History 223 (Fall Semester)

Weimar Germany: Society, Politics and Modernity in Europe's "Roaring Twenties"

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Office Hours: Mondays (4:20-5:20), Wednesdays (2:30-3:30)
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INTRODUCTION:

"Weimar Germany" refers specifically to that period between 1918 and 1933 when a republican constitution, framed in the town of Weimar, governed Germany. More broadly, though, it designates an historical era of remarkable turbulence and transformation. In its celebrated cultural production, its social tolerance, and its fast-paced urbanity, Weimar Germany presented an extremely modern image. This historical epoch also casts a more ominous shadow, though, one associated with political crises and the rise of the Nazi movement.

This course has two principal objectives. First of all, it examines the Weimar Republic not just as a contained historical period between 1918 and 1933, but more importantly as the focal point of an examination of modernity and modernism in the first third of the twentieth century. We will look at the origins of artistic and literary modernism in the 1890s, at the technological advances of the Second Industrial Revolution, and at the reorganization of business, society, and politics throughout the 1920s. In this sense, Weimar Germany extends beyond its fifteen-year political existence and beyond the borders of Germany. Over the course of the semester we will examine its deeper origins and broader influence by comparing the transformations in Germany with those in other countries during this same period, including the Soviet Union and the United States. The course concludes with a look at the social and cultural continuities of Weimar Germany after 1933 and at this period's lasting reputation.

The course has a second objective, as well - to serve as an exercise in doing history. As we expand the boundaries of Weimar Germany, we will also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of how historians isolate and define historical epochs. Moreover, an examination of Weimar Germany provides the perfect opportunity to explore the paradoxes and pitfalls of writing history backwards (with a full knowledge of what comes next), when the history about which we write moves forward (with an infinite number of future possibilities at each point in time). Historians often portray the Weimar Republic as a series of conditions and outcomes that led inevitably to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Can historians avoid this teleological trap? By the end of this course, we will have a better understanding of how historians
explore and interpret a past that is much more richly complex than a mere sequence of events.

**REQUIREMENTS:**

First and foremost, of course, you must attend the lectures and participate in class discussion. I expect you to complete the assigned readings and view the required films before the discussion section in which we will talk about them. In addition, you will write two papers of 6-8 pages on topics assigned by me and complete a take-home final examination. The written assignments will draw only on the material from this class (lectures, readings, films, and discussion).

The two papers, the take-home final examination, and your participation in discussion sections will each count for 25% of your final grade.

**COURSE MATERIALS:**

We will read the following five books, all of which are available for purchase at Underground Textbook Exchange (664 State Street) and on 3-hour reserve in College Library:

Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*
Leni Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir*
Hans Fallada, *Little Man, What Now?*
Bertolt Brecht, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*

In addition, we will read selections from other books, as well as original documents from the period, all of which have been collected in a coursebook, available for purchase ($8.27) at the Humanities Copy Center (First floor of the Humanities Building), and on 3-hour reserve in College Library.

Finally, we will view the following three films, which you may watch in Van Hise 259 or rent from your local video store:

*Metropolis*
*Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*
*Cabaret*

**OUTLINE OF LECTURES AND DISCUSSION SECTIONS:**

September 5: What is Weimar Germany, and why should we study it?

September 10: The *Kaiserreich* and the *Belle Époque*
September 12: The Origins of Modernism
Peukert, pp. 1-18

September 17: The new frontier - technological development on the eve of the First World War

September 19: Total War
SECTION: Eksteins, pp. 1-135

September 24: Revolution in Germany and Russia

September 26: The Treaty of Versailles and the Weimar Constitution - A new political order?
SECTION: Eksteins, pp. 139-299

October 1: Political instability and economic chaos

October 3: Art and society during the galloping inflation
Selections from The Weimar Republic Sourcebook, "A Moral History of the Inflation" and "The End of the Private Sphere," Nos. 29, 258, in Coursebook
Peukert, pp. 19-77

October 8: Berlin between Moscow and Chicago, part I - the Soviet example and the Russian émigré community

October 10: Stabilization, diplomatic achievement and the "Golden Twenties"
SECTION: Peukert, pp. 79-221

October 15: Berlin between Moscow and Chicago, part II - Americanization and the fascination of the New World

October 17: Mass culture and urban life

October 22: The "new woman," part I - gender and social change in the 1920s
*FIRST PAPER DUE IN CLASS*

October 24: The modern body, part I - population, eugenics and the abortion debate

Selections from The Weimar Republic Sourcebook, "This is the New Woman," "My Workday, My Weekend," "Twilight for Women," "Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Women," and "The Companionship Marriage," Nos. 78-80, 281, 308, in Coursebook

October 29: The "new woman," part II - the cultural representation of women and the threat of modernity

October 31: Bauhaus, city planning and the modern physical space
SECTION: Metropolis and Berlin: The Symphony of a Big City

November 5: The modern body, part II - sexuality and the permissive society

November 7: The other Weimar - critiques of modernity and the exceptionalism of Berlin
SECTION: Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir, pp. 1-134

"The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl," (downloaded from Lexis-Nexis, pp. 1-3), in Coursebook

November 12: Crime, poverty and the underside of social change

November 14: National minorities, anti-Semitism and social cleavages in democratic Germany
SECTION: Selections from The Weimar Republic Sourcebook, "Marriage Laws and the Principles of Breeding," "The Longing of Our Time for a Worldview," "The Charm of Berlin," "Creative Landscape: Why Do We Stay in the Provinces?" "The Law and Sexual Minorities" (This one may have been separated in your coursebook, but look for page #697 at the top of the piece's continuation.), and "Sexual Catastrophes," Nos. 50, 141, 164-165, 304, 307 Coursebook

November 19: Economic collapse and the end of the golden years

November 21: New politics and the rise of National Socialism
SECTION: Cabaret

Peukert, pp. 222-282

November 26: 1933 and the Nazi seizure of power
*SECOND PAPER DUE IN CLASS
November 28: NO SECTIONS OR LECTURE (Happy Thanksgiving Eve!)

December 3: National Socialist culture and the new aesthetic - the triumph of anti-modernity?

December 5: Post-Weimar Weimar - continuities in Nazi Germany and in exile
   SECTION: Fallada

December 10: Modernity, modernism and the legacy of Weimar

December 12: The long shadow of Weimar - the popular memory of an era
   SECTION: Brecht
   Eksteins, pp. 300-331

December 18 (Tuesday): Take-home final examination due in my department mailbox (fifth floor of the Humanities Building, #5096) by 5:00 pm.