A commemorative portrait of William II, on his 25th anniversary as emperor (Granger Collection).

An excerpt from *Germany After the First World War*

"The wish to resurrect a world in which moral standards and family and social relationships were intact was nevertheless profoundly misplaced and doomed to disappointment. Whatever were the real possibilities of picking up the pieces after 1918—and, as we shall see below, these possibilities were tiny—the desire to return to a pre-war world in which authority was allegedly respected, family life secure, and moral codes upheld was based upon a set of fundamental misconceptions. In contrast to what Germans caught in the upheavals of 1918 and 1919 may have believed, it is doubtful whether for many of them 'normal' family or social relations had existed anywhere but in their minds. Certainly the fact that millions of fathers had been called away to war (many never to return), and the fact that hundreds of thousands of women had been compelled to take up factory work meant the upheaval of family and social relationships which, at least in retrospect, appeared stable and comfortable. Yet it is important not to idealize the pre-1914 world—as many Germans appear to have done. For most (and certainly for most working-class) Germans, 'normal' family life as we have become accustomed to think of it had not existed before the First World War. Instead, everyday life had been characterized by high physical mobility (whereby perhaps a third of a city's population moved every year), the widespread practice of taking in lodgers (which occurred in 10 to 20 per cent of all households, and a much higher proportion of working-class households, in Imperial Germany), and by children frequently having to leave home to work at a young age. The picture of a happy and healthy family life, in which parents were able to supervise their children closely, in which the stern discipline of the father and the loving care of the mother were ever present, was for many—if not most—Germans a fiction."

HISTORY
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A revealing social history of the Weimar era and the failure of German democracy

Germany After The First World War

BY RICHARD BESSEL

Reviewed by Edward B. Segel

The failure of democracy in Weimar Germany, presumably one of the most advanced and sophisticated societies, still casts a shadow on democratic aspirations throughout the West. Richard Bessel's latest study, *Germany After the First World War*, examines the Weimar Republic from the perspective not of its end, but its beginning—the early years whose consequences "formed a crucial element" in the ultimate failure. This impressive social history concentrates especially on the postwar demobilization and transition, "a social and psychological as well as an economic and military process," on how the war was remembered, and generally on "the contribution of the war, the defeat, and the post-war transition to the political culture of Weimar Germany." Unlike other historical studies, including Detlev Peukert's *The Weimar Republic*, Bessel finds the clues to the failure of Weimar democracy not so much in structural weaknesses stemming from the 19th century, but rather in the accumulated upheavals and catastrophes from 1914 through the early 1920s and the German people's response to them.

An illusive war

The First World War began in Germany, as elsewhere, with a number of illusions: that it would be short and quickly victorious, and, in Germany, that the apparently universal enthusiasm at its opening would heal the social, political, and economic rifts within Wilhelmine society. But the groundwork was already being laid for eventual disillusionment and the ultimate rejection of the traditional regime. The prewar decades of peace and real material improvement made it even more difficult to tolerate wartime and postwar hardships, as the strains of war brought new divisions within military and civil society. The effects of the overstretched war economy—including severe shortages of manpower and material resources, destructive inflation, the crisis in food supply, and the forced resort to the black market or theft to provide for one's family—all seemed to threaten traditional relationships, social values, and sources of authority.

Disintegration and demobilization

After defeat and revolution, "Germany faced a prospect which no developed industrial country had faced before: the sudden and largely uncontrolled demobilization of millions of soldiers." Partly because of the very disintegration of the German army at the end of the war, the demobilization itself was carried through with surprising success, but it also carried the seeds of later troubles. Through such legends as the "stab in the back," politicians and people alike failed to come to grips with the realities that Germany had been defeated and that somehow the war had to be paid for. Bessel's massively documented economic analysis demonstrates with one factor after another—labor, housing, agriculture—how problematic was the German postwar experience, and how intractable the difficulties, never really solved, that confronted the new Republic. The manner of economic demobilization was "an expression of the classic dilemma of the Weimar Republic: that measures which were probably economically necessary for the long-term health of the country were politically impossible in the short term."

Above: Officials of the Berlin Reichsbank carrying baskets of devalued currency during the severe inflation of 1923. On the cover: Berliners selling tin cans for scrap during 1923. (Both photos courtesy of Granger Collection.)

The war did more than shatter lives and hopelessly distort the national economy. To the widely felt fears of social breakdown and moral chaos was added the illusory yearning of the German citizenry to return to a stable and disciplined past, "an often hysterical urge to construct a world [most Germans] never had." For Bessel the Germans' moral preoccupations served only further to lead them astray: "A 'moral' agenda can be particularly destructive and dangerous for a political democracy. By their nature, questions of morality are more expressions of illusions than reflections of reality, and therefore form particularly dangerous terrain on which to practise democratic politics."

The German people do not emerge very well from this account. Their communal illusions included overblown popular expectations, and contributed to their inability and unwillingness to accept the reality of defeat and impoverishment. They denied the ambiguities of their wartime behavior in favor of uncritical legends of militarist heroism. This broader glorification of military values in the Weimar years, including the resort to political violence, are to Bessel far more important than the supposed impact of the so-called "front generation," which he considers essentially a "literary invention," an "expression of middle- and upper-class intellectuals' embarrassed discovery of their poorer brethren" in the trenches. The "front generation" was, however, a powerful myth in the hands of the right wing and especially the Nazis, who could manipulate it for their own political ends. Taking refuge in such fantasies about the war, "Germans did not really care to take a sober look at the difficulties before them.... Germans retreated into an illusory world in which their problems were invariably the fault of others...." Thus *Germany After the First World War*, a lucid and persuasive study, becomes in the end a sad tale of successive, destructive illusions and collective self-deception—then as now a tragically weak basis for democracy.

About the Author: RICHARD BESSEL is Senior Lecturer in History at the Open University.

About the Reviewer: EDWARD B. SEGEL is Professor of History and Humanities at Reed College. He teaches the history of diplomacy and war in modern Europe.

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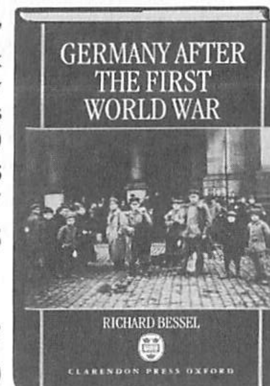

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