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The Genesis of the Sonderweg

The age: everything that has appeared in the War and after the War was already there.

-- Musil, *Tagebücher*

Since Germany's defeat in 1945, scholars have debated the place of National Socialism in German history and the role continuity plays in telling the larger German story. This is no mere object of idle curiosity, since the very legitimacy of the modern, peaceful, and democratic Federal Republic of Germany has always hinged on its ability to distance itself from the violence and illiberalism of the Third Reich. Such an undertaking has naturally led historians to ask whether the Nazi dictatorship represented a short-lived aberration in an otherwise linear progression towards a democratic state, or rather a horrific denouement to a longer tradition of authoritarianism and bellicosity. Thus the key problem for scholars in today's Germany, as Konrad Jarausch explains, is to account for "the incommensurability of simultaneous man-made life-worlds of utter privilege, wealth, and consumption and death-worlds of utter degradation, starvation, and brutal annihilation."¹

One way scholars respond to this dilemma is through the concept of a German *Sonderweg*, or "separate path." This term refers to a modernization paradigm with origins in the polemical writings of Fritz Fischer and Hans-Ulrich Wehler in the 1960s and 1970s. They suggested that long-term deviations in German modernization in the nineteenth century serve to explain the rise of Nazism in the twentieth. The subsequent historiography surrounding Germany and the Third Reich has created so-called "master narratives," which attempt to interpret German history on a large scale, as accounts of the

ways in which modern industrialization and tradition coalesced in the German Empire to produce a powerful nation-state with an inclination towards war in 1914 and a public rejection of democracy in 1933. In this way, the *Sonderweg* thesis represents a meaningful contribution to the larger task of coming to terms with Nazism and the extremities of the Holocaust.

This study will first lay out the course of the German *Sonderweg* in post-1945 historiography, the intent being to construct a clear assessment of the thesis as it has evolved over the past fifty years. In doing so, this study will address how and why the *Sonderweg* thesis has been heavily criticized in the past few decades by scholars who complain about its attempt on the one hand to normalize the histories of other Western nations,² and on the other to see every episode of the past 250 years as leading to the Third Reich and the Holocaust.³ Intense debate over the *Sonderweg* thesis has lasted for over two decades, and this scrutiny has led to a decline in the *Sonderweg*'s explanatory power. As a result, historians such as Helmut Walser Smith are left to bemoan the absence of viable explanatory alternatives to fill the gap left by a discredited *Sonderweg*.⁴ To understand why this beleaguered thesis has endured such intense controversy, this project begins by asking why the notion of a “separate path” has been so deeply ingrained in contemporary thought, and to discover when, where, and in what form the notion of a “separate path” took hold in Germany.

Much more than a simple reconstruction of previous *Sonderweg* debates, this study intends to break down the various diagnoses offered as a solution to Germany's ills by turning away from postwar historians to focus specifically on treatises published by leading German intellectuals throughout the Weimar period (1919-1933). This study

applies Fritz Fischer and Hans-Ulrich Wehler's understandings of the *Sonderweg* to the pre-Nazi era, exploring the existence of a specifically Weimar *Sonderweg* and analyzing the ways in which the concept of a German *Sonderweg* differed between the 1920s and the postwar period. From this premise, this project will analyze three prominent German intellectuals of the Weimar period: the artist Hugo Ball, the novelist Thomas Mann, and the essayist Robert Musil. Beyond their public presence and wealth of publications, these three intellectuals offered valuable critiques of the Weimar period predicated on their own singular understandings of the German past, and their writings would go on to shape notions of German identity in the following decades. It is this paper's argument that the Weimar era constitutes a significant moment in the construction of a specifically twentieth-century German identity and that notions of a German *Sonderweg* heavily informed the intellectual capital produced throughout the period.

The Course of the Sonderweg

According to Helmut Walser Smith, 1941, among the other markers of the Germany past (1914, 1918, 1933, 1939, 1945), is the "vanishing point" of German history;⁵ it is the moment around which decades of postwar historiography have revolved. In reconciling the postwar period with the Final Solution, many historians utilized the *Sonderweg* thesis as a means of contextualizing the Third Reich within a broader German history. Wielded as a methodological tool, the *Sonderweg* thesis became a significant paradigm of historical thinking which has transformed present-day interpretations of German history as a whole. As a result, the past fifty years of German historiography have consistently dealt with the *Sonderweg* on some level or another. Helmut Walser Smith's most recent work claims that the era of the *Sonderweg* has at last come to a close,

yet without an alternative narrative in place to structure our views of the German past, the *Sonderweg* remains a powerful teleological device for explaining German actions in the twentieth century. The following lays out the course of the *Sonderweg* thesis in postwar historiography, emphasizing how conventional understandings of the thesis have become embedded in our historical consciousness as part of a greater German saga. These historiographical trends help explain why the *Sonderweg* is a narrative to which many continue to cling.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many German intellectuals believed in the existence of a positive “German way.”⁶ In general, the notion of a “special path” meant that the German-speaking lands had taken a route from aristocracy to democracy that was unlike any other in Europe, as a midway between the materialism and utilitarianism of the Western democratic systems on the one hand, and the autocracy of Tsarist Russia on the other.⁷ In the nineteenth century, this course was a source of pride. The German path represented a distinctive form of democratization that occurred as a movement “from above,” in contrast to the grassroots democratic movements that played out in Britain and France, with reform occurring “from below.” The German authoritarian state enacted reform of its own accord, and Germans citizens considered this path a superior alternative. With unification in 1871 came a tendency to exalt a particular German combination of political, economic, military, and educational institutions. As a whole, the German monarchy and the nation’s industrial success, alongside its army and universities, were tied to a positive historical paradigm that understood German history as a road to success.⁸ With the turn of the twentieth century, the ideas of the Imperial Age transitioned into modernity, and the “ideas of 1914” were

linked to the understanding of a positive *Sonderweg*, tying the concept to the First World War and retaining powerful purchase throughout the Weimar years.⁹

Pushed beyond recognition by Nazi zealots, however, this positive perception of the German *Sonderweg* lost much of its intellectual credibility and moral authority in the postwar world. As a consequence, German tendencies towards the military and authoritarianism have been labeled the “peculiarities” of German history.¹⁰ The resonance and importance attached to these peculiarities has been examined critically in the postwar period. With the defeat of Germany in 1945, scholars asked how the German catastrophe had been possible. During the immediate postwar period the German population maintained varying images of the Third Reich as a time of order and prosperity, and this ambivalence left a mark on the professional sector.¹¹ Much of the historical research produced in Germany throughout the 1950s explored a predominately political focus detailing the collapse of Weimar, the Nazi seizure of power, and the unleashing of the Second World War. Within Germany an embattled politics of memory emerged – Germans who were prepared to accept Hitler’s responsibility for the Second World War found it hard to reopen the question of war guilt for the First World War.¹² Thus, much of the original critique that linked the German peculiarities of the nineteenth century to the atrocities of the twentieth came from historians outside of Germany, such as Pierre Renouvin, Bernadotte Schmitt, and Luigi Albertini.¹³ These scholars focused on specific peculiarities: some concentrated on the happenstance of geography, on Germany’s fatal position between east and west on the European continent; others expanded upon a German exceptionalism that was enacted via military force; and still

others detailed a peculiar German mind warped by irrationalism, the glorification of martial values, obedience by the subject, and contempt for Western values.¹⁴

In Germany, Fritz Fischer's 1961 analysis of German war aims in the First World War broke the historiographical mold.¹⁵ Regarded as the first German historian to recognize the need for a critical review of German actions during the First World War, Fischer placed responsibility for the start of the conflict squarely on the shoulders of the Imperial German government. Fischer posited that the Great War was a culmination of Germany's "will to power."¹⁶ In Fischer's view, the German Empire created in 1871 was a partnership between the Prussian military and an authoritarian state administration, which, according to Fischer, determined Germany's passage into modernity and hinged on a world policy dedicated to securing Germany a place in the sun no matter what the cost. This will to power, then, necessitated military conquest as a means of safeguarding Germany's social, cultural, and political heritage and a way to guarantee the balance of power in a new world system of states. As a result, German world policy was, in Fischer's view, in no small measure responsible for the imminent danger of a general war in the summer of 1914. Fischer pointed to German politicians and publicists, "and with them the entire German propaganda machine during the war," as warmongers.¹⁷ As such, the cornerstone of his thesis involved a total reversal of the nineteenth-century notion of a positive *Sonderweg*.

According to Fritz Fischer, the defeat of Germany in 1918 did not then engender a wholesale reassessment of German identity. Rather it "preserved in the following two decades a political and historical image [of Germany] which was colored by illusions."¹⁸ Given such a long-standing historical trend, Fischer's work posed a significant challenge

to several widespread German views. The first was an assumption that Germany had fought a defensive war, and had only done so because it believed that its very existence was in jeopardy. The second followed David Lloyd George's dictum that all the great powers had "slithered into the cauldron of war," meaning that all the powers – Britain, France, Russia, and Germany – shared similar responsibility for the outbreak of conflict.¹⁹ As a whole, Fischer challenged the "comfortable interpretations" of previous German scholarship and reopened questions that many regarded as closed.²⁰ *Germany's War Aims of the First World War* suggested a reinterpretation of German policies from 1914 to 1918 that linked tendencies of the nineteenth century to Germany's failures in the twentieth. Fischer drew connections from 1871 to 1945, and claimed that the policies pursued by the Nazis throughout the Third Reich were reflected in widely held German aspirations which long predated Hitler. The questions raised by Fischer's work concerned the role of continuity in German history; it was an interpretation of the recent German past constructed within a framework that adequately explained the socio-political processes behind the decisions that led to the Second World War.²¹ More importantly, it implicated the German people in Hitler's war crimes. As such, this singular interpretation of the German past "comes close to making the Holocaust inevitable in Germany."²²

The reaction to Fischer's work was dubbed the "Fischer Controversy." Generally regarded as the beginning of a critical perspective of the German past, assessments of the controversy differ in drastic ways.²³ Within Germany, Fischer was faced with a campaign coordinated among leading German historians to reject his thesis.²⁴ Gerhard Ritter, regarded as Fischer's arch-critic and part of an older generation of German

historians, believed that the war-guilt question was an issue of the past, having settled any disputes with the Franco-German school book agreement of 1951.²⁵ This agreement made it possible to instill a historical consensus, pre-Fischer, which allowed shared culpability for the war of 1914 between the great powers and isolated the Third Reich from German history, preferring to interpret it as a *Betriebsunfall* (accident) and Hitler as a one-time aberration.²⁶ Fischer's thesis, of German *Alleinschuld* (sole responsibility), carried strong moral overtones, and according to many of Ritter's colleagues, this view amounted to a betrayal of German patriotism and a threat to the German consciousness.²⁷

Ritter's generation of scholars dominated the German *Zunft* (guild of historians). At any other point in time Fritz Fischer's thesis might have been simply rejected by the historical majority and forgotten. However, time and circumstance were against Ritter and his following. The "Fischer-Kontroverse" became tied to both the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials, and as the controversy wore on, it played an important role in both the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Second World War. Journalists latched onto the controversy surrounding Fischer's book, highlighting the work's appeal to both the historical expert as well as the interested public, and the growing positive reaction in the media made it impossible for the *Zunft* to ignore the book or attempt to sideline Fischer. Thus, Germany's history was no longer left solely to the academic historians and their professional journals. The media made the controversy available to the wider public, and the pro-contra debate surrounding Fischer's thesis aired widely. As a result, Fischer's negative *Sonderweg* thesis seized the national German consciousness, and, in an interesting twist, the historiographical debate the thesis then engendered was more significant than Fischer's study itself. For younger

German historians, “Fischer’s writings were a declaration of independence,” and debate about the *Sonderweg* went on to influence and shape the arguments of further generations of German scholarly work.²⁸

The “Fischer Controversy” went on to inspire various theses which sought to provide a critical metanarrative of German history.²⁹ Fritz Fischer’s model of a German *Sonderweg* that deviated significantly from the route taken by Western societies has gained wide currency in modern historical and political literature and has come to serve as the foundation of a new, critical approach to German history.³⁰ Published in 1973, Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s *The German Empire* broke fresh ground on the *Sonderweg* debate.³¹ Wehler’s work analyzed the historical processes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Germany, and organized them under themes of class, economics, and politics, creating an inventory of serious historical problems. Wehler emphasized patterns of continuity in the German social fabric from the Second Empire to the Third Reich, and the general thread running throughout his analysis is the view that knowledge of the German Empire between 1871 and 1918 remains indispensable for understanding German history in the twentieth century.³² In Wehler’s view, a social structure that impeded modernization in some areas while allowing it in others dominated Germany between 1871 and 1945. Wehler described the German Empire as “a Bonapartist dictatorship based on plebiscitary support and operation within the framework of a semi-absolutist, pseudo-constitutional monarchy.”³³ He believed that a disastrous course had been set for the entire direction of the German Empire, and that the social, economic, and psychic structures of the *Kaiserreich* acted as matrices and were able to produce similar configurations over a long period of time.³⁴ The key explanatory concept behind

Wehler's thesis was the assumption of a defensive method of modernization, which attempted to safeguard as many of the older, economic, social, political, and cultural patterns as possible.³⁵

Hans-Ulrich Wehler's work is the prime example of a particular "Bielefeld School" approach, which judged that "however long and circuitous," the "fateful *Sonderweg* of the Germans" led from Bismarck to Hitler.³⁶ Wehler meant to illustrate how the political realities of the *Kaiserreich* had taken a "hazardous leap forward... [which led] the nation up a blind alley... [and would] lead to its downfall."³⁷ Among the first of Wehler's critics were Thomas Nipperdey, Lothar Gall, and Klaus Hildebrand.³⁸ Nipperdey argued that Wehler was too willing to portray the aristocratic nature of the *Kaiserreich* in a negative hue; Gall criticized Wehler's "Bonapartist" bent; Hildebrand rejected Wehler's structural "social history" outright.³⁹ However, Wehler's understanding of the exceptionalist nature of German modernization succeeded in creating a critical view of the German past that was shared by a wider intellectual public, providing "innovative impulses, intellectual coherence, and polemical vigor that proved well nigh irresistible."⁴⁰

Konrad Jarausch cites the unexpected economic transformations and cultural shifts of the 1980s as the catalysts that "appeared to announce the end of modernity as a distinctive, two-century long era."⁴¹ Modernity came to be seen as the source of Germany's problem, rather than its solution. In 1984, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley offered perhaps the greatest challenge to what previous critics had dubbed the "new orthodoxy" of German historical thought.⁴² Both British historians at odds with the notion that their country's past served as positive standard of modernization, Blackbourn

and Eley began their *Peculiarities of German History* by probing the normative assumptions which proponents of the *Sonderweg* inherently made about proper historical development. The debate largely targeted the form of domestic politics, whether manipulation from above or grassroots mobilization from below had instigated change in the Second Reich. According to Hans-Ulrich Wehler and the Bielefeld School, it was Germany's lack of modernity that determined its subsequent disasters – that the antiquated nature of a feudal administration crippled Germany as it moved into the twentieth century. Conversely, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley emphasized the modernity of the *Kaiserreich*. Their main critique focused on the existence of the *Bürgertum* (middle class) in Germany throughout the unification period and the social and political effects their liberal mindset had on the new regime. In Blackbourn and Eley's analysis, the commonly held "peculiarity," that there was a gaping hole where the bourgeoisie should have been in Imperial Germany, was an illusion.⁴³ In a wider European perspective, German modernization did not look nearly so exceptional and seemed to follow a pattern of economic, political, and social development typical of countries on the continent.⁴⁴

What remains significant about *Peculiarities* is that it did not challenge the Bielefeld notion of continuity between the *Kaiserreich* and Third Reich, and by extension the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Blackbourn and Eley did not deny the continuities of German history that comprised the backbone of the *Sonderweg* thesis. However, they rejected the belief that Hitler was a historical aberration and refused to acknowledge the view of Hitler as a "snake charmer" who seduced a German people driven to despair by the immediate circumstances of the Versailles Treaty, 1920s' inflation, and 1930s'

depression.⁴⁵ They argued not *whether* continuity existed, but instead *which form* it took. Rather than reduce the nineteenth century to “the ante-room of Nazism,” a method that Blackbourn and Eley find too frequently used and too comfortable, they instead demonstrated the similarities in both theory and practice between the politics of the Weimar Republic and the politics of the Wilhelmine period: the fragmentation of the bourgeois middle, the hostility of bourgeois parties to the left, the importance of the confessional divide, the emergence of a new radical nationalism.⁴⁶ Their goal was to restore a sense of contingency to modern German history and reject the form of teleological blandness that resulted from Fritz Fischer and Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s negative *Sonderweg*.⁴⁷ In acknowledging that continuity occurred, they were not simply buying into a generalized answer to the underlying social changes of the twentieth century. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley’s admission to continuity came with a rejection of longer-term aspects of the *Sonderweg* thesis, redirecting primary attention away from the deeper historical continuities and toward the immediate fascism-producing aspects of German Imperial policy and culture.⁴⁸ As a result, the *Sonderweg* was relegated to an increasingly more circumscribed period and role in German history.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer called for a new examination of the meaning of the German past. Europe had moved into a new age in the 1990s, and as far as the continent was concerned, the twentieth century had become history.⁴⁹ In the wake of Germany’s reunification, Jarausch and Geyer asked how the German past could be viewed with 2000 as its pivotal point rather than 1945. In an attempt to reconcile Germany’s postwar transformation into a democratic society, *Shattered Past* addressed the void left by the collapse of three traditional “master

narratives” of German history, which Jarausch and Geyer argued had failed to adequately explain the story of the German past. The national “master narrative” lost much of its intellectual credibility as well as its moral authority after the Second World War, due to its undeniable complicity in genocide and the Holocaust; the Marxist narrative lost its critical edge as it became dogma; and the *Sonderweg* narrative postulated an incorrect Anglo-American method of modernization, which led to false assumptions of German backwardness and difference.⁵⁰

Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer saw German history as a fractured landscape; a narrative ruptured at particular points, specifically 1918, 1933, 1945, and 1989. As such, German history was plural and composed of a variety of histories. They encouraged the “recognition of the very instability of the German condition and making it a pivotal concern of historical reconstruction.”⁵¹ In advocating a multiplicity of histories, Jarausch and Geyer argue that the real task in interpreting German history is acknowledging “the extraordinary difficulty of an emergent nation in finding a way of living together, in generating a civic culture to unite a diverse society, and in developing viable forms of participatory and peaceful protest.”⁵² Encouraging historians to analyze such themes as war and genocide, the decline of German power, and the definitions of national identities, Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer support the creation of new narratives in order to navigate the extremes of Germany’s past in the hope that they will “serve as guideposts in deciphering the shifting map of territories and people that make up the twentieth century German past.”⁵³

Making the claim that no single master narrative can render German history complete, Jarausch and Geyer pulled on separate histories. In doing so, they discarded

the *Sonderweg* thesis and dismissed the notion of continuity from German history altogether. According to their interpretation of a shattered German past, the entirety of the German story could not possibly point to Hitler and could not be subsumed as a pre-history of the Nazis.⁵⁴ Instead, they advocated a rethinking of “German histories from the margins to decenter received conceptions of what it means to be German at a given time.”⁵⁵ They called for a critical historicization of all the major themes of analysis – state, society, nation, and modernity – and posited that history should be the study of how these categories were constituted.⁵⁶ Their argument cancels out the need for a coherent, single understanding of German history, in favor of a pluralist approach that illuminates the vagaries of the German past rather than drowning in a traditional historical narrative. In a way, Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer moved beyond the *Sonderweg*.

This method of moving “beyond” is enhanced with two of Helmut Walser Smith’s most recent works. Smith’s 2008 *Continuities of German History* details his understanding of the ways in which ideas and political forms are traceable across what historians (notably Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer) have taken to be the sharp breaks of history.⁵⁷ The volume looks across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the strands of continuity found in nationalism, racism, and anti-Semitism in Germany, focusing on what Smith referred to as the “symbolic forms” of German history. His analysis of anti-Semitism and its connections with the evolving exclusionism of German communities in the nineteenth century provides the perfect illustration of Smith’s larger theme: German continuity. Smith makes two assertions about continuity. The first is that continuity need not imply particularity, and precisely the most important continuities (seen from the standpoint of twentieth-century catastrophes) are not particular to

Germany. The second claim argues that only by considering the kind of continuity (i.e. anti-Semitic violence) is it possible to see the actual peculiarity, the specific tendency that informed later German identity structure and government policy.⁵⁸ In specifically pointing to a *longue durée* of anti-Semitic tendencies in various European countries, Smith extends the “temporal and spatial depth of field” of German continuities *en masse*.⁵⁹

With this argument Helmut Walser Smith addresses the *Sonderweg* and its historiography as a whole. Smith rejects Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer’s insistence that there are no links to be found between the various ruptures of German history and instead asserts a proposal for an analysis based on historical change over several centuries. He argues that skepticism towards master narratives has hindered historians’ ability in explaining National Socialism and the Holocaust. In acknowledging continuity, however, Smith does not accept the *Sonderweg* as part and parcel of the German narrative, rather he focuses on what aspects of German continuity are interrelated to the histories of other nations such as France and the countries of Eastern Europe. The traditional *Sonderweg* thesis revolves around what made Germany peculiar, which led historians to focus on Germany alone. Smith instead emphasizes broader continuities that have accompanied transformative periods of various national histories throughout the nineteenth century. Smith acknowledges that these transformations have had specifically German variations, but insists that they remain enmeshed within a larger European social and political framework.⁶⁰ Smith calls for a revision of historical understanding that constitutes an attempt “to construct bridges across chronological chasms.”⁶¹

In this way, Helmut Walser Smith claims that he has moved beyond the *Sonderweg*, pushing past Jarausch and Geyer to construct a narrative of German history that has links to the rest of Europe. For Smith, the legacy of predeterminism that lingers in German historiography is a phenomenon of the postwar period, and he asserts that the vacillating nature of German *Sonderweg* historiography is exactly what discredits it now. According to Smith, this weakening has largely occurred because no tenable continuity thesis has been put forth to replace the *Sonderweg* as a methodological tool to explain the Holocaust. Smith argues that the end of the *Sonderweg* has, in effect, eliminated of much of the nineteenth century from the events of the early twentieth: “Previous generations of German historians...possessed an acute sense of the chronological depth of German and European history. But this sense has left us.”⁶² As a result, the *Sonderweg* as a historical method fails to adequately situate National Socialism in the long-term narrative of German history. Several historians have attempted to fill the void. Helmut Walser Smith specifically cites David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley’s work on class as a driving force of analysis behind continuity theses. Many other historians also now focus on the critical importance of the 1890s in the German narrative as the key break in modern German history. Most recently, a new paradigm has emerged (Smith’s) that gives precedence to the historical vanishing point of 1941. Smith’s vanishing point superimposes rationality, science, and the disciplining of the body into arguments for a broader European-wide continuity, and in doing so Smith renders German history not as the culmination of a separate path, but rather as “a particular variant of modernity, specifically as a nation of troubling modernity.” By relinquishing the notion of German peculiarity, the causal streams of German history can be analyzed on their own. In Smith’s case, nationalism

and ethnic antagonism can be emphasized as powerful currents without claiming a unique status for German variations of European ideologies. As a result, beyond the *Sonderweg* exists “a deeper chronological sense to our explanation of the twentieth century, and...the possibility that in our explanation of German history, and the twentieth-century catastrophe it brought forth, we [can] situate the German past in a denser weave of international and transnational history.”⁶³

This international history encompasses the extremes of violence and pain as well as wealth and happiness. Deftly described by Jarausch and Geyer, “the incommensurability of simultaneous man-made life-worlds of utter privilege, wealth, and consumption and death-worlds of utter degradation, starvation, and brutal annihilation,” is the sign of twentieth century German history.”⁶⁴ This is what the *Sonderweg* thesis tries to encompass. It searches for the reasons behind the German catastrophe not just in political pathologies but also in economic problems, social disintegration, and cultural tropes. In the 1960s the *Sonderweg* surfaced as a retrospective teleology of modern German history that allowed Germans to analyze their past in a different way, to separate an evil past from a better present.⁶⁵ As the postwar period wore on, the paradigm lost its ability to answer new questions posed by reunification and the postmodernist shift. Nevertheless, the *Sonderweg* remains a powerful explanatory tool. Helmut Walser Smith claims we have left the *Sonderweg* behind, yet it cannot be denied that it continues to leave an indelible impression on contemporary German historiography – after all, Smith could not compose his theories without addressing it. The causal streams Smith urges historians to follow are a product of a historical understanding of the German past created by the *Sonderweg*, and David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley make the case that had Fritz

Fischer and Hans-Ulrich Wehler not existed it would have been necessary to invent them.⁶⁶

The Weimar Moment

What is the place of National Socialism in German history? That is the question which has informed much, if not all, German historiography in the post-Fischer era. In *Sonderweg* historiography, the answer to that question rests on two historical assumptions: that an understanding of the greater German past necessitates an inherently negative diagnosis of German ills, and that this diagnosis is a product of and hinges on the emergence of National Socialism in Germany. What if we excluded National Socialism from German history – not by making it out to be a momentary aberration, but rather by analyzing the period before the Nazi Party existed? When, where, and in what form, then, does the notion of a “separate path” take hold in Germany? In the writings of Hugo Ball, Thomas Mann, and Robert Musil the various “peculiarities” of contemporary historiography can be broken down in a new context, and the *Sonderweg* is revealed as a cultural artifact of a “Weimar moment,” used by Germans to reconstruct their society and identity in the aftermath of the First World War.

Reorienting the *Sonderweg* in the Weimar period requires an adjustment of Helmut Walser Smith’s “vanishing point.” In the way that the postwar *Sonderweg* debate hinges on National Socialism, 1914 serves as the catalyst for an interwar *Sonderweg*. In understanding the “spirit of 1914,” one gets a glimpse of the intellectual climate that produced what was essentially a *Sonderweg* diagnosis in the 1920s, as well as the problems which that diagnosis was designed to address. Labeled as the social artifact of an “ideological syndrome” and as a product of “war psychosis,”⁶⁷ the spirit of 1914 in

Germany, according to Peter Gay, reached levels of absurdity: the war offered “purification, liberation, and enormous hope, ... it set hearts of poets aflame, ... and the Germans had at last united as a *Volk*.”⁶⁸ For many Germans, August 1914 was a historic turning point, the first step towards the recreation of the German nation on a more exalted level. This path to recreation underpinned a specific German mission, which Wolfgang Mommsen argues lay at the heart of the positive nineteenth century *Sonderweg* – an ideological framework at play within the German social and political structures of the period.⁶⁹

However, this mission revealed the dangerous underbelly of 1914 – that the world “should find recuperation in the German spirit, and that the war was justifiable as a means to this end” – which, simply stated, meant victory at all costs.⁷⁰ According to Mommsen, this ideological soil established a wholly uncritical belief in German superiority, both intellectual and martial, along with a willingness to impose that superiority on others by force.⁷¹ As evidenced by a contribution to the *Hamburger Nachrichten* dated November 1914 (written by Major-General von Disfurth), Germany meant business: “We are and must be barbarians, if by this we understand those who wage war relentlessly and to the uttermost degree.”⁷² The best-known example of early wartime German propaganda is the “Appeal by the 93.” Signed by ninety-three prominent German intellectuals, the Appeal was an attempt by leading academics to protest the “lies and calumny” spread by the Allies in order to stain Germany’s honor in her struggle for existence in 1914.⁷³ The Appeal belies a genuine belief that a declaration by important men would cure the misunderstanding between Germany and the world, and it reveals a surprise that anyone would have doubted German honor. More importantly,

the document was signed by men utterly out of their minds with excitement for the German cause.

Yet, this initial elation turned into depression as the wave of chauvinism was followed by guilt and shame after the German defeat in 1918 and the proclamation of the Weimar Republic on November 9 by Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann. At that point German troops were still on foreign soil and in total disarray, the General Staff was still frantically scrambling for martial peace, and the entire Imperial administration was demoralized and discredited.⁷⁴ Thus, the Republic was born in turmoil. The Weimar period was left to pick up the pieces of a broken German nation. In Walter Gropius' words: "[It] was more than just a lost war. A world [had] come to an end," and Weimar had to seek radical solutions to Germany's problems⁷⁵ - "there was endemic disorder... desperate hunger ... demoralization among intellectuals... an army to be brought home and demobilized... [and] there were bitter wounds to be healed and no time to heal them."⁷⁶

The demoralized intellectuals of the 1920s dealt with the baggage of a previous generation of intelligentsia who had forsaken their traditional roles in favor of wartime indoctrination. The post-1918 world hailed the "Appeal by the 93" as "the treason of the intellectuals."⁷⁷ John Jay Chapman, in his analysis of the Appeal, asked, were these not the greatest minds in Germany?⁷⁸ The mandarins of German society had signed a document that exuded an emotional nationalistic fervor quite contrary to the traditional aloof nature of German academics.⁷⁹ Moreover, it seems as though they signed it gladly, and in doing so they proclaimed the solidarity of German intellectual and cultural elites with official Imperial policies and Prussian militarism. Wolfgang Mommsen lists a

number of intellectuals who actually enlisted in the war effort – Hugo Ball (whose subsequent disillusionment will be discussed below), Max Beckmann, Hermann Hesse, and Ernst Toller – and detailed the work of those who lent their formidable intellectual abilities to the homefront (Friedrich Meinecke, Werner Sombart, and Max Scheler).

By November 1918, the war was seen “as a superhuman cataclysm about which nothing could be done and which had to be endured and mastered by aesthetic means.”⁸⁰ This aesthetic means of endurance and hopeful recovery transitioned into the Weimar Era. As such, the Weimar Republic is the physical reflection of a German identity crisis in the aftermath of the First World War. The issue of how Germany was to be represented, and essentially reconstructed, in the interwar period is highly significant to this discussion of the *Sonderweg* because its practical and symbolic elements are inextricably linked to the creation of a new Germany in the 1920s. Today the Republic plays a pivotal role in twenty-first century conceptions of German identity. Founded in the “classical center,” home of Goethe and Schiller, Weimar is associated with the first attempt at truly democratic forms of political and social emancipation in Germany.⁸¹

Quoting Peter Gay, when we think of Weimar,

we think of modernity in art, literature, and thought; we think of the rebellion of sons against fathers, Dadaists against art, Berliners against beefy philistinism, libertines against old-fashioned moralists; we think of *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The Magic Mountain*, the *Bauhaus*, Marlene Dietrich.⁸²

According to Gay, traditional historiography of the Weimar era has come to view the period between 1918 and 1933 as a period of turmoil, filled with highs and lows, struggling to define itself in the face of revolution and disenchantment, but above all invested in the recreation of the German nation, both politically and culturally.

Emerging from the German Revolution in November of 1918, the Republic engaged in a commerce of ideas that struggled to reinvent the German nation in the face of military defeat. It was the task of the Weimar Republic to create new ties between the traditional Imperial system and the future democratic state. Regarded as perhaps the most challenging obstacle for the new regime to surmount, the 1919 Peace of Versailles has spawned myths that continue to color historical understandings of the Weimar Republic today. Known as the “War Guilt Clause,” Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty legally impugned the German nation with responsibility for the Great War, and by signing the Treaty, Germany was required to disarm and pay millions in reparations to its former Allied adversaries. The Versailles Treaty was considered a constant and deliberate humiliation by the German people, a long and calculated affront that ate away at the morale of the Republic from the inside out. As a result, the anguish of defeat and sense of guilt imparted by Versailles saddled the Weimar Republic with a damaging legend that would influence its legacy throughout the following century. Despite such malign, however, the Weimar Constitution has been hailed as a symbol of revolution, giving shape to the Republic and providing an outlet for a new generation of German society to test its abilities and reach for new heights of cultural and political acclaim.

How did the Germans of the 1920s view their own era? The facilitator of Weimar thought, according to Peter Gay, was a “community of reason.”⁸³ Devoted to radical inquiry, open to ideas considered impossible or scandalous to previous generations, the community facilitated a new Weimar spirit. Weimar came to symbolize a hope for a new start. The revolutionary moment in 1918 had highlighted the differences between the emergent Germany and its recent past: lyrical poetry as opposed to military swagger,

Humanist philosophy as opposed to the submission to authority, pacific cosmopolitanism as opposed to an aggressive foreign policy.⁸⁴ Reform and reconstruction were required in the Weimar period as result of the desperate and practical need to unify these two worldviews into a cohesive cultural, political, and intellectual front. Emphasis on understanding the world – and by understanding it, changing it – became the community of reason’s intellectual creed. Their new understanding began with Germany herself.

As part of this community of reason, Hugo Ball and his *Critique of the German Intelligentsia* (1919)⁸⁵, Thomas Mann and his *Order of the Day* (1942), and Robert Musil’s *Precision and Soul* (1911-1937) offer representative accounts of how Germany negotiated the Weimar period on an intellectual level. The single thread that unites each piece is the outbreak of war in 1914. Each intellectual has very different conclusions about and solutions for Germany’s problems in the 1920s, but they all reach those conclusions in the same way: each develop a critique of the German past that hinges on the calamity of 1914. Ball’s *Critique* is perhaps the community of reason’s earliest attempt to reorient Germany’s past, present, and future with its defeat in 1918. “It was supposed to be a book about the modern intellectuals, especially about the authors of *Die Weißen Blätter*” (the blank check), but it became “a sketch of German development and more like a draft against the Manifesto of the 93 Intellectuals.”⁸⁶ At their most basic level, Ball, Mann, and Musil wrote passionate indictments of the German past for its social, political, and cultural failings in the run up to the First World War, and each work identifies major issues in German political, intellectual, and cultural history in an effort to formulate possible solutions to one of the most significant European problems of the

twentieth century: Germany. In Ball's words, they sought "to trace the principles that put the German characters at odds with the rest of the world."⁸⁷

A Kingdom of All Human Beings

Born February 22, 1886, in Pirmasens to a Catholic family, Hugo Ball was a German author, poet, and leading Dada artist. Ironically, and like many other young artists and intellectuals, Ball enthusiastically volunteered for military service in August of 1914. As a letter to a friend on August 7 reads, "War is the only thing that excites me."⁸⁸ However, after three successive rejections on medical grounds, Ball abandoned his military aspirations and instead made a trip to the Belgian front lines in November 1914 as a private citizen. Ball's diary entries about the visit illustrate the impact of the war on his thoughts: "It is the total mass machinery and the devil himself that has broken loose now. Ideals are only labels that have been stuck on. Everything has been shaken to its foundations."⁸⁹ Taking on an increasingly nihilistic tone, Ball quickly turned on the war effort and declared himself a pacifist in January 1915.⁹⁰ By May, he had fled Germany to Switzerland in a self-imposed exile, and would emerge in the period from 1914 to 1918 as a cofounder of *Zurich Dada*, a distinguished Expressionist poet and playwright, and a dogged anti-war publicist. Arriving in Bern in 1917, the center of political anti-war activity on the continent, Ball gathered with a group of fellow émigré intellectuals, including Annette Kolb, René Schickele, and Ernst Bloch, around the newly formed anti-war journal *Die Freie Zeitung*.⁹¹ Politically the journal supported the Entente while consistently denouncing German militarism, nationalism, and the Prussian aristocracy. For Ball the war represented, "the final phase of a permanent, commensurate with its nature, barbaric protest of Germany against the Western spirit," and his resolution to

engage in anti-war resistance (a decision he called not only just, but the highest duty) resulted in *Critique of the German Intelligentsia (Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz)*.⁹²

The *Critique*, Ball's first major work, is an important document of its time. Its major themes (art vs. politics, materialism vs. spirituality, individual vs. collective) stemmed from the major crises that occurred during the *Critique's* conception. To contextualize the piece, in November 1917 the Bolshevik revolution occurred in Russia; President Wilson's *Fourteen Points* hit the international stage in January 1918; Max von Baden took power in Germany on October 4; Kiel fell on November 2; Munich fell November 7; and revolution broke out in Berlin on November 9. These dates are significant for they frame Ball's larger analysis of a German problem. The *Critique* is an investigation of the German mind, and it operates on two levels: it confronts contemporary issues and reconstructive currents in German politics post-1918, and it also proposes a specific teleology of the German past in accordance with Ball's goal of German salvation in the 1920s.⁹³ Ball proposed a radical revision of German thought, identifying major issues in German political, intellectual, and cultural history in an effort to formulate possible solutions to one of the most significant European problems of the twentieth century: German militarism and nationalism. The *Critique* can be broken down into five major concerns: an attempt to deal with the history of Prussia that, according to Ball, lay in the historical ties between Martin Luther and the Prussian state; a concern with and a critique of what Ball understood as a typically Prussian ethos; a need to analyze the true nature of the First World War, which for Ball was a result of the lack of democratic tradition in Germany; the controversial proclamation that the Entente was fighting a just war; and Ball's conviction that the solution to war lay not in negotiation,

but in Germany's recognition of guilt.⁹⁴ The *Critique's* foreword concludes with the question, "Have the Germans lost all their senses?"⁹⁵ Ball's entire work is an attempt to salvage those senses and to reorient them to the post-1918 world.

The *Critique* points to the Middle Ages as the source of twentieth-century Pan-German mentality. Ball traced the origins of Pan-Germanism to the conflict between the Pope and Kaiser: "The medieval universal state of pope and Kaisers initiated an intimate connection between the German populace and Italy... [thus] the powerful German kings [became] merely the avenging sword and executioner of Roman will."⁹⁶ As a consequence, German theology of the Middle Ages was tied to the sword, and German prestige was built upon blood and iron. From the Middle Ages, Ball moved on to Luther as the pivoting point of German history. According to Ball, Luther separated Germany from Rome and was the first person to claim that, based on the Bible, state authority had a divine origin.⁹⁷ In doing so, "God [became] a tool of monarchy. Morals and religion [were] subordinated to the omnipotence of state power," and as a result Ball made the claim that one deep rooted cause of the First World was the Reformation of the nineteenth century.⁹⁸ "Luther removed the shackles from the feudal rulers," and thus "he bears the responsibility for the fact that in Germany [in the twentieth century] there is still no effective political conscience in matters of foreign policy."⁹⁹

Parallel to his treatment of the Reformation's confessional divide, Ball also analyzed Germany's divergence from Western tradition. In tracing the implementation of Protestant theology in German philosophy, Ball contrasted the German *Aufklärung* with the French Revolution.¹⁰⁰ According to Ball, "the rebellious spirit of the rest of Europe moved in opposite directions to German institutions, away from that feudal ethos of

rulership, that diplomacy of special priorities, that militarism of conscience.”¹⁰¹ In Germany, the Enlightenment asserted itself with some difficulty against Luther’s Protestant theology, and as a result, according to Ball, self-determination, freedom, equality, and brotherhood fell on deaf ears. Ball singled out Kant and Hegel as Luther’s counter-revolutionary prodigies by tying a conspiracy against progress to the rise of Prussian preeminence in the nineteenth century.¹⁰² Kant, according to Ball, elevated Prussian power to unparalleled heights, and Hegel in turn verified the world historical destiny of the Prussian state – Prussia became

A universal state where worldly interest superseded divine ones; where Berlin offered a shameless substitute for Rome and an omnipotent clergy of bureaucrats as a substitute for the priesthood; where a new scholasticism emerged under the name of state pragmatism; and where the Prussian king, with the aid of his ministers and professors, ruled over the abject penitentiary world of his subjects as its highest and worldly power.¹⁰³

Ball thus sees Bismarck and the creation of the German state in 1871 as the culmination of a religious process begun by Luther, carried into philosophy by Kant and Hegel, and reaching the zenith of its political expression in the Wars of Unification. For Ball, Bismarck’s rise then signaled “the final invasion of Teutonic barbarism into Latin civilization: World War One.”¹⁰⁴ Ball labeled the trend as the intellectual sickness of a nation, and in doing created a cultural narrative of German history anchored in a negative teleology – a negative *Sonderweg*.

In order to bring Germany back to the correct path, Ball proposed the formation of a new “church of the intelligentsia,” creating a new community, a “kingdom of all human beings who are of a single good will.”¹⁰⁵ “The German people must open their eyes ... we are demanding democracy... [and] the proclamation of new human and national rights concludes the war.”¹⁰⁶ Ball would have had Germany align with the West

and turn towards the democratic principles of the French Revolution. Germany's princes would be subject to a spiritual authority, its nationalism cast out in the name of a free Europe – it was a task of a new order:

... this regime must fall, either through surrender of its weapons, through collapse of its economy or through the united intellectual effort of its revolutionaries... this nation, in short, must be condemned and cast down if there are to be guarantees for the reconstruction of humanity, for a world republic, for the work of freedom on behalf of the salvation of afflicted people... it will be the task of a responsible intelligentsia...¹⁰⁷

Ball believed that only a clean break with the past would allow for new thinking and the construction of a reformed Germany. For him it was imperative that Germany seek to establish the highest principle of humanity and freedom, and to do so with the same fervor with which they had “plunged the world into misfortune, suffering and rubble.”¹⁰⁸ The new church of the intelligentsia was tasked with righting Germany's past wrongs, and forging a new German path out of the old one.

A German Democracy

Thomas Mann was a German novelist, short story writer, and social critic. Born in Lübeck in 1875, Mann's first short story, *Little Mr. Friedemann (Der Kleiner Herr Friedemann)*, was published in 1898. His novels, the most famous of which are *Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family* and *The Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg)*, garnered international acclaim, and his analysis and critique of the German mind is noted for its political insight into the Weimar era. Mann's *Order of the Day*, published in 1942, is a collection of political essays spanning the interwar and Nazi eras. Mann's work in the 1920s is in stark contrast to his writings during the First World War, specifically the anti-political, anti-democratic manifesto published at the close of the conflict. In 1918, Mann's *Reflections of a Non-Political Man (Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen)* was

published as a riposte to his brother Heinrich's criticism of Germany and the war effort. The piece justified the authoritarianism and inward "culture" (*Kultur*) of Germany against the moralistic "civilization" (*Zivilisation*) and democracy of England and France. Mann stated that "[democracy] is a politics that is hostile to Germany," and he was deeply convinced that "the German people will never be able to love political democracy, ... that the much decried 'authoritarian state' is and remains the one that is proper and becoming to the German people."¹⁰⁹ Writing in 1918, Mann believed that the German will to power remained uncontested in its legitimacy and its aims. An excerpt from his diary illuminates how Mann felt a month and a half before the armistice was signed: "Thought once again how good it would be if I were to die now."¹¹⁰ Mann believed that the Allies wanted to drive Goethe, Luther, Frederick the Great, and Bismarck out of the German experience so that they could adjust themselves to democracy, and he would never recant his statements.¹¹¹

What changed then? How did Mann make the conversion into what Peter Gay has referred to as a "republican intellectual" (*Vernunftrepublikaner*)?¹¹² Many of Mann's biographers and analysts of his work have expressed doubt in the conventional understanding that Mann simply left behind the undemocratic, highly conservative positions of *Reflections*, and many have questioned his motives in doing so.¹¹³ However, what matters is the fact that he did indeed write and publish a series of speeches and novels that, whether directly or indirectly, consistently underlined his democratic conversion in the 1920s, and supported the increasingly beleaguered Republic throughout the period. As early as 1921, in an unpublished essay on Jews, Mann attacked the nascent "swastika-nonsense" invading Germany, and for the rest of the decade (and

beyond) Mann was considered the German Republic's staunchest defender.¹¹⁴ Mann's aim in the 1920s, expressed quite candidly in his speech, "Of the German Republic," given on October 13, 1923, "was to win you [the German people] to the side of the Republic; to the side of what is called democracy, and what I call humanity."¹¹⁵ His goal, though many sectors of the German public had sworn off the Republic, was to establish a relationship between the Republic, democracy, and the German people, and "Of the German Republic" ends with a call for humanity: "we are honoring its explicit legal form, whose meaning and aim we take to be the unification of our political and national life, when we yield our still stiff and unaccustomed tongues to utter the cry: 'Long live the Republic!'"¹¹⁶

Mann's objective was to build bridges between German culture and the wider world in the wake of the First World War. His mission was to explain Germany to the world at large, and his larger *œuvre* is representative of German responses to defeat in 1918. Mann found himself among the losers in 1918, those who had fervently supported German war aims, and he was left to try and reconcile the German Republic and a discredited value system with the new democratic principles of Weimar. He, like the rest of Germany, was faced with a set of questions: could there be human politics in modern mass societies; was there any future left in Enlightenment humanism, liberalism, and democracy; was totalitarianism the inevitable shape of things to come?¹¹⁷ Mann believed that it was his duty to work towards a new understanding of Germany, and his endeavors make it possible to gain understanding of the so-called German catastrophe.¹¹⁸

Mann understood that the effort Germany had to make in order "to modernize, democratize herself, sweeping away the old, romantic imperial Germany" was a task that

could only proceed “agonizingly and against the grain, meeting extreme resistance because the old Germany [was] much too deeply and firmly established in men’s souls, [was] much too deeply identified, perhaps, with Germanism itself.”¹¹⁹ Oddly enough, that statement came in September of 1918, but it rang true for the entire span of the Weimar era. Mann and the rest of the community of reason were faced with a struggle against “the frightful, world-menacing thing” that Mann understood as one of the two ineradicable forces of the German heart: on one side the devotion to antiquity and an attachment to ancestors and an old glorious dynasty, and on the other the enchanting feeling of freedom, pride in human equality, and individual right.¹²⁰ It was his goal to understand the German mind, to assess its past, analyze its present, and provide hope for its future.

To Mann, the German past represented an irrationalist narrative that repudiated reason and whose mental attitude rejected freedom, justice, culture, optimism, and a faith in progress. The nineteenth century particularly, according to Mann, represented a period of intellectual taboo in Germany that rejected the liberal sentiments of the French Revolution and was characterized for its absolute unrestraint and its “orgiastic, radically anti-humane, [and] frenzied dynamic character.”¹²¹ Mann points to a German *Weltanschauung* (worldview) that flowed from academic and professional spheres – a wave of intellectual and pseudo-intellectual currents that brought forth “anomalous barbarism [and] primitive popular vulgarity.”¹²² According to Mann, reason had veiled its face in Germany and “humanity seems to have run like boys let out of school away from the humanitarian, idealistic nineteenth century.”¹²³ The First World War, then, was the emancipation of this pent up brutality, an unleashing of a German dictatorship of force on

the world, which created a fanatic state of mind complete with hallelujahs and bell-ringing until every German foamed at the mouth.

When Mann spoke out in favor of the Weimar Republic, giving “Of the German Republic” as a lecture in the *Beethovensaal* in Berlin, he had his misgivings, aware of “its weaknesses, the inadequacy of its revolutionary momentum, and even its errors of principle.” What drove him to the arena was “the feeling that it was [his] duty to pledge all the intellectual credit [he] had... to struggle against the frightful, world-menacing thing which [he] saw growing and increasing.” Mann understood Germany’s past as that “world-menacing thing,” and he believed that Germany’s fate belonged to the Republic. He believed that there was such a thing as a “German democracy” and to think that the phrase must refer to “some outlandish kind of foreign humbug [was] mere childishness.”¹²⁴ For Mann, the solution to Germany’s ills was to link the better aspects of Germany’s past (the Goethean era of culture and intellectual experience) with the promise of the Weimar future (democracy), taking the first steps towards liberation and rehabilitation.

Jettisoning “German”

The Austrian essayist Robert Musil was one of the great critical and imaginative minds of the twentieth century. Born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1880, it should be noted that although Musil was not a native German, reserving Musil for a specifically Austrian tradition distorts his relationship to Europe as a whole and the broadly shared concerns of his generation.¹²⁵ Musil’s philosophical and literary concerns were mediated though the German language and his identity was shaped in terms of the wider sphere of

German culture. Politically, he identified himself with the fate of the German nation and made a name for himself as a specifically German intellectual.

Musil was a witness to and a participant in the ideological upheaval of both the First and Second World Wars. His initial success came in 1906 with the publication of his first novel, *The Confusions of Young Törless* (*Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*), and for much of his career Musil was a working journalist writing serious articles on culture, contributing to the literary feuilleton of newspapers, and reviewing books and plays for various publications.¹²⁶ His insights revealed a German and European culture in crisis. The purpose of Musil's *Precision and Soul* (a collection of essays taken and translated from Musil's larger *Gesammelte Werke*, written between 1911 and 1937) was to engage his readers' thoughts and feelings directly with the problems of modern culture. Historically, these essays open a window as to what it felt like to be a committed intellectual in Germany and Austria in the interwar period – not indifferent, but a passionate observer.¹²⁷ Musil's significance emerged at a point at which the European conventions of ideology, form, and language began to break down. The task he set himself was to think through the spiritual experience of his generation socially, culturally, and intellectually.¹²⁸

The only member of this study's trio to actively participate in the First World War, Musil attended the *Militär-Oberrealschule* in Hranice and took part in officer training at the *Technische Militärakademie* in Vienna, fully enlisting for military service in 1901. Between 1914 and 1918 he served as an Austrian officer on the Italian front and was decorated several times. He then went on to serve as the editor of a military newspaper and a bureaucrat within the Republican Defense Ministry in Austria after the

collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. The war, according to Musil, “erupted like a disease in this social organism; and enormous pent-up energy ... [that] finally dug itself [a] gangrenous fistula in the twentieth century.”¹²⁹ The overriding concern of Musil’s post-1918 work was thus the larger catastrophe of German culture and ideology that found expression in the Great War.

It was clear to Musil that the elements of 1914 were already present in the nineteenth century – “one thing after another, it all came into being, and today it is once again all present at the same time.”¹³⁰ German identity in 1914 was composed of a long list of symptoms that, according to Musil, reached back a century, including nationalism, religion, and an antagonism to science. Musil believed, however, that the disconnect between what he referred to as “precision” and “soul” (the collective and the individual, respectively) represented the most significant factor in creating the Germans of the nineteenth century. His analysis of a German “special path” was couched in the German need to shape its identity in such a way to isolate precision and soul, and the complex array of results that identity heralded in 1914. According to Musil the antithesis between precision and soul was embodied by the relationship between the German individual and the German state. Musil made the claim that Germans regarded the state as an institution for human perfectibility, and as such German identity became wholly dependent on the state. In effect, the collective subsumed the individual, and Musil believed that the ideology of the German state had deepened “to the point of idolatry... seeing in it both an institution for the perfection of human nature and a kind of spiritual superperson.”¹³¹

At the turn of the century, however, that identity became a problem, as many Germans sought to reclaim the soul they seemed to have lost. Musil believed that this

struggle against soullessness degenerated into hysterics on the eve of the First World War, and in 1918 he saw Europe as teetering on the verge of apocalyptic change as a result of the German identity crisis. Solving the identity crisis, Musil maintained, was a necessary obstacle to overcome in order to arrive at a new epoch for the world.¹³² His solution lay “neither in waiting for a new ideology nor in the clash of the ones that are quarreling today, but in the creation of social conditions that safeguard the stability and depth of ideological endeavors in general.”¹³³ Musil’s answer lay in jettisoning the “German” identity as a whole. Musil promoted man as man, rather than man as “German” or “French” or “European.” By labeling oneself, Musil believed that the individual became isolated and the “other” not like him became dehumanized. This, to Musil, was the ultimate consequence of Western civilization as a whole and the greatest problem that the new age had to overcome. In describing “The German as Symptom” (one of the essays within *Precision and Soul*) Musil believed he was raising the problem of civilization as a collective. In order for Germany, and the rest of Europe, to right themselves, a larger supra-identity had to be assumed by all of Europe, if not the entire global community. According to Musil, the disconnect between precision and soul was a product of Western civilization and Germany was the most visual symptom.

Today’s Sonderweg

Together, Ball, Mann and Musil represent an important intellectual facet of the Weimar period. In reading their works together, one begins to understand that much of the reassessment of Germany’s place in Europe after defeat in the First World War tended to inhabit a tense position between robust apologetics for Germany’s special place in European history and subtle doubts about the implication of its recent past; in other

words, toward a portrayal of Germany as a country unmoored from the rest of Western civilization. In short, the language of these thinkers suggests that the *Sonderweg*, far from being an interpretive invention of the 1960s, was in fact encoded into the very DNA of German thought. This project has traced the contours of this discussion, and considers the implications of pushing back the clock on Fritz Fischer's theory, thereby opening the door for a reconsideration of notions of continuity in German history.

The nineteenth century accommodated a long list of contradictions – individualism and social solidarity, aristocracy and socialism, pacifism and militarism, nationalism and internationalism, religion and natural science – and these contradictions lasted in to the Weimar period in Germany (perhaps best illustrated by the visual contrast of pacifists shaking hands with Entente leaders alongside the assassination of Weimar politicians). *Precision and Soul* is Musil's most complete account of the ideological crisis of German culture, but it is much more than just a catalogue of Germany's ills. It speaks to a larger audience and was intended to be much more than a simple diagnosis. Indeed Ball, Mann, and Musil, each took a moment in their works to outline a prognosis alongside their respective *Sonderwege*. Ball emphasized the creation of a new intelligentsia; Mann pointed to democracy; and Musil believed that the unification of “precision” and “soul” would usher in a new age for Germany and Europe as a whole. As such, the 1920s the notion of a German *Sonderweg* is more than just a backwards narrative, it also looks ahead. Built into the understanding of the German past is an inherent hope for the future, a hope that if the Germans can discover what is wrong with Germany they can fix it. Interpreted in such a way, the *Sonderweg* thesis emerges not as a creation of postwar historiographical discussion, but rather as a powerful intellectual

agent in its own right, used in the interwar period to construct a cultural narrative of German history that sought to provide solutions to Weimar problems.

As a result, the construction of German identity in the twentieth century is not premised on the knowledge of what came “after” (the Nazi period), and instead the *Sonderweg* is revealed as cultural artifact, used to both define Germany’s past and help organize its future. This is what makes the 1920s so distinct from the postwar historiography. Postwar conceptions of the German *Sonderweg* are reflections of a much broader trend in German thought. After the Second World War, notions of the *Sonderweg* became a favorite of social historians looking for ways to place the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust in the longer stream of German history. Since the 1980s, however, such continuity theses have come under sustained attack, leaving scholars without an overarching paradigm for explaining the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Contemporary historians like Konrad Jarausch and Helmut Walser Smith are in favor of entirely eschewing the notion of a German *Sonderweg* and have posited new ways of analyzing the German past. Jarausch maintains that the goal of postwar historiography is to “recivilize” the German past, but one cannot talk about recivilizing the post-1945 world without buying into the idea that what came “before” was wrong. Historians thus find themselves at a cross roads, unable to defend the *Sonderweg* thesis satisfactorily but unwilling to let it go completely. By revealing the ways in which *Sonderweg* tropes have appeared in early twentieth-century writing, this study has shown how the historiographical difficulties are inseparable from larger patterns in German historical thought, thus offering a new perspective on this longstanding debate.

ENDNOTES

¹ Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12.

² David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Politics and Society in Nineteenth Century Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

³ Peter Watson, *The German Genius: Europe's Third Renaissance, the Second Scientific Revolution, and the Twentieth Century* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 25; Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race Across the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.)

⁴ Helmut Walser Smith, "When the Sonderweg Debate Left Us," *German Studies Review* 31 (2008): 27.

⁵ Smith, "The Vanishing Point of German History: An Essay on Perspective," *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 272.

⁶ Jürgen Kocka, "German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg," *Journal of Contemporary History* 23(1988), 3.

⁷ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany, 1867-1918: Politics, Culture, and Society in an Authoritarian State* (London: Arnold, 1995), 207.

⁸ Blackbourn and Eley, *Peculiarities*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, ix.

¹³ Pierre Renouvin, *La Crise Européenne et la Grande Guerre* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1934); Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1930); Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

¹⁴ Blackbourn and Eley, *Peculiarities*, 5.

¹⁵ For an examination of the original German publication see Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914-18* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1962).

¹⁶ Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 9. For more information on the concept of "will to power" (*Wille zur Macht*) see Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation.*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications 1969) and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Dover Publications, 1999).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 637.

¹⁹ Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48(2013): 253.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

²¹ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871-1918*, trans. by Kim Traynor (Hamburg: Berg Publishers, 1985), 1.

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- ²² Watson, *The German Genius*, 21.
- ²³ Philipp Stelzel, "Fritz Fischer and the American Historical Profession: Tracing the Transatlantic Dimension of the Fischer-Kontroverse," *Storia della Storiografia* 44(2003): 67.
- ²⁴ Strandmann, "Fischer Controversy," 254.
- ²⁵ J.A. Corbett, "France and Germany Agree – on the Past," *Historical Bulletin* 23(1955), 158-62. This textbook agreement was part of the Franco-German Textbook Recommendations of 1951 – a product of French-German rapprochement that encouraged international collaborationist efforts in order to overcome the high levels of conflict and mistrust which had built up over the course of eighty years and three wars.
- ²⁶ Strandmann, "Fischer Controversy," 254.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 261; 257.
- ²⁹ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 96.
- ³⁰ Mommsen, *Imperial Germany*, 206.
- ³¹ For the German see Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich, 1871-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994).
- ³² Wehler, *The German Empire*, 1.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.
- ³⁵ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 96.
- ³⁶ James N. Retallack, "Social History with a Vengeance? Some Reactions to H.-U. Wehler's 'Das Deutsche Kaiserreich,'" *German Studies Review* 7(1984): 424.
- ³⁷ Wehler, *The German Empire*, 31.
- ³⁸ Thomas Nipperdey, "Wehler's 'Kaiserreich.' Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 1(1975): 539-60; Lothar Gall, "Bismarck und der Bonapartismus," *Historische Zeitschrift* 223 (1976): 618-32; Klaus Hildebrand, "Geschichte oder 'Gesellschaftsgeschichte'? Die Notwendigkeit einer Politischen Gesichtsschreibung von den Internationalen Beziehung," *Historische Zeitschrift* 223(1976): 328-57.
- ³⁹ James N. Retallack, "Social History with a Vengeance? Some Reactions to H.-U. Wehler's 'Das Deutsche Kaiserreich,'" *German Studies Review* 7(1984): 426.
- ⁴⁰ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 97.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² Retallack, "Social History with a Vengeance?" 427.
- ⁴³ Blackbourn and Eley, *Peculiarities*, 13.
- ⁴⁴ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 98.
- ⁴⁵ Blackbourn and Eley, *Peculiarities*, 22.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-3.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ⁴⁸ Smith, "When the Sonderweg Debate Left Us," 229.
- ⁴⁹ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 1.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5/87; Peter Black, "Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories by Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer," *German Studies Review* 27(2004): 669.
- ⁵¹ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 17.

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- ⁵² Ibid., x.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 18.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 83.
- ⁵⁶ Eric D. Weitz, “Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories by Konrad H. Jarausch; Michael Geyer,” *Slavic Review* 63(2004): 150.
- ⁵⁷ Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 10-1.
- ⁵⁹ James M. Brophy, “The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Racism, across the Long Nineteenth Century by Helmut Walser Smith,” *Central European History* 42(2009): 745.
- ⁶⁰ Smith, *Continuities*, 12.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 6.
- ⁶² Ibid., 227; 225.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 230-2; 236; 237.
- ⁶⁴ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 12.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 10.
- ⁶⁶ Blackbourn and Eley, *Peculiarities*, 32.
- ⁶⁷ Mommsen, *Imperial Germany*, 208; Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 11.
- ⁶⁸ Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 11.
- ⁶⁹ Mommsen, *Imperial Germany*, 208.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 215.
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² John Jay Chapman, *Deutschland über alles; or, Germany Speaks: A Collection of the Utterances of Representative Germans – Statesmen, Military Leaders, Scholars, and Poets – in Defense of the War Policies of the Fatherland* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1914), 81.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 37.
- ⁷⁴ Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 147.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., 9.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 14.
- ⁷⁷ In French, *la trahison des clercs*. See Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. Richard Aldington (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007).
- ⁷⁸ Chapman, *Deutschland über alles*, 44.
- ⁷⁹ The term *mandarin* comes from Fritz Ringer’s *Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 5: “the social and cultural elite which owes its status primarily to educational qualifications, rather than to hereditary rights or wealth,” composed of “doctors, lawyers, ministers, governmental officials, secondary teachers and university professors.”
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 37.
- ⁸¹ Mary Fulbrook and Martin Swales, *Representing the German Nation: History and Identity in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 11.
- ⁸² Gay, *Weimar Culture*, xiii.

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- ⁸³ Ibid., 23.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., 2.
- ⁸⁵ For the German edition see Ball, *Zur Kritik der Deutschen Intelligenz* (Bern: Freier Verlag, 1919).
- ⁸⁶ Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1927), November 14, 1918, p. 212.
- ⁸⁷ Ball, *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*, trans. by Brian L. Harris (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 1.
- ⁸⁸ Letter of August 7, 1914, *Hugo Ball: Briefe, 1911-1927*, ed. by Annemarie Schütt-Hennings (Zurich: Benziger, 1957).
- ⁸⁹ Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, November 1914, p. 16.
- ⁹⁰ Brian L. Harris, "Hugo Ball's Critique of the German Mind: A Translation with Introduction and Notes on Hugo Ball's *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*" (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin, 1979), 90.
- ⁹¹ Anson Rabinbach, introduction to *Critique of the German Intelligentsia* by Hugo Ball (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), xv.
- ⁹² Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Hugo Ball," in Wolfgang Rothe, ed., *Expressionismus als Literatur: Gesammelte Studien* (Bern und Munich: Francke, 1969), 750; Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, September 26, 1917, p. 203.
- ⁹³ Ibid., 140.
- ⁹⁴ Philip Mann, *Hugo Ball: An Intellectual Biography* (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons Ltd., 1987), 113-115.
- ⁹⁵ Ball, *Kritik*, 14.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., 17.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., 25
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., 19; 32.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., 45-6.
- ¹⁰⁰ From Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay "Beantwortung de Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" (Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?). The German term for the "Enlightenment" (*aufklaren*: to illuminate; *sich aufklären*: to clear up).
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., 47.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., 75.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., 95.
- ¹⁰⁴ Harris, "Hugo Ball," 147.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ball, *Kritik*, 12; 21.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 9.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 113.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 114.
- ¹⁰⁹ Mann, *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, trans. by Walter D. Morris (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1983), 16-18.
- ¹¹⁰ Mann, *Diaries, 1918-1939*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (London: Robin Clark Ltd., 1984), September 14, 1918, p. 4.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid., September 16, 1918, p. 5.
- ¹¹² Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 23.

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- ¹¹³ Keith Bullivant, "Thomas Mann and Politics in the Weimar Republic," in *Culture and Society in the Weimar Republic*, ed. Keith Bullivant (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 24.
- ¹¹⁴ Anthony Heilbut, introduction to *Letters of Heinrich and Thomas Mann, 1900-1949*, ed. by Hans Wysling (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xv.
- ¹¹⁵ Thomas Mann, *Order of the Day* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 11.
- ¹¹⁶ Mann, *Order of the Day*, 45.
- ¹¹⁷ T.J. Reed, "Mann and History," from *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, ed. by Ritchie Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.
- ¹¹⁸ Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe: Reflections and Recollections* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).
- ¹¹⁹ Mann, *Diaries*, September 28, 1918, p. 9.
- ¹²⁰ Mann, *Order of the Day*, ix; 23.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*, 55.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, ix; 17.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹²⁶ Burton Pike, forward to *Precision and Soul*, by Robert Musil (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), ix.
- ¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, xiii.
- ¹²⁸ David S. Luft, *Robert Musil and the Crisis of European Culture 1880-1942* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 16.
- ¹²⁹ Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul*, ed. and trans. by Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 128.
- ¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ¹³² *Ibid.*, 31.
- ¹³³ *Ibid.*, 130.