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The Making of the 20th Century

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Weimar and the Rise of Hitler

A. J. Nicholls

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Illustrations

Cover page: The author and the publishers wish to thank the Radio Times Hulton Picture Library for permission to reproduce a detail from a photograph of Hitler taken in the late 1930s.

Map: Germany after the Peace Settlement

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Abbreviations

| | |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BVP | <i>Bayerische Volkspartei</i> (Bavarian People's Party). |
| DDP | <i>Deutsche Demokratische Partei</i> (German Democratic Party). |
| DVP | <i>Deutsche Volkspartei</i> (German People's Party). |
| DNVP | <i>Deutschnationale Volkspartei</i> (German National People's Party – German Nationalists). |
| KPD | <i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands</i> (German Communist Party). |
| NSDAP | <i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> (National Socialist German Workers' Party – Nazis). |
| SPD | <i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (German Social Democratic Party – Majority Social Democrats). |
| USPD | <i>Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (German Independent Social Democratic Party). |

Preface to the Second Edition

WHEN I came to prepare the revised edition of this book I assumed that I should want to alter much that I wrote ten years ago. In fact, however, I find that most of it has stood the test of time – which is not to deny that much interesting and valuable work has been done by historians of the Weimar period during the intervening years. The early part of the Republic's history has attracted particular attention, with the publication of documentary material on the revolutionary government as well as the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. Generally speaking, the tendency has been to criticise Social Democratic leaders for their febleness and lack of initiative. Indeed the time may now have come for a more sympathetic approach to men like Ebert, who, for all their weaknesses, did try to cope with daunting economic, diplomatic and political problems, and who were by no means entirely unsuccessful. By 1928 the moderate view of the 'German revolution' was that it had succeeded in giving Germany democracy without falling into the pitfalls of radical socialist chaos or monarchist reaction. The economic crisis which followed showed up the fundamental unpopularity of the Republican régime among large sections of German society – particularly the propertied classes. But it would be a difficult exercise in counter-factual history to prove that, with a longer period of economic stability after 1928, the Republic would still have been doomed to extinction. Perhaps, too, we are now more tolerant of politicians' inability to deal with the slump than was the case when this book was first published. Our own experience has shown us that the post-war dams set up to secure the Western world from economic recession are by no means impregnable and that the problems faced by our fathers in the 1930s were not so easily soluble after all. Nevertheless, I think I was too kind to Brüning's administration in the first edition of this book; he and those who supported him do seem to have been remarkably obtuse in their handling of domestic affairs. They sought to exploit Germany's economic crisis to undermine both the Republic and Versailles, rather than making the amelioration of domestic distress their first priority. It was this lack of pragmatism which was one of the most disastrous features of Weimar politics and it helped Hitler to gain his massive electoral support.

On Hitler himself there is little more to be said. The recent plethora of biographical writing about him has added little to our knowledge of German history or even, it must be said, to our appreciation of his own role in it. Of far greater importance are regional studies, such as those by Noakes and Pridham, which illustrate the development of the National Socialist movement at the grass roots. People did not become Nazis by accident, or because they were hypnotised by Hitler. This is a lesson we should bear in mind in Britain at a time when Fascism is beginning to reappear on our own political scene.

In this edition I have added material to the notes where it seems to me that new writing has to be taken into account. Where necessary I have appended an explanatory note at the bottom of the text. The Bibliography has also been rewritten and substantially extended.

Needless to say, this book does not pretend to be a definitive history of the Weimar Republic. For that it would need to delve far more deeply into social and economic questions as well as into the detailed workings of the political system. My aim has been to provide an introduction which will acquaint readers with the general contours of the subject and provide a basis for further specialist reading.

Oxford
December 1977

A. J. N.

Preface to the First Edition

IN this book I have attempted to provide an introduction to the political history of the Weimar Republic. The failure of German democracy in the years after the First World War was of crucial importance, not only for Germany but for the world as a whole. It is necessary to understand the causes of this failure, and to avoid a natural tendency to oversimplify them. Very often they have been sought in the national character and historical development of the Germans, in the nature of Western capitalism, in the weaknesses of the Republican constitution or in the hypnotic power of Adolf Hitler. Some of these explanations are more respectable than others; none alone can begin to satisfy any serious enquiry.

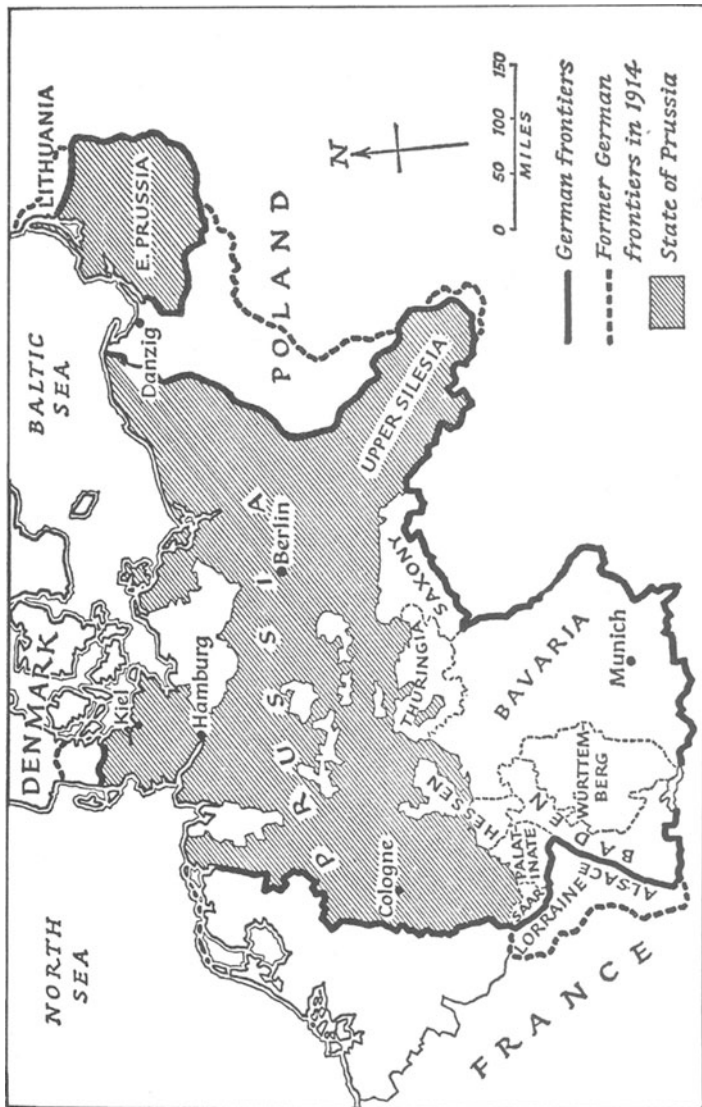
One unforeseen by-product of Hitler's catastrophic war was the opening of German official records to historians. During the last two decades a great many valuable monographs have been published which throw light on the problems besetting the Weimar Republic. I have attempted to incorporate some of their findings into this book, but the need for compression precludes a detailed or definitive treatment. If I am able to stimulate the reader to delve more deeply into this fascinating and complicated subject I shall feel that my work has been justified.

My thanks are first of all due to my College for providing me with the facilities without which this book could not have been written. I should also like to acknowledge with gratitude the help I have received from Christopher Thorne and the late Miss Elizabeth Wiskemann. I am especially indebted to the late Sir John Wheeler-Bennett for his kindness in reading my manuscript and for his invaluable comments. I have benefited greatly from discussions with my Oxford colleagues, especially Tim Mason, Jonathan Wright and Modris Eksteins. Needless to say, I am entirely responsible for the opinions expressed in the book and for any errors which it may contain.

I wish to acknowledge the care and accuracy of my typists, Miss D. Twamley and Miss. E. Harrison, and finally I should like to thank my wife for her constant encouragement.

*St. Antony's College
Oxford
March 1968*

A. J. N.



Germany after the peace settlement