

Democrats into Nazis

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*Middle Class Radicalisation in a
Single German Town, 1918-1924*

By

Alex Burkhardt

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For my father

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ABSTRACT

In the January 1919 elections, the first in Germany since the end of the war and collapse of the monarchy, the protestant middle classes of the Bavarian town of Hof an der Saale voted overwhelmingly for the left-liberal, pro-republican German Democratic Party. Five years later, in the Reichstag elections of May 1924, these very same districts cast their votes for the Völkisch Block, a cover organisation for the banned Nazi Party. Why did this dramatic and disturbing electoral turnaround occur? In answer to this question, this book provides a detailed analysis of the political culture of Hof's protestant *Bürgertum* during this five-year period. It uses newspaper editorials, the minutes of political meetings, electoral propaganda, the documents of civic associations and commercial organisations, the publications of the protestant church, and a range of other sources in an effort to reconstruct what Hof's Burghers did, thought, said and wrote between these two elections. What happened between January 1919 and May 1924 to transform Hof's middle-class inhabitants from Democrat into Nazi voters, and how did this startling change manifest itself at the level of discourse and political culture?

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This book is dedicated to my late father, Howard Burkhardt, whose own father originally came from Hof and spent several years in British captivity during the Second World War. I regret that he is not around to read it, and to see that the many stories he told me during my formative years about Germany and the war left some kind of impression after all.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

Aufrufe	Appeal or “call to arms”
BMP	Bayerische Mittelpartei: Bavarian Middle Party
Bürgergesellschaft	The “Citizens Community Hall”, a meeting hall in Hof
Bürgerrat	Citizens Council
Bürgertum	Middle Classes or Bourgeoisie
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei: German Democratic Party
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei: German National People’s Party
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei: German People’s Party
HA	<i>Hofer Anzeiger</i> : Hofer Gazette
Kaiserreich	The pre-1918 Imperial German Empire
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands: German Communist Party
MSPD	Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands: Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei: National Socialist German Workers’ Party
OV	Oberfränkische Volkszeitung: Upper Franconian People’s Newspaper
Räterepublik	Council Republic
Reichswehr	The inter-war German Army
Saalestadt	“Town on the Saale River”
Vereinshalle	“Association Hall”, a meeting hall in Hof
Völkischer Block	The Völkisch Block (cover name for the banned NSDAP)
Vogtland	The region in southern Saxony and Upper Franconia which includes Plauen and Hof

USPD

Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei
Deutschlands: Independent Social
Democratic Party of Germany

INTRODUCTION

On a cold Sunday afternoon in late January 1919, heavy snow began to fall on Hof an der Saale, a town of 40,000 people on the Bavarian border to Czechoslovakia. It was fortunate, one local newspaper later remarked, that the snow had held off until after lunch, because most of the town's inhabitants had spent the morning trudging to and from polling booths to cast their votes in the first German elections since the end of the First World War and abdication of the Kaiser some ten weeks before.¹ This was a critical juncture in German history, an election to decide on the kind of state that would replace the constitutional monarchy of the *Kaiserreich*.

To most observers, it was perfectly obvious who the residents of Hof's working-class districts would vote for. In these impoverished industrial quarters, where dingy tenement blocks and textile manufacturing plants lined the Saale River and where some cramped and insalubrious rooms housed entire families, voters backed the Independent Social Democratic Party (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, USPD) almost to a man (and, for the first time in German history, woman).²

In the more affluent districts to Hof's north and west, however, the outcome of the election was harder to predict. Here, factory owners, civil servants, doctors, shopkeepers, schoolteachers and other *bürgerliche* (middle-class) residents of the town faced a choice between three newly constituted parties, with the forces of left-wing and right-wing liberalism as well as German nationalism all vying for their support. In the end, however, Hof's Burghers overwhelmingly endorsed the left-liberal German Democratic Party (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei*, DDP), a progressive, pro-Republican organisation committed to working with moderate Social Democrats, supportive of women's rights, in favour of reconciliation with Germany's erstwhile enemies and welcoming of Jews.³ By contrast, the right-wing nationalist Bavarian Middle Party (*Bayerische*

¹ "Morgenpost" in *Hofer Anzeiger* (henceforth *HA*), no. 17, 20 January 1919.

² Rudolf Macht, *Geschichte der Hofer Arbeiterbewegung Band 3/1 (1918-1923): Spaltung* (Hof; Selbstverlag 1991), pp. 45–46.

³ "Ergebnisse der deutschen National-Wahl" in *HA*, no. 17, 20 January 1919.

Mittelpartei, BMP) endured a miserable, anonymous campaign and failed to break the 200 vote mark. The *bürgerliche* newspaper greeted the dawning of a new, democratic era in Germany, while local middle-class liberals called on their compatriots to “behave democratically” and applauded the fact that the “spirit of German militarism” had finally been consigned to the past.⁴

By the time of the May 1924 elections five years later, however, this situation had changed beyond recognition. On a balmy spring day, the same doctors, teachers, shopkeepers and civil servants who had voted for the German Democrats in January 1919 again went to the polls to cast their votes in national and regional elections. This time, however, the back pages of the local newspaper were bedecked with swastikas and calling on readers to vote for “the Völkisch Block” (*Völkischer Block*), a cover organisation for the banned Nazi Party. Men in military uniform marched in the streets, Nazis and Communists clashed at “Patriotic Events”, and the local Protestant pastor polemicized against “Jewish Bolshevism”. The Democrats were now a forgotten, almost spectral presence, haunting thinly populated meeting halls; in 1924 they won just over 600 votes compared with over 6000 five years previously. This time, victory in the middle-class (and some working class) districts of Hof went to the Nazis, who received the backing of over 8000 people.⁵

Within the space of half a decade, the middle classes of this small Bavarian town had switched their support from a party of centre-left liberals to the most radical nationalists in German history. But why did this remarkable and disturbing turnaround occur? Why did support for left-liberalism in Hof collapse so utterly in such a short period of time? How did right-wing nationalism recover from its apparent eclipse during the November Revolution, and why did the Nazis become its most prominent standard bearers? These questions lie at the heart of this book, which explores the political culture of Hof’s protestant middle classes between November 1918 and May 1924. This is an investigation into what the town’s Burghers did, thought, said and wrote during the half-decade after the First World War, a close analysis of the content of their newspapers, the speeches given at their political meetings, the sentiments expressed in

⁴ See “Wohin treiben Wir?” in *HA*, no. 327, 29 December 1918; Stadtarchiv Hof (henceforth StaHf), ZA.2430, *Dokumente der Deutschen Demokratischen Partei Hof’s, 1918-1924* (henceforth *DDP Hof’s*), “Hof, 12 Dezember”, 12 December 1918; “Dem Gedächtnis unserer gefallenen Helden!” in *HA*, no. 90, 16 April 1919.

⁵ “Reichstagswahl-Resultate” in *HA*, no. 107, 5 May 1924.

their civic associations, the rituals enacted at their gatherings, the values propagated in the sermons of the local Protestant pastor and the parish newsletter, and the opinions offered in the writings of politically involved individuals.

As we shall see, there was nothing inevitable about the Hofer *Bürgertum*'s abandonment of democratic principles and dramatic shift to the right, which did not result from a deep-rooted, putatively "German" orientation toward authoritarian racism, much less a distinctly middle-class predilection for hyper-nationalist fascist parties. In fact, after being completely rejected by the electorate in January 1919, Hof's far right was handed an opportunity to "re-emerge from its political quarantine" due to a series of extraordinary revolutionary and national crises that befell the town, the Reich and much of Europe in the first five years after the First World War.⁶

Middle-Class Radicalisation in the Weimar Republic

In his seminal book *Germans into Nazis*, the US historian Peter Fritzsche charted the process by which the political discourses, expectations and ambitions of Germany's protestant middle classes were radically transformed by the experiences of the First World War and 1918 Revolution. It was principally these two highly politicising events, Fritzsche argued, that led to a growing detachment of bourgeois nationalism from the more staid, elitist pretensions of 19th century monarchism and toward the violent, volatile, *völkisch* populism which the Nazis would become the primary exponents of.⁷ And yet, as Fritzsche acknowledges, there was no straightforward transfer of *bürgerliche* loyalties from the "old" to the "new" right in the aftermath of the First World War, and the road travelled by Germany's protestant *Bürgertum* on their fateful journey toward Nazism was a twisted one.⁸

⁶ Manfred Kittel, *'Weimar' im evangelischen Bayern. Politische Mentalität und Parteiwesen 1918-1933* (München: Bayerische Landeszentrale für Politische Bildungsarbeit, 2001), p. 52.

⁷ Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 178–180.

⁸ An exploration of the putative distinction between "old" and "new" right can be found in Stefan Breuer, *Ordnungen der Ungleichheit: Die Deutsche Rechte im Widerstreit ihrer Ideen 1871-1945* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001).

In the January 1919 elections, the widespread support among Hof's middle classes for the left-liberal German Democratic Party was mirrored across the Reich, with the DDP later entering the first republican government as part of the "Weimar Coalition" in alliance with moderate Social Democrats and the Catholic Centre Party. It appeared that, though some sections of the German *Bürgertum* had indeed greeted the revolution with a degree of horror and panic, there was also a palpable relief at the end of the war and even of the monarchy, and a certain confidence that Burghers could participate fully in shaping the revolution in co-operation with the representatives of other political camps.⁹

And yet, within 18 months of this apparent "new beginning", the protestant *Bürgertum* was already absconding from a pro-republican politics, as the Democrats lost much of their backing in the elections of summer 1920 and the locus of *bürgerliche* political gravity shifted to the right-liberal German Peoples' Party (*Deutsche Volkspartei*, DVP) and the national-conservative DNVP (*Deutschnationale Volkspartei*, DNVP). This rightward migration did not end here, however, as the *Bürgertum* took further steps away from the political centre ground in subsequent elections, first in the direction of myriad single-issue splinter parties and, ultimately, toward the Nazis.¹⁰ And despite this obvious difficulty uniting around or settling on a single political party before 1929, unanimous protestant-*bürgerliche* support for Hindenburg in the 1925 Presidential elections showed that, if united, they could be a powerful force at the polls.¹¹

Thus, from the early 1920s, German Burghers increasingly sought out politicians who uncompromisingly rejected, rather than begrudgingly

⁹ This ambiguous, but to some extent positive, *bürgerliche* response to the revolution is related in *Fritzsche*, *Germans into Nazis*, pp. 106-112, and also related in Michael Epkenhans, *Das Bürgertum und die Revolution 1918/19*, *Kleine Schriften / Stiftung Reichspräsident-Friedrich-Ebert-Gedenkstätte*, Nr. 16 (Heidelberg: Stiftung Reichspräsident-Friedrich-Ebert-Gedenkstätte, 1994).

¹⁰ See Larry Eugene Jones, "The Dissolution of the Bourgeois Party System in the Weimar Republic", in *Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany*, ed. by Richard Bessel and E. J. Feuchtwanger (London: Barnes & Nobles, 1981), pp. 268-89 and Larry Eugene Jones, "'The Dying Middle': Weimar Germany and the Fragmentation of Bourgeois Politics", *Central European History*, 5.01 (1972), 23-54.

¹¹ Peter Fritzsche, "Presidential Victory and Popular Festivity in Weimar Germany: Hindenburg's 1925 Election", *Central European History*, 23.2/3 (1990), 205-24.

accepted, the “dictated peace” of Versailles, who promised to provide more resolute opposition to “Marxism” rather than collaborate with the Social Democrats, and who hoped to replace Republican democracy with something entirely different rather than “work constructively” within the system. But this radicalisation was not restricted to the realm of national politics; it was also vividly reflected in the provincial settings where the majority of protestant burghers lived. Over the course of the 1920s, in the small villages of the countryside and in towns such as Marburg, Gotha, Celle, Oldenburg and Greifswald, the protestant *Bürgertum* began to mobilise into a militant subculture that was bitterly opposed to the Weimar Republic.¹²

As the mood became more febrile during 1919 and 1920, the “Burgher Councils” and “Home Guards Units” (*Einwohnerwehr*) that had sprung up during the revolution in order to advance middle class interests and guard against left-wing extremism gradually evolved into more tightly organised and ideologically sophisticated formations.¹³ The most prominent manifestations of this radicalising, extra-parliamentary middle class politics were paramilitary “Combat Leagues” such as the Steel Helmets (*Stahlhelm*) and the Young German Order (*Jungdeutscher Orden*) that

¹² For the example of Marburg, see Rudy Koshar, *Social Life, Local Politics, and Nazism: Marburg, 1880-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). For Gotha, see Helge Matthiesen, *Bürgertum und Nationalsozialismus in Thüringen: das bürgerliche Gotha von 1918 bis 1930* (Jena: G. Fischer, 1994); For Celle, see Frank Bösch, *Das konservative Milieu: Vereinskultur und lokale Sammlungspolitik in ost- und westdeutschen Regionen (1900-1960)* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002). Oldenburg and other parts of Lower Saxony are the subject of Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Greifswald is covered in Helge Matthiesen, *Greifswald in Vorpommern: konservatives Milieu im Kaiserreich, in Demokratie und Diktatur 1900-1990* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2000). The villages of the protestant countryside are addressed in Wolfram Pyta, *Dorfgemeinschaft und Parteipolitik, 1918-1933: die Verschränkung von Milieu und Parteien in den protestantischen Landgebieten Deutschlands in der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1996).

¹³ For a comprehensive overview of the Burgher Councils, see Hans-Joachim Bieber, *Bürgertum in der Revolution: Bürgerräte und Bürgerstreiks in Deutschland 1918-1920* (Hamburg: Christians, 1992). The Home Guards are covered in James M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) and Dirk Schumann, *Political violence in the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933: fight for the streets and fear of civil war* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), pp. 16–25.

sought to “reclaim control” of public space from “the left”.¹⁴ And at the same time as these new, avowedly nationalist and anti-socialist formations were coming into being, more traditional social and institutional organs of protestant-*bürgerliche* Germany – such as the church, the provincial press and, above all, a dense network of ostensibly “apolitical” civic associations (or *Vereine*) – also became increasingly radicalised germ cells of right-wing nationalism.¹⁵

A subplot of the overall story by which *Germans* became Nazis, then, is the crucial question of how *democrats* became Nazis – or at least of how and why a social constituency that had endorsed a moderate democratic party in January 1919 could abandon it so quickly and gravitate toward a catalogue of ever more extreme anti-republican organisations.¹⁶ And yet it would be wrong to speak of a scholarly consensus about precisely why this process occurred, when it was triggered, and where its deeper social, cultural, political and economic roots lay. An older (though still influential) tradition of scholarship located the origins of inter-war *bürgerliche* radicalisation deep in Germany’s past, and especially in the aftermath of the failed “liberal” revolutions of 1848. According to this “Special Path” (or *Sonderweg*) theory of Germany’s historical development, the German middle classes failed to perform their proper historical function in the transition from feudalism to capitalism by enacting a true “bourgeois revolution” in 1848 that would remove “pre-modern elites” from power. This failure gave rise to a “feudalised” middle class that was uniquely susceptible to illiberal and authoritarian attitudes, and which, some seventy years after 1848, remained too “politically immature” to accept a parliamentary republic and instead found its natural home on the far right – irrespective of the brief and purely tactical flirtation with the German Democrats in January 1919.¹⁷

¹⁴ Dirk Schumann, *Political violence in the Weimar Republic*, chap. 6.

¹⁵ Claus-Christian Szejnmann, *Nazism in Central Germany: The Brownshirts in ‘Red’ Saxony* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), chap. 4; Frank Bösch, *Das konservative Milieu*, chap. 5; Frank Bösch, “Militante Geselligkeit: Formierungsformen der Bürgerlichen Vereinswelt zwischen Revolution und Nationalsozialismus”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*. Sonderheft.Vol. 21 (2005), 151–82.

¹⁶ Of course, that the Nazis were enormously successful beyond the protestant *Bürgertum* is the subject of an extensive literature, but a useful summary is Conan Fischer, *The Rise of the Nazis* (Manchester University Press, 2002).

¹⁷ A useful summary of the various strands of the *Sonderweg* theory is Jürgen Kocka, “German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German

The *Sonderweg* thesis, or some variant of it, is still wheeled out with unerring frequency in contemporary (especially German) scholarship on the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazis.¹⁸ Its apparent durability notwithstanding, however, this reading of modern German history has been subjected to significant criticism for its excessive determinism, its failure to acknowledge the civic and democratic gains made by the German bourgeoisie during the 19th century, and its rose-tinted depiction of the state of parliamentary democracy in nineteenth century Britain and France, the supposed “bastions” of liberalism.¹⁹ But if such deterministic, structural explanations for Weimar-era *Bürgerliche* radicalisation have fallen out of fashion, then there is still no clear scholarly unanimity about where its roots truly lay.

Of course, many historians have focused here on the impact of the First World War in radicalising Germany’s bourgeoisie and providing a rich vein of middle-class support for right-wing nationalist parties. This emphasis on the war has taken many different forms. Some scholars have focused on the “August experience,” the putative unity that prevailed in Germany on the outbreak of the war which, coupled with an ongoing military campaign against and opposition to the “liberal” west, primed German Burghers for the radicalisation that set in during the 1920s.²⁰ Others have focused instead on the “trench experience” which perceivably “brutalised” millions of Germans, feeding fantasies of “comradeship” and

Sonderweg”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23.1 (1988), 3–16 and, for some more recent reflections by the same author, Jürgen Kocka, “Looking Back on the Sonderweg”, *Central European History*, 51.01 (2018), 137–42.

¹⁸ See, for example, two relatively recent accounts of the German Revolution which draw heavily on the *Sonderweg* thesis, Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19: der wahre Beginn unserer Demokratie* (München: Europa Verlag, 2017) and Joachim Käppner, *1918 – Aufstand Für Die Freiheit: Die Revolution Der Besonnenen* (München: Piper, 2017).

¹⁹ See David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford [Oxfordshire]; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

²⁰ For example, Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany*, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare, 10 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Steffen Bruendel, *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volksstaat: die ‘Ideen von 1914’ und die Neuordnung Deutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003).

“belonging” that right-wing formations were best placed to profit from.²¹ Such formations (and ultimately the Nazis) were the eventual victors in an on-going struggle to define what the war experience meant, especially among the protestant *Bürgertum*.²²

There is no doubt that the First World War, and the enduring question of how to make sense of it, played a key, destabilising role during the Weimar Republic, and that the nationalist right’s success in forcing through its bellicose interpretation was critical in radicalising (especially) protestant-*bürgerliche* voters and inducing them to support anti-republican formations. That said, however, a straightforward emphasis on the war in triggering and sustaining *bürgerliche* radicalisation leaves many questions unanswered – such as why so many former soldiers returned home to peaceful civilian life after the war, or why the (presumably, similarly brutalised) populations of Britain or France did not throw their lots in with the hyper-nationalist right during the 1920s.²³

But most of all, an exclusive emphasis on the war fails to explain how a party such as the DDP (which had an, at best, ambivalent attitude toward German militarism) was ever able to enjoy such success among a supposedly “brutalised” population.²⁴ Indeed, as Thomas Weber has recently pointed out for the example of Bavaria, the first parliamentary elections after the First World War did not represent a watershed moment,

²¹ See George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and, for a recent variant on this thesis which emphasises a culture of “comradeship”, Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler’s Community, 1918-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. 9-32.

²² The victory of the right in shaping popular narratives on the war is emphasised in Arndt Weinrich, *Der Weltkrieg als Erzieher: Jugend zwischen Weimarer Republik und Nationalsozialismus*, Schriften der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, n.F., Bd. 27, 1. Aufl (Essen: Klartext, 2013), esp. 65-125.

²³ A wide-ranging critique of the idea that the First World War led to a straightforward “brutalisation” of Weimar-era politics can be found in Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914-1923* (Oxford, UK; New York: Berg, 2007).

²⁴ See Karl Holl, “Die Deutsche Demokratische Partei im Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Wehrpolitik und Pazifismus”, in *Pazifismus in der Weimarer Republik: Beiträge zur historischen Friedensforschung*, ed. by Karl Holl and Wolfram Wette, Sammlung Schöningh zur Geschichte und Gegenwart (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1981), pp. 135–49.

but rather a continuation of a tendency toward moderate reformism that had been evident even before 1914.²⁵

But if the legacies of neither the nineteenth century nor the First World War are sufficient on their own to explain middle class anti-republican mobilisation during the 1920s, then where should we look instead? Several historians have emphasised the devastating hyperinflation of 1923-24 in destroying not only middle-class savings, but also middle-class support for the parties of the bourgeois centre. According to this line of argument, the hyperinflation dramatically amputated the *Bürgertum* from its traditional liberal and conservative political representatives, engendered an enhanced middle class hatred of the better organised (and increasingly better paid) socialist working class, while completely inverting the staid bourgeois “moral order” in favour of the destructive fanaticism of the Nazis.²⁶ Based on this reading of inter-war German history, it is to the middle, supposedly “golden” years of the Weimar period between 1924 and 1929 that we must turn if we want to understand *bürgerliche* radicalisation and the dramatic “realignment” of bourgeois voting patterns that resulted in near unanimous protestant middle class backing for the NSDAP after 1929.²⁷

And yet the contours of the devastating hyperinflation of 1923 do not accord seamlessly with the process of *bürgerliche* radicalisation outlined above. The middle-class defection from the Democrats was already underway by the time of the 1920 Reichstag elections, as the DDP lost 10% of its January 1919 vote share primarily to the right-liberal DVP

²⁵ Thomas Weber, *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 23–24.

²⁶ One of the most prolific scholars in emphasising the catastrophic effects of the hyperinflation on the middle class parties has been Larry Eugene Jones - see, for example, "Inflation, Revaluation, and the Crisis of Middle-Class Politics: A Study in the Dissolution of the German Party System, 1923–28", *Central European History*, 12.02 (1979), 143–68. The role of the hyper-inflation in inverting the "moral order" of the German bourgeoisie is stressed in Gerald D Feldman, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also Bernd Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*, Weimar and Now, 26 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). For a study that advances similar arguments for the specific case of Munich, see Martin H. Geyer, *Verkehrte Welt: Revolution, Inflation und Moderne, München 1914-1924*, Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft, Bd. 128 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

²⁷ See Thomas Childers, *The Nazi Voter: The Social Foundations of Fascism in Germany, 1919-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

(which initially evinced a highly ambivalent attitude toward the Republic) and the right-wing nationalist DNVP (which at this time was hardly a party of the “bourgeois centre”).²⁸ Similarly, it was primarily during 1920 and 1921 that organisations such as the nationalist, paramilitary Stahlhelm and the radically *völkisch* German Nationalist Protection and Defiance Federation (*Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund*) experienced dramatic growth and became political forces to be reckoned with.²⁹ If *bürgerliche* radicalisation during the Weimar period was a straightforward reaction to the debilitating financial (and moral) effects of the hyperinflation, then why were such trends already clearly observable before the galloping inflation of the war years reached crisis proportions with the French invasion of the Ruhr?

Rather than locate the roots of middle class mobilisation against the Weimar Republic primarily in the 19th century, the First World War, the mid-1920s or even the Great Depression, this book argues that the crucial factor was in fact the massive revolutionary and ethnic violence that characterised the half-decade between 1918 and 1923, not just in Germany but across much of central and eastern Europe. Recent scholarship has revisited this initial period of profound post-war instability and shown how pernicious its effects were for the historical development of Europe’s fledgling democracies. For though the guns on the Western Front fell silent in November 1918, the fighting was only just beginning across those large areas of the continent where state power was disintegrating and the

²⁸ Thomas Mergel’s influential thesis about a gradual “Toryisation” of the DNVP over the course of the Weimar Republic notwithstanding (see Thomas Mergel, “Das Scheitern des deutschen Tory-Konservatismus. Die Umformung der DNVP zu einer rechtsradikalen Partei 1928-1932”, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 276.2 (2003), 323–68), there is little question that, at least in its formative years, the disparate factions which made up the DNVP were united by a common rejection of the Republic. See, for example, Hans Dieter Bernd, “Die Beseitigung der Weimarer Republik auf “*legalem Weg*”. Die Funktion des Antisemitismus in der Agitation der Führungsschicht der DNVP” (Hagen, 2004), and Maik Ohnezeit, *Zwischen “schärfster Opposition” und dem “Willen zur Macht”. Die Deutschnationale Volkspartei (DNVP) in der Weimarer Republik 1918-1928*, Beiträge zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien; Bd. 158, (Düsseldorf: Droste 2011).

²⁹ Brian E Crim, *Antisemitism in the German Military Community and the Jewish Response, 1914-1938*, 2016, p. 35. The formative years of the *Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund* are covered in chapter 1 of Rainer Hering, *Konstruierte Nation: Der Alldeutsche Verband, 1890 bis 1939*, Hamburger Beiträge zur Sozial- und Zeitgeschichte. Darstellungen, Bd. 40 (Hamburg: Christians, 2003).

vast land empires that had organised the region for centuries were beginning to collapse. Ethnic and separatist conflicts broke out as Germans, Poles, Czechs, Rumanians, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Greeks, Turks, Finns and others tried to “change the facts on the ground” and claim the territories they believed were theirs. At the same time, revolutionary uprisings inspired by the Russian Revolution began to spread outwards from the civil war-wracked lands of the former Tsarist Empire, serving as a utopian inspiration for some and an apocalyptic nightmare for others.³⁰

Crucially, the violence that characterised these post-war conflicts was very different from the strictly military combat that had prevailed between 1914-1918, for these were “existential conflicts fought to annihilate the enemy, be they ethnic or class enemies”, and they involved thousands of men organised into paramilitary bands which battled each other, the Bolsheviks and domestic revolutionaries across the continent.³¹ It was out of this vortex of ethnic and counter-revolutionary existential conflict that the extremist politics of the inter-war period were born, with many of the men involved becoming deeply embroiled in right-wing movements (and regimes) upon their return. Robert Gerwarth has persuasively argued that the political awakenings and ideological radicalisations of key figures from the Third Reich and other inter-war fascist and right-wing authoritarian regimes came as responses to, and involvement in, the existential conflicts of the immediate post-war period.³²

However, the broader relationship between the atmosphere of revolutionary and ethnic crisis which engulfed much of post-war Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand, and the process of *bürgerliche* radicalisation sketched out above on the other, remains to be explored. Existing scholarship on post-war conflict has tended to focus specifically on those who personally took up arms against their perceived ethnic or class enemies, rather than on the broader middle-class milieus of provincial towns across the continent. To be sure, a recent study by Mark

³⁰ See the collected essays in *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, ed. by Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, The Greater War, 1st ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Eliza Ablovatski, “The 1919 Central European Revolutions and the Judeo-Bolshevik Myth”, *European Review of History: Revue Européenne D’histoire*, 17.3 (2010), 473–89.

³¹ Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), p.13.

³² Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, p. 215.

Jones has applied the framework of post-war violence to the specific case of Germany and shown convincingly how a seemingly all-permeating sense of European wide “civil war” exerted a profound influence on the conduct and decision making of key actors, and the perceptions of broad sections of the population, during the founding of the Weimar Republic.³³ But Jones’ study focuses principally on decision makers at the center and medial representations of the revolution in prominent press organs, and his is essentially a history of the November Revolution and its immediate aftermath, ending in the summer of 1919 with the Munich *Räterepublik*, the Treaty of Versailles, and the adoption of a new constitution. There is thus a bigger story to be told about the relationship between the half-decade of existential conflict after the First World War and the genesis of *bürgerliche* radicalization in the Weimar Republic. This book is a contribution in this direction.

Thesis and Sources

The central contention of this book is that, if we want to understand why the protestant German Burgher’s commitment to democracy collapsed so quickly and so utterly after an apparently promising start, then it is to the atmosphere of revolutionary and ethnic violence which prevailed during the first five years of the Weimar Republic that we must turn for answers. The seemingly endless panoply of left-wing revolutionary uprisings inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, as well as continued ethnic and national conflict with (above all) Poles, Czechs and the French, convinced German burghers that parliamentary democracy and co-operation with the moderate left could not secure their status and security, or the status and security of their treasured Fatherland. They thus increasingly retreated from the moderate positions they had occupied immediately after the war and drifted toward those organisations who promised to most resolutely crush the revolutionary left and restore the Reich to greatness in the face of foreign aggression.

The book aims to prove this central contention by providing a case study of the radicalisation of the protestant *Bürgertum* of a single town – Hof an der Saale – during the first fraught five-year period of the Weimar Republic. Local case studies, of course, have a well-established pedigree when it comes to scholarly examinations of Weimar-era *bürgerliche*

³³ Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

radicalisation, from William Sheridan Allen's pioneering work on the rise of the Nazis in the Lower Saxon town of Northeim during the depression, to Helge Matthiesen's penetrating analysis of inter-war bourgeois politics in the Thuringian town of Gotha. None of the previous studies, however, have focused specifically on the five-year period after the First World War, or aimed to contextualise *bürgerliche* experiences within broader, trans-national trends toward existential conflict. This book concentrates much more purposefully on this period of perceived "civil war" as it was felt at the local level, in order to explicate precisely those social, political, economic and ideological dynamics that produced a dramatic middle class turn to the right within a single protestant-*Bürgerliche* constituency.³⁴

This book draws on the work of M. Rainer Lepsius and Karl Rohe to define the protestant-*Bürgertum* as a distinct socio-moral milieu united by a common political culture, and which existed alongside and was sometimes opposed by rival Socialist and Catholic milieus in Germany from the late nineteenth century until after the Second World War.³⁵ This is in contrast to those older definitions of the *Bürgertum* which defined this formation as a "social class" encompassing those "middling" professional groups sandwiched between the industrial working classes on the one hand, and big industrial and agrarian interests on the other.³⁶ Such a definition was obviously limited in that it failed to account for those "national minded" workers who held aloof from the parties of the left, as well as the large numbers of "middle class" Catholics who, along with their working class co-religionists, consistently voted for the Catholic

³⁴ The use of the term "civil war" to describe the first five years of the Weimar Republic has been used in Richard Evan Frankel, *Bismarck's Shadow: The Cult of Leadership and the Transformation of the German Right, 1898-1945* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005), p. 106 and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Radikationalismus und Nationalsozialismus", in *Die Politik der Nation: Deutscher Nationalismus in Krieg und Krisen, 1760-1960*, ed. by Jörg Echternkamp and Sven Oliver Müller, Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte, Bd. 56 (München: R. Oldenbourg, 2002), pp. 203–19 (p. 213).

³⁵ M. Rainer Lepsius, *Demokratie in Deutschland soziologisch-historische Konstellationsanalysen: ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), chap. 2; Karl Rohe, *Wahlen und Wählertraditionen in Deutschland*, pp. 65–69. There is some ambiguity over how many milieus there were in the Kaiserreich and Weimar Republic, but Rohe identifies three principal "camps" - Socialist, Catholic and National (or protestant-*Bürgerliche*).

³⁶ For a discussion of this, see Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg: Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1973), pp. 65–95.

Centre Party rather than the liberal and conservative parties of the protestant bourgeoisie.³⁷ Lepsius and Rohe were able to explain constellations such as these, and also how the protestant *Bürgertum* was able to integrate groups and individuals with varying levels of material wealth and social standing, by characterising it not as a *class*, but as a *milieu* united by a common “national” mentality and political culture. Thus when this book refers to the protestant-*Bürgertum*, it is this non-Socialist, non-Catholic, broadly national minded milieu that is denoted. Nonetheless, frequent reference is made here to Hof’s “middle classes” – which is not intended to imply a residual attachment to a materialist class-based definition, but only to more adequately address the inherent problem of translating the German term “*Bürgertum*” into English.³⁸

Any attempt to reconstruct a political culture must aim to uncover “those fundamental attitudes, emotions and actions that are determinative for the actors in a political system,” and must therefore focus on the discourses, practices and symbols of the community under study.³⁹ This book accesses a range of discourses, practices and symbols created by those institutions in Hof which historians such as Rudy Koshar, Frank Bösch and Helge Matthiesen have identified as key to the political and cultural cohesion of Germany’s provincial, protestant middle classes. This includes the content of the local *bürgerliche* newspaper, the *Hofer Anzeiger*; the documents of local branches of *bürgerliche* political parties such as the German Democratic Party, the Bavarian Middle Party, various splinter parties, and the Nazis; the documents of local civic societies, such as veterans’ leagues, patriotic clubs, and gymnastics and singing societies; reports from the local employers’ and factory owners’ formation, the Trade Chamber for Upper Franconia, which met monthly and provided a forum for the economic luminaries of the Hofer *Bürgertum*; sources from

³⁷ See Karl Rohe, *Wahlen und Wählertraditionen in Deutschland: Kulturelle Grundlagen Deutscher Parteien und Parteiensysteme im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), p. 154.

³⁸ A full discussion of the complications of translating the term “*Bürgertum*” into English can be found in Jürgen Kocka, *Civil Society and Dictatorship in Modern German History* (Hanover [N.H.: Published by University Press of New England, 2010), p. 15.

³⁹ See Schumann, *Political violence in the Weimar Republic*, p. xx; Karl Rohe, “Politische Kultur und der kulturelle Aspekt von politischer Wirklichkeit: Konzeptionelle und typologische Überlegungen zu Gegenstand und Fragestellung politischer Kulturforschung.”, in *Politische Kultur in Deutschland: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung*, ed. by Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jakob Schissler (Opladen, 1987), pp. 39–48 (p. 42).

the local Protestant church, principally the parish newsletter, speeches of local pastors, and minutes of meetings of Protestant associations such as the Protestant Workers' Society; and the public and private writings of politically engaged local *bürgerliche* notables.⁴⁰

Of course, the Hofer *Bürgertum* was a far from homogenous entity; it was the site of innumerable social, political, economic and ideological conflicts during the five years under study here. These sources are used not only to elaborate on the commonalities that held this constituency together, but also to draw out the conflicts and frictions that lent it a considerable degree of instability and dynamism. Nonetheless, the aim here is to use these sources to show that a basic political consensus existed among Hof's protestant middle classes, but that this consensus was constantly contested and underwent dramatic changes during the five years that are the focus of this study. In short, though in the immediate aftermath of the First World War this consensus was structured around broadly democratic and pro-republican narratives and values, the ethnic and revolutionary conflict of the post-war period led to a "*Plausibilitätsverlust*" ("loss of plausibility") of such narratives and lent considerable credibility to a nationalist right that had seemed dead and buried during the Revolution.⁴¹

Conclusion

The Hofer *Bürgertum* underwent a process of dramatic radicalisation during the first five years of the Weimar Republic, as reflected by the strikingly different elections of January 1919 (when the middle-class vote

⁴⁰ The critical importance of the press to the cohesion of Germany's protestant *Bürgertum* is outlined in Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially pp. 117–120, and Modris Eksteins, *The Limits of Reason: The German Democratic Press and the Collapse of Weimar Democracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), chap. 3. The role of *bürgerliche Vereine* is the particular focus of Bösch, "Militante Geselligkeit: Formierungsformen der Bürgerlichen Vereinswelt zwischen Revolution und Nationalsozialismus", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*. Sonderheft.Vol. 21 (2005), 151–82. The importance of the church comes into focus in Bösch, *Das konservative Milieu*, pp. 96–100 and Pyta, *Dorfgemeinschaft und Parteipolitik*, p. 477.

⁴¹ On the idea of a *Plausibilitätsverlust*, see Willibald Steinmetz, "40 Jahre Begriffsgeschichte—The State of the Art," in *Sprache, Kognition, Kultur: Sprache zwischen mentaler Struktur und kultureller Prägung*, ed. Heidrun Kämper and Ludwig M. Eichinger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 188

went predominantly to the German Democrats) and May 1924 (when this same constituency voted largely for the Nazis). This book is an attempt to establish and explain why this happened by focusing primarily on the changing political culture of Hof's protestant *Bürgertum* during this period. The overall argument is that the ethnic and revolutionary turmoil which permeated much of Central and Eastern Europe (and which also manifested in Hof) for five years after the formal end of the First World War had a profound effect on politics in the town, discrediting pro-republican narratives and allowing the nationalist right to impose its interpretation of events. The Nazis proved to be the ultimate beneficiaries of this process. But before we can embark on our study of the travails of Hof's protestant middle classes between 1918 and 1924, a final question remains to be answered; what makes this particular town a suitable and instructive case study for such an investigation?