



The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity

By Detlev J. K. Peukert



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The nature of Weimar's terminal crisis - how a politically liberal and culturally progressive society could succumb to fascism - remains one of the central historical questions of our century. In this major work, Detlev J.K. Peukert offers a stimulating interpretation that not only places Weimar in the history of twentieth-century Germany but also reveals it as an archetype of the ambivalences and pathologies of advanced industrial society.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Born out of national defeat in 1918, the Weimar Republic launched Germany on an experiment in modernity under the least propitious circumstances. In an outstanding scholarly study that is likely to spark controversy, late German historian Peukert (*Inside Nazi Germany*) claims that the distinctive national characteristics of German history and of Weimar do not all point in a direct line to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933.

Weimar's fragile attempt at democracy, he contends, was destroyed by a steady retreat from political compromise and by a continuous shrinking of the material and economic base, which prevented the liberal government, with its welfare structure, from gaining real legitimacy in the eyes of the German people. Interpreting Weimar as a brief, headlong tour of the fateful choices made possible by the modern world, this rigorous history explores the paradox of a society that spawned avant-garde cultural breakthroughs amid bleak poverty and political breakdown.

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From Library Journal

This relatively brief history appeared first in German in 1987, three years before the author's death. Now in a sound English translation, it offers a wide-ranging social, political, and economic analysis. While not arguing that the Weimar experiment in democracy was doomed to fail, Peukert (*Inside Nazi Germany* , Yale, 1989) clearly suggests that a general "crisis of modernity" rendered a happy outcome most unlikely. Especially good at describing the era's economic problems and class struggles, he fails to do full justice to such social themes as gender and age conflict, which he introduces only to pass over too quickly. Based almost entirely on secondary works in German, the book contains occasional broad generalizations that, together with an overuse of the passive voice, result in imprecision. Nonetheless, it is well-crafted, sober, and succinct, well suited to its intended audience of undergraduate readers and the informed general public. -- James B. Street, Santa Cruz P.L., Cal.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Peukert, who died in 1990 at age 39, also wrote *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life*. This new book is not quite everyday life under the Weimar Republic, but it does shift the emphasis from the doings of a few old men--the military elite who handed the country over to Hitler--to the prevailing anguish among all classes of Germans during the 12 years the Republic survived. Peukert sums up this anguish as "the crisis of classical modernity." He notes that, since 1870, Germany had already been subjected to an accelerated process of modernization: industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, rationalization of daily life. Dislocations that were mild and bearable under the prosperous empire became killers in the Weimar years, after military defeat and with two horrendous economic crises in ten years. Weimar, in short, was not something completely new in German history. It was more of the same under impossible conditions. Peukert offers new angles on the period, all designed to show that it wasn't some fatal flaw in the German character that produced Hitler, but a series of complex problems all striking at once. Demographics, for example: A baby boom in 1900-10 flooded the job market just at the start of the Depression, and the Nazis recruited heavily among these young unemployed. Peukert also points out surprising continuities between Weimar and what followed. Laws against abortion and homosexuality never came off the books in those supposedly freewheeling years. Women who were married weren't supposed to work, were even fired from civil-service jobs. Nazi race madness was anticipated by a concern for eugenics by both the right and the left, going back decades. Writing to amplify and correct other historians, Peukert is

dense, allusive, and sometimes crabbed. This is definitely not Weimar for beginners, and perhaps is best read as part of Germany's process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung--coming to terms with the past. Or as a warning of how long stretches of hard times can bring out the worst in people. -- Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

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