

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Hiden. *Republican and Fascist Germany: Themes and Variations in the History of Weimar and the Third Reich, 1918-1945.* London: Longman, 1996. x + 270 pp. \$185.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-49209-7; \$41.60 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-49210-3.

Reviewed by Lee Blackwood (Yale University)
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This book is a sophisticated, well-written contribution to the teaching literature on the period of Europe's second Thirty-Years' War, when events in Germany had a determinative impact on world history. John Hiden not only identifies and elucidates the critical issues of first Weimar and then Nazi Germany's internal development; he also pays substantial attention to the linkages between domestic politics and foreign policy as well as to Germany's central role in the diplomatic arena. Coming to us at a time when simplistic, monocausal interpretations of the German past have once again gained the limelight, and when too much of the academic training in modern German history reflects an epistemological agenda suffused with relativism, Hiden's book is a breath of fresh air. It stimulates the reader to acknowledge and to reflect on enduring political, economic, and social themes.

The densely packed, but nonetheless fluid narrative tackles the following topics:

- * The impact of Versailles and Gustav Stresemann's pursuit of treaty revisionism posited on integrating Germany with the West for the sake of acquiring greater freedom of maneuver in the East

- * The promise and problems of the Weimar Republic's democratic system

- * The political landscape during the Weimar Republic as defined by the major parties

- * The impact of German society's social and ideological divisions on Weimar parliamentarianism and the increasingly difficult quest for stable parliamentary coalitions

- * The nature and exercise of state authority under the

Nazi dictatorship and the role of overlapping bureaucracies

- * The opportunistic—though by no means conflict-free—relationship between big business and the state

- * The working class and its passage from a social welfare system born of revolution to a dictatorship that ratcheted up labor requirements in the name of national sacrifice

- * Farmers and the NSDAP's ability to exploit the Protestant rural population's lack of strong political affiliations

- * The middle classes and the phenomenon of the "shrinking middle" in Weimar and the NSDAP's attendant appeal to the *Mittelstand*

- * The role of police-based control during the Nazi period and the ideological and social foundations of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a phenomenon serving to link the regime and the populace

- * The Holocaust and the implications of Hitler's racial war for an understanding of German history, and, finally

- * Nazi Germany's foreign policy in the broader context of European international and economic relations.

This, needless to say, is a very ambitious agenda, and Hiden acquits himself well by providing an intelligible overview of the major debates and the literature surrounding these weighty issues. At the same time, this book is more than just a historiographical overview. Conceptually, the author focuses his analysis on the all-too-easily discounted fact that the Third Reich was but one possible outcome of the Weimar Republic's crisis,

and, furthermore, that Weimar itself was by no means doomed to fail.

Instead of attempting to provide a complete history of the 1918-33 and 1933-45 periods, the author focuses on “themes and variations” in order, *inter alia*, to demonstrate “how much effort was required and on how many different fronts ... the Weimar Republic could be destroyed and with it some of its promising policies.” Hiden correctly notes that “the resilience of the Weimar Republic is not something which is commonly stressed, partly because it was for so long treated as a mere antechamber to the Third Reich” (p. 2). By no means should this emphasis on contingency be construed as an effort to downplay implicitly the Third Reich’s ignominious place in history. Hiden notes, for example, that the widespread exposure of German troops in the East to the gruesome reality of genocide and racial warfare meant that news of what Nazism really entailed for those deemed inimical to the *Volksgemeinschaft* circulated much more widely than true apologists would have us believe.

In addition, Hiden does a masterful job of delineating the ways in which all segments of the German population grew to accommodate themselves to the Nazi dictatorship. The motives behind German complicity ranged from the mundane will to survive—both in the face of, and, indeed, without repression (witness the behavior of the civil service and the military leadership after 1933). Complicity grew out of the crass and corruptive pursuit of self-interest (witness the rise of German tourism that accompanied Germany’s territorial expansion beginning in March 1938). And German motives also, of course, reflected various degrees of social and political acceptance of Nazism, a force which, Hiden acknowledges, mobilized significant mass support at a critical juncture in Weimar’s attempt to master a daunting array of social, economic, and political crises. The fact that Hitler’s seizure of power was far from inevitable did not prevent the disturbing emergence of a viable, accepted *Volksgemeinschaft* which in turn formed an essential underpinning of Nazi Germany’s racial war. On the other hand, the precarious position of the Nazi movement on the eve of the *Machtergreifung* compels us to avoid giving short shrift to the

critical human factor (witness the myopic conservative elites, whom Hiden appropriately excoriates for their decisive role in first undermining the Brüning government and then facilitating the transfer of power to Hitler in 1933 in the fantastically stupid hope that the Nazi leader could thus be contained).

The discerning reader will take away from this book an appreciation of how Nazism functioned as a *sui generis* system defined less by inherent German “traits” and more by both the continuities and discontinuities between the Weimar and Nazi periods. As the author notes, “the [Weimar] Republic is a much better candidate for ‘historicization’ than the Third Reich will ever be, in so far as its various and genuine achievements have been seriously undervalued in the determined quest to track down every slightest sign of the terminal disease falling on Germany in 1933.” By seeking to make “plain just how much effort the NSDAP had to expend to destroy the political system in which it grew” (pp. 213-14), Hiden has made a very timely contribution to the English-language literature.

While there is little that is new here or controversial, the book is a very handy compilation of themes and historiographical references. Advanced undergraduate and graduate students could put this book to good use as a capstone reading in a seminar on Weimar Germany and the Third Reich, though the bibliographical essay may contain too many German-language citations to be of much use to the former. There are occasional errors as well. The SPD [Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands] is listed as the Sozialistische Partei Deutschlands, and Hiden is entirely too bullish on Great Britain’s alleged role as a stabilizing force in Eastern Europe after 1918 for this reader’s taste. Otherwise, however, the book appears to have undergone thoughtful and careful editing, and it is clearly the product of serious reflection and judicious synthesizing by its author.

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