David W Fletcher, Fall 2005, Revised May 2017

THE GREAT WAR - A "WATERSHED" IN MODERN GERMAN HISTORY

Why was the Great War or World War I a "watershed" in modern German history? First, the Great War led to the downfall of Kaiser Wilhelm II who abdicated in 1918. This marked the end of the Hohenzollern dynasty that dated back to the eleventh century and had ruled Brandenburg from 1415. In the same year, the Wittelsbach dynasty in Bavaria and the Hapsburg dynasty in Austria collapsed. Essentially, the Great War meant the end of monarchies throughout Germany and Europe.[1]

Second, Prussian hegemony waned and would never recover. Remnants of Prussian authority continued to exercise considerable influence (e.g., in the army). But the growth of socialism and extreme political parties gradually took over what Prussia had controlled. Bismarck had served as prime minister and foreign minister of Prussia, the weakest of the five European powers, until 1871. Then, by a series of successful wars, he brought about political unification of the Prussian-dominated *Laender*. While Bismarck's foreign alliances certainly insulated the new German nation against French encroachment, his domestic policies thwarted community and individual rights. For example, his stiff opposition to Social Democrats (in the West) and the Roman Catholic Church (in the South) gained little in the long run and merely alienated significant segments of the German populace. When Bismarck was forced from office as chancellor in 1890, the shape of European politics, and Germany itself, had changed considerably. And his greatest achievement, the political unification of the German *Laender*, essentially failed to bring about internal unification of the German people. As a result of the disruptions of the Great War, Prussian authoritarianism suffered irreparable damage and could not recover.[2]

Third, it took the Great War to solidify, though in tenuous ways, the German people as a modern nation. The Allies and their treatment of the defeated Germans had a lot to do with the preservation of Germany's national unity.[3] But the fact that Germany survived intact and was not sliced up, as the Allies did after World War II, meant that Bismarck's work in the 1870s would not prove totally fruitless. In spite of rich diversity and youthfulness as a national entity, Germany's technological prowess proved itself in two ways. The country survived a devastating conflict on more than one front, and the nation rebounded during the Nazi era of the 1930s and early 1940s.

Fourth, like other European nations heavily engaged in the war, Germany lost a substantial number of young males in the conflict. The memory of these losses became indelibly etched on the consciousness of the entire population, especially the aged (i.e., their mothers and fathers) and the very young (i.e., those who took their places).[4] Those who returned, and others their age, became lost in the morass of existential absurdity created by so senseless an enterprise as the Great War. Nonsensical ideologies, void of Victorian-like moral constraints, replaced romantic notions and quickly captured the popular mind and will.[5]

Fifth, the duplicity by which Germany's political and military leaders hid their own mismanagement of the conflict was not by itself anything novel. But the context of that duplicity, that is, 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 Great Britain.[6]

Sixth, the constitutional government, without the monarch, devised after the Great War became the model for West Germany following World War II and for reunified Germany since 1990. Under the constitution of the Second Empire (1871-1918), a revised version of the old North German Confederation agreement, federal or confederated power belonged to the Federal Council or *Bundesrat* in which Prussia had much greater power than the other states (i.e., a majority of representatives). The King of Prussia was also the *Deutscher Kaiser* or German King, and the chancellor was the Prussian prime minister. The Emperor presided over the Bundesrat as president, represented Germany in international affairs (but needed Bundesrat approval for treaties), functioned as commander-in-chief of the army, issued legal proclamation (although he did not take part in legislation), and appointed the chancellor and other civil servants. Legislation was the responsibility of the Bundesrat and parliament, or the *Reichstag*, a body of about 400 members popularly elected every three years (extended to five years after 1885). Thus, German government under the constitution of 1871 was bicameral. The Reichstag represented the German people in their government and made important decisions about laws and especially the annual budget. But the chancellor was not responsible to the Reichstag, and the Kaiser had complete authority to convene and adjourn the legislators. With the abdication of the Kaiser in 1918, a direct result of the Great War and the collapse of the government, the constitutional structure of the German *Laender* changed dramatically.[7]

The constitution of the Weimar Republic (1919 - 1933) was proclaimed in August 1919 by the Weimar National Assembly. The National Assembly, with delegates from various political parties, had been elected in January by proportional representation. All citizens, including women, at least twenty years old were allowed to vote. The Assembly moved from

Weimar to Berlin in September and disbanded in May 1920 with elections for the new parliament or *Reichstag* set for the following month. The president was head of state, and the chancellor was head of government and responsible to the parliament. Like its predecessor, the Bundesrat, the *Reichsrat* was the official federal body of the German states under the Weimar Republic. Unlike its prototype, however, it wielded little influence in the nation's affairs. Limited mostly to influence, it could not legislate and could be overruled by parliament. In the Reichsrat, Prussia maintained a majority with about forty percent of 67 seats (in 1926), but the real power of the nation resided in parliament. Like the National Assembly, it was formed of members elected popularly on the basis of proportional representation. Males and females at least twenty years old could vote. The Reichstag, or parliament, set the budget, issued federal laws, and made treaties with other countries. It also had a role in the central government, particularly the formation of a cabinet. Reciprocally, the president could dissolve parliament, but he could not close its session. This peculiar structure (i.e., the possibility that parliament could withdraw support without determining any successor) led to repeated lapses and crises in the Weimar Republic. For example, the democratic republic held eight general elections for the Reichstag and formed twenty-one different cabinets in its short duration. As a result, it was unstable from its inception.[8]

After the collapse of the Third Reich and the "condominium" of Allied powers, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) reconstituted politically on the basis of the Weimar constitution. The Parliamentary Council patterned the recovering country's Basic Law substantially on the earlier document but with three major modifications designed to correct its weaknesses. First, the West German head of state or president held significantly reduced power.

Second, excessive proportional representation in the election of members of the federal parliament, or *Bundestag*, was abridged. Third, the opposition could not effect a "no confidence" vote upon the current leadership until it agreed on a new cabinet to take its place. These safeguards protected the new version of German democracy from problems experienced in the 1920s. After reunification of FRG and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) in 1990, the five *Laender* of the GDR, essentially communist controlled since October 1949, adopted the Basic Law en masse. A provision to reexamine and possibly amend the federal constitution was dropped. In this way, the monumental changes that occurred in the government soon after the Great War continue to influence Germany's political life today.[9]

Seventh, war itself would never be the same after the Great War. The mechanized nature of the conflict and its hugeness, with mass bombardment and mass casualties, brought Germany and its enemies into modernity.[10] For Germany, technological evolution had come with lightning speed. The war became, in a sense, an outlet or showcase for German technological advancement.[11] During the Nazi era, it would speed up even more, although the Nazis built on an already modern foundation.[12] After the Great War, the Germans were propelled collectively into modernity.[13]

Finally, add all the spin-offs from the Great War that lay the foundation for World War II that ended in a defeated and divided Germany and brought about "Cold War" for over forty years in the twentieth century.[14] At the conclusion of his treatment of World War I, Hew Strachan highlights the global impact of the conflict:

> The First World War broke the empires of Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary and Turkey. It triggered the Russian Revolution and provided the bedrock for the Soviet Union; it forced a reluctant United States on to the world stage and revivified liberalism. On Europe's edge, it provided a temporary but not a long-term solution to the ambitions

> of the Balkan nations. Outside Europe it laid the seeds for the conflict in the Middle East. In short it shaped not just Europe but the world in the twentieth century. It was emphatically not a war without meaning or purpose.[15]

Truly, Germany's early twentieth-century "watershed" was a major turning point for the whole world as well.

ENDNOTES

1. On the culpability of the Kaiser for the start of the war, see John G. Stoessinger, "The Iron Dice: World War I," *Why Nations Go to War*, 5th ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 1-26.

2. Dietrich Orlow, "The Founders' Generation," *A History of Modern Germany: 1871 to Present*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 1-41. For the cultural crisis, see Fritz Stern, "Langbehn and the Crisis of the 1890s," *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology* (1961; rpt., Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1965), 197-227.

3. Gerhard L. Weinberg, "The Defeat of Germany in 1918 and the European Balance of Power," *Germany, Hitler & World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11-22.

4. On those who mourned, see Jay Winter, "Communities in Mourning," *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 29-53.

5. Robert Wohl, "Germany: The Mission of the Young Generation," *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), 42ff. See as well Stern's "The Esthete's Turn to Politics" and "Conclusion: From Idealism to Nihilism" in *Politics of Cultural Despair*, 256-274, 326-361.

6. Orlow, *History of Modern Germany*, 5th ed., 118-128, 135-138. For the socioeconomic problems in Berlin and the mass "political" response of women, see Belinda Davis, *Homes Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

7. Wilfried Fest, *Dictionary of German History 1806-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 23, 29-30, 126-127.

8. Ibid., 126-127, 173-174.

9. Orlow, *History of Modern Germany*, 5th ed., 257ff.

10. "The First World War was truly 'the Great War'. Its origins were complex. Its scale was vast. Its conduct was intense. Its impact on military operations was revolutionary. Its human and material costs were enormous. And its results were profound." John Bourne, "Total War I: The Great War," *The Oxford History of Modern War*, ed. Charles Townshend (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117. For a brief summary of the men, machines, and battles of World War I, see Michael S. Neiberg, *Warfare in World History*, Themes in World History, ed. Peter N. Stearns (New York: Routledge, 2001), 59-72.

11. Clive Trebilcock, "The Industrialization of Modern Europe, 1750-1914," and Hew Strachan, "Military Modernization, 1789-1918," in T. C. W. Blanning, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 40ff., 69ff.

12. See David Schoenbaum, "The Third Reich and Its Social Promises," *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany 1933 - 1939* (1966; rpt., New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 1-42.

13. Orlow makes important observations about Germany's "asymmetrical modernization." *History of Modern Germany*, 5th ed., 359ff.

14. Donald D. Wall, *Nazi Germany & World War II* (St. Paul, Minnesota: West Publishing Company, 1997), 1-63; Modris Eksteins, "Spring without End," *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 300-331.

15. *The First World War* (New York: Viking, 2003), 339-340.