

Book Reviews

Gustavo Corni, *Weimar. La Germania dal 1918 al 1933*, Carocci Editore, Rome, 2020, pp. 290.

This engaging book by Gustavo Corni, former Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Trento, traces the short democratic history of the Weimar Republic, when within the span of just 15 years Germany experienced a democratic-republican parenthesis that, even though it failed so quickly, is still considered a precious example for the study of the history of democratic regimes. The example of Weimar, born of Germany's defeat in the First World War in a nation that lacked a democratic-republican tradition (apart from some limited areas and periods, such as the Rhineland at the end of the eighteenth century) is examined by Gustavo Corni to re-propose a theme treated in a rather contradictory way in historiography: the reading of this topic has always been strongly influenced by the two epochal events that preceded and followed Weimar, which in this way has too often been reduced to a "consequence" of defeat in the War and/or a mere "prodrome" of the advent of Nazism. These evaluations therefore led to a devaluation of Germany's first democratic experience. Yet the brief history of the Weimar Republic cannot be analysed simply as the cause of the events that followed, due to its intrinsic weakness; rather it should be studied in the light of the striking features of originality and modernity that it embodied, albeit in such a short period.

Corni's work, which comes more than three decades after the publication of one of the most important works on the history of the Weimar Republic,¹ considers the vast literature on the subject, largely in German and English, above all because the Italian contribution has been very limited. The author accordingly begins his introduction to this important page in the history of European parliamentary democracy with the quotation of one of the greatest German historians,

¹ D.J.K. Peukert, *La repubblica di Weimar. Anni di crisi della modernità classica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 1996 (original, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1987).

Detlev Peukert, who stated in his important monograph: "Weimar is not resolved in its beginning and its end" (p. 11). Peukert's desire to avoid the pincer "represented by the two epochal events that inaugurated and, respectively, ended it" leads us to think that it is possible to frame the Weimar Republic as a more significant experience than it has generally been judged to have been in a part of the historiography (p. 11). Corni does not shy away from this reasoning but rather promotes it, to outline the features of a period of transition in which tradition, explicit in the tendency towards authoritarianism, very often had to confront a strong push towards modernity, expressed as the need for parliamentarism in a rapidly changing society. The history of the drafting of the Weimar Constitution is an example of this need of the German people: the lack of a past with clear democratic features, in fact, greatly complicated the task of the constituents, referred to in the historiography as *Vernunftrepublikaner* ("republicans of reason"). The constituents, therefore, "joined the republic following political reasoning (*Vernunft*, reason), not out of open and convinced ideological or emotional adhesion," understanding that the difficult situation of the present and the harsh predictions for the future required the choice of a political regime consisting in the democratic-parliamentary republic (p. 51). The group of constituents was deeply influenced by their perception of the destruction wrought by the War and of the consequences for the internal political context: to escape the unrest in Berlin, therefore, the constituents had to meet in the town of Weimar, a famous cradle of German culture, to forge a text that between progressive and traditional elements "was based on compromises, barely hidden, and that can be placed politically at the centre" (p. 75).

Corni's volume is ordered in part chronologically and in part by selected themes, with the intention of "examining the complex historical events that marked Germany between 1918 and 1933, of which the Republic is only one component, however important, analysing them as such and incorporating them as organically as possible into the context from which the Republic started and that in which its history was articulated" (p. 13). Corni's work, in essence, shuns the dry dichotomies and definitions that are often reserved for this historical period, "in the awareness that a structural and contextual interpretation is not exhaustive," seeking, on the contrary, to focus on the "accidents," "ambiguities," "contradictions" and "personalities," with the aim of bringing them to the attention of the reader and providing a new point of view on this exemplary historical event (p. 13). Among these events, characterizing the subsequent history of the Weimar Republic, the author considers the presidential elections of 1925, following the death of the first president, Friedrich Ebert, in which the conservative candidate,

the professed Protestant Paul Von Hindenburg, prevailed. thanks to the votes of the Bavarian Catholic party, which openly betrayed the candidate of the Weimar parties. Through the example of President Ebert and many others recounted in his work, the author intends to focus on the importance that the most valid personalities had in the history of Weimar, given that most of them disappeared immediately from the public arena.

The first two chapters concern the events of the last year of the War and the immediate post-war period, which were analysed to reconstruct the difficulties arising from the post-war recovery undermined by internal divisions and revolutionary forces. The “Sword of Damocles” of the war reparations due to the victors – calculated at 7-10% of the German GDP from 1918 to the moratorium declared by US President Herbert Hoover in 1930 and decided at the Versailles Peace Conference, where Germany had no opportunity to make a case for itself – is analysed in a long third chapter. The severe punishment inflicted by the victors takes up a significant part of Corni’s work, who, citing John Maynard Keynes’ deservedly famous essay,² develops an analysis of the counterproductive consequences of the reparations for Germany, for the international economy and even for the economies of the victorious powers themselves. Despite the various difficulties and the numerous dramatic moments, including the hyperinflation of the early 1920s, which was an economic, social and cultural phenomenon of frightening proportions, causing the collapse of the rules of operation of a collective system, accentuating and exasperating inequities, Germany was able to react and overcome the crisis thanks to a drastic monetary reform. The German economy, later, thanks to the contribution of American credits, experienced strong growth and an extraordinarily rapid and brilliant development until the Great Depression of the 1930s, which affected Germany much more severely than other countries precisely because of the strong link with the US economy. The American economic and cultural contribution was, therefore, the engine of the Republic during the second part of the 1920s. Germany, in this period, was on the road to Americanization much more than Britain, France or Italy, considering the level of education, the spread of household appliances, telephones, medical systems and the press. At the same time, however, together with a new Germany founded on heavy industry and a society in course of transformation towards modernity, there was still a country linked to the rural world and agriculture, which

² J.M. Keynes, *Le conseguenze economiche della pace*, Adelphi, Milan, 2007 (*The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, MacMillan, London, 1919).

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embraced 33% of the population and for which working the land was not merely an economic activity but a way of life.

The economic factor, therefore, among the many present in the short history of the Weimar Republic, was decisive and was one of the most fraught with consequences at the twilight of the democratic-republican experience of the German people in the first part of the twentieth century. It was decisive, in fact, in the case of the consequences linked to the Great Depression, which enabled Hitler and the National Socialist movement to become established within the German political scene.

The chronological treatment is then “broken,” to allow the discussion of two exemplary themes that are gone into more deeply in Chapters 7 and 8, on “two specific aspects of republican history: Jews and women” (p. 14). The decision to dedicate two chapters to these important themes, necessary to an understanding of this historical period, of its continuity and discontinuity with the past and above all of the “contradictions of which those years were full”, as if to “broaden the point of view to what would happen after 1933,” does not detract from the importance of other issues that characterized the Weimar years: the question of the working class, culture, the welfare state, the political and diplomatic conflict with the intransigence of France, the hyperinflation, the Depression, the need to return to regain the status of credible interlocutor in the European and world context politically, diplomatically and economically, the birth and development of National Socialism. All these are clearly explored to provide a broad picture of a decisive historical period for German and European history (p. 14).

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