

Rebellion and Revolution

Rebellion and Revolution:
Defiance in German Language, History and Art

Edited by

Melissa Etzler and Priscilla Layne

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

“The German people, too, have their revolutionary tradition. There was a time when Germany produced characters that could match the best men in the revolutions of other countries, when the German people displayed endurance and vigour which would in a more centralised nation have yielded the most magnificent results, and when the German peasants and plebeians were full of ideas and plans that often make their descendants shudder.”

—Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*¹

Friedrich Engels wrote those words in London in the summer of 1850, two years after the disappointment of the Revolution of 1848. He felt the bourgeoisie were to blame for the failure of the revolution because they had betrayed the proletariat; for Engels, this situation mirrored the Peasants’ War of 1525 which he viewed as an early attempt at revolution and liberation from class inequality. While the Peasants’ War and the “Failed” Revolution of 1848 are two examples out of a series of unsuccessful revolts in German history, we believe it is the revolutionary spirit behind such attempts that warrants further examination. This was, therefore, a key issue which we wished to address during the 16th Annual Interdisciplinary German Studies Conference in Berkeley during the spring of 2008. Just as Engels suggested over 150 years ago, we sought to remember past revolutions and rebellious characters throughout German history in an effort to assess what has changed, what we have learned and what issues remain contested.

Following in Engels’ footsteps of engaging in a retrospective look at German rebellions by beginning with the Peasants’ War, we found it prudent to begin this collection of articles with Thomas Brady’s “1525 and All That: The German Peasants’ War in Modern Memory.” This article underscores how interpretations of the Peasants’ War have changed throughout German history and are extremely dependent on the *Zeitgeist*. Brady illustrates two modern interpretations of this revolt by focusing on the prominent historians: Günther Franz, a former member of the SS; and Max Steinmetz, a devout Communist. Despite their varying backgrounds, Brady notes that both Franz and Steinmetz believed the goals of this

¹ Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, XVI.

revolutionary movement of the 16th century could only be realized in the 20th century. Whereas Franz placed the peasants' triumph in 1933, with the dawning of the new era of National Socialism, Steinmetz believed the goal of the masses to create a nation state was realized in the German Democratic Republic. In his conclusion, Brady discusses a further development to this historical narrative—Peter Blickle's assimilation of Franz's populist tradition with the historical-materialist ideas of Steinmetz, ultimately uniting the viewpoints within a framework of appreciation for the "common man" in German history. Brady's essay is a key starting point as it addresses the question of how rebellious movements are historicized and interpreted in order to benefit a certain point of view. Beginning with this article also stresses how relevant questions surrounding the Peasants' War are for the subsequent rebellions discussed in this collection.

Following Brady's historical approach to the Peasants' War is Martin Blawid's article, "The Rebel with the Iron Hand: 'Rebellion' and 'Hegemonic Masculinity' in Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*," which offers a socio-cultural interpretation of one of the key historical and literary figures of the same war. Focusing on issues of gender, Blawid analyzes Götz's rebellious nature by discussing how he embodies the term "hegemonic masculinity," as defined by Robert Connell, which is reflected in Götz's physical strength, individuality and charisma; his self-concept, or conscious self-fashioning; and his patriarchal nature towards his subjects. What essentially qualifies Götz as a rebel is his belief that his society needs to be ruled by men who abide by the former knightly code of honor, and that such men need to occupy the critical socio-cultural positions and overturn the new legal system by any means necessary, even rebellion. Blawid's article provides an example of a rebellious individual at the cusp of an historical turning point and his inability to transition from his medieval value system to that of the early modern period.

The third article in this book focuses on a literary text composed in the 18th century yet which also, in part, draws its inspiration from a rebellious movement of the 16th century. Jeffrey High's "Schiller's Declarations of Independence: The Dutch *Oath of Abjuration*, the 'American War,' and the Untimely Rhetoric of Marquis Posa" begins by illustrating Schiller's tendency to create literary works inspired by historical, rebellious movements based on their current socio-political relevance. High argues that *Don Karlos* (1783-1787), which uses the Dutch War of Independence (1568-1648) as its main source, is also greatly influenced by the more recent American War of Independence. High illustrates Schiller's knowledge of American history and demonstrates

how he incorporates the key ideas and even the rhetoric of Thomas Jefferson into the character of Marquis Posa, who openly seeks a revolution in his request for a contractual protection of “happiness.” High proves that the goal of *Don Carlos* is, like that of the *Declaration of Independence*, to establish a new state.

Moving forward chronologically from the late 18th to the early 19th century, it is necessary to consider the impact of the French Revolution (1787-1799) on German society, thus chapters four and five are devoted to interpretations of historical rebellions found in the works of Heinrich von Kleist. Julie Koser’s article, “Rebellious Bodies: The Human Form as Site of Social and Political Conflict in Heinrich von Kleist’s *Die Hermannsschlacht* and *Penthesilea*,” explores the correlation between the physical body and the body politic. As with Schiller’s works, Kleist’s concentration on political upheaval was topical; the dramas were both written during the Fourth and Fifth Coalition Wars and reveal Kleist’s encouragement of the use of force by the Germans against Napoleon’s occupying troops. Amidst this background of political turmoil, Koser focuses her attention on a particular social upheaval: namely the highly contested role of women among the new wave of patriotism. She examines how Kleist uses his female characters, and specifically their bodies, as a means of inspiring patriotic sentiments. Koser argues that both of these dramas ultimately reinforce the passive role of women and thereby mirror Germany’s conservative stance; encouraging women to maintain the established social norms which required a gendered division of the public and private sphere.

In chapter five, Andreas Gailus’ article, “Language Unmoored: On Kleist’s ‘The Betrothal in St. Domingue,’” provides an analysis of Kleist’s rebellious rhetorical strategies. Gailus begins by explaining Kant’s theory of how individuals morally orient themselves in the world by way of the *Geschichtszeichen*, which is an attempt to make history readable as a promise and as a sign of progress. While Kleist is also concerned with the individual’s orientation and with the reading of signs, in opposition to Kant, his tale is anarchic: it undermines and undoes the semantic coordinates which would typically point us in the direction of an underlying reality. Kleist reveals how the perception of reality, in the context of multi-racial Saint Domingue, becomes open-ended and indecipherable. Gailus argues that the illegible nature of the text is part of the text’s logic—in its self-dislodging it demonstrates that words are not grounded by an extra-linguistic world of facts, but rather they are held in place by a communal system of association. Ironically, in proving the fragility of words, as signs which are arbitrarily assigned to their meaning and accepted by a community, Kleist’s nihilistic work problematizes the

political impetus for the French revolution. Since the revolution is carried out by a unified community struggling to achieve democratic representation, it also relies on a foundation which is dependent upon a contestable shared belief.

The revolutionary spirit with which authors of the early 1800s had been preoccupied reached another peak mid-century with the Revolution of 1848. Following Engels' disappointment with regards to this uprising, in the early 20th century a new generation of Germans were inspired both by Marx and Engels' writings and the revolutionary movements taking shape in Russia. These Germans believed a chance for a successful revolution could be seized towards the end of the First World War. At this opportune moment, sailors and soldiers revolted against their superiors by refusing to continue fighting. Instead, these enlisted men joined the ranks of disgruntled workers in an attempt to turn the country into a *Räterepublik*. However, the masses also desired a revolution from above, preferably led by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), an organization whose leaders were worried by the increasing numbers of party members joining the leftists every day. The SPD realized that in order to end the revolution successfully and prevent a further left-wing radicalization of the country, they would have to announce the abdication of Emperor Wilhelm II and thus end the war. The SPD used the *Freikorps*, an unofficially employed army of discontents and former soldiers still dedicated to military life, to squash the leftist revolutionaries. In 1918, Prince Maximilian of Baden resigned from his position as Reich Chancellor (*Reichskanzler*) which was taken over by Friedrich Ebert, who in 1919 became the first president (*Reichspräsident*) of the democratic Weimar Republic. And in January of 1919, a division of the *Freikorps* captured and killed Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, co-founders of the Spartacus League and German Communist Party.²

This tumultuous period of German history is represented by several chapters in this collection, the first of which concerns the political strife of 1919 and its broader ramifications. In chapter six, "Antigone-Figures: Alfred Döblin, Friedrich Becker, and Rosa Luxemburg in *Karl und Rosa*," Dayton Henderson examines how *Karl und Rosa*, the final volume of Döblin's novel, *November 1918*, intertwines the failure of the historical Spartacist Uprising with a fantastic narrative of grief. Henderson analyzes the way in which both the political author, Döblin, and his characters in *Karl und Rosa*, Rosa Luxemburg and Friedrich Becker, can be viewed as modern incarnations of the Greek heroine Antigone. They are all linked in

² See Haffner, *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918-1919*.

their rebellious actions and also in a larger discourse of mourning. Henderson's article reveals how this novel stages grieving as a revolutionary act while simultaneously providing an outlet for Döblin to mourn his own kin and to assert his dedication to the dead from the United States, where he lived in exile during World War II. In exploring Döblin's role as a historiographer, Henderson explains how he uses a fictionalized historical setting to address the issue of mourning by returning to the dead in order to rewrite their history in such a way as to provide solace for the living. Döblin's novel is rebellious as it provides consolation for current grief by providing a different past.

Chapter seven also presents an examination of literary reactions to the rebellious period immediately following World War I. Matthias Buschmeier's "Bedeviled Humanity: Revolutionary Violence and the Classical Tradition in Wilhelm Speyer's *Der Revolutionär* and Brecht's *Die Maßnahme*" explores the authors' attempts to determine the correct means of engaging in revolutionary acts. Buschmeier begins with the play *Der Revolutionär*, which was written at the end of World War I yet has a plot line that resembles the historical events preceding the first Russian Revolution in 1905. The play revolves around two Germans who have become involved with Russian anarchists living in exile in Leipzig. Each of the characters in the drama represents an attempt to either morally justify or question revolutionary violence: these representative figures include a neoclassicist idealist who is overcome with the enthusiasm of those involved in the revolution; an egotist who, in order to fulfill a personal desire, uses humanist values to argue against the Russian Revolution; and a dogmatist who attempts to validate revolutionary terror tactics as altruistic actions. Buschmeier subsequently describes the historical relevance of this play by demonstrating how it draws a parallel to the opposing views within the revolutionist movement of the time: which is essentially a conflict between humanity and brutality. To achieve this he analyzes the contrasting ideas found in the writings of Karl Kautsky and Leo Trotsky. Buschmeier concludes by illustrating the way in which an ethics of revolution underlies Bertolt Brecht's, *Die Maßnahme*. The play avoids moral judgments, yet it attempts to portray the effects of Leninist revolutionary thinking.

Similar to Andreas Gailus' essay, Christoph Kleinschmidt's article "Rhetoric of Revolt: On the Dialectical Function of Manifesto and Art Program in Naturalism, Expressionism and Dadaism" addresses the linguistic rebellion in these three avant-garde literary movements. Germans have consistently fought for and against the "purity" of their language from the *Sprachgesellschaften* of the 17th century to the avant-

garde movements in the 20th century to contemporary discussions regarding the *Rechtschreibreform*. Kleinschmidt examines the role of the manifesto in aiding these new aesthetic movements in disassociating from older literary traditions and also from each other. Emerging at a time which is often categorized as the “simultaneousness of the unsimultaneous,” Kleinschmidt reveals that although these movements attempted to negotiate their own unique position, there were several surprising aspects common to all. He locates an analogous rhetorical and argumentative basis to the manifestos which are, paradoxically, meant to demonstrate the singularity of each movement and clearly distinguish it from that which came directly before. In outlining this tradition of revolution in terms of movement immediately followed by counter-movement, Kleinschmidt reveals a repetition evincing a power struggle apparent in these literary traditions: each demonstrates an attempt to dominate in terms of discourse. Kleinschmidt concludes by suggesting a reading of literary history as a history of revolution.

Whereas Julie Koser’s article provides an analysis of the “rebellious body” in literature, John Williams’ “The Rebellious Body of the New Human Being: Socialist Nudism in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933” is an historical study of one of the lesser known cultural phenomena of German history. He explains how the Koch schools were established in the mid-1920s in order to educate individuals on topics ranging from sexuality and physical health to issues pertinent to the socialist labor movement. Overall, these sites were areas where people could retreat from an era of instability and return to nature by way of dancing, exercising, and discussing politics in the nude. Williams discusses how the nudists considered the “health”—physical, moral and political—of the collective proletariat body to be at risk, both due to oppression caused by outside forces, such as industrial capitalism, and by the irrational drives of the workers, such as repressed sexuality which was influenced by popular conservative religious beliefs. The holistic goal of the nudists was ultimately to create a “New Human Being” whose liberated, healthy body could be metaphorically viewed as the site of political agency, and this political body would encourage the emancipation of the German working class.

The disappointment of the revolution of 1918 and the violence that ensued during the polemic years of the Weimar Republic would inevitably be followed by Hitler’s takeover in 1933. In light of these failed attempts at positive change and the resulting atmosphere of conspiracy, in which not only Nazi Germany but East Germany was shrouded, German history seemed to be lacking its rebels. Buschmeier addresses the Germans’

alleged lack of “revolutionary potency” in chapter seven. This legacy was only further emphasized by the nonviolent nature of the fall of the wall: “Behind this revolution [1989] lie the failed revolutions of 1848 and 1918 as well as the mass demonstrations against reactionary forces in the name of Luther (Wartburg festival, 1817) and for German unity and freedom (Hambacher festival, 1832). In a sense, the protest movement of 1989 begins where these celebrations of protest left off.”³

Nevertheless, a history of rebellious movements in Germany which focuses on pacifism and failure would be misleading. The 1968 student movement, which not only enthused young Germans but also swept across the entire world, successfully changed many enduring aspects of German society in areas such as education and gender relations; some of which were not just remnants of Nazi Germany but even had roots in the Wilhelmine era. Furthermore, the student movement’s means, from agit-prop to subversive action, were often far from non-violent. In 1969, inspired by the student rebellions that crossed the globe, Herbert Marcuse heralded a new sensibility in his *Essay on Liberation*: “This would be the sensibility of men and women who do not have to be ashamed of themselves anymore because they have overcome their guilt: they have learned not to identify themselves with the false fathers who have built and tolerated and forgotten the Auschwitz and Vietnams of history...”⁴ Marcuse was convinced that the revolution would not be headed by the working-class, who were increasingly integrated into the system, but rather it would be led by students and ethnic minorities.

Priscilla Layne addresses this “new sensibility” in her article “Waiting for my Band: Music, Legacy and Identity in Peter Zadek’s *Ich bin ein Elefant, Madame*.” Working off of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson’s concept of identity diffusion, Layne argues that Zadek’s film is a depiction of the identity crisis faced by young Germans who refused to accept the social roles offered to them. Layne reiterates Marcuse’s claim that the postwar generation was intent on distancing itself from its parents’ past crimes and unveiling the continuing fascism in their contemporary society. She considers rock music’s importance as the soundtrack for this “new sensibility.” As an Anglo-American import with roots in African American culture, rock music helped countercultural Germans reject their parent culture and construct a self-perceived freer identity heavily influenced by continuing notions of the freedom of African American culture which can be found in earlier discussions about jazz. The use and meaning of music

³ Schonsee and Lederer, “The Gentle Revolution,” 312.

⁴ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 24.

in this film is, however, by no means unambiguous. While students may find solace in rock music it does not eradicate the need for self-reflection: one cannot move on before first confronting and coming to terms with the ghosts of the past.

While Layne looks at the student movement's self-portrayal in a contemporary film, Elliot Neaman's article, "How the Discourse of Violence, Nationalism and Neo-Colonialism Informed the German Student Movement of 1968," focuses on the legacy of this movement. Four decades later, the memory of '68 is quite contended. Disappointment in the Red-Green coalition (1998-2005), a coalition that was populated by famous '68ers like Joschka Fischer and Otto Schily, may help explain the recent revisionist approach to remembering the German student movement. In Germany, the '68ers have been blamed for a multitude of societal ailments from high divorce and low birth rates, to violence at schools and terrorism. While some view the events surrounding 1968 as a monumental revolution with tangible goals, others condemn '68ers as the spoiled sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie.⁵

This critical view of the student movement has only been intensified by the current fear of international terrorism, which has reignited discussions about "The German Autumn" and German left-wing terrorism. In a recent volume Wolfgang Kraushaar edited entitled *Die RAF und der linke Terrorismus* (The RAF and Left-Wing Terrorism), he highlights the important juncture between the past and present discussion about terrorism:

It is not possible to turn to what by now is considered a closed chapter on the history of terrorism, without simultaneously being aware that the look back is always in perspective concurrently affected by that terrible date which has been expressed in the abbreviation "9/11"...In this respect, since then every look back [at the history of the RAF] is difficult, because it happens through the perspective of "9/11" and its consequences. The "old" terrorism wins a contrasting view in comparison to the "new" one.⁶

⁵ See Kraushaar, "Sie hatten nie eine politische Forderung..."

⁶ "...die Hinwendung zu einem inzwischen als abgeschlossen geltenden Kapitel aus der Geschichte des Terrorismus [ist] nicht möglich, ohne sich zugleich der Tatsache bewusst zu sein, dass der Blick zurück perspektivisch zugleich auch immer durch jenes Schreckensdatum mitgeprägt ist, das in dem Kürzel '9/11' seinen Ausdruck gefunden hat...Jeder Blick zurück ist seitdem insofern schwierig, als er durch die Brille von '9/11' und dessen Konsequenzen erfolgt. Der 'alter' Terrorismus gewinnt sein Kontrastbild im Vergleich mit dem 'neuen'." Ibid., 13 (translation by the authors).

Neaman's article asks whether the student movement was much more violent and nationalist than it has been remembered. He begins by outlining the various strains of the radical current of the student movement, and then provides an overview of the critiques against them. Finally, he analyzes the key figures, such as Rudi Dutschke, and the primary question of violence: how far were the more radical members of the movement willing to go beyond the law to achieve their aims. Neaman argues that in order to fully understand the events of this period, how the student movement led to the terrorist actions carried out by the Red Army Fraction, one must consider the context in which this occurred—the efforts to undermine capitalism were inspired by the issues of de-colonization and the Cold War.

In the final chapter, chapter twelve, Seth Howes provides an illustration of the politicization of a subcultural movement within Germany during the 1970s and 80s. "Skinhead and Stasi: Impossible Rebellions and the GDR Neo-Nazi Problematic" begins by illustrating a tendency in political and sociological discourse both in the GDR and the FRG to equate the terms "skinhead" and "right-wing." Next, Howes outlines the different ways in which East Germans interpreted the origins of this subculture in the East and West and he further addresses the shortcomings of these theories. East German historian Hermann Langer located the societal structure, capitalism, as the cause for the emergence of this subculture in the West. Therefore, he considered the West German skinhead subculture a natural reaction to increasingly disciplinary structures and imperialist discourse. By contrast, in the East this subculture was believed to be associated with "nazi-punk," and was perceived by certain members of the Stasi to be an alien force intentionally intruding in the GDR from West Germany. Howes concludes by focusing more closely on East Germany and the theories therein surrounding the origination and development of this subculture which, inexplicably, deviated from the norm. He argues that an analysis of these interpretations of skinheads in the East can ultimately help to demythologize its antifascist myth.

Although Howes' article focuses on the reception of the skinhead subculture in a then divided Germany, the violent xenophobic attacks that followed reunification and continue to serve as a thorn in the nation's side are indicators that a unified Germany was not an automatic solution to the GDR or the FRG's problems. Ending with Howes' article allows us to address yet another relevant and recent anniversary, the 20th commemoration of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Howes shows us that two decades after re-unification there are still aspects of East German history that need to be revisited and re-contextualized in order for Germany to

move forward as the tolerant and democratic nation it aspires to be. Perhaps the most recent landmarks since 1989, such as Angela Merkel becoming the first female Chancellor and the passing of the first anti-discrimination law, are testaments that despite some bumps in the road, today's Germany steadfastly remains on the path to its goal.

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CHAPTER ONE

1525 AND ALL THAT: THE GERMAN PEASANTS' WAR IN MODERN MEMORY

THOMAS A. BRADY JR.

A few miles south of Innsbruck on the high road to Italy lies the little town of Vill in Tyrol. There, on a bright November day in the year 1976, some historians were sunning themselves on a hotel's terrace. They and others had assembled for one of several conferences organized to mark the 450th anniversary of the German Peasants' War of 1525. This conference, last in the series, devoted itself to the insurrection's final phase, the 1526 rising in the county of Tyrol.¹ Michael Gaismair, a leader and theorist of the rising, was a South Tyrolean, a native of Stertzing/Vipiteno just over the Brenner Pass, and an official of the prince-bishop of Brixen/Bressanone. From his pen came the "Tyrolean Constitution" (*Tiroler Landesordnung*), one of the most comprehensive statements of the insurrection's political and social goals. After the rising's collapse, Gaismair fled his native land for Venice, where he was murdered in 1532. The jubilee's final gathering was dedicated to him and to this final stage of the Peasants' War. At these meetings, historians from the two Germanys, West and East, came together for the first time to discuss a theme of common interest.

Participants later reported that as historians were chatting in small groups on the hotel terrace, off to the side sat two men, deep in conversation. They made an odd couple, one a lean, six-foot-eight giant, the other a pleasant-looking little fellow who stood no more than five-foot-seven on his tallest day. From their demeanor one might have taken them for former university comrades talking about olden days. In fact, they were the most eminent living historians of the great German Peasants' War of

¹ The proceedings are published in Dörrer, *Die Bauernkriege und Michael Gaismair*.

1525. They carried, to borrow an image Mark Twain once applied to Theodor Mommsen, the German Peasants' War and its actors around in their capacious skulls. Revitalized by relations between the two Germanys, the issue of revolution in German history had risen to the surface for the first time in 125 years.

Their contrasting statures mirrored the marked differences between the two historians' biographies. The tall fellow was Günther Franz, born in 1902 in Hamburg, where his father was a businessman. From his student days, he rose to become professor of history successively at Heidelberg, Jena, Strasbourg, and, following an enforced pause from 1945 to 1957, in the agricultural college at Hohenheim near Stuttgart. He died in Stuttgart in 1992 at the age of 90. For decades, Franz was a leading scholar of German agrarian history, a subject he brought into the university at a time when most historians scorned it as demotic and uninteresting, or, as they would have said, "unserious." Yet Franz's most important book, *The German Peasants' War* (*Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*), still remains the fullest account of that movement, because it rests on his incomparable mastery of the local and regional sources. Partly for this book, the author won the nickname "Bauern-Franz."²

Among the German historians who joined the National Socialist Party, Franz is one of the most notorious. He entered the party in 1933, and after 1935 his academic career rose with it. By 1937, he had entered the SS, in which he achieved the rank of *Hauptsturmführer* by the end of World War II. An unforgettable scene from those years portrays huge Franz stalking into a session of the German Historical Association in the black uniform of the SS. At that time, Franz held a post in the Race and Settlement Office (*Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt or RuSHA*) of the SS, where he oversaw Heinrich Himmler's project for a collection of records of German witchcraft trials during the early modern era. Franz's writings from the mid- and later 1930s are heavily colored by the ideologies of biological racism. After the war, though he denied having been "captured" by National Socialism, he lost his professorship. Twelve years later, by means still obscure, he was called to the chair of history at Hohenheim. Franz continued to publish excellently edited volumes of sources on the Peasants' War, on medieval and modern agrarian history, and on Hessian regional history.

² Laurenz Müller, *Diktatur und Revolution*, 16n50, who criticizes Wolfgang Behringer's portrayal of Franz's politics. See Behringer, "Von Krieg zu Krieg," 543-91 and Behringer, "Bauern-Franz und Rassen-Günther," 114-41.

The small fellow who chatted with “Bauern-Franz” in the Tyrolean sun was the German Communist historian Max Steinmetz. Born into modest circumstances at Frankfurt am Main in 1912, he studied at Heidelberg and Freiburg im Breisgau, where he was formed in the seminar of Gerhard Ritter (1888-1967). In 1949, Steinmetz admitted to East German authorities that at Freiburg he had come “gradually under Nazi influence,” yet, although he did perform his obligatory military exercises (*Wehrsport*) in a student SA unit, no evidence has come to light of any real association with the NSDAP itself.³ Shortly after receiving his Ph.D., Steinmetz was conscripted. He served as a radioman in France and then in Latvia, where Red Army units captured him in 1944. In a Soviet POW camp over the following four years, he committed himself to Marxism-Leninism.

Released by the Soviets, Steinmetz opted for settling in the Soviet Zone of Occupation, very soon to become the German Democratic Republic (GDR). He secured a post in what became in the GDR-era the Ministry for Education (*Ministerium für Volksbildung*), and in 1952 he joined the ruling Party of Socialist Unity (SED). Two years later, although he had published only two book reviews since his return to Germany, albeit politically important ones, he was called to a professorship of history at Jena. From there he moved to Leipzig to direct the Institute for German History, which became the principal center for his field. Preeminently a very astute political manager of scholarship, more than an interpreter of historical sources, Steinmetz was able to place his Leipzig students in leading university posts in the GDR. His most important contribution to scholarship was the set of 34 theses he drafted for a conference at Wernigerode in 1960. Steinmetz died in 1990, having just outlived the state and the party he had served.

While the post-1945 political changes in Germany closed doors to Franz, to Max Steinmetz they opened the way to a career as a prominent historian. His advance was driven by his country’s need for a coherent history that was both historical-materialist in principle and national in its thrust. The general idea lay close at hand. In an essay from 1850, Friedrich Engels (1820-95) had made a case for seeing the German Peasants’ War as a revolutionary moment, proof that the Germans also possessed a revolutionary past. A century later, Alfred Meusel (1896-1961), a central figure in the reorganization of historical studies in the German Democratic Republic, built Engels’ argument into his picture of the march of German

³ Laurenz Müller, *Diktatur und Revolution*, 293: “Im Sommer 1933...sei er ‘allmählich unter nazist. Einfluss’ geraten.”

history toward a German national, democratic state, which his own GDR represented. “The thema probandum of German historical research and teaching,” Meusel wrote in 1952:

must be the struggle for German unification. We have to show that at all turning points of German history—at the time of the Reformation and the great German Peasants’ War, at the time of the Wars of Liberation, in the Revolution of ’48, in the November Revolution of 1918, ...during the following years, and again, now after [our] liberation from fascism by the Soviet Army—there existed a serious democratic force which fought for a united Germany in the form of a peace-loving, democratic, and sovereign national state.⁴

In the late 1950s, the GDR’s growing assertion of itself as a nation, the true Germany, intensified the need for an interpretation of German history that rested on theoretical grounds alone. With respect to pre-modern German history in particular, this need evoked and justified an effort to establish the “early bourgeois revolution” as the normative concept of the German Reformation and Peasants’ War and, moreover, to give this concept an adequate empirical underpinning. Max Steinmetz took up this task. The time was ripe, since in the rival West Germany nothing was further from historians’ minds than Reformation and Peasants’ War. Indeed, as a prominent church historian lamented in the early 1960s, this once grand topic of historical research had degenerated into “an antiquarian exercise.”⁵ In 1960, Steinmetz, now a professor of history at Leipzig, stepped up to fill his country’s need to claim for its own the meaning of early German history. He drew up a list of theses—a modest thirty-four to Luther’s ninety-five—which framed an agenda for new research on the Reformation as an early bourgeois revolution.

⁴ Meusel, “Die wissenschaftliche Auffassung der deutschen Geschichte,” 405, here from the English of Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective*, 48. Dorpalen’s book, though a useful survey of the literature, focuses on interpretations to the near-exclusion of the practical politics of scholarship in the GDR. Hence he ignores, except for this single quote, the influence of Meusel, who also played a major role in the rehabilitation of Thomas Müntzer as a progressive alternative to Martin Luther. In this respect the literature on the role of the concept of early bourgeois revolution has improved radically since 1990. For the state of the question at that time, see Brinks, *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft*, 132-39; also the brief treatment in Brady, *The Protestant Reformation*, 18-20. For the substantially changed situation today, see Walinski-Kiehl, “Reformation History and Political Mythology,” and above all Laurenz Müller, *Diktatur und Revolution*.

⁵ Moeller, “Problems of Reformation Research,” 3-4.

Max Steinmetz's theses rested on the insight that if the old concept were to have modern standing, it had to be given a modern scholarly underpinning. He began by defining the revolution's time and place. Steinmetz determined the early bourgeois revolution took place between 1476 and 1535, from the late medieval rural revolts to the German princes' mastery of the popular movements. For this definition he rendered full homage to Engels:

The first great action of the rising bourgeoisie (Engels) in Germany reached its highpoint in the Reformation and Peasant War (1517–25), the most significant revolutionary mass movement of the German people until the November revolution of 1918...The Reformation and Peasant War [formed] the kernel and highpoint of the early bourgeois revolution in Germany, from the posting of the Theses in Wittenberg to the defeat of most of the peasant armies in 1525/6.⁶

Defining the place of the early bourgeois revolution proved more difficult, because around 1500 "Germany" was little more than a vague idea. Real research had to deal with a Holy Roman Empire afflicted by blocked economic development, social structures and class conflicts, and extreme political fragmentation. This problem could only be handled by returning to the teleology of national history as a kind of history tout court, that is, a stage of progress from a feudal past through a bourgeois present into a socialist future. Defined in this way over the following two decades, the early bourgeois revolution became one of the most distinctive concepts of historical scholarship in the GDR.⁷

By 1976, when the two historians met at Vill in Tyrol, the idea of Reformation and Peasants' War as an early bourgeois revolution lay at the peak of its popularity, and it is quite understandable that "Peasant Franz" and "Comrade Steinmetz" may be seen as advocates of entirely incompatible, even opposite views of the same events. In fact, there are some striking similarities between the two men's interpretations.⁸ Both see in these events a revolutionary movement which, defeated in its own time, nonetheless began a historical movement toward the realization of its goals in the twentieth century. Günther Franz described the connection in 1933: "Today, at the end of the first successful revolution, the peasant has won

⁶ Steinmetz, "Theses on the Early Bourgeois Revolution," 9-10.

⁷ Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective*, chap. 3.

⁸ I rely here on Laurenz Müller, *Diktatur und Revolution*, who documents the subject very fully. For an English summary of his book, see Müller, "Revolutionary Moment." Müller was killed by an avalanche on a winter climb in the Valais.

in the Third Reich the position in national life for which he had already striven in 1525.” In 1960, Max Steinmetz, for his part, called the Peasants’ War “the first attempt of the popular masses to create a unified national state from below.”⁹ His student Günter Vogler completed this thought a decade or so later claiming that “the political, cultural, and military accomplishments of the German early bourgeois revolution” would live on in the GDR.¹⁰ These texts suggest that, beyond all (often profound) differences between their perspectives, Franz and Steinmetz shared a formal narrative of German history. It was a revolution of the common people, which began with the Reformation and the Peasants’ War in the 1520s and, though then defeated, is or has been completed by a revolutionary German state in the twentieth century.

Thus did Franz and Steinmetz add their visions to the grand narrative of German history since the end of the Middle Ages. Its chief fashioner had been Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), who advanced the idea of the Protestant Reformation as a national revolution, a mortgage unpaid in its time but redeemed in our own. This is not to say that Ranke had any appreciation of the Peasants’ War, which he once named “the greatest natural event of the German State.”¹¹ He meant that, though impressive, it had not possessed any *historical* importance. In his own generation, however, there was one who very much accorded this kind of significance to the Peasants’ War. He was Wilhelm Zimmermann (1807-78), a Swabian vintner’s son and pastor, who founded the radical populist, but also the national, narrative of this event. From Zimmermann’s *General History of the Great Peasant War (Allgemeine Geschichte des grossen Bauernkriegs)*, which appeared in 1841, Friedrich Engels gathered most of the materials for his essay of 1850 on *The Peasant War in Germany (Der deutsche Bauernkrieg)*.¹² From Ranke descended the national grand narrative that Franz and Steinmetz had learned; the latter at Heidelberg, the former at Freiburg im Breisgau from Gerhard Ritter, who in 1925 called Martin Luther “the eternal German.”¹³ This narrative never lost its Rankean starting point, the German Protestant Reformation as the Germans’ struggle for freedom against the—for Franz in the 1930s “Jewish,” for Engels and Steinmetz “feudal”—power of the Roman Catholic Church. It

⁹ Steinmetz, “Theses on the Early Bourgeois Revolution,” 17.

¹⁰ Laurenz Müller, *Diktatur und Revolution*, 1.

¹¹ Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte*, 2:126.

¹² Müller and Schindling, *Bauernkrieg und Revolution*. On Engels’s debt to him, see also Friesen, *Reformation und Utopia*.

¹³ Ritter, *Luther: Gestalt und Symbol*, 151: “Er ist wir selber: *der ewige Deutsche*.”

maintained a sense of regret over the Reformation's outcome of further fragmentation and the destruction brought by the Thirty Years' War, and simultaneously a confidence in the future redemption of the Reformation's promise as a national event.

This common story is clearly visible in the writings of both Franz and Steinmetz. Into this stately neo-Rankean carriage each installed his own motor, Franz's a radically populist nationalism, Steinmetz's a full-blown historical materialism. The goals they ascribed to the revolutionary movement differed as well. For Franz, the goal was the peasants' coming to power in their character as the true German nation, though it must be said that his early concept lacked the thoroughgoing racialism of later days. For Steinmetz, the particular goal of revolution, the formation of a democratic German nation, formed only the German contribution to the international struggle for a classless society. This is why, except for his work on the German peasantries, Franz disappeared from view after 1945, while Steinmetz did not even make his mark until the 1960s.

In any event, the prominence of Steinmetz's achievement proved fairly brief. The concept of an early bourgeois revolution was losing credibility well before the GDR dissolved in 1990 after only forty years of existence. For one thing, the historians who employed the concept found it very difficult to identify empirically any group which 1) warranted the label of "bourgeoisie," 2) was numerous and strong enough to plan and carry out revolutionary action, and 3) strove for political goals that could open the way for capitalist development. According to the historical-materialist law of development, the crisis of feudalism could only be resolved by a revolutionary moment that strove for bourgeois political hegemony, a step which would in itself promote the transition to capitalism. Yet, empirical research shows that most of the insurrectionists of 1525 were farmers, and those who did not come from the land were urban craftsmen and miners. By contrast, the most credible candidates for the title of "bourgeoisie"—the urban elites—supported not the insurrection but the German princes who crushed it.

Based on the principles of Engels, Max Steinmetz devised a two-part solution to this conundrum. First, he took the peasants, lesser burghers, and miners and labeled them "plebeians," an ancient Roman term rarely applied to European societies. Second, he identified this "class" as the objective bearers of an early bourgeois revolution, despite the fact that the documents showed that they expressed no ideas which could even faintly be called "bourgeois." For Steinmetz, therefore, the plebeians were the true agents of a revolutionary moment, in which they played a role belonging, according to theory, to the burghers of the cities and towns. In a

sense, the rebels of 1525 became a vicarious bourgeoisie, though the real meaning of actions lay in the belief in a future without exploitation of humans by humans. This was for them a hope, for their heirs a foreshadowing of the revolutionary moment that lay far in the future. That future belonged to the labor movement of modern times, the legitimate leadership of which passed from the Social Democracy to the Communist Party. This is how Max Steinmetz solved the problem of linking the present with the deeper past without proceeding through the intervening centuries of German backwardness, reaction, and failure.

Largely through the work of Steinmetz's own students, during the 1960s and 1970s historians in the GDR set out to provide the Engels-Steinmetz picture with an empirical basis. Three problems arose from the discussions they held during the first half of the 1970s. First, they differed over the casting by Engels and Steinmetz of the pre-modern German burghers as forerunners of a modern bourgeoisie. Second, they struggled with the logic of integrating Germany's Reformation into European history by means of the theory of social revolutions, despite the fact that historians working from historical-materials principles in other countries never fully accepted the concept of a German early bourgeois revolution. And third, they came gradually, and with great reluctance, to an appreciation for the role of religion in the German Reformation.¹⁴

These discussions revealed an unsatisfactory interface between concept and evidence. Their implications emerged into public view with the Luther Jubilee of 1983. Martin Luther, once a traitor to his people, and *his* Reformation were now rehabilitated to positive roles in the GDR's official narrative of German history.¹⁵ This historicization—relativization or contextualization—of the main actors sapped the Reformation and Peasants' War of their explanatory power. As one scholar admitted in the pages of the GDR's premier historical journal, "Our understanding of history, too, must be historicized."¹⁶ That he thereby rang the death knell of the early bourgeois revolution, is clearer today than it appeared in the mid-1980s.

Max Steinmetz outlived Franz by two years, his own country by a few months. No historian today, I think, would defend his ideas as he

¹⁴ Walinski-Kiehl, "Reformation History and Political Mythology," 52-54. For a contemporary reaction to the rehabilitation of Luther in the GDR, see Peterson, "'Workers of the world unite—for God's sake!'"

¹⁵ Of which the most characteristic scholarly fruit is Brendler, *Martin Luther: Theology and Revolution*, translated from the German original edition of 1983, the year of the Luther Jubilee.

¹⁶ Schmidt, "Zur Entwicklung des Erbe- und Traditionsverständnisses," 196.