



# Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy

By Eric D. Weitz

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## Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy By Eric D. Weitz

Weimar Germany still fascinates us, and now this complex and remarkably creative period and place has the history it deserves. Eric Weitz's *Weimar Germany* reveals the Weimar era as a time of strikingly progressive achievements--and even greater promise. With a rich thematic narrative and detailed portraits of some of Weimar's greatest figures, this comprehensive history recaptures the excitement and drama as it unfolded, viewing Weimar in its own right--and not as a mere prelude to the Nazi era.

*Weimar Germany* tells how Germans rose from the defeat of World War I and the turbulence of revolution to forge democratic institutions and make Berlin a world capital of avant-garde art. Setting the stage for this story, Weitz takes the reader on a walking tour of Berlin to see and feel what life was like there in the 1920s, when modernity and the modern city--with its bright lights, cinemas, "new women," cabarets, and sleek department stores--were new. We learn how Germans enjoyed better working conditions and new social benefits and listened to the utopian prophets of everything from radical socialism to communal housing to nudism. *Weimar Germany* also explores the period's revolutionary cultural creativity, from the new architecture of Erich Mendelsohn, Bruno Taut, and Walter Gropius to Hannah Höch's photomontages and Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's theater. Other chapters assess the period's turbulent politics and economy, and the recipes for fulfilling sex lives propounded by new "sexologists." Yet *Weimar Germany* also shows that beneath this glossy veneer lay political turmoil that ultimately led to the demise of the republic and the rise of the radical Right.

Thoroughly up-to-date, skillfully written, and strikingly illustrated, *Weimar Germany* brings to life as never before an era of creativity unmatched in the twentieth century--one whose influence and inspiration we still feel today. In a new chapter, Weitz depicts Weimar's global impact in the decades after the destruction of the republic, when so many of its key cultural and political figures fled Nazi Germany. The Weimar style they carried with them has powerfully influenced art, urban design, and intellectual life from Tokyo to Ankara, Brasilia to New York. They made Weimar an example of all that is liberating, and all that can go wrong, in a democracy.

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## Editorial Review

Review

**A New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice**

**One of Financial Times's Best Books for 2007**

**A History Book Club Selection**

"In his engaging readings of these works, Weitz forgoes abstruse analysis. Instead, he presents them as fresh attempts to make sense of a world in which reliable beliefs about authority and order, class and gender, wealth and poverty, no longer held. His most innovative chapter is an imaginary walk through Berlin, observing the daily lives of the city's different classes. . . . Better than most histories, the book connects culture, politics and city life."--**Brian Ladd, *New York Times Book Review***

"*Weimar Germany* is elegantly written, generously illustrated and never less than informative. It is also history with attitude. In that respect, it perhaps also reflects in itself something of the fractious period which its pages so convincingly evoke."--**Peter Graves, *Times Literary Supplement***

"Excellent and splendidly illustrated. . . . Weimar was more than a German phenomenon. . . . [*Weimar Germany*] is a superb introduction to its world, probably the best available."--**Eric Hobsbawm, *London Review of Books***

"Weitz takes readers on a walk through Weimar Republicera Berlin in the footsteps of a 1920s flâneur, an urban ambler. . . . Separate chapters, with a wealth of well-chosen illustrations, explore Weimar's new theories of architecture, graphic arts, photography, theater, philosophy and sexuality. Weitz selects key exemplars of each discipline--Brecht, Weill, Mann, Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn, August Sander, László Moholy-Nagy, Hannah Höch, Siegfried Kracauer, etc.--for in-depth focus. . . . A lively style and excellent illustrations make this intellectually challenging volume accessible to both academics and armchair scholars."--**Publishers Weekly (starred review)**

"Now . . . comes Eric D. Weitz's long-awaited *Weimar Germany*, a work that builds on the extant literature and gives things a refreshing new spin. A seasoned scholar of German history, Weitz offers an altogether original approach, a potent mix of cutting-edge historical analysis, rich visual and literary illustration, and imaginative excursions through the physical spaces and places of the era, bringing to bear his uncommon erudition and a prose style that is at once rigorous, wonderfully animated, and distinguished by breathtaking clarity."--**Noah Isenberg, *Bookforum***

"Weitz has produced an elegant and captivating study of Germany's Weimar years, that turbulent period from 1918 to 1933 when the old German society seemed to break apart. In this period, Germany became a constitutional democracy, the arts blossomed, modern and liberal ideas flourished, and the economic and political situation staggered from one crisis to another, ending in the Nazi ascendance to power. This period is often treated as simply the forerunner to the Nazi era, but Weitz shows that it was far more than that. . . . Weitz has synthesized in clear and engaging fashion a great deal of the huge primary and secondary literature of Weimar. . . . If you have only one book on the Weimar period, this should be it. For all libraries."--**Barbara Walden, *Library Journal* (starred review)**

"[Weitz] is a reliable guide through Weimar's political and economic maze, and a good one on the social revolution that made many women--far from all--less dependent on husband, hearth and home. In one of his

best chapters, Mr. Weitz takes us on a ramble through the sleepless metropolis of 1920s Berlin: from the glittering cafes around Potsdamer Platz to Isherwood's cabarets and seedy bars, from the bracing beaches of Wannsee Lake to the dank and stifling dwellings of the workers' quarter, Wedding."--**The Economist**

"Brilliantly maps a pivotal era."--**Peter Skinner, *Foreword Magazine***

"Weitz offers a comprehensive history of the Weimar Republic that combines a sober approach to the politics and economics of this conflicted era with a highly engaging and readable new take on its famous cultural and social experiment...One of the book's achievements compared to previous Weimar histories is Weitz's integration of important work on gender, sex, and the body throughout his nine chapters."--**H.D. Baer, *Choice***

"It is impossible to talk about post-1918 Germany without focusing on its political and financial instability. . . . Weitz covers this ground clearly and in sharp detail, breaking down the complex tug-of-war between communists, democrats and conservatives. . . . But more gripping to Weitz (and to this reviewer) is the artistic and intellectual ferment that Weimar embodied--a cultural explosion he chronicles with a passionate, persuasive voice. . . . [Weitz] wins points for his no-frills language that transports us back to the racy, cosmopolitan atmosphere of 1920s Berlin--and for saving his best for last. In the book's resonant closure about the rise of authoritarianism, Weitz seems in directly to hold a mirror up to America's own political catastrophe in the post-9/11 Bush years."--**Michael Levitin, *The Financial Times***

"Eric D. Weitz has written a splendid book. . . . Appreciating Weimar's unique qualities and extraordinary accomplishments is something Weitz allows all of us to do with this fine book."--**Robert G. Moeller, *American Historical Review***

"The name Weimar has always carried a double charge. In politics, it means an incurable disease, a state divided against itself, a habit of hatred and assassination; in culture, it means fruitful transgression, the gratified shock of the modern. By showing how these two sides belong to the same coin, *Weimar Germany* serves as a perfect introduction to its subject."--**Adam Kirsch, *The New York Sun***

"It is the thesis of Eric D. Weitz in *Weimar Germany* that even before the Nazi coup of 1933, Weimar democracy, however brilliant its cultural particulars, never had a chance....And yet, as *Weimar Germany* makes elegantly clear, what a vibrant and kinetic moment it was with such artists as Käthe Kollwitz and George Grosz, such architects as Erich Mendelsohn and Walter Gropius, such novelists as Alfred Döblin, Thomas Mann, and Joseph Roth, the theater of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, the photography of August Sander and László Moholy-Nagy, the cinema of Robert Wiene and Fritz Lang."--**John Leonard, *Harper's Magazine***

"Considers Germany between the World Wars from far more than merely the political perspective. Stressing the new liberalism and modernism that marked the Republic, Weitz . . . devotes whole chapters in his new work to Weimar's astonishing flowering in architecture, cinema, photography, literature, painting, sculpture, journalism, and cabaret life. . . . Presents a comprehensive synthetic history, it is thoughtfully illustrated (including wonderful color plates) and it is written in a crisp, transparent prose that might serve as a model for modern historians."--**Matt Nesvisky, *The Jerusalem Report***

"Weimar lasted 14 years, the Third Reich only 12. Yet Weimar is always seen as a prelude to the Third Reich, which appears to have been created by Weimar's failures. Actually, as Eric Weitz argues, the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) was not responsible for the Reich; it was a democratic, socially aware and progressive government, way ahead of many other European governments in its introduction of workers' rights, public

housing, unemployment benefit and suffrage for women. However, Weimar was, from the beginning, the target of the anti-democratic forces of the established Right. . . . Weitz looks closely at many aspects of Weimar and demonstrates clearly just what an extraordinary time this was . . . A fine and important book."--**Justin Cartwright, *Spectator***

"A well-informed, sophisticated analysis of Weimar's greatest accomplishments and their lasting significance. . . . The best introduction to the historical setting and rich legacy of Weimar culture. And this, as [Weitz] convincingly argues, is the Weimar that speaks most clearly to us."--**James J. Sheehan, *Commonweal***

"Nothing enlivens history more than the people who experienced it, and Weitz gets at concepts and trends through the work and lives of the players. His mostly lively and descriptive writing paints visual pictures that are complemented by well-chosen photographs and illustrations. . . . Generally, Weitz, as in his tour of Berlin, succeeds in guiding readers down the avenues of this unusually rich and complex time, until these boulevards finally meet in an abrupt dead end."--**Francine Kiefer, *Christian Science Monitor***

"Eric D. Weitz, in his well-illustrated book, explores this contested society. He sees the 'promise' of his subtitle in the optimism of its creative community's embrace of the Weimar Republic's potential, and the 'tragedy' in the efforts of the established right to destroy the republic."--**James Skidmore, *The Globe & Mail***

"The unquestionable strength of this well-written book . . . lies in the depictions of culture, everyday life, art, literature, and philosophy as well as in the deep understanding of the changing world of everyday people. . . . Weitz's unobtrusive gender awareness and his sense of class-bound life and experiences come across in a matter-of-fact manner and show what writing about history has to offer when a talented author knows how to combine political, economic, social, gender, and cultural history and how to weave them into a lucid picture of the past."--**Hanna Schlissler, *German Studies Review***

"Weitz . . . attempts far more than merely to produce a new history of Weimar suitable for the age of the 'War on Terror.' His aim is to transform the way that we approach the 1920s in Germany. . . . *Weimar Germany* is a most welcome addition to the existing literature on this hotly contested period."--**Tobias Boes, *Modernism and Modernity***

"Weitz's meticulous research and excellent use of contemporary poster and photographs, along with other period pieces, make 1920s Germany, especially Berlin, come alive. Readers will stroll down Potsdamer Platz with its elegant shops. They will hear political debates in beer halls, cabarets, and street corners. They will see the birth of modern architecture and view the neighborhoods of the Jews, Poles, and Slavs fated to become Nazi scapegoats. . . . This is a thought provoking book that gives keen insight into a society teetering over the edge."--**Jewish Book World**

"In *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, Professor Eric D. Weitz of the University of Minnesota fills in the details. He does a good job. He presents a case history worthy of study by lawyers of this century."--**Walter Barthold, *New York Law Journal***

"[Weitz] has written a spirited survey chat for grounds cultural and intellectual developments, and it will find a well-deserved place in many courses on German history and German cultural studies."--**Peter Jelavich, *Central European History***

"The story of the Weimar Republic is the story of Germany's journey from fallen Old World power to the ultimate symbol of modern horror--of cutthroat politics, lingering postwar resentments, new freedoms, and

modernist art. Eric D. Weitz, a University of Minnesota historian, sorts through this knotty mass of narratives in order to describe how German consciousness was uprooted from the Bavarian forests and ushered into the ferocity--and beauty--of the machine age."--**Colin Fleming, *Wilson Quarterly***

"*Weimar Germany* is strikingly illustrated with numerous photographs, posters, and reproductions of paintings supplemented by text that is both well-written and captivating in its use of imagery. The author's interest in the period shows through as does his sense of foreboding, given the aftermath of this fiery burst of creativity."--**Lou Tanner, *Virginia Quarterly Review***

"Between 1918 and 1933 every aspect of Weimar Germany was in a state of flux. It is a great achievement that Weitz has managed to bring all the disparate strands together and to develop a cogent argument that Weimar Germany was so dynamic, so exciting and so suffused with optimism and creativity. Weitz's strength lies in his ability to make the era come alive. This is superb history."--**Bruce Elder, *Sydney Morning Herald***

"Each era writes its own histories of earlier eras, and now we have the equally commendable *Weimar Germany* . . . . To read about Weimar is to be reminded of the stupendous number of gifted people it produced or nurtured or gave passing shelter to, and who contributed to creating 20th-century Western culture. Weitz goes into illuminating detail about their achievements and their influence, even in areas beyond their art."--**Roger K. Miller, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette***

"A concise, yet comprehensive survey of life, art and politics during a crucial period in German and, indeed, world history."--**Alan Behr, *CultureKiosque***

"An engaging representation of the cultural climate of Weimar Germany in a variety of areas."--**Faith Anne Scott, *eHistory***

"Eric Weitz paints Weimar--actually Berlin, nothing much ever happened in Weimar--as suffering from a split personality: vibrant and creative, on the verge of modernity; and sullen, backward-looking and afraid."--**Harry Eagar, *Maui News***

"[Weitz tells] a story that continues to attract us three-quarters of a century later as lived experience, a story that, while it ended badly, should not sit perpetually in Hitler's shadow. . . . Perhaps the best single-volume history available in English."--**John Kappes, *Cleveland Plain Dealer***

"*Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* is an impressive work, interesting, well researched and creatively written. . . . He includes many important observations on Weimar politics and economics, but the greatest strength of the book is its treatment of Weimar culture and particularly the crucial place of Berlin in that history. . . . It is a significant addition to the literature on Weimar Germany and should be read by everyone interested in the period."--**Paul Bookbinder, *European History Quarterly***

"Weitz is at his best when examining the vibrant cultural life of Weimar and the many individuals whose work both evoked and manifested the hope that a better society would emerge from the ruins of the old."--**Irene Guenther, *European Legacy***

"Weitz has done a fine job of integrating much of this material (highlighted in a short bibliographic essay) into a fresh new synthesis. His particularly judicious selection of illustrations--color plates and black and white--makes the volume a well-rounded resource for students and scholars alike."--**Ulf Zimmermann, *H-Net Reviews***



"A valuable read for those interested in what came before as well as later."--**NYMAS Review**

"Weitz has penned an outstanding book. He gives the message of 'Berlin is Weimar; Weimar is Berlin' its most stimulating, colorful, and elegant voicing. Weitz's Weimar is visually stunning. With inviting, even friendly, prose he guides the reader through the sights and sounds of Berlin. . . . Weitz's structure is clean yet rounded; functional yet playful; revolutionary yet organic. . . . His bibliographic essay is a model of concision."--**Kevin Ostoyich, *The Historian***

"[A]s the discussion of right-wing discourses, parties, and movements progresses, one is struck again by the author's ability to tie specific example to general trend. Like his account of the republic's beginning, Weitz's depiction of the end is a taut, clear narrative that delivers thought-provoking analysis."--**Theodore F. Rippey, *Monatshefte***

"Impassioned, detailed and deeply absorbing."--**Kanika Datta, *Business Standard***

From the Back Cover

"This is not another standard history of the Weimar Republic. Eric Weitz effortlessly blends politics and economics, philosophy and literature, art and architecture in a gripping portrait of a culture whose pathology was exceeded only by its creativity. From Heidegger to Hitler, from Bauhaus to 'our house,' from Thomas Mann to Fritz Lang, much of Western modernity was invented here-its glories as well as its horrors. This is history at its best."--**Josef Joffe, publisher and editor of *Die Zeit* and fellow of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University**

"This superb book not only finally delivers a satisfying general history of Weimar that has been missing for many years, but, more important, is a remarkable accomplishment in that it covers all the main themes of Weimar Germany, ranging from politics to literature, architecture to economy, cinema to ideology. Elegantly written and cleverly structured, this is an outstanding achievement by a mature, erudite, balanced, and intellectually sophisticated scholar."--**Omer Bartov, Brown University**

"Implied throughout this book is the question of whether it is possible for contemporary democracies to succumb to neofascist forces in the same way that the Weimar Republic fell to the Nazis. For Weitz, the downfall of Weimar does not simply provide a lesson of what we should avoid today. Rather his insightful book vividly portrays the Weimar period as a historical epoch filled with creative experiments and utopian projects that still need to be realized."--**Jack Zipes, University of Minnesota**

"Eric Weitz, a leading American historian of the German Left, has given English-language readers the most textured, encompassing, and engaging history of Weimar to date. He presents the first German republic, and Berlin in particular, as a beleaguered experiment in mass politics and mass culture: overshadowed by the terrible costs of a lost war, deeply divided politically, but still an open-ended wager on modernity."--**Charles Maier, Harvard University**

"Weitz has written a simply magnificent history of the Weimar Republic, one that incorporates its economic, political, and cultural history in a way that no other book has succeeded in doing. The book is knowledgeable, lively, lucid, and thorough, and Weitz's enthusiasm for his subject is palpable. Undoubtedly, this will be the standard history of Weimar Germany for years to come."--**Richard Wolin, author of *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism***

"Enriched by many contemporary photos, Weitz's comprehensive and highly readable account of the Weimar Republic incorporates the latest research on post-World War I Germany. To my knowledge, there is no other

book that does a better job of examining the country's precarious existence between liberal-democratic modernity and conservative-authoritarian backlash."--**V. R. Berghahn, Columbia University**

"This is an important and evocative book that balances broad cultural developments and richly detailed analyses of, for example, the cultural criticism of Siegfried Kracauer, the collages of Hannah Höch, and the pessimistic ruminations of Oswald Spengler. *Weimar Germany* should find a broad audience given its subject, its lucid and lively style, and its wonderful illustrations."--**Mary Nolan, New York University**

#### About the Author

Eric D. Weitz is Dean of Humanities and Arts and Professor of History at City College, City University of New York. He is the author of "A Century of Genocide" and "Creating German Communism, 1890-1990" (both Princeton).

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