

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING GERMANY'S FIRST DEMOCRACY: REFLECTIONS ON THE FOUNDING OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC IN 2019

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The founding of Weimar democracy is most often marked by the ceremonious opening of the National Assembly on February 6, 1919 when its 423 members convened in the National Theater of Weimar to draft, debate, and ultimately to ratify the constitutional terms of Germany's new democracy. The scenes of polite deliberation and passionate debate that filled the theater were legitimated by the democratic elections of January 20, 1919. The writing and ratification of the constitution that concluded in August 1919 has long been recognized as the Republic's founding moment.

Yet this focus on the constitution and the National Assembly has long overshadowed a markedly different founding moment for the Weimar Republic — that of November 1918 — when the coalescing forces of military defeat, popular revolution, and collapse of the state called the question of democracy as political form.

Indeed, the revolution of November 1918 proved a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of democracy in Germany, although this connection is seldom asserted in historical accounts of the founding of the Weimar Republic. Until quite recently, the revolution of November 9, 1918 was a mostly “forgotten” political episode best known as a “failed revolution.” Distinct descriptors were attached to the notion of failure: it was abbreviated or incomplete, became stuck, left a lasting and irreparable hole in the heart of Weimar democracy or caused the republic itself to be “stillborn.”¹ In the wake of the Paris Peace agreement of 1919, nationalist rhetoric turned the insurgent soldiers, sailors, and workers of 1918-19 into the “November criminals,” whose revolutionary uprising was a crucial stage in the legend of the stab-in-the-back that brought about Germany's catastrophic defeat.² For right-wing nationalists, the act of instituting the republic was a longer-term consequence of the revolution, one that forged an inextricable link between November 1918 and the republic's founding as conjoined acts of betrayal.³

In the past two to three years leading up to the centennial of both the revolution and the founding of the Weimar Republic, retrospectives

1 Eberhard Kolb, “1918/19: Die steckengebliebene Revolution,” in Carola Stern and Heinrich A. Winkler, eds., *Wendepunkte deutscher Geschichte 1848-1990* (Frankfurt a.M., 2001), 100-25; Reinhard Rürup, “Problems of the German Revolution 1918-19,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 3/4 (October 1968):109-35; Heinrich August Winkler, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Revolution von 1918/19: ein Rückblick nach sechzig Jahren* (Berlin, 1979).

2 Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg, 1914-1933* (Düsseldorf, 2003); George Vascik and Mark Sadler, eds., *The Stab-in-the-Back Myth and the Fall of the Weimar Republic: A History in Documents and Visual Sources* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

3 Axel Schildt, “Der lange November: zur Historisierung einer deutschen Revolution,” in *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19*, ed. Alexander Gallus (Göttingen, 2010), 244.

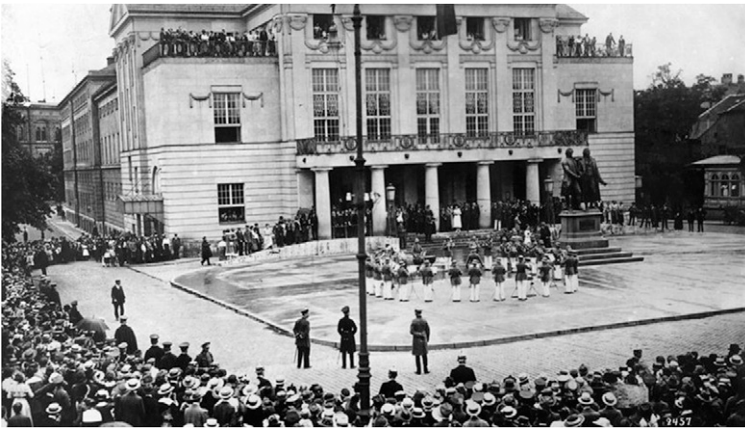


Figure 1. Closing ceremony for the Nationalversammlung at the National Theater in Weimar. © bpk.

as academics, politicians, and museum curators share their reflections and reinterpretations of history with the broad public. Notable in the contiguous centennials of the November Revolution and the formal founding of the Weimar Republic is the marked distance between these two foundational moments.

The goal of this essay is to situate the November Revolution in the story of Weimar democracy's founding and as one of its origins. My recent work examines crucial citizenship effects of the revolution that were formative of Germany's first democracy as new terms of political participation and representation were invented, improvised and imagined in that in-between time and space from November 9, 1918 to the convening of the National Assembly in February 1919.⁴ Since this centennial juncture is one in which the presumed failures — of both the Weimar Republic and the November revolution — have

have sought to historicize the place of both events — or their relative absence — in Germany's commemorative culture.⁴ The commemoration of such anniversaries constitutes a uniquely performative realm of history's meaning in which *Tagespolitik* meets scholarship,

4 Conferences include: "Der Kieler Matrosenaufstand in der Revolution 1918. Epizentrum eines politischen Umbruchs?" Wissenschaftlicher Workshop im Vorfeld des 100. Jahrestages der Kieler Novemberereignisse 1918, Kieler Stadt- und Schifffahrtsmuseum/Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, March 3-6, 2016; "Living the German Revolution: Expectations, Experiences, Responses," German Historical Institute London, October 18-20, 2018 (see the conference report by Marius S. Ostrowski, *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, Vol 41, No. 1 (May 2019): 155-163). Also noteworthy were the

conferences organized by the Forschungsstelle Weimarer Republik, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena: "Zusammenbruch, Aufbruch, Abbruch? Die Novemberrevolution als Ereignis und Erinnerungsort," November 24-26, 2017 and "Die Weimarer Reichsverfassung: Aufbruch und Innovation," December 6-8, 2018. Notable studies include: Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution*

von 1918/19 (Berlin/München/Zürich/Wien, 2017); Daniel Schönpflug, *Kometenjahre 1918: Die Welt im Aufbruch* (Frankfurt, 2017); Heiko Mass, "Die Weimarer Nationalversammlung als demokratischer Erinnerungsort," and Alexander Gallus, "Auf dem Weg zur Reaktualisierung durch Historisierung. Die vergessene Revolution von 1918 revisited," in Michael Dreyer und Andreas Braune,

eds., *Weimar als Herausforderung. Die Weimarer Republik und die Demokratie im 21. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 2016), 3-6; 9-21.

5 Kathleen Canning, "Gender and the Imaginary of Revolution in Germany," in Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn, eds., *In Search of Revolution: Germany and Its European Context, 1916-1923* (Berlin, 2015), 103-26.

been subject to new exploration and analysis,⁶ the starting point of this essay is a brief examination of the ways in which these specters of failure have haunted the history of Germany's twentieth-century democracies.

The view of Weimar as a republic that was flawed, or even doomed from its revolutionary beginnings, meant that its democratic sensibilities left little trace in the formation of the Federal Republic's post-1945 democracy. Yet, the Weimar past was not wholly absent. Rather, as Sebastian Ullrich has argued in his study, *Der Weimar Komplex*, it hung over the Federal Republic's beginning like a very long shadow — the shadow, that is, of democracy's catastrophic failure.⁷ West German politicians who sought to anchor the Federal Republic in democratic ideas of the past thus looked much further back. In 1948, not surprisingly, celebrations were held to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the 1848 revolution, while the thirtieth anniversary of Weimar's founding went largely unmarked.⁸ Indeed, the success and self-confidence of the emergent Federal Republic in the late 1940s and early 1950s seemed to depend on its ability to distance its democracy in form and content from the crisis-ridden republic of Weimar. The GDR, by contrast, sought to enshrine and overcome the legacy of the Weimar Republic by launching its own "antifascist-democratic revolution" after 1945.⁹

The relative absence of the Weimar Republic in the public commemoration of Germany's path to democracy is critically examined in the introduction to the 2016 essay collection, *Weimar als Herausforderung*, whose editors, Michael Dreyer and Andreas Braune, note that an expansive 2001 compilation of German sites of memory, for example, featured few memorials from the Weimar period. The inclusion of the Bauhaus in commemorative culture linked it not to the Weimar period but instead highlighted its fate under Nazism

6 Dreyer and Braune, *Weimar als Herausforderung*; Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irina Renz, eds., *1918: Die Deutschen zwischen Weltkrieg und Revolution* (Berlin, 2018); Tim B. Müller and Adam Tooze, eds., *Normalität und Fragilität. Demokratie nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 2015); Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-19* (Cambridge/New York, 2017); Albert Dikovich and Alexander Wierzock, eds., *Von der Revolution zum Neuen Menschen: Das politische Imaginäre in Mitteleuropa 1918/19: Philosophie, Humanwissenschaften und Literatur* (Stuttgart, 1918).

7 Sebastian Ullrich, *Der Weimar-Komplex. Das Scheitern der ersten deutschen Demokratie und die politische Kultur der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Göttingen, 2009). Also see his "A Democratic Legacy? The Memorialization of the Weimar Republic and the Politics of History of the Federal Republic of Germany," in Bill Niven

and Chloe Paver, eds., *Memorialization in Germany since 1945* (New York, 2010), 381. Also see Christoph Gusy, *Weimars lange Schatten. Weimar als Argument nach 1945* (Baden-Baden, 2003).

8 Ullrich, "A Democratic Legacy," 381.

9 Ullrich, "A Democratic Legacy," 379.

and its subsequent revival and dissemination across the two postwar Germanies and in the United States.¹⁰ Dreyer and Braune point to the overwhelming prominence of 1933 in the venues of popular political education, even as Germany still lacks a museum dedicated to Weimar history and political culture. Their volume calls for new commemorative attention to the Republic's founding, its capacity to foster loyalty in the face of political murder and putsch attempts, to defend democracy and to sustain republican governance as it dug itself out of crisis and paralysis time and time again, at least until 1931.¹¹ Dreyer and Braune seek a critically positive engagement with the innovative, imaginative, and inventive aspects of Weimar democracy, not least its anchoring of a social state at the heart of republican democracy, a laudable legacy for the post-1945 Federal Republic and beyond in the view of progressive and Social Democratic scholars and politicians.

While a refurbished memory of the Republic might make room for its embrace of a social state ahead of its time, it is not surprising that the piece-by-piece dismantling of the Republic and its ultimate collapse in 1933 have long overwhelmed this more positive vision. Instead, the Republic has been rendered a site of mourning and lamentation — not only for a lost democracy but also for the exile of its cultural ambition, and most profoundly, of course, for the catastrophic human consequences of the Nazis' rise to power. In this sense, the founding and the collapse of Germany's interwar democracy has reverberated across continents and decades and is indisputably a world-historical event with global implications. This sense of mourning and loss remains a powerful legacy of the Republic even as interpretive reflections on Weimar democracy began to shift some three or four years ago, as scholars and politicians began to look towards its centennial. The backdrop for that change is a new recognition and appreciation for the high-stakes task of building a democracy, of sustaining it and insuring its survival in the face of rising populist, nationalist and authoritarian movements.

Indeed, the Weimar Republic has become a readily available paradigm for imperiled democracies, a case study of “the suffocation of democracy,” a lesson in “how democracies die,” even if they do so under indisputably specific historical circumstances.¹² In fact, these days we German historians in North America are regularly called upon to offer reflections on possible parallels between Germany in the early 1930s and the intensifying denigration of democracy in the United States since January 2017. In its struggle to design, negotiate, enact, and defend democracy in the face of vigorous and periodically

10 Dreyer and Braune, “Weimar als Herausforderung. Zum Umgang mit einer schwierigen Republik,” in *Weimar als Herausforderung*, xi–xiii.

11 Dreyer and Braune, “Weimar als Herausforderung.” On Weimar democracy's capacity to generate a vigorous defense, even the desire for democracy, see Manuela Achilles, “Anchoring the Nation in the Democratic Form: Weimar Symbolic Politics Beyond the Failure Paradigm,” in Geoff Eley, Jennifer Jenkins and Tracie Matsysik, eds., *German Modernities from Wilhelm to Weimar. A Contest of Futures* (London, 2016), 259–82.

12 Christopher Browning, “The Suffocation of Democracy,” *New York Review of Books* (Oct. 25, 2018) and Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York, 2018).

violent opposition, Weimar has gained a poignant place in the history of western democracies. This new attention to the fate of Weimar democracy allows for its reframing as an inherently fragile yet still visionary political formation.

I. Revolution and the inception of democracy

This essay's reflections on how republican democracy became a possibility in 1918 are framed by two key arguments: the first considers Weimar democracy's temporal dimensions, namely its advent as a sudden democracy, a term that is suggestive for the beginnings of Germany's two twentieth-century postwar democracies. A sudden democracy, even if popularly summoned, as in 1918, requires improvisation and invention, as established structures of governance are shattered, and as juridical and constitutional changes propel the disenfranchised or partially enfranchised into the new status of full citizens (1918-19) or create the conditions for restoration of disbanded citizenships to those who had lost or forfeited them (1945-48). These processes of rebuilding forms of governance and political representation often take place in the absence of tradition or in open conflict with past forms of belonging. The speed with which sudden democratic frameworks are built were often compelled by external conditions, such as military collapse and defeat, the terms of peace and occupation, and by the need for alleviation of the civilian population's dire material needs. The notion of sudden democracy takes seriously "the broken character" of revolution, defeat, social and national collapse that calls forth new forms of governance and political representation under the conditions of emergency.¹³ The sudden inception of Weimar democracy might be understood as an eruption, while Germany's democratization after the Second World War was in one sense indisputably sudden — in the violent end of the Nazi state and its war of annihilation and the installation of military occupation by the victorious Allies. Yet postwar democratization also required a deliberate and gradual process of demilitarization, denazification and conversion that lasted into the early 1950s.¹⁴ The popular memories of the Weimar Republic as a time of "political instability and misery," along with the view, widely shared among intellectuals and politicians, that democracy "was an ideology foreign to the German people" necessitated a process of conversion.¹⁵

Second, the contests over forms of governance between November 1918 and spring 1919 make clear the ways in which democracy as a political form is one that is continually "in the making," a contention

13 Axel Schildt refers to the "gebrochenen Charakter der Revolution" in his essay, "Der lange November," 244.

14 Jennifer Fay, "Becoming Democratic: Satire, Satiety and the Founding of West Germany," *Film History. An International Journal* 18/1 (2006): 6-20; Jennifer Kapczynski, *The German Patient: Crisis and Recovery in Postwar Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2008); Sean Forner, *German Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democratic Renewal: Culture and Politics after 1945* (Cambridge/New York, 2014) and "Reconsidering the 'Unpolitical German': Democratic Renewal and the Politics of Culture in Occupied Germany," *German History* 32/1 (2014): 53-78.

15 Ulrich, "A Democratic Legacy?," 379-80.

that Tim B. Müller and Adam Tooze have recently asserted most persuasively and that was implicit in my exploration of citizenship and the convening of democratic subjectivities in 1916-19.¹⁶ Peter Fritzsche's hallmark essay, "Did Weimar Fail" similarly emphasized the *contingency* of Weimar democracy, a formulation that is close to the notion of democracy in-the-making. Citing Alfred Döblin, Fritzsche argued that the Republic came "without operating instructions."¹⁷ From another angle we might understand democracy as "in-the-making" because it suffers recurrent crises of representation. Democracy is chronically beset by challenge as conflicts ensue over who is entitled to representation and how representation is structured or restricted, for example, on the basis of class, employment status, gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion or sexuality. Contests over the terms of inclusion/exclusion raise critically important questions about how democratic sensibilities are awakened in actors and subjects who seek to convene, assemble, defend or restore democracies and how we, as historians, find and interpret evidence of these sensibilities, affinities, and disavowals. A further question with particular relevance for the history of Weimar democracy is how democratic affinities begin to disintegrate, are damaged or rendered dangerous, how they are dismantled or ultimately shattered.

Peace, bread and democracy had been the slogans of popular protest since 1916 that demanded an end to the military state of siege and its suspension of civil and political rights. Democracy came to stand not only for the restoration of these liberties, but also for the enactment of new rights of political participation and new forms of political representation, in which socialist and parliamentary visions mingled. The widespread everyday protests across the urban landscape of Germany over bread, coal, over the inequities of rationing, exposed the state's inability to provide for its citizens, while mass strikes in the munitions industry laid bare the precariousness of industrial labor under the conditions of war in spring 1917 and the early winter of 1918.¹⁸ As the legitimacy of the Hohenzollern state grievously weakened and Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff were forced to request an armistice, Prince Max von Baden's provisional government enacted the October reforms, embracing the vision of a parliamentary monarchy that stopped short of democracy and sought to stave off a revolutionary uprising.

That Germany's catastrophic defeat, popular revolution, and the collapse of the Kaiser's state all occurred within the span of a few

16 Tim B. Müller, "Die Weimarer Republik und die Europäische Demokratie," in *Weimar als Herausforderung*, 59-60; Tim B. Müller and Adam Tooze, eds., *Normalität und Fragilität. Demokratie nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 2015), Introduction, 15; Kathleen Canning, "Gender Order/Disorder and New Political Subjects in the Weimar Republic," in Gabriele Metzler and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Geschlechterordnung und Politik in der Weimarer Republik* (Heidelberg, 2016), 59-80 and "Gender and the Imaginary of Revolution in Germany."

17 Peter Fritzsche, "Did Weimar Fail?" *Journal of Modern History*, 68/3 (September 1996): 631.

18 See, for example, Gerald D. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor in Germany 1914-1918* (Providence/Oxford, 1966) and Jürgen Kocka, *Facing Total War. German Society 1914-1918* (Göttingen, 1978).

days led to competing sites of governmentality and forms of political representation. In this sense the “double declaration of the republic” on November 9, 2018 — Philipp Scheidemann’s announcement of the “German Republic” from a Reichstag balcony on November 9, 2018, followed two hours later by Karl Liebknecht’s declaration of the “free socialist Republic of Germany” from the balcony of the Berlin *Stadtschloss*¹⁹ lent a framework to the ensuing contests over political representation, which found expression on the one hand, in the spontaneous formation of workers’ and soldiers’ *Räte* across Germany and on the other, in the rushed reorientation of parties, unions, clubs and associations towards mass mobilization of new voters, including millions of women, for Germany’s first democratic elections.²⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, these two forms of political representation also formed explicitly gendered fronts of revolution.²¹

Contemporaries across the political spectrum expressed disbelief and shock at this sudden emergence of competing and incompatible futures, encompassing the possibilities of council rule or democratic elections, but also prospects as varied as the resumption of war through a *levée en masse*, a Spartacist seizure of power on the path to a proletarian revolution, or the return of the Kaiser at the helm of a new constitutional monarchy.²² While democracy had constituted a vague ideal of a future polity during the war, between November 1918 and February 1919 it became an alternative to revolution, the return of the Kaiser or the resumption of hostilities. Yet these imagined futures were nonetheless present in the founding of Weimar democracy, whether in the narratives of loss and longing — for Kaiser and empire — or the desire for revenge in the guise of the stab-in-the-back legend, or in the violent crushing of revolutionary hopes with the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in January 1919.²³

The revolution lent Germany’s interwar democracy a specific temporality: it was born of a *Traditionsbruch* — a rupture of tradition — amidst disastrous defeat, imperial collapse, and dire material crisis, without a template for governance under these conditions. Contingency and the capacity to imagine, invent, and experiment were necessary and inevitable aspects of the republic’s founding. How this contingency was experienced and described is revealed in memoirs, letters, and diaries of contemporaries that highlight the disparate standpoints and sensibilities of the revolutionary moment as it authorized new actors, subjects, and publics, who puzzled over the spatial locations and temporal implications of the revolution — where it

19 Axel Schildt, “Der lange November,” 244; Hirschfeld, Krumeich, and Renz, 1918: *Die Deutschen zwischen Weltkrieg und Revolution*; Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19*.

20 Kathleen Canning, “Das Geschlecht der Revolution: Stimmrecht und Staatsbürgertum 1918/19,” in Alexander Gallus, ed., *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19*, (Göttingen, 2010), 84–116.

21 Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld und Franziska Mann, *Was jede Frau vom Wahlrecht wissen muss!* (Berlin, 1918), 7.

22 Michael Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a Levée en Masse in October 1918,” *Journal of Modern History* 73 (Fall 2001): 459–527 and Michael Geyer, “Zwischen Krieg und Nachkrieg — die deutsche Revolution 1918/19 im Zeichen blockierter Transnationalität,” in Gallus, *Die vergessene Revolution*, 187–222.

23 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*, transl. Jefferson Chase (New York, 2003), 8–31; 193–207; Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration*.



Figure 2. Revolutionary street scene, 1919.
© Ullstein Bild.

began, when it might end — along with its possible course and outcomes: what it might disrupt, transform, invent, dismantle.²⁴ The artist Käthe Kollwitz, for example, mused mournfully about the meanings of the revolution, imagining her fallen son, Peter, as one of the revolutionary soldiers. For Kollwitz

the revolution was inextricable from the experience of war, for both herself and her dead son.

So this *is* really happening. We experience it but can scarcely grasp it. I am continuously thinking of Peter. If he had lived, he would have joined them. He would have ripped off those insignias as well. But he did not live and when I last laid eyes upon him he had the same hat with the cockade and his face was shining.²⁵

The diary entries of Thomas Mann report his observations of the sound of distant shots and express his wish for rain that might quell the gunfire:

The dry but frosty weather favors the revolution: the sun breaks through. If it were pouring rain, the revolution would certainly languish ... No mail delivery today. The rebels have also taken over the railway station and stopped all trains from passing through ... All of this will soon fade away and calm will return, one way or another, and you will carry on with your lives as they were, as they will be ...²⁶

While Mann conveys a sense of revolution as a minor annoyance that could be easily dispelled by rain, Theodor Wolff, the editor-in-chief of the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt*, offered a starkly different view in his editorial of November 10, 1918:

24 Alexander Gallus has recently drawn attention to the importance of the experience of revolution, its psyche and emotional dimensions, while Mark Jones' 2018 monograph sheds new light on the ethnography of fear, rumor and violence in the revolution. Alexander Gallus, "Auf dem Weg zur Reaktualisierung durch Historisierung: Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19 Revisited," in *Weimar als Herausforderung*, 17-18; Jones, *Founding Weimar*.

25 Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher 1908-1943*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz (Munich, 2012), Entry for Nov. 9, 1918, 378-79. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

26 Thomas Mann, *Tagebücher 1918-1921*, ed. Peter de Mendelssohn (Frankfurt, 2003), 60-61.

One can call it the greatest of all revolutions because never before has such an attempt taken such a firmly built Bastille surrounded by solid walls. A week ago a military and civil administrative organization still existed ... and it seemed that its regime was ensured to last the course of time. The grey cars of the officers raced through the streets of Berlin like monuments to power. Police stood on the squares; an enormous military organization seemed to surround everything ... Early yesterday morning, in Berlin at least, all of that was still there. By yesterday afternoon none of it existed anymore.²⁷

These brief observations of politically attuned intellectuals reveal a range of responses to a revolution that none appeared to anticipate, from Mann's skeptical dismissal to Wolf's wonderment at revolution's sudden and non-violent quality, to Kollwitz's embrace of an uprising that promised justice for her son.

II. Inventing democracy

During the frenetic weeks between November 9, 1918 and the first democratic elections on January 20, 1919, new terms of political participation and representation had to be invented, improvised and imagined and new kinds of political expertise were convened to provide tutelage to new citizens. This was the critical dilemma the revolution posed for those who would invent the republic. Although both the *Räte* and the new mobilizations of voters redefined and expanded the terrains of politics, suffrage reform has scarcely figured as significant in historical analysis of this period of revolution and rupture. In fact, during the revolutionary period from November 1918 through late January 1919, revolution and suffrage represented radically different political imaginaries. The vision of a republic of councils foresaw direct democracy, led by soldiers, sailors and male workers, but it also found adherents well beyond these constituencies, attesting to its (at least momentary) resonance as a new form of political representation. Intellectuals and artists, radical female socialists, even housewives in one or two locations, were inspired to convene councils of their own. The formation of *Räte der geistigen Arbeiter* (councils of intellectual workers) aimed to "act for the cultural political radicals on the ground of the new republic."²⁸ Kurt Hiller, Jewish pacifist, journalist and influential activist for homosexual rights, who led the Berliner Rat der geistigen Arbeiter (Berlin Council of Intellectual Workers), sought

27 As cited in Mark Jones, "The Crowd in the November Revolution 1918," in Weinbauer et al., *In Search of Revolution*, 48-49.

28 Ian Grimmer, "'Moral Power' and Cultural Revolution: Räte geistiger Arbeiter in Central Europe 1918/19," in Weinbauer et al., *In Search of Revolution*, 205-206.



Figure 3. Women's protest, 1919. © Archiv der deutschen Sozialdemokratie/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

to “extend the revolution beyond the demands of the traditional labor movement in the hope of advancing a cultural revolution.”²⁹ At the same time, the Berliner Arbeitsrat für Kunst, founded in November 1918 by Bruno Taut and Walther Gropius,

sought to mirror the workers’ and soldiers’ councils by making innovations in art and architecture accessible to a broader population.³⁰

Hans Joachim Bieber’s study of *Bürgerräte und Bürgerstreiks* in Germany uncovered agile bourgeois activists who quickly overcame their shock at the revolutionary events and sought to organize councils on the grounds of previous associational networks, interest groups, or along the lines of profession. He points to a feverish level of activity in the months of November and December, as the *Bürgerräte* sought to deflect a radicalization of the revolution and to mobilize support for the convening of a National Assembly.³¹ Councils quickly figured as an experimental form of political representation, even for those who sought to deflect or oppose revolutionary change.

If the Independent wing of the Social-Democratic Party (USPD) and the later Communists (KPD) were the only political parties that explicitly embraced the formation of women’s councils, it appears that female members of the Bund deutscher Frauenvereine also convened their own councils, as reported in the association’s journal, *Die Frau*.³² Indications that the term *Rat* (council) may have been an open-ended trope of political mobilization can be found in reports like one from Posen about a women’s council that was founded there in December 1918 to protect the interests of “das bedrohte Deutschtum” (endangered “Germanness”).³³ While little is known about the internal

29 Grimmer, ‘Moral Power’ and Cultural Revolution, 205-06.

30 Regine Prange, “Der Arbeitsrat für Kunst und seine Ausstellungen,” in Thorsten Scheer, Josef Paul Kleihues, and Paul Kahlfeldt, eds., *Stadt der Architektur - Architektur der Stadt: Berlin 1900 - 2000* [exhibition catalog] (Berlin, 2000), 93-104.

31 Hans-Joachim Bieber, *Bürgerräte und Bürgerstreiks in Deutschland 1918-1920* (Hamburg, 1993).

32 Willy Albrecht, Friedhelm Boll, Beatrix W. Bouvier, Rosemarie Leuschen-Seppel, Michael

Schneider, “Frauenfrage und deutsche Sozialdemokratie vom Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Beginn der zwanziger

Jahre,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 19 (1979): 489. Also see Ute Gerhard, *Un-erhört. Die Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung*

(Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1990), 330-31.

33 “Frauenräte,” *Die Frau* 26/3 (1918/19): 96.

workings of the women's councils or of the *Hausfrauenräte*, which also found occasional mention, both sought to transcend the definition of council membership in terms of *Beruf* (profession) or place of production. Although some feminists sought to redefine the work of housewives as constituting productive labor,³⁴ the tendency of most municipal councils to limit voting membership to those "who were employed for wages or salaries" resulted in the *de facto* exclusion of women and workers in agriculture and domestic industry, as well as casual, temporary, or marginally employed workers. As historian Peter Caldwell has argued, the definition of a new notion of council citizenship in terms of "those active in production, to workers of 'hand and head,'" was intrinsic to the council movement's vision of democratization, which was to encompass not only politics but also the socialization of production.³⁵ These narrow parameters of participation fostered more fundamental criticism of the council ideology by none other than liberal feminist Gertrud Bäumer, who, in the spring of 1919, noted scathingly that "as a system of representation based solely on profession with essentially economic goals" the councils could not be entrusted with the task of political representation.

In our struggle for female suffrage we have always been aware that peoples' interests must be represented not only in relation to production, but also from the standpoint of their roles as consumers, of their locations and interests outside of work. One of the crucial shortcomings of constitutional processes thus far has been a starting point that is too exclusively focused on production and that does not sufficiently consider peoples' activities as consumers, renters, members of a family, or their much more essential and personal life contexts outside of the sphere of work."³⁶

If in the council debates, democracy was at best a transitory state on the way to revolution, the declaration of equal suffrage opened an arena of popular mobilization for the invention of democracy. Sudden and unanticipated by all parties on November 12, 1918, the proclamation of equal suffrage granted new political rights to women over age twenty and to working-class men whose right to vote had been restricted by the Prussian three-class suffrage laws. The suffrage declaration thus resolved the hard-fought battle of the pre-war period over political participation of socialist and working-class men but also the decades of socialist and feminist campaigns, in Germany and across Europe, for the right to vote. In the aftermath of war and in the face

34 Margarete Weinberg, „Rätesystem und Hausfrauen.“ *Die Frauenbewegung* 21 (Juli 1919): 51-52.

35 Peter C. Caldwell, "The Citizen and the Republic," in Geoff Eley and Jan Palmowski, eds., *Citizenship and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Germany*, (Stanford, 2008), 45-46.

36 Gertrud Bäumer, "Die neue Gefahr für das Frauenstimmrecht," *Die Frauenfrage* 21 (May 1919), 36-37. See also Anja Weberling, *Zwischen Räten und Parteien. Frauenbewegung in Deutschland 1918-1919* (Pfaffenweiler, 1994), 36.

of the massive loss of men at the front, equal suffrage meant that two million more women than men would decide the new form of state. Especially against the backdrop of the presumptive “excess” of female citizens, the proclamation of equal suffrage had a significant impact on debates about the terms of political participation and representation, prompting waves of nationalist anxiety about the feminization of politics.³⁷ The work of inventing democracy called for hastily assembled campaigns led by experts who could begin the process of tutoring female voters, who purportedly lacked political experience and the capacity for political judgment in the exercise of their first vote.³⁸ The gender of revolution, as I have argued elsewhere, is precisely in the different forms of political representation it unleashed, including the mass mobilization and education of new voters.

As this massive mobilization of voters began, the Spartacists and the newly formed KPD drew a dividing line between the revolutionary councils and the prospect of parliamentary government. Assessing the elections to the National Assembly as constituting a “cowardly detour” from revolution, one that aimed to “defraud the socialist revolution of its socialist goals and to emasculate it into a bourgeois democratic revolution,” Rosa Luxemburg castigated the idea of a National Assembly as “an outmoded legacy of bourgeois revolutions, an empty shell, a relic from the time of petit-bourgeois illusions of a ‘united people’ and of the ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’ of the bourgeois state.”³⁹ When the KPD met for its inaugural congress on December 23, 1918, it faced the critical decision of whether the KPD should take part in the elections to the National Assembly.⁴⁰ Recognizing that the revolutionary forces were “not yet in a position to secure the victory of socialism simply through the overthrow of a government,” Luxemburg appealed to her comrades in the pages of the *Rote Fahne* to support participation in the elections while holding out the prospect of utilizing “the elections to the National Assembly to fight against the National Assembly” and upholding the call: “all power to the councils!”⁴¹ She disparaged the idea of “exploring parliament for so-called positive gains,” noting that “not the parliamentary majority in the National Assembly,” but the popular mobilization in factories and streets “will decide the fate of the National Assembly.” Indeed, Luxemburg imagined “the electoral action” and the floor of the parliament itself as “a means of training, rallying and mobilizing the revolutionary mass” to ultimately “take this fortress by storm and raze it to the ground.”⁴² Luxemburg’s vision was defeated in a vote of 62 to 23, and the KPD boycotted the elections to the National Assembly. Luxemburg’s shrewd realism

37 Ute Planert, “Women’s Suffrage and Anti-Feminism as a Litmus Test of Modernizing Societies,” in Sven Oliver Müller, *Imperial Germany Revisited. Continuing Debates and New Perspectives* (New York/Oxford, 2011), 107-25 and *Antifeminismus im Kaiserreich: Diskurs, soziale Formation und politische Mentalität* (Göttingen, 1998); see in particular chapter 5 “Geschlechterpolitik im ersten Weltkrieg.”

38 I first outlined these arguments in my essay, “Das Geschlecht der Revolution,” in Gallus, *Die vergessene Revolution*, 84-116.

39 Rosa Luxemburg, “The National Assembly,” *Rote Fahne* (November 20, 1918), published in: *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Robert Looker and transl. W.D. Graf, 262-65.

40 Paul Fröhlich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in Action*, transl. Johanna Hoornweg (Chicago, 2010; 1st edition Chicago, 1939), 285-86.

41 Fröhlich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 282.

42 Luxemburg, “The Elections to the National Assembly,” *Rote Fahne* (December 23, 1918), published in *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings*, 287-90.

had led her to recognize the complications and difficulties the revolution faced, not least because of its entanglement with notions of democracy that were undergoing redefinition in all political arenas.⁴³

As insurgent workers and soldiers seized sites of governance across towns, cities, provinces, and the capital of Berlin and

Wilhelm made off to Holland, “democracy” remained without a template, even as the Social Democratic leadership and the liberal professoriate, notably Max Weber, Hugo Preuss and Walther Rathenau, were engaging in more earnest explorations of parliamentarism as an offensive strategy of democratization since mid-1917.⁴⁴ On November 14, 1918, five days after the revolution, Hugo Preuss, who led the writing of the Weimar constitution, sought to “bridge the gap between revolution and constitution,” outlining in the *Berliner Tageblatt* a political space for democracy that would institutionalize the “power of the people.” Acknowledging the revolutionary legacy of democracy, Preuss sought to convince contemporaries of the compatibility (for a time) of these two political terms. The common ground of democracy was the sole political form that could resolve Germany’s crisis of governance:

The aims of the present holders of power [Author’s note: here he refers to the councils] might be the best and most pure imaginable; yet they cannot escape from the logic of the situation, which is that the attempt to constitute the new State while excluding the bourgeoisie must lead unavoidably, within a short space of time, to Bolshevik terror ... If a democratic political organization has not been established to secure equal rights for all citizens, then there will be no alternative to violence... Not classes and groups, not parties and estates in hostile isolation, but only the whole

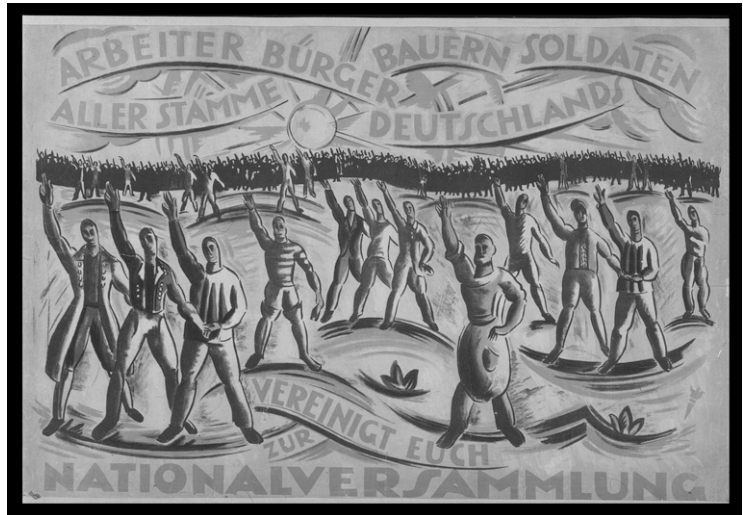


Figure 4. César Klein, Poster commissioned by the Rat der Volksbeauftragten, 1919.
© Bundesarchiv.

43 Fröhlich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 285.

44 See Marcus Llanque’s *Demokratisches Denken im Krieg. Die deutsche Debatte im ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 2000), 169–70 and Ch. 2, Section “Die Strategie einer offensiven Argumentation der Demokratie,” 170ff.

German people, represented by a German National Assembly elected by completely democratic elections, can create the German republic. And that must be created quickly if unspeakable misfortune is not to crush completely our poor people.”⁴⁵

By the time Max Weber authored his essay “Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland” in December 1917, he sensed the acute danger of the “growing bitterness of the masses” under the conditions of war. Weber’s attempt to define democracy as a new form of politics was built around the firm rejection of both the *Obrigkeitsstaat* (authoritarian state) and the prospect of socialism.⁴⁶ Weber regarded uniform, equal suffrage for all political bodies in the Reich as a fundamental precondition for the “internal unification of the nation in its struggle for existence,” warning that if “the democratization of Germany’s constitution were thwarted now, it would occur ‘at the expense of Germany’s future.’”⁴⁷ Weber’s vision of democracy called up a new form of “positive politics” in 1917–18: for Weber equal voting rights meant that “at the point of social life, the individual, for once, is not, as he is everywhere else, considered in terms of the particular professional and family position he occupies, nor in relation to difference of material and social situation, but purely and simply as a citizen.”⁴⁸ Here Weber offers a remedy for the criticism that Gertrud Bäumer leveled at the political form of the workers’ and soldiers’ councils.

Weber provided an outline of the space in which democracy should take shape in 1918–19 — if it were to constitute an alternative to violence and “unspeakable misfortune.” Indeed, as Hugo Preuss undertook first steps to realize the task of shaping Weimar democracy’s form and content, millions of new citizens, casting their first vote in the elections of 20 January 1919, heralded democracy’s arrival. Art historian and entrepreneur Oskar Münsterberg reflected on that day:

Today at 3 pm I went to the polls with Helene. For the first time, today, German women were able to exercise their right to vote. The polling stations were overrun with people: rich and poor, old and young, men and women — stood in long lines for hours in order to fulfill their new duty to vote for the new Republic’s first National Assembly. How quickly democratic thought saturated all social groups and the duty to vote embraced by all circles of the population! I voted today for the first time myself. Under previous

45 Hugo Preuss, “Volksstaat oder verkehrter Obrigkeitsstaat?” *Berliner Tageblatt* November 14, 1918, reprinted in Hugo Preuss, *Staat, Recht und Freiheit* (1926; repr., Hildesheim, 2006), 365–368.

46 Terry Maley, *Democracy and the Political in Max Weber’s Thought* (Toronto, 2011), 52–53.

47 As cited in Wolfgang Mommsen, *Max Weber und German Politics, 1890–1920* (Chicago, 1990), 247. Mommsen cites here Weber’s *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, December 1917, 252.

48 Maley, *Democracy and the Political*, 53. He cites here Weber’s “Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland,” in *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Tübingen, 1988), 299.

governments, I knew that my vote would have no influence. The Reichstag was merely a speaker's tribune, not a significant site of power.⁴⁹

The stakes of participatory citizenship in 1918-19 were much higher than the affinities of citizens with their chosen political parties. Rather, in those heady days between November 1918 and 20 January, 1919, democratic sensibility encompassed the conscious recognition that there was no turning back, no return to “the old system” and that citizenship now meant the capacity to shape the *Zukunftsstaat*, the future state, its form, and its national boundaries, and the terms and consequences of the anticipated peace negotiations. The coincidence of Germany's defeat, revolution and the imagining of a new German democracy in 1918/19 also meant that political visions and programs were inextricable from the structures of feelings, from grief and mourning, from the desire for absolution, resolution, revolution, and democracy. The somber acknowledgement by liberal feminist Agnes von Harnack, for example, that “an entire sea of blood and tears” overshadowed Germany's first democratic election, opened an unusual space for the recognition of emotion as a crucial component in the sensibilities of this sudden democracy.⁵⁰

III. Conclusion

Rejecting the longstanding view of a “pathologizing democratization” in post-World War I Europe, the historian Tim B. Müller has recently called for an assessment of the “conditions of possibility for interwar democracy.” Situating Weimar democracy in the context of a European, even global process of emerging mass democracies in the interwar period, Müller notes the absence of models and predecessors for incipient democracies born of war, social revolution, and the collapsing and refiguring of empires and nations. The democracy Müller examines is also much more than a set of political or constitutional structures, fixed in place by a constitution in a given year and place. Rather than an “ordering



Figure 5. Safis, Poster commissioned by the Werbedienst der sozialistischen Republik Deutschland, 1919.
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49 Aufzeichnung aus dem Tagebuch des Unternehmers und Kunsthistorikers Oskar Münsterberg (1865-1920) aus Berlin (LEMO Online, Deutsches Historisches Museum), DHM-Bestand) <https://www.dhm.de/lemo/zeitzeugen/oskar-muensterberg-wahlzur-nationalversammlung.html>

50 Agnes von Harnack, *Die Frauen und das Wahlrecht* (Ausschuss der Frauenverbände Deutschlands, n.d., 2-3. This brochure most likely appeared in late November or December of 1918.

concept,” Müller views democracy as constituting a new way of life, a new imaginary encompassing actions, institutions, ideas, habits and affects.⁵¹

Methodologically, research on “democracy in the making” returns to the perspectives and experiences of contemporaries who engaged in the day-to-day work of imagining and seeking to build both ideals and structures that would anchor interwar democracy. Citing Social Democratic Minister of Labor and Chancellor Gustav Bauer (1919–20), Müller notes that, at the outset of the Republic, Bauer viewed democracy as constituting a political system defined in terms of the people’s sovereignty, notions of self-governance, and the need for a vibrant economic democracy. Yet Bauer also envisioned democracy as a “way of life, a moral-ethical sensibility” that encompasses all arenas of everyday life.⁵² During the Republic’s middle years, its so-called period of stabilization, Julius Hirsch, state secretary in the Ministry of Economics, conceived of democracy as compatible with and even advancing a “democratic culture of conflict” (“eine demokratische Streitkultur”) that would encourage citizens to craft their own political judgments amidst competing viewpoints and claims. Müller explicates the vital place of argument, critical engagement and contest in Hirsch’s notion of a democracy in the making. For Hirsch, democracy was not a gift: rather it arose through the unleashing of a terrain of struggle (“Freigabe eines Kampfbodens”).⁵³ A focus on democracy in the making, of course, poignantly lays bare a democracy in the fight for its life, in which Weimar has won new empathy. Michael Dreyer highlights the *Republikschutzgesetz* (Law for the Protection of the Republic), passed in the aftermath of Walther Rathenau’s murder in 1922, as one example, while Tim Müller points to the 1925 funeral of Friedrich Ebert as a turning point at which the liberals and Social Democrats worked to foster a political culture that could nourish and secure a democratic form of rule.⁵⁴

These brief elaborations of the competing forms of political representation in 1918/19 prompt the fundamental question as to whether democracy as a form of government necessitates “a new kind of subject,” a new kind of sensibility, as a field of interaction between exterior framings and “technologies of citizenship” — the changes in law, governance, national boundaries, law, social or cultural codes — and the emotions and affective affinities of postwar citizens who longed for a new civic culture and participatory politics, for an end to authoritarian, violent, annihilative regimes, and for a new kind of

51 Tim B. Müller and Adam Tooze, *Normalität und Fragilität. Demokratie nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*; Tim B. Müller, *Nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Lebensversuche moderner Demokratien* (Hamburg, 2014); Tim B. Müller, “Die Weimarer Republik und die Europäische Demokratie,” in Dreier und Braune, *Weimar als Herausforderung*, 57–74.

52 Müller, “Die Weimarer Republik und die Europäische Demokratie,” 66.

53 Müller, “Die Weimarer Republik und die Europäische Demokratie,” 69–70. Also see Jens Hacke, “Liberal Alternatives during the Crisis of Democracy: The Political Economist Moritz Julius Bonn and the Era of the Two World Wars,” *New German Critique* 42/3 (November 2015): 145–68.

54 Dreier, “Weimar und die Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” in *Weimar als Herausforderung*, 295–307 and Müller “Die Weimarer Republik und die Europäische Demokratie,” 67–68.

polity between revolution and restoration of the dismantled state. This was true not only in 1919, but also in 1945.

A century separates the convening of democratic sensibilities in 1918-19 and our current crisis of democracy. Linking both is perhaps an understanding of democracy — with political scientist Bonnie Honig — as a “form of politics that is always in emergence in response to everyday emergencies of maintenance.”⁵⁵ James Miller’s recent study *Can Democracy Work?* opens with the question of what is living and what is dead in the modern democratic project.⁵⁶ Arguing that the democratic project is inherently unstable, he reminds us of Hannah Arendt’s view that “the shared political experience of exuberant new beginnings is a recurrent feature of modern democratic revolts.” In fact, Miller argues that “these *revolts* are a central part of the story of modern democracy, not an unfortunate blemish on the peaceful forward march toward a more just society. Rather they form the heart and soul of modern democracy as living reality.”⁵⁷ Drawing upon Arendt, Miller illuminates the tension between “episodes of collective self-assertion,” which are “invariably fleeting,” and “the need for a more stable constitution of collective freedom, embodied in the rule of law, and representative institutions that can operate at a larger and more inclusive scale,” which aptly describes the Weimar Republic at its founding and during subsequent later crisis points.⁵⁸ James Miller’s definition of the “democratic project” as “inherently unstable” offers an intriguing parallel to the more recent rediscovery of Weimar’s legacy for twentieth-century European democracies, but also for the present-day democracy of the Federal Republic. Miller suggests that even in times when liberal democratic institutions, such as trust in representative politics, are “more fragile than ever,” democracy continues to flourish in the guise of “furious dissent.”⁵⁹

Although the legacy of the Weimar Republic was, for the most part, effaced or even actively denied during the founding of the Federal Republic and the conversion of Germans to democracy in the post-1945 period, the dichotomy long upheld between Weimar as the “bedrohte Demokratie” (democracy under threat) and the Federal Republic as the “wehrhafte Demokratie (democracy capable of self-defense) now requires rethinking.⁶⁰ In revisiting the fragility of the Weimar Republic, we also can establish its capacity for self-defense at critical junctures from 1919 until its end. Indeed, the ability of the Bonn Republic to become a “defensible democracy” derived in part at least from the lessons of Weimar — both its tenacity at these turning points and its ultimate collapse. Despite periodic challenges

55 Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton, 2011), xvii.

56 James Miller, *Can Democracy Work? History of a Radical Idea from Ancient Athens to our World* (New York, 2018).

57 Miller, *Can Democracy Work*, “Prelude: What is Democracy?”, 10. Emphasis in the original.

58 *ibid.*, 11.

59 *ibid.*, 11-12.

60 Michael Dreyer makes this point convincingly in his essay, “Weimar und die Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” in Dreyer and Braune, *Weimar als Herausforderung*, 303-06.

to its authority by the student movement or terrorism in the 1970s, the Federal Republic never confronted the fundamental and ferocious assaults on democracy of 1920, 1923 and 1931 to 1933. In this sense, Weimar lives on as a case study of democracy's precarity, but also of its inventiveness in the face of recurrent crises and relentless delegitimization.

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