H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hans-Ulrich Wehler. *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, Bd. 4: Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten 1914-1949.* München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2003. 1173 S. EUR 49.90 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-406-32264-8.

Reviewed by David Crew (Department of History, University of Texas at Austin)
Published on H-German (June, 2005)

This most recent addition to Hans-Ulrich Wehler's massive multi-volume survey of *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte* is an impressive achievement. It combines an amazingly rich and detailed synthesis of the existing research with a forceful assessment of the course and meaning of the first half of Germany's "short twentieth century" (1914-89). Wehler has a very definite case to make which boils down to two major arguments. The first is a theoretical and methodological assertion, originally formulated in the early 1970s, that a "problem-oriented historical-structural analysis" drawing upon Weberian rather than Marxian concepts can provide powerful explanations of modern German history.[1] In recent years, the cumulative effects of gender history, the "history of everyday life" (*Alltagsgeschichte*), the "linguistic turn" and the new cultural history have raised serious doubts about the ability of Wehler's *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* to construct a convincing master narrative of German history. Some German historians would now argue that no single narrative is possible or even desirable.[2] While acknowledging the significance of the new approaches, Wehler insists that a "social-historical" analysis still provides our best way of understanding modern German history. In his hands, "social history" is an integrating concept that concerns itself not just with social structure but with all the important aspects of historical reality, including politics. Only foreign policy appears not to be included under the umbrella of this comprehensive perspective.

Wehler's second major argument concerns the vital importance of the social, institutional, and mental continuities in modern German history, from the *Kaiserreich* to the Third Reich, that he believes produced Hitler's dictatorship. In the introduction to his book on the *Kaiserreich*, Wehler argued that "a central problem is ... the defence of inherited positions of power by pre-industrial elites against the onslaught of new forces."[3] In the volume under review here, Wehler once again insists upon the importance of the "cartel of traditional power elites" which eventually lifted Hitler into power. Wehler also insists on an important continuity between Bismarck and Hitler. He argues that Bismarck's rule was a form of charismatic leadership which Hitler expanded, intensified, and made into the very pivot of the Nazi regime.

Two other continuities are important to Wehler. First, he draws attention to the persistence and the remarkable success and productivity of the German variant of capitalism across all the political regimes of Germany's twentieth century, except, of course, for the post-1945 East German communist regime. This corporatist-capitalist economic order, which combined "a system of private ownership and initiative with state-directed promotion and protection" (p. 987), continued to reproduce a hierarchy of social inequality in which the market remained the central determining factor. This, too, is a powerful continuity in German history along with the appearance of various nostrums to overcome these social divisions. The most successful of these, Wehler argues, was the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* ideology, which claimed to have replaced antiquated notions of class and class conflict with a new social contract based upon equal opportunity for *bona fide* members of the Aryan race.

Wehler turns, finally, to one of the most basic continuities in modern German history–nationalism. National Socialism had many different roots but Wehler argues that the most significant of all was German nationalism in its most extreme form. Hitler's charismatic rule

and genocidal antisemitism represented a new form of the state–but at its core, Wehler argues, was a radicalized version of nationalism which had the power to mobilize large numbers of Germans.

Although he stresses the importance of key continuities, Wehler also acknowledges that the period covered by his book was an "era of unprecedented turbulence" (p. 983) and "tumultuous radical changes" (p. 989). Yet, it is precisely these ruptures that make it hard to argue for the determining effects of the continuities that Wehler insists are so vital. World War I constituted a massive and multi-faceted break with the German past. Not only did the war kill or wound millions of Germans and destroy the German Empire, but, above all, as Wehler observes, it invalidated old world views and made the competing utopias of Communism and Nazism appealing. It can be suggested–although Wehler does not directly propound this argument–that the entire decade from 1914 to 1924 was a prolonged period of crisis which left deep scars on the bodies, minds, hearts, and memories of millions of Germans.[4] Memories of the lost war, the revolution and the post-war crisis continued to haunt Germany's leaders well into World War II. Hitler wanted, at all costs, to avoid another November 1918, which he understood as not just the result of a conspiratorial, left-wing and Jewish "stab in the back," but as the outcome of the Imperial government's failure to feed its people. During World War II, the Nazis were quite willing to starve to death millions of Soviet citizens in the occupied Eastern territories if this meant that German civilians did not have to tighten their belts.[5]

Hitler and the Nazi movement were distinctive symptoms of the general crisis produced by World War I. The continuity between Bismarck and Hitler that Wehler posits is dependent upon seeing Bismarck's rule as a type of charismatic leadership. Yet, Bismarck was not and certainly did not want to be dependent on any kind of mass following. Hitler would, on the other hand, have been nothing politically without his exceptional relationship with the German people. It is hard to see Hitler playing any political role before 1914. Only the extraordinary conditions of defeat, revolution, and, eventually, the general crisis produced by the Depression made Hitler's type of charismatic leadership possible. Nor would the conservative elites have been able to consign Weimar democracy to the dustbin of history without Hitler, his movement, and his snowballing electorate.

For each of the historical periods discussed in this book–World War I, the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany and post-war Germany until 1949 (the book offers nothing unusual in terms of periodization)–Wehler provides an analysis of the same four basic categories: society, economy, politics and culture. The relative weight and importance of each of these "axes" changes, however, from one period to the next. During the Weimar Republic, the economy dominates all the other spheres. Under Hitler, however, politics is in command.

Although he certainly does not approach Weimar solely from the vantage point of its failure, the Republic's demise and the rise to power of Nazism that this failure enabled is never far from his mind. From the outset, Germany's first democracy was burdened with the mental as well as the material consequences of defeat, revolution and the Versailles Treaty. One of Weimar's biggest problems, even during the so-called "Golden Years" of relative stabilization between 1924 and 1929, was its failure to win the hearts of the majority of ordinary Germans. When the Republic was finally laid to rest in 1933, far fewer Germans mourned its death than had grieved the passing of the Empire in 1918. This lack of popular support was ruthlessly exploited and promoted by members of the conservative ruling elites who had survived the revolution, who hated the republic and who actively undermined it whenever they had the opportunity. Wehler directs a blistering attack against the political delinquency of the East Elbian agrarian nobility. University professors and Protestant church leaders also earn their share of Wehler's scorn. Only a minuscule number of professors declared themselves to be "Vernunftrepublikaner," while the majority pined away for the Empire and the privileges they had enjoyed under the Kaiser. German Protestantism, torn between "nostalgic monarchism" and *vlkisch* nationalism," made no attempt to come to terms with the new republic. Wehler also argues that life was squeezed out of Weimar democracy by a double-pronged assault from the right-wing totalitarianism of the Nazis and their mirror image, "left-totalitarian Communism." Yet, this assessment of the importance of German communism is not reflected in the space Wehler devotes to the German Communist movement, a mere seven pages (pp. 535-541) compared to the thirty-nine pages in which he analyzes "The Rise of National Socialism" (pp. 542-579) in great detail.

Readers will be disappointed if they are expecting an extensive discussion of one of the most distinctive features of Weimar Germany, its vibrant, experimental, and hotly contested cultural life. Although "culture" is one of Wehler's four primary "axes," he devotes just a few pages to film and radio and no serious attention to Weimar

painting. Yet the Nazis did not limit their assault on the Weimar Republic to its political or economic weaknesses. They also condemned the "cultural bolshevism" which they insisted the hated Weimar "system" had imposed upon Germany. In the Nazis' minds, the "degenerate" art of Weimar was one more sign that it was a racially diseased "Jewish Republic." In 1937, Hitler's "Degenerate Art Exhibition" purged German culture of these dangerous cultural excrescences. Wehler's discussion of "culture" under the Nazis includes religion, the educational system, censorship of literature, and political control of publishing and the new media. However, Wehler provides no substantial discussion of Nazi architecture or art policy, even though Hitler was intensely interested in both of these areas of cultural production and despite the fact that Nazi art policy, in recent years, has become an important field of research.[6]

Wehler is also unwilling to engage seriously with Detlev Peukert's influential and challenging interpretation of Weimar Germany. Peukert detected a different set of continuities between Nazism and Germany's pre-1933 past than those to which Wehler draws attention. Peukert argued that the *Kaiserreich* introduced a period of "classical modernity" in Germany, which experienced its crisis years during the Weimar Republic (*Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne*).[7] The Third Reich was the result of Weimar's failure to resolve the multiple crises of "classical modernity" within the political framework of parliamentary democracy.[8] Peukert insisted that the Third Reich was a pathological variant of Germany's pre-1933 modernity, an exaggerated development of modernity's "dark side." Wehler is impatient with such arguments (pp. 674-675). For Wehler, the main problem with modernity in Germany appears to have been its incomplete development rather than any possible "pathologies" or contradictions that modernity (in Germany or elsewhere) might have contained.

Wehler argues that the key to understanding Hitler's success is Max Weber's concept of "charismatische Herrschaft." In the unprecedented crisis of the Great Depression, more and more Germans began to believe that only a strong "leader" could solve Germany's problems. By 1932-33, many were convinced that Hitler was a new "political messiah" who would lead Germany to a better future. After 1933, this prophecy appeared to come true as the rearmament drive ended mass unemployment and Hitler's adventurous foreign policy was rewarded with one bloodless victory after the other. These were ideal conditions, Wehler argues, for the construction of a powerful and enduring charismatic relationship between the *Fhrer* and "his people" that became the very essence of the Nazi political regime.

However, it is important to separate the reality of this relationship from its propaganda image. From the very earliest days of the Nazi movement, Hitler had carefully rehearsed and performed the role of political prophet and charismatic leader. After 1933, the Nazis mobilized the entire state and propaganda apparatus to create the illusion that a charismatic relationship did in fact exist between Hitler and the German people. Determining how much of this illusion was also real is more difficult than Wehler seems prepared to admit. The actual spectrum of popular response to Hitler was quite complicated and certainly changed over the course of time. At the beginning of this volume, Wehler rejects Thomas Nipperdey's suggestion that "the basic color of history is grey, in endless shadings" (p. xx). Wehler insists that "in the era of two total wars, the *Fhrer*-dictatorship of Hitler, the war of annihilation in the East, the collapse of civilization in the Holocaust, clear standards of judgment, that must absolutely recognize 'black and white,' are completely unavoidable" (p. xxi). This is certainly a valid statement of a moral position. It is less helpful as an analytical tool. When it comes to the task of constructing a nuanced, balanced analysis of the attitudes of Germans toward Hitler during the Third Reich, the shades of grey that separated the black from the white extremities of the spectrum may prove to be quite useful colors. When Wehler uses blanket categories to describe the relationship between Hitler and "his Germans"–such as "blind faith" ("*blindes Vertrauen*," p. 615) or the "consensus state" ("*Konsenzstaat*," p. 738)–he erases these important gradations.

Wehler insists upon the decisive and determining role played by Hitler in the development and implementation of the Holocaust. He exhibits no sympathy for the kinds of "structuralist" arguments that have been advanced by Hans Mommsen and others. Without Hitler's fanatical antisemitism, Wehler insists, there would have been no Holocaust. Wehler's focus on Hitler's central importance in the Holocaust, does not, however, blind him to the participation and responsibility of many ordinary Germans. Wehler makes it very clear that the annihilation of the European Jews would not have been possible without the participation of "hundreds of thousands of activists and millions of willing helpers," including administrative officials, judges, railwaymen, police officers, and soldiers in the Wehrmacht (p. 885).

Although Wehler sees Nazism as the result of important continuities in modern German history, he also

argues that the Nazi regime produced radical breaks with inherited hierarchies of social structure. The Nazi promise of a racial community was embedded in the prospect of a racially defined "achievement society" that offered very real new possibilities for social advancement, but, even more importantly, produced an enduring "mental loosening of class differences." This transformation of social perceptions was one of the most remarkable changes produced by Nazism in its brief, yet massively destructive period of rule. The social-Darwinist, meritocratic achievement society promoted by the Nazis combined with the enormous power of Hitler's charismatic leadership to mobilize the popular energies that made it possible for Nazism to continue fighting the war to the bitter end. Yet, the energies unleashed by Hitler could also be utilized after 1945 for the reconstruction of Germany. Ironically, and very much despite their own intentions, the Nazis helped to make the post-war transition to a functioning West German democracy possible.[9]

It is interesting that Wehler has chosen to end this volume with the year 1949, rather than 1945. There are certainly good reasons for this decision. The actual fighting may have stopped in early May 1945, but Germans continued to struggle for survival for at least the next three years. What type of Germany might emerge from the ruins of Hitler's Third Reich was by no means clear in 1945. By 1949, however, it was obvious that whatever Germany might become in the second half of the twentieth century, there would be two competing versions of the new national future. Wehler's discussion does not, however, provide a deep analysis of the years between 1945 and 1949. What he has to say is not much more than a sketch and the occupied zones of West Germany receive a good deal more attention than East Germany.

This review of Wehler's main arguments cannot do justice to the richness, complexity and detail of an analysis developed over more than eleven hundred pages. Most readers will find this book challenging. Wehler makes no concessions to story-telling. His writing is analytical and sometimes a bit schematic. At times he is argumentative, even polemical and moralistic. Yet even if readers do not agree with all of Wehler's judgments, they will nonetheless find here elegant, sophisticated, yet accessible statements of the major historical debates (for example, his excellent summary of "polycentrism" in the Third Reich, pp. 623-625). Apart from the arguments and analyses it presents, the book is an invaluable compendium of factual information. Recently, one of my undergraduate students asked me a question about how the Nazis financed rearmament. Not knowing the details, I checked Wehler's table of contents to find that he provides a concise, clear answer to precisely this question (pp. 698-699). The book reflects Wehler's vast knowledge and the long and distinguished career that he has devoted to understanding German history. Wehler has drawn upon the results of a massive body of research on the first fifty years of German history in the past century. It is unfortunate that the bibliographic references to this material are not easier to access. Because there is no actual bibliography, anyone interested in the literature on a specific topic will have to work their way through the most relevant footnotes.

One of the most important questions raised by this book is whether the particular "social-history" paradigm, first introduced more than thirty years ago by Wehler and other members of the so-called Bielefeld School, can still help us to make sense of modern German history. In his preface, Wehler acknowledges that his analysis now faces considerable competition from a variety of other "methodological approaches, theoretical verdicts and interpretations," which readers may well find more convincing (p. xxii). In Wehler's skilled hands, "Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte" certainly retains the power to generate a coherent, and in many ways compelling, explanation of the first half of Germany's twentieth century. Yet even such a virtuoso performance cannot conceal its own major shortcomings. These are most evident in the proliferation of "continuities" we find in Wehler's analysis–not just the continuity of elites, but of charismatic leadership, of capitalism, of nationalism. It is by no means clear what explanatory weight each of these different strands of continuity is meant to bear, or how exactly they relate to one another. A compelling case can also be made that the often quite violent and dramatic ruptures experienced in Germany's "Era of Extremes" (*Zeitalter der Extreme*) have exerted greater influence than any of the continuities that Wehler has identified.

Notes

[1]. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1918* (Gttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), p. 11.

[2]. Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003); see H-German review at `http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=219971064463851`.

[3]. Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1918* , p.

14.

[4]. Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian, eds., *Pain and Prosperity: Reconsidering Twentieth-Century German History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). See H-German review at http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=126411106855288.

[5]. Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999).

[6]. See, for example, Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). See H-German review at http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=1635846635364; and Alan E. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chamber of Music, Theater and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Wehler mentions Steinweis but not Petropoulos in the relevant footnote (p. 836).

[7]. Detlev Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik. Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), p. 17.

[8]. Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 42.

[9]. Although, as Ulrich Herbert has recently pointed out, a transformation of West German mentalities and values, which finally anchored economic success in a secure popular commitment to a democratic society, took much longer to complete. See Ulrich Herbert, ed., *Wandlungsprozesse in Westdeutschland. Belastung, Integration, Liberalisierung 1945-1980* (Gttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: David Crew. Review of Wehler, Hans-Ulrich, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, Bd. 4: Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten 1914-1949.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10583

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.