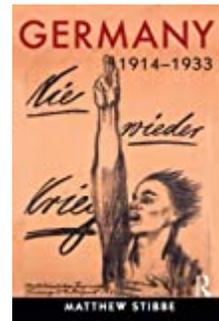




Matthew Stibbe. *Germany, 1914-1933: Politics, Society and Culture.* Harlow: Longman, 2010. 258 S. \$34.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4058-0136-2.



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M. Stibbe: Germany 1914-1933

The title of Matthew Stibbe's latest work, - Germany, 1914 - 1933: Politics, Society and Culture - offers an important interpretive clue for readers. Stibbe argues that the First World War is essential for understanding some of the central problems and challenges facing the Weimar Republic, both in terms of political and social structures and mentalities. He contends that 1914 is the starting point of a new era of German history, -marked by ongoing political, socio-economic and cultural crisis and ending in the Nazi seizure of power in 1933- (p. 2). Stibbe emphasizes, however, that this is not to suggest clear lines of continuity from the outbreak of World War One to Hitler, -but rather to uncover the full range of possible outcomes which emerge when one seeks to challenge conventional forms of periodisation- (p. 2). He aims to -provoke further debate by offering a critical interpretation of the most recent research- while -placing it within a broader framework of competing methodologies and historical narratives, all of which attempt to -tell the story- of the Weimar Republic- (p. 6). In order to do this, he draws on a wide variety of secondary sources alongside collections of published documents.

The first two chapters focus on World War One, from two different perspectives. Chapter One, -The War from above- looks at some of the central problems that political, military and industrial leaders faced as they attempted to mobilize Germany for war. While outlining the broader narrative of Germany's entry into the war, Stibbe also highlights the -Burgfrieden- and the range of interpretations that historians have placed on the SPD's decision to support the war. The split of the left had profound consequences for politics after the war, a theme which returns throughout the book. In his second chapter, Stibbe steps away from high politics into -The War From Below-. He emphasizes current research which reveals that the gap between the -home front- and -fighting front- was not as vast as scholars previously thought. Rather, both fronts -were in constant touch with each other- (p. 38). Drawing on both the history of -experience- (-Erfahrungsgeschichte-) and -everyday life- (-Alltagsgeschichte-) Stibbe explores the close relationship between the -home- and -front- as well as the deteriorating material conditions and social tensions that led to growing criticism of the state. Social problems, including prostitution and juvenile delinquency, were intensi-

fied by the conditions of war and women became targets for male anxieties about female sexuality and fears over the collapse of the social order in general. Stibbe sets up a broad framework for the rest of his book by exploring the complex political and economic changes related to the war alongside social issues and everyday experiences.

Stibbe's third chapter, "Political and Psychological Consequences of the War" begins with a review of the "fragile post-war consensus" and concentrates on the challenges to the Republic from the extreme left and anti-republican right. In asking whether or not the interwar years saw an increasing brutalization of society, Stibbe explores a key interpretive debate. On the one hand, post-war discourses often focused on the cult of the fallen soldier (used by both the far Left and far Right), extremist groups valorized violent conflict and women were both "demonized" in popular and high culture and became victims of physical violence. All of these developments support the thesis that Weimar society became increasingly brutal. On the other hand, Stibbe analyzes current work regarding veterans' organizations, whose ideology was pacifist or anti-war, the anti-militarist protests in the early 1920s and the experiences of soldiers who were more interested in integrating and participating in post-war society. Whether groups appropriated the cult of the fallen soldier for political mobilization or argued for a peaceful vision of society, Stibbe emphasizes that post-war society was riddled with implicit or explicit connections to the experiences and memories of the war. Whether or not this is a cause or symptom of the brutalization of society is subject to more historical inquiry.

In chapter four, "Economy and Society in the 1920s", Stibbe first discusses the relationship between big business, labor and the state and in subsequent sections gives an overview of the urban poor, the middle-classes and the countryside. Stibbe draws attention to new research on the urban poor, noting that in spite of individual acts of defiance ("Eigensinn") including nonconformity in dress, violent acts against welfare officials, women's assertions concerning their right to abortion and youth rebellion in the form of street gangs "it was clear that the urban poor could not fit into the conventional party landscape or form a coherent political narrative of their own, particularly when generational conflicts led to a growing alienation between young and old" (p. 111). Stibbe also notes that historians have given significant attention to the middle classes based on their "alienation from the conventional liberal parties [â] as a result of the inflation and other economic pressures" which played a role in

the collapse of the Republic (p. 112). Alongside the conventional approaches concerning middle-class "anxiety", Stibbe points out research that stresses the role of confessional cleavages (alongside sociopolitical ones) which contributed to social division and became "one of the defining social characteristics of the German electorate in the 1920s and beyond" (p. 115). Stibbe concludes his chapter by discussing the changing patterns of agriculture and labor in the countryside and how rural discontent played out in politics, particularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The pressures, experiences and social conditions across this wide-range of society play out in Stibbe's later analysis of political conflict at the end of the 1920s.

In his fifth chapter, "Weimar Culture", Stibbe stresses the need to examine the diversity of interwar Germany amongst the "competing visions of modernity and tradition" (p. 133). On the one hand, Weimar symbolized hopefulness and vibrancy in art, music, literature, theatre and film. On the other hand, it also stood for the darker side of modernity with anti-Semitic, misogynistic and homophobic discourses and images, alongside critiques of "modernity" in general. For example, in his section on "sex and sexuality" Stibbe draws attention to research which contrasts anxieties about "Americanization", female "emancipation", fears over the declining birthrates and debates over abortion with the sex reform movement and the rationalization of sexuality. Throughout this chapter, the author contrasts the possibilities and limits in Weimar culture, using scholarship which draws out the ambivalence of Weimar modernity.

Chapter six, "The Final Years of the Republic", shifts back to politics, concentrating on the impact of the Great Depression, the rise of the Nazis, contentions on the left and the steps that lead to Hitler's appointment as Reich Chancellor in January 1933. The "crisis of democracy", alongside economic upheaval and the inability of the Left to successfully fight against fascism is the background for his second section of the chapter, which explores the increase in support for the NSDAP in the early 1930s. Alongside his analysis of voting patterns, Stibbe also examines the relationship "between Hitler and the forces of traditional anti-republic conservatism in Germany" in order to understand why the Nazis were able to assume power in January 1933 (p. 187). In his conclusion Stibbe reemphasizes the structural and cultural impacts of World War One on Weimar politics, society and culture, including the desire to sustain the "mythology of August 1914", and the overall failure of "cultural demobilization" (p. 207). Stibbe makes a persuasive argument

that the cultural and social impacts of World War One are as important as the political uncertainties that are often emphasized in the historiography on Weimar Germany.

Because of his focus on broad themes, Stibbe runs the risk of over-generalizing some aspects of society, politics and culture. However, his approach is successful in emphasizing both the importance of understanding perspec-

tives âfrom aboveâ and âfrom belowâ and reaffirms that the experiences, memories and myths of World War One had long-standing consequences in the interwar years. This book would serve as an excellent text for the classroom and constitutes a valuable resource for scholars who are looking for an up-to-date overview on the research of the Weimar Republic.

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