

Arnold Brecht: A Weimar Liberal of 1918 the German Revolution

Source- Arnold Brecht on the November Revolution (Retrospective Account 1966) from GHDI, Weimar Republic, Beginnings: War and Revolution

http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3821

Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884-1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 108-10.

Background and Summary of Research

Arnold Brecht (1884-1977) was a German politician during the Weimar Period. In this account, Brecht details the events of the November Revolution in 1918. On November 9, Max von Baden announced the abdication of the Kaiser and turning over of power to Friedrich Ebert, head of the SPD. Just before the revolution, Brecht, working as a judge, was invited to work in the Chancellery and he continued under the new post-revolutionary SPD government. His high ranking role as a civil servant and his unique firsthand perspective on Weimar developments make his works valuable to scholars of the period. The passage about the revolution is taken from Brecht's autobiography, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht*, first published in 1966. Brecht left Germany in 1933 and became a political researcher at The New School in New York.

In the first draft of the exploration, I examined Brecht's account of the November Revolution by summarizing and analyzing his autobiography, *Political Education*, as well as some reviews of the book, and finally comparing accounts of the November Revolution from Brecht and Hitler. Ultimately, the revolution and Brecht's subsequent role in the SPD government were important in developing his "political education" and providing him with a strong belief in democracy that would remain with him throughout the Weimar years. The focus of this final draft will be to further explore Brecht's political education and examine his lasting role in history. I summarize and analyze Brecht's *Prelude to Silence* as well as reviews of the book, compare *Prelude to Silence* to *Political Education* to examine any differences in the accounts of the Weimar years, and finally examine some scholarly references to Brecht's works in other historical accounts of the Revolution/Weimar years. Overall, while Brecht is not the most referenced or known Weimar politician, scholars recognize the value of his historical account from *Political Education* and *Prelude to Silence*, his post-Weimar role as a political theorist, and his unwavering support for democratic ideals, rooted in his experience of the revolutionary period, amidst the contentious and trending toward extremist political climate of Weimar.

Summary/Analysis of *Prelude to Silence: The End of the German Republic*

Web Search

- *Prelude to Silence* first published in 1944, is one of Brecht's most enduring works along with *Political Education*
- The book is available in the UCSB library, and online I also found some reviews from JStor/ProQuest from the 1940s to examine the book
- the citations for the book/reviews are below

Brecht, Arnold. *Prelude to Silence, The End of the German Republic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1944

In *Prelude to Silence*, Brecht offers a brief history of Germany's turn to Nazism in the 1930s and his own view of the causes to account for it. Brecht faults a number of institutional and constitutional defects which discouraged the democratic system. Specifically, he notes three overriding mistakes in the Weimar Constitution. (1) Proportional representation in the context of the diversified political space of Weimar Germany resulted in the "splitting up of parties" and allowed for more ideologically driven representatives that were less "able to find a compromise among various groups, interests, and views" to be elected (47). It also empowered extremists. (2) Popular vote of the president in a system with so many parties often result in no party being able to get their candidate elected and allows for "popular outsiders" without party ties or political experience, like Hindenburg to be elected (48). (3) Finally, the president was given too much power that was undefined; Brecht singles out executive emergency powers and other "loopholes for authoritarianism (Ibid). The lack of party cohesion and sheer amount of parties made it difficult to correct these defects and indeed create a governing coalition at all. For example, Brecht discusses how the pro democratic "Weimar coalition" that emerged after the Revolution and that included the SPD, the liberals, the centrists, lost their majority in the Reichstag elections in 1920. Yet the right-wing parties could not form a majority either because the communists, who were against both the right and the Weimar coalition. This resulted in generally fragmented governing coalitions. (129-131). These institutional defects made democracy vulnerable to Nazism. Brecht rejects historical explanations for Germany's transition, but looks to more legalistic and institutional factors. Although he acknowledges that many segments of society were not supportive of democracy during the 1920s.

Reviews of *Prelude to Silence*

Shuster. George N. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Dec., 1944), pp. 615-617

<http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/stable/pdf/2144130.pdf?acceptTC=true>

Hermens. "Brecht, Arnold, *Prelude to Silence: The End of the German Republic*. (Book Review)." *Review of Politics* 7 (Jan 01, 1945): 111,

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1291004602?accountid=14522>.

Rheinstein, Max. "BRECHT: *Prelude to Silence: The End of the German Republic* (Book Review)." *The University of Chicago Law Review* 12 (Jan 01, 1944): 104,

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1301249096?accountid=14522>.

In general, the reviewers at least take an interest in Brecht's account of how the Nazis seized power, though admittedly they also see it as an insufficient explanation.

"To say that the Weimar Republic failed by reason of bad legal planning is to claim too much" (Shuster)

"He carries the logic of a legalistic analysis to such lengths that important, and overriding material facts are given inadequate attention" (Hermens)

"One might wish that Doctor Brecht had more vividly described the fight put up by the non-Fascist masses of Germany themselves" (Rheinstein)

Despite these criticisms, the reviewers tend to acknowledge that "Constitutional factors loom large in any satisfactory estimate of Nazi Power" (Shuster). They emphasize the importance of Brecht's notion that Hitler did "not represent a unanimous Germany," but he had to "fight an opposition" that

was not “easy to overcome” (Rheinstein). The opposition of Hitler, those supporters of democracy, however, were “disarmed” by the “defects of the Weimar Constitution...in their fight against both conservative reaction and totalitarian revolution (Hermens). The reviewers reveal the startling irony of Brecht’s contention that democratic elements of the Weimar Constitution had actually served to weaken pro-democratic supporters against opponents. This reveals an important lesson; that democracy is dangerous in the hands of those who don’t support democratic precepts; especially in the divisive political arena of Weimar. In this sense, some blame could be laid to the framers of the Weimar constitution. As Hermens notes “the mistakes of history are made less by the men of evil...than by the good people, who mean well but defeat their good intentions by their blunders.” The central blunder here, for Brecht, is the Weimar Constitution. Yet it is important to acknowledge that Nazism was not inevitable, the “tide of revolution...might have been halted” but the “democratic spirit of the Weimar Constitution was snuffed out by privation and disillusionment” (Shuster).

Comparing *Prelude to Silence* and *Political Education*

Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884-1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 108-10

Brecht touches upon these issues in his autobiography, *Political Education* as well. Discussed in the first draft, he devotes an entire section on the importance of the loss of the “pro-democratic majorities” in the Reichstag elections in 1920 which dealt a crippling blow to the prospects of democracy in Weimar. In *Political Education*, first published about 20 years later, Brecht essentially repeats the same argument stressing the importance of the year 1920. “For democracy to function properly, it is a necessary condition that a broad majority of the people appreciate democratic ideals and earnestly want to see democratic rules of the game obeyed” (185). He also points out the faults in the Weimar constitution.

“Taken as a whole the Weimar Constitution, as it is generally called, was a venerable document from the democratic viewpoint, evidence of the idealistic desires which inspired its originators. But too little experience, a lack-not only in Germany, but in the whole world-of a really advanced political theory, and finally the confidence in the continuance of democratic majorities and in the democratic reliability of elected presidents, led to some fateful errors in important details” (155).

However, he offers more commentary by exploring alternative potential solutions in forming a government to have prevented the transition to Nazism in 1933. Some of these alternatives included splitting the National Socialists and only including the moderate wing of the Nazis in the governing coalition, also forming only a minority government coalition and forcing a dissolution of the Reichstag in the hopes of another coalition (389-390). Additionally, there were possibilities of establishing a military dictatorship or even a monarchy. Brecht personally favored the creation of an “oligarchic democracy” in which governing power was reserved “to adherents of the democratic constitution as against totalitarian opponents” (391). He also suggested the banning of totalitarian parties was feasible given the setback that the Nazis received in the November 1932 elections.

Beyond this added commentary, Brecht’s views on the Weimar political system had remained more or less the same over the 20-year span between *Prelude to Silence* and *Political Education*. The big takeaway from this is probably the importance of this period in shaping Brecht’s political education. If the revolution had “educated” Brecht and provided him with his pro-democratic leanings, the incompatibility between the tumultuous political environment in the 1920s and the Weimar Constitution tested his resolve. Yet he remained steadfast in his beliefs and committed to his conviction

that Nazi takeover was not inevitable. Putting Brecht in the context of Weimar development can be further examined by looking at other scholarly literature.

Scholarly References and Analyses of Brecht's works

Web Search

- The analyses from above and the previous draft demonstrates the instrumental role that Brecht had as a civil servant in the Weimar years. I wanted to conclude by examining some further references to Brecht's work in more recent historical literature
- using google books and google n-gram, I searched for more recent books about the November Revolution/Weimar years with a high number of references to Brecht, and that are available in the UCSB library
- the citations are below

Bookbinder, Paul. *Weimar Germany: The Republic of the Reasonable*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Mommsen, Hans, Elborg Forster, and Larry Eugene Jones. *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Eyck, Erich. *A History of the Weimar Republic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954.

Summary of Books

All of the books are essentially histories of the Weimar Republic. Bookbinder's book discusses how the faults and ultimate failure of Weimar clouds the earnest "reasonableness" and the political accomplishment of the Republic. "It was a republic of those who were willing to be reasonable, to put aside short-term self interest and work for the longer-term interests of the broader community" (Introduction). Mommsen furthers a similar argument. "Given the bleak conditions facing Germany after 1918, the Weimar regime was able to achieve a remarkable degree of political stability even though it never won the support of Germany's professional and conservative elites (preface). Eyck's account, much older than the other two, offers a history of Weimar Germany that seeks to shed "expatriate resentments" of Germany and offer constructive critiques with the understanding that the "peaceful reconstruction and survival of Western civilization is impossible without the wholehearted collaboration of the German people" (preface).

Role of Brecht in the Books

When discussing the November Revolution, Bookbinder references Brecht's- "the high ranking and long term-civil servant...who loyally supported the Republic"- argument, stated in *Political Education*, that a gradual transition to a constitutional monarchy would have brought the government more support and increased the likelihood for survival in favor of the socialists or communist transitions pursued by the SPD and KPD (29). Instead, the SPD-led transition resulted in the loss of the "pro-Weimar" parties in the Reichstag elections of 1920 as the nationalist parties began to take their place. Citing Brecht, Bookbinder describes it as a "mortal wound" to Weimar democracy (51). The importance of the 1920 Reichstag elections for Brecht is expressed in both *Prelude to Silence* and *Political Education*. Mommsen explains, "As Arnold Brecht has conclusively argued, it was not the Weimar democrats who were to be held responsible for the demise" of Weimar, rather those who did not support democratic principles (Mommsen). For example, Eyck mentions how Brecht, "One of the best of all the nation's civil servants, a man who, although strictly nonpartisan, left no room for doubts about his firm democratic

beliefs," was excused from the German Chancellery in 1927 because of his more liberal leanings that did not mesh under the Chancellorship of the more right-wing administration of Chancellor Wilhelm Marx. This was partly due to the personal nationalist leanings of the of the new interior minister Walther von Keudell, who sought to undercut the positions "of those who were loyal to the republic," including Brecht, one of the "principle casualties" (Mommsen 246) (Eyck). Brecht was soon offered a position in the Prussian civil service.

Scholarly accounts of Brecht, while generally brief, all seem to repeat a similar theme of Brecht's loyalty to the regime and dedication to democracy. In a time when the country was becoming more politically extreme, more divisive, and generally more nationalistic, Brecht remained ostensibly "nonpartisan" but essentially a de facto liberal. As discussed in the first draft, this could be traced to his liberal "education" during the revolution, and his work with the post-revolutionary SPD government. In *Political Education* and *Prelude to Silence*, Brecht explains the tenuous position of democracy in Weimar, but why this lack of support for democracy in the first place? Bookbinder cites Brecht to offer some insight.

"German democracy lacked the richness of symbols in which other democracies rejoice. There were no heroes, no martyrs, and, for most of the history of the Republic, there were no days of commemoration...The Weimar leaders, who had been instrumental in destroying the monarchy, depriving the German people of the flag many of them cherished and disassociating the symbols of the Protestant Church from the state, were not sufficiently sensitive to the power of symbols." (150).

Interestingly, Brecht emerged from the November Revolution not as an ultranationalist lamenting the old or a revolutionary pushing for a radical new direction, but as a genuine liberal. Where the period witnessed extensive polarization and conflict, Brecht can provide a unique "nonpartisan" outlook of Weimar developments devoid of post-war self pity or clouded by extreme political agendas.

Bibliography

Brecht, Arnold. *Prelude to Silence, The End of the German Republic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1944

Brecht, Arnold. *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884-1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 108-10.

Bookbinder, Paul. *Weimar Germany: The Republic of the Reasonable*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Eyck, Erich. *A History of the Weimar Republic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

Hermens. "Brecht, Arnold, *Prelude to Silence: The End of the German Republic*. (Book Review)." *Review of Politics* 7 (Jan 01, 1945): 111,
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1291004602?accountid=14522>.

Mommsen, Hans, Elborg Forster, and Larry Eugene Jones. *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Shuster. George N. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Dec., 1944), pp. 615-617
<http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/stable/pdf/2144130.pdf?acceptTC=true>

Rheinstein, Max. "BRECHT: *Prelude to Silence: The End of the German Republic* (Book Review)." *The University of Chicago Law Review* 12 (Jan 01, 1944): 104,
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1301249096?accountid=14522>.