

Letter from the Editor

During the months leading up to Donald Trump’s victory in the electoral college in November 2016—and ever since—pundits, the public, and even some professional historians have been reminded of or drawn analogies (some more persuasive than others) to the darker sides of modern German history and to developments in interwar Europe as a whole. It remains to be seen whether or not the West is currently witnessing a resurgence of fascism, a term used in some quarters much too loosely. In any event, some historians have been more vocal and direct in their comparisons than others. As Volker Berghahn recalls in this issue’s worthy **memorial to Fritz Stern**, yet another gifted historian of Central Europe lost to the profession this year, worries about the threat to “real liberties” posed by policies adopted in the wake of September 11 “only increased” when Trump rose to the top of the Republican ticket in the spring of 2016: that April, just one month before his death, the *New York Times* published a letter to the editor in which Stern lamented the “decline in liberalism in our time”—a “fundamental American value” that has “always stood in defense of human decency.”

The themes of the articles in this “double issue” of *Central European History* all resonate in some way with contemporary developments. James Retallack’s **“Mapping the Red Threat: The Politics of Exclusion in Leipzig Before 1914”** is a compelling case study of the ways in which Saxon conservatives schemed to curtail the franchise during the *Kaiserreich*—through devious, Machiavellian practices such as gerrymandering and the adoption of voting laws distinctly disadvantageous to working-class voters. Using the tools of electoral mapping, a mainstay of media coverage today but a major innovation dating from this very period, Retallack forcefully demonstrates how regional authorities in Leipzig effectively subverted the principle of a fair and equal vote (for all male citizens) by employing sly strategies of political exclusion. As this suggests, the inexact implementation of “fair” democratic principles existed long before the complete erosion of democracy in late Weimar—whose fate remains a stark and timely warning about the fragility of free and open societies.

The character of the first democracy on German soil is the topic of Jochen Hung’s far-ranging review essay, **“‘Bad’ Politics and ‘Good’ Culture: New Approaches to the History of the Weimar Republic,”** which analyzes the extent to which a spate of recent studies has deconstructed the reigning master narrative of that era as a stark study in contrasts between woeful political decline and flourishing cultural achievement. Hung not only usefully reminds us that these were not the (normative) terms in which most contemporaries would have viewed the period through which they lived, but also argues that the two spheres of politics and culture were more entangled than this simple dichotomy would suggest. While acknowledging that scholars will continue to understand the “bad” political developments of the era as the unfortunate prelude to the Nazi nightmare that ensued, Hung provocatively urges us to consider as well possible continuities and affinities between Nazi culture and the “uniquely innovative and progressive” modernism of the Weimar era. At the very least, he suggests, this will give us a better sense of what was “really unique” about the earlier period.

With an eye to the catastrophe of the 1930s and 1940s, many historians of modern Germany have focused on ways in which even earlier developments contributed to subsequent events. Scholars are nowadays less inclined to talk of a German *Sonderweg* (special path), and few would posit, of course, some sort of straight line from Bismarck to Hitler (much less from Luther to Hitler). Certain phenomena—such as the rise and spread of rabid nationalism—nevertheless remain a subject of interest for obvious reasons related to the course of modern German history, as well as to more contemporary concerns. The diffusion of national(ist) sensibilities among those individuals who populated the “flyover” world of the modest German hometown is the subject of Helmut Walser Smith’s **“Monuments, Kitsch, and the Sense of Nation in Imperial Germany.”** Smith is less interested in the “ideological formulations” and “organizational patterns” of nationalism, about which we already know a great deal thanks to the work of historians who have focused on the role played by a narrow number of prominent nationalists, be it well-positioned elites active on high or subaltern radicals closer to the grass roots. Instead, he turns his attention to the emergence of a more intangible, emotional attachment to the nation on the part of ordinary Germans, for whom a sense of belonging to this new imagined construct became somehow “self-evident, like the air one breathes.” One way to get at this process, Smith argues, is to analyze how objects “mediated” nationhood. To that end, and making innovative use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), the article looks at the spatial spread of provincial monuments erected in the late nineteenth century in honor of both veterans, as well as more famous political, military, and cultural figures; it also examines the diffusion of various forms of kitsch with nationalist motifs, such as beer steins and ceramic pipes. Together, Smith believes, these monuments and specimens of kitsch helped make the nation more familiar, more commonplace, more tangible—in short, part and parcel of one’s hometown world and thus of one’s identity. Demonstrating that connection is difficult, of course, and a receptivity to such objects (as well as a local desire to erect such monuments) suggest that such sensitivities already existed in at least embryonic form, i.e., that the monuments and kitsch spread on already fertile ground. The article nevertheless provides an important methodological impetus for getting at a largely intangible process—the emergence and development of a sense of nation—through an examination of the materiality of the everyday.

Just as the rise of nationalism has been a mainstay of research on the nineteenth century, resistance under autocratic regimes has been a source of sustained scholarly interest for those who focus on the Nazi period itself. In a superb specimen of microhistory, Douglas G. Morris’s **“The Lawyer Who Mocked Hitler, and Other Commentaries on the Nuremberg Laws”** provides a novel take on the possibilities for such behavior by examining a minor incident in the legal history of the Third Reich: the prosecution in the late 1930s of attorney Max Hellmann, a Jewish-born convert to Protestantism who fell afoul of the Nuremberg Laws by employing an “Aryan” woman to work in his household after the death of his non-Jewish wife. Hellmann mounted a clever legal defense aimed at showing the absurdity of the Nazi legal system by effectively parodying the 1935 racial laws, as well as the so-called leadership principle (*Führerprinzip*)—a cutting critique that culminated in a bold attempt to subpoena Adolf Hitler himself to testify in court! As one of the anonymous readers of this piece astutely observed, Morris’s “ingenious and original” point is that Hellmann took aim at the laws by intrepidly “performing” his satiric commentary: in fact, this performance of the absurdity of the regime *was* his commentary, in a way reminiscent

of the activities of postwar dissidents in eastern Europe who later endeavored to “live in truth.” Hellmann’s subsequent imprisonment and death in Buchenwald in 1939 nevertheless provides a sober reminder of the dangers involved in resisting autocratic bullies who have grasped the institutional reigns of power.

The final article in this issue, Will Glenn Gray’s **“Paradoxes of Ostpolitik: Revisiting the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties, 1970,”** draws attention to the possible pitfalls of placing nonexperts in powerful diplomatic positions. In a critical reassessment of Willy Brandt’s 1970 treaties with the Soviet Union and Poland, which heralded the West German phase of détente, Gray argues that envoy Egon Bahr, the chancellor’s colorful confidante, negotiated a flawed treaty with Moscow that ignored issues that were vital to the Federal Republic and her western allies, above all the status of Berlin, thus needlessly alienating West Germany’s partners as well as the conservative domestic opposition. The Warsaw treaty negotiated later that year was more in line with West German interests, Gray argues, but effectively soured relations with Warsaw for years to come—suggesting a “harder edge” to Brandt’s Ostpolitik than the one conveyed by the iconic image of the chancellor kneeling, during his visit to the Polish capital, in honor of the victims of the 1944 ghetto uprising. One wonders how Brandt and Bahr might have responded to such criticism were they still alive; they may have conceivably countered that, whatever the flaws of the treaties, their main objective had always been to ameliorate first and foremost the everyday lives of ordinary *East* Germans—and that they were ultimately successful in this endeavor, as developments in the 1970s and 1980s bore out. All of this nevertheless relates to a major issue of scholarly contention concerning the waning years of the Cold War: the extent to which détente and Ostpolitik contributed to the demise of communism—or, as their critics maintain, to a twenty-year lease on life for a failed and inhumane system.

In closing, a brief explanation for the decision to publish a “double issue” in lieu of two separate ones in the fall and winter of this year. This was largely the result of a variety of snags related to production issues: the long-delayed online adoption this fall of ScholarOne, a comprehensive peer review management system that promises to help streamline the submission process; the ironing out of additional workflow issues with a new copy editor; and, finally, regrettable submission delays of accepted manuscripts not yet in a shape suitable for publication. The editorial staff *bittet um Nachsicht* and is working hard to ensure that future issues will once again appear on time in the calendar month for which they are scheduled—a goal only made possible by the unflagging support of Julia Chang and her superb production team at Cambridge University Press.

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