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THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

The Crisis of Classical Modernity

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2. Old Legacies and a New Start, 1918–19

On 10 February 1918 the *Frankfurter Zeitung* made an appeal to the newly elected National Constituent Assembly, which had gathered in Weimar away from the turmoil of civil war in Berlin:

> The German National Assembly in Weimar should resolve as a matter of urgency that a large notice be put up in every room used by the politicians and wherever the machinery of party runs. This notice should bear the message, in letters of fire: 'Do not forget: the German people has carried out a revolution!'[1]

Stirring words – and their fiery message still inspires the writings of many modern historians. Yet they should also give us pause: not only because of their disparaging comparison of the 'machinery of party' with the 'people', which reflects a problematical strain in the German political tradition, but because we need to ask what the pressures were in response to which the founding fathers of the new constitution were liable to 'forget' the revolution.

If there was to be a new start in 1918–19, then many problems inherited from the past had to be dealt with first. The National Assembly was faced with the task of drawing up the framework for a new system of government and a new social order, while also having to decide what degree of continuity there should be with the political and social institutions that had gone before. This entailed a confrontation between, on the one hand, those in favour of stability, who had just gained a narrow majority in the elections, and, on the other hand, the forces of counter-revolution and the supporters of the increasingly radical *Räte* movement (soldiers' and workers' councils). Given the magnitude of the burdens imposed by the peace settlement,

and the social and political problems created by demobilization, by the switch from a war to a peace economy and by the need to make provision for war victims, the 'revolution' was in reality only one aspect, albeit an important one, of the transition from a monarchy to a republic and from war to peace. The 'German revolution of 1918–19' was part of the process of the establishment of democracy, and as such has rightly been the object of much historical study and controversy;[2] but it can be properly assessed only if it is seen within the larger context of the events of wartime and the post-war period, if its successes and failures are viewed in the light of international comparisons and if the events of the revolution are judged in terms of the strategies and options that were available, or were perceived to be available, at the time.

Above all, we must ask precisely what sort of revolution the German people can be said to have 'carried out'. The fierce controversy that still rages among historians concerning the nature of the revolution of 1918–19 is a reflection of ideological differences among the scholars concerned, but it also indicates the many-faceted character of the revolutionary process itself. It is imperative, therefore, if we are to understand the events that took place, to distinguish the several political strands of the revolutionary movement (indeed, to distinguish the several separate revolutionary movements) and to specify the different chronological phases of which the revolution consisted. The concrete historical events of the revolution, I suggest, were the product of three distinctive movements, and fell into three stages.

It is, of course, always somewhat arbitrary to extract a particular set of phenomena from the inchoate mass of historical events and to highlight them in ideal-type fashion. Alternative explanatory models are quite possible. I think it is useful, however, to suggest that the 'German revolution' was made up of the following three relatively independent ideal-type revolutionary movements:

– the *constitutional revolution* carried out by democratic politicians and their parties and complemented by corporatist co-operation between the leaders of the institutions of labour and capital and the state

– the *peace and social-protest movement*, which was the product of spontaneous action by workers (though not only workers) and found institutional expression in the *Räte* movement

– the *socialist movement*, led by a mixed grouping of left-wing politicians, which became significant only as the revolution gained momentum.

These three movements – which partly reinforced one another and partly obstructed one another, with the balance among them constantly shifting – together passed through three broad chronological phases:

– a period of *hope*, lasting until the revolution was successfully accomplished in Berlin on 9 November 1918

– a period of *decisions*, leading up to the elections for the National Assembly on 19 January 1919

– a period of *disappointment*, which can be said to have ended in the spring of 1919 (if the events leading up to the Kapp putsch and the March revolution of 1920 are left aside).

When did the first phase, the period of hope, begin? Certainly we need at least to go back to before the naval mutiny of late October and early November 1918, to the end of the preceding September, when Germany's leaders decided to face up to imminent defeat on the battlefield by seeking an armistice on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points and, on the domestic front, set in train a parliamentary reform of the constitution. But the origins of the three partly complementary, partly conflicting movements that we have identified as fuelling the revolution really went back further still. We need, in fact, to seek the origins of the 'German revolution' in the 'German awakening' (*Deutscher Aufbruch*) of 1914. It is only in the light of the mythology of August 1914 that the drama of November 1918 can be understood.

HOPES

As early as 1915, in a highly prophetic essay which remained unpublished at the time, Max Weber wrote:

Here, too, the prolongation of the war is entirely the result, not of objective political considerations, but of a fear of peace . . . To a far greater extent still, however, people are afraid of the domestic political consequences of the disillusionment that will inevitably set in, given the foolish expectations that have now run riot.[3]

These expectations had 'run riot' in August 1914, as war fever had taken hold in Germany. While the troops mobilized, hopes that the Reich could break out of its self-inflicted international isolation were stirred into a millenarian frenzy. The euphoria gripped mainly the middle class, though not exclusively so. Sections of the working class also hoped for social regeneration under the aegis of a united 'Volksgemeinschaft', or 'national community', but these hopes rapidly faded when the prosaic reality of war set in. It was in this climate that the political movements which, in altered form, were to bring about the revolution of 1918–19 first took shape.

The Kaiser's proclamation of a 'Burgfrieden', or domestic truce, encompassing all the political parties, including the previously ostracized Social Democrats, as well as the trade unions and employers' organizations, seemed to herald a new political era: the prospect of a fresh start which very few political leaders were at first able to resist. The politicians were also carried along by the surging popular sense, extending to the working class, that the 'national community' faced a time of trial both at home and abroad. Here, then, was the origin of the latent mass feeling of expectancy, and disappointment, that subsequently played a decisive part in shaping the revolution. In addition, August 1914 brought about the bewilderment and isolation of the hitherto socialist left, a political blow whose effects remained even after the revolution had broken out. Finally, mass rallying behind the banner of 'Volksgemeinschaft' and the establishment of a 'Burgfrieden' among the dominant social institutions provided the foundations for a political model of chauvinistic integration under the hegemony of the military–conservative complex that was eventually to reach its fatal culmination in the era of totalitarianism.

The unfavourable turn taken by the war increased domestic tensions. The military–conservative complex tightened its hold on power, while disillusionment and dissatisfaction became more widespread among the population. As a result of this polarization, the liberal and democratic forces in society slowly re-established the traditional position that they had temporarily abandoned in August 1914. At the same time, conflicts over the basic issue of wages and living standards stepped up sharply, with groups that had previously been under-represented in the Social Democratic movement, such as women and young people, now playing a larger role. Since action by representative trade union and political bodies was officially in abeyance, social protest often also found expression in new, spontaneous forms.

By 1917–18 a mood of disenchantment had descended on the three movements we have identified, and they were now prepared to break free from the military–conservative hegemony. The Inter-Party Committee representing the 'Burgfrieden', politicians who formed a majority in the Reichstag – the Social Democrats, the liberals and the Centre – provided a platform, albeit a shaky one, for moves towards a negotiated peace and the introduction of parliamentary reform. This alliance set the pattern for the constitutionalist movement that kept its hand on the reins though all the later vicissitudes of the revolution.

The euphoria that had swept through the masses in 1914 had long since given way to disillusionment at the way the war was proceeding and to anger at the authorities' inability to ensure an equal division of the burdens the war imposed. Workers rediscovered the old traditions of class conflict. A large number of strikes took place, culminating in the great January strike of 1918, and there were many other acts of social protest and dissent that pointed to the dissolution of the reigning social and moral order. At the same time, however, the peace and social-protest movement, which had seen its hopes dashed after 1914 and was now demanding that the colossal sacrifices of the war should at least be rewarded by a fundamental change in the post-war social order, was nurturing a new set of exaggerated expectations which would guarantee a new round of disappointment later.

The socialist left also regained some of its influence during the war, but it reorganized itself into a number of splinter groups and embarked on the revolution as a divided force. Furthermore, the main divisions that emerged within what had been the SPD Reichstag group –

between the Majority Socialists (MSPD), the Independents (USPD) and the Left Radicals (Linksradikale, or Spartacus) – did not reflect differences between left and right on matters such as the nature of revolution and the structure of post-revolutionary society, but rather attitudes towards war credits and ways of ending the war. As long as the events of the revolution did not entail the making of clear-cut choices, however, these differences could be glossed over in the common call for 'socialism'. During the crucial weeks of the revolution, at any rate, this meant that almost everyone could appeal to socialist slogans without feeling the need to follow them through to their logical conclusions.

Such was the state of the various movements that determined the course of the revolution when the final death-throes of the monarchy set in on 29 September 1918. Ludendorff, who until now had been the all-powerful head of the Supreme Army Command and had staked everything on victory in the offensives of the previous spring, now foresaw imminent collapse on the western front and demanded that an immediate request for an armistice be made on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points. At the same time, he pressed for the formation of a new government, which would have to concede Germany's defeat and accept the likely peace terms that would follow, from the majority parties in Parliament: the Social Democrats, the liberals and the Centre. The eventual effect of this cynical manoeuvre, which absolved the ruling conservative and military leadership from responsibility for the consequences of its own failed war policy, was to inflict on the democratic parties the odium of the notorious *Dolchstoß*, directed by stay-at-home politicians against the fighting soldiers in the trenches.

In the short run, however, Ludendorff's panic move backfired on its author. President Wilson's replies made it clear that an armistice was conditional on Germany's laying down her arms and on the resignation of those who had been responsible for German policy. The result was that the constitutional reforms put before Parliament in October by the new government under the Chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, became quite far-reaching; indeed, if they had been implemented, the Reich would have become a parliamentary democracy. There were also increasingly insistent calls behind the scenes for

Kaiser Wilhelm II to abdicate. At the same time, the people who had panicked in September now tried to change course yet again as events both inside and outside the country threatened their position. Rumours of a coup at the Kaiser's headquarters in Spa and an order to the German fleet to set sail on a last engagement sparked off a naval mutiny in Wilhelmshaven on 28 October and a sailors' insurrection in Kiel on 3 and 4 November. With these events, the mass peace movement had come into play.

Until this point it had looked as though the constitutionalist movement enjoyed sufficient institutional influence and popular support to be able to wind up the war on both the external and domestic fronts along the lines envisaged in October. Yet the uprisings of early November led to a rapid, and largely bloodless, seizure of power by workers' and soldiers' councils in most German cities, culminating in the revolution in Berlin on 9 November. The speed with which the *Räte* movement spread, and the fact that it spontaneously assumed the same form everywhere, demonstrated that the military and civil structures of the monarchy had forfeited all remnants of their legitimacy.

On the other hand, the attitude of the members of the peace and protest movement towards the agents of constitutional reform remained favourable. The *Räte* were quite ready to accept trusted figures in the two workers' parties as their leaders and representatives, and in some regions even liberal and Centre politicians as well. The *Räte* movement and the politicians who represented it in practice fell in behind the traditional methods of the constitutionalist movement; the socialist vocabulary used by the *Räte* had no substantive force. The language of the peace and protest movement did show, nevertheless, that there was a general expectation among its supporters that when the war and the revolution were over a new and just social order would have to be created, to compensate for the sacrifices made during the war and to fulfil the utopian hopes that had been dashed after August 1914. These conflicting attitudes within the *Räte* movement during the revolutionary period explain why the representatives of the radical left, notably the Spartacus group around Liebknecht and Luxemburg, remained so uninfluential. At the same time, however, it

could be foreseen that the radicals would increase their influence if the gulf between the socialist aspirations of the *Räte* and the sober pragmatism of the SPD politicians were to widen. The gap between socialist idealism and cautious constitutionalism might conceivably have been bridged if the Social Democratic politicians had addressed themselves to the radical democratic elements in the *Räte* movement's programme and integrated them into the constitutional framework of the revolution. But this was an experiment that was never tried.

DECISIONS

The 'period of decisions' lasted two months: from 9 November 1918 to 19 January 1919. It was during this period that the lasting results of the revolution were achieved. At the same time, the decisions taken by the constitutionalist politicians created the conditions which led inevitably to the collapse of the mass movements that arose during the months that followed. The leading Social Democratic politicians insisted on the paramount importance of pursuing the limited goals of the constitutionalist movement, and with mass support – though this support was becoming increasingly divided against itself – they implemented them. In the process the resilience of the alliance between the constitutionalist and *Räte* movements was tested to the limit, until unity finally gave way and the two movements, one victorious and the other increasingly radicalized, became locked in the bitter confrontation that was to be the key feature of the revolution's final phase.

The revolutionary government that was formed in Berlin on 10 November 1918 from representatives of the two socialist parties rested on this unusual dual legitimacy, the crucial structural fact of this central stage of the revolution. The 'Council of People's Representatives' proclaimed itself an organ of the revolution, deriving its legitimacy from the Berlin workers' and soldiers' councils. At the same time, in its function as the government of the Reich it stood clearly for the tradition of constitutionalism, for the new constitutional system embodied in the October reforms and for continuity in the administration of state. Leading bureaucratic figures remained in positions they had previously occupied, and on 14 and 15 November two prominent liberals, Eugen Schiffer and Hugo Preuß, were appointed to head Reich ministries.

This rigid adherence to administrative continuity on the part of the new Reich leadership, despite its revolutionary mandate, is one of the most striking and distinctive features of the German revolution of 1918–19. For Friedrich Ebert, who rose during these months to become the dominant figure not only within the SPD but within the Reich government, the need for order remained paramount. All government measures had to conform to this requirement, even if they were based on fundamental and hitherto undisputed principles of Social Democracy. If we are to understand the political logic of the men who were now in charge of the revolution – and who, as we have said, could count on the backing of the bulk of the *Räte* movement, at least between November 1918 and January 1919 – we must examine their obsession with order.

There were several reasons, of varying significance, why Friedrich Ebert and his comrades did not question the primacy of order.[4] First and foremost, these men were conscious, as they viewed matters in 1918, of the truly shattering spectacle of events in Russia. The awful warning here was not so much the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks – most observers doubted that the Bolsheviks would last long, and their German imitators in the Spartacus group remained relatively uninfluential – as the breakdown, on both the domestic and international fronts, that had gone hand in hand with it. The Peace of Brest-Litovsk, dictated by the Germans in the spring of 1918, had deprived Russia, defenceless and in chaos, of half of its European territory, while the rest of the country was in a state of economic collapse, starvation and civil war. In addition, the conditions for an armistice imposed on Germany by the Allies were severe, and Ebert wanted to be able to enter the forthcoming peace-treaty negotiations from a position of greater strength. A further reason for wariness was that demobilizing the army and putting the economy back on to a peacetime footing would entail a degree of organizational effort by the state that had never previously been contemplated. These considerations underlay the agreement which was made on 10 November between Ebert and the *de facto* head of the armed forces, Groener, and which formed the basis for the fundamental compromise that

conditioned relations between the new republic and the old military. Finally, the preoccupation with order and administrative continuity was also a product of the statist tradition within German Social Democracy. Apart from a few theorists such as Rosa Luxemburg, German socialists had envisaged socialism not as a process of spontaneous self-organization by the masses but as an expansion of public administration designed to promote the general welfare.

The revolution of 1918–19 remained faithful to this conception of the role of the state, and in this sense was a clear continuation of the liberal, parliamentary tradition of the constitutionalist movement. It also reflected the reluctance of the leadership, conscious of its new responsibilities in government, to subject a highly complex industrial society, with an infrastructure essential for the smooth running of daily life, to disturbing experiments in radical reorganization.

But despite the fact that there was considerable support for this concern for order, there were three vital problems which the constitutionalist revolution could not solve and which it merely trusted would go away. First, the hope that the military and the civil service would display a loyal neutrality was soon shown to be misplaced. By then, however, the government had become dependent on them. Secondly, although the new *Räte* movement was an important independent institutional factor in the political situation, the Social Democrats made no attempt to draw on the support of the *Räte* to introduce democratic reforms of the state administration, or to build up an army that might have been politically more compliant than the old monarchical officer class was able or willing to be. It is impossible to tell how such an experiment would have fared, but it was a fatal mistake that it was never tried. Thirdly, the only immediate reforms that the Social Democratic leadership was prepared to countenance were ones which formed part of the process of introducing constitutional democracy. All more ambitious measures, such as the nationalization of heavy industry or the break-up of the East Elbian estates, were referred to the jurisdiction of the future German Parliament. This decision, which had far-reaching consequences, was approved by a Reich Congress of Councils convened in Berlin on 16 December 1918. The same body also confirmed the authority of the Council of People's Representatives led by Ebert and called for the election of a National Constituent Assembly based on universal proportional suffrage.

It is difficult to say whether or not the deferment of substantive economic and social reforms was a wise move. Certainly, it deprived the young republic of the chance of establishing a clear and distinctive socio-political identity which the adherents of the *Räte* movement might have been more willing to defend. On the other hand, the fact that the Prussian Minister for Education, Culture and Church Affairs, Adolf Hoffmann, failed in his attempt in December 1918 to bring about a permanent separation of schools and the church shows how limited the political options were, even in this early phase. All that Hoffmann achieved was to boost the electoral fortunes of the Centre Party, trading on memories of Bismarck's conflict with the Catholic church, which possibly cost the two socialist parties their electoral majority. It is also debatable whether, say, nationalization of the mining industry would actually have satisfied the expectations of those in the peace and protest movement, since those expectations would later have been dashed anyway by the economic distress of the early post-war period.

In any event, the leaders of the revolution decided to go no further than to call for a constitution to be drafted by a National Assembly. This course of action met with widespread assent, if only because Germans had long been accustomed to the mechanism of political representation through Parliament. Not the least important consequence was that the balance of forces within the National Assembly would bring the non-socialist half of the electorate back into the reckoning and so tone down the constitutional transformation to which the SPD was committed.

In a further development, on 15 November 1918 the leaders of heavy industry and the trade unions concluded an agreement on a *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft*, or 'central working association'. The outlines of such an agreement had already been sketched in October during discussions on a joint approach to the impending problem of demobilization. The prospect of a new corporatist socio-economic settlement allowed trade union leaders to feel that they could live with the retention of capitalist forms of ownership.[5] Long-cherished social demands such as the eight-hour day were to be met, and there would be an attempt to establish new ways of dealing with problems of social

welfare and collective wage bargaining. This agreement between the representatives of major economic interests reinforced the SPD leadership's reluctance to launch an interventionist attack on property.

Decisions of this sort, clearly signalling that the revolution was to be confined to constitutional and corporatist measures, were bound to place a strain on the alliance with the *Räte* and to rupture the coalition with the USPD (Independent Socialists). There were armed clashes in Berlin over Christmas 1918; at the end of December the USPD representatives left the government; street fighting followed in Berlin between 5 and 11 January 1919. The latter events have since acquired the somewhat inappropriate label of the 'Spartacus uprising'. The Spartacists were, in fact, preoccupied with the internal problems of setting up their party – the KPD (Communist Party) was founded on 1 January 1919 – and had no more of a clear-cut strategy during the confused events of January than did the representatives of the *Räte* and leaders of the USPD who also took part in the 'uprising'. The left's uncertain stance underlined its marginality and fragmentation; its defeat at the hands of pro-government workers' units and Freikorps (free corps) volunteers, whose atrocities culminated in the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht on 15 January, heralded the imminent collapse of the alliance between the constitutionalists and the protest movement. Thwarted in their aspirations, the revolutionary workers turned 'Karl and Rosa' into a unifying symbol of martyrdom that was far more potent than the two leaders themselves had ever been while they were alive.

Gustav Noske's ruthless decision to act as a 'bloodhound' in order to uphold the Social Democrats' version of the revolution, and the unscrupulous drafting of so-called Freikorps fighters, of dubious political coloration, to move against protesting workers, turned the Social Democrats into a party of civil war. The split within the working class that the revolution had hitherto kept largely concealed was now ripped open to view; and the party had also – quite unnecessarily, given the real balance of forces in January – delivered itself into the hands of armed groups for whom the fight against 'Bolshevism' was merely a prelude to the fight against the revolutionary current as a whole.

The final important event in these two decisive months was the

election of the National Assembly, held on 19 January 1919. In the polls the workers' parties failed to secure an absolute majority of votes: the SPD won 37.9 per cent and the USPD 7.6 per cent. A full-fledged socialist programme was thus rejected by the electorate. All the same, the parties which had made up the Inter-Party Committee in 1917–18, the nucleus of the constitutionalist movement, did achieve an overall majority. These parties – the 'Weimar Coalition' that was to bring in the new constitution – comprised, in addition to the SPD, the Centre Party, which gained 19.7 per cent of the votes, and the liberal-left German Democratic Party (DDP), which gained 18.5 per cent. To their right were the parties that rejected the Republic, the one hesitantly, the other vehemently: the national-liberal German People's Party (DVP) with 4.4 per cent electoral support, and the German National People's Party (DNVP) with 10.3 per cent, the latter party a mixture of conservative and radical-right elements.

Apart from some changes at the margins, these results display a considerable degree of electoral continuity between the monarchy and the Republic. If it is legitimate to use the election figures for 19 January 1919 as evidence of the state of national opinion in the preceding November and December, then Ebert's policy of caution – his unwillingness to govern against the wishes of the majority – was justified. On the other hand, it is a moot point how far the very cautiousness of the Ebert government may actually have reinforced the resistance to revolutionary change on the part of the German people.

DISAPPOINTMENTS

By 19 January 1919, then, the period of decisions was over. For the time being, the question of the power structure was settled: the shape of the new political order would be the responsibility of the Weimar Coalition, and the new social and economic order would be defined by the *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft*. But the social forces that had given rise to the protest movement and the *Räte* had not been broken. On the contrary, in the months ahead the struggle by the working-class masses reached a level of intensity which surpassed that of the revolution proper in November 1918. A clearer action programme

also emerged, with its aim the participation of the *Räte* in decision-making at all levels and structural reforms such as the nationalization of the mines. During this phase the more radical politicians in the USPD and in some radical-left groups within the *Räte* movement made increasing headway, and the break with the SPD widened. Yet despite the upswing in revolutionary activity, the period in general can be characterized as one of disappointment, and not only in terms of concrete achievements. The mass strikes and armed conflict that took place in the Ruhr, in Munich (where there was a short-lived *Räte* republic), in Bremen and in central Germany were sparked off by the realization that the hope of establishing 'socialism', in whatever form, had been dashed.

In effect, the months between January and April 1919 saw a repetition, in the different regions of the Reich, of the course of events in the fighting in Berlin at the beginning of the year. The outcome was that the *Räte* movement was, at one and the same time, politicized and robbed of its power, and its adherents retreated into bitterness and disenchantment. This pattern was later to repeat itself in 1920, with the Kapp putsch and the March revolution that followed it.

The overall effects of the upheavals of 1918–19 cannot be assessed until we have dealt with the peace treaty, the creation of the new constitution and Germany's domestic adjustment to peacetime conditions. We can, however, briefly sum up the position in which the three principal movements that had carried out the revolution found themselves at the end of this third phase.

The constitutionalist movement had carried the day on all of the issues, including corporatist reform, which it regarded as vital: in this sense it had had a 'good' revolution. On the other hand, it had bought its victory at the cost of a heavy reliance on the old élites in the military and the bureaucracy, and as early as the Reichstag elections of 6 June 1920 it had to face the fact that majority electoral support for the Weimar Coalition that had brought in the new constitution had already faded away.

The social-protest and peace movement had helped bring the constitutionalists to power in November 1918, but in the two crucial months of the revolution the movement had been unable either to evolve its own independent line of action or to lodge itself within the new political order as a kind of alternative force for democratization. The thwarting of the hopes of the mass movement – which were never likely to be fulfilled in their entirety – led to conflict tantamount to civil war. This conflict was later to make the gulf between the majority Social Democrats and the more radical sections of the working class unbridgeable.

As part of this process of disenchantment, the USPD split, and in 1920 sections of the protest movement allied themselves with the KPD, which, after the failure of the revolution in Germany, became increasingly firmly committed to the apparently more successful Bolshevik model.

Once these processes of transformation were complete, by the summer of 1920, the pattern that was to typify the remaining years of the Weimar Republic was fixed: the forces of democratization were split, and their capacity to act effectively was checked.

THE MAKING OF THE CONSTITUTION: OPENNESS AND COMPROMISE

The victory of the constitutionalist revolution was most clearly apparent in the drafting of the constitution itself. Yet the constitution can scarcely be said to have been the crowning glory of the revolution, as the process of its adoption was fairly unspectacular and was not an event of symbolic importance that imprinted itself on the minds of contemporaries. Besides, the months of 1919 during which the debates on the constitution occurred were overshadowed by far more momentous matters: the third phase of the revolution and the peace conference at Versailles. Largely ignored by people at the time, unloved by almost all strands of political opinion in the later years of the Weimar Republic, severely castigated by historians – the principal document in the history of German democracy has never had a good press. And yet, to be fair to the Weimar constitution, we should not measure it against expectations which the immediate events of the revolution and the later exigencies of the post-war situation were bound to leave unsatisfied; nor should we ascribe to it all the ills that arose when its provisions were implemented, or indeed resisted.[6]

Vital preliminary decisions concerning the basic principles of the new political and social order had already been taken by the time the National Assembly began its work. When Ebert, on 15 November 1918, charged the liberal-left jurist Hugo Preuß with the task of preparing a draft constitution, it was clear that the resulting document would represent a continuation of German constitutional tradition. On the same day, moreover, the trade unions and employers launched their policy of corporatism on the socio-economic front, with the unions acknowledging the principle of capitalist ownership. Since, in addition, the revolution had spread on a regional basis, with separate governments being formed in the various *Länder* (states), it was also apparent that the new Reich would be organized as a federal structure and would have to take account of different political traditions in the provinces. Originally, in fact, Preuß had proposed a restructuring of the *Länder* whereby Prussia, with its position of dominance, would be partitioned, the smaller states would be merged and the sphere of jurisdiction of the central national authority would be considerably enlarged. But by the time a states' conference of Reich and *Länder* representatives had gathered on 25 January 1919, this scheme had already become a dead letter. The influence exercised by the *Länder* over the shape of the constitution was strengthened by being institutionalized in a states' committee which drafted the 'Law Concerning Provisional Authority in the Reich'. Once this law was passed, on 10 February, the basic division of power in the new republic was laid down, even before the formal debate on the constitution in the National Assembly had begun.

The actual drafting of the constitution itself also proceeded in relatively unspectacular fashion because the politicians in the National Assembly, where there were no clear-cut majorities and the balance of forces was always shifting, were constantly driven to agree to compromises. Thus, on questions of property ownership there was a middle-class alliance between liberals and the Centre, whereas on all matters concerning educational and religious policy the Centre stood opposed to the secular-minded liberals and Social Democrats. The *Räte* movement, of course, had been defeated as a political force, and yet some of its ideas on *Mitbestimmung* (co-determination, or participatory decision-making) on economic matters also found their way into the National Assembly's resolutions. In addition, a split between centralists and federalists ran through all parties.

A fully consistent constitution had never been likely, nor would it have been desirable. The only way in which such a constitution might have come about would have been through the fiat of a victorious radical majority, but both the power-political pattern created by the revolution and the party-political verdict delivered by the German electorate amounted to a blend of continuity and change, and the result was an unstable balance of political forces. The inconsistencies of the constitution may have offended political and legal purists, and were indeed frequently deplored. Yet, as an authentic expression of the power balance prevailing in 1919, they were an attempt to get to grips with the basic structural problem confronting any modern constitution: namely, how to accommodate mutually antagonistic social pressures, organized special-interest groups and competing political ideologies and sets of values. Of the two possible ways of dealing with this problem – confining the constitution to being a set of purely structural and administrative statutes, or making it a repository of competing prescriptions, an avowedly pluralist compromise – the founding fathers of Weimar went for the second, more risky, option. The constitution set out an array of provisions, but these were to be given definition and substance only by subsequent legislation and political action.

Historians, like people living at the time, have judged the Weimar constitution in the light of the concrete political uses to which it was put. Certainly, the ways in which a particular constitutional scheme is used or misused are in a sense the responsibility of that scheme. But if we are to judge the Weimar constitution fairly, we should also take into account the alternative outcomes which were inherent in it but which, in the political conditions of the 1920s, had no chance of actually being realized. It is precisely when a constitution explicitly enshrines the principle of openness and compromise, as was the case with the constitution of the first German Republic of 1919, that we should lay stress on the unused potential for democratic innovation which it contains.

As far as the detailed provisions of the constitution are concerned, we shall deal only briefly with some of them here.

The adoption of proportional representation directly bolstered the organizational importance of party lists in the political system, despite the fact that parties were not explicitly named in the text of the constitution. Interestingly, however, the results of the 1919 election were not greatly different from the results of the Reichstag election of 1912 in which each constituency had only one member. The introduction of female suffrage and the lowering of the voting age made little difference either. This relatively high degree of continuity in respect of party politics is evidence against the view, common in older research, that proportional representation contributed significantly to the collapse of the Republic. The fact that the middle-class parties lost votes in the 1920s, first to splinter parties and then to the NSDAP, was not a result of proportional representation; nor could the rise of the NSDAP as a mass party between 1930 and 1932 have been blocked by some different form of voting system.

As we have mentioned, the decision to adopt a federal system had been made during the first days of the revolution. But although certain matters involving, for example, education and religion now came within the jurisdiction of the Reich, as they had not done after 1871, the powers of the national government were tempered by the continuing existence and independent political role of the *Länder*, notably including Prussia. Indeed, it was the Social Democrats, ideologically committed to a centralized republic, who in practice were to rely on the 'Prussian bulwark', governed by an SPD-led Weimar Coalition.[7] Conversely, repeatedly canvassed plans for centralization, which was provided for under the constitution, were eventually (albeit only partially) implemented in 1932–3 by those political groups whose aim was to destroy the last remaining self-defence mechanisms which the Republic possessed.

The centrepiece of the power structure created by the constitution was the much-debated dual system whereby both the Reichstag and the Reich President were elected by direct popular vote. This system, in which the national government was tugged in different directions by Parliament and the head of state, was a perpetuation, for better or worse, of German political tradition, despite the fact that, in contrast to the position under the monarchy, the head of state was now elected and the head of government was subject to the approval of (or at any rate the absence of express rejection by) a parliamentary majority. Since the Republic was destroyed through the active connivance of the second Reich President, Paul von Hindenburg, the dualistic nature of the Weimar constitution has attracted widespread criticism. On the other hand, it can be said that under Ebert the selfsame dual system proved to be a stabilizing force during the crises of the post-war years.

Those political thinkers, such as Max Weber, who helped pave the way for the new constitution had particularly favoured a strong Reich President invested with charismatic legitimacy, on the grounds that such a figure would be able to counteract the political paralysis they feared would result if parliamentary power were monopolized by party bureaucrats. Institutional conflict was thus built into the constitution, in the interest of encouraging political flexibility and innovation. No one foresaw that before long there would actually be too many political crises and that the party system itself would become unstable.

The desire for stability that was felt so strongly in the years after the Second World War was based on historical memories of the crises that had marked the Weimar era. This feeling found particular expression in the strengthened position of the Federal Chancellor under the Basic Law of the Bonn constitution. It would be unhistorical to look for similar sentiments in the constitutional debates of 1919. In any case, the lifetime of the Weimar Republic was far too short for well-tried ground rules governing political activity within the dualistic framework of the constitution to have evolved. It should be remembered, however, that dualistic systems have functioned successfully, and have weathered crises, in the United States and in France under the Fifth Republic.

Ultimately, the success or failure of the Weimar scheme would depend on whether the political forces operating within it were prepared to exercise their rights according to the terms of the constitution or whether they would actively seek to undermine it.

The principal test was to come with the use of emergency powers granted under the notorious Article 48.[8] This article not only allowed the Reich President to override *Länder* which failed to fulfil their constitutional obligations but also gave the President sovereign legislative and executive authority in a state of emergency. The validity of

legislation enacted under Article 48 was not restricted to the duration of the state of emergency, although it could be rescinded by Parliament at any time. Despite this democratic safeguard, Article 48 was used in the years 1930–33 to legislate in defiance of the will of Parliament, when the President countered each attempt to terminate his emergency powers by ordering a dissolution. Indeed, in this situation Parliament's right to rescind led the presidential governments into a predicament from which there were only two ways of escape: either constant dissolutions of the Reichstag followed by new elections, or an outright coup. In this sense Article 48 certainly did not offer adequate protection against abuses on the part of a President hostile to the constitution. On the other hand, what provisions would have been adequate?

A directly elected Reich President was only one among various plebiscitary elements which the framers wrote into the constitution. A further ingredient was the institution of the referendum itself. A referendum could be called by the Reich President or by the Reichsrat, if either of these were opposed to a piece of legislation passed by the Reichstag, or by petition on the part of a specific proportion of the electorate. In practice, referendums were used rarely and were never successful, so that the view of earlier historians that plebiscitary elements in the constitution fatally undermined the Republic would not appear to be particularly plausible.

Not only did the Weimar constitution specify the institutional structures and decision-making processes of the political system: these formal, procedural regulations were complemented by a second main section of the constitution containing substantive provisions. Going well beyond a statement of traditional fundamental rights, a total of fifty-six articles spelled out in detail the 'basic rights and obligations of the German people'. The constitution, in fact, was a brave attempt to specify the essential characteristics of a democratic welfare state. The statement of new basic rights guaranteed local self-government and the position of the permanent civil service, protected the rights of religious denominations and defined the basic structure of the system of education and learning; declarations on the family and the protection of children and young people were also included. In the field of social welfare and the economy, the 'regulation of economic activity' was linked to 'principles of justice' and the goal of a 'dignified existence

for all people', guaranteeing the 'economic freedom of the individual' (Article 151) 'within these limits'. On these foundations, which reflected both the aspirations of the revolution of 1918 and the class compromise with which the revolution had ended, a series of specific provisions was erected, dealing with nationalization, safety measures for workers, welfare insurance, labour exchanges, unemployment benefit, freedom of association for trade unions and workers' participation in decision-making in *Wirtschaftsräte* (economic councils).

This list of basic rights demonstrates graphically the sense in which the constitution was a compromise document. The demands of different social groups were simply set down in disjointed fashion. Concrete pledges were made which could be delivered only by votes in Parliament, along with formulaic injunctions which, again, could be given content only by subsequent legislation.

While it is easy to enumerate such inconsistencies, it is hard to suggest an alternative constitution that might have been better suited to the conflicts and complexities of a modern industrial class society. Given that the Weimar Republic led such a short and crisis-ridden life, the extent to which it implemented the programme of basic rights was really quite creditable. The successes ranged from the Reich Youth Welfare Law of 1922 to the Labour Exchanges and Unemployment Insurance Law of 1927. Other projects, it is true, such as a Reich School Law and a labour-law code, could not be implemented because of social tensions and lack of parliamentary support.

Any open and avowedly pluralistic constitutional settlement would have had to face the same fundamental problem. The new structure had to pass the practical test of achieving a basic consensus and gaining the co-operation of a working majority from among the political and social groups that had created it. But the open character of the Weimar constitution came into collision with a number of factors that would have been present in Germany in the 1920s under any circumstances:

– in the realm of domestic politics, there was growing segmentation and deadlock among the groups which had established the Republic;

– on the economic front, there was little scope for raising living standards: there was no growth to cushion the effect of, and extend,

the initial compromise that had been reached between employers and unions;

– accordingly, in the realm of social policy, too, the scope for compromise and reform became increasingly narrow.

The Weimar constitution, in fact, was simply not given the chance of proving itself: of becoming accepted, through practical day-to-day routine, as the basic legal framework underlying the political and socio-economic life of the Republic. Instead, it was used as the source for a series of stopgap solutions which satisfied no one. Under these circumstances, no sustainable political settlement was possible. Everyone would have been happy to claim credit for success, after the event; but when the Weimar settlement most needed friends, almost everyone was only too happy to disown it.

THE PEACE TREATY AND ITS PROBLEMS

The Paris peace conferences had scarcely been concluded before the Versailles myth became a more potent factor in German attitudes than the actual terms of the peace settlement itself. The nationalist response, transcending party lines, was summed up in the slogan 'the shameful diktat of Versailles',[9] and such thinking continued to prompt many historians after the Second World War to hold the Versailles Treaty responsible for the rise of Hitler. If we are to judge the period dispassionately, however, we need to make a distinction between the psychological burdens which Versailles imposed and the real effects of the peace treaty.[10] At the same time, it must be granted that the German obsession with Versailles played a part, in turn, in influencing subsequent political realities.

Four groups of factors served to determine in advance the nature of the peace treaty that would emerge.

The nationalistic frenzy of 1914, and the subsequent belief that the massive losses caused by the war could be justified only by equally massive eventual victory, at first meant that public opinion in all the combatant nations was bent on inflicting a punitive peace settlement. Although by the end of 1918 the Germans were coming round, reluctantly, to the idea of a negotiated peace, earlier attitudes were still very powerful below the surface, and they provoked a surge of indignation when the peace terms were made public. Conversely, public opinion in the victorious powers was scarcely willing to be fobbed off with a negotiated peace rather than the spoils of triumph. All the politicians concerned were influenced by the strength of public feeling, or at any rate were obliged to take it into account.

In the second place, Germany herself had demonstrated, with the Peace of Brest-Litovsk imposed on Soviet Russia in 1918, the sort of treatment that her own defeated opponents might expect. This, in the eyes of the Allies, undermined the moral force of the case for a lenient treatment of Germany on their part.

Thirdly, the armistice conditions of November 1918 had curtailed German armaments and power to such an extent that it was impossible for Germany to start up the war again. This automatically reduced the political influence of the United States, but in any case Wilson was hesitant in exerting American power in favour of a peace settlement along the lines of his Fourteen Points (to the extent that these were capable of being given a precise interpretation).

Finally, during the Paris peace conference, wars in Turkey, Russia and elsewhere were still going on. While the debate over the Versailles 'diktat' continued to fuel Germany's long-standing preoccupation with her own problems, the Allies' attention was shifting to wider questions of world peace. For the Allies, the new pattern of states in large areas of eastern, central and southern Europe, the 'red peril' threatened by Soviet Russia and by Communist uprisings in other countries and problems of demobilization and reconstruction of the world economy were matters just as pressing as the German question.

Given these prior conditions, it was inevitable that the process of peace-making at Versailles should have been marked by inconsistencies. On the purely procedural level, the Allies presented the Germans with a completed draft of the treaty for signature. Note was taken of only a few of the objections raised by the German delegation and, more important, no formal negotiations with the losing side were conducted. In a formal sense, indeed, the victors imposed a diktat. On the other hand, the Allies' action was not so much an arrogant exercise of power as a symptom of their disguised internal disunity. The Allies were only

able to reach compromises among themselves behind closed doors. The form of the Versailles process, which was so humiliating to the Germans, actually reflected divisions among the western powers which if anything worked to Germany's material advantage.

There was a similar ambivalence about the actual content of the Versailles terms themselves, which were a blend of harsh, symbolic and immediate penalties and milder structural conditions, with possibilities of revision and conciliation in the longer term. Germany's economic and demographic superiority over her neighbours, particularly France, was not erased by Versailles. France did not achieve her war aims and was only partially protected by the new League of Nations and a projected British–French–American security pact (which never in fact materialized). Some of the symbolic gestures were actually worse than useless. They may have satisfied public opinion in the victorious states in the short run, but in German eyes they discredited the treaty as a whole. The war-guilt clause, for example, which was included in order to justify the demand for reparations, was turned into a powerful weapon of agitation by German counter-propaganda.

The substantive conditions imposed by the peace settlement were severe, but they were bearable.

The territories that Germany lost – leaving aside the colonies, which were valueless anyway – either had majorities of non-German speakers (in the case of cessions to Poland and Denmark) or, as in Alsace-Lorraine, had a German-speaking population which had never been fully integrated into the Reich after 1871. The creation of non-viable German-speaking mini-states in Danzig, Memel and the Saar was certainly ill-conceived; only the last of these was given the prospect of determining its future in a plebiscite. The drawing of the boundary with Poland caused particular indignation among Germans. Given the mixed national pattern of settlement over a wide area of contiguous territory, any German–Polish frontier was bound to leave a sizeable minority on the 'wrong' side, but whereas this fact had worked in the Germans' favour under the frontiers of 1815 to 1918, this time the Poles were the beneficiaries. But the widespread feeling in Germany that an amputation had been performed on the eastern frontier did not spring merely from local absurdities in the way the new border was drawn; it was a response to the fundamental alteration in the

position of nationalities that had taken place in central, eastern and southern Europe. Three multinational empires had been replaced by a dozen small and medium-sized states. Of these, only the states which were successors of the powers that had lost the war (Germany, Austria and Hungary) had become fairly homogeneous in terms of national make-up (although they were forced to accept that sizeable minorities of their own nationals now lived outside their own borders). The other new states had boundaries that were contentious according to criteria of nationality, and all contained substantial national minorities within their territory. Whereas the great international peace treaties between 1648 and 1815 had led to the creation of a balanced group of federal structures out of this jumble of nationalities, the Paris peace treaties were based entirely on the principle of national self-determination; any resulting problems would be resolved through the League of Nations and by legislation protecting minorities. In practice, however, these new states were too weak to project a clear national identity and they became breeding-grounds for mutually conflicting irredentist claims and for experiments in enforced nationalist regimentation. But the German reaction to the impossibility of drawing satisfactory frontiers in eastern Europe also remained caught in the same nation-state mentality that had given rise to these problems. The Germans argued for a revision of frontiers in their own favour, but this would merely have transposed the problem of minorities back within their own territory.

Indeed, by succumbing to the nationalistic obsession with revising her eastern frontier, Germany deprived herself of the opportunity of playing the real trump card which the Paris peace settlement had dealt her. The repulse of Russia and the division of central, eastern and southern Europe into a handful of small and medium-sized states, temporarily dependent on France but not likely to remain so in the longer term, gave Germany the chance to establish an informal hegemony in the region by expanding her economic and cultural influence through a policy of accommodation and co-operation with the new nations. The Germans' fixation on the myth of the 'shameful diktat' of Versailles blinded them to the medium-term strategic advantage which the new realities created by Versailles and the other Paris treaties had given them.

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If, in a long-term sense, Germany's geographical position and economic strength were only slightly weakened, or perhaps even enhanced, by Versailles, onerous disarmament conditions certainly made up for this in the short term. These conditions included the restriction of the Reichswehr to a professional army of 100,000 men and massive limitations on weapons and defensive fortifications; the Allies were given comprehensive rights of inspection and disarmament control within Germany; and the Rhineland was to be occupied for fifteen years. All of this was bound to be seen as particularly humiliating by a nation whose conception of itself, during the war and the pre-war era, had been founded on military strength and a militarist posture. In the longer run, however, the treaty itself provided Germany with a strong case for revision on this point. German disarmament had been proclaimed as the prelude to general disarmament, but if other nations were not going to be made to comply, then Germany's right to rebuild her own weaponry would be given moral legitimacy.

Reparations provoked a national outcry, not least because of the war-guilt clause that was invoked to justify them, but, although they proved to be a serious burden on the post-war German economy, they were by no means the obstacle to future economic recovery that nationalistic propaganda painted them to be. In any case, the level of reparations and the size of the payment burden did not become a central matter for controversy until the period 1920–24.

To sum up, we can characterize the Versailles Treaty as a document which, while not without its shortcomings on matters of detail, sought overall to provide a balanced solution to the problem of establishing peace both in Europe and in the world as a whole. Despite the Allies' triumphalist behaviour in the moment of victory and the angry, nationalistic response of the Germans, Germany's long-run position as a great power was not only maintained but enhanced. From the point of view of *Realpolitik*, practicable routes to possible future revision were left open. At the same time, the treaty had created a psychological barrier, in the form of the nationalist notion of the 'diktat', which would not make revision easy to achieve.

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WINDING UP THE WAR ON THE DOMESTIC FRONT

For all those in positions of political responsibility, the main worry at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919 was that of winding up the war on the domestic front. Millions of soldiers had to be brought back home and found work; millions of war victims had to be cared for. A highly complex economy geared to war had to be transformed into a peace economy. Not least, mechanisms of supply, transport and law and order had to be kept going at a time of defeat and revolution.[11]

Of course, those in charge of the economy had already given thought during the war itself to the eventuality of demobilization. But their plans to use the bureaucratic controls of 'war socialism' as a basis for establishing a state-capitalist planned economy in peacetime found little support. It was not only employers who wanted to return to a 'free economy'. Economic direction had existed to deal with shortages, and it was discredited among the population generally, workers included. The group of industrialists led by Hugo Stinnes and trade union leaders headed by Carl Legien encountered relatively little resistance when, at the time of the October reforms of 1918, it drew up the outlines of an agreement providing for co-operation between trade union and employers' leaders to complement the measures being taken by the state Demobilization Office. The revolution delayed the conclusion of this *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft* agreement only by a few days, and it was signed on 15 November 1918. The new director of the state Demobilization Office, Josef Koeth, fitted into the picture well: he had already resisted all proposals for a system of state-capitalist economic planning, and had spelled out his own position *vis-à-vis* the unions and industry by saying that 'on questions affecting the workers he was more in the Social Democratic camp, whereas on economic questions he was on the side of the employers'.[12]

The first phase of demobilization went through astonishingly smoothly. There was sufficient administrative continuity to sustain transport and the infrastructure, and co-operation among employers and trade unionists enabled the most pressing problems of reintegration to be handled flexibly. Above all, the measures that were taken accorded with what people were doing anyway: the soldiers simply wanted to get home as quickly as possible and, once home, to

re-establish their 'normal' pre-war way of life. Another successful aspect of the transition to a peacetime economy was that the maximum use was made of the free market, but state intervention was retained to deal with severe problems and a corporatist agreement was used to safeguard employees' welfare. By contrast, most of the longer-term plans of the Demobilization Office came to naught: the principal feature of the second phase was that the peacetime economy was consolidated and stimulated by means of open-handed inflationary financial measures. On the other hand, this inflationary policy of 1919–20 undoubtedly kept the unemployment figures relatively low and protected Germany from the effects of the world economic crisis of 1920–21. We shall discuss later the longer-term significance of the inflationary decade 1914–24 (see chapter 3).

It is only if we compare the demobilization after the war of 1914–18 with the chaos that followed the Second World War that we can measure the scale of the earlier achievement – an achievement that was not grasped by contemporaries precisely because it happened with such apparent ease. The comparative success of the Demobilization Office, the *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft* and the revolutionary government cheated these institutions of the credit they deserved. At the same time, the smooth transition to a peacetime economy kept expectations high, pegged to nostalgic memories of pre-war standards rather than the plight the country actually now faced. The effort put into providing for war victims, for example, was substantial, and yet was taken for granted, whereas there was perpetual criticism of the bureaucratic procedures involved and of the generally fairly modest levels of benefit that were all that the state of the post-war economy permitted.[13]

All told, the Republic did not gain recognition for its achievements precisely because it succeeded in re-establishing a peacetime economy in a relatively trouble-free fashion. This did not, however, prevent the blame for the generally poor performance of the post-war economy from being laid at its door.

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A REVOLUTION THAT FAILED, OR A COMPROMISE THAT WOULD SURVIVE?

Seen as a social revolution, the establishment of a new order in Germany in 1918–19 was a revolution that failed. But the revolution was only one part, albeit an important and spectacular one, of a wider process: the winding up of the war on both the domestic and external fronts. If the German situation is considered in its entirety and is compared with post-war developments in other European countries, it is possible to deliver a more favourable verdict. Certainly, events did not proceed in a clear, simple sweep: the recourse to compromise merely put off the day when conflicts would have to be resolved, while also depriving the new state of a glamorous focus of identity in the form of a symbolic revolutionary act comparable with the storming of the Bastille. Compromises can be lived with, but hardly loved. Yet the new constitutional structure stood up well in a comparison with the preceding Wilhelmine dispensation, and particularly so in view of one of the potential alternatives, namely the sort of chauvinistic mass integration that had flared up in August 1914.

The effects of the euphoria of August 1914 should not, of course, be exaggerated. Nevertheless, although mass sentiment had become more friable, towards the end of the war it rallied once again as hopes for victory were aroused by the installation of the Hindenburg–Ludendorff Supreme Command in 1916, the diktat of Brest-Litovsk and the noisy propaganda put out by the 'German Fatherland Party'. The options at the end of the war, in other words, were not limited merely to left-wing socialism and moderate Social Democracy. Some form of mass totalitarian integration, riding on a wave of aggressive nationalism, remained a long-term threat even after the Supreme Command had forfeited its credibility through military defeat in the autumn of 1918. The temporary crippling of the right gave the November revolution an easy victory: perhaps too easy a victory. The orderly departure of the old power groupings and the conciliatory behaviour of those members of the old élites who remained encouraged the illusion among the constitutionalist politicians that they could count on the loyalty of the armed and unarmed 'servants of the state'. Because there seemed to be no present danger of counter-revolution,

the wind was also taken out of the sails of the social-protest movement and the left during the decisive revolutionary months. And by the time the threat posed by the Freikorps and the citizens' militias became apparent, the new power relationships had already stabilized.

From a longer-term perspective, it is clear that the proto-totalitarianism that flared up in 1917 was the truly significant alternative to the fundamental constitutional compromises of 1918. And it was this strain in the German political tradition that reasserted itself, in radicalized form, when the National Socialists seized power in 1933.

The achievements of Weimar constitutionalism, then, need to be judged against the totalitarian potential that existed on the right, and not just in light of the failure to institute a full range of democratic or socialist reforms. Despite its imperfections, the Weimar Reich constitution provided an open framework for an experiment in democracy which would have been quite capable of further refinement under more favourable external circumstances. It brought different groups into the new order: enduringly so in the case of the old 'enemies of the Reich' (*Reichsfeinde*) in the Social Democratic labour movement and Catholic political groups, temporarily so in the case of sections of the middle class. It offered new corporatist ways of attempting to reconcile basic social divisions, and it laid down the foundations for an expansion of the welfare state. Finally, it was signally successful, by international standards, in helping make possible the transition to a peacetime economy.

So much for the positive achievements of the immediate post-war years. There were, however, a number of important elements in the situation which did not bode well for the future. These included the burdens imposed by the peace treaty; the fact that the hopes of the social-protest movement had been frustrated; the continued existence of élites with anti-republican attitudes, notably in the higher echelons of state where their influence might be critical; the dearth of republican commitment, both social and symbolic, on the part of a growing number of members of the middle class who were among the losers in the decade of inflation; and, aggravating all these factors, the lack of governmental freedom of manoeuvre in policy-making, caused by the stagnation of the post-war economy.

Given all these problems, the openness and reliance on compromise

which characterized the new order in Germany made the future of the democratic experiment highly uncertain. The experiment would turn out to have been justified only if it produced concrete political and social results. It was not yet clear whether the scope for implementing reforms, consolidating the welfare state and providing a financial underpinning for the settlement of 1918–19 actually existed, or whether, instead, the conflicts and social divisions that had not been resolved would flare up even more fiercely. Would the old élites exact unceremonious revenge for the revolution? Would a surge of nationalist resentment even sweep away the unglamorous compromise of 1918–19 altogether and reinstate the model of society that had prevailed during the war?

We can agree with Heinrich August Winkler's conclusion that German society was already too 'advanced' for a revolution of either the classical or the Bolshevik type.[14] The existence of a democratic tradition in Germany and the complexity of Germany's industrial and social structure meant that any radical break with the past was impossible; what was needed was a delicate balancing act among different groups in society and a constant trade-off between continuity and reform. At the same time, it was her very modernity that made Germany susceptible to the temptation to avoid resolving her internal conflicts within a social-liberal constitutional and political system, and instead to displace the pressure externally, resorting to an aggressive, authoritarian, nationalistic system dominated by a military–industrial complex. This danger had been provisionally warded off in 1918–19, thanks to military defeat and the establishment of the new republican order. The survival of the new settlement would depend on whether or not the constitutional and class compromises on which the Republic was founded would prove a sufficient basis for its legitimacy, and whether the Republic's openness could be mobilized to protect and consolidate them. But this meant that the success of the republican experiment would depend critically on the amount of freedom of manoeuvre, notably in an economic sense, that it was given during the years which lay immediately ahead.

The German response was a great upsurge of nationalist outrage, which was sanctioned, inflamed and exploited by the Reich government's declaration of a policy of 'passive resistance'. This policy called for all Germans in the occupied region, from railway workers to miners, to refrain from co-operating with the occupying forces, in an attempt to ensure that the 'productive guarantees' would remain unproductive. An unlimited general strike was officially called, which the Reich government financed by paying the wages and salaries of workers and public employees. Political tensions in the occupied region increased, and there were separatist disorders and acts of terrorism.

By the summer of 1923 it had become apparent that the campaign of 'passive resistance' was going to fail. It was being financed by the printing of money, which sent inflation into an ever-ascending spiral; the rest of the Reich economy was struggling under the strain; by ruthlessly bringing in outside workers the French were succeeding in making the 'guarantees' productive after all; and it was clear that a prolongation of the confrontation would indeed bring about the separation of the Rhineland from the Reich which the French had been hoping for.

In the autumn, therefore, the newly formed Great Coalition under Stresemann attempted a wholesale change of course on the political, economic and external fronts. Although there was at first a hope that the ending of the policy of 'passive resistance' on 26 September 1923 would lead to an international agreement paving the way to negotiations, Stresemann was soon forced to acknowledge that there was no option other than full capitulation to France. And yet France's total victory in the struggle in the Ruhr was to be turned, over the next months, into an unexpected yet clear gain for Germany as general exhaustion set in and more sober counsels began to prevail.

On 30 November 1923 the Reparation Commission set up a committee of experts chaired by the American financial specialist Charles Dawes to make a realistic assessment of Germany's ability to pay and, on this basis, to work out a feasible new programme of payments.[5] The Dawes Plan, published in April 1924 and accepted by the Reichstag in August, granted Germany a reasonable scale of annual payments and also made American credits available, though at the same time German economic and financial administration of the plan was placed under the supervision of Allied commissioners and an Agent for Reparations Payments. This supervised stabilization coincided with the currency reform that ended the inflation.

Once international agreement to establish a more viable system of reparations payments had been secured, the argument about 'productive guarantees', which had hitherto provided the French with the pretext for their presence in the Rhineland, now rebounded against its proponents. Under pressure from her own allies, France was forced to announce the end of her occupation of the Ruhr when the Dawes Plan was accepted, and the withdrawal began in August 1925.

It took the crisis of 1923, then, to induce both sides, victors as well as vanquished, finally to face up to the fact of the Versailles settlement. After four years of obdurate wrangling over revision of the treaty, the Versailles terms proved to constitute a by no means impracticable basis for inaugurating a new post-war era in Europe. In a sense the world war of 1914–18 did not end until 1923.

The weariness and the chastened mood that descended in 1923 helped to make possible a stabilization of the situation on both sides. Germany and, in a different fashion, France were each given a much needed breathing-space. Nevertheless, only time would tell whether this new-found stability would lead to a permanent strengthening of the balance of power in Europe and, with it, to a new solidity in German foreign policy.

THE INFLATIONARY DECADE, 1914–24

While events on the international stage obeyed one kind of rhythm, economic developments in Germany, and with them the pattern of change in society, followed a different rhythm of their own. As in the case of foreign affairs, however, the economic and social changes that had begun in 1914 had not come to a halt by the end of the war in 1918; a provisional equilibrium was not reached until late 1923 and early 1924. Stabilization was preceded by acute crisis.

The constant factor throughout the decade 1914–24 was inflation.[6] It had a profound bearing on social structures, and these in turn helped to stimulate inflation. But before we attempt an assessment of the

social significance of the inflationary decade, we must first outline the different stages of inflation through which the economy passed during the period. Three principal phases can be distinguished: the period of war inflation from 1914 to 1918; the demobilization inflation of 1919 to 1921; and the catastrophic hyperinflation that built up during 1922 and led to the complete collapse of the German currency in 1923.

Before 1914 inflation had been an unfamiliar phenomenon, to German economists and the German public alike. People were thus at a loss, during the war and the early post-war period, to know how to respond to the unmistakable fall in the mark's domestic purchasing power and its decline on foreign-exchange markets. The wholesale price index had risen from 1 in 1913 to 2.17 in 1918: by the end of the war, in other words, the mark was worth only half of its pre-war value. This was a substantial reduction in the value of money holdings and a drain on the purchasing power of people dependent on fixed incomes.

The causes of this inflation became apparent only gradually. The imperial government had decided against financing the war by imposing special new taxes or even by increasing the taxes of the more wealthy. Instead it employed two measures that had inflationary consequences. It raised war loans, which would be repaid with interest after the 'final victory'; and, skating close to the limits of financial probity, it increased the volume of money in circulation, progressively abandoning the link between paper money and gold reserves that had been maintained before the war. Shortages of consumer goods and unscrupulous profiteering on armaments also generated price rises, which the increasing quantity of money served only to exacerbate. The defeat of 1918 shattered any surviving illusions that the government would clear away this mountain of debts and paper money by imposing reparations on Germany's opponents. Only a radical currency reform would have rectified the situation.

The republican governments, however, were hardly likely to impose a painful remedy of this sort: it would have amounted to an expropriation of war-loan subscribers and people on fixed incomes, and the odium would have been incurred by the new state, not by the Wilhelmine authorities which had actually created the problem. In addition, a rigorous dose of austerity would have deprived the govern-

ment of funds it needed to tackle the urgent tasks of post-war reconstruction. Accordingly, a cheap-money policy was deliberately pursued during the period of demobilization, which meant that compensation could be paid to war victims, to resettled ethnic Germans and to anyone who had owned property in lands that had now been detached from the Reich. It also meant that despite low tax yields in the first months after the end of the war, all the state's regular financial commitments, from civil servants' salaries to welfare benefits, could still be met. Furthermore, the economy needed to be bolstered by subsidies and cheap credits as the switch to peacetime production took place. Last but not least, the danger of unemployment among demobilized soldiers had to be averted. The combined effect of these policies, financed by inflationary means, was to halve the value of the mark within a year of the end of the war and to reduce it further the following year. The wholesale price index (again taking 1913 as 1) rose to 4.15 in 1919 and to 14.86 in 1920. The inflationary boost to the economy was certainly successful in the short run in promoting expansion and easing the process of demobilization. While the Allied powers became caught up in a world economic crisis, Germany was assured full employment and economic recovery. But there was no avoiding the fact that a solution to the underlying currency problems had merely been postponed.

In 1921 the German currency stabilized somewhat, in comparison with the previous year (the wholesale price index remaining at 19.11), but in the following year inflation accelerated dramatically: the index for 1922 reached 341.82. There were several reasons for this increase, involving both domestic policy (over half of government spending was financed by printing notes) and foreign policy (the dispute over reparations). The Reich government also tried to exploit the growing monetary chaos so as to win support for its 'Erfüllungspolitik', the tactic of using short-term compliance with the Versailles terms to demonstrate that they could not, in fact, be fulfilled.

The moment of truth came in 1923. On the foreign front 'Katastrophenpolitik' won the upper hand, with the crisis in the Ruhr; the printing presses became overheated, turning out money to finance the campaign of passive resistance; and the economy began to falter. There was a complete loss of confidence on the foreign-exchange market.

At the same time, there was a first real increase in unemployment, and hunger riots took place. The hyperinflation that had begun in 1922 now became a currency collapse of astronomical proportions. During 1923 the paper mark gradually lost its function as a medium of payment, and firms and local authorities resorted to issuing substitute forms of currency. In January 1923 the wholesale price index was already 2,783 times higher than its 1913 level; by December 1923 it was 1,261 thousand million times higher.

The hyperinflationary excesses of 1922–3 have left a profound imprint on the German psyche, although in the interests of historical accuracy the common view needs to be modified on two counts. In the first place, it must be remembered that the inflation began as early as 1914 and received its decisive boost from the methods the Wilhelmine government used to finance the war. Secondly, the inflation of the immediate post-war period had beneficial effects in the short run, both for the economy and for social policy. Nevertheless, the dramatic image of breakdown in 1923 was significant, not only because it left a long-lasting psychological scar but also because the complete collapse of the currency actually made the ensuing currency reform more acceptable. Certainly, when a new bank of issue was established on 15 November, with German property assets providing security for its Rentenmark, the new parallel currency was accepted relatively rapidly both at home and abroad. In 1924, following the adjustments to reparations agreed in the Dawes Plan, the German currency was stabilized permanently when the new Reichsmark was tied once again to the gold exchange standard.

So the inflationary decade ended. It remains to be seen, though, whether the terms on which stability was achieved in 1924 were of long-term benefit or disadvantage to the German economy.[7]

The social effects of the decade of inflation are not easy to assess.[8] On the one hand, substantial and deep-seated processes of change clearly took place. On the other hand, when examined closely these changes cannot be described exclusively in terms of the relative economic positions of the social classes: there are too many inconsistencies of detail, and too many variations between regions and over time. The general account that follows must be accompanied by the proviso that it is a rough one which needs to be modified on various specific points.

The social groups that gained included, first, the entrepreneurs. They obtained cheap credits and were able to undertake sizeable investment projects and to build up big commercial empires. (Hugo Stinnes was the most notable case in point.)[9] The decline of the mark gave them a price advantage on world markets, while the rises in costs that had been brought about by new social policies after the revolution could always be passed on in inflated prices.

Gainers also included farmers and anyone else with mortgaged property who was able to pay off debts in valueless money, as well as possessors of foreign exchange or tangible assets, provided that they were not obliged to dispose of their real assets simply in order to meet the costs of day-to-day living.

For workers the effects were less straightforwardly beneficial,[10] even if we separate the dramatic fall in living standards that occurred in 1923 from the easier years of inflation that had gone before. Broadly speaking, the demobilization inflation of 1919 to 1921 served to finance state welfare benefits and the agreements on hours and other industrial questions that had been negotiated by the unions and employers; real wages also rose, though not back to their pre-war levels. Above all, until the year 1923 there was no unemployment to speak of, apart from a brief spell, quickly overcome, immediately after the war. On the debit side, however, standards of living remained low. Only unskilled workers saw any real improvement in their position, unlike skilled workers, white-collar workers and public officials.

The losers from inflation included all those who had previously lived on long-term investment interest: that was a substantial section of the pre-war middle class, and included many intellectuals. The position of the salaried middle class – white-collar workers and *Beamten* (public employees) – also deteriorated. Pensioners and recipients of welfare benefits were hit as inflation increased, since their incomes were adjusted to price rises only partially and after delay. Small shopkeepers and craftsmen were able to profit financially from the inflation if they operated on the black market, but this left them socially marginalized: targets of criminal investigation by the state and of the resentment of outraged consumers.

This, as we have said, is a generalized picture of the effects of inflation on different social groups, and we should remember that the

effects on individuals were far more confused and confusing. Two individuals from the same broad social class might be affected very differently, depending on the precise period in question, the part of the country in which they lived and their exact role within the fabric of the economy. Indeed, it was precisely through the confusion experienced by individuals and their fears for their social status that the real psychological impact of the inflation made itself felt. A profiteering ethic became common among people who had previously prided themselves on their rectitude. Others turned to crime out of sheer hardship, justifying their action on the grounds that it was the only way they could survive. Both phenomena, profiteering and poverty-induced crime, showed that the rather rigid social and moral code of the age of the monarchy had at last begun to work loose. Many social thinkers had predicted that this would occur as a result of the spread of industrialization, but it was only now that the process became irreversible and began to happen on a mass scale. (See figure 7, p. 149.)

In a sense, there had been an inversion of values. Money and success were now seen as goals that justified breaking the law, while honesty was stigmatized because it flew in the face of the rules of a dog-eat-dog inflationary society. The shifts in the relative standing of the different social groups that we have described not only made individuals uncertain about their social status but also helped foster a widespread new relativism in social morality.

THE REPUBLIC ON THE DEFENSIVE

Kurt Tucholsky wrote in the *Weltbühne* on 8 May 1918: 'We have not had a revolution in Germany – but we are certainly having a counter-revolution.'[11] He was referring to the fact that so many 'Prussian students' had been pouring into the Freikorps that university lecture courses had been disrupted. The Freikorps were fighting against 'Bolshevists' in the Baltic region, against Poles in Silesia and West Prussia and against alleged 'Spartacists' in the big cities of the Reich;[12] they had as many as several hundred thousand members, although the numbers fluctuated. But the counter-revolution was not confined to the

Freikorps. Neighbourhood civilian militia organizations, student fraternities and middle-class clubs and societies were also centres of reaction, and anti-republicanism was common in the formal and informal networks linking peasant farmers and large landowners in the provinces. The Freikorps had been called out by the republican politicians, but their attitude towards democracy was lukewarm at best. For the most part they despised and hated the Republic.

The counter-revolution drew on a tradition of thought and action that went back much earlier than the tumultuous events of 1918. Its attitudes and expectations owed much to the militant nationalism of the 'Pan-Germans', to imperialist dreams of world power, to Germany's colonialist propaganda and colonial adventures. Extreme right-wing views on domestic issues – anti-Semitism, anti-liberalism, anti-Marxism – had also become more prevalent in the late-Wilhelmine period, and the years immediately before the war saw attempts to build up new forms of authoritarian political mass movement.[13]

The 'spirit of 1914' was the product of these symptoms of late-Wilhelmine crisis and the illusions of 'Volksgemeinschaft', or 'national community' – notions of 'Burgfriedenspolitik', 'Frontkameradschaft' and 'Kriegssozialismus' (political 'truce' at home, the 'comradeship' of the trenches and 'war socialism'). The mixture was a potentially explosive one, its aim the belligerent mobilization of the masses and a militarist reactionary leadership. It came most clearly into political focus in the dictatorship of the Supreme Army Command under Ludendorff and Hindenburg, and for a period during 1917–18 it generated a highly effective mass organizational apparatus in the shape of the 'German Fatherland Party'. This new form of mass party (whose leaders included Wolfgang Kapp and Tirpitz) claimed to have recruited over a million people opposed to the conciliatory policies advocated by the majority Reichstag grouping of the SPD, Centre and left liberals. Its influence was at its greatest between the Brest-Litovsk negotiations of late 1917 and the spring offensives of 1918, which inspired a last illusory hope of outright victory. When Germany had to acknowledge defeat in the autumn of 1918, the movement broke apart, but the beliefs and goals that had fuelled it did not thereby cease to exist. The fact that the monarchy collapsed so rapidly and with so little bloodshed in November 1918 led the Social Democrats to underestimate the potential for