



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/00787191.2020.1840809](https://doi.org/10.1080/00787191.2020.1840809)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Smale, C. H., & Windsor, T. (Eds.) (2021). Aftermath: German Culture in the Wake of World War I. *OXFORD GERMAN STUDIES*, 49(4), 329-335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00787191.2020.1840809>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

This is the accepted author manuscript version of the article. The final published version is available online at following permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00787191.2020.1840809>

Aftermath: German Culture in the Wake of World War I

Introduction

Catherine Smale and Tara Talwar Windsor

This themed special issue of *Oxford German Studies* offers new perspectives on German cultural responses to the end of World War I. Bringing together experts in literary and film studies, gender history, musicology and art history, we set out to examine the complex and synergetic relationship between German cultural practices and politics in the aftermath of the war. Specifically, our collected contributions trace how cultural practitioners responded to the collective experiences of military defeat and revolution, and explore the role of art, literature, film and music in shaping the multiple, interrelated and often competing visions of society that emerged in the wake of the conflict.

The special issue has its origins in an interdisciplinary conference held at King's College London in September 2018 as part of the World War I centenary commemorations, which also coincided with a major exhibition at Tate Britain in the summer of 2018 entitled 'Aftermath: Art in the Wake of World War One'.¹ In exhibiting the war's impact on British,

¹ With grateful thanks to the MHRA, King's College London and the AHRC *Language Acts and Worldmaking* project for funding the conference, and to Emma Chambers and Rachel Rose Smith from Tate Britain for their collaboration. We would also like to extend our thanks to the other participants for their papers and contributions to discussions at the conference.

German and French art and cultural memorials, the gallery emphasized a desire to show not only ‘the physical and psychological scars left on Europe’ but also ‘how post-war society began to rebuild itself’.² Indeed, during a joint roundtable discussion following a tour of the exhibition with conference participants, curators Emma Chambers and Rachel Rose Smith elaborated on the etymology and wider connotations of the shared central concept in the titles of the exhibition and conference, which we now take up in this special issue: the concept of ‘aftermath’. As well as its more common and current usage to connote a period following an event in which the repercussions of that occurrence are felt, ‘aftermath’ is, in fact, an ‘agricultural term referring to the new grass that grows immediately after reaping’.³ In this sense, as Chambers writes, the ‘long shadow’ that the war cast over art in the 1920s resulted not only in ‘works that reflected on the death, destruction and social upheaval caused by the war, but also imagined how society might be reconstructed to create a brighter future’.⁴

Informed by this double meaning of ‘aftermath’, our approach to post-war German culture in this special issue intersects and engages with recent developments in scholarship on the cultural and political history of Weimar Germany. In her 2018 study *Experiment Weimar*, Sabine Becker calls for a reassessment of the influence of the World War I on the culture of the Weimar Republic. Diagnosing in existing scholarship a ‘starre[...] Fixierung auf das Ende der Republik und deren nahezu bruchlose[...] Überführung in die NS-Diktatur’, she

² ‘Aftermath: Art in the Wake of World War One’, Tate Britain Press Release, 4 June 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/aftermath-art-wake-world-war-one> [accessed 14 September 2020].

³ Emma Chambers, ‘Aftermath’ in *Aftermath: Art in the Wake of World War One*, ed. by Emma Chambers (London: Tate Publishing, 2018), pp. 6-13 (p. 12).

⁴ Chambers, p. 12.

highlights a need for new approaches to the culture of the Republic that take account of its origins and do not simply regard it as a prelude to the Third Reich.⁵ Becker's argument is influenced by recent historical work which challenges conventional, often teleological narratives of the Weimar Republic as doomed from the start and as an 'Inkubationszeit des Faschismus',⁶ and which, in doing so, seeks to foster an increasingly nuanced understanding of the period's openness and contingencies.⁷ Shifting the focus of the discussion onto World War I and its cultural legacy can, Becker suggests, open up new perspectives on the Weimar Republic, allowing it to be viewed not as a crisis-ridden failure, but rather as a 'hochreflexives, nachdenkliches, phantasievolles und ausdrucksstarkes Zeitalter'.⁸ At stake here is a reassessment of what Jochen Hung terms 'the popular image of Weimar as an artful dance on a political volcano', an image that rests on a dichotomy between 'cultural glitter' and 'political doom' that was perpetuated by historians like Detlev Peukert and Eberhard

⁵ Sabina Becker, *Experiment Weimar: Eine Kulturgeschichte Deutschlands 1918-33* (Darmstadt: wbg, 2018), p. 10.

⁶ Jost Hermand and Frank Trommler, *Die Kultur der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1978), p. 112.

⁷ See, for example, *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters*, ed. by Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2005); Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik: Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008); Jochen Hung, "'Bad' Politics and 'Good' Culture: New Approaches to the History of the Weimar Republic", in *Central European History*, 49 (2016), 441-53; and Gerd Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage: Das Trauma des Ersten Weltkriegs und die Weimarer Republik* (Freiburg: Herder, 2018).

⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, quoted in Becker, p. 12.

Kolb in the 1980s and has continued to influence scholarship on the period.⁹ For example, in his 2007 study of Weimar Germany – itself bearing a subtitle that points to a dichotomous narrative of Weimar’s ‘Promise and Tragedy’ – Eric D. Weitz juxtaposes “‘the sparkling brilliance” of modernist masters like Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, and Bruno Taut with “the plain hatred of democracy” of Weimar’s right-wing extremists’.¹⁰ Despite Becker’s own challenge to the persistent image of Weimar-era cultural production as a ‘Tanz auf dem Vulkan’ – arguing that it was ‘vielmehr ein brodelndes Laboratorium und virulentes Experimentierfeld’ – her study does not, ultimately, move beyond what she describes as ‘die Weimarer Republik kennzeichnende Gleichzeitigkeit von politischem Scheitern und kulturellem Prosperieren’.¹¹ In fact, Becker’s assessment that ‘[d]em Versagen des politischen Spitzenpersonals [...] steht der künstlerische Experimentiercharakter und Innovationsfreude der Weimarer Kultur gegenüber’¹² maps directly onto the prevailing master narrative of the era which is based on a ‘sharp distinction between “bad” politics and “good” Weimar

⁹ Jochen Hung, ‘Beyond Glitter and Doom: The New Paradigm of Contingency in the Weimar Republic’, in *Beyond Glitter and Doom: The Contingency of the Weimar Republic*, ed. by Jochen Hung, Godela Weiss-Sussex and Geoff Wilkes (Munich: Iudicium, 2012), pp. 9-15 (p. 14). For studies that perpetuate the dichotomy between ‘glitter’ and ‘doom’, see, for example, Eberhard Kolb, *Die Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1984) and Detlev Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).

¹⁰ Hung, “‘Bad” Politics”, p. 442. See Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 361-64.

¹¹ Becker, pp. 522-24.

¹² Becker, p. 522.

culture’, as Hung has put it elsewhere.¹³ This narrative, Hung argues further, ‘not only fails to do justice to the way many [...] Germans perceived their time but also keeps us from understanding how closely intertwined these two spheres were in the Weimar Republic’.¹⁴

While we cannot claim to offer a wholesale reappraisal of Weimar Germany’s cultural and political histories, the articles collected here take up and develop these impulses to view the period from its beginning rather than its end, and to complicate long-standing, overly simplistic narratives of Weimar’s seemingly separate cultural and political spheres. By refocusing attention on specific ways in which the war shaped cultural expression in its aftermath, we illustrate multiple ways in which cultural and political practices were interdependent and mutually constitutive. This entails both expanding our understanding of what constitutes Weimar culture and exploring sites of political activity beyond the realm of parliamentary democracy.¹⁵ As such, the focus of the special issue is intentionally wide-

¹³ Hung, ‘“Bad” Politics’, p. 442.

¹⁴ Hung, ‘“Bad” Politics’, p. 442.

¹⁵ See *Weimar Culture Revisited*, ed. by John Alexander Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) for a collection of essays which broadens the traditional definition of Weimar culture. For a reassessment of the relationship between politics and culture through the lens of authority, see Anthony McElligott, *Rethinking the Weimar Republic: Authority and Authoritarianism, 1916–1936* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), esp. Chapter 6 on ‘The Quest for Cultural Authority’. For recent efforts at ‘bringing together [Weimar’s] cultural and political narratives’ see *Forum: The Weimar Republic Reconsidered* ed. by David Lazar and Richard F. Wetzell, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington DC*, 65 (Fall 2019), esp. Richard F. Wetzell ‘The Weimar Republic Reconsidered: Introduction’, 9-17 (pp. 12-14); Laurie Marhoefer ‘Did Sex Bring Down the Weimar

ranging in several, interlinking respects. Firstly, we illustrate how complex and varied responses to the experiences of war and military defeat can be found in works by cultural practitioners across the political spectrum and are not limited to those by left-wing intellectuals and pacifists, as Anton Kaes has argued.¹⁶ The cultural practitioners discussed here range from politically conservative writers and artists such as Thomas Mann, Hans Friedrich Blunck and Ernst Vollbehr, to those with explicit socialist sympathies, such as Berta Lask, Käthe Kollwitz and G. W. Pabst. Secondly, the focus of the special issue moves beyond the modernist canon that has often been hailed as representative of Weimar culture to encompass seemingly more traditional genres and forms; indeed, the cultural modes and expressions discussed in our contributions range from one of the oldest art forms, the fairy tale, to the newest – sound film. In drawing together figures with a broad range of political identifications and cultural styles and outputs, we aim to shed new light on what Moritz Föllmer terms the ‘sheer range of different modernities’ that co-existed in Weimar culture and contributed to the period’s ‘diversity and open-endedness’.¹⁷ Some of the contributions gathered here highlight striking thematic or formal affinities between works whose creators stood at seemingly opposite ends of the political spectrum, while others demonstrate the instability of and slippage between certain frequently used critical categories, such as

Republic’, 59-71; and Molly Loberg, ‘City Streets and Civil Unrest: The Costs of Violence in the Weimar and Nazi Eras’, 73-88.

¹⁶ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 2.

¹⁷ Moritz Föllmer, ‘Which Crisis? Which Modernity? New Perspectives on Weimar Germany’, in Hung and Weiss-Sussex, pp. 19-30 (p. 28).

modernist, traditionalist, left-wing and right-wing.¹⁸ In this regard, the special issue intervenes in recent scholarly debates about the politics of aesthetics in the Weimar period by complicating the ostensible dichotomy between forward-thinking modernists and reactionary traditionalists and showing how similar cultural forms and genres were mobilized by practitioners to different political ends.¹⁹

Thirdly, the political import of the cultural works and practices explored in our contributions is not restricted to their aesthetic qualities or their relationship to the new democratic system, but also intersects with several wider political issues of the day, including international understanding and the geo-political order, gender and body politics, and political subjectivities and collectives within and across national borders.²⁰ In doing this, the

¹⁸ See Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, pp. 361-64.

¹⁹ Recent scholarship that sets out to challenge the association between modernism and progressive politics includes Nicholas Attfield, *Challenging the Modern: Conservative Revolution in German Music, 1918–1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Michael Minden, *Modern German Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), esp. Chapter 4: The Literature of Negation, pp. 114-48; and Carl Gelderloos, *Biological Modernism: The New Human in Weimar Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019). See also Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

²⁰ For a new collection on Weimar's international, transnational and global entanglements, see *Weimar und die Welt: Globale Verflechtungen der ersten deutschen Republik* ed. by Christoph Cornelißen and Dirk van Laak (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020). On the body as a 'marker[...] of integration or disintegration through which both the impacts of capitalist modernity, and imaginings of an emancipatory politics, were conceived', see Robert

issue also moves beyond the much-studied narrative accounts of the First World War by writers such as Ernst Jünger, Erich Maria Remarque, Arnold Zweig, Ludwig Renn, Ernst Glaeser and others, that reconstructed the wartime experience in what David Midgley terms an ‘ideological contest [...] over the way the war should be interpreted in retrospect’.²¹ Regardless of whether they emphasized the slaughter of the battlefield in order to cultivate their readers’ pacifist sensibilities or ‘sought to blot out the suffering and destruction [...] and concentrate on [the war’s] positive aspects’,²² these accounts tended to present the shared

Heynen, *Degeneration and Revolution: Radical Cultural Politics and the Body in Weimar Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 54. On the notion of ‘the body as a historically contingent site of subjectivity’ that intersects with ‘discourses of class, nation [and] citizenship’, see Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 98; and Canning, ‘Claiming Citizenship: Suffrage and Subjectivity in Germany after the First World War’, in *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 116-37.

²¹ David Midgley, *Writing Weimar: Critical Realism in German Literature, 1918-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 226. See also Martin Travers, *German Novels on the First World War and Their Ideological Implications, 1918-1933* (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1982); Matthias Schöning, *Versprengte Gemeinschaft: Kriegsroman und intellektuelle Mobilmachung in Deutschland 1914-33* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009); and Elisabeth Krimmer, *The Representation of War in German Literature: From 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 71-104.

²² Karl Leydecker, *German Novelists of the Weimar Republic: Intersections of Literature and Politics* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), p. 127.

male experiences of trench warfare as the defining characteristics of the conflict and its legacy. In expanding our focus beyond these narrative accounts, then, and in tracing the legacy of the war across a range of different cultural forms, we reveal some of the limitations of and gendered assumptions behind what has traditionally been understood as the ‘war experience’.²³ Thus, many of the articles in this special issue shed light on the ways in which artists and intellectuals sought to create imagined solidarities and collective identifications in the wake of the conflict. While these identifications are sometimes founded on the fantasy of what Thomas Mergel terms a ‘Schützengrabengemeinschaft’,²⁴ they also envisage forms of community that are not directly rooted in the homosocial sphere of the trenches, mobilizing shared individual experiences and/or common cultural heritage with a view to cultivating new collective imaginaries and political affiliations.²⁵

²³ See, for example, Richard Bessel’s claim that ‘[t]he “front generation” consisted of *men*; it was a representation of *male* experiences’. See Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 272. Emphasis in original.

²⁴ Thomas Mergel, ‘Führer, Volksgemeinschaft und Maschine: Politische Erwartungsstrukturen in der Weimarer Republik und dem Nationalsozialismus 1918-1936’, in *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918-1939*, ed. by Wolfgang Hartwig (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), p. 27.

²⁵ On the concept of ‘Gemeinschaft’ in socialist culture in the Weimar Republic, see Sabine Hake, *The Proletarian Dream: Socialism, Culture, and Emotion in Germany, 1863-1933* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), esp. pp. 222-37. On the creation of community through performative culture, see Matthias Warstat, *Theatrale Gemeinschaften: Zur Festkultur der Arbeiterbewegung 1918-1933* (Tübingen: Francke, 2004). For an influential critique of the

To draw out their complex lines of enquiry and challenge the teleology of traditional readings of Weimar history, the articles in this special issue are organized thematically, rather than chronologically. In the first contribution, James A. van Dyke focuses the parameters of the discussions to come by examining four representations of the First World War which were all completed and unveiled by artists with different socio-political and ideological perspectives in the year 1932. Setting out to expand the canon of Weimar art history through the inclusion of lesser-known artists and works, van Dyke draws attention to the ways in which the social meaning of the war was articulated and contested through artistic production and reception. Central to his argument is an act of ideology critique that challenges the ‘useful myth’ of an opposition between seemingly liberal, democratic modern art and National Socialism.²⁶ Instead, as van Dyke shows, one sometimes finds surprising affinities between ostensibly modern and conservative works of art that challenge straightforward binary categorizations.

The interrogation of conservative approaches to modernity is developed in the next two articles, which are concerned with the repurposing of traditional languages and forms to engage with (geo-)political questions in the wake of the conflict. In her contribution, Tara Windsor shows how the conservative writer Hans Friedrich Blunck (1888-1961) consciously situated himself in a lineage of political writers who idealized the notion of a German cultural nation or *Reich* in times of territorial loss, and reinvented this tradition in an effort to

discourse of ‘Gemeinschaft’, see Helmut Plessner, *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1924).

²⁶ Georg Büßmann, “‘Degenerate Art’—A Look at a Useful Myth”, in *German Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1905-1985*, ed. by Christos M. Joachimide, Norman Rosenthal, and Wieland Schmied (Munich: Prestel, 1985), pp. 113-24.

challenge the nation-state order enshrined in the Treaty of Versailles. Windsor's article sheds light on the intimate relationship between Blunck's cultural and political projects, revealing how his *völkisch* literature and international engagement re-constructed and mythologized various aspects of Germany's past as a direct and strategic response to the war and as a cultural foundation for Germany's post-war future.

Nicholas Attfield's article is also concerned with the reframing of literary and musical heritage in response to the war and its aftermath. Focusing on the close relationship between Thomas Mann (1875-1955) and the composer Hans Pfitzner (1869-1949), Attfield highlights their shared concern with the work of the Romantic writer Joseph von Eichendorff (1788-1857). He argues that, for both Mann and Pfitzner, the German Romantic heritage offered not only a collective solace for the privations of the war, but a forward-facing mode of national-conservatism for the dawning post-1918 era. In this regard, his article picks up on another thread that runs through this special issue: namely, the role of culture in fostering shared political affiliations and solidarities in response to perceived fragmentation of German national identity. Thus, Attfield shows us how Thomas Mann and his circle saw in music a capacity to create and express community and to bind the individual into a collective – a capacity which was seemingly vital to restoring the country's status in the post-war era.

Whereas the first three articles are particularly concerned with conservative discourses and forms in the wake of the war, the next three articles in the issue engage with aspects of left-wing politics and culture. First, Ingrid Sharp's contribution sets out to make women's political cultures visible in the historiography of the post-war era. Focusing on two key areas – women's suffrage and women's revolutionary activism – Sharp reminds us of the need to recentre women's experience in accounts of what Julia Sneeringer has termed the 'two political revolutions in Germany: the proclamation of the republic and the

enfranchisement of women'.²⁷ For Sharp, the period following the November revolution and the armistice was not merely characterized by economic hardship and privation. Rather, it offered the possibility for transformative thinking that resulted in a multiplicity of visions for a post-war society. Sharp's reminds us of the need to take account of the dreams, goals and visions of female activists in this period in order to gain a more complete understanding of the scope and extent of women's political cultures in and beyond Germany in the post-war period.

The possibilities for transformative thinking that arose in aftermath of the war are the starting point for Catherine Smale's contribution, which focuses on the depiction of women's revolutionary activism in the communist dramas of Berta Lask (1878-1967) from the mid-1920s. Smale builds on Sabine Hake's concept of the 'proletarian dream' – that is, a 'collective fantasy' that 'promises the victory of class struggle of revolution' – to show how Lask uses the performative structures of the mass drama to cultivate gendered communities of proletarian identification that transcend the boundary between actor and spectator.²⁸ Smale's article sheds light on the discursive construction of gender roles in the wake of World War I and, specifically, the place of women in the communist political culture of the Weimar Republic.

Finally, Leila Mukhida's article turns to G. W. Pabst's *Kameradschaft* (1931), one of the early 'talkie' films of the Weimar period. Analysing the compelling soundscape of the film through the lens of what she terms 'acoustic realism', Mukhida shows how Pabst's deployment of new sound technology is a central part of his political project. Not only does

²⁷ Julia Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 1.

²⁸ Hake, p. 3.

the use of sounds and noises drive an affective critique of the war and reveal the precarity of the human subject under capitalist labour conditions; it also enables the director to explore questions of nationhood and international relations in the post-war period. Overall, Mukhida's article positions Pabst's film in the context of the post-war struggle to find new modes of expression for the experiences of World War I and its aftermath, highlighting the ways in which the development of new sound technologies created new modes of sensory communication and meaning-making.

Bookended by two articles on quite different expressions of visual art completed in the critical years 1931/32 – ranging from the seemingly traditional to the technologically cutting-edge – and taking in literature, theatre, music and women's activism along the way, the special issue illustrates numerous ways in which the war's legacies were felt and processed from the end of the war to the eve of the Nazi acquisition of power. Rather than presenting this period as one of unbridled cultural progress juxtaposed with political turmoil and impending doom, however, the circularity of this structure encapsulates the simultaneity and co-existence of differing interpretations of the war's meaning and impact, and highlights its mobilization in diverse genres, styles and activities to serve competing understandings of modernity and engender new visions of the post-war order.