



Raucous rally: Hitler's supporters celebrate in front of his party's unofficial headquarters, Hotel Kaiserhof, next to the Reichstag.

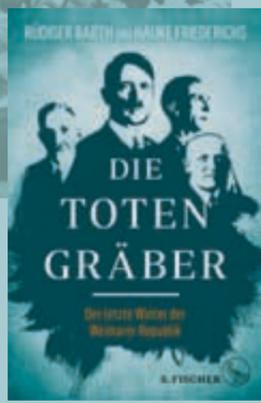
BY LUTZ LICHTENBERGER

Germany, November 1932. These are dark times for the Weimar Republic. While still alive, democracy is but hanging by a thread. Unemployment is dramatically high – more than five million Germans are out of work. Fights are breaking out in the streets. There's a whiff of civil war in the air. The *Reichstagswahlen* – the national parliamentary elections – already the second of the year, have again failed to yield a governing coalition. The National Socialist German Workers' Party under Adolf Hitler comes in ahead of all other parties; still, with 33 percent of the vote, it has incurred significant losses. Meanwhile, the Communist Party, at 17 percent, is gaining in popularity.

The center does not hold. Against the two extremist parties, the Social Democrats and the center-right Zentrum party are further weakened. The two moderate parties, which have been holding Germany together for the 14 years since World War I, win a mere 35

percent combined. The situation is in deadlock.

Chancellor Franz von Papen, a monarchist at heart, is able to remain in office only by way of special powers granted to him by President Paul von Hindenburg. Adolf Hitler, his cronies and henchmen are getting nervous. Just this summer, they saw themselves on the verge of seizing power, with Hitler one election away from the chancellery. Now, the party with seemingly unstoppable momentum is suddenly running out of cash, with factional divisions beginning to show within the ranks. Hitler and Gregor Strasser, his main intra-party rival, with socialist leanings to boot, cannot agree on a way forward. The old Prussian elites inside the Berlin beltway are clinging to power, and the radical Nazi upstarts cannot see how they can rise to the highest ranks of government legally, through elections, as long as Hindenburg and his constitutionally guaranteed emergency powers keep von Papen's cabinet in power. It's time to scheme their way to the top. But how?



RÜDIGER BARTH AND HAUKE FRIEDERICHS
Die Totengräber. Der letzte Winter der Weimarer Republik, Frankfurt a. M., S. Fischer, 2018

Such is the premise of a new book by two German historian-journalists that has become a surprise bestseller since its publication last April. Historians have dismissed *Die Totengräber. Der letzte Winter der Weimarer Republik* (The Gravediggers. The final winter of the Weimar Republic) as a non-scholarly book. Newspaper critics – and readers – on the other hand, have embraced the blow-by-blow account of the 75 days before Hitler become chancellor and Germany descended into 12 years of tragedy, death and destruction.

Rüdiger Barth and Hauke Friederichs tell their story in the present tense while documenting official records and quoting extensively

Endgame

Two German historians have co-written the story of how Hitler came to power, yet in the form of a contemporary political thriller. It's a disturbing and entirely intoxicating read

from diaries, letters and the newspapers of the day. And then they throw in a little trivia and few spoonfuls of gossip.

It all makes for a disturbing, and entirely intoxicating read. The authors themselves credit the American TV show *House of Cards* as an inspiration, claiming the machinations underway in Germany during the Weimar Republic were just as shifty but in fact more gripping – after all, they did actually happen. The cast of characters provides the full gamut of gruesome archetypes without any clear-cut heroes for relief.

There's the larger-than-life Paul von Hindenburg, a 77-year-old World War I field marshal who had never been a politician but was so admired for his role in the Battle of Tannenberg in 1914 that 11 years later he was called upon by still-influential monarchist elites to run for the presidency, which he won with 48 percent of the vote. In 1932, the 84-year-old head of state did not care for democratic values and sought to keep his protégé Franz von Papen as chancellor. The sharp-tongued Harry Graf Kessler quipped that von Papen “looked like a grouchy billy goat trying to snap to attention. A figure straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*.” The chancellor is backed by the fat cats and industrial elites who care not a whit about growing income inequality, people freezing in their unheated apartments and the most destitute actually starving to death. His long-time ally and Minister of Defense, Kurt von Schleicher, is well aware of von Papen's unpopularity and misguided policies. But hardly a straight-shooter,

together with his military friends, von Schleicher concocts a secret service report outlining the danger of an imminent civil war between Nazis and communists – if von Papen stays in power. Von Schleicher alone can “fix it” and save the republic! Von Papen's cabinet members defect and on Dec. 2, 1932, Hindenburg is forced to appoint von Schleicher.

Kurt Schumacher, a young, up-and-coming Social Democrat who would like to fill the role of the smart and principled politician, sees von Schleicher as “an office Napoleon, an opportunist, despite some modernist leanings, a man of the authoritarian state, an anti-democrat, a monarchist, a prisoner of his ancestry and his cast” – and someone who had to be opposed by all possible means.

The new chancellor's plan is indeed to come to the help of low-income workers – to appease the left, including Social Democrats and Communists. And to split the Nazi party apart by making Strasser, Hitler's NSDAP nemesis, vice chancellor. It is a shrewd move by a dubious character.

Meanwhile, Hitler has become restless. It has been his stated purpose to go all in, to give in to no compromise, to join no coalition without him and his party at the helm. But now he fears being left out in the cold again. He is uncertain how much support he can rally among the ranks of the NSDAP to oppose Strasser. He is so distraught that he contemplates suicide. “If the party falls apart,” Hitler confides to his sycophantic spokesman Joseph Goebbels, “I will be gone in a matter of three minutes.”

The unspoken take-away from Barth's and Friederichs' sober account is that it all did not have to happen, that Hitler's rise to power was not inevitable. The many twists and turns of the unheroic saga provide all too many moments when history – or rather upstanding, sober old white men – could and should have intervened.

But von Papen, vengeful and delusional, cannot come to grips with being ousted from the chancellery. With the help of rich industrialists, he conspires with Hitler. Von Schleicher's feeble social initiatives fail, as do his attempts to bring the indecisive and duplicitous Strasser on board. In a last-ditch effort, the beleaguered chancellor demands dictatorial powers from von Hindenburg. The president, with some influence from his close advisor, his son Oskar, denies von Schleicher and – hoping that von Papen, now as Vice Chancellor, will be able to contain him – appoints Hitler chancellor on Jan. 30.

When Paul von Hindenburg dies in 1934, Hitler assumes the presidency by fiat. That very same year, the Nazis oust Franz von Papen and the rest of the cabinet's old elite. Von Papen becomes ambassador to Turkey. Later, after being convicted as a war criminal by a German de-Nazification court, he would spend two years in prison. On Hitler's orders, Kurt von Schleicher and Gregor Strasser are murdered by Nazi henchmen during the wee hours of June 30, 1934, the Night of the Long Knives.

LUTZ LICHTENBERGER'S TRANS-ATLANTIC BOOK REVIEW

PERCEPTION TRAP

For four long chapters of masterfully even-handed historical analysis, Andreas Rödder hides his political leanings – without ever being dull. The historian from the southwestern German city of Mainz asks “Who is afraid of Germany?” (*Wer hat Angst vor Deutschland? Geschichte eines europäischen Problems*) and lays out the conflicts over the country in the center of Europe, starting with the lead-up to World War I, spanning the Weimar Republic, the Nazi era, post-war Western Germany, post-reunification and finishing with today's debate on the euro and the migration crises. The country's elites want to see Germany as a “post-classical democratic nation-state” among other nation-states and as a “non-military power.”

Rödder carefully delineates Germany's present “twofold dilemma” in Europe and the world: “German leadership is in demand and criticized at the same time.” Both the currency disputes and the refugee crisis have laid “the old perception trap.” What the Germans considered their right – demanding fiscal responsibility from Greece and others – or their moral obligation – giving shelter to more than one million refugees – appeared to outside observers a hegemonic pursuit.

The moderate conservative Rödder ultimately lays his chips on the table, forgoing flashy headlines for well-reasoned policy proposals. No country should continue playing the victim card, Germany included, while being aware of how its actions may be perceived as more aggressive than intended. The country is often in better shape than it realizes – and therefore should maintain its composure while voluntarily investing more in other countries, as did the US with the Marshall Plan of 1948. The EU would do well to adopt a more flexible approach by steering away from the elusive goal of becoming an “ever-closer union.” Rödder's book combines a deft scholarly touch with acute political realism. Any country would benefit from being the subject of such a book.

ANDREAS RÖDDER

Wer hat Angst vor Deutschland? Geschichte eines europäischen Problems, S. Fischer, Frankfurt a. M., S. Fischer, 2018

WESTERN FALLACIES

Volker Steinkamp, a professor for French and Italian literature at the University of Duisburg-Essen, had never written about international politics until he published a forceful essay titled “The West and the Rest” in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2013. Six years later, he has expounded on his original idea in a slender yet historically profound volume titled *Foreign Affairs: Kritische Betrachtungen zur Außenpolitik* (Foreign affairs. Critical observations on foreign policy).

Steinkamp retells how Germany, after reunification in 1990, joined all other Western states in championing democracy and human rights worldwide and thus plays its part in achieving world peace.

Steinkamp is by no means against democratic values. He is merely casting doubt on whether a foreign policy based on such a universal axiom is actually an effective tool for confronting the challenges posed by 21st-century global politics.

In a sweeping tour through 18th-century France and the United States in the 20th century, he nimbly limns the shifting narratives to defend interventions on foreign soil.

Today, Steinkamp writes, “the universal imperative’ to implement the West's notion of liberty not only within one's own societies but to project them into the world” had become part of the conventional wisdom from Europe's Left all the way to US-American neocons. Steinkamp wants to remind Western politicians of an essential lesson of the Cold War: Keeping the peace while simultaneously securing one's own freedom and independence should be their “very own and most noble duty.”

Steinkamp has written an elegant treatise on the fallacies of Western thinking about the international order. However, actual decision-makers may find his laudable rationale confusing when formulating foreign policy concerning, for example, China, Russia or Venezuela, where points of contention are too complicated for the simplistic dichotomy of interventionism and non-interventionism.

VOLKER STEINKAMP

Foreign Affairs. Kritische Betrachtungen zur Außenpolitik, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a. M., 2019

CALIFORNIA CRIB

Thomas Mann, author of *The Magic Mountain*, winner of the 1929 Nobel Prize for Literature and “the greatest living man of letters,” as he was announced during his 1938 United States book tour, was forced to flee Nazi Germany. After four years in Princeton, New Jersey, he moved to his new home in California, where he resided for 10 years. From there, he aided the allied counter-propaganda efforts by writing his famous 55 BBC radio broadcasts, which were published by Knopf in 1943 under the title *Listen, Germany*.

The German government bought his home on San Remo Drive in Pacific Palisades in 2016. After extensive renovations, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier inaugurated the Thomas Mann House in the summer of last year as a center for dialog between German fellows and their US colleagues in all fields of science and the arts.

Mann's grandson Frido, born in the US in 1940, has now written a memoir, *Das Weiße Haus des Exils* (The White House of exile), about his childhood in Los Angeles. It is a monument to his grandfather's vocal opposition to Hitler and a passionate plea for ever-closer trans-Atlantic relations in our time of global upheaval.

Before Frido Mann gets to the more uplifting parts, he rips into the US president, calling out his “socially dangerous disregard for decency, the truth, culture and human dignity unprecedented in American history.” It is time to marshal “all remaining resources, drawn from our extraordinary cultural traditions” to counter the nationalist and fundamentalist forces willing to undermine liberal democracy. He hopes the house built “in the spirit of Thomas Mann” will play a vital part in this endeavor.

While Frido Mann's well-meaning calls for accountability and accommodation are highly laudable, his often stilted and loquacious writing does not serve his cause. Try *The Magic Mountain* instead.

FRIDO MANN

Das Weiße Haus des Exils, S. Fischer, Frankfurt a. M., 2018