IB European History

*The Coming of the Third Reich* (2003)

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Part I: The Progressive Republic

*Sonderweg* (literally: *"special path")* is a controversial theory in German historiography that argues that Germany has followed a special path from an authoritarian autocracy into democracy, distinct from other European countries. Since the collapse of Nazi Germany in 1945 the Sonderweg thesis argues that the failure of Germany to develop firm democratic institutions in the 19th century was decisive for the failure of the Weimar Republic 1918-1933. Unlike England or France in which thriving democratic institutions evolved over time Germany remained authoritarian, anti-democratic and anti-liberal. In this view of Sonderweg, which was put forth by writers as varied as the American journalist William L. Shirer and British historian AJP Taylor, the Germans have always rejected democracy and human rights, worshiped strong leaders, and rejected the concept of the active citizen. According to AJP Taylor, *“1848 was when German history reached a democratic turning point and failed to turn.”* Shirer’s 1961 masterpiece, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich,* sawGerman history proceeding logically from Luther to Hitler. Shirer interpreted Hitler's rise to power as proof of a German character flaw. Because of an innate German aversion to national minorities and because of the authoritarian, traditions of Junker Prussia, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were inevitable.

Any Sonderweg thesis that argues the inevitability of the Nazi dictatorship is categorically flawed. New evidence proves Hitler’s III Reich was a historical anomaly. There was nothing predictable about the rise of Hitler and the Nazis; there was nothing predictable about Germany’s participation in murderous genocide; and there was nothing predictable about the Reich’s goal to destroy the European continent with total war. The very last country in which we would expect such events to occur was Germany. The more we study the Weimar Republic the more we are convinced that the rise of Adolf Hitler had no logical or predictable underpinnings. That the Weimar Republic, the most progressive democracy in the world, would surrender to a genocidal dictatorship defies the logic of German history. There was nothing inevitable about the coming of the III Reich in Germany, just as there was nothing inevitable about rise of the Bolsheviks in Russia.

To be sure there were some similarities between Germany and Russia before 1914. Both nations were ruled by authoritarian monarchies, backed by a powerful government bureaucracy; both had a strong military élite; both countries were confronting rapid social change brought about by the two fastest rates of industrialization in the world; both the Hohenzollern and Romanov political systems were destroyed by the profound crisis of military defeat in the Great War; and both were succeeded by a brief period of conflict-ridden democracy before the social/economic chaos was resolved by the rise of dictators. But there are also many crucial differences, principal among them the fact that the Bolsheviks completely failed to win the level of mass public support in free elections in November 1917. In contrast it was the free elections of 1930-1933 in Weimar Germany which provided the essential basis for the Nazi rise to power. In 1917 Russia was still hopelessly backward, overwhelmingly peasant, semi-literate and lacking in any democratic institutions or traditions. In 1918, Germany was highly advanced, virtually fully literate and had a long tradition of an educated citizenry. It is certainly true that the Great War destroyed the ancien régime of Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Imperial Russia. But the old order differed substantially from country to country and it was destroyed in different ways with different consequences. Searching for an explanation for the rise of Hitler in German history undeniably runs the risk of making the entire process seem inevitable. The triumph of Nazism was far from a foregone conclusion, right up until the early months of 1933. The failure of Germany to develop strong democratic traditions surely played a role in the success of the Nazis but this by no means made the Nazis inevitable.

Unlike the United Kingdom and France, Germany after 1871 never established any strong democratic institutions. The constitution Bismarck penned for the II Reich in 1871 fell far short of the ideals dreamed of by the German liberals in 1848. The constitution lacked any declaration of principle about human rights and civil freedoms. There was no German bill of rights protecting civil liberties. The German legislative branch-the Reichstag-could not legislate. The Reichstag could not propose a bill nor check the power of the Kaiser or the Imperial Chancellor. The very name of the new German leader after 1871 derived from the Latin name *“Caesar.”* This in itself demonstrated Bismarck’s obsession with centralized power. Government ministers, including the head of the civilian administration, the Reich Chancellor-an office created by Bismarck for himself and held by him for some twenty years-were civil servants, not party politicians like in England or France. Bismarck saw to it that the army was virtually a state within a state, with its own direct access to the Kaiser and its own system of self-government. Bismarck set up the German General Staff as a semi-autonomous kingdom, free from Reichstag interference. Unlike the United Kingdom or France, there was no civilian control over the military. The army impacted German society in a variety of ways. Its prestige, gained in the stunning victories of the wars of unification was enormous. Noncommissioned officers, that is, those men who stayed on after their term of compulsory military service was over and served in the German army for a number of years, had an automatic and guaranteed right to a job in state employment when they finally left the army. This meant that the vast majority of policemen, postmen, railway men, teachers, state administrators and government bureaucrats, had been socialized in the army and behaved in the military fashion to which they had been accustomed. While it is undeniable that German political development post 1871 took a very curious path of development, this alone does not prove the inevitability of the Nazi regime.

To fully understand the phenomenon that was the Nazis, we must turn to Germany’s first experiment in democracy, the Weimar Republic (1918-1933). The Weimar Republic represented the moderate phase in Crane Brinton’s model for revolutions. The Weimar Republic in Germany paralleled Kerensky’s moderate phase in Russia. The major difference was that while Kerensky only ruled for nine short months, the SPD moderates in Germany were in power for fifteen years. The Weimar Republic followed the collapse of the Hohenzollern monarchy on 9 November 1918, just as Kerensky’s government followed the disintegration of Romanov power in Russia 12-15 March 1917. And while Kerensky’s moderate phase preceded the rise of the Bolshevik extremists on 25 October 1917, the Weimar Republic was the stage directly before the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship on 30 January1933. Because the Weimar Republic was the *“rule of the moderates”* one of the major issues thus facing the democracy was the SPD political coalition in the Reichstag trying to rule the country. The SPD coalition was composed of moderate political parties (SPD, Catholic Center Party, National Liberals) struggling to hold on for their political lives while simultaneously being besieged by the radical left (KPD, or German Communist Party) and the radical right (German Nationalists and Nazis). Part of the fundamental challenges of Weimar was the attempt to hold the moderate center. That being said, Weimar Germany had a number of enormous advantages that would seem to prevent the rise of a radical government. It is because of these unique features of Weimar that make the rise of Hitler a Black Swan. The evidence speaks for itself.

Weimar Germany was the most literate and best educated country in the world. German literacy rates stood well above 90% and German universities were the model for higher education in both Western Europe and the United States. American and British pre-med students learned German and then studied in German universities. Berlin was the Mecca for world physicists. In 1921 Albert Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for his theory of relativity (e=mc2.) As Einstein was theorizing about the speed of light, five blocks away Max Planck was refining his quantum theory (e=hf.) Besides physics, Weimar Germany was the epicenter of pure research in medicine, eugenics, pharmaceuticals and chemistry. Weimar Germany was a highly sophisticated, modern nation-state. Weimar was not Junker Prussia. Junker Prussia was the German exception, not the German rule. Bismarck never had a broad-based German following. Unlike Junker Prussia, Weimar Germany was a progressive and forward looking society whose best traditions were anchored in the ideals of the European Enlightenment 1700-1800. The principals of constitutionally protected civil liberties, religious and political tolerance, and the sanctity of human life were cornerstones for German’s first experiment in republican government.

The Weimar constitution of 1919 granted universal suffrage to both men and women at the age of 20. The German electorate was the best educated most sophisticated and most politically active voter population in the world. Between 1918 and 1933 voter turnout was consistently over 80%. Compare this to an embarrassing 43% for the United States during this same period. The SPD was the largest political party in the world and was the model for political parties on both sides of the Atlantic. The SPD had over a million members and was fully committed to democracy, the emancipation of women, social equality, and the outlawing of any racial or sexual discrimination. Weimar political parties were well organized, superbly led and generously financed. The German electorate was well-read and actively involved in the political process. It is difficult to find a country that embraced the democratic process more than Weimar Germany. To argue that Hitler came to power because of electorate indifference is ludicrous and simply not true. Unlike their English or American counterparts who did not go to the polls (38% and 43% voter participation respectively) and who were both poorly read and poorly informed, the German voter knew exactly who he was voting for and what was at stake. It is this fact that makes the Nazi rise to power so baffling.

One of the least expected results of the new Germany was a sudden relaxing in previously widely-accepted gender roles and sexual moral conduct. German society had always represented women as 'mothers of the nation' but now German women suddenly found themselves in a strong political position and they dominated the Weimar electorate. This is because, out of a total population of 60 million Germans, two million young men between the ages of 18 and 34 had been killed in World War I and another five million had been so severely physically or mentally injured that they could play little role in government at any level. (The ratio of women to men in Weimar Germany was 1650:1000.) Many other older men of experience in government were now becoming too old and their influence had waned. This set of unusual circumstances presented the women of Germany with an unusual and unique opportunity to become major players right across German life. Although women had not been allowed to participate in any political organizations prior to 1914, they now readily grasped the new opportunities that the war and its aftermath brought to them. In the earliest years of the Weimar Republic women voted in large numbers and keenly supported the pro-Republican parties that had granted them the vote. This high profile of many assertive women was an entirely new thing in German society. Women became leaders in the arts, show business and even in business and commerce. Weimar was Europe’s first experiment in women's liberation.

In 1919, under the more liberal atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, Magnus Hirschfeld purchased a villa not far from the Reichstag building for his new Institute for Sexual Research in Berlin. His institute housed his immense library on sex and provided educational services and medical consultations. People from around Europe visited the Institute to gain a clearer understanding of their sexuality. Hirschfeld was a Jewish physician and sexologist. He was openly gay and was a vocal advocate of homosexual rights, including gay marriage. Hirschfeld was considered to be the *“Einstein of sex.”* Hirschfeld campaigned for the decriminalization of abortion and against laws that banned female teachers and civil servants from marrying or having children. From 1919 onward, Hirschfeld worked tirelessly to overturn Paragraph 175. This was a provision Bismarck insisted on inserting into 1871 German constitution that criminalized homosexuality. Hirschfeld argued that Paragraph 175 encouraged blackmail and homosexual violence. His motto was *"Justice through Science.”* Hirschfeld believed that a better scientific understanding of homosexuality would eliminate the anger, violence and hostility towards homosexuals.

Homosexual and lesbian bars started appearing in other major German cities besides Berlin. By 1920, Berlin was considered the homosexual capital of the world. The Eldorado Club in Berlin was a Mecca for German transvestites where once through the door it was impossible to distinguish men from women. Of course, this shocked many Germans but a certain momentum had been unleashed which would now be difficult to control. It is probably fair to say that while earlier German societies had glorified Motherhood, and the Mother's duty to the Fatherland (which later returned under Hitler), the Weimar years glorified Women, Sexuality and Free Expression. Hedonism (the belief that the good of men and women is best served by the pursuit of pleasure), was actually seized upon by the liberal Weimar government as a way to unite the ever-present political squabbles of German life. There was a feeling that the Germans had suffered long enough and - in a land with an unreliable economy – all should enjoy themselves while they could, resulting in the first true sexual revolution in western civilization. Prostitution was decriminalized in 1927. In 1930 an SPD-KPD coalition in the Reichstag was four votes short of abolishing Paragraph 175, the law which criminalized homosexuality. By 1931 there was mass and energetic public support from all walks of life to sweep away Paragraph 218, the legal provision that criminalized abortion. Only the pro-life Catholic Center Party was in opposition. The pro-abortion movement in Weimar Germany was a political and cultural phenomenon, actively supported by tens of millions of Germans, especially women. The KPD led the charge flooding German streets with banners that read *“Dein Körper gehört Dir!”* (Your body belongs to you!) What is truly astounding about this campaign was that it took place during the height of the Depression, hardly an auspicious time, but a period that would explain the clamor for safe abortions on demand. Though both Paragraph 175 and Paragraph 218 were never overturned in the Reichstag, given more time and without the murderous arrival of the Nazis in 1933, both laws would have been swept away. Both the gay rights and the pro-abortion movements were proof that Weimar Germany was an acute body-and-sex conscious society, modern in every sense of the word.

The Weimar Republic was on the cutting edge of applied science. Ideas known as racial hygiene or eugenics began to inform population policy, public health education, and government-funded research. The thrust of Weimar eugenics can be summarized by *“Science as Salvation.”* By keeping the *“unfit”* alive to reproduce and multiply, eugenics proponents argued, modern medicine and costly welfare programs interfered with natural selection–the concept Charles Darwin applied to the *“survival of the fittest”* in the animal and plant world. In addition, members of the *“fit,”* educated classes were marrying later and using birth control methods to limit family size. The result, eugenics advocates believed, was an overall biological *“degeneration”* of the population. As a solution, they proposed *“positive”* government policies such as tax credits to foster large, *“valuable”* families, and “negative” measures, mainly the sterilization of genetic *“inferiors.”* Eugenics advocates in Weimar Germany included physicians, public health officials, and academics in the biomedical fields, on the political left and right. Serving on government committees and conducting research on heredity, experts warned that if the nation did not produce more fit children, it was headed for extinction. A growing faction, linking eugenics to race, championed the long-headed, fair *“Nordics”* as *“eugenically advantageous”* and discussed *“race mixing”* as a source of biological degeneration. None of these eugenic proposals were ever realized during the Republic. The Nazis would do that. Political opposition to *“Science as Salvation”* was enormous, especially from the pro-life Catholic Center Party. What Weimar eugenics demonstrated though was a thoroughly modern country on the brink of applying science to social policy.

There was no widespread anti-Semitism at work in Weimar Germany. After the middle ages, the Germans could no longer be characterized as Jew-haters. German Jews were a tiny minority, numbering barely 600,000 or about 1% of the population. Since the 19th century German Jews had been fully integrated into German society. Prior to 1933, had you asked a German Jew, *“What are you?”* his response would have been, *“I am German.”* A German Christian would have answered the same way. 18th century Prussia under Frederick the Great was the first state in Europe to protect freedom of religion. Prussia became the model of European religious tolerance during the Enlightenment. German Jews had been fully emancipated from any legal restrictions with Bismarck’s constitution of 1871. There are few recorded cases of any violent anti-Semitism in the II Reich. German Jews were considered by most Germans to be equal citizens, fully protected by the law. Jew-bating was not a characteristic of modern German society. Proof for this lies in the fact that between 1918 and 1933 over 60% of German Jews married German Christians. What is ironic about this statistic in light of the Nazi genocide is that within two or three generations German Jews would have naturally disappeared anyway. Weimar Germany was a model for cultural and religious assimilation. This explains why most Germans had little patience for Hitler and the Nazis. Hitler’s rabid anti-Semitism was considered by most to be the ravings of the far right lunatic fringe and socially unacceptable. If we could go back to 1918 and ask a European what modern country would build death camps and methodically annihilate 6 million Jews the answer would not be Germany. The answer would be either France or Russia. Both countries had a long history of widespread anti-Semitic violence, not Germany. Murderous pogroms took place in the Russian Pale, not in Prussia or Bavaria.

By 1900, well before the outbreak of the Great War, Imperial Germany was the Continent’s wealthiest, most powerful and most advanced economy. In the last years of peace, Germany was producing two-thirds of continental Europe’s output in steel, half its output in coal and lignite and twenty percent more electrical energy than the United Kingdom, France and Italy combined. By 1914, with a population of 67 million, the German Empire commanded far greater resources of manpower than any other continental European power with the exception of Russia. By comparison, the United Kingdom, France and Austria-Hungary each had a population of 40 and 50 million at this time. Germany was the world leader in the most modern industries, such as chemicals, pharmaceuticals and electricity. In agriculture, the massive use of artificial fertilizers and farm machinery had transformed the efficiency of the landed estates of the north and east by 1914, by which time Germany was, for example, producing a third of the world’s output of potatoes. Living standards had improved by leaps and bounds since the turn of the century if not before. The products of Germany’s great industrial firms, such as Krupp and Thyssen, Siemens and AEG, Hoechst and BASF, were famous for their quality the world over. It is in this economic context that we must put the economic giant that was Germany. Still, after four and a half years of war, Germany was the strongest economic power in Europe in 1918. Once the United States stabilized the German economy with the Dawes Plan of 1924, Germany 1924-1929 again was emerging as Europe’s most dynamic economy. Weimar Germany dominated global markets in the areas of state-of-the-art technology, namely electrical (AEG, BASF, Blaupunkt and Siemens), chemicals (IG Farben), steel (Krupp, Rhine Metal and Thyssen) high performance optics (Leica Camera AG and Karl Zeiss AG), aviation (Heinkel and Messerschmidt), automobiles (Audi, Mercedez-Benz, Opel and Porsche,) and audio (BASF, Bosch GMBH and Deutsche Grammophon).

Even the most hardcore reactionary might eventually have learned to tolerate the Republic if it had provided a reasonable level of economic stability and a decent, solid income for its citizens. But after the collapse of the United States stock market in 1929, economic stability in Germany was impossible. The Great Depression 1929-1933 radicalized Weimar politics and all but guaranteed the rise of political extremist. Without the economic implosion of Weimar 1929-1933 the Nazis and the Communists would never have had the fertile political soil to sew their seeds of hatred and distrust. Far from being inevitable, the rise of National Socialism in Germany is best seen as a reaction to unprecedented economic collapse.