The Making of the 20th Century

Series Editor: GEOFFREY WARNER

- David Armstrong, *The Rise of the International Organisation:
A Short History*
V. R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*
Brian J. L. Berry, *Comparative Urbanisation: Divergent Paths
in the Twentieth Century*
Richard Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach of the First World War*
John Keiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War*
Dominic Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*
Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe
1918–1933*
B. N. Pandey, *South and South-east Asia 1945–1979: Problems and Policies*
Esmonde M. Robertson, *Mussolini as Empire-BUILDER*
Zara Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*
Richard Storry, *Japan and the Decline of the West in Asia 1894–1942*
Christopher Thorne, *The Approach of War 1938–1938*
R. T. Thomas, *Britain and Vichy: The Dilemma of Anglo-French
Relations 1940–1942*
Hugh Tinker, *Race, Conflict and the International Order*
Fiona Venn, *Old Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*
Wang Gungwu, *China and the World since 1949*
Elizabeth Wiskemann, *Fascism in Italy: Its Development and Influence*

Further titles are in preparation.

Weimar and the Rise of Hitler

A. J. Nicholls

St. Martin's Press New York

© A. J. Nicholls, 1968, 1979, 1991

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 3rd edition 1991 978-0-333-55098-4

All rights reserved. For information, write:
Scholarly and Reference Division,
Sty. Martin's Press, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 10010

First published in the United States of America in 1991

ISBN 978-0-333-55099-1

ISBN 978-1-349-21337-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-21337-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nicholls, Anthony James, 1934

Weimar and the rise of Hitler / A. J. Nicholls. — 3rd. ed.

p. cm. — (The Making of the 20th Century)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Germany — Politics and government — 1918–1933

2. Hitler, Adolf, 1889–1945.

I. Title. II. Series.

DD240.N49 1991

943.085 — dc20

90 — 48823

CIP

To

My Parents

Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Preface to the First Edition</i>	ix
<i>Introduction to the Third Edition</i>	x
1 The Lost War	1
2 The German Revolution	8
3 The Foundations of the New Republic	23
4 The Republic Makes Peace	44
5 1919–1922: Years of Crisis and Uncertainty	56
6 Hitler and Republican Instability	71
7 Ruhr Occupation and Inflation	83
8 Towards Recovery	93
9 The Semblance of Stability: 1924–1929	105
10 The End of the Republic	120
11 Hitler's Success and Weimar's Failure	142
<i>Chronological Table</i>	162
<i>Bibliography</i>	167
<i>Index</i>	185

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 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 over-simplify 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 Miss Elizabeth Wiskemann. I am especially indebted to 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.

A. J. N.
St. Antony's College, Oxford
March 1968

Introduction to the Third Edition

It is a great pleasure for me to be able to introduce a third edition of this book, the first edition having appeared over twenty years ago. Thanks to the generosity of my publishers, I have been able to incorporate a good deal more material than was possible in the earlier revised version, and this is appropriate, since the last decade has been a fruitful one so far as studies of the Weimar period are concerned.

In the preface to the second edition, which appeared in 1979, I had the temerity to claim that most of what I had written in the original book had stood the test of time. Of course, I acknowledged that much interesting and valuable work had been produced by historians in the intervening years, and this is just as true of the last decade. If I am immodest enough to repeat my earlier boast, it is because I believe that the picture of Weimar Germany presented to the reader in this book is still a fair one, and not because I wish to minimize the scholarly work of others.

Since 1968 arguments have raged about the supposed inadequacies of the November Revolution which created the Republic; about the burden of the peace settlement – and in particular the reparations payments – on Weimar governments; about the impact of inflation on the German economy and the population at large; about the social basis of the Nazi movement; about the pressure of supposedly high wages and public expenditure on an overstrained economy, and about the possibility of a more adventurous alternative to Brüning's deflationary policy, 1930–1932. When checking on the way in which these and other controversial matters have been treated in this book I feel that most of my judgments have been confirmed rather than otherwise, but that in some cases modifications, or more often elaborations, are necessary. This has been done through additional sections in the text, complementary footnotes and the addition of a new Chapter 11, discussing aspects of Weimar's collapse and the rise of the Nazi movement.

So far as the German revolution of 1918/19 is concerned, three phases of explanation can be identified. The first, popular in West Germany after 1949, was that Germany had been faced with a clear choice between a socialist revolution à la Bolshevik Russia or a parliamentary Republic supported by the more conservative elements in society. In the 1960s this view was challenged, and it was argued that the social democratic leadership of the revolution could have made much more use of the

authority of the workers' and soldiers' councils to give Germany a stronger democracy. It was pointed out that the threat of bolshevism had been greatly exaggerated, whereas the danger from the right had actually been much more serious. In the last decade or so, a further revision of view has occurred, with doubts being expressed as to the feasibility of wide-ranging reform in the revolutionary period, especially in view of the confusion and lack of will exhibited by the councils themselves.¹

It is certainly clear that socialist experiments could have seriously exacerbated Germany's already difficult economic situation and might well have led to civil war. One plausible conclusion is that Germany – far from being the ideal testing ground for a proletarian revolution, as some radical Marxists believed – was actually too advanced economically to sustain such a revolution without descending into chaos. However that may be, with hindsight the majority Social Democrats were probably right to move as quickly as possible in the direction of parliamentary democracy. Germany was not Russia, and the German workers, let alone the middle class, would have been unlikely to tolerate a dictatorship, however 'proletarian' it might appear.² As it was, the constitution which resulted from Ebert's prudent leadership was certainly the most democratic in Germany's history, and would have been inconceivable had the monarchy survived.

A great deal of discussion has taken place about the inflation which had its roots in the deficit spending practised by the Imperial German government during the First World War, and which finally destroyed the German currency in the hyper-inflation of 1923. There have been suggestions that inflation actually benefited the German economy because it enabled industry to increase production and keep its employees in work. It was even claimed that it helped other countries, such as Britain and the U.S.A., to overcome an economic recession. Despite the vociferous complaints of the middle classes during the inflation, doubts have been expressed about the extent of their emiseration. It has been pointed out that loss of savings was balanced in some cases by a sharp reduction in debt.

Linked with this discussion of inflation has been the continuing argument about reparations burdens arising from the Versailles Treaty. Could the Germans have paid them? Was not the inflation simply an easy way of avoiding harsh measures which would be necessary if the reparations payments were to be made? Despite the lively discussions which have arisen from investigations into the inflation period, investigations which have greatly enhanced our knowledge of German politics and society, the commonsense view of inflation still seems to me to be the most convincing.

Certainly there are indications that both business interests and politicians saw inflation as a means of putting pressure on the Allies over reparations, but this assumption turned out to be quite wrong, since Germany's balance of trade worsened in the inflation period. The real reason for the lack of effective measures to control the money supply was the political impossibility of carrying through an unpopular package of deflationary measures until the Reich was clearly on the edge of collapse in the later summer of 1923. By that time hyper-inflation had so weakened the Mark that its purchasing power vanished, and there was a *de facto* deflation which could only be overcome by creating a new currency. Weimar governments were not particularly wicked or unscrupulous; they were simply living from hand to mouth. In this respect the irresponsibly high reparations demands cannot be exculpated from blame for the situation, but nor were they its primary cause.

Whatever benefits inflation may have brought, and temporary full employment is the only convincing example of such a benefit, the real and perceived losses to the mass of the population, and particularly to the middle class, created confusion and bitterness which seriously discredited the Republican regime. Nor can inflation be divorced from the measures necessary to cure it. Cuts in public spending and high interest rates, which accompanied the stabilization of the mark, upset large numbers of public employees in Germany and damaged the interests of small business and the farming community. Inflation and its aftermath were not the only reasons for the rejection of the Republican system by many such people, but they certainly contributed very substantially to that result.³

Other areas of discussion in recent years have been the nature of Hitler's mass support and the source of his party's funding. Fortified by computer technology, scholars have subjected the Nazi electoral base to close scrutiny. The results have been interesting and sometimes surprising. Some old clichés have been exploded by these researches, but it must be said that careful historians had avoided them anyway. The most important of the old aunt sallies to be attacked was the idea that Hitler's NSDAP was a 'lower-middle-class' party which attracted few members of the working class. Certainly for the period 1930–33 it is clear that many Germans in blue collar occupations voted for Hitler. As for the Nazis' financial backers, the propagandist claim of communists during and after the Weimar period that Hitler was paid by big business has been vigorously denied. The Nazi party generated a lot of its own funds by the frenetic activism of its supporters. Nevertheless, many less prominent businessmen gave money to the Nazis, and individual Nazi satraps, like Göring, received substantial sums from major industrialists.⁴ Readers of this book need

not have been under illusions about these matters. On page 69 of the last edition I rejected the suggestion that the NSDAP was ever 'the tool of big business or that it appealed exclusively to an ill-defined group called the lower-middle-class'.

In fact, the traditional picture of the NSDAP was indeed that, unlike any other political movement in Weimar, it was able to become a genuine *Volkspartei*, or people's party. It drew support from all classes of the population, but appealed disproportionately strongly to provincial voters in protestant Germany. This picture has actually been confirmed by recent researches. The larger the city, the less likely it was to have a very high proportion of Nazi voters. Election studies have also confirmed the relative imperviousness of Roman catholic voters to Hitler's blandishments, but even here one should beware of over-simplifications. There certainly were many Roman catholics who voted for Hitler, but as a category they were less likely to do so than protestants. Among other interesting facts to be thrown up by election studies has been the tendency of older voters to choose the NSDAP. Hitler did not only attract the young activist, he also convinced many old age pensioners that he alone could bring them security.

When considering Hitler's electoral success, we should remember that he achieved it by first participating in and then capturing a popular political movement of the right. It was Hugenberg's anti-Young Plan campaign and the 'middle-class block' tactics pursued by conservative, anti-Republican parties in German Land and municipal elections, which gave the Nazis the prestige and publicity they needed to attract 'respectable' voters. Once in that position, their radical activism made them a far more realistic choice than their colourless and divided 'middle-class' rivals.

One of the most notable changes of emphasis in the study of Weimar Germany which has occurred during the 1980s has been the discrediting of neo-Keynsian economics and the historical reappraisals to which this has led. Generally speaking, one can say that by the 1970s a consensus existed that the collapse of Weimar had been largely due to social and political pressures from the right of the political spectrum. The major enemies of the Republic were seen as reactionary army officers and officials, the landowning classes in Eastern Prussia and major business interests, especially those in heavy industry. On the other hand, the socialist and Christian trade unions and the political parties which supported them were regarded as bulwarks of Weimar, even if the Centre Party showed itself inclined to collaborate with the Nazis as the crisis grew deeper. More specifically, it was thought that the Republic had been fatally weakened from the end of 1929 by misguided economic policies of a deflationary

kind. These exacerbated the impact of the American stock market crash and encouraged a crisis atmosphere from which Hitler emerged as the chief beneficiary.

Since the first publication of this book the comfortable certainty that mass unemployment can be cured by the application of free-spending government policies has been comprehensively exploded. As I mentioned in the preface to the second edition, 'experience has shown us that the post-war dams set up to secure the Western World from economic recession are by no means impregnable.' The experience of stagflation and the failure of planned economies in many parts of the world has helped to stimulate a new look at the later years of Weimar, and has encouraged different explanations for its demise to be presented to us. 'Different' does not, of course, mean new; most interpretations can be found in the political controversies which were current in Germany before 1933. At that time the left blamed reactionary and nationalist forces for the ills of the Republic; the right blamed Marxist threats to private property, state interference in the economy, unreasonable wage demands from over-mighty trade unions, high taxation and excessive government spending. In recent years, the second set of explanations has enjoyed a recrudescence of favour among historians, albeit presented in a more detached and scholarly manner. In particular, the view that deficit spending would have been an option for the Brüning government after March 1930, has been severely criticized. Apart from stressing the practical difficulties of such a course, the defenders of Brüning argue powerfully for the claim that the real ills of Weimar pre-dated the 1929 crash; that there was a 'crisis before the crisis' which had its roots in the inflationary period and the insecure stabilization which followed it. This is an important area for discussion which I have decided to tackle in the new final chapter of this edition. Suffice it to say at this point that the issue remains highly contentious and is unlikely to be settled for some time, if at all. What is clear, however, is that facile criticism of Weimar governments for their ignorance of economic truths is out of place. In this respect I cannot forbear to quote my original comments on Brüning's policy, penned in 1968: 'There is no evidence that, even with a perfectly free hand, Brüning could have helped Germany by pursuing – in isolation from the rest of the world – a policy of reflation' (p. 112). That judgment has since been reinforced by some scholars, but rejected by others. My own view is less sympathetic to Brüning than it was at the time I wrote the first edition, but I have tried to set out the issues for the reader in the new Chapter 11.

My thanks are due once again to my publishers, and particularly to Vanessa Graham, for encouraging me to revise this volume. As I made

clear when it first appeared, it is not a definitive history of the Weimar Republic. For that I should need to explore economic and social issues in a great deal more depth than is possible in an introductory account, and political events would need to be treated in much more detail. I make no apology for adopting a different approach. It seems to me that, before readers can begin to appreciate the rich variety of specialist material which exists on this period of German history, they require an overview of the general contours of the subject. It is that which this book seeks to provide.

A. J. NICHOLLS, May 1990.

1. For a discussion of the development of the debate over the German revolution see H. A. Winkler, 'Die Revolution von 1918/19 und das Problem der Kontinuität in der deutschen Geschichte', in *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 250, Nr. 2, April 1990, pp. 303–319. Also E. Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, pp. 138–47.
2. Winkler, 'Revolution und Kontinuität'. pp. 311–13.
3. One of the best studies of the inflation remains C. Bresciani-Turroni, *The Economics of Inflation, A Study of Currency Depreciation in Post-war Germany, 1914–1923* (London, 1937 republished 1968). However, a major international research project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation led, in the early 1980s, to the publication of important research into different aspects of inflation in this period. See, for example, G. D. Feldman and others (eds), *The Experience of Inflation, International and Comparative Studies* (Berlin/New York, 1984), and G. D. Feldman (ed.), *Die Nachwirkungen der Inflation auf die deutsche Geschichte, 1924–1933* (Munich, 1985). Among those who helped set up this project were Carl-Ludwig Holtfrerich, whose *Die Deutsche Inflation, 1914–1923, Ursachen und Folgen in Internationaler Perspektive* (Berlin, 1980) tends to take an 'optimistic' view of inflation, whilst accepting the damaging effects of hyper-inflation, and illustrates how complex were the effects of inflation on various sections of society, and how perceptions of inflation seemed to change over time.
4. See H. A. Turner *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler* (New York, Oxford, 1985). See for example, p. 148. For a different view of the same subject: D. Abraham, 'Big Business, Nazis and German Politics at the End of Weimar', in *European History Quarterly* vol. 17 (1987) pp. 235–45.

Germany after the peace settlement