18</sup> In this light German revisionist policy during the Weimar Republic, the significance of defeat in the First World War for public opinion, and the desire to see Germany as having a positive history and not just as the guilty party in the war have become considerably stronger among many Germans and, above all, more understandable.

<sup>17</sup> Koszyk, *Gustav Stresemann*.

<sup>18</sup> On this cf., e.g., the many 'Vertriebenen Serien' made for German TV by ZDF's chief historian Guido Knopp and the bestselling books on the air war by Jörg Friedrich, *'Der Brand': Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945* (Munich, 2002), and *'Brandstätten': Der Anblick des Bombenkrieges* (Munich, 2003).

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And not least, economic expansion has become more visible. The wielders of economic power are increasingly throwing off the fetters of national policy, and pushing their interests through against those of the nation-states. In removing themselves from any control, they are also preventing themselves from becoming the instruments of national policy. This reveals the powerlessness of the nation-states – not least Germany. And it gives Stresemann's political strategy of making use of the economy a new slant. His achievement, for instance, in including heavy industry in his political vision, is rated more highly today than it was a few decades ago, when his attempts attracted some serious criticism.<sup>19</sup>

And the social costs of this policy, the weakening of the labour movement and its economic interest groups, will surely also be judged differently today from how it was when the economy was prospering. At a time of growing prosperity, when employees' interest groups were powerful, and important parties accepted social responsibility, Stresemann's socially backwards-looking *Bürgerblockpolitik* was bound to be viewed more critically than under present-day conditions, in which trade unions are regarded as a fossilized, unnecessary organization, collective bargaining is in doubt, real wage increases are nothing but pipe-dreams, and the propertied classes are overtly given preference in economic and social policy, just as in the Weimar Republic.<sup>20</sup> The upshot is that from today's perspective, new biographies can produce new findings, which, it can be assumed, will shed an even more positive light on Stresemann than has previously been the case.

However, this is just one – albeit crucial – factor that has changed the present-day perspective. The upsurge in research on the middle classes again raises the question as to how strongly the Weimar Republic was influenced by this group, and raises the possibility of interpreting Stresemann as a representative of the German middle classes. New biographies – a totally appropriate form in which to present a liberal politician – can, therefore, over and above the purely biographical, make an important contribution to the history of the

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Ruge, 'Stresemann – Ein Leitbild?', *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 14 (1969), pp. 468–84

<sup>20</sup> Cf., as early as 1974, Claus Dieter Krohn, *Stabilisierung und ökonomische Interessen: Die Finanzpolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1923–1927* (Düsseldorf, 1974).

German middle classes in the early twentieth century. Using an approach that includes generation-specific issues, a biographer could see Stresemann as the role model for an entire generation of middle-class Germans. His biography could thus help to unravel the history of the middle classes in the Weimar Republic.

How did Stresemann, a liberal member of the middle class, set about realizing his system of bourgeois values in the Kingdom of Saxony and then in the Weimar Republic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and what exactly were these values? To define these would provide a yardstick against which his whole policy could sensibly be interpreted. And if sufficient attention is paid to his early period, Stresemann could be used as an important test case for evaluating how middle class the German Kaiserreich was. Does he, for instance, show that during the Kaiserreich a talented outsider could achieve fame, power, and wealth by demonstrating middle-class virtues, displaying enthusiasm, and using clever tactics, while not submitting to the narrow notions of status held by the conservative notables? Did his great successes as early as in the Kaiserreich reflect purely his personal flexibility, or does his career also shed light on the structures of the Kaiserreich, which from this perspective were not just narrow and rigid, but also open and changeable?

Moreover, if Stresemann's work is examined from the point of view of a gradual adoption of modernizing ideas, it could be established whether Saxony under Stresemann developed in a way that increasingly recognized the demands of the twentieth century, enabling Stresemann (and thus Germany as well) to survive the future in a modern, democratic, industrial society. It seems that Stresemann was early aware of progressive answers to the question, so important for Germany, of how the workers, for example (and their political and industrial organizations) could be integrated into German society. Even at such an early point in time, he advocated recognition of the Free Trade Unions, and favoured the principle of collective wage agreements, the high road to reconciling the interests of capital and labour. Thus it is no coincidence that Stresemann was the first Chancellor of the Weimar Republic who, in the crisis year of 1923, brought together a working Grand Coalition embracing parties from the DVP to the SPD.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Karl Heinrich Pohl, Sachsen, 'Stresemann und der Verband Sächsischer

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Even before the outbreak of the First World War, Stresemann recognized that the German Reich needed a greater input from its citizens in decision-making, that unfair electoral systems gradually had to be abolished wherever they existed in the Reich, and that the *whole* population had to be encouraged to participate more in politics. While his fellow party-members in Prussia were still clinging to the unfair three-class franchise, Stresemann introduced a change in Saxony which modernized the franchise, reduced the power of the Conservatives, and at a stroke gave the Social Democrats almost a third of all seats in the *Landtag*.<sup>22</sup> He also changed the tone within the political parties and industrial associations when, by founding the *Verband Sächsischer Industrieller* (Association of Saxon Industrialists), he attempted to restrain the influence of the agrarian lobby, to break the alliance of iron and rye, and to overcome Germany's social stagnation.<sup>23</sup> And not the least of his achievements was to make an important addition to the German social welfare system. Almost single-handedly, Stresemann ensured that the growing number of salaried employees had their own social insurance scheme, and were thus integrated into the social system.<sup>24</sup>

Thus an up-to-date biography of Stresemann will be able to do him justice only if it takes sufficient account of his early period of activity. Yet almost all biographies published so far feature only half the man, the Weimar Stresemann, although to be sure, in his most recent study Kurt Koszyk shows more interest in the early years.<sup>25</sup> In any case, Stresemann's Saxon period needs to be more closely inves-

Industrieller: "Moderne" Industriepolitik zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts?', *Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte*, 134 (1998), pp. 407–40.

<sup>22</sup> Id., 'Politischer Liberalismus und Wirtschaftsbürgertum: Zum Aufschwung der Liberalen vor 1914', in Simone Lässig and id. (eds.), *Sachsen im Kaiserreich: Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im Umbruch* (Cologne, 1997), pp. 101–32, and Simone Lässig, 'Wahlrechtskämpfe im Kaiserreich. Lernprozesse, Reformimpulse, Modernisierungsfaktoren: das Beispiel Sachsen', *Neues Archiv für Sächsische Geschichte*, 65 (1994), pp. 137–68.

<sup>23</sup> The first to write about this was Donald Warren, *The Red Kingdom of Saxony: Lobbying Grounds for Gustav Stresemann 1901–1909* (The Hague, 1964).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Prinz, 'Gustav Stresemann als Sozialpolitiker – Magier oder Zauberberlehrer?', in Pohl (ed.), *Politiker und Bürger*, pp. 114–42.

<sup>25</sup> Koszyk, *Gustav Stresemann*, pp. 19 ff.

tigated and related more tellingly to a total assessment of the man, and of the German middle classes as a whole. It is not just a matter of deciphering the early influences and his economic and political socialization; after all, Stresemann's Saxon period was longer than his entire Weimar period. Thus Saxony was not just a 'preparatory phase' for Weimar, but a time with its own unique value for the person and the politics of Gustav Stresemann.

Moreover, the richness of the existing material on Stresemann could be placed in the service of innovations in the genre of biography. After all, a new Stresemann biography only to a limited extent faces the task of unearthing new details (for example, in relation to the Saxon period). Rather, such an undertaking offers the chance to go beyond the chronological reconstruction of his political actions and to do greater justice to the person. It would be a case not merely of interpreting Stresemann primarily as the human agent of an innovative foreign policy in the Weimar Republic, as has been done often enough before, but rather of acknowledging this policy as a partial aspect of Stresemann the man, as something that, while a part of him, did not make up the entire human being. This would also offer a way of avoiding the 'biographical trap'<sup>26</sup> which is especially dangerous in the case of Stresemann on account of the control that he exercised over the papers he left on his death. It is therefore important to examine the value of these papers as sources more critically, and to use parallel sources and alternative traditions more often than has been done to date.

Thus it is time to attempt an assessment, going beyond all political and factual matters, of Stresemann not merely as a politician, but as a human being at the beginning of the modern period. Whether one wants to describe him as a 'border crosser',<sup>27</sup> or as a man with a mask,<sup>28</sup> psychological approaches hitherto shunned by historians could be used in a new biography and the traditional findings meas-

<sup>26</sup> On this cf. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Die biographische Illusion', *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History*, 3 (1990), pp. 75–81.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Heinrich Pohl, 'Gustav Stresemann – Überlegungen zu einer neuen Biographie', in id. (ed.), *Politiker und Bürger*, pp. 13–40, at pp. 28 ff.

<sup>28</sup> On this cf. Jonathan Wright, 'Die Maske: Stresemanns politische Persona', *ibid.* pp. 41–63.

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ured against them. This would not only cast light on Stresemann's life, but also give German research on biography a boost.

## II

Eberhard Kolb, the Nestor of German Stresemann studies, has undertaken in his brief biography of Stresemann to summarize the state of international research and to introduce the interested reader 'to three decades of German politics from the Kaiserreich to the end of the Weimar Republic' (blurb, p. 2), all in readable language not weighed down by jargon and over just 125 pages. Kolb is particularly well suited to achieve this almost impossible task. Not only is he one of Germany's most knowledgeable experts on the history of the Weimar Republic<sup>29</sup> who has studied Stresemann and his foreign policy for more than twenty years,<sup>30</sup> but he is also fully familiar with Stresemann the party politician, having edited a voluminous collection of sources on National Liberalism in the Weimar Republic.<sup>31</sup>

Thus we approach this slim volume with high expectations which, to anticipate, are largely fulfilled. This applies both to content and style, which is precise yet readable. It is regrettable, however, that the text is inadequately equipped with a scholarly apparatus. While it indicates quotations, it does not allow the reader to follow them up. This is probably more the publisher's failing than the author's. Of course, in such a brief overview we look in vain for discussion of far-reaching questions such as how Stresemann fits into a history of the *Bürgertum*, a general debate on the achievements of biography today, or a close examination of problems of source criticism.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Eberhard Kolb, *Die Weimarer Republik* (3rd edn.; Munich, 1993) which is in every respect convincing.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. his pioneering early essay, 'Probleme einer modernen Stresemann-Biographie', in Otmar Franz (ed.), *Am Wendepunkt der europäischen Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1981), pp. 107–34.

<sup>31</sup> Eberhard Kolb and Ludwig Richter (eds.), *Nationalliberalismus in der Weimarer Republik: Die Führungsgremien der Deutschen Volkspartei 1928–1933, Quellen zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien, Dritte Reihe: Die Weimarer Republik*, 9 (2 vols.; Düsseldorf, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> The blurb (p. 3) suggests that the book describes the *Bürgertum* taking a direction 'which, ultimately, was unable to establish itself, to the great detriment of Germany and Europe'.

Kolb begins with a brief prologue in which he describes Stresemann's funeral in 1929. This is worth noting, as it means that he does not take a strictly chronological approach, but looks at Stresemann's life, as it were, from its end. This strengthens the author's intention to present the protagonist's life as consistent, to confer upon it a clear logic, and to interpret it from its climax. After the prologue, Kolb's work is divided into a total of six almost equal chapters. He describes Stresemann's early years, looks at the young man's rise, examines the war policy in detail, discusses the early years of the Weimar Republic, extensively treats the Republic's crisis year of 1923, and devotes himself to the successful foreign minister only in the final chapter. A brief time chart, and an even briefer but completely up-to-date bibliography round off the account.

At first glance it is clear this biography of Stresemann does not confine itself to the Weimar politician between 1923 and 1929, but covers the whole life. Only about one third of it, much less than in all previous biographies, is devoted to the well-known Weimar period of Stresemann's life. In this way Kolb demonstrates that he considers all phases of Stresemann's life equally important. This undoubtedly represents significant progress in recent biographical work on Stresemann, and deserves the highest respect.

In the first part, 'Prägungen', Kolb looks at Stresemann's early years from 1878 to just after the turn of the century. The reader is given information about Stresemann's parental home and family, youth, student years, membership of a student fraternity (*Burschenschaft*), and his personality, all of which has been closely researched as far as this is possible on the basis of available material, which Kolb has evaluated and used in its entirety. The *petit bourgeois* background of a family from Luisenstadt in Berlin that traded in bottled beer emerges clearly as do the difficult circumstances within the family, such as problems with an alcoholic brother and the early death of the mother. The reader recognizes the familial surroundings in which the young Stresemann, who had many interests and a capacity for enthusiasm, grew up with his romantic ideas as a collector and writer of poems and wide-ranging literary interests. Kolb conveys a lively picture of all this, but one which is crucially shaped either by contemporary or later accounts by Stresemann himself, or by friends who were well-disposed towards him.

Kolb thus undoubtedly accepts at face value the image manufac-

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tured by Stresemann and his friends. We lack a brief word (more could not be expected in an account of this sort) on the source basis, for example, some recognition of the fact that a student's own account of his education is one of the documents in which the author almost invariably lies. No comment is made on the fact that the statements about Stresemann on which Kolb draws were often made retrospectively by teachers and fellow students writing about their famous acquaintance, sometimes shortly before or after Stresemann's death—which has a marked effect on the tenor of the accounts.<sup>33</sup> In general, Kolb—like Wright and Birkelund—accepts without comment Stresemann's interpretation of himself as a youthful 'Traumjörg' (dreamer),<sup>34</sup> who was not (yet) aware of the realities of life.

None the less, Kolb convincingly depicts the fascinating rise of this young man blessed with neither beauty, health, nor riches. He clearly presents Stresemann's ambition and dynamism, and gives an adequate account of his early socialization at school, university, and in student fraternities. This also applies to his account of Stresemann's early activities and his commitment to reforming fraternities. Kolb concludes: 'In Stresemann's schooldays and student years, important co-ordinates of his world image and his fundamental political convictions emerged, which remained crucial to his later life' (p. 21). Even if this statement is qualified, much of this seems to be true.

Kolb also handles the next phase of Stresemann's life, the Saxon period, with great expertise, although, as in the previous section, he is unable to draw on his own archival research. The various levels of Stresemann's development are outlined and related to each other. Kolb depicts Stresemann's rise from syndic of the Association of Chocolate Manufacturers into a powerful industrial syndic who soon had sole say in the Association of Saxon Industrialists, but was also listened to by the Association of Industrialists and the Hansa Association. His affinity with manufacturing industry, and opposi-

<sup>33</sup> In places such as this the lack of any footnotes, however modest, is sorely felt.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the poetry collection with this title which Stresemann made available to a small circle of friends when he was in his early 20s. Similarly, his youthful love for a 13-year-old acquaintance is simply accepted as a fact, and accorded a great deal of significance.

tion to heavy industry becomes clear. Similarly, the genesis of his early policy of social balance, which vehemently rejected the 'master in my own house' attitude of heavy industry, is explained and its significance assessed. Notice is also taken of the social policy maker, who, from an early date, did not see Social Democrats *just* as enemies.

Kolb explains the transformation of Stresemann, member of the National Social Union, into the National Liberal Stresemann as early as 1903 among other things in terms of the hunger for power of the twenty-five-year-old, who quickly recognized that only the National Liberals could offer him a springboard into a major political career. This was, at the very least, a risky operation, for the National Liberal Party had lost considerable significance in Saxony, and especially in Dresden. Yet Stresemann made the National Liberal Party and Saxon industrialists into important factors not only of Saxon politics. Here, too, Stresemann's career followed a steep and seemingly unstoppable rising curve until 1912, when he lost his seat in the *Reichstag* and a withdrawal from German politics threatened.

For Kolb, this year occupies a key position, as he asks the hypothetical question of what would have happened if Stresemann had not, 'luckily', entered the *Reichstag* in 1914. Regardless of Kolb's controversial reply that this would have meant general failure for the great politician, the hint that a 'favourable constellation' (p. 40) always played an important part in Stresemann's successful life is interesting. In general, one could have wished that the author had more often expanded his all too succinct account of Stresemann's life development. On the whole, however, it should be said that Kolb's presentation and weighing-up of the first two periods of Stresemann's life with the required brevity and density is outstanding.

In the following four sections, Kolb is on familiar territory. They treat the period from 1914 to 1929, that is, the time when, in earlier biographies, Stresemann only really emerges as a person. Kolb therefore devotes himself to the self-imposed task of finding out how Stresemann's 'temporary fall from grace', his excessive war aims policy, his vision of a greater Germany, and his radical attempts to silence all opponents of such a policy are to be explained (p. 41). Kolb offers a bundle of explanations, including a qualification of Stresemann's position in the national and international war aims discussion; a constant Anglophobia, which emerged virulently here; the

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desire to secure the Reich by means of further expansions; the argument that such demands would keep the flank open for internal reform; and the defence of being inadequately informed. Finally, Kolb points out that over time, Stresemann modified his demands, but that this has not really been noticed by political scientists or historians. Here Kolb displays a great deal of understanding for his protagonist – perhaps too much?

The fact that by historicizing this problem Kolb embeds it in the national and international context and thus deprives it of its uniqueness and excessiveness is certainly progressive. Indeed, Maximilian Harden and Matthias Erzberger, as well as the French and English politicians to whom Kolb refers in support of his thesis, did not essentially argue any differently from Stresemann. However, whether this is a 'convincing interpretation that allows us to recognize the pre-1914 and post-1922 Stresemann as a personality and political actor in the Stresemann of the years from 1914 to 1918' (p. 41) must be left to the reader to decide. For an explanation we would probably need to know more about Stresemann the man.

Continuity in Stresemann's activities, by contrast, is much easier to find in his demands for a more parliamentary German Reich. These demands continued seamlessly from the pre-war into the post-war period, and strongly influenced Stresemann's domestic political activity. It is the achievement of Kolb's work to have identified the significance of this continuity. To be sure, however, a parliamentary democracy along present-day lines was never Stresemann's goal; even the Weimar Republic went too far for him in many respects. Throughout his entire life he held to a model according to which the state was to accept a great deal of social responsibility, and entrepreneurs and unions would work together in harmony – in other words, the model of a *Volksgemeinschaft* which clearly privileged corporatism above individualism. Thus although Stresemann's ideas for the Kaiserreich can be called modern, this was no longer true of almost all areas of society during the Weimar parliamentary Republic. This aspect could have been emphasized more strongly.

In one thing, however, we must agree with Kolb. In the autumn of 1918, Stresemann was confronted by

a pile of shards: instead of a German peace based on power, Germany faced total military defeat and humiliating armistice

conditions; instead of the moderate parliamentarization he had hoped for, which would have put his party in a key position and given him a greater chance to exercise influence and possibly put him line for a high office, there was a parliamentary government without the National Liberals; he himself, if not ostracized, was relegated to a marginal position. And there was more: in November 1918 his political future as a whole was on the line (p. 56).

It is no coincidence that Stresemann suffered a physical and mental breakdown at this point. Kolb is also interested in the sick Stresemann, and points out the impact of this lasting illness on his politics.

Kolb shows himself to be *au fait* with even the smallest details when he deals with the founding phase of the Deutsche Volkspartei (German People's Party). He concludes that it was not Stresemann's fault that a common liberal party was not achieved. Whether this positive assessment also applies to his behaviour during the Kapp putsch, however, is open to serious doubt. Stresemann's preference for the 'stab in the back' theory, similarly, is judged by Kolb to be an aberration. Here he could have taken a closer look at Stresemann's motives, which would have done justice to the politician's ambiguity.

Becoming chancellor in the crisis year of 1923 represented the first climax of Stresemann's career. Kolb, following the general trend in research, credits Stresemann with ending the battle for the Ruhr, overcoming the inflation, and confronting separatists and left- and right-wing extremists. Germany was rescued from chaos, Kolb argues, and thus Stresemann, who had still been a monarchist at the beginning of the republic, finally mutated into a *Vernunftrepublikaner*, a republican from reason rather than conviction. Neither Kolb, Wright, nor Birkelund criticize Stresemann for his behaviour – after all, he helped to remove the Saxon government illegally and to finish off the leftist republican project there.

In his account of Stresemann's foreign policy too, Kolb follows the general trend in research. Stresemann is acknowledged as the 'main architect of a republican foreign policy' (p. 94), and the interconnections between foreign and domestic policy are knowledgeably presented. Kolb adopts the arguments of Peter Krüger and, in modified form, Gottfried Niedhart, in his benign judgement of Stresemann. Ultimately, Kolb celebrates Stresemann as probably 'the most fasci-

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nating and significant personality' in the Weimar Republic.<sup>35</sup> Few shadows fall on the protagonist of his biography.

### III

In contrast to Kolb, Jonathan Wright has written a full-scale academic biography directed at an international specialist readership. Right from the start I should like to stress that this work will set new standards in research. As this is the first major biography of Stresemann by a British researcher, it is interesting to see what emphases this view from outside produces. The objective of this study is not just to sum up the results of previous research, which was Kolb's aim. Rather, Wright also wants to discover something new, to leave the well-trodden paths, and to present a 'different Stresemann' from the one we know so far.

This voluminous work, which is still awaiting translation into German,<sup>36</sup> is also conventionally structured. Wright does not spend much time debating recent trends in biography, but comes to the point immediately, that is, Stresemann and his life. In general it could be said that theoretical reflection is not this author's forte, although that is what one expects from a new biography of Stresemann.

In general, the study follows a chronological scheme. The distribution of material indicates that Wright follows the old pattern in assigning relative weight to the different periods of Stresemann's life. The Weimar politician is clearly at the centre of the study, the Saxon syndic and party politician accounts for about 15 per cent of the work, while only about 100 pages out of 525 are devoted to the period before 1918. Clearly, from the British view, the foreign policy is especially interesting. However, we must wonder whether this structure can do justice to a *Gesamtbiographie* of Stresemann. In this respect Wright falls below the standard set by Kolb.

Wright's account draws on a rich basis of literature and sources. There is hardly an important work that he does not refer to, but when it comes to sources it is noticeable that none of the archival holdings relating to the 'Saxon Stresemann' (apart from Stresemann's papers) are listed. The author obviously avoided the Saxon archives, with the

<sup>35</sup> Blurb, back cover.

<sup>36</sup> The same applies to the comprehensive work by Christian Baechler, which makes full use of sources.

exception of the university archive in Leipzig. This is probably connected with the structure of the study, which rates Saxony as a mere prelude to Stresemann's real story. Nor does Wright refer to the German foreign office documents that concern Germany's economic negotiations and were not dealt with in the offices of the *Staatssekretär* or minister. It is pleasing to see, however, that the archives of the French and the British foreign office were consulted, and that a wealth of material (Stresemann's correspondence with Kurt Himer, Jean Stresemann papers, and Carl von Schubert papers), so far largely unknown, has been incorporated into the study. However, in Wright's study, too, the Stresemann papers are the main source and alternative traditions are used only to a moderate degree.

The volume is divided into ten chapters of unequal weight. The first two chapters deal with Stresemann's youth and his Saxon period in a concentrated way, but drawing on new sources, Wright presents a lively account. There is nothing essentially new here, however, and Wright largely treads the paths already mapped out by Kurt Koszyk.<sup>37</sup> Even Kolb presents almost as much material. But the main thing missing from Wright's account is systematic source criticism of Stresemann's own statements and of the 'friendly accounts' by the acquaintances of his youth. Wright's study, too, perpetuates the picture, drawn by Stresemann himself, of an essentially lonely and self-referential young man who quickly developed considerable ambition and applied a great deal of rationality to the pursuit of his goals in life.

In addressing the question of whether Stresemann was an opportunist and careerist whose main interest was power rather than ideas, Wright takes a clear position. He argues that as the result of socialization at home and at school, university studies and membership of a student fraternity, and finally the influence of Friedrich Naumann and his National Social Union, Stresemann in the first twenty-five years of his life developed a view of the world that could be described as liberal and bourgeois. Stresemann's switch from the National Social Union to the National Liberal Party is not systematically thematized, but attributed to pure expediency, an interpretation that has much going for it.

The co-ordinates of Stresemann's value horizon were formed by a Germany strong towards the outside and with an urge to assert, and,

<sup>37</sup> Koszyk, *Gustav Stresemann*, pp. 19 ff.

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if necessary, to prove itself against other nations, plus a readiness for reform at home (combined with the desire to give more power to the National Liberals) and a wish for social balance (which, however, only conditionally included Polish citizens, for example). These, argues Wright, had been with him his whole life long, and, with greater or lesser variations, he always advocated them in his profession and in politics. What this account, however, does not make quite clear is that what had once been progressive was almost backwards-looking during the Weimar republic.

From this perspective Social Democracy, which Stresemann perceived as unpatriotic and intolerant, was never a real political option for him (p. 24). Despite the rationalism which characterized his dealings with Social Democracy, even as early as in Saxony – an attitude which, incidentally, distinguished Stresemann from many of his bourgeois contemporaries – he always rejected the Social Democrats and their ideology. Stresemann's goal was harmony and the overcoming, not the hardening, of class differences. Despite strong criticism on specific points, Wright on the whole sees Stresemann in a positive light. Thus there is only a partial openness in the assessment of Stresemann's life.

Wright presents Stresemann's Saxon period knowledgeably on the basis of existing literature, which, however, still leaves many questions open. As in the Kolb biography, Stresemann's rise to become a powerful syndicalist and organizer of business while dominating the National Liberals, and not only in Saxony, is described. In Wright's account, we can also see what chances the late Kaiserreich offered a 'hungry' and talented young man, even if he had no financial and social capital. The emergent organizer and party and economic manager can be seen, the person who revolutionized Saxon associational life in business circles and turned his party inside out, developing an effective political party appropriate to modern mass society out of a sleepy party of notables. No secret is made of the fact that in the course of this he sought support from the most diverse organizations, even from the political far right. His support for liberal policies, often going against the ideas of both Social Democrats *and* Conservatives, and for export-orientated manufacturing industry against heavy industry and the proponents of the 'master in the house' point of view, are made clear. We are also introduced to Stresemann as a private individual, the head of a bourgeois family

with a beautiful and creative wife and two gifted children, who was personally ambitious and not always likeable.

However, more is known about Stresemann's networks in Saxony's social circles than we read here. The names Ernemann and Arnhold, for instance, important figures in Saxon industry, whom he met in many associations and who exerted a strong influence on him in social policy matters, do not appear in Wright's account. Nor does the *Alldeutscher Verein* (Pan-German League), of which Stresemann was a member and to which he frequently lectured. Here there are clear weaknesses in Wright's account. Moreover, he does not take the opportunity to present Stresemann as an important representative of a new generation of young, aspiring middle-class men. In Wright's study he remains primarily a loner, a figure to be picked out in an individual biography.

Although Wright clearly has sympathy for his protagonist, his book is definitely not a hagiography, as the section on the First World War illustrates well. Wright presents Stresemann's almost pathological hatred of Britain, and his excessive war aims (even when concluding peace with Russia) with great clarity. He is critical of Stresemann's role in bringing down Bethmann Hollweg, and does not shy away from calling intrigues intrigues (p. 92). Similarly, Wright gives a differentiated account of Stresemann's dubious role in explaining unlimited submarine warfare, recognizes his totally uncritical adoption of military assessments, and points out his miscalculation in respect of the attitude of the USA.

Wright also nicely points up the irony that although Stresemann seemed to have achieved his aims with Bethmann Hollweg's downfall, he was in fact unable to implement them. Bülow did not succeed the Chancellor, and the Supreme Army Command was not prepared to permit reforms in Prussia, perhaps Stresemann's most important domestic political goal. We are shown Stresemann's dual face: on the one side the desire for national, if not nationalist, expansion; on the other, the permanent and intensive quest for reforms and a gradual parliamentarization of the Reich (above all, Prussia).

How does Wright deal with his self-imposed task of explaining Stresemann's transformation from a wartime annexationist into the European statesman of 1925-9 (p. 111)? For one thing, for Wright as for Kolb, over a twenty-five year period of political activity Stresemann did not change so dramatically as to go beyond what was

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acceptable. German as well as Allied politicians (who operated in more stable democracies) went through similar changes. Secondly, Wright emphasizes Stresemann's capacity to learn. For Wright, the period up to 1923 was to some extent an apprenticeship during which Stresemann grew into his role as a great statesman and increasingly changed himself after the crisis of 1918 which had left him profoundly insecure and depressed. It does not become entirely clear, however, whether Wright is talking only about a gradual process of learning and thus constant change which remained within the liberal range that defined Stresemann throughout his life, or whether some fundamental change is visible.

The case for continuity cites Stresemann's socialization in Saxony, his clear and well-developed nationalism, his social openness, his conviction that only the Liberals were able to bridge the left and the right, and his inner rejection of the equal franchise although he had come to terms with democracy during Weimar. All this characterizes him as a Wilhelminian German – albeit an 'enlightened' one. Wright convincingly portrays Stresemann's hesitant path towards acceptance of the Weimar Republic, and his vacillating attitude towards the Kapp putsch (p. 152).

The core of the biography is devoted to the years 1923 to 1929, Stresemann's big years after which, according to Wright, he transformed himself into a supporter of parliamentarism. Most of Stresemann's ideals dated from the nineteenth century, not least his indestructible affection for the Crown Prince, and he was therefore never a convinced democrat from the heart. But regardless of that – or perhaps because of it – as a minister and party leader he convincingly and successfully mastered the instruments of a political mass democracy. He also repeatedly and magnificently managed to combine party policy and national policy. With the exception of the Nazi Party, no other political party in the Weimar Republic was associated so strongly with the name of an individual party leader as Stresemann's *Deutsche Volkspartei*.

Wright provides a balanced account of Stresemann's chancellorship in 1923, doing justice to its significance. This part is not merely fundamental reading for anyone interested in Stresemann; it sets new standards for Weimar historiography. The same applies to Wright's description and analysis of German foreign policy between 1924 and 1929. The structure of Stresemann's strategy is revealed in an account

full of facts, but also containing far-reaching reflections. In this part of his study Wright admirably incorporates the known literature. Wright here presents a standard work on the history of foreign policy in the Weimar Republic. Given the length of the work and the detail in which negotiations are reconstructed, the events could occasionally be somewhat confusing for the non-expert. If there is too much of a good thing here, one could have done with more of it in the earlier part.

On the whole, Wright's assessment of Stresemann's foreign policy and party politics is extremely positive. This judgement coming from a British scholar carries a great deal of weight, all the more so as Wright can be critical at times, for example, when dealing with Stresemann's attitude towards the covert armament of the *Reichswehr*. However, he uses this to raise fundamental questions concerning Stresemann as a human being and his foreign policy only from case to case, and not systematically. The same applies to the problem of whether the 1923 campaign against Saxony might not have been harmful to the future of the Republic in the long term. Wright certainly confronts Stresemann's potential tactical errors (pp. 242 f.), but does not pursue the criticism systematically and pull it together to form a whole picture. Added to this is that Wright values Stresemann most highly as a diplomat. Stresemann's achievement in committing German industry to his policies, even though he was no friend of heavy industry, remains very much in the background. The international steel cartel, for example, is mentioned only once (p. 375). The process by which it came into being deserves more interest.

To reiterate, Wright's competence in this part of his study is beyond any doubt. The only thing that we might miss is a constant personal relation to Stresemann, who features less as a human being (who also has a private life) than as the agent of a highly successful (foreign) policy. This is certainly important. Yet the personality – and after all, we are dealing with a biography and not a study of German foreign policy, of which this particular foreign policy represents merely a partial (although important) aspect – remains a little in the background. This is especially regrettable because throughout the book Wright scatters clever and far-reaching comments on Stresemann's personality, for example, when he discusses Stresemann's relationship with the Crown Prince (p. 231), or possible anti-Semitism (p. 136).

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This shortcoming is all the more noticeable as Wright has elsewhere penned something like a psychological portrait of Stresemann. There Wright cleverly diagnosed Stresemann's inner ambivalence, clearly brought out the difference between 'wanting to appear' and 'the real I', and, on the whole, interpreted Stresemann as a person whose defining feature was the mask that he donned. This mask was 'one of this politician's essential features in the interplay between his personality and the politics of his time'.<sup>38</sup> The diagnosis of Stresemann as an outsider in a bourgeois world to which he only ever belonged to a limited extent could have served as a unifying line running through the interpretation of his politics. Yet Wright has chosen not to pursue this approach. None the less, this is a great work which will take some superseding in form and content.

### IV

A few months after Jonathan Wright, the American John P. Birkelund published his biography of Stresemann. The author is a successful businessman from the investment milieu and also a talented amateur historian who, according to his German publisher, has been working on this topic for fifteen years. Thus we expect a study that will cast expert light on Stresemann's economic background and policies, and possibly on German-American relations as well. And indeed, Birkelund's aim is firstly, as expected, to place the economic aspect, and in particular, the USA as a factor at the heart of his study, and secondly and somewhat surprisingly, to take special note of constitutional aspects (p. 8). This approach, however, does not promise to reveal any completely new aspects of Stresemann's life and work. To anticipate, Birkelund's biography does not stand comparison with Wright's study. Nor does it present its historical theme with the mastery achieved by Kolb.

To start with, the source base of Birkelund's work reveals serious gaps. Of the unpublished sources, he has used only the microfilm copies of the Stresemann papers, which are not, however, complete. Beyond this, Birkelund has not consulted any further unpublished documents from a German or international archive. How anyone can expect to find out anything substantially new about Stresemann, or

<sup>38</sup> Wright, 'Die Maske', p. 43.

to bring out the economic theme in particular, on this basis is a moot point. Moreover, Stresemann's papers and the reports and statements by Wolfgang Stresemann, which are referred to relatively frequently, are used almost without any source criticism. Although the current literature is listed in the bibliography, the references make clear that only a fragment of these titles, and mostly those by American scholars, were consulted for the actual work.

Birkelund's biography, like the two others under review, is conventionally structured and displays the 'classic Saxon deficits'. Here, too, Stresemann's life appears as a one-way street that necessarily led straight to Weimar and the national politician. However, Birkelund, like Kolb before him, stresses the brief period from 1912 to 1914 as one of particular crisis in Stresemann's life, when his career was in the balance (pp. 82 ff.). Such a conclusion, however, can be drawn only if Stresemann the syndic and bourgeois politician in Saxony is considered rather insignificant. In fact, if one takes a different perspective, in 1914 Stresemann was at the peak of his effectiveness in Saxony, and not only there. At that moment, Stresemann was on the point of becoming Saxony's political opinion-former and giving his career a further boost. This could have been mentioned.

Admittedly, for an American historian and an American readership, this part of Stresemann's life may not be especially interesting. But four brief chapters on youth, lobbyist and politician, *Reichstag*, and political exile is simply not enough. However, a good twenty-five pages are devoted to Stresemann in the First World War. The other two-thirds of the book deal with the Weimar politician, looking at both domestic and foreign policy. Despite the claims made for the book, constitutional aspects are rather marginal. Yet the period between 1919 and 1923, that is, the time up to Stresemann's period in office, is looked at intensively. Thus it could be said that the part of the biography devoted to the Weimar years is sensibly structured, and deals well with the various aspects of Stresemann's politics.

It is clear that Birkelund wrote his study for a broad and interested American public which is not particularly familiar with German history, and is therefore grateful for additional information. At times, the book almost becomes a German history for Americans, presenting the basic issues, especially in foreign policy. This applies to the description of associational life in Saxony and the Kaiserreich (pp. 35 ff.) as much as to the detailed account of Stresemann's cabinet and

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ministers in 1923 (pp. 282 ff.). For a German reader, these basic explanations are sometimes inappropriate. In addition, there are a number of small errors. Bosch and Duisberg can hardly be counted among the leaders of German heavy industry (p. 188); Stresemann can hardly have celebrated his thirty-eighth birthday in 1923; and it was not Stresemann's honorary doctorate,<sup>39</sup> but his dissertation, that was often the subject of public derision.<sup>40</sup>

If we enquire whether the book contains anything substantially new, we have to admit that there is not much. This, however, is also a reflection of the quality of Wright's biography, which this one follows. As far as new facts about Stresemann and his life are concerned, it contains little that is unknown. It contains no new information on Stresemann's youth; on the contrary, it does not even tell us as much as Wright's and Kolb's books. This is partially attributable to the fact that Birkelund did not consult the Jean Stresemann papers, which contain, among other things, Stresemann's private correspondence with his wife. Instead Birkelund, as already mentioned, draws mainly on Stresemann's 'official' statements in his papers and information provided by Stresemann's son. More seriously, statements made by Wolfgang Stresemann about his father, whom he admired deeply, are simply reproduced. But what value can we attribute to a son's statements about his father, in particular, a son whom Birkelund himself describes as extraordinarily loyal (p. 11)?

What is illuminating about Birkelund's study is its American perspective. Birkelund gives the USA the value it deserves in Stresemann's biography and his politics, in particular before 1914.<sup>41</sup> Birkelund argues convincingly that despite a visit to the USA in 1912, the young Stresemann had little understanding of the American mentality. This, in turn, resulted in a catastrophic misjudgement in respect of unlimited submarine warfare, and an underestimate of the significance of the USA as an economic power in the First World War

<sup>39</sup> This was conferred on him, with the American ambassador Schurmann, in 1928 by the University of Heidelberg.

<sup>40</sup> *Die Entwicklung des Berliner Flaschenbieregeschäfts* (The development of the bottled beer business in Berlin) (Berlin, 1901).

<sup>41</sup> For this perspective cf. Manfred Berg, *Gustav Stresemann und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika: Wirtschaftliche Verflechtung und Revisionspolitik 1907–1929* (Baden-Baden, 1990).

(p. 85). However, Birkelund also emphasizes Stresemann's ability to learn during the Weimar Republic.

Birkelund undoubtedly admires Gustav Stresemann's human greatness and his politics. This is already spelled out in the Foreword (pp. 10 f.). This admiration, however, does not prevent Birkelund from criticizing Stresemann's policies, and it is this critical perspective that distinguishes this new biography. In adopting it, the author removes himself a little from the previous biographical consensus that generally saw Stresemann's activities as on the whole positive. Birkelund clearly calls Stresemann an annexationist and a chauvinist (pp. 98 ff.), emphasizes the failure of his policy in the First World War, discusses Stresemann's attitude to the war guilt question in highly critical terms, and criticizes his support for the 'stab in the back' myth.

Birkelund also outlines Stresemann's highly ambivalent behaviour during the Kapp putsch, and establishes that Stresemann only came to accept the republic in 1923. This allows the processual nature of the way in which Stresemann and his policies changed to emerge clearly. There was a gradual change in Stresemann's politics, not a sudden break. In principle, this is not a new finding. Almost all recent authors see the year 1923 as representing a test for Stresemann, one which he passed brilliantly before maturing into the great Weimar statesman. Even Birkelund does not discuss further the significance of Stresemann's suppression of the 'Saxon experiment' in 1923.

On the whole, it could be said that Birkelund places greater emphasis on the contradictions between Stresemann as an individual and his policies than Kolb does, for example, when he describes Stresemann's policy for Poland and his ambivalence (pp. 410 f.). Birkelund succeeds admirably in classifying Stresemann as a representative of the middle classes, and making his attitudes recognizable as a paradigm for many others. This perspective, however, does not provide a structural element for the whole biography. The reader painfully misses a serious discussion of the economic variant of German policy, a topic for which the author would certainly have a special proclivity, given his training. Nowhere, however, does he increase our knowledge in this area, something which would certainly have been possible even without further research in German archives.

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A number of insightful individual observations by Birkelund should not be overlooked. He undoubtedly recognizes the impact of ill-health on Stresemann's life and politics (pp. 233, 363). Similarly, he goes into detail concerning Stresemann's cultural interests, stressing, for example, his affinity with Goethe and his works (p. 235). However, he also recognizes that, from an academic point of view, Stresemann was not the Goethe expert he often liked to present himself as to the outside world. Yet Birkelund does not develop this observation into a contribution towards a psychological portrait of Stresemann; nor does he pursue this aspect throughout the entire biography.

Under these circumstances, the final assessment of Birkelund's biography must remain highly ambivalent. It provides little that is new, and hardly opens up fundamentally new perspectives compared with what we already know. The view of an American outsider provides a variation on the known critical aspects of Stresemann's politics, but they are not judged so gravely as to constitute a paradigm shift in the assessment of Stresemann. Despite everything, Stresemann remains a 'good man'. In sum, it would probably not have been a great loss if this book had not been published in Germany. In any case, Birkelund's study does not measure up to Wright's subtle analysis.

## V

To recapitulate briefly, it should be noted that research on Stresemann has undoubtedly been enriched by the three new studies reviewed here. The short but excellent work by Eberhard Kolb presents the current state of research on Stresemann to a broad German public. Kolb systematically and expertly paces out the present-day research horizon in terms of both contents and approaches. His book updates the reader on Stresemann and the current research on him even better than Manfred Berg's book did in its time.<sup>42</sup> The reader also finds out which problems require closer explanation (for example, Stresemann in Dresden and Saxony), which are controversial, and what the author's opinion is on the academic debates. More could not be expected of such a short study. In sum, Kolb's book is a

<sup>42</sup> Berg, *Gustav Stresemann*.

high quality presentation of the current state of research which Kolb himself has helped to define with his works.

Jonathan Wright's aim is not merely to present the state of research, but also to highlight something new. And he does, indeed, bring to light a number of hitherto unknown facts about Stresemann's life, especially during the Weimar Republic. In his judgement Stresemann is Weimar's greatest statesman, despite some individual criticisms. The concentration on the Weimar politician, however, robs the study of a certain openness of interpretation. Because it was seemingly of secondary significance for his politics during the Weimar Republic, Stresemann's early period in Saxony – after all, it lasted for fifteen years, while Stresemann was Foreign Minister for only six – is not, on the whole, given sufficient weight. Anything that pointed towards the Weimar politician is emphasized; anything that fits less well tends to be relegated to the background, though it is not passed over in silence. The openness of the British author is welcome here, as he is able to overcome some of the constrictions which the German interpretations run into. Wright's sovereign overview and his ability to place Stresemann's achievement in the context of European politics is revealed not least in the brilliant conclusion to his study.

It should be noted, however, that the study takes a rather conventional approach. The author launches into his theme without any preliminary theoretical reflection. Added to this is the concentration on politics, which is not systematically justified anywhere. Other aspects, whether personal or social in character, such as health, social position, mentality, or cultural status, are addressed from time to time, but do not coalesce into factors of intrinsic value. To this extent the study occasionally runs the risk of seeing Stresemann mainly as an agent of Weimar foreign policy rather than as a multi-faceted human being who was *also* a politician. The fact that biographies, as Niklas Luhmann suggests, are a chain of coincidences which organize themselves into something, and which then gradually become less mobile,<sup>43</sup> is not always apparent in Wright's study.

Compared with the works by Kolb and Wright, Birkelund's comes off a little worse. It achieves neither the sovereign overview attained by Kolb, nor does it outdo Wright in terms of research or

<sup>43</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Short Cuts* (4th edn.; Frankfurt, 2002), p. 32.

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interpretation. There is no theoretical reflection about biography as a genre and what it can achieve; there is often a lack of source criticism; small, careless mistakes creep in; and there is little evidence of the fresh approach that we expect from an outsider coming from industry. However, for a readership that is not so familiar with the subject, the way in which the biography is embedded in the foreign policy of Weimar as a whole must be refreshing. The readable style of this work also assists an engagement with the topic. Not least, it should be mentioned that Birkelund attempts to fit his theme into the new international situation after 1989, and to judge Stresemann in this context. What is progressive about this study is the author's more critical view of his protagonist. Perhaps he is initiating a gradual shift in the assessment of Stresemann which might cut the 'hero of Weimar' down to a more normal size. About Stresemann the politician (and to some extent also the person) we are at present better informed than ever before, not least thanks to the biographies reviewed here. We know more about Stresemann than about most historical figures active during the early Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic. None the less, what is missing is an approach that leaves old paths behind, gives the human being Stresemann equal weight with Stresemann the politician, treats his whole life as of equal value, and, not least, confronts the seeming inevitability of his career with his internal 'brake' and thus emphasizes the openness of his life. Perhaps it is time to abandon the chronological approach in order to avoid the 'biographical trap' that an author can so easily fall into when writing about Stresemann.

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