



**Arthur D. Brenner.** *Emil J. Gumbel, Weimar German Pacifist and Professor.* Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2001. ix + 227. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-04101-1.



**Reviewed by** Rose Gatens (Department of History, Belmont University)

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## **A Passion for Peace: Emil Gumbel and the Struggles of German Pacifism after the Great War**

A Passion for Peace: Emil Gumbel and the Struggles of German Pacifism after the Great War

Emil J. Gumbel was one of the most widely known and outspoken critics of German militarism and political violence during the Weimar era. A junior lecturer in statistics at the University of Heidelberg, Gumbel was also a politically engaged pacifist and socialist. Postwar historians often cite his books documenting judicial responses to political violence in the Weimar Republic as evidence of the anti-republican and antisocialist mentality of the German judiciary during the interwar years. His name is frequently included in lists of German academics whose dismissals before 1933 illustrate how politicized the so-called apolitical German universities had become by the end of the 1920s. But this man who in his own day was recognized as a formidable enemy of National Socialism has remained a largely unknown figure in the history of Weimar political discourse. Through Arthur Brenner's new biography, Gumbel returns to the historical stage, the protagonist of a compelling drama about the struggle of a Jewish pacifist professor to strengthen a German republic that embod-

ied the Enlightenment ideals of "peace, individual liberty, and social equality" (p. 5).

Although the history of socialist and communist responses to the Great War and its aftermath is well known, historians have only recently begun to study the role of political pacifism in the debate about Germany's place in the community of nations. Brenner's biography of Gumbel is a welcome contribution to our knowledge of pacifist dissent in Germany during the crucial period between the end of World War I and the National Socialist seizure of power. While the postwar German peace movement was small, its members had been active participants in efforts to establish international institutions to arbitrate conflicts among sovereign states. They participated in Europe-wide attempts to prevent war in 1914 and, after war began, to open both private and diplomatic channels among the combatants to negotiate peace. Gumbel, one of the most prominent publicists for pacifist internationalism in Germany, came to the movement as a young veteran in 1915.

Through the prism of his beleaguered life, we gain considerable insight into the nature of political violence

in Germany during the Weimar era from the perspective of those who opposed it. In reading about their hectic schedule of public lectures, their persistent barrage of critical newspaper and magazine articles and their continuing publications chronicling government support of secret paramilitary organizations and other right-wing attempts to circumvent the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, we come to understand why their opponents in and out of government perceived them as such a grave threat to efforts to sabotage the postwar settlement.

We better understand those factors in German and European society that prepared at least some German citizens to support internationalist principles at a time of growing nationalism. We better recognize the personal and professional dilemmas of pacifist dissenters in speaking out against the Great War and cherished nationalistic myths. We learn much about the pressures applied to professional academicians like Gumbel, F. W. Foerster, G. F. Nicolai and Bertrand Russell to conform to the nationalistic certitudes of their colleagues. As Gumbel himself acknowledged of Bertrand Russell, his courage as a middle-class intellectual was all the more impressive because it required him to disavow the status and power of the elites from which he himself sprang.

In the chapters dealing with the formation of Gumbel's pacifist philosophy and his activist view of citizenship in a democratic society, Brenner prepares the ground for a solid analysis of Gumbel's professional conflicts at the University of Heidelberg. One of the strengths of Brenner's presentation of the eight-year long Gumbel Affair is his thorough exposition of Gumbel's perspective on these events and the effects of social isolation on Gumbel and his family. Equally impressive is Brenner's ability to present a balanced account of this complicated personality whose struggles with senior colleagues were not only about differences in political values, but also about profound differences in attitude about "academic mores and caste-consciousness and about Gumbel himself" (p. 91). Throughout his analysis, Brenner remains critically sympathetic to Gumbel. We get to know the devoted pacifist, the social moralist, the politically engaged scholar who was admired for his courageous exposes of Germany's secret paramilitary organizations, for his relentless and meticulous documentation of judicial favoritism toward anti-republican groups and individuals, and for his fortitude during sustained attempts to revoke his right to teach in a German university. We also get to know the egotistic, arrogant, and socially immature radical who often disaffected even

sympathetic colleagues, politically like-minded pacifists and fellow socialists by his intemperate actions.

Brenner provides important insight into the interplay between Nazi campaign politics in Baden and the politically related conflict between the University of Heidelberg and Baden's Ministry of Culture and Education over Gumbel's promotion to extra-ordinary professor against the recommendation of his faculty colleagues. As a consequence of his published exposes of collusion between the German courts and perpetrators of right-wing political violence, Gumbel became one of the most vocal critics of the rising National Socialist Party, as well as a frequent target of Nazi attacks on Weimar-era universities and the Weimar Republic. The campaign led by Nazi students to revoke Gumbel's right to teach and to dismiss him from his academic post intensified the sentiment among his Heidelberg colleagues to excise him from their ranks. The heightened political and academic tension surrounding his ultimate dismissal in 1932 prompted him to leave Germany and, ironically, to "credit" his colleagues with saving his life.

There is no doubt that the nature of Gumbel's work in Germany caused him to live his life largely in the public eye. The drama of his life in exile was more personal, filled with the economic privations, familial demands and political frustrations common to many refugee academics and political activists. Gumbel continued his research in statistics in exile. His scholarly reputation earned him posts at the University of Lyon and later as one of the refugee scholars at the New School for Social Research in New York. But he never attained a permanent academic post in the United States. He despaired of the fractiousness of the emigre community in the United States and though he tried through various channels to influence United States policy toward post-war Germany, his ideas were rarely considered. He invested considerable energy in attempts to discredit Arnold Bergstraesser, who had played a critical role in his dismissal from the University of Heidelberg in 1932. These activities served not only to marginalize him politically, but, according to Brenner, contributed significantly to Gumbel's inability to secure permanent employment in the United States.

By comparison to the drama of the first six chapters of this book, the last two chapters are somewhat anticlimactic. This is a result, I believe, of source limitations that Brenner encountered and acknowledges. For Gumbel was not a diarist. Most of his private correspondence was either confiscated from his home or lost during the war as he embarked upon his journey as a political

refugee. Given his need for economic security through academic lecturing, his writing in exile focused primarily on his statistical research. The diaries which he kept following the death of his wife in 1952 remain in the hands of his family and are not available to researchers. Thus, the private side of this man is generally undeveloped in this work and his public persona remains the center of this story.

Most of the contemporary sources relating to Gumbel are documents in the public domain. The key source is Gumbel's personal collection of newspaper clippings that include his journalistic writings, announcements and reports of his public speeches on behalf of the German League for Human Rights, reports and editorials about his problems with the University of Heidelberg, reports and reviews of his controversial books, especially *Zwei Jahre Mord* and *Verschwoerer*, reports and editorials about treason indictments brought against him and reports of Nazi Party attacks against him. Brenner has enlarged on this collection with an impressive array of archival sources, including those of the University of Heidelberg, the municipal archives for Heidelberg and the provincial

archives for Baden, and the archives of the Federal Republic of Germany. Brenner also consulted archives in the United States and Canada bearing on Gumbel's exile. Through these and other sources, Brenner has written an insightful analysis of the efforts of German pacifists to weaken the forces of reaction and to strengthen the grounds for a socially just democratic state during the interwar years.

Gumbel's political biography is an important chapter in the larger history of pacifist opposition to twentieth-century warfare. Through Gumbel's story, Brenner clearly articulates the tensions between pre-World War I attitudes toward war and postwar pacifists' decisive rejection of the elemental destructiveness of modern military technology. He takes us step by painful step through the struggles of pacifists to gain credibility and respect in a political atmosphere poisoned by war and defeat, delusions of national grandeur, and fantasies of revenge. He reminds us, in the details of Gumbel's life that in a century characterized by almost unspeakable violence there were voices, albeit "lamentably rare" (xiii) that opposed the rush forward to the abyss of global war.

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