H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Heinrich August Winkler, ed. *Weimar im Widerstreit. Deutungen der ersten deutschen Republik im geteilten Deutschland.* Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2002. 193 pp. EUR 24.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-56653-6.

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Published on H-German (January, 2004)

In the period since the collapse of the GDR and the reunification of Germany in 1989/90, scholars have shown a growing interest in the problem of coming to terms with a "divided past"; that is, the problem of how to reconcile the two very different historiographical traditions prevalent in capitalist West Germany and communist East Germany during the Cold War era. In particular attention has focused on the Third Reich and the Holocaust, as well as on the German resistance to Hitler.[1] However, as Heinrich August Winkler argues in the introduction to this new collection of essays, "hardly any chapter in German history created such tensions between the Federal Republic and the GDR as the Weimar [period]" (p. 9). This is largely because the political and ideological battles between communists and social democrats which began at that time were still being fought out between the two German states in the 1950s and beyond. Even in the 1980s and into the 1990s, the years 1918-1933 continued to be a hotly contested area of debate, with both sides claiming to represent the most humane and democratic version of history.

The volume is neatly divided into three sections, each devoted to a major area of controversy within and between the two opposing historiographical traditions. The first section deals with the foundations of the Weimar Republic in 1918-19, and in particular with rival interpretations of the character and significance of the November 1918 revolution. Klaus Schoenhoven begins with an overview of recent literature on the legacy of the First World War, paying particular attention to its political, social and cultural effects. In his view the First World War was both the *Urkatastrophe* of the twentieth century and at the same time particularly damaging to Germany, where it helped to breed a widespread contempt for parliamentary politics and a glorification of violence, especially, but not exclusively, on the political Right. The results were already to be seen in the early years of the new republic: between 1918 and 1924, for instance, 376 politically motivated murders took place, and among the victims were such prominent democratic politicians as Matthias Erzberger and Walter Rathenau, as well as the revolutionaries Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. These murders in turn were a heavy burden for the new republic to bear, perhaps outweighing in importance even the economic and social costs of the war.

Moving on to the November 1918 revolution itself, Winkler gives a precise summary of the changing nature of West German interpretations of the workers' councils of 1918-19. Whereas in the 1950s historical writing on this subject was dominated by anti-communism, in the 1960s new questions arose. Was the period November 1918 to February 1919 a missed opportunity for the

left in Germany? Could the split in the workers' movement between communists and social democrats have been avoided at this time? Was there a "third way" between a Soviet-style dictatorship and a capitalist parliamentary republic? Winkler himself rejects the answer provided by the "68ers" in West Germany, who stressed the revolutionary democratic potential contained in the workers' council movement of Winter 1918-19. As far as he is concerned, the government of people's commissars, led by Ebert and Scheidemann, had to make compromises with the bourgeois parties and the forces of law and order in order to prevent the slide into chaos and civil war. Compromise with the communists was out of the question, for the latter were determined to block not only the elections to a National Assembly but also the formation of a broadly representative coalition-based government. If the elections had not taken place, and if the bourgeois parties had not been allowed to enter the government, argues Winkler, then the most likely result would have been civil war followed by right-wing dictatorship, and certainly not a strengthening of democratic socialism in Germany.

A very different view of the events of 1918-19 prevailed in the GDR, as Juergen John shows in his contribution, which examines in detail the use made by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the anniversaries of 1918 in 1948, 1958 and 1968 in order to reinforce its own claim to historical legitimacy. The official party line was laid down as early as 1948, and stressed the "bourgeois" nature of the 1918 revolution and the "opportunistic" behavior of the SPD and USPD-dominated workers' councils. The "lessons" to be drawn were self-evident: a successful socialist revolution could only be achieved in Germany by ridding the workers' movement of all forms of *Sozialdemokratismus* and instead building up a "party of a new type" based on the Bolshevik model of democratic centralism as practiced by Lenin in the Soviet Union and by the SED from 1948-49 onwards. Even so, as John notes, this orthodox position was challenged at various points–particularly in the late 1950s and again in the Gorbachev era–by an alternative view which stressed the revolutionary (albeit non-Leninist) character of the workers' councils of 1918-19 and the possibility of missed opportunities for a separate German road to socialism. In other words, the "lessons" of 1918 might just as easily challenge the legitimacy of SED rule as reinforce it. This problem explains why party chairman Walter Ulbricht took such a strong personal interest in the question of historical interpretations of 1918, and why, under his successor, Erich Honecker, the party actually began to distance itself from any positive references to 1918 at all. Instead, greater emphasis was now placed on the revolutions of 1848, which could be more easily presented as a defining moment in the history of the German workers' movement within the broader framework of the "heritage and tradition" debate.

The second section of the book moves on to look at another equally controversial area of the historiography, namely the rival and mutually incompatible policies adopted by the SPD and the KPD in the early 1930s when confronted with the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party. Eberhard Kolb, in his contribution, subjects the actions of the SPD leadership between 1930 and 1933 to a critical analysis and comes to a fairly positive assessment of the party's attempts to uphold democracy in the face of threats from a totalitarian left and fascist right. In particular the decision of the party to "tolerate" the Bruening government between 1930 and 1932 must be judged in terms of how it was seen at the time: as a short-term strategy designed to allow the parliamentary system to survive the immediate economic crisis, rather than as a betrayal of social democratic principles. Andreas Wirsching, on the other hand, investigates the position adopted by the KPD between 1928 and 1932, with particular emphasis on the "anti-fascist action" of 1932. The KPD's policy after the Prussian elections in April 1932 was to undermine the leadership of the SPD by appealing to the SPD rank-and-file to join in a common struggle against Hitler. If SPD-oriented workers could be won over, their leaders would have to follow. Yet, as Wirsching notes, any real chance of a united front against fascism was destroyed by internal rifts within the KPD, which ended ultimately in the refusal of the party's Central Committee to compromise on ideological questions or to drop its condemnation of "reformist" social democratic organisations as "social fascist." Initial confusion and uncertainty in April 1932 were followed by a hardening of entrenched ideological positions in July 1932, to Hitler's advantage and to the disadvantage of both KPD and SPD.

The two further commentaries by Hermann Weber and Werner Bramke are perhaps more interesting for what they say about Wirsching's contribution than Kolb's. Thus Weber criticises Wirsching for overemphasizing the autonomy of the German communist party and its followers; in his view, the KPD simply followed the line established by the Comintern in Moscow, whose goal was to destroy the Weimar Republic and the SPD as the first step towards the establishment of a communist dictatorship in Germany. Bramke, on the other hand,

warns against any one-sided view of the relationship between the SPD and the KPD. The KPD's "ultra-left" strategy was indeed the main obstacle to the achievement of anti-fascist unity in 1932-33. However, this strategy also needs to be understood against the background of the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in 1919, and the crushing of the May Day demonstrations by the SPD-dominated Prussian government in 1929. Such events, argues Bramke, drove the KPD into a marginalized position within Weimar society and encouraged the process of Stalinization at the expense of internal party democracy.

The final section looks at differing interpretations of the legacy of Weimar in the post-1945 world. Here we are dealing with some of the most important "founding myths" of the two German states in 1949. In West Germany, for instance, the slogan "Bonn is not Weimar" was linked to a negative interpretation of the 1919 Weimar constitution, which was held to contain insufficient safeguards against the rise of extremist parties on the one hand and the abdication of power by responsible democratic parties on the other. However, as Dieter Grimm points out, Bonn survived not only because it had a more robust constitution but because of the entirely different conditions prevailing in the western zones of Germany in the late 1940s and beyond. In particular the Basic Law of 1949 was preceded by the reemergence and/or amalgamation of democratic parties who were in fundamental agreement on the principles which should govern the new state. Anti-communism too was perhaps an important unifying factor in West German politics, especially in the 1950s.

In the eastern part of Germany, on the other hand, the slogan "no going back to Weimar" was used to justify the enforced merger of the SPD and KPD in 1946, and to uphold the GDR's claim to be "anti-fascist" (as opposed to the "fascist-clerical" Federal Republic which allegedly had returned to the aggressive imperialist policies of the past). This led to some highly distorted images of West Germany, such as the idea that the Grand Coalition of the mid-to late 1960s was the precursor for a new fascist dictatorship bent on launching a war of aggression against the Soviet bloc in alliance with the United States. However, as Martin Sabrow convincingly argues, historical scholarship in the GDR had many different faces. At its worst it simply provided crude justifications for SED rule, but at its best it also helped to open up new areas of research which had previously been marginalized or ignored in German historiography. In the 1960s most East German historians were prepared to put up with a high level of party interference in their work, and surprisingly it was left to the SED ideology chief Kurt Hager to call for less rigid forms of academic debate so that scholarship in the GDR might compete more effectively with that produced in the west. By the 1980s, on the other hand, the tables had turned and some of the key GDR experts working on the 1917-1933 period were beginning to challenge the narrow framework in which they were obliged to work, especially the obligation to denounce the Weimar Republic as an imperialist state while presenting an uncritical image of the KPD as the only positive alternative on offer. The result was a gradual loss of faith in the party and the way in which it prescribed the type of history that could be written in the GDR, although direct criticism of the SED and its academic policies was very rare until after 1989.[2]

The individual contributions in this volume all make highly interesting reading in their own right. Taken together, they provide a valuable account of the divided history of the German workers' movement since 1918, and how this history was used and abused by both sides in the Cold War era. However, I also have one or two criticisms of the volume as a whole. While we learn a great deal from Sabrow about the ideological pressures placed on scholars in the GDR, and in particular the role played by the SED-Institute for Marxism-Leninism (IML), much less is said about the more subtle political constraints placed on West German historiography. These constraints are implied rather than spelled out in detail. Moreover, while nearly all the contributors praise the SPD for its commitment to defending democracy between 1918 and 1933, only one, Werner Bramke, seriously considers the long-term negative impact of Ebert's anti-Bolshevik policies in November-December 1918, namely the alienation of large numbers of workers and intellectuals from the new republic and their subsequent attraction to the anti-democratic (and later pro-Stalin) KPD. And yet as Winkler notes, the failure of Ebert and Scheidemann to undertake a broader socialization of the economy in the 1918-19 in alliance with the USPD and other radical leftist groups is still a highly contentious issue in Germany today. On the one hand, it was an absolute precondition for the establishment of a functioning parliamentary democracy with the half-hearted approval of the bourgeois parties, but on the other hand it also produced deep and damaging divisions on the German left with far-reaching consequences for the 1920s and beyond.

Notes

[1]. Recent publications in this field include Juer-

gen Danyel, ed., *Die geteilte Vergangenheit. Zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in den beiden deutschen Staaten* (Berlin, 1994); Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, 1997); Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1999); Klaus Neumann, *Shifting Memories: The Nazi Past in the New Germany* (Ann Arbor, 2000); Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (London, 2002).

[2]. This tendency can also be seen in some of the recent autobiographies written by former GDR historians. See e.g. Fritz Klein, *Drinnen und Draussen. Ein Historiker in der DDR. Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000); and Joachim Petzold, *Parteinahme wofuer? DDR-Historiker im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Wissenschaft*, ed. Martin Sabrow (Potsdam, 2000).

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Citation: Matthew Stibbe. Review of Winkler, Heinrich August, ed., *Weimar im Widerstreit. Deutungen der ersten deutschen Republik im geteilten Deutschland.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2004.

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