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The Weimar Republic in the early 1920s

George Grosz (1893-1959) was one of the most provocative artists in Germany in the Weimar years and played an important role in the Dada movement from 1917 to 1920. His paintings, drawings, and cartoons brilliantly caricatured the powerful nationalist elites of German society: industrialists, bankers, military officers, judges, teachers, and churchmen. His acerbic political satire led to confrontations with the authorities and criminal prosecution. Grosz emigrated from Germany in January 1933, just prior to Hitler's appointment as chancellor. His autobiography was first published in German in 1946 under the title *A Little Yes and a Big No*. It described the disaffection of left-wing writers and artists from a Weimar establishment that failed to enact lasting reforms. The passages excerpted here depict the chaotic conditions following the First World War and the bitter political conflicts and social divisions that characterized the early years of the Weimar Republic. They also convey the sense of foreboding with which many supporters of the Republic viewed the political developments of the time.

2.8 George Grosz, *Autobiography*

Even the capital of our new German Republic was like a bubbling cauldron. You could not see who was heating the cauldron; you could merely see it merrily bubbling, and you could feel the heat increasing. There were speakers on every street corner and songs of hatred everywhere. Everybody was hated: the Jews, the capitalists, the gentry, the communists, the military, the landlords, the workers, the unemployed, the "Black Reichswehr,"² the [Allied] control commissions, the politicians, the department stores, and again the Jews. It was a real orgy of incitement, and the Republic was so weak that you hardly took notice of it. All this had to end with an awful crash.

It was a completely negative world, with gaily colored froth on top that many people mistook for the true, the happy Germany before the eruption of the new barbarism. Foreigners who visited us at that time were easily fooled by the apparent light-hearted, whirling fun on the surface, by the nightlife and the so-called freedom and flowering of the arts. But that was really nothing more than froth. Right under that short-lived, lively surface of the shimmering swamp were fratricide and general discord, and regiments were being formed for the final reckoning. Germany seemed to be splitting into two parts that hated each other, as in the saga of the Nibelungs. And we knew all that; or at least we had forebodings.

Postwar Berlin: noise, rumors, shouting, political slogans - what will happen now? Everybody can say whatever he wishes, so everybody talks about riots and strikes, about martial law and impending political takeover. [Matthias] Erzberger, who negotiated and signed the German peace treaty, is assassinated by members of a "patriotic" society. [Karl] Liebknecht is murdered by a soldier, "Red Rosa" Luxemburg is thrown into a canal.³ Those in power do nothing. [Friedrich] Ebert⁴ has his beard trimmed and exchanges his democratic worker's cap for a top-hat; he now looks more like a Chairman of the Board, and dresses accordingly.

² The "Black Reichswehr" was a military formation secretly organized by the army (the Reichswehr) in the early 1920s to circumvent the limits placed on Germany's military forces by the Versailles Treaty. It enrolled approximately 20,000 volunteers in 1923.

³ Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) and Rosa Luxemburg (1870-1919), founders of the German Communist Party (KPD) after the war, were killed in captivity during the failed Spartacus uprising in January 1919.

Privy councillor [Otto] Meissner,⁵ the Master of Ceremonies of the Republic, tries to fill the shoes of his illustrious predecessors and avoid too many proletarian mistakes. Nasty jokes circulate about him. The little man takes his revenge, as he feels no power above him.

Yes, there was freedom of speech. But people had been used to marching for years, so they simply went on marching, albeit less straight, less smartly than before. For years they had obeyed orders; now they went on marching, but nobody gave orders ... yet. They had to march because they knew they must fall into line. But what they missed was the sharp voice of command. They simply did not know what to do with the freedom for which they had ardently yearned. Everyone had his own political opinion, a mixture of fear, envy, and hope, but what use was that without leadership? The unions? They sufficed no longer. The grumbling became increasingly threatening, finally dangerous. As no one felt guilty – a whole people never does – everyone looked for a scapegoat, and harmless old ditties about Jews suddenly had the odor of a pogrom.

Not only young people marched through the streets. There were many who could not get over the defeat. Others were unable to find their way back into the working world they had left. That world had disappeared or was disappearing, and actual work was hard to find, even by those who were eager to work. Berlin was teeming with the unemployed. To pacify them, they were given games instead of work. Out of every 100 persons, 80 lived from government unemployment benefits.

Source: *George Grosz: An Autobiography*, trsl. by Nora Hodges (Berkeley: University of California Press 1998), pp. 149–150

Euthanasia and eugenics

The eugenic "racial hygiene" movement in Germany, founded in 1905, sought to strengthen the German nation and race in its Darwinian competition with other peoples. It viewed modern medicine and democratic, humanitarian values as contrary to natural selection, because they enabled the weak and the sick to survive. In the aftermath of defeat in the First World War, German nationalists increasingly looked to racial hygiene as a potential source of national regeneration. Already during the war, as shortages increased, mental patients had been allowed to die through reduced diets, and the medical facilities of mental hospitals had been made available to treat the casualties of war. Euthanasia, eugenics, and other measures aimed at purifying the German race entered the public discussion in the Weimar era to a greater degree than had been the case before the war.

In 1920 the lawyer Karl Binding and the psychiatrist Alfred Hoche published the pamphlet, *Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life*, excerpts from which are presented in the first selection below. The two authors stressed the high cost of keeping mentally defective and incurably ill patients in public institutions. They viewed involuntary euthanasia, forced sterilization, and other eugenic measures not as a regression to

4 Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925), head of the majority Social Democratic Party (SPD), was the first president of the Weimar Republic from 1919 to his death in 1925.

5 Otto Meissner (1880–1953) was a leading civil servant from 1911 to 1945. He continued as chief of the presidential chancellery under Hitler.

in their own right. He seeks to secure their permanence in the world by recapturing the rank to which their defenders are entitled. At the same time he is fighting for the cause of Europe, for every European influence that radiates from Germany as the center of Europe.

We are not thinking of the Europe of today which is too contemptible to have any value. We are thinking of the Europe of yesterday and whatever thereof may be salvaged for tomorrow. We are thinking of the Germany of all time, the Germany of a two-thousand-year past, the Germany of an eternal present which dwells in the spirit, but must be secured in reality and can only so be politically secured.

The ape and tiger in man are threatening. The shadow of Africa falls across Europe. It is our task to be guardians on the threshold of values.

Source: Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany's Third Empire*, trsl. by E. O. Lorjmer (New York: Howard Fertig, 1971), pp. 13-15, 37-8, 91-2, 161-5, 263-4

Hyperinflation, 1923

In this excerpt from Stefan Zweig's 1943 autobiography, the Austrian author describes his experience of the great inflation in Germany in 1923. Inflation had plagued the German economy because of pent-up consumer demand and reparations payments in kind ever since the end of the First World War, but it reached unprecedented proportions in the summer of 1923. In January of that year the French occupied the Ruhr industrial region to enforce German reparations shipments. The German government countered by calling on public employees to refuse to cooperate with the French. To finance this passive resistance the government resorted to printing currency that soon led to galloping inflation. The exchange rate went from 7.43 marks to the dollar in November 1918 to 7,589 marks to the dollar at the end of 1922. It declined precipitously in 1923 and reached a low of 4.2 trillion to one in November, the month that Hitler launched his "Beer Hall Putsch." By that time the new government under Gustav Stresemann (1878-1929) had called a halt to passive resistance. The currency was stabilized with international cooperation, and after the defeat of the Hitler Putsch (Doc. 2.13) the Weimar Republic entered a temporary phase of relative stability that lasted until the onset of the Great Depression in 1930.

The hyperinflation of 1923, however, left lasting scars. It impoverished millions of ordinary Germans with savings accounts while enriching businesses and wealthier people who held their assets in real property. The memory of this trauma in the public consciousness contributed to the policies that would later intensify the *deflation* of the 1930s. Because holders of foreign currency enjoyed privileges unavailable to ordinary Germans, the inflation undoubtedly exacerbated xenophobia as well. Most damaging of all were its long-term political effects. It further undermined public confidence in liberal institutions and gave added legitimacy to anti-republican forces. While Hitler failed to gain power in the Great Inflation, memories of its devastating impact on German society contributed to his popular support in the Great Depression.

2.11 Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*

Abruptly the mark plunged down, never to stop until it had reached the fantastic figures of madness, the millions, the billions and trillions. Now the real witches' sabbath of inflation started, against which our Austrian inflation with its absurd enough ratio of 15,000 old to 1 of new currency had been shabby child's play. To describe it in detail, with its incredibilities, would take a whole book and to readers of today it would seem like a fairy tale. I have known days when I had to pay fifty thousand marks for a newspaper in the morning and a hundred thousand in the evening; whoever had foreign currency to exchange did so from hour to hour, because at four o'clock he would get a better rate than at three, and at five o'clock he would get much more than he had got an hour earlier. For instance, I sent a manuscript to my publisher on which I had worked for a year; to be on the safe side I asked for an advance payment of royalties on ten thousand copies. By the time the check was deposited, it hardly paid the postage I had put on the parcel a week before; on street cars one paid in millions, trucks carried the paper money from the Reichsbank to the other banks, and a fortnight later one found hundred thousand mark notes in the gutter; a beggar had thrown them away contemptuously. A pair of shoe laces cost more than a shoe had once cost; no, more than a fashionable shoe store with two thousand pairs of shoes had cost before; to repair a broken window cost more than the whole house had formerly cost, a book more than the printer's shop with a hundred presses. For a hundred dollars one could buy rows of six-story houses on the Kurfürstendamm, and factories were to be had for the old equivalent of a wheelbarrow. Some adolescent boys who had found a case of soap forgotten in the harbor disported themselves for months in cars and lived like kings, selling a cake every day, while their parents, formerly well-to-do, slunk about like beggars. Messenger boys established foreign exchange businesses and speculated in currencies of all lands. Towering over all of them was the gigantic figure of the super-profitteer Stinnes.⁹ Expanding his credit and in thus exploiting the mark he bought whatever was for sale, coal mines and ships, factories and stocks, castles and country estates, actually for nothing because every payment, every promise became equal to naught. Soon a quarter of Germany was in his hands, and perversely, the masses, who in Germany always become intoxicated at a success that they can see with their eyes, cheered him as a genius. The unemployed stood around by the thousands and shook their fists at the profiteers and foreigners in their luxurious cars who bought whole rows of streets like a box of matches; everyone who could read and write traded, speculated, and profited and had a secret sense that they were deceiving themselves and were being deceived by a hidden force which brought about this chaos deliberately in order to liberate the State from its debts and obligations.

Source: Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, trsl. by Helmut Ripperger (New York: Viking Press, 1943), pp. 311-313. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Putnam, Inc. From the original German text, (c) 1976 Williams Verlag AG, Zurich/Atrium Press Ltd, London

⁹ Hugo Stinnes (1870-1924) was an industrialist who took advantage of the inflationary situation to build what was for a time the largest industrial conglomerate in Germany.

and hold them fast, as if with hands, and you have the singular habit of addressing yourself to one particular member of your audience at any one moment – I noticed this to be completely characteristic. As for your hands, they are so expressive in their movements that they are like eyes in this respect. It is hardly surprising that a man like that can give peace to a poor suffering spirit!

Especially when he is dedicated to the service of the fatherland.

My faith in Germandom has not wavered for a moment, though my hopes were – I confess – at a low ebb. With one stroke you have transformed the state of my soul. That Germany, in the hour of her greatest need, brings forth a Hitler – that is proof of her vitality ... that the magnificent Ludendorff openly supports you and your movement: What wonderful confirmation!

I could go untroubled to sleep, and there was no need for me to have woken up. May God protect you!

Source: Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Briefe, 1882-1924, und Briefwechsel mit Kaiser Wilhelm II*, Vol. I (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1928), pp. 124-6.
[Röhl, *From Bismarck to Hitler*, pp. 52-3]

The Beer Hall Putsch, 1923

The purpose of Hitler's failed "Beer Hall Putsch" in Munich on 8 and 9 November 1923 was to overthrow the Weimar Constitution and replace it with an authoritarian regime. Modelling his coup attempt on Mussolini's "March on Rome" of the year before, a successful bluff, Hitler thought he could count on the support of German conservatives, especially the dictatorial ruler of the state of Bavaria, Gustav von Kahr (1862-1934). Against the wishes of the national government in Berlin, Kahr had not only permitted but encouraged the activities of the radical right in Bavaria. Such prominent conservatives as General Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937), the chief of staff of the German Army in the First World War, were to have leading roles in the government Hitler hoped to establish. Kahr thought better of his alliance with Hitler, however, and ordered the Munich police to suppress the putsch attempt. In the ensuing shoot-out sixteen Nazis and three policemen were killed. Although Kahr had no sympathy for the Weimar system, he was reluctant to support an obviously illegal venture that did not command full army support. Hitler had not yet gained the millions of followers that would make him so indispensable to conservatives ten years hence. Kahr became a victim of Hitler's revenge in the "blood purge" of 30 June 1934 (see Doc. 3.21).

The following selection is an extract from Hitler's testimony at his trial. Posing as an unselfish patriot, he insisted that an attempt to overthrow a government that had signed the armistice in November 1918 and the Versailles Treaty in 1919 could never be considered treason. He pointed out that the highest Bavarian officials had originally been part of the conspiracy. He justified his putsch attempt by the danger of the spread of Marxism. Hitler understood that his appeal to conservatives lay in his willingness to use ruthless measures against the left. He knew that he could count on the sympathy of the court, which gave him the minimum penalty allowed by law. Sentenced to five years, he was released after serving only eight months. In prison he wrote his book, *Mein Kampf*. After his release he resolved to seek power legally and constitutionally in order to avoid a similar debacle in the future.

2.13 Hitler's speech in his own defense, 1924

Hitler: May it please the Court!

... Replacing the person by the cipher, energy by mass, the Marxist movement is destroying the foundation of all human cultural life. Wherever this movement breaks through, it must destroy human culture. The future of Germany means: destruction of Marxism. Either Marxism poisons the people, their Germany is ruined, or the poison is going to be eliminated – then Germany can recover again, not before that. For us, Germany will be saved on the day on which the last Marxist has either been converted or broken ...

We will fight spiritually for one who is willing to fight with the weapons of the spirit; we have the fist for the one who is willing to fight with the fist.

When we recognized that the territory of the Ruhr would be lost, our movement arrived at a big point of discord with the bourgeois world. The National Socialist movement recognized clearly that the territory of the Ruhr would be lost if the people would not wake up from its lethargy. World politics are not made with the olive branch, but with the sword. But the Reich too must be governed by National Socialists ...

But our movement has not been founded to gain seats in parliament and daily attendance fees; our movement was founded to turn Germany's fate in her twelfth hour ...

As we had declared at numerous public meetings that our leaders would not, like those of the Communists did, stand in the rear in the critical hours, our leaders marched in front. On [General Erich] Ludendorff's right side Dr. [Friedrich] Weber marched, on his left, I and [Max von] Scheubner-Richter and the other gentlemen. We were permitted to pass by the cordon of troops blocking the Ludwig Bridge. They were deeply moved; among them were men who wept bitter tears. People who had attached themselves to the columns yelled from the rear that the men should be knocked down. We yelled that there was no reason to harm these people. We marched on to the Marienplatz. The rifles were not loaded. The enthusiasm was indescribable. I had to tell myself: The people are behind us, they no longer can be consoled by ridiculous resolutions. The Volk want a reckoning with the November criminals, as far as it still has a sense of honor and human dignity and not for slavery. In front of the Royal Residence a weak police cordon let us pass through. Then there was a short hesitation in front, and a shot was fired. I had the impression that it was no pistol shot but a rifle or carbine bullet. Shortly afterwards a volley was fired. I had the feeling that a bullet struck in my left side. Scheubner-Richter fell, I with him. At this occasion my arm was dislocated and I suffered another injury while falling.

I only was down for a few seconds and tried at once to get up. Another shot was fired, out of the little street to the rear of the Preysing Palace. Around me there were bodies. In front of us were State Police, rifles cocked. Farther in the rear there were armored cars. My men were 70 to 80 meters in back of me. A big gentleman in a black overcoat was lying half covered on the ground, soiled with blood. I was convinced that he was Ludendorff. There were a few more shots fired from inside the Royal Residence and from the little street near the Preysing Palace and maybe also a few wild shots fired by our men. From the circle near the Rentenamt, I drove out of town. I intended to be driven back the same night ...

A few days later, at Uffing, we found out that I had suffered a fracture of the joint and a fracture of the collarbone. During those days I was all broken down by pains of body and soul, if only because I believed that Ludendorff was dead. I obtained the first newspapers at Landsberg. There I read the statement about a breach of my pledged word, that I had pledged

my word to Herr von Kahr never to undertake anything without informing him, that I had given this pledge on the evening of November 6th. There I stood as a perfect scoundrel without honor. That is the lowest thing to do; that man, who worked together with us the whole time, stepped up with such lies against us now, when we could not defend ourselves and, to an extent, were broken down in spirit. I never gave such a pledge to Mr. von Kahr. I said, I am standing behind you loyally, I will do nothing against you. Finally I said: "If you are not going to make up your mind, then I will not consider myself obligated as far as my decisions are concerned." When this campaign of slander continued in the course of the next few days and one after the other was brought in to Landsberg [prison], whose only guilt was to have adhered to our movement, then I resolved to defend myself and to resist until the last breath. I did not enter this court to deny anything or to reject my responsibility. I protest against the attempt that Herr von Kriebel tries to assume the responsibility, be it only for the military preparations. I bear the responsibility all alone, but I declare one thing: I am no criminal because of that and I do not feel as if I were a criminal.

I cannot plead guilty, but I do confess the act. There is no such thing as high treason against the traitors of 1918. It is impossible that I should have committed high treason, for this cannot be implicit in the action of November 8th and 9th, but only in the intentions and the actions during all the previous months. But if I really should have committed high treason, then I am surprised not to see those gentlemen here at my side, against whom the prosecutor would be obliged to file indictments;¹¹ those who willed together with us the same action, discussed and prepared things down to the smallest detail, things which may be described in particular at a closed session later. I do not consider myself as a man who committed high treason, but as a German, who wanted the best for his people ...

Source: Office of the US Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality,
Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Vol. V
(Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1946), pp. 73-4

Struggle for an expanded National Socialist program

This draft of a more detailed program than the Nazi Party's official "Twenty-five Point Program" (Doc. 2.6) was prepared under the leadership of Gregor Strasser (1892-1934) in 1925. Although Hitler countermanded its adoption to avoid any commitments to specific social and economic reforms and to keep full personal control of party policy, the draft is of interest as an indication of the kind of social and economic reforms that many idealistic Nazis favored, at least in the early years. This draft provides the most detailed record of what some party members understood under the term "German socialism." Striking are the many archaic features, such as the restoration of guilds, the special protections for small proprietors, especially farmers, and the establishment of vocational chambers, representatives of which would serve in a national parliament (the Reich Chamber of Corporations). The corporate state (*Ständestaat*), a

¹¹ Hitler is here referring in particular to Kahr, General Otto von Lossow (commander of the Bavarian Reichswehr), and Colonel Hans Ritter von Seisser (chief of the Bavarian state police), all of whom had helped plan the putsch attempt with Hitler.

