Dirk Schumann, *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic, 1918–1933: Fight for the Streets and Fear of Civil War*, Berghahn: Oxford, 2009; 346 pp., 10 illus., tables; 9781845454609, £60.00 (hbk)

Timothy S. Brown, *Weimar Radicals: Nazis and Communists Between Authenticity and Performance*, Berghahn: Oxford, 2009; 213 pp., 31 illus.; 9781845455644, £50.00 (hbk)

Political extremism is one of the characteristics of Weimar Germany. Its differences, escalating in murder and open street violence, have been considered to be one fundamental reason for the decline of the contested democracy. In retrospect its failure seemed almost inevitable. It is a challenging task for historians to analyse history as an open process and not to interpret it deterministically, blinded by the light of the already known outcome. This is what Dirk Schumann took as a principle when he started his investigation of political violence in the Weimar Republic. Published in German in 2001, his study has recently been translated into English and released in a revised and slightly shortened version. It continues to be an important contribution for better understanding this issue.

Political radicalism and violence have been explained as arising both out of the Bolshevik revolution (with fascism as its countermovement) and out of a common 'brutalization' deriving from front-line experiences of war. However, such civil-war-like conditions did not last longer than two years following the war. According to Schumann, political violence must rather be seen as a 'by-product of a fight for public space'. He does not put into question the consensus on its destructive impact but insists that it should be conceived mainly as 'a symbolic show of force' that could have been bridled if a government would have been strictly determined to do so. For this reason, Schumann suggests a view of the Weimar state as one certainly 'with alternatives to the Nazi takeover' (viii).

In order to achieve deeper empirical insight, Schumann's examination concentrates on a 'mid-size level', the Prussian province of Saxony, a highly industrialized but in some areas still agricultural province (it equates today, with the exception of some smaller districts, to the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt). Paramilitary forces of the right like the 'Stahlhelm', the largest of the Combat Leagues, and the 'Wehrwolf' as well as the social democratic and bourgeois-republican 'Reichsbanner' and the communist 'Rote Frontkämpferbund' were founded in this part of Germany (in the cities of Magdeburg and Halle). The only attempted revolutionary uprising of the KPD, the 'March action' of 1921, also took place in this region. Schumann primarily draws on provincial government and administration files, but also on the internal communication of the KPD and the regional daily press. The book contains a helpful index of subjects as well as an index of peoples and places.

The period of fierce political violence at the beginning of the Weimar Republic accentuated by the assassinations of republican representatives like Erzberger and Rathenau can be considered as a 'circumscribed civil war' (1). However, this was

not typical for the Weimar Republic as a whole. In the subsequent years 'small' violence became endemic (xiii). 'Small' means that it was of limited nature, often consisted in ritualistic street fighting and did not repeatedly lead to deadly confrontations between large numbers of combatants. While admitting that the roots of the violence can be traced back to the time before the war, Schumann turns his attention to the prevalent and diffuse fear of the bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the workers' movement which was transferred to the radical left. Right-wing extremist groups seemed to avoid a danger that never became real. Moreover, it was right-wing extremist claims of the public sphere that were the source of similar processes of mobilization and organization on the social democratic and communist sides, confirming even more the apprehension of the middle classes and consolidating their inclination to ignore if not to accept the violence of the Nazis. Henceforth, violence was ascribed regularly to the extreme left. However, in the end it was not the fear of the Communists that ultimately led to the underestimation of National Socialism but rather the ease of using National Socialism as the rising mass movement of choice necessary for dissolving the unpopular republic.

It has often been stated that a more stable foundation for democracy could have been achieved at an early stage, at the turn of 1918/19. Schumann backs up this thesis by discovering the 'relative unimportance' of the Home Guards (308). The role of the Communists should also not be overrated since, by this time, the bourgeoisie was not primarily concerned with the threat of a Bolshevik revolution. Sustainable changes in bureaucracy, justice, the military and the economy would have been possible and there was another missed opportunity to save the republic in its final stage: the chance for a decisive advance against the SA was not seized in 1932. Nevertheless the history of the Combat Leagues for Schumann implies the pessimistic vision that, even without the Great Depression and the surrender to the Nazis, an 'authoritarian revision of the political system' would have been likely (313).

As Schumann suggests, those involved in violent encounters were neither especially 'brutalized' veterans nor the 'youth' but mostly adults already having their own families. Apart from the last phase of the republic marked by the economic crisis, the majority of them would have had a job although their occupational profile is not obvious. It remains difficult to explain the political violence by the specific characteristics of its perpetrators. Given the imprecise delineation of a multiplicity of political milieus or subcultures, Schumann prefers another model to describe the political culture of the Weimar Republic. Citing the work of Karl Rohe, he suggests that three 'camps' – a catholic, a socialist and a national camp – can be distinguished within the political electorate. This would make it easier to explain disintegrative tendencies in the bourgeois party spectrum and the growth of the NSDAP. As regards political violence in Schumann's narrative, basically two – ideologically and organizationally – distinguishable groups were clashing in the streets and trying to conquer the public terrain: 'Back in the middle Weimar years, the boundary between the bourgeois-national and the socialist camps had rigidified, which was reflected not least in the way political violence

developed' (313). Maybe in this view 'left' and 'right' are presented by Schumann as somewhat more monolithic than they were perceived by contemporaries.

That is where Timothy S. Brown sets the starting point of his study on Weimar radicals. As he argues in the very beginning, narratives focusing on ideology and organization 'risk closing down inquiry at precisely the point at which it should be opened up' (3). Therefore, he takes another perspective, interpreting radicalism not against the backdrop of ideology but as a certain habitus. In many cases radicals of the left and of the right not only lived in the same neighbourhood, but also shared a 'culture of radicalism' with a common 'set of ideas and terms', for example 'socialism', 'nationalism' or 'revolution', to which Brown refers, after Helmuth Plessner, as a 'discourse of social radicalism' (4). The 'Zersetzungsschriften' (subversion papers), distributed by both sides to influence each other, function within this discourse. The case of the former Nazi Richard Scheringer, a defendant in the Ulm Reichswehr trial who switched to the Communists, provides a prominent example of defection. But it seems doubtful whether defection was a widespread phenomenon before the Nazi takeover.

In order to guard against possible misunderstandings, Brown insists at the end of his appraisal that Nazism and German Communism should not be seen as 'two sides of the same totalitarian coin' (149). Nonetheless they made up part of a '"semiotic community" operating at multiple levels' (William Sewell) (8). Applying three 'space metaphors' Brown tries to shape the object of investigation. First, Nazism and Communism do not occupy opposite ends of a spectrum but rather constitute 'poles' in a field of converging forces (5). Second, and consequently, there is not a space 'between' but a 'zone of conflict' in which militants outside the movements are canvassed and in which they participate in the creation of the discourse (6). Third, a 'vertical distinction' is made within political movements, 'between "top down" and "bottom up"'. Attempts to stage radicalism 'from above' subsumed under the notion of 'performance' were often thwarted by a need for 'authenticity', of those 'from below' judging their movements on the basis of values like 'heroism', 'honesty' or 'solidarity' that had the 'potential to cut across ideological and organizational boundaries' and that could qualify one under the category of the 'ideal revolutionary' (12). This third distinction serves to enlighten the conflicts within the competing movements, e.g. the Stennes or Stegmann Revolts.

Focusing on the creation of meaning, Brown attaches great importance to relying on 'the classic source materials of social history' such as police reports or the work of political spies (9). The book contains a considerable number of figures – fliers and cuttings from the radical press – which he adroitly uses to underline his argument.

Whereas Schumann finally shifts the responsibility for the failure of the Weimar Republic predominantly to the middle classes, incorporating them in a 'bourgeois-national camp' together with the National Socialists, Brown does not want to 'assign blame'. He is looking for common characteristics and emphasizes 'the extent to which Nazism as a mass movement drew on a widely shared world of

ideas, and that the widely shared nature of these ideas is one of the things that gave National Socialism its force' (147). One might add to this conclusion that if there were somebody to blame, it would be a much larger group. This is not deterministic but it undoubtedly ingrains National Socialism more deeply in Weimar society.

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