

ROBERT E. NORTON

The Crucible of German Democracy

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Mohr Siebeck

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Robert E. Norton

The Crucible of German Democracy

Ernst Troeltsch and the First World War

Mohr Siebeck

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For my children

Grace Evelyn
Millicent Sterling
Frederick Augustus

For this alone is lacking even to God,
to make undone things that have once been done.

Aristotle (quoting Agathon)

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Preface

This book is about how and why Germany became a parliamentary democracy on October 28, 1918. That fact and that date – nearly two weeks before the November Revolution, before the Social Democratic leader Friedrich Ebert assumed the post of the Imperial Chancellorship, and before Wilhelm II abdicated his throne – will come as a surprise to many readers, and that surprise in turn provides perhaps the most compelling rationale for this book.

For a variety of reasons, we have neglected the rise and development of democratic thought in Germany during the First World War. As a consequence, we have lost sight of the many individuals and events discussed here that contributed to the complete transformation of the German political system in the final months of 1918. Although that formal change occurred in some ways unexpectedly, it also took place as a logical result of intentional efforts by a large number of people who had argued and fought for increased democratization in Germany over the previous four years, and in many cases for long before that. During the war, growing numbers of Germans even thought that democracy – for their own country and in general – was inevitable and unstoppable. That was probably too optimistic, but the fact that so many believed it tells us something significant about their outlook and helps to explain their actions. At the same time, of course, there had always been opposition to democracy in Germany, and as the conflict wore on that opposition grew into virulent hostility, only to intensify once the war was lost and the forces of democracy prevailed. But that is the point: democracy *did* prevail, and it did so not in the form of some foreign imposition, and not because there seemed to be no better alternative immediately available, but because it represented the conscious choice of countless Germans themselves who viewed it as providing the best path forward for the future.

In this sensational sequence of events, Ernst Troeltsch, who lived from 1865 to 1923 and over the course of his life came to play a number of prominent roles in his country, occupied a decisive position. Troeltsch was an acclaimed philosopher, historian, theologian, and sociologist, first at Heidelberg and then at Berlin, arguably the two most important universities in Germany at the time. But he was also an active politician and more generally one of the most well-known and respected public figures of his day. Yet he, too, like the democratic movement of

which he was an indispensable part, has been largely forgotten and, like it as well, deserves greater recognition. Troeltsch was by no means the only person in Germany who would advocate for democracy during the war. But given his stature and intellectual authority he was uniquely able to promote it in ways that made it seem both possible and palatable to a large segment of the population, many of whom continued to regard democracy with wariness and suspicion – or with open disdain.

Following an introduction outlining its three principal themes – the general evolution of democratic thought and activity in Germany between 1914 and 1918; the nature and function of the so-called “culture war” during the same period, of which the debate about democracy (both for and against) was a central component; and finally the thought and personality of Ernst Troeltsch himself – the first chapter of the book begins with the events immediately surrounding August 1, 1914, the day mobilization was declared in Germany. Over the next four years, the country and its people would undergo many profound and wrenching changes, ultimately leading to the apparently abrupt transition from a constitutional monarchy to a parliamentary democracy on October 28, 1918. How that tectonic shift came to happen, the convoluted interplay of arguments, decisions, and actions that took place in those intervening years – all of which were the direct product of the war and its multiple pressures – forms the principal subject of the chapters that follow.

Again, Ernst Troeltsch is far from the sole protagonist in this enormous drama and is certainly not the most important one. And to be clear: this book does not offer a conventional biography, tracing the entire span of Troeltsch’s life and thought, nor is it an intellectual biography of him alone. It presents, rather, a kind of intellectual-historical group portrait, depicting Ernst Troeltsch as he interacted with some of the most consequential people and ideas of his time, focusing on the last decade of his life and the role he played in defining and even shaping it. But there were also, as I have said, many others who dedicated their energy – and sometimes their lives – to realizing their vision of a democratic German future, and a large number of them appear in this book as well.

Nevertheless, as one of the most famous intellectuals in the capital of Berlin, and at a time when intellectuals truly mattered, Troeltsch occupied a singular place at the center of a complex nexus of power and influence that gave him privileged access to information few others had and enabled him to apply his extraordinary abilities as few others could to the task of orienting his fellow Germans in a confusing and ever-changing reality. And he did not just comment on, he also actively participated in some of the key political events of the day, giving us, through him, an unusually direct and intimate perspective on those larger developments. As the war persisted and it became possible to speak more freely

about political matters at home, Troeltsch and those who thought like him began to press ever more forcefully for democratic reform and peace. They did not succeed immediately, and their equally determined opponents almost won out. But in the end, and almost unbelievably, the proponents of democracy triumphed – even as Germany itself lost the war.

That mixed legacy served to lay the groundwork for the troubled history of the Weimar Republic. This book, however, is not about that new state but about how the elements that enabled it gradually emerged and coalesced within the old one. Weimar endures as an object of even popular fascination in part because we know that this seemingly improbable experiment in democratic self-governance would not last and that it would fail after only fourteen years of existence, its end hastened by the ceaseless and ever more malevolent assaults by its enemies. In advancing a greater appreciation of the native origins of Germany's first democracy, this book will, I hope, contribute to the on-going revisions in how we judge the Weimar Republic's inherent chances for success and thus participate in the continuing reevaluation of twentieth-century German and European history more broadly. But the primary focus here is on those tumultuous and violent four years between August 1914 and November 1918 in which a German democratic state was originally conceived and then, against all odds, finally realized.

Introduction

Democracy in Germany

Among the received ideas surrounding the fall of the German Empire in 1918 and the subsequent declaration of what became known as the Weimar Republic is the notion that the first German democracy more or less suddenly appeared out of nowhere, emerging unexpectedly from within an otherwise deeply conservative and monarchical state, which made it all but destined to fail. On this reading, the nascent republic was mortally compromised from the outset because there was an insufficient number of actively committed democrats willing or able to defend it against a majority of enemies all too determined to see it destroyed. “The inner weakness and the death of the Weimar democracy,” Kurt Sontheimer concluded in his classic study of 1962, “are inextricably linked with the effectiveness of antidemocratic thought.”¹

The congenital defect of the new state appeared to be two-fold: not only was Weimar under constant inner siege by virulent antirepublican adversaries, it was also, as the sardonic phrase has it, supposedly a “republic without republicans.” There were at best, so the familiar narrative goes, a handful of “rational republicans”² – *Vernunftrepublikaner* – who regarded the new state with cool pragmatism as a necessary but only “provisional roof,”³ to use Heinrich August Wink-

¹ Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik. Die politischen Ideen des deutschen Nationalismus zwischen 1918 und 1933*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1964), 11.

² This term was coined by the historian Friedrich Meinecke, who wrote in November 1918: “I remain, facing the past, a heartfelt monarchist, and will be, facing the future, a rational republican.” Friedrich Meinecke, “Verfassung und Verwaltung der deutschen Republik,” in *Politische Schriften und Reden, Werke*, ed. Georg Kotowski (Darmstadt: Siegfried Toeche-Mittler Verlag, 1958), 2, 281. See the pioneering essay on this subject by Harm Klueting, “‘Vernunftrepublikanismus’ und ‘Vertrauensdiktatur.’ Friedrich Meinecke in der Weimarer Republik,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 242 (1986), 69–98. On the entire phenomenon see *Vernunftrepublikanismus in der Weimarer Republik. Politik, Literatur, Wissenschaft*, ed. Andreas Wirsching and Jürgen Eder (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2008).

³ Heinrich August Winkler, “Der deutsche Sonderweg: Eine Nachlese,” *Merkur* 35/8 (1981), 801.

ler's evocative metaphor, and who were themselves all too eager to replace it at the first opportunity with a more robust and durable alternative. Such apparently grudging acceptance among an elite minority seemed debilitating enough. But even worse were the open scorn and active hostility directed toward the Republic by many others besides. Some detested it as the bastard child of both a shameful defeat and the ignominious end to the monarchy. Others viewed democracy in itself as fundamentally alien to German tradition and culture. The eventual collapse of the Weimar Republic, repudiated and undermined by the very people it was supposed to represent, thus seemed practically guaranteed. The unsteady construction of the reviled state, lacking a deep foundation in either popular sentiment or historical experience, eventually and seemingly inevitably fell in on itself, leaving a political vacuum that others quickly rushed in to fill.⁴

While much of the foregoing account is undeniably true – during the 1920s there were many talented and resourceful antagonists of democracy in Germany, perhaps none so generously equipped with cunning prowess and prosecutorial zeal as Carl Schmitt – it tells only part of the story. There were also considerable numbers of politicians, political theorists, and legal scholars, in addition to other intellectuals from a variety of backgrounds – not to speak of the countless ordinary citizens whose thoughts and actions went unrecorded – who throughout the decade after the war devoted themselves to upholding both the idea and the reality of democracy in Germany and in the rest of Europe. From the prominent Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen, who in 1920 published *On the Essence and Value of Democracy*,⁵ acclaimed as one of “the great foundational writings on democracy ever”⁶ written; to the now neglected but once widely esteemed German political economist Moritz Julius Bonn, who wrote perceptively about, and proposed solutions to, *The Crisis of European Democracy* in 1925;⁷ to the social democratic

⁴ The idea that a “power vacuum” led to the demise of the Weimar Republic is the central thesis of the influential book by Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. Eine Studie zum Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie* (Stuttgart: Ring-Verlag, 1955).

⁵ Hans Kelsen, *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1920); translated as *The Essence and Value of Democracy*, eds. Nadia Urbinati and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti; trans. Brian Graf (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). Cf. also Horst Dreier, *Rechtslehre, Staatssoziologie und Demokratietheorie bei Hans Kelsen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1986). See also the collection of all of Kelsen's essays on democracy in German and in English with an informative introduction by the editors: Hans Kelsen, *Verteidigung der Demokratie*, eds. Matthias Jestaedt and Oliver Lepsius (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

⁶ Katrin Groh, *Demokratische Staatsrechtslehrer in der Weimarer Republik. Von der konstitutionellen Staatslehre zur Theorie des modernen demokratischen Verfassungsstaats* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 107.

⁷ Moritz Julius Bonn, *The Crisis of European Democracy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1925); there quickly followed a German version, *Die Krisis der europäischen Demokratie* (Munich: Meyer & Jessen, 1925). For more on Bonn and his related writings, see Moritz Julius Bonn, *Zur*

philosopher and legal theorist Hermann Heller, who was arguably the most brilliant political thinker on the left during the entire Weimar period and who became a fierce adversary of none other than Carl Schmitt: these and other able advocates of the Republic committed themselves in word and in deed to democracy by justifying its legitimacy and buttressing its institutions.⁸ Leading scholars of constitutional law such as Gerhard Anschütz, Richard Thoma, Hugo Preuß, and Gustav Radbruch were respected and influential voices who in their teaching and their publications steadfastly promoted democratic principles and defended the new German state founded on them. And some, such as Radbruch and Preuß, actively sought to put those ideas into practice by serving in governmental politics.⁹

What is more, many observers on both the left and the right during the Weimar period confidently assumed – or grimly accepted – that democracy in Germany, as throughout the West, had become so firmly entrenched as to be all but ineradicable. In 1926, Heller asserted that, despite the various and acute challenges facing it,

democracy today is by far the predominant form of governmental authority; our democratic way of thinking, the result of a development of ideas over many hundreds of years, is today, despite many antidemocratic sentiments, inextricably linked with the general context of all of our epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, political, and legal notions.¹⁰

Even Schmitt, in his provocative attempt to dissociate liberalism from democracy in his strident essay on *The Intellectual-Historical Condition of Modern Parliamentarianism*, also of 1926, conceded, if with evident reluctance:

The history of political ideas and theories of the state in the nineteenth century can be summarized by a simple slogan: the triumphal march of democracy. No state within the Western European cultural sphere has withstood the spread of democratic ideas and institutions. Even where strong social forces resisted, as in the Prussian monarchy, they still lacked an intellectual energy going beyond their particular sphere that could have conquered the democratic faith. Progress was simply synonymous with the expansion of democracy, antidemocratic resistance

Krise der Demokratie: Politische Schriften in der Weimarer Republik, 1919–1932, ed. Jens Hacke (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015). See also by Jens Hacke, “Moritz Julius Bonn – ein vergessener Verteidiger der Vernunft. Zum Liberalismus in der Krise der Zwischenkriegszeit,” *Mittelweg* 36: *Zeitschrift des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung* 6 (2010), 26–59.

⁸ See David Dyzenhaus, *Legality and Legitimacy: Carl Schmitt, Hans Kelsen and Hermann Heller in Weimar* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997). In his preface, Dyzenhaus writes: “Heller is hardly known outside of Germany. This is unfortunate for, as I shall argue, his social democratic theory of the legitimacy of the legal order is superior to Schmitt’s and Kelsen’s positions;” xi.

⁹ Cf. Martin D. Klein, *Demokratisches Denken bei Gustav Radbruch* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2007).

¹⁰ Hermann Heller, *Die politischen Ideenkreise der Gegenwart* (Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt, 1926), 48. Cf. Marcus Llanque, ed. *Souveräne Demokratie und soziale Homogenität. Das politische Denken Hermann Hellers* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2010).

merely a defensive posture, an apology for historically antiquated artifacts and the struggle of the old with the new. [...] Ranke called the idea of popular sovereignty the most powerful idea of the time and its conflict with the principle of monarchy the leading tendency of the century. Since then, that conflict has, for now, ended with the victory of democracy.¹¹

And yet, because of the virtually single-minded focus on the forces that eventually undid the Weimar Republic, the debates about and, crucially, *for* democracy during that period, as well as the particular character of Weimar democracy itself as a political and legal reality, had long been all but ignored.¹² Strikingly, as recently as the year 2000, the editor of a collection of essays on the subject stated that, as a result of this nearly universal neglect, “we still know almost nothing about democratic thought in the Republic.”¹³ A decade on, in 2010, it still had to be said about the 1920s in Germany that “democratic thought, particularly that of constitutional law professors, has so far been researched only in a fragmentary manner.”¹⁴

It will come as no surprise, then, that a similar state of affairs exists with respect to our general awareness of the immediate incubator of Weimar democracy, namely the domestic political developments that took place in Germany during the First World War itself. But the fact is that the Weimar Republic did not just suddenly emerge *ex nihilo* or solely in response to the unprecedented crisis that engulfed the stunned and reeling nation following the traumatic loss of both the war and the Emperor. Rather, throughout the conflict, and especially during its middle years, there had been a vigorous and constantly evolving debate among preeminent German politicians and other public figures – including many university professors, journalists, writers, and unaffiliated intellectuals – about their

¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1926), 30–31; translated into English as *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

¹² One important early exception is the excellent study by Herbert Döring, *Der Weimarer Kreis. Studien zum politischen Bewußtsein verfassungstreuer Hochschullehrer in der Weimarer Republik* (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1975). And the most recent significant corrective is by Jens Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie. Zur politischen Theorie des Liberalismus in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2018).

¹³ Christoph Gusy, ed. *Demokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2000), 12. Heiko Bollmeyer, *Der steinige Weg zur Demokratie. Die Weimarer Nationalversammlung zwischen Kaiserreich und Republik* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007), 28, also writes that, before his own book, “the work of the Weimar National Assembly has never previously been treated to a systematic investigation.”

¹⁴ Groh, 1. It has recently been argued that, apart from its cultural aspects, the Weimar Republic as a whole “has not received the attention it deserves” from scholars; see Michael Dreyer, Andreas Braune, “Weimar als Herausforderung. Zum Umgang mit einer schwierigen Republik,” in *Weimar als Herausforderung. Die Weimarer Republik und die Demokratie im 21. Jahrhundert*, eds. Michael Dreyer and Andreas Braune (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2016), xii.

country's political future. And for a significant portion of the participants in these debates, that future was, and had to be, democratic. The end of the war and the abdication of the Kaiser finally offered the opportunity to turn theory into practice. And even though the conditions were obviously far from ideal, it was in the eyes of many at least the culmination of a development that was on balance positive and in any case necessary – and above all unavoidable.

On December 16, 1918, Professor Ernst Troeltsch announced in a lecture to the Democratic Student Union of Berlin: “Overnight we have become the most radical democracy in Europe.”¹⁵ After having presumably got his listeners' attention by that bold declaration, Troeltsch took care to emphasize, however, that

if one considers it more carefully, it did not in fact happen quite over night. Democracy is the natural consequence of modern population density, connected with the education of the people necessary for its sustenance, industrialization, mobilization, militarization, and politicization.¹⁶

It was these large and long-term social, economic, and political processes, Troeltsch argued, that had created the conditions that made democracy not just possible but also inevitable. Democracy was not one single thing or the result of a single event, he insisted, but an accumulation of events and experiences over time that had contributed to an enormous, and ongoing, process of social transformation. Moreover, that process was in Troeltsch's view consistent, or even synonymous, with modernity itself and as such was a welcome but in any event inexorable force.

Nevertheless, the intellectual developments that took place between 1914 and 1918 leading up to Troeltsch's conclusion and everything it implies had long been overlooked. Marcus Llanque, the author of a pioneering work on democratic thought in Germany during the war, stated in 2000 that, “the theoretical reflections on democracy during the First World War had not yet been the subject of an independent inquiry” prior to his book.¹⁷ Yet there were many such “theoretical reflections on democracy” during the entire period that merit close attention. To mention only the most well-known example: at the end of 1917 and in early 1918, as the war still raged on and with no clear end in sight, no one less than Max Weber wrote two weighty treatises, “Voting Rights and Democracy in Ger-

¹⁵ Ernst Troeltsch, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Schriften zur Politik und Kulturphilosophie (1918–1923)*, vol. 15, ed. Gangolf Hübinger and Johannes Mikuteit (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 211. This edition will henceforth be referred to in the notes as *KGA*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Marcus Llanque, *Demokratisches Denken im Krieg. Die deutsche Debatte im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Akademie, 2000), 14.

many”¹⁸ and “Parliament and Government in the Reordered Germany,”¹⁹ that together articulated his theory, and expressly announced his endorsement, of parliamentary democracy.

And while these famous essays have certainly not been ignored by scholars, Weber was scarcely alone. Hugo Preuß, who would become the author of the Weimar constitution, published as early as mid-1915 *The German People and Politics* (with a second edition of 8,000 copies coming out the following year), which was quickly recognized as one of the most momentous publications of the entire war.²⁰ Because German censorship officially forbade and actively suppressed public discussion of internal politics until the end of 1916, Preuß was not yet able to advocate openly for democratic reform in his book, and he even conspicuously avoided using the word “democracy” itself. He did, however, advance a bracing critique of the existing German state, and in so doing implicitly created a space for promoting such reform, by characterizing the Imperial Reich as an *Obrigkeitsstaat*, a word Preuß made famous and is usually rendered in English, somewhat misleadingly, as “autocratic state,” although “authoritarian state” would be preferable and more accurate.²¹ By imposing rule by and from above – that is, through the *Obrigkeit* –, the very structure of the German state, Preuß argued, impeded Germany’s broad-based political and social development from below – that is to say, by the people themselves. In a review of Preuß’s book, the liberal constitutional scholar Gerhard Anschütz noted that, “to be sure, the author’s terminology avoids, apparently intentionally, the word democracy.” But Anschütz felt that Preuß had nevertheless made it clear, and deplored the fact, that the existing German state stood as “an antidemocratic island in the ocean of a world that is becoming more and more democratic.”²²

Hugo Preuß’s book – which also counted Ernst Troeltsch among its many admirers – was an exceptionally early, but hardly the sole contribution to the debate

¹⁸ Max Weber, “Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland,” in *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann, intro. Theodor Heuss (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1958), 233–79.

¹⁹ Weber, “Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland,” *ibid.*, 294–431.

²⁰ Hugo Preuß, *Das deutsche Volk und die Politik* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1915). Llanque, *Demokratisches Denken*, 68, rightly asserts that the book “belongs among the outstanding publications of the World War.”

²¹ The word achieved widespread familiarity through a newspaper article Preuß published in the *Berliner Tageblatt* on November 14, 1918: “Volksstaat oder verkehrter Obrigkeitsstaat?” Reprinted in Hugo Preuß, *Staat, Recht und Freiheit. Aus 40 Jahren deutscher Politik und Geschichte*, with a foreword by Theodor Heuss (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1926), 365–68.

²² Gerhard Anschütz, review of Hugo Preuß, *Das deutsche Volk und die Politik*, in *Preußische Jahrbücher* 164 (1916), 341.

about the need for democratic liberalization and political reform in Germany. And even those at the time who were more skeptical, or merely cautious, about those larger tendencies and who reserved judgment about whether they were in themselves a good thing or not, nevertheless increasingly framed the discussion of Germany's political future around the relative merits or viability of democracy in general in ways that sought to take into account the distinctive historical and cultural identity of Germany. In late 1916, the moderate historian Friedrich Meinecke wrote an essay called "The Reform of the Prussian Franchise" that provides a good example of how some tried to accommodate the incursion of democracy in Germany with existing social and political realities:

We are also not out to win the satisfaction and complete agreement with democracy and social democracy. We are not arguing from the standpoint of democratic ideals, but rather from that of purely state interests. Germany is simply not made for pure democracy. Within its bourgeois classes and in the entire rural population the monarchical tradition is rooted so deeply that reasonable and pragmatic social democrats have now already begun to reckon with it and will know how to find their way to the grand duke as well as to the emperor. Despite all democratic mass movements, the aristocratic view of life is also so integral to the German sensibility, so supported not only by our social structure and custom, but also by the spirit emanating from our highest culture, culminating in Goethe, that, if one would only initiate our democracy properly and not disturb its natural progression, it would also give birth to a new aristocracy and thus organically grow into the old society and our national cultural context.²³

Even for Meinecke, who is typically held up as the very model of the reluctant, "rational" republican, the question was clearly not *if* but rather *how* Germany would become more democratic.²⁴ Or, as Gustaf Steffen, a Swedish social democratic professor of law and member of the Swedish parliament who was sympathetic to the German cause, pithily put it in his book of 1916, *Democracy and the World War*: "There must be democracy. But *how* should democracy be?"²⁵

²³ Friedrich Meinecke, "Die Reform des preußischen Wahlrechts," in *Politische Schriften*, 152.

²⁴ See the richly detailed corrective to the conventional view of Meinecke by Stefan Meinecke, *Friedrich Meinecke. Persönlichkeit und politisches Denken bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995). See also Nikolai Wehrs, "Demokratie durch Diktatur? Meinecke als Vernunftrepublikaner in der Weimarer Republik," in *Friedrich Meinecke in seiner Zeit. Studien zu Leben und Werk*, eds. Gisela Bock and Daniel Schönplugg (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2006), 95–118.

²⁵ Gustav F. Steffen, *Demokratie und Weltkrieg* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1916); cited by Johannes Unold, "Deutscher Bürgerstaat," *Deutschlands Erneuerung. Monatsschrift für das deutsche Volk* 11 (1918), 49. Two years before the war began, Steffen had also published a probing historical and analytical work on *Das Problem der Demokratie* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1912). Interestingly, Troeltsch, who wrote in 1915 that he knew only yet another book by Gustav Steffen, *Die Demokratie in England. Einige Beobachtungen im neuen Jahrhundert und*

This is all not to deny that there were many outspoken and resolute opponents of democracy in Germany who, as the war progressed, grew increasingly alarmed at the widening acceptance of the idea that an expanding democratization would, and indeed must, occur in Germany no matter the outcome of the war. Speaking for countless others of similar mind, Kuno Count von Westarp, who was “probably the most influential conservative party politician in Germany during the first third of the twentieth century,”²⁶ published an essay in 1916 in which he advocated, as its title bluntly states, “Order and Subordination – not Democratic Egalitarianism.”²⁷ Twenty years later, in his authoritative history of conservative politics in Germany just before and during the war, Westarp justified his categorical rejection of democracy by stating that he harbored principled reservations toward the “opinion,” as he took care to call it, that

the political institutions in our Western neighbors and in the United States were the result of an irreversible development of humanity and that the essence of all progress consisted in ever greater political freedom, which was understood as an unlimited participation of the masses in governing and constraining the state’s power with regard to all political endeavors.²⁸

To Westarp, who viewed democracy less as a benefit and more as a threat to humanity, resisting its encroachment was not just a political necessity, it was an ethical obligation. “To the statesman who did not acknowledge democratic development even in itself as legitimate,” he explained, “but viewed it as pernicious, resistance appeared as a duty and by no means as futile, if it were mounted against the very first step and carried out with resolve.”²⁹

Even taking into account the uncompromising opposition of Westarp and innumerable others like him, the larger point is that, even though there was often fierce disagreement about the meaning and value of democracy, and despite many challenges, setbacks, and reversals, some of the most intense political debates in Germany from 1915 onwards revolved around democracy itself: what it was or was not, how to promote and expand it, or how to check and contain it. That this fact has largely been forgotten says less about the importance or quality

ein Renaissanceepilog (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1911), also said “I don’t rate him all that highly.” Cf. Ernst Troeltsch to Eugen Diederichs, 10 July, 1915; in *KGA* 21, 109.

²⁶ “*Ich bin der letzte Preuße.*” *Der politische Lebensweg des konservativen Politikers Kuno Graf von Westarp (1864–1945)*, Larry Eugene Jones and Wolfram Pyta, eds. (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), 1. The editors note, however, that “there is no comprehensive study of his political life despite the abundance of available sources;” *ibid.*

²⁷ Kuno Graf von Westarp, “Ordnung und Unterordnung – nicht demokratische Gleichmacherei,” *Kreuzzeitung*, 23 January, 1916. Republished in *Preussen und die Folgen*, ed. Achim von Borries (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1981), 88.

²⁸ Kuno Graf von Westarp, *Konservative Politik im letzten Jahrzehnt des Kaiserreiches*, Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1935), 2, 217.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

of those contemporary discussions and struggles themselves than it does about our own subsequent failure, for whatever assorted reasons, to perceive their significance or even their very existence.

One final illustration of the many complexities and ambivalences involved: no one could suspect the eminent historian and sociologist Otto Hintze – who has been described as “methodologically the most advanced, if not overall the most important German historian of the late Empire”³⁰ – of harboring insufficient loyalty to the German state. A proud and unapologetic Prussian, Hintze, with a face bearing the deep scars giving testimony to his days as a member of a dueling student fraternity, was outwardly and inwardly unmistakably a figure of the establishment. In 1910, Professor Hintze had been contracted by the highest authorities to write the official history of the Hohenzollern dynasty, the ruling family of Prussia and after 1871 of the united German Empire. Five years later, in 1915, the House of Hohenzollern would celebrate the 500-year anniversary of its reign and wanted its triumphant story properly told. In preparation for the commissioned book, Hintze was even granted an hour-long audience with His Imperial and Royal Majesty, King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany, Wilhelm II, an event that Hintze fondly recalled until the end of his life.³¹ Clearly, the resultant portrait did not displease its subject. When *The Hohenzollern and Their Creation. Five Hundred Years of Patriotic History*³² appeared on schedule, it was distributed free of charge to all German schools, an act of largesse that was made possible by a generous subvention from the Prussian government.³³ As the book makes clear over the course of its more than seven hundred pages, Hintze, although he privately harbored reservations about the person of the reigning monarch, could not conceive of a Germany without the monarchy.

Nevertheless, as early as 1911, Otto Hintze was already entertaining the thought that “perhaps the gradual democratization of political life is an unavoidable, even if undesirable, fate of the modern world, but it is not a blessing and not

³⁰ Jürgen Kocka, “Otto Hintze,” in *Deutsche Historiker*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 3, 41. See also the collection of essays in *Otto Hintze und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft. Ein Tagungsbericht*, eds. Otto Büsch and Michael Erbe (Berlin: Colloquium, 1983).

³¹ See Wolfgang Neugebauer, *Otto Hintze. Denkräume und Sozialwelten eines Historikers in der Globalisierung, 1861–1940* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2015), 418. See also Meinecke, *Autobiographische Schriften, Werke* (Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler, 1969), 8, 235.

³² Otto Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk. Fünfhundert Jahre vaterländischer Geschichte* (Berlin: Paul Parey, 1915). Dietrich Gerhard, “Otto Hintze: His Work and His Significance in Historiography,” *Central European History* 3 (1970), 18, said this work “is still regarded as the most substantial history of Prussia and, in spite of its occasion, as sober and balanced.”

³³ Kocka, “Otto Hintze,” 44.

a goal to aspire to, above all when it occurs at too rapid a tempo.”³⁴ Just before the war in 1914, Hintze’s stance had moved again, ever so slightly, toward a resigned if still reluctant acceptance of such “democratization” as an undeniable reality: “Even if one admits that the tendency toward the progressive democratization of public life is present, there is hardly any question that an unbridled spread of this tendency would not be seen as a blessing.”³⁵

By early 1917, some equivocation about the desirability of democracy in principle still remained in Hintze’s mind. But he had by then recognized that fighting against it would be self-defeating, whereas providing it with positive regulation might contain or correct some of its excesses. As he wrote in an essay that year on “The Democratization of the Prussian Constitution”: “The democratic movement is here and is acting with fundamental force; it would be foolish to want to resist it at all costs. One doesn’t need to promote it deliberately, but one must try to guide it in the right direction.”³⁶ At around the same time, while commenting “On the Reform of the Prussian Franchise,” Hintze came to this remarkable conclusion:

We are living in extraordinary times and have to acquaint ourselves with the thought that a decisive step toward the democratization of our political and social life has become an inevitable necessity. It does not matter if one greets that fact with jubilation or accepts it with silent gravity as a perhaps fateful imperative of the hour. We are about to enter into a new chapter of our history. Within the Empire, the European continent, indeed the world, we cannot alone resist the great momentum of our time toward progressive democratization. We would thereby withdraw into a dangerous isolation from the peoples of the earth.³⁷

The political realism of Hintze’s assessment is impressive, as is the intellectual fairness it displays, leaving room as it does for differences of opinion about whether democracy as such was a positive or negative ideal. But the fact stands that, almost two years before the Weimar Republic was founded or could even be imagined as a remote possibility, Otto Hintze, the very incarnation of a loyal Prussian subject, left no doubt that, to his mind, there was no alternative for Germany but to join the world in following the democratic path.

³⁴ Otto Hintze, “Das monarchische Prinzip und die konstitutionelle Verfassung,” in *Staat und Verfassung. Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur allgemeinen Verfassungsgeschichte*, ed. Gerhard Oestreich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 379. On these and the following passages, see Neugebauer, 446–49.

³⁵ Otto Hintze, “Das Verfassungsleben der heutigen Kulturstaaten,” in *Staat und Verfassung*, 400.

³⁶ Otto Hintze, “Die Demokratisierung der preußischen Verfassung,” *Europäische Staats- und Wirtschaftszeitung* 2/18 (1917), 459.

³⁷ Otto Hintze, “Zur Reform des preußischen Wahlrechts,” *Europäische Staats- und Wirtschaftszeitung* 2/17 (1917), 435.

For Hintze, the embrace of democracy was not warm, but it was genuine and – this point is crucial – the product of a gradual evolution.³⁸ And once he had made it, his hard-won commitment to democracy never wavered, and nothing indicates that Hintze, who was known and respected for the “high degree of intellectual honesty”³⁹ he displayed in both his work and his person, would or could ever change his position.

Nor did he. On May 21, 1933, Hintze resigned from the editorial board of the prestigious journal, *Historische Zeitschrift*, the leading organ for historical research in Germany and on which Hintze had served by then for four decades. He explained his reasons for this dramatic step to Friedrich Meinecke, then the Editor in Chief of the journal, this way: “I would like to avoid the appearance of any concession to a cultural and political direction that proclaims as its goal, among other things, that the year 1789 shall be deleted from world history.”⁴⁰ The reference to the French Revolution was a veiled but unambiguous allusion to the Enlightenment ideals that had inspired the first European democracy, which the Nazis wanted to extinguish and Otto Hintze had come over the years to adopt as his own.⁴¹

Well before Woodrow Wilson delivered his famous message to Congress on April 2, 1917, declaring that the “world must be made safe for democracy” and urging his compatriots “to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included,”⁴² the German people had already long since embarked on the arduous project of their own self-liberation. But not only did Wilson’s appeal to his fellow Americans betray a manifest unfamiliarity with internal German affairs, it also revealed a rather shaky grasp on the very principles he was purporting to promote, showing him to be insensi-

³⁸ This is why it is problematic at best to state, as Rainer Hering does in *Konstruierte Nation. Der Alldeutsche Verband 1890 bis 1939* (Hamburg: Christians, 2003), 343–44, that “even the well-known historian Otto Hintze in 1914 considered parliamentarianism to be unsuitable for Germany.”

³⁹ Kocka, “Otto Hintze,” 43

⁴⁰ From a letter to Friedrich Meinecke, cited in Neugebauer, 565. See on this painful episode, Peter Th. Walther, “Die Zerstörung eines Projektes: Hedwig Hintze, Otto Hintze und Friedrich Meinecke,” in *Friedrich Meinecke in seiner Zeit. Studien zu Leben und Werk*, eds. Gisela Bock and Daniel Schönplüg (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2006), 119–43.

⁴¹ Hintze was of course far from alone in making the difficult transition from proud monarchist to principled republican. Another similar case is the Heidelberg historian Karl Hampe; see his *Kriegstagebuch 1914–1919*, eds. Folker Reichert and Eike Wolgast (Munich: R. Oldenburg, 2004).

⁴² Woodrow Wilson, *War Messages*, 65th Cong., 1st Sess. Senate Doc. No. 5, Serial No. 7264, Washington, D.C., 1917; 3–8.

tive to the contradiction involved in advocating the imposition of a political system by one sovereign nation onto another by force, all in the name of self-determination. Several months later, Eberhard Gothein, a distinguished economist and historian at the University of Heidelberg and the successor to Max Weber's chair, felt moved to remind the American president about some of the finer points of political strategy as well as about some of the basic tenets of democracy itself:

Mr. Wilson should inform himself that, through the insistence on negotiating over peace with Germany only after it has democratized itself, he complicates the battle to an extreme degree for precisely those parties which are striving to achieve that goal. We are fighting it [i.e. the battle for democracy] because we regard democratization as indispensable to the healthy development of our inner affairs and thus to a positive foreign policy; but it is grist to the mills of our political opponents if our enemies turn it into a precondition for a peace agreement. The ordering of our domestic matters is our concern, not that of any foreign power.⁴³

It is to recovering and reconstructing the protracted struggle in Germany during the war to imagine, articulate, and finally to realize a democratic future for itself, to understanding how and why democracy emerged for a significant number of its leading figures as the best, indeed the only possible, political option for their country even while it was still in the midst of the most profound existential crisis it had ever faced, that a major portion of this study is devoted.

Der Kulturkrieg

One of the most important obstacles preventing an adequate appreciation of the evolution of democratic thought in Germany during the First World War has been what has been variously called the "mobilization of intellect," the "war of minds," or, in the phrase made famous by Ernst Troeltsch, the *Kulturkrieg*, or the "culture war:" the unparalleled public debate that burst into being even before war was even officially declared only to continue and intensify as it progressed.

Although there were similar developments in all the warring countries, in Germany the public discussion about the war was an effort in which seemingly every thinking person participated and reflected every conceivable standpoint across the cultural, political, and ideological spectrum. Communists, social democrats, liberal Protestants, conservative Catholics, reactionary aristocrats, progressive feminists, loyal monarchists, neutral pacifists, and everyone else in between: all weighed in on the war and how it affected their cause and what that might mean for Germany, and for the world, as a whole. To date, however, there still exists no

⁴³ Eberhard Gothein, *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 5 September, 1917; cited in Llanque, *Demokratisches Denken*, 115.

exhaustive accounting of the total output by all the participants in this extraordinary public exchange of ideas; even the precise number of publications they produced remains largely a matter of conjecture. One scholar who sought to compile the “most complete bibliography possible” listing the writings published during the war in Germany alone had by the year 1999 amassed no fewer than 13,001 relevant titles.⁴⁴ In its magnitude, diversity, and consequence, the German intellectual engagement with the war and its attendant ramifications is one of the most significant, and most fascinating, cultural endeavors – one hesitates to call it an accomplishment – undertaken during the previous century.

It is also one of the most poorly understood. When the subject of German commentary during the First World War has been addressed by scholars, it has frequently been portrayed as faintly embarrassing, certainly unsavory, and ultimately as incomprehensible. There has even been a basic uncertainty about what to call it. Most often, the phrase the “ideas of 1914” has served as a kind of shorthand formula to refer to the aggregate intellectual content of the German war of words as a whole. Not a little ironically, however, there has been at the same time almost universal agreement that, within the writings that are said to fall under the rubric of those “ideas of 1914,” actual “ideas,” or at any rate intelligible ones, seemed to be in markedly short supply. Klaus Schwabe, who contributed some of the earliest and still among the best-informed examinations of the whole phenomenon, admitted that he found it “difficult to analyze rationally,”⁴⁵ and that, because of their “vagueness,” “it is not easy to render the quintessence of the ‘ideas of 1914’ in clear concepts” owing to “the predominance of a strongly emotional, irrational component.”⁴⁶ In a more recent study, Kurt Flasch also candidly revealed how alien and off-putting he found the writings of the wartime authors. “I agonized over their texts for a long time,” he confessed. “I take the fact that their arguments almost never made sense to me as a sign of historical difference.”⁴⁷ Others have thrown up their hands altogether and diagnosed, though presumably with something less than clinical precision, the entire German intelligentsia as having been afflicted by a “war psychosis.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Kurt Flasch, *Die geistige Mobilmachung. Die deutschen Intellektuellen und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Alexander Fest, 2000), 11.

⁴⁵ Klaus Schwabe, “Zur politischen Haltung der deutschen Professoren im Weltkrieg,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 193 (1961), 605.

⁴⁶ Klaus Schwabe, *Wissenschaft und Kriegsmoral. Die deutschen Hochschullehrer und die politischen Grundfragen des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1969), 37, 43.

⁴⁷ Flasch, 8. See the bracing online review of Flasch’s book by Peter Hoeres in the *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*: <http://library.fes.de/fulltext/afs/htmlrez/80115.htm>

⁴⁸ Charles McClelland, *The German Historians and England. A Study in Nineteenth-Century Views* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971), 226.