

Translated excerpt

**Harald Jähner**  
***Höhenrausch***  
***Das kurze Leben zwischen den Kriegen***

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**Harald Jähner**  
***Exhilaration***  
***The Short Life Between the Wars***

Translated by Jefferson Chase



## **Intoxication: “New Germany” Between the World Wars**

History can be made with the camera. In 1925, when photographer Frieda Riess had young boxer Erich Brandl pose naked in her studio on Berlin’s Kurfürstendamm boulevard, illuminating his sculpted body with sophisticated lighting and depicting him in the way only men usually did with women, and moreover, when the art dealer Alfred Flechtheim printed the resulting images in his trendy magazine *Querschnitt*, displaying the boxer from the front and back, they both felt the intoxication of completely in step with a dawning age. Boxing was a new sport in Germany, an American import that was taking the country’s cultural scene by storm. You could learn a lot watching a bout. Bertolt Brecht thought that it was a great model for theater and installed a reflex ball near his writing desk. He wasn’t alone. Novelist Vicki Baum worked out regularly in a boxing gym. The phrase “body culture” was becoming more and more common. The period was obsessed with flawless, muscular physiques. To be modern was to be athletic and fast. And the Weimar Republic with its love of images was especially keen on female photographers and the female gaze through the camera lens. The most interesting and innovative figures in this new art form were women.

Riess had Brandl stare at the floor rather than showing his face and looking at the viewer so that the boxer was more like an object. She also forbade from adopting any of the usual pugilistic poses. Instead of fists held high, which was how sculptor Renée Sintenis had previously depicted the young pugilist, Riess instructed him to raise his right arm a bit so that he looked defenseless. This pronounced vulnerability reinforced the impression that the photographer was radically challenging and reversing customary gender roles. Even in the provocative 1920s, it wasn’t every day that a woman as lovingly objectified a man’s body as Riess did. Something so bold would make an impression – that much was certain.

This book will use scenes like this photo shoot in Frieda Riess’ well-known studio to construct a panorama of a heady period of history that in many respects still serves as blueprint for our own. From today’s perspective, the Weimar Republic is like a lenticular

picture oscillating between surprisingly contemporary images and bizarre and alien ones. Sometimes, people from that era seem more modern than we are, as though we were looking back on something still to come for us. At other times, they are as remote from us as the soberly dressed, stiffly posed figures of our ancestors in early family portraits.

The Weimar period began in the euphoria of 1918, with the fall of the Kaiser and proclamation of the first democratic republic on German soil. “The old world is rotten through and came apart at the joints,” remarked the modern dancer Valeska Gert. “I want to help destroy it. I believe in the new life. I want to help to build it.” Newness was dawning wherever you looked. People envisioned a New Objectivity, the New Man, the New Woman, a New Building – they even sought passionate to convert empiricism into a New Objectivity. Architect Bruno Taut, actually a man who valued balance and would soon become famous for the restrained functionality of his large housing projects, used language of nearly religious fervor when he announced the idea of New Building in 1920: “Our tomorrow gleams in the distance...Up with transparency and clarity! Up with purity. Up with the crystalline! Up – higher and higher – with everything flowing, graceful, edgy, sparkling, flashing and light! Up with the New Building!” Taut’s cubic dwellings and the unadorned tubular steel furniture seem very sober and rational to us today, so it’s difficult to imagine the intoxication, and aggressiveness, with which people back then constructed them. Conversely, Taut raged against the ornate architecture with a fury of dynamite and wrecking balls: “Away with these ... gravestone and cemetery facades plastered over four-story junk stores and pawn shops! Smash these limestone columns, Dorian, Ionian and Corinthian. Destroy these lame jokes! ... Away with our ideas of space, hominess and style! To hell with them! They reek. Break them down and dissolve them! Let nothing remain! ... Death to everything musty and old!”

How did these two poles fit together? How can Taut’s frenetic words be reconciled with the architectural modernity whose sobriety, coolness and balanced elegance still seem so exemplary today? The drama-loving radicalism typical in various areas of the 1920s cries out for us to investigate the emotional economy of the Weimar Republic. Very few historical periods have engendered such intense feelings. Born of the hardship of war, the enthusiasm of the 1918 Revolution was overshadowed by humiliation of defeat and sensation of spiritual homelessness. The unusual freedom of the era carried risks. Fortunes went up and down like a roller-coaster. An unexpectedly mercurial upsurge was followed two years later by hyperinflation with its grotesque billion-mark bank notes with so little that not even a beggar would stoop to pick them up off the street. Hyperinflation undermined centuries-old moral values, erased traditions from people’s minds and attuned them to a turbulent decade that, in

the words of historian Detlev Peukert, tried out, rehearsed and almost simultaneously discarded all the positions and possibilities of modernity with breathless cosmopolitanism.”

The book is about emotions, moods and sensations as aggregates of political attitudes and conflicts. It will examine ephemeral phenomena like unease, faith, anxiety, over-saturation, self-confidence, consumerism, dance crazes, hunger for new experiences, pride and hatred. How did people feel in the Weimar Republic? Naturally, there is no one simple answer to this question, although it remains the crux of the multiple different, contradictory perspectives of the period. What was it like to be young or female, a city-dweller or a farmer? What did the paramilitary soldier who couldn't accept the war was lost feel like in 1918? What about the revolutionaries? What were the origins of the widespread hatred for everything soft and plushy, for decoration and ornament? How did young women see their future when inflation ate away their dowries, but they could, for the first time, get jobs? How did people feel as the big cities grew and grew, and unlike today, no one knew if they would ever stop. How could the otherwise melancholy novelist Joseph Roth be enthusiastic about urban transport so as to exclaim: “I pledge my faith to the Gleisdreieck rail switching station?” Why did the young author Ruth Landshoff-Yorck kiss the hood of her car when she parked it in the garage for the nights, and why did she recommend her readers do the same?

We will tell the story of the Weimar Republic through the places crucial to its mental development: dance halls, the Bauhaus building, open-plan offices, traffic jams, photographers' studios, the Sportpalast arena, the election-time beer tents or the streets full of marching paramilitaries. But our focus will also include the villages and small towns increasingly resentful of the big cities that allegedly turned people's heads, lured young women into leaving home and siphoned off potential brides from rural areas. The hardships of country life severely contrasted with the wonderful new promises of modern consumerism for city-dwellers. Is there any way of doing justice to the German provinces by concentrating solely on the glamorous highlights of the 1920s? Or would that repeat the mistake Berlin cultural elites were accused of making during the period, namely of being so caught up in the excitement of metropolis that they ignored reality in the country as a whole? Conversely, what can we make of the Weimar Republic's passion for the countryside, the enraptured settler-pioneers who called upon Germany's youth to take to the fields and who were precursors of today's organic food movement and rural communes?

All this cultural transformation would have lacked its full force had not jazz set people in motion, inspiring and intoxicating them. Pop culture was born with the record album,

which dramatically augmented the intensity of life. In a revolution, individuals were now allowed to join the hop-steeping masses on the dancefloors – that combustion point of social life – without partners. In fact, dancing alone was one of the most exciting bridges with our times. But if we tilt the lenticular picture a bit we can also see lines of elegant taxi dancers waiting to be engaged in ballrooms. How did they feel, these discharged young military officers who were paid for their company in halls across Germany by independent women tired of sitting around and waiting for someone to ask them to dance? One of Berlin's massive pleasure domes, the Haus Vaterland, even offered child-sitting services for housewives who wanted to take party in afternoon soirees.

We will investigate the ever-contentious issue of the human body, the new controversies surrounding the dichotomy of male and female, the trend toward tenderness and ambiguity, on the one hand, and hardened, optimized physiques, on the other. Ominously, the latter was on ample display in the paramilitary gangs that marched in closed formations through the streets and gave their members an intoxicated feeling of superior strength. It was a period in which governments that rapidly came and went tried to ride the tiger of public discontent, and we will look at the emotional states that formed people's political values, attitudes and convictions. Not coincidentally, journalism reached new heights of style and acuity during the Weimar Republic. Intellectuals of all sorts developed a hothouse sensibility for the political ramifications of seemingly apolitical aspects of daily life.

To understand how people felt at the time, it's important not to read history from the back to the front. Unlike we today, those who lived in the Weimar Republic didn't know how it would end. In our knowledge of the horrific monstrosity that was National Socialism, it is tempting to treat these years as a preliminary stage and search everywhere for early harbingers of inevitable collapse. But mass unemployment wasn't an automatic reason for people to vote for Hitler. Many jobless Germans, in fact, didn't. So who did? Why would a woman like Luise Solmitz, a Hamburg teacher and diarist happily married to a Jewish husband, be a Nazi sympathizer? What did people at the time see when they saw Hitler? The same man we do today after two generations of historical investigation? Why did so many Germans refuse to talk to one another, reject parliamentary debates as useless squabbling and spurn newspaper reports on politics as the typical lies of corrupt media?

German emotions during the Great Depression oscillated between hatred and longing for unity. The delightful variety the 1920s had produced now often seemed like a burden, sometimes a curse. Many Germans saw society as hopelessly divided, torn between

irreconcilable, isolated worlds unwilling to reach any sort of consensus. It is impossible not to compare this disenchantment with our own situation. In our distress at the attempts of fundamentalists to divorce themselves completely from the public sphere of what they contemptuously reject as the “mainstream media,” we today are perhaps better able to appreciate the proverbial “Weimar conditions,” the negative conditions that ultimately brought down the first German republic. Around 1930, democracy in Germany lost one of its most crucial yet fragile resources: faith. Whereas people had the sensation of being liberated, as though soaring to new heights, during the period’s good years, they now felt exploited and deceived. Starting in 1930, multitudes of Germans changed their attitudes concerning everything from fashion and their own bodies to tonalities and musical preferences. The mood plummeted, and people increasingly longed to hand their fate over to a savior. In so doing they sought out new forms of intoxication that were more compelling, aggressive and malign than ever before.

Every historical narrative has no choice but to implicitly pose the question of individual responsibility. The rise of National Socialism was not inevitable. Nor was Weimar democracy so weak that no other ending was imaginable. Every individual made his or her own choices, among other places, at the ballot box.

## **Chapter 1: When the War Came Home**

“Café Vaterland is brightly lit. I go in for a moment. Although there could be a hail of gunfire any minute, the band is playing a waltz.” Count Harry Kessler

### **The First Days**

The Weimar Republic began with a paradox: The First World War only reached Germany once it was over. In November 1918, step by step, that conflict came home.

During the four years of fighting, the Reichswehr had succeeded in keeping the battle outside the country's borders. While broad stretches of France and Belgium were being devastated in unprecedented fashion, not a single tile on a single roof had been damaged in Germany. But the Wilhelmine monarchy now lay in pieces, and the German people decided that enough was enough. Strikes halted production, and citizens' committees and workers' and soldiers' councils were formed to run German municipalities. The revolution seemed to have triumphed before it had even really gotten started, with a remarkable lack of bloodshed. Soldiers turned their backs on their commanders, navy men in Kiel refused to sail from harbor, and the Imperial regime, worn out by the war, faced collective mutiny. In early November, the Bavarian monarchy fell, followed by the Kaiser himself two days later, on November 9, 1918. The government under Max von Baden – which was the first German cabinet ever to include Social Democrats and which had only held power for a month – announced the emperor's abdication before Wilhelm II had made any such statement. He was, in essence, tossed out on his ear. The following day, the Kaiser meekly fled to the Netherlands.

Huge crowds milled about between the palace and the Reichstag building in Berlin, nervous, unsettled, agitated and adventure-seeking. A remarkable number of women, groups of female friends and colleagues, were among them. So too were office workers, laborers and even wealthy, elegantly dressed bourgeoisie. All were certain they were about to experience something big, a massive explosion. People sensed that they were on the threshold of a new age, and no one knew what it would bring. Would there be happiness and further tribulation? Anarchy, mob rule, civil war? A dictatorship of the proletariat? Bourgeois law and order for all? Or at least the occasional pork roast again after all the wartime privations? Who would guide them through this great uncertainty. Germany without a Kaiser was a proposition that confounded and scared people. Who would now take the initiative?

That person was a man named Philipp Scheidemann, who was eating lunch in the Reichstag canteen. The 35-year-old printer and journalist, who had joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 1883 while it was still banned, had been a state secretary for a little more than five weeks. He had been honored with the post because the disintegrating imperial regime felt it needed a token Social Democrat – if, naturally, only in the back rows – as part of its latest hastily installed governing cabinet. Stresemann’s appointment was intended to mollify agitated workers. But the opposite was the case.

The notoriously happy-go-lucky Scheidemann, who regularly published humorous op-eds in the dialect of his native city of Kassel under the name Henner Piffendeckel, realized that the unrest in front of the palace on November 9 was coming to a head. Although it had only been without a Kaiser for a few hours, Germany desperately needed a beacon of hope, a leader who would command respect. Scheidemann saw him in Friedrich Ebert, the lumbering, gruff, down-to-the-earth SPD chairman and gifted engineer of compromises. So “between soup and dessert,” as he later joked, Scheidemann took to the Reichstag balcony, where huge crowds had amassed, and proclaimed in his characteristic singsong voice the establishment of a new German republic. Speaking off the cuff, he said: “The German people had achieved victory across the board. What is old and rotten has collapsed. Militarism is finished! The Hohenzollerns have abdicated! Long live the German republic! Representative Ebert has been appointed Reich chancellor. Ebert has been charged with forming a new government. All socialist parties will be part of the government...Our task now is not to allow this glorious victory, this complete victory of the German people, to be sullied, and I ask you: Please ensure that security is not disrupted. We need to be able to take pride in this day for all time! Nothing should be allowed that can later be used as an accusation against us. What we need now is calm, order and security!”

Two hours later, Karl Liebknecht, who would go on to found the German Communist Party, proclaimed the formation of a republic for a second time from a balcony of the City Palace. This was anything but farcical repetition. Whereas the Social Democratic Scheidemann presented the monumental change as a fair accomplishment and declared the nascent revolution had already achieved complete success, so that it was imperative to return to calm and order, Liebknecht told his listeners that they were merely at the start of a long struggle to be fought with the greatest ferocity. The “state order of the proletariat” needed to be established, then the revolution completed around the globe. “Up with liberty and happiness and peace!” he exclaimed. It was a slogan to which everyone could subscribe but which was also a battle cry of the highest order.



The fall of Imperial government had at point cost seventy people, eight in the German capital, their lives. That was not many considering the pompous arrogance of the other side and the many armed confrontations it took before the military defenders of the old regime yielded. The revolution had thus far been peaceful, and bourgeois onlookers and the media regarded November 9 as a day that would go down as one of the better moments in German history. The leftwing editor-in-chief of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, Theodor Wolff, published a veritable hymn to the victorious revolution on the front page of the subsequent issue of that newspaper. In it, he praised Ebert's commitment to restore peace and order, secure food supplies and offer the old civil service a role in the new state. Even if they found it difficult, Wolff proposed, "disciples of the new" and representatives of the old would have to work together "out of love for the people." The new order Wolff sought to conjure up was a respectful community of communication and compromise: "No one who claims to be able to think for himself will want to step on the toes and insult those who believe with all their hearts in a different house of faith. It's not the worst people who don't throw their convictions to the wind every time a new power that arises. A people that succeeds in becoming independent does itself credit by honoring the honest sentiments of those members whose privileges it wants to overcome." Wolff must have written down his plea for mutual respect in

extreme haste on the evening of November 9, but this powerful statement hit all the right notes and addressed the entire German people with great emotion. It's easy to picture him writing, manically puffing a cigarette and getting up to march excitedly around his desk after finishing every sentence – a newspaper editor to his core. Wolff attached extreme importance to every word of his article, which unfortunately ran over onto the next page by two lines. There, he ended his missive with a call to disarm anyone who refused to acknowledge what the people had happily been able to achieve.

The most pressing task was now to officially end the lost war as quickly as possible. Two days after the proclamation of the German republic, representatives of the new provisional government signed a ceasefire in the forest of Compiègne. With that they laid the groundwork for what the majority of Germany had come to long for, if only recently: the establishment of a peaceful, freedom-loving democracy in which all people could live from the fruits of their labor and pursue personal happiness without threat of war or physical violence.

That was the plan anyway, and it was presented as an opportunity the people could seize. But not everyone longed for freedom and democracy. Many Germans, including some from humble circumstances, had no desire for anything but monarchy and empire. Without the holy trinity of God, honor and fatherland, they felt homeless. For them, the war waged so bitterly by the Kaiser and the Reich couldn't simply be ended with signatures on a piece of paper. The war returned home to German in the form of demobilized soldiers turning on their compatriots who had stopped the conflict. The fighting continued not on the blood-soaked battlefields of France and Belgium, but on German streets and or, in one prominent case, a German rail station. Aggression discharged itself in minor incidents in which soldiers vented their frustration with their own kind who they felt had abandoned them. Here and there, and often completely arbitrarily, the defeated warriors would take their revenge.

For example, in the railway station in the Wanne district of the greater Bochum area. A frustrated military battalion returning home stopped over there on November 30 and encountered a security detail from the local workers' and soldiers' council. After berating them as "rabble with no fatherland," the troops, who remained loyal to the Kaiser, knocked one of the guards to the ground. Both sides started firing upon each other with machine guns. Four soldiers were seriously wounded, whereupon their comrades went on a rampage through Bochum, storming an official government office building. A nine-year-old boy was killed, and a second railway watchman was injured. After the soldiers had worked off their rage, they

got back on a train and continued their journey. Incidents of this sort were so common that on December 1, the *Berliner Tageblatt* only devoted five lines to the violence.

Feeling cheating of an honorable end to the war, which would have made their sacrifice during four years of fighting seem worthwhile, homecoming soldiers violently exacted revenge for the ceasefire on countless occasions. Wherever there was opportunity, they fought with the new government's security forces. Small groups of soldiers also hunted down individuals on the streets they identified, rightly or wrongly, as revolutionary workers and intellectuals, shirkers and fratricides.

At the behest of the provisional government, the Army High Command in Berlin ordered all its troops in the capital to "end the senseless gunfights." Those orders implicitly acknowledged that the army itself was responsible for most of the violence: "Fellow citizens! In isolated locations in the city, shots are still being fired at organs of the current Reich government and at civilians and citizens in uniform. Rumor has it that the shots are coming from individuals who believe they have to defend the old regime. Let them know that...their orders are to support the current Reich leadership with all the means at their disposal."

Everywhere, appeals were made for Germans to display the virtue they had traditionally cherished above all but now seemed painfully short of: discipline. The workers' and soldiers' councils, those spontaneously formed organs of a new civil society that had still to be constituted, urged their fellow citizens to maintain calm and order. For us, the term "workers' and soldiers' councils" may conjure up Spartacist chaos, wild-eyed leftist comrades-in-arms giving free rein to their revolutionary elan. But the opposite was the case. Most councils were made up of pillars of communities, artisans and skilled laborers, people courageous enough to fill the power vacuum so that the stability needed for Germany to prosper could be restored as quickly as possible. Almost all the councils were comprised of Social Democrats who wanted to steer Germans' pursuit of their right to self-rule into orderly channels.

Typical of the attitudes of the councils was a call to action headlined "Self-Discipline and Order are Necessary" published on November 14 in the *Bütower Anzeiger*: "Only a people that understands how to voluntarily maintain discipline is mature enough and ready for self-determination. Are we capable of this? Are we as a people capable of governing ourselves? The government believes we are. They trust the people to impose order. Let us show that we are worthy of this faith. Let us show that we are ripe for political freedom. Then order will rule. The army and the people need order to achieve peace." The authors were

listed as “Krahn, Fitzner and Reserve Lieutenant Voss.” People like these were the peaceful face of the November Revolution. But these sort of men also allegedly inspired Lenin to remark that there could ever be a true German revolution: “Revolution in Germany. That will never happen. If these Germans want to storm a train station, they first buy a ticket.”

If only that had been case, we might say. This appeal for calm written by three concerned citizens suggests the sort of chaos that was spreading in the wake of the successful revolution. Away from the labyrinth of the major site and developmental lines of history, a tangle of smaller conflicts arose in which civic-minded citizens, labor leaders, sailors, officers and community representatives, as well as *hasardeurs* and criminals, decided whether blood would be spilled or not. The many skirmishes between “army and people,” moderate and radical socialists, aristocrats and communists were accompanied by the anarchic activities of innumerable outlaws who sought to profit from the political unrest. The decommissioned navy men Otto Haas, for instance, stole a car on the first day of the revolution – with the intention of putting himself “at the disposal of the new government,” as he later testified at his trial after he was caught. Without any great bureaucratic fuss, as was the rule in those heady days, one of the newly appointed people’s representatives hired him as a driver. He also drove around privately in the car, a Wanderer W3. The *Berliner Tageblatt* reported: “That was how he travelled to Potsdam as a train full of wounded men arrived. He took advantage of the opportunity, passing himself off as a prison official and having the engine driver, a government councilor and a deputy civil servant arrested. He then confiscated all the food on board: bacon, ham, sausage and eggs. He made it back to Berlin where he personally sold it all off.”

People repeatedly committed crimes of this sort under the guise of state authority. A pimp masquerading as a people’s deputy grabbed a couple of council security officers standing on the next corner and summarily ordered them to execute a man he claimed had committed an act of high treason against the new state. The obedient officers immediately carried out these orders, not suspecting that man they put to death was no counter-revolutionary, but a criminal associate who had become too much of a rival to the fake deputy.

Most criminals, however, didn’t need assistance from officers of the state. After the war, guns were everywhere. Many of the numerous deserters from the armed forces had taken their weapons with them, keeping them for personal use or selling them off for small sums of money in bars. Morally suspect segments of society were thus armed to the teeth. Men

pretending to be militia guards plundered people on the streets and looted stocks in warehouses and stores. In the Buchholz neighborhood of Berlin, one such gang claiming to be defenders of law and order arrested the district mayor and stole the community till. Nevertheless, the violence only turned truly severe when the SPD-led government called on the military to help.