

David W Fletcher, Fall 2005

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IMPACT OF THE GREAT WAR ON GERMANY FROM 1914 TO 1929

The Great War or World War I (1914 to 1918) pitted the Central Powers of Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Germany, and Ottoman Turkey against the Allied Powers of Britain, France, Japan, Russia, and Serbia (joined later in the war by Italy, Portugal, Romania, the United States, and Greece).¹ For Germany, the bitter conflict devastated the young nation socially, politically, and economically.²

The war itself, brutal and bloody in its prosecution, caused the death of millions of Germans.³ The memory of these losses became indelibly etched on the consciousness of the entire population and especially the aged and the very young.⁴ An entire generation of young men were “lost” and, in the thinking of many, could never recover.⁵ Those who survived the experience struggled with issues of personal identity and meaning in life. Lost in the morass of existential absurdity created by so senseless an enterprise as the Great War, they gravitated toward nonsensical ideologies that, void of Victorian-like moral constraints, replaced romanticism and quickly captured the popular mind and will. Too, displacement of males, possibly two million killed and some four million wounded, disrupted traditional relationships and values but opened doors of opportunity for women in various ways.⁶

More broadly, popular and even “highbrow” culture turned away from traditional, communal values and began to emphasize the creativity and self-indulgence of the individual.⁷ On the basis of the “Stab in the Back” legend, so-called patriotic Germans blamed antiwar elements (i.e., the Communists) and perceived outsiders (i.e., the Jews) for the nation’s downfall.

A wider and wider gap between disparate social classes, such as proletariat and bourgeoisie, and ever-factional political parties developed.⁸ Ideologically, the populace reverted to pre-unification dependencies on the separate *Laender* for both beliefs and actions. True, in one sense the Great War solidified Germany as a modern nation. But this preservation of German national unity was due more to the Allies and their treatment of the defeated Germans than to any internal cohesion.⁹

Politically, and militarily, the country's leaders failed to repair the country's wounds and blamed the Allies and the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁰ Most importantly, the war destroyed the monarchy and a lot of its trappings. William II, known as "Kaiser Bill," abdicated in 1918, and this marked the end of the Hohenzollern dynasty that had roots back to the eleventh century and had ruled Brandenburg since 1415. In the same year, the Wittelsbach dynasty in Bavaria collapsed as well as the Hapsburg dynasty in Austria. The Great War essentially meant the end of monarchies throughout Germany and Europe.¹¹

The establishment of soviets by Marxist elements in Berlin and Munich during the revolution of 1918 scared moderates. In reaction to this, the old alignment of power between aristocrats and army (i.e., the rule of the elite or the rule of the Prussians) held the day against communist revolutionaries. But this was only a temporary propping up of the old Prussian hegemony that had waned after the Great War and never really had recovered. As a result, the socialists lost significant influence politically and could not bring about any moderate coalition.¹² Extreme political parties gradually took over what Prussia had controlled. Radical individuals and groups began to increase their influence especially by violent means.¹³ Social and economic deterioration added to the problem and accelerated the pace of radicalization of various groups.¹⁴

This internal dissent hurt the country's ability to effectively carry out any helpful strategy with regard to the nation's foreign policy. In this respect, the duplicity by which Germany's political and military leaders hid their own mismanagement of the conflict and its aftermath was not, by itself, anything novel. But the context of that duplicity, i.e., primarily done internally with regard to international treaty-making, rendered Germany impotent in foreign affairs. The nation and its new leaders were at the mercy of Allied diplomatic efforts. In other words, they were most often in a no-compromise, no-win situation. This gave Weimar leaders little flexibility for important decisions that affected the Germans at home and in their relationship to other countries, especially France and Britain.¹⁵

Economically, Britain's naval blockage during the war disrupted Germany's international commerce and strained its ability to import and export goods.¹⁶ Due to military needs and the blockade, citizens eventually faced shortages of basic goods. Black-market trade increased but failed to meet needs adequately. Eventually, disgruntled and desperate women in Berlin held mass protests against the government because of this lack of basic foodstuffs.¹⁷

The government's use of war credits, or the issue of bonds to finance the war, kept the economy churning in its wartime posture. After Armistice, the Allies in the Treaty of Versailles levied excessive reparations, or war debt, on Germany that set in motion an unhealthy cycle of international economic dependencies. To deal with this, the Weimar government decided to redistribute wealth and not honor war debts in 1923. Inflation skyrocketed and wrecked the German economy. In the same year, when the government failed to make good on French claims to reparations in kind (or materiel), the French army invaded the Ruhr Valley. The increased

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German hatred of the French made the populace even more susceptible to radical ideologies and persuasions. The pressure of these economic factors on certain segments of the population, i.e., the working-class and even some of the middle-class, created great suffering, and this pushed them to favor actions against the Weimar government.¹⁸

The Great War marked a grand watershed in German history. In spite of the problems left by the ravages of war, Germany's rich diversity, its "youthfulness" as a national entity, and its technological prowess proved itself in two ways. It got the country through a devastating conflict on more than one fighting front. And, it undergirded the rebound of the nation during the Nazi era of the 1930s and early 1940s. For Germany, technological evolution had come with lightning speed. The war became, in a sense, an outlet or showcase for German advancement. During the Nazi era, it would speed up even more, although the Nazis built on an already modern foundation. By a mixture of great loss and great accomplishment, the Germans after the Great War were propelled collectively into modernity.¹⁹

NOTES

1. See Norman Rich, "The Coming of World War I," *Great Power Diplomacy, 1814-1914* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1992), 440-465; John Keegan, "The Crisis of 1914," *The First World War* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 48-70; Hew Strachan, "To Arms," *The First World War* (New York: Viking, 2003), 1-31. For a classic treatment, see Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (rpt.; New York: Ballantine, 1994). For an older treatment, see Laurence Lafore, *The Long Fuse: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War I* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965). For the German perspective, see V. R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1993).
2. For the complexities, see Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, tr. P. S. Falla (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).
3. See Niall Ferguson, "Strategy, Tactics and the Net Body Count," *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York: Basic, 1999), 282-317.
4. Generally, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).
5. Robert Wohl, "Germany: The Mission of the Young Generation," *The Generation of 1914* (Harvard University Press, 1979), 42-84. Compare Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, tr. A. W. Wheen (rpt.; New York: Fawcett Crest, 1982). See the insightful overview by Modris Ekstins, "Memory and the Great War," *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford University Press, 1998), 305-317. And, for a glimpse into the agony, see John Ellis, "Conclusion," *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 189-205.
6. Gail Braybon, "Women, War, and Work," *Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Strachan, 149-162. Also, Bonnie G. Smith, "Warriors, Pacifists, and Revolutionaries," *Changing Lives: Women in European History Since 1700* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath, 1989), 365-405. And, Helen L. Boak, "Women in Weimar Germany: The 'Frauenfrage' and the Female Vote," *Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany*, eds. Richard Bessel and E. J. Feuchtwanger (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1981), 155-173. For the suppression of women's views and writings, though, during the Weimar Republic, see Agnes Cardinal, "Women on the Other Side," *Women and World War I: The Written Response*, ed. Dorothy Goldman (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), 31-50.
7. See Walter Laqueur, *Weimar: A Cultural History 1918-1933* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974). And, Dietrich Orlow, "Weimar Culture," *A History of Modern Germany: 1871 to Present*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 149-154.

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8. For an excellent treatment, see Erich Maria Remarque, *The Road Back*, tr. A. W. Wheen (rpt.; New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1958). Compare, too, Thomas Mann, "Disorder and Early Sorrow," *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories*, tr. H. T. Lowe-Porter (rpt.; New York: Vintage, 1989), 179-213.
9. See Gerhard L. Weinberg, "The Defeat of Germany in 1918 and the European Balance of Power," *Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11-22.
10. Compare Hermann Hesse, *If the War Goes On . . . Reflections on War and Politics*, tr. Ralph Manheim (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).
11. Erich Eyck, "The Collapse of the Monarchy," *A History of the Weimar Republic*, Volume 1, tr. H. P. Hanson and Robert G. L. Waite (Harvard University Press, 1962), 1-46. See too Walter H. Kaufmann, *Monarchism in the Weimar Republic* (New York: Bookman, 1953).
12. See Ralph Haswell Lutz, *The German Revolution, 1918-1919* (rpt.; New York: AMS, 1968).
13. See chart on German judiciary in the Weimar Republic in Evelyn Anderson, *Hammer or Anvil: The Story of the German Working-Class Movement* (London: n.p., 1945), 87, quoting E. J. Gumbel's *Vier Jahre Politischer Mord*.
14. See Hans Fallada, *Little Man, What Now?* tr. Eric Sutton (rpt.; Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1983). Also, Felix Gilbert, "Unrest and Chaos in Germany: 1919-1924," *The End of the European Era, 1890 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 204-209.
15. Orlow, "Foreign Relations," *History of Modern Germany*, 154-156.
16. Strachan, "Blockade," *First World War*, 199-230.
17. See Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
18. See Ferguson, "How (not) to Pay for the War," *Pity of War*, 395-432. Compare the essays in Juergen Baron von Kruedener, ed., *Economic Crisis and Political Collapse: The Weimar Republic 1924-1933* (New York: BERG, 1990). And, contrarily, David B. Southern, "The Impact of the Inflation: Inflation, the Courts and Revaluation," *Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany*, eds. Bessel and Feuchtwanger, 55-76.
19. See especially Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).