

I / THE TRAUMA OF BIRTH:

From Weimar to Weimar

I

The Weimar Republic was an idea seeking to become reality. The decision to hold the constituent assembly at Weimar was taken primarily for prudential reasons—as Philipp Scheidemann, the first Prime Minister of the Republic, later admitted, Berlin was not safe.¹ But Weimar also came to symbolize a prediction, or at least a hope, for a new start; it was tacit acknowledgment of the charge, widely made in Allied countries during the war and indignantly denied in Germany, that there were really two Germanies: the Germany of military swagger, abject submission to authority, aggressive foreign adventure, and obsessive preoccupation with form, and the Germany of lyrical poetry, Humanist philosophy, and pacific cosmopolitanism. Germany had tried the way of Bismarck and Schlieffen; now it was ready to try the way of Goethe and Humboldt.

It is easy, too easy, to ridicule this solemn search for a usable past. Fifteen years later, in English exile, the distinguished historian Arthur Rosenberg recalled the constitutional assembly with some acerbity. "History," he wrote, "enjoys discrediting arbitrarily chosen symbols."² There is some justice in this observation; the choice of Weimar was in part a symptom of wishful thinking. To found a country in the city of Goethe did not guarantee a country in Goethe's

¹ *Memoiren eines Sozialdemokraten*, 2 vols. (1928), II, 352.

² *A History of the German Republic* (tr. Ian F. D. Morrow and L. Marie Sieveking, 1936), 101.

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image. It did not even guarantee its survival. The Republic was born in defeat, lived in turmoil, and died in disaster, and from the beginning there were many who saw its travail with superb indifference or with that unholy delight in the suffering of others for which the Germans have coined that evocative term *Schadenfreude*. Still, the choice of Weimar was neither quixotic nor arbitrary; for a time the Republic had a real chance. Whatever some derisive historians have said, if the end of the Republic was implied in its beginning, that end was not inevitable. As Toni Stolper, a survivor and perceptive observer of Weimar, has noted, the Republic was marked by creativity in the midst of suffering, hard work in the midst of repeated disappointments, hope in the face of pitiless and powerful adversaries.³ I might add that it is precisely this easy pessimism, which then saw (and still sees) the Republic as doomed from the start, that helped to fulfill the prophecies it made. The end of Weimar was not inevitable because there were republicans who took the symbol of Weimar seriously and who tried, persistently and courageously, to give the ideal real content.

The Weimar ideal was both old and new. The striking mixture of cynicism and confidence, the search for novelty and for roots—the solemn irreverence—of the twenties, were a child of war, revolution, and democracy, but the elements that made it up came from both the distant and the recent past, recalled and revived by a new generation. Goethe and Schopenhauer, historic dates like 1848 and 1871, were living realities for the new Weimar, while the immediate ancestry of the Weimar style, still passionately debated, went back to the turn of the century and the 1890s. "In German art, the transition from

Peter Gay, *The Trauma of Birth. From Weimar to Weimar*. In: *Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider*, New York 2001, pp. 1-22.