



Dirk Blasius. *Weimars Ende: Bürgerkrieg und Politik 1930-1933.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005. 188 S. EUR 24.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-525-36279-2.



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Politics of Fear

Dirk Blasius's excellent new study of civil war and politics at the end of Weimar Germany has received very favorable reviews in Germany. In particular, historians trying to defend a traditional political or social history against what they perceive as attacks from a new cultural history of politics see *Weimars Ende* as an example of an old-school history of politics leading to new results.[1] Almost all reviewers of Blasius's work note their surprise that in only 188 pages, the author manages to shed new light on one of the allegedly best-researched epochs of German history, focusing his analysis on threats of civil war, fights between paramilitary formations and rhetorical uses of these clashes as arguments in political debates.[2]

At first sight, the research design of Blasius's study seems to be rather old-fashioned. In recent years, many historians (Peter Fritzsche and Charles Saunders come to mind) have emphasized the need to look past Weimar and to free the republic from the telos of its collapse and the perspective of the subsequent National Socialist dictatorship.[3] Contrary to that, and on the basis of the "stock of orderly historical knowledge" (pp. 7, 9), Blasius wants

to re-evaluate Germany's short path into National Socialism, which he at one point conceptualizes as the "night of German fate" (p. 9). In his account of the final years of the Weimar Republic—or rather of 1932, since he devotes only ten pages to 1930 and 1931—he wants to concentrate on civil war as both a real and an imagined phenomenon. His claim that historiography so far has forgotten the theme of civil war seems rather odd, especially if one considers studies of political violence from Eve Rosenhaft to Pamela E. Swett; analyses of European politics in the interwar period from Ernst Nolte to Andreas Wirsching; and the numerous books on the various paramilitary units such as the Stahlhelm, the Reichsbanner, the Rotfrontkämpferbund and the SA.[4] Blasius refers to only few of these studies, tending rather to cite classical works on Weimar politics by Heinrich August Winkler, Karl Dietrich Bracher, Ernst Rudolf Huber, Hans Mommsen, Eberhard Kolb and Wolfram Pyta. Nevertheless, his analysis is unique in its attempt to explain the destruction of the republic in terms of fears of civil war.

On the basis of governmental sources and especially

newspapers Blasius reconstructs the debates surrounding the violent conflicts in the election year 1932. Convincingly, he argues that the transition from the Heinrich Brüning cabinet to Franz von Papen's "cabinet of the barons" constituted the "take-off phase" for the Nazi seizure of power. The abolition of the SA ban by Papen showed that his political strategy—trying to win Hitler as an ally—was basically misconceived (pp. 50-53). This miscalculation proved to be fatal for the Republic, since it gave way to what Heinrich August Winkler has called the most violent election in German history. In summer 1932, according to official statistics, 33 people were killed in Prussia in July and August and 378 were injured in political fights. The most severe incidents (which were widely reported on in the press) were clashes in Ohlau on July 11, the so-called "Bloody Sunday" on July 17 in Altona and the murder in Potempa (Upper Silesia) on August 9 and 10. Blasius does not offer any new insights into the well-known history of these incidents. Yet, through his nuanced description of the press coverage (he quotes extensively from various newspapers), he reconstructs the bellicose atmosphere of summer 1932. The events were caused by various actors. In the aftermath, however, all participating parties and paramilitary groups claimed to have acted in self-defense and to be the sole guarantors of law and order.

This "civil-war-situation" (*Bürgerkriegslage*) constitutes the background for Blasius's analysis of the "Preußenschlag," the replacement of the Prussian Braun/Severing administration—the last bastion of the Weimar Republic—with a Commissioner of the Reich. In this part of the book and the following examination of the lesser-known lawsuit of Prussia against the Reich before the Staatsgerichtshof, Blasius draws on his own widely-acclaimed study on Carl Schmitt, who served an expert witness for the Reich.^[5] In both cases, the civil war was a central reference point within the political rhetoric. Prussian Prime Minister Carl Severing—as well as Chancellor Papen—used the threat of an impending civil war as an argument to justify their positions (pp. 71f.). Again in the lawsuit of October 1932, the memory of the summer incidents was used to legitimize the actions of the Reich.

The argument of the threatening civil war was decisive not only for the destruction of the Prussian government, however, but also for the fall of the Papen cabinet after the November elections. As Blasius clearly shows, the so-called "war-game Ott" was directed above all against an insurrection of a united political left. The imagined civil war scenario left such an impression on Papen that he resigned and Schleicher became chancel-

lor. In the most interesting section of his book, Blasius refutes attempts to consider Kurt von Schleicher's strategy as directed against the National Socialists, rehabilitating him as a possible alternative to Hitler (pp. 140, 144). In November and December 1932, Schleicher appears to have had a realistic assessment of the dangers of a civil war, using the horror scenario as a political argument. Plans for a state of emergency (*Staatsnotstand*) that were developed during his chancellorship were predominantly directed against a communist uprising. After Paul von Hindenburg refused to break the constitution by postponing the elections until the end of the year and to announce the state of emergency—according to Blasius again for fear of a civil war—the plans could later serve the National Socialists for the establishment of their dictatorship.

As Heinrich August Winkler pointed out in his review, it remains a little unclear how Schleicher's transformation from a clever tactician to a risk-taker who misjudged his possibilities could take place in such a short period.^[6] Moreover, taking Hindenburg's justification of his actions (the prevention of a civil war) at face value seems to be a little over-simplified. However, Blasius's study has the great merit of pointing out that for bourgeois circles, the fear of a civil war was always, above all, the fear of a communist uprising. Thus, the party that was largely responsible for the violence in the streets managed to present itself as a possible savior of law and order.

In *Weimars Ende* Dirk Blasius succeeds in showing that the civil war was a focal point of politics in the final year of the Weimar Republic. Politicians and journalists made extensive use of the scenario of a civil war in order to justify their actions. With the revolutionary uprisings at the beginning of the republic still in mind, bourgeois observers in particular feared the outbreak of a civil war and used this fear to justify their positions. The analysis of these rhetorical schemes makes the book an excellent contribution to the history of the political culture of Weimar Germany. It enhances our understanding of people's fears and can therefore help us to explain their actions. However, in several parts and formulations of the book one has the impression that Blasius wants to do more. He not only talks about the civil war as a category of experience and interpretation, but also about actual fights between different political groups that threatened the state's monopoly of legitimate violence. Even though these two aspects cannot be analyzed independently, as Blasius correctly claims (p. 20), his examination of the contemporary interpretations of political vio-

lence is much more thorough and insightful than his account of the street fights.

With respect to the latter it remains unclear whether we are supposed to re-conceptualize the final years of the Weimar Republic as a civil war or to continue to speak of a situation resembling a civil war. Contrary to his announcement at the beginning of the book, Blasius does not really attempt to determine the degree of political violence, and his formulations are very ambivalent in this regard. He speaks of the “civil war of printed words” (p. 15), the “specter” of a civil war (p. 16), the “threat” and the “politics” of civil war (p. 20), the “approaching” civil war (p. 22). Blasius sees the invocation of the civil war as a slogan for mobilization and political life as “imprisoned by the civil war situation” (p.33). He describes a civil war “in permanence” (p. 63), an “open” civil war that might have turned into a “real” civil war (p. 69); considers the civil-war as “in full swing” (p. 68)—and then it is suddenly only a “latent” civil war again (p. 123). The definition of the civil war Blasius offers at the beginning of his book does not offer sufficient means to settle the question as to whether a civil war took place or not. As Patrick Wagner suggested in a review published in H-Soz-u-Kult, despite the high degree of violence at the end of the Weimar Republic there are serious doubts as to whether it could correctly be described as a civil war.[7]

Thus, Blasius’s study has its greatest merits not as a traditional political or social history of the civil war at the end of Weimar Germany, but rather as a cultural history of political discourse connecting the rhetoric of civil war to political decision-making and the violence in the streets. Its problems occur where it attempts to conduct a social analysis of street violence or a political analysis of decision-making. It is excellent as an examination of people’s fears and their instrumentalization and exploitation by political actors. Written in a clear style, it may serve as a superb introduction to the final year of Weimar Germany, summarizing older research and integrating it from the organizing perspective of the civil war. Quoting extensively from newspapers, Blasius manages to convey the atmosphere of the time, the intensity of political conflicts that often overstepped the border into paramilitary fights.

Notes

[1]. See especially the review by Johannes Härtner in *sehpunkte* 5 (2005), <http://www.sehpunkte.historicum.net/2005/09/8181.html>.

[2]. Even Heinrich August Winkler, the most em-

inent expert on Weimar’s political development, says that he gained new insights reading Blasius, who quotes Winkler extensively at crucial points in his study. See Heinrich August Winkler, “Die Angst vor dem Bürgerkrieg. Dirk Blasius vermisst den Weg von Weimar zu Hitler neu,” *Die Zeit* (April 6, 2005). See also the reviews by Patrick Wagner, H-Soz-u-Kult, <http://hsozukul.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2005-3-020>; and (less favorably) Gerd Krumeich, “Fleisch vom Fleische. Verkannte Nazis: Dirk Blasius untersucht das Ende der Weimarer Republik,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (November 10, 2005).

[3] Peter Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?” in *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996), pp. 629-656; Thomas J. Saunders, “Weimar Germany. Crisis as Normalcy-Trauma as Condition,” in *Neue Politische Literatur* 45 (2000), pp. 208-226.

[4]. Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence 1929-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Pamela E. Swett, *Neighbors and Enemies: The Culture of Radicalism in Berlin 1929-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917-1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Propyläen, 1987); Andreas Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg. Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918-1933/39* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999); Dirk Schumann, *Politische Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik. Kampf um die Straße und Furcht vor dem Bürgerkrieg* (Cologne: Klartext, 2001); Karl Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner Schwarz Rot Gold* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966); Volker Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm. Bund der Frontsoldaten 1918-1935* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966); Kurt G. P. Schuster, *Der Rote Frontkämpferbund 1924-1929* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1975); J. M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1977); Richard Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Stormtroopers in Eastern Germany 1925-1934* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Peter Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone. Geschichte der SA* (Munich: Beck, 1989). Many of these books do not even appear in Blasius’s bibliography; Schumann is mistakenly called Schumacher.

[5]. Dirk Blasius, *Carl Schmitt. Preußischer Staatsrat in Hitlers Reich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001).

[6]. Winkler, “Die Angst vor dem Bürgerkrieg.”

[7]. Patrick Wagner, H-Soz-u-Kult, [http:// rezensionen/2005-3-020 .
hsozukunft.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/](http://rezensionen/2005-3-020.hsozukunft.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/)

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