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Braune, Andreas, Elsbach, Sebastian and Noak, Ronny,
eds. Bildung und Demokratie in der Weimarer Republik.
Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2022 (pp. 306,
ISBN 978-3-515-13272-5)

Abstract

The article is a review of the monograph entitled *Bildung und Demokratie in der Weimarer Republik*, published by Franz Steiner Verlag in 2022. This monograph is an effect of the academic conference “Bildung und Demokratie”, that took place in 2020 and was organized by the Weimar Republic Research Institution of the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena and Weimarer Republik e. V. The editors of the reviewed monograph, namely Andreas Braune, Sebastian Elsbach, and Ronny Noak, are renowned scholars specializing in problematics of the Weimar Republic. This review article contains a short description and evaluation of all sixteen chapters published together as a monograph. As a whole, they refer to a wide spectrum of subjects. However, their common ground is the question of the education of both youth and adults on the subjects of democracy and republicanism during the period of the Weimar Republic. All issues raised in the monograph are also analysed in the context of the very complex political reality of Weimar Germany. The article ends with general remarks on the problematics discussed in the monograph.

Keywords: democracy, republicanism, parliamentarism, civic education, Germany, Weimar Germany

Słowa kluczowe: demokracja, republikanizm, parlamentaryzm, edukacja obywatelska, Niemcy, Republika Weimarska

I

The publication reviewed in this article refers to an important and eventful time in the history of Germany – the Weimar Republic period. It is a result of the conference “Education and Democracy” (“Bildung und Demokratie”), held in 2020 by the Weimar Republic Research Institution of the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena and Weimarer Republik e. V. As pointed out by the editors of the volume, the statements presented therein constitute the first research initiative to analyse the issues of education in the context of the democratic system of the Weimar Republic and to exchange views that accompanied this issue. Undoubtedly, the subject matter of the Weimar Republic is a popular object of research, not only in German science but also outside it.¹ However, this does not change the fact that new research fields can be still discovered in this area. This has been done successfully by the authors of the chapters of the publication in question. The issues addressed in the book are therefore not only topical, but also extremely interesting for people interested in the “Weimarer Zeit” in the history of Germany.

The subject matter of the publication is the question of the relationship between education and democracy in the Weimar Republic. Using various examples, the authors show the reader, how the new state has tried to instil democratic culture by means of actions in the field of education and upbringing of citizens of different ages. These initiatives and actions are presented in the context of the turbulent political life of the “first” republic in the German history.² The volume is divided into four parts, each of which contains chapters on similar topics. The first part shows individual problems relating to particular German countries with regard to education reforms in line with democratic principles. The second part refers to individual initiatives and activists whose aim was to strengthen the republic by developing civic and pro-democracy education. Part three contains texts on the views of thinkers, politicians and scientists of the era on the theoretical aspects of education in pluralistic parliamentary democracy. Part four analyses the entire spectrum of practical activities of left-wing and socialist formations. Attention is paid here to activity among young people and to those political parties which participated in the democratic functioning of the republic and those who have rejected this option.

II

The author of the chapter titled “Durch Bildung zu Demokratie und Sozialismus? Schulpolitik im «Sächsischen Projekt 1919–1923»” is Karl Heinrich Pohl. He presented the phenomenon of the failure of Social Democrats who ruled Saxony, against conservative

¹ The good examples of publications referring to the question of civic education in the Weimar Republic are: Noak and Elsbach, “Das freie Auge spricht!”; Busch, “Demokratielernen in der Weimarer Republik”.

² The author of this article is aware that the first state entity in the current German territory, whose political system was based on the principles of democracy and republicanism was the so called “Republic of Mainz”. However, that state functioned only for several months of 1793 and was territorially limited. Czaplinski, Galos and Korta, *Historia Niemiec*, 411.

circles, in introducing an ambitious curriculum of educational reforms. Their proposals for equal access to education, secular teaching, co-education and vocational education did not eventually enter into force. As K.H. Pohl rightly points out, this case is characterized by ideological tensions in the then Weimar Republic. Thus, progressive forces (Social Democrats) clashed here with conservative ones, which rightly feared losing their position as a result of the implementation of the demands of the left.³

A very similar problem is discussed by Jannik Sachweh in the article titled “Bildungspolitik und Schulbuchproduktion im Freistaat Braunschweig 1918–1933”. The author focuses here on presenting the process of preparation of new textbooks, corresponding to the republican reality of the system (mainly textbooks for German language and history) in Brunswick. Referring, *inter alia*, to the developments related to the textbook titled *Jugendland*, J. Sachweh argues that the content and the ideological load of the textbooks depended on the aspirations of the political formation, which had control over it at a given moment. Thus, the left (SPD) clashed with conservative forces (for example Deutsche Volkspartei and Deutschnationale Volkspartei) again. So this is another article that illustrates well the political reality of the Weimar Republic. It was characterized by instability resulting from the differences between the largest political forces.

Another paper, by Adrian Weiss, is essential from the perspective of the democratic identity of the contemporary Germany. It is titled “Keine Stunde Null nach 1945. Über die Kontinuität bildungspolitischer Innovationen der Weimarer Schulreform in der frühen Bundesrepublik”. The author aptly argues that various initiatives and reforms of education in accordance with democratic ideals, undertaken during the Weimar Republic, despite the interruption by the NSDAP government, were important in the process of building the Federal Republic of Germany. A. Weiss describes the educational initiatives of Georg Eckert and his associates. Both before and after the Third Reich, they advocated in Brunswick that history be taught in accordance with the postulates of attaching students to the ideals of democracy and reconciliation between nations. Attention should be drawn to the conviction stressed by A. Weiss, that instilling the attachment to democracy in citizens was a condition for correct functioning of democracy in the FRG.⁴

Gunnar B. Zimmermann is the author of “Die Hamburger Arbeiter-Abiturientenkurse von 1923 und 1927. Ein bildungspolitischer Impuls mit Langzeitwirkung”. He analysed and assessed the importance of educational reforms in Hamburg after the fall of the Third Reich. Using a wide archive database, the author described with great precision two editions of courses for workers, which enabled them to graduate from high school and to enrol in higher education during the period of the Weimar Republic (in 1923 and 1927). The author rightly emphasized that this was part of the efforts of the SPD co-ruling Hamburg to introduce as many representatives of the previously underprivileged classes and young socialists into the universities as possible. Contributing to the view that after 1945 West Germany “did not start from scratch” (expressed by A. Weiss in the previous chapter), the author points to subsequent history of participants of these courses, by recalling their life path and public functions held by them in the Bundesrepublik.

³ Moreover, as Marek Maciejewski notes, both the Catholic and Lutheran clergy continued to advocate monarchy. Maciejewski, “Między II a III Rzeszą”, 107.

⁴ It is worth mentioning that civic education was introduced in the FRG, as a separate subject of teaching (starting from 7th grade). Gierszewski, “Edukacja”, 155.

A very interesting case showing the opportunistic use of the educational policy was presented by Anna Lehner. Her article is titled “Ländlichen Grenzraum regieren. Schulpolitik als Regierungstechnik in der «bayerischen Ostmark», 1924–1933”. It describes the relationship between the effects of the border change after World War I and the educational policy pursued by Germany on the borderland adjacent to independent Czechoslovakia. The author analysed the opportunistic use of the concerns about the loss of German national identity, which arose in the Weimar Republic, by the Bavarian Forest authorities. As A. Lehner notes, local authorities exaggerated the threat of “Czechoslovakisation” to raise more central funds for “enhancing German spirit”. One of the most important areas where these funds were allocated was education.

III

The first chapter of the second part is titled “Stabilisierung der Demokratie durch politische Bildung? Die Reichszentrale für Heimatdienst und freie Volkshochschulen in der Weimarer Republik” and written by Pierre Schmuck. The author asks the question about the role and possibilities of strengthening and stabilizing democracy by the Reich Agency for Homeland Service (Reichszentrale für Heimatdienst). In his analysis, P. Schmuck refers to the situation during the Second Reich, citing Paul Ruehmann’s views on political education.⁵ The description of the formation and role of the Reich Agency for Homeland Service and the adult education centres (Volkshochschulen) in political education touches on a very important and essentially universal problem. This problem is the neutrality of political teaching.⁶ As rightly noted by P. Schmuck, the idea behind establishing the Reich Agency for Homeland Service was to provide people with professional political knowledge so as to make them informed citizens dedicated to the republic. However, this institution was also a field of political struggle in the Weimar parliament, where it was accused of spreading pro-government propaganda. There is no doubt that by pointing to the links between the Reich Agency for Homeland Service and the contemporary Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bildungszentrale für politische Bildung) P. Schmuck proves the thesis, found in other articles, that the Bundesrepublik after 1945 did not start “from scratch” in terms of political education of citizens.

Christian Lübcke in the article “Ein Versuch zur Demokratisierung der Reichswehr. Bernhard Rauschs Vorschläge für eine Staatsbürgerliche Unterrichtung, 1919–1920”, has presented the person and views of Bernhard Rausch who tried to introduce civic

⁵ It is noteworthy that first political educational initiatives appeared as early as in the Second Reich. As an example, Matthias Busch mentions the establishment of the Vereinigung für staatsbürgerliche Erziehung des deutschen Volkes. Interestingly, the most active in striving to introduce the civic and political education (staatsbürgerliche Unterricht) were liberal and bourgeois forces. However, these efforts were modest in comparison with the initiatives and actions during the Weimar Republic. Busch, “Demokratielernen in der Weimarer Republik”, 28–9.

⁶ The question of neutrality in political education is also addressed by M. Busch stating that the central problem in political education in the Weimar Republic was explanation of public events taking place in the country, without resorting to political propaganda. *Ibid.*, 33.

education in the Reichswehr. Ch. Lübecke synthetically described the political situation in the Weimar Republic army, especially in the context of the Kapp-Lüttwitz Coup (Kapp-Lüttwitz-Putsch) and the views presented by Rausch in this respect. This leftist activist wanted to make the soldiers politically aware and make them genuine and conscious citizens of the republic, in a democratized army whose purpose was to protect the constitution and the state. The Rausch's unsuccessful initiatives is the basis to demonstrate the conflict between the elite – the old and conservative military top brass and leftist activists striving for reforms. It can be indicated that Rausch's ideas have largely materialized today. Therefore one should keep in mind the important role, that the contemporary Bundeswehr plays in the political education of young people.⁷

In the text titled “Bemühungen um die Verankerung eines demokratischen Bewusstseins in der Weimarer Republik”, Ernst Laubach has asked a fundamental and still topical question: why did the Weimar Republic fall? Referring to examples of large and small civil organizations, the author has demonstrated that during the Weimar Republic there were many initiatives intended to instil the republican and democratic spirit in Germans. He has invoked the views of the most important politicians and theoreticians: Hugo Preuss, Gustav Radbruch and Theodor Heuss, who stressed the importance of promoting devotion and loyalty to the republic among citizens. He has also pointed to the activities of the previously mentioned Reich Agency for Homeland Service and the most important political parties and their youth organizations. He notices, in this case, that many Weimar political forces did not show support for the republic, perceiving it rather as the only possible form of functioning of the German state in the international context.

IV

In the first chapter of the third part, “«Erziehung zur praktischen Politik.» Helmuth Plessners Vorschlag zu einer Schule für politisches Denken, Staatskunst und Diplomatie im Kontext seiner frühen Schriften der 1920er und -30er Jahre”, Tim Zumhof presents the biography and views of Helmuth Plessner. He was a German philosopher and sociologist who attempted to find a way to increase support for republican and democratic ideas among young people and academia. This article refers to the motif, present repeatedly throughout the publication. It is the conflict between the past represented by the imperial Second Reich and conservatism, and the present reflected by republicanism and democracy. T. Zumhof described Plessner's initiatives, as the most important of which should be considered the proposal to establish political education seminars at universities, as well as the “School for Political Thought” (Schule für politisches Denken). He wanted to politically educate the German university and bureaucratic elites (who were not identifying themselves with the republic and its values) so as to win their support

⁷ More on the topic in: Sachs, *Die Zusammenarbeit*, 37–41. Today, the Bundeswehr is referred to as a “Parliament's Army” (Parlamentsarmee). Not only does this symbolize that the army is subordinate to the democratic authority of the Parliament, but also points to its faithfulness and readiness to defend democratic values. A German soldier should be a “uniformed state citizen” (Staatsbürger in Uniform), a law-abiding citizen, aware of his duties. More on the topic in: Bormann, *Erziehung*, 69–76.

for the system of parliamentary democracy and the republic. It should be emphasized, however, that as early as in the second half of the 1920s it became clear that most of the academic staff and young students were not persuaded to support a democratic republic.⁸

Peter Techet is the author of the text “Reine Wissenschaft und politische Bildung. Hans Kelsens unpolitisches Wissenschaftsverständnis als Voraussetzung für eine pluralistisch-demokratische Bildung”. It presents Hans Kelsen’s views on the problem of the scientific nature of political education. The author of the chapter has proved that Kelsen’s concept of science (Wissenschaft) did not exclude political action, on the contrary. He has also described the problem of the “ideologization” of political knowledge in post-war Austria and Kelsen’s attitude towards this phenomenon. P. Techet has proved that for Kelsen the aim of political education was to give man the ability to assimilate and independently evaluate various views and ideas, to reach compromises, and the ability to follow the ideas of other people. Such education was supposed to enable the creation of a democratic society.⁹

In the study titled “Modus Co-vivendi. Kompromisse als demokratisches Erfordernis in der politischen Theorie der Weimarer Linken”, Albert Divkovich discusses the concept of compromise in the views of thinkers situated on the left side of the political scene, not only in the Weimar Republic but also in the interwar Republic of Austria. The author proved that, despite the absence of the culture of compromise and the poor perception thereof, there were many initiatives in the Weimar Republic to strengthen it. As far as Austria is concerned, A. Divkovich referred to the views of Otto Bauer, who legitimized the compromise policy of the SDAPÖ in the early days of Republican Austria. The author’s main thesis is that Bauer did not see compromise as a value in itself, but as a tactical means to further develop the Social Democrats’ power within the parliamentary system. A. Divkovich also described Kelsen’s and Radbruch’s views on the problem of political compromise.¹⁰ One of the most important conclusions of the chapter is that none of the key political differences and problems in the Weimar Republic was resolved through compromise. This led to a “snowball effect” and the collapse of coalition governments, which then made it easier for the NSDAP to come to power.

Jonathan Voges in the study titled “«Erziehung im Sinne der Völkerversöhnung.» Der Völkerbund als Gegenstand des Geschichtsunterrichts in der Weimarer Republik”, discussed one of Europe’s most important problems after the World War I, namely peaceful cooperation and reconciliation between nations. J. Voges has presented the views and actions of many German activists (Heinrich Scholze, Gertrud Bäumer, Emerich Franzis, Marie Gräfin zu Dohna) on the need to raise the young generation of Germans in the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between nations. The author’s conclusion that these initiatives failed to be adopted in the practice of the Weimar Republic is important.

⁸ Zöllner, *Die Unfähigkeit*, 126, 130.

⁹ It is worth mentioning that it is the democratic system which was considered by H. Kelsen as predestined for finding social agreement and mitigating political tensions. Czerwińska, “Wom Wesen”, 183–4. More on various aspects of H. Kelsen’s views and their reception: Łuszczzyńska, “Polish Criticism of Hans Kelsen’s”, 106–19; Łuszczzyński, “Value of Law”, 180–1; Bosiacki, “Za i przeciw”, 7–20.

¹⁰ For more on Kelsen’s understanding of politics as an art of compromise, see: Kick, “Politik als Kompromiß”, 63–80.

The ideas of the League of Nations (Völkербund) were therefore treated as an Entente's instrument to pursue their own objectives disguised as international law.¹¹

V

Christian Faludi in the first chapter of the fourth and the last part, titled "Sehnsucht nach Sozialismus. Der Reichsjugendtag in Weimar 1920", described very meticulously the course of the whole event of "Reich Youth's Day" and its political and social background. Using the example of events that took place in Weimar in 1920, the study illustrates the conflict over youth between leftist formations and right-wing and conservative forces (including ecclesiastical ones). One of manifestations of this struggle is, for example, the burning of a swastika by left-wing groups during the Reich Youth's Day, described by Ch. Faludi. The Reich Youth's Day is yet another symbol of action of left-wing parties and the workers' movement to win political support from masses of young people, described in the reviewed book.

The author of the chapter titled "Darstellung und Vermittlung des sozialistischen Demokratiekonzepts. Die Kinderrepublik Seekamp 1927 der Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft der Kinderfreunde" is Irmela Diedrichs. Another initiative of leftist forces to educate children in the spirit of their values is described here. I. Diedrichs has referred to the activities of the Reich Worker's Collective of Children's Friends (Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft der Kinderfreunde – RAG), which promoted the idea of organizing a summer camp during which children were educated to operate in a democratic and republican state. The main issue here was educating children from an early age so that they would support and engage in socialist ideas in the future. I. Diedrichs rightly pointed to the "ideal" of the socialist child promoted during the camp by comics and leaflets, which was embodied by Mieke Maier. The ambivalent attitude of the RAG towards the Weimar Republic indicated by the author should be emphasised. It was considered as a transitional stage to achieve true socialism.

In the chapter "Politische Schulungsarbeit im Kaiserreich und der Weimarer Republik. Wandel und Kontinuität im Bildungsverständnis des linkskommunistischen Pädagogen Dr. Karl Schröder", Rhena Stürmer has presented the person and views of Karl Schröder. This declared leftist and communist belonged to the radical wing of the SPD, in which he was responsible for the question of education – Schulungsarbeit. The author described K. Schröder's work at the Central Commission for Education (Zentrale Bildungsausschuss – ZBA). Working with this institution, Schröder advocated educating young people in the spirit of Marxist ideals. He opposed all kinds of relativisms and compromises, which made him an outsider within the SPD and part of the wing separated from the party's mainstream.

Jule Ehms is the author of the article "Integration oder Klassenkampf – Führerbildung oder Basisdemokratie? Das Bildungsangebot der syndikalistischen Freien Arbeiter-Union

¹¹ Similar views on the League of Nations shared by most Germans during the Weimar Republic are presented by Busch, "Kommentar: «Völkербundspädagogik», 71.

Deutschlands". The article discusses the syndicalist trade union FAUD, including primarily the educational initiatives conducted by its Berlin-based branch between 1928 and 1931. In the article the author presented the history of the FAUD as the first syndicalist trade union in Germany. In describing the educational activities of the trade union in Berlin, the author proved that syndicalists did not propose a coherent institutional offer for this type of activity. The activity of the FAUD's Berlin branch in the field of education was therefore not systematic, but involved organizing various events, meetings and lectures aimed at preparing workers for the revolutionary and class struggle.

VI

Summarizing all the presented studies, the editors of this valuable volume reach important conclusions, also supported well by the literature on the subject. First of all, it should be pointed out that the Weimar Republic was a product of strong political disputes. This led to the politicization of many areas of the state functioning, including political and civic education. Political education was therefore seen by the Weimar Republic's movements and parties as an opportunity to influence young people so that they would later support their postulates. School was therefore one of places that were crucial for democracy in the Weimar Republic and where there was a struggle between different approaches to it.¹²

The multitude of approaches presented in the book reflects the political disputes held in the Weimar Republic. The main axis of dispute ran between left-wing and conservative movements.¹³ Representatives of moderate forces and the emerging national-socialist right also pushed forward their demands. The initiatives of left-wing forces presented in the volume, primarily the SPD, confirm well the thesis that it was this formation that led the way in the issue of pro-democratic and pro-republican education of citizens. This was dictated, of course, by the desire to shape attitudes of support for socialist ideas.¹⁴

A noteworthy and right conclusion is the conviction (present among many views in the Weimar Republic) that the successful creation of a democratic and pluralistic system in the state depends on the proper formation of citizens in this spirit. The volume also proves that the initiatives in the field of civic education from the period of the Weimar Republic, although interrupted by the rule of the NSDAP, gave effect after 1945 in Germany.¹⁵ A good proof here is the existence in the Weimar Republic of an institution that was a progenitor of the Federal Agency for Civic Education, namely the Reich Agency for Homeland Service (as stressed by P. Schmuck in his chapter).

¹² Otto, "Neuer Staat – Neue Schüler*innen?", 35. For more on the history of political education in the Weimar Republic, see: Sander, "Geschichte der politischen Bildung", 16.

¹³ The workers' movement in the Weimar Republic was unstable either. That was a result of a rivalry between the SPD and the KPD. Maciejewski, "Między II a III Rzeszą", 108. For more on the crisis of the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s in the context of the Prussia versus Reich case trial, see: Ochmański, "18 brumaire'a Republiki Weimarskiej".

¹⁴ Noak and Elsbach, "«Das freie Auge spricht!»", 90–1.

¹⁵ Maciejewski, "Między II a III Rzeszą", 100.

It should be emphasized that the concepts that seem to be common for most of the volume's articles in the context of the Weimar Republic are "transformation" and "experiment". Democratic education took place in that country during the transformation of German society and politics into a republican, pluralistic and democratic state. The needs resulting from this fact gave rise to undertaking innovative projects, a sort of experiments.

Another right conclusion presented in the book is the statement about the problem of identification of political forces and citizens with the new state - the Weimar Republic. In fact, many political forces treated it as a temporary entity (e.g. the extreme left), refused to compromise or missed the times of the empire (conservatives). Another problem was to find an answer to the question of how to educate citizens committed to the republic when their majority simply did not support it. In addition, except of the working class, the middle bourgeoisie and the liberal professions, for most of German society the post-World War I state was synonymous with defeat and just a shadow of the former mighty empire. Weimar Republic had therefore more opponents than supporters. It is reasonable to consider it a "republic without republicans".¹⁶

To conclude, another important value of the publication under review must be mentioned. Although it refers to specific problems of the Weimar Republic, the issues addressed therein have a universal and timeless dimension. Suffice it to mention, for example, the neutrality of political education, the instrumentalization of politics, the search for compromise in democracy or the identification of citizens with the state. In my opinion, one of the most important universal problems is the ability of citizens to function properly in a democratic system. The editors of the volume, citing Oskar Negt, argue that democracy is the only form of political system that needs to be learned. The role of democratic traditions and practices in society as a condition for the permanence of this form of political system was also emphasised by famous Alexis de Tocqueville.¹⁷ Today, one can name the Russian Federation as a state where democracy has collapsed without being based on a strong foundation of tradition and the multi-faceted rooting of democracy.¹⁸ Thus, it was not only the Weimar Republic that lacked well-established democratic traditions, which ultimately led to its dysfunction and, later, to its collapse and the advent of tyranny. It was therefore not enough to include the concept of "public spirit" (*staatsbürgerliche Gesinnung*) in Article 148 of the Constitution, it still had to be instilled in the citizens. This was, however, an extremely difficult task in the face of rejection of the new state by the majority of citizens. Nevertheless, it was one of the central reasons for political education during the Weimar Republic.¹⁹ This is also demonstrated by the authors' statements in the publication evaluated here.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98–9, 107, 110.

¹⁷ Tracz-Tryniecki, *Myśl polityczna*, 80–1, 111–2.

¹⁸ More detail in: Evans, "The failure", 48–9.

¹⁹ Kuhn, Massing Skuhr, *Politische Bildung*, 53. Article 148 sentence 1 of the Constitution of the Weimar Republic (Weimarer Reichsverfassung) read as follows: "In every school the educational aims must be moral training, public spirit, personal and vocational fitness, and, above all, the cultivation of German national character and of the spirit of international reconciliation. (In allen Schulen ist sittliche Bildung, staatsbürgerliche Gesinnung, persönliche und berufliche Tüchtigkeit im Geiste des deutschen Volkstums und der Völker-versöhnung zu erstreben). Die Verfassung des Deutschen Reichs. Vom 11. August 1919 (Reichsgesetzblatt 1919, Nr. 152).

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