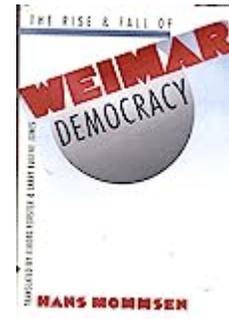


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Hans Mommsen. *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xv + 604 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2249-4.



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In the 1940s S. William Halperin's *Germany Tried Democracy* became the standard graduate-level textbook in English on the history of the Weimar Republic. In the 1960s Halperin was superseded by Erich Eyck's more balanced account. I believe that Hans Mommsen's *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy* will become the new standard for graduate student courses on twentieth-century Germany in English-speaking countries.

Professor Mommsen has had a long and distinguished career at the University of the Ruhr in Bochum. This book incorporates Mommsen's views from earlier works and also tries to integrate the important work of other scholars from the last twenty years. The organization of the book roughly follows the level of scholarly activity in the different periods of Weimar. The early years from 1918 to 1924 are covered in the first five chapters while the last five years from 1928 to 1933 are covered in six chapters. The middle years are allotted only two chapters. This is lamentable but perfectly understandable. The book is about the Republic's rise and fall and it is primarily about politics. Indeed, Mommsen warns his readers in the preface not to expect discussion of society, economics, or culture independent of political developments.

Mommsen has strongly held views on most every aspect of the Republic's politics. This is his book and he

chose "not to disrupt my account with scholarly discussions of issues in the field" (p. xi). The complete lack of notes means that a non-expert will have to guess where Mommsen is getting information and even some short quotes. With this in mind, it might have been better had the author at least included a bibliographical essay at the end rather than short topical bibliographies with no comment. These drawbacks make the book unsuitable for undergraduates.

In a graduate seminar, it would probably make sense to use Mommsen's book with a Weimar source book and/or a collection of articles and book excerpts so as to provide some balance and a starting point for debates. Greater and lesser issues for discussion could include the following of Mommsen's assertions:

1. The MSPD should have taken the revolution of 1918 much further politically and economically to achieve a greater break with the Wilhelmine empire.
2. The principle of judicial review threatened the Republic by allowing reactionary judges to strike down rights that exceeded Wilhelmine-era law, including equality of the sexes, improved rights for illegitimate children, and the confiscation of property without compensation.

3. The loyalty of the judiciary should have been secured through revision of the disciplinary code and promotion procedures.

4. The system of proportional representation and party lists favored members of special interests who often held high position on these lists.

5. The elections of 1919 should have been postponed to realign the party system and recruit a new parliamentary elite.

6. The fears of a “Bolshevist” uprising were completely unfounded and did not justify the ban on political activity in 1919-1920.

7. Following the lead of Charles Maier, Mommsen emphasizes the loss of the eight-hour day as being symbolic of the failure of the Republic to change social policy.

8. The decisive factor in defusing the crisis of 1923 was the danger of France separating the Rhineland from the German state.

9. The inflation and stabilization of 1923-1925 marked the abandonment of the social and political achievements of the revolution.

10. A fundamental flaw of the Weimar constitution was that it did not explicitly support political parties and allowed too many special interests to flourish.

11. The Social Democrats’ support for Stresemann’s policy of fulfillment was not rewarded by domestic political considerations. “The notion that the SPD had to be ‘on board’ in matters of foreign policy, but that domestic policies were best left to the parties of the bourgeois Right had become a self-evident principle of German political life among those who served in the Marx and Luther cabinets” (p. 211).

12. In 1926 the ultimate goals of the “dominant elements within German heavy industry” were “the permanent exclusion of the Social Democrats from government responsibility, the systematic destruction of the parliamentary system, and the installation of a government that would rule by means of the special emergency powers provided for in Article 48 of the Weimar constitution” (p. 220).

13. Despite a decline in the blue-collar proportion of the work force from 55 to 49 percent, a further contraction in the heavy-industrial sector would have been desirable.

14. Mommsen backs Carl-Ludwig Holtfrerich over Knut Borchardt on the issue of German wages vs. productivity in the 1920s. Without mentioning this debate specifically, Mommsen states that wages lagged behind productivity gains.

15. The basic problems of the post-inflation Weimar economy were a) the unwillingness to innovate; b) the concentration of technological improvements in unproductive sectors; c) high interest rates; d) insufficient capital formation caused by the inflation, the *Reichsbank’s* credit policies, and tariff policy. A comparison with Britain, France, and the United States might have been useful here.

16. The formation of the Marx IV government in 1927 was mostly due to the President’s office, and there was no agreement on social policy.

17. Bruening’s deflationary policy was driven more by reparations policy than by the fear of inflation or the importance of a balanced budget.

18. The Nazis were self-financed until the Reichstag elections of July 1932. After that they were dependent on subsidies and loan guarantees from industry. This would seem to contradict Mommsen’s earlier statement that the Nazi purchase of the *Muenchener Beobachter* from the Thule Society was financed by industry’s Anti-Bolshevist fund.

19. Bruening’s goal fairly early on was the establishment of a dictatorship and perhaps the restoration of the Hohenzollern monarchy.

I agree with some of these points and disagree with others. They are all debatable to some degree and an entire seminar on the Weimar era could be run on them.

The book really hits its stride in its discussion of the decline and fall of the Republic. All the familiar villains and fools appear: Hitler, Hindenburg, Bruening, Strasser, Hugenberg, Goebbels, Papen, and Schleicher. Particularly striking is the description of the decay of the Nationalist Party, portrayed as a German *Moby Dick*, as the indecisive Count Westarp fails to dissuade mad Captain Hugenberg from his destructive course. Despite the many wounds, the Republic showed a Rasputin-like ability to survive, and one feels at the end that the Hitler chancellorship was a very close thing indeed. Six months more and all would have changed.

The translation by Larry Eugene Jones of Canisius College and independent scholar Elborg Forster is excel-

lent. The text flows easily, translation of terms is standardized, and there is reference to the original German in places. Some note should be made of the dust jacket. The text here would lead the reader to believe that the book focuses on the ability of outside international forces to influence national internal policy. This is certainly an important question for current policy, but it is not at all the theme of this book.

In summary, this book will become the standard ad-

vanced text in English on the Weimar Republic for the next twenty years, but it is handicapped by the total lack of footnotes or bibliographical discussion and thus must be used with a supplement.

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