Why did Weimar Fail?

How and why did Weimar democracy fail? By examining how Berlin workers experienced and participated in Weimar’s collapse at the street level between 1929 and 1933, Swett offers new answers to this old but still important question.

Individuals may have experienced the republic’s collapse as a natural disaster before which they were helpless, but historical scholarship produced after 1945 has sought more satisfying explanations that emphasize the scope and limits of human agency and responsibility. In his classic study *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik* (1955), Karl-Dietrich Bracher portrayed Weimar’s end as the cumulative result of many factors, among which were the weaknesses of multiparty democracy, the actions of the *Reichswehr*, the proliferation of paramilitary groups and radical parties, and pressures brought on by the Great Depression. Despite his careful attention to these structural factors, Bracher assigned ultimate responsibility for the final collapse to the small group of politicians and industrialists around the ailing President Paul von Hindenburg. Important revisionist challenges looking beyond the realm of high politics began to emerge in the 1980s. One line of revision has been to look to the action of political parties, especially the SPD and KPD, for the roots of failure. In *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence 1929-1933* (1983), for example, Eve Rosenhaft located the failure of German communism to combat fascism effectively in the local politics and culture of Berlin’s urban ghettos. Rather than looking to the failures of the political left, a second line of revision has emphasized the failure of the middle classes to embrace republicanism in the 1920s as a key factor in Weimar’s collapse. Such was the approach taken, for instance, by Peter Fritzsche in *Germans into Nazis* (1998).

Sometimes against and sometimes in concert with previous approaches, Swett uses the tools of *Alltagsgeschichte* to glean a deeper understanding of how ordinary Berlin workers participated—albeit unwittingly—in the transition from Weimar republicanism to Nazi authoritarianism. Her focus is less on party politics than on the everyday meanings of radicalism. Rather than taking party affiliation with the KDP or NSDAP as a marker of radicalism, in other words, Swett digs below the level of party politics to uncover the causes and context of radical behavior at the street level. Radicalism, she argues, had less to do with economic hardship or the competing ideologies of communism and National Socialism than it did with “the day-to-day relationships between members of these communities and the methods they employed for preserving some degree of familial and neighborhood autonomy in the face of catastrophe” (pp. 7-8). On her account, then, the culture of radicalism emerged less out of party politics or opposition to the state than it did out of grassroots action undertaken by locals to defend the security and independence of their community in the face of mounting national crisis. Grassroots activism backfired, however, because the strategies employed—especially when violent—pitted neighbor against neighbor and thereby eroded the communal solidarity needed to confront the socio-economic and political crisis after
1929. All of this, she concludes, deepens our understanding of why Europe’s strongest labor movement failed to mount an effective opposition to the Nazi triumph in 1933.

Drawing on an impressively varied source base that combines published materials (city newspapers, novels, memoirs, and oral histories) with archival materials in police and political party files, Neighbors and Enemies has a clear and logical structure. After a long introduction situating the project historiographically in the literature of Weimar’s collapse, the book is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the Kiez (small neighborhood) centered on Kreuzberg’s Nostizstrasse and examines how a sense of local autonomy and identity developed there during the 1920s. Although it would not have shown up on an official map of the city, the Kiez was a locally recognized neighborhood within a neighborhood—a community created by crowded tenement life and shared landmarks (local pubs, public transport stops, etc.) and characterized by a strong sense of local allegiance and solidarity. By tracking how this Kiez responded to socioeconomic crisis from 1929 to 1933, Swett seeks bottom-up insights into Weimar’s collapse. Chapter 2 investigates how the stability and autonomy of the Kiez began to decay during the Great Depression. Long-term unemployment challenged gender boundaries and exacerbated generational tensions: resentment over being “feminized” by lack of work led older men to create a hyper-masculine political sphere hostile to women, while youths unable to enter the work-force at all rejected the social democratic and trade union traditions of their elders in favor of more radical alternatives. Economic crisis, Swett shows, unraveled socio-political stability at the neighborhood level first. Chapter 3 turns to an examination of how republicans and radicals competed for the allegiance of Berlin’s workers. Republicans, working through the SPD and the Reichsbanner (a prorpublican paramilitary group founded in 1924), tried to convince workers that it was in their best interest to support Weimar democracy and oppose the radicalism being espoused by the KPD and NSDAP, but could not find a way to make their message convincing. The radical parties also vied for workers’ allegiance. Although they were more successful in recruiting members, they also had little success in enforcing party discipline: locals regularly disregarded party directives and, in many cases, seem to have had little interest or grasp of their party’s goals.

Indeed, as Swett shows in chapters 4 and 5, making a workers’ revolution (the goal of the KPD) or building the Third Reich (the goal of the NSDAP) were not the reasons that workers joined the radical parties—rather, they joined and then co-opted party structures to address local concerns. In the two strongest chapters of the book, Swett takes a close look at grassroots politics as distinct from party politics: its sources, aims, and methods (chapter 4) and its results (chapter 5). Here, Swett’s research yields rich new insights into the meanings that Weimar politics had on the street. Rather than reading street battles, local protests, the proliferation of party uniforms, and the like as signs of economic desperation or ideological warfare between the KPD and NSDAP, Swett looks to the day-to-day relationships between the inhabitants of the Kiez to discern their true meaning. Thus, whereas previous scholars have emphasized how different in makeup the two radical parties were, Swett explores the intermingling of communists and Nazis at the neighborhood level (see the suggestive photo on p. 205): radicals knew each other at the local level, in other words, and were competing to solve local (not national) problems such as hunger, turf encroachment, and street safety for residents (especially female ones). Through a fascinating use of denunciation records as a source, both by locals to the police and by party members about their own comrades, Swett suggests in chapter 4 that denunciation functioned as a sort of “internal discipline” (p. 230) in the Kiez, that is, as a way to curb the influence of outsiders. Turning from denunciation to political violence in chapter 5, Swett makes innovative use of welfare reports on youthful offenders to excavate the motives behind small-scale neighborhood violence. Conflicts over money and personal animosities played their role, but mostly small-scale violence seems to have come out of a desire by young unemployed males to demonstrate that they still controlled their communities and lives: to protect women and friends, for example, or to discourage public drunkenness or neighbor-against-neighbor spying.

How did these forms of localized personal conflict cascade to threaten the stability of the entire city and, eventually, the republic itself? In her conclusion, Swett seeks to answer this question by returning to the macrolevel to consider the Emergency Decrees, issued from mid-1930 onwards on the basis of the infamous Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, as “a response to the culture of radicalism in Berlin” (p. 286). She writes: “The primary motivation of radical workers in Berlin, regardless of party affiliation, was not to overthrow the republic but to defend the sovereignty of their communities. The strategies they chose, however, were incompatible with a bordered public sphere and were seen as chal-
lenging to the authority of the state. With the advent of the emergency decrees, this challenge was criminalized” (p. 286). With the Nazi seizure of power underway in early 1933, workers were in no shape to mount an effective challenge, not just because—as previous scholars have stressed—of the fatal ideological division between the SPD and KPD, but because workers were by 1933 so alienated from the parties that claimed to represent their interests. Indeed, on the book’s last page, Swett boldly claims: “It was not just the failures of the Weimar Republic that encouraged a local radical culture but the freedoms of the republic as well. Though workers did not articulate it as such and their actions worked largely to weaken democracy, they were fighting to defend a local sense of power that could have only developed during the republican period. By 1933, the freedoms that had allowed for local radicalism no longer existed” (p. 300).

In Swett’s finely drawn portrait of how a working-class district of Berlin weathered the crisis years of 1929-33, we can discern both the merits and limits of Alltagsgeschichte as an historical approach. On the one hand, Swett’s careful attention to the culture of everyday life yields a rich evocation of what life in a Berlin Kiez was actually like for men as well as women, adults as well as children. Even more importantly, she has deepened our understanding of how small “p” politics worked on the Berlin streets, particularly in chapters 4 and 5 where she gives sensitive readings of how ordinary individuals, informed by their own (not their party’s) sense of what was good and right for their community, acted with political agency. Moreover, many of her findings—for instance, the intermingling of fascist and communist workers in the Kiez—will be sure to stimulate further research. On the other hand, I finished the book wondering about the costs of shrinking the historical scale to the Kiez: how much about macro-level change can we really explain by attending to the micro-level? Swett carefully balances her attention to the everyday in Berlin with a discussion of political change at the national level, but the discussions are often disconnected. Are the street-level politics of Berlin’s working-class districts really sufficient to explain the collapse of the Weimar republic? Should they be? There are times in the book, indeed, when Swett seems to claim too much for her local study (for instance, in her conclusion when she portrays the Emergency Decrees as a response primarily to worker radicalism in Berlin). These questions about the explanatory power and limits of Alltagsgeschichte, however, should in no way discourage readers; indeed, they should pick up this marvelous study of Berlin street politics and seek answers for themselves.

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