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The Failure of the Weimar Republic

F.L. Carsten asks whether Germany has learned the lessons of 1918-1933.

[F.L. Carsten](#) | Published in [History Today Volume 6 Issue 5 May 1956](#)

The fate of the first German Republic is a question of great contemporary interest: if the causes of its disintegration are properly analysed, they may provide valuable pointers to the weaknesses of parliamentary democracy in Germany and help in an assessment of its position today. What lessons can be drawn from the events of the years 1918-33? What factors, what institutions, and what individuals were responsible for bringing Hitler into power?

These questions are the more important because many of the leading participants have published their memoirs, usually of a highly apologetic nature—for example, Franz von Papen, Hjalmar Schacht, Otto Meißner, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and Carl Severing.

Other writers have taken it upon themselves to come out in defence of President von Hindenburg, or the nationalist leader Alfred Hugenberg, or the Social Democrats. Still others have written heavily biased books, attempting to fasten the chief blame upon the President, the Reichswehr, the German Communists, German Heavy Industry, the Junkers, whichever the case might be.

This flood of apologetic and polemical literature has made a sober and scholarly investigation of the problem all the more essential, and it is surprising that none has been undertaken sooner, either inside or outside Germany. It is therefore of considerable interest that a German scholar, a lecturer in the Free University of Berlin, Karl Dietrich Bracher, has now published a detailed and careful analysis of *"The Dissolution of the Weimar Republic—a study of the disintegration of power in a democracy."*¹ This weighty book refutes countless errors, falsifications and half-truths contained in the literature on the period. The author adopts a positive democratic and liberal attitude, yet does not shrink from strongly criticizing the policy of the democratic parties, from exposing many structural weaknesses in the Weimar Republic and of German politics in general. He has no axe to grind, and does not engage in any special pleading.

It is generally believed that it was the economic crisis of the early 1930's that was responsible for Hitler's victory. But this opinion evades an analysis of the concrete political situation. As Dr. Bracher says, "the interpretation of the catastrophe of 1932-3 should not start with constantly reiterated references to the vague collective idea of a 'world economic crisis.' Much more important is an... understanding of the structural political problems of the Weimar Republic and the fatal chinks in it that provided openings for authoritarian and totalitarian counter-movements."

Against the many attacks on proportional representation and the protagonists of a two-party system, he emphasizes that "in 1932 such a mode of election would have benefited the Nazi Party. The whole problem could not have been solved by a technical manipulation of the electoral system."

Against those who plead for stronger presidential powers, relying on the argument that the Nazis did not achieve office through the President but in virtue of being the strongest party in parliament, Dr. Bracher proves convincingly that they won their way through a web of intrigues spun by entirely irresponsible people around the ancient President.

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The same "chain of personal intrigues, actions and counter-actions, the inter-twinings of which are difficult to overlook and hardly possible to unravel," had already caused the gradual dissolution of Brüning's government and his replacement by von Papen early in 1932.

Because parliament met very seldom, and because no majority government could be formed, these intrigues assumed an extraordinary importance and decided the fate of the Republic, while the genuine democratic forces looked on in helpless passivity, without any serious attempt to alter the course of events, or even to assess the situation realistically.

Of these genuine democratic forces the Liberals fared worst. The German middle classes, threatened in their existence by the war and the subsequent inflation and economic crisis, lost their feeling of security and became prone to accept "new solutions," the hazy slogans of a "conservative revolution."

The two liberal parties in 1919 together obtained as much as 23 per cent of the parliamentary seats; but by 1928, in spite of economic prosperity, they had declined to 13 per cent; in 1930 they obtained only 8.5 per cent, and in 1932 a mere 2 per cent of the seats; their followers had gone over to the Nazis. The two other components of Republican coalition governments fared much better; best of all the Catholics.

Their parliamentary strength hardly changed, in spite of the slump, and in spite of the fact that their leader, Brüning, was the head of a very unpopular government between 1930 and 1932; it amounted (including the Bavarian Catholics) to 15.1 per cent in 1928, 14.8 per cent in 1930, 15.9 and 15.0 per cent in 1932.

This successful resistance of the Catholics to the blandishments of Nazism was one of the most remarkable facts in the history of the Weimar Republic. It is in striking contrast to the illusory hope of the Social Democrats and others that they, by going into opposition, would be able to recover their lost strength.

The third and largest democratic force, the Social Democrats, declined markedly from their initial 37.9 per cent in 1919 to 29.8 per cent in 1928, 24.5 per cent in 1930, and to 21.6 and 20.4 per cent in 1932. This decline was not catastrophic, and it mainly benefited the Communists as is proved by an analysis of many local results; but it nevertheless reveals a serious weakness in the strongest democratic party.

Dr. Bracher attributes it above all to the hesitations of the party leaders in modifying their traditional attitude of opposition, and adapting the party structure and its Marxist ideology to new situations. This eventually led to their complete passivity when faced with great political decisions, a long time before the Nazi victory. It led to the overthrow, in March 1930, of the government in which they themselves played the leading part, resulting in their own abdication from power, and with them that of parliament.

The party was pushed on to the defensive and did not make a single serious attempt to regain the initiative. It was unable to attract the young or the victims of the slump, or to develop any convincing line of propaganda, and became the prisoner of its own doctrines. It seriously underestimated the Nazi danger, and later declined any proposals for co-operation from anti-Nazi generals.

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Its outmoded conceptions, its traditional distrust of the Reichswehr, its fear of losing more votes to the Communists, were too strong. In common with many others, the Social Democrats fondly believed that the Nazis, once forced to assume responsibility, would soon lose followers and show their own incompetence, that they would be unable to muster the two-thirds majority required for any alteration of the constitution.

When von Papen in July 1932 illegally ousted the Social Democratic government of Prussia, the party leaders refused to meet force by force, maintaining that they had no right to be brave at the cost of the police. The trade unions, meanwhile, would not strike because the jobs held by their members might be taken over by unemployed youths who were followers of the Nazis.

Yet, even if there had been only a symbolic resistance, it would have strengthened the fortitude of the Social Democrats. Nor is this an academic speculation, since the Nazis came into power at the last minute, at a time of growing cleavages within their own party and of an incipient improvement in the economic situation, as Dr. Bracher rightly points out. He adds that it took another twelve years to the day, until July 1944, till a break was made with the longing for legality at any price which had prevented any resistance against the Papen Putsch.

Thus the three pillars supporting parliamentary democracy, the Liberals, the Social Democrats and the Catholics, showed quite different tendencies: one caved in, one was seriously weakened, and the third alone remained standing. Above all, the peasants went over to the Nazis, especially in the Protestant districts of northern, western and central Germany.

In the towns, it was the middle and lower middle classes, the young, the indifferent and the unemployed, who were most strongly attracted by Nazi propaganda. It was not so much the nationalist appeal, the outcry against Versailles and the later treaties, which drove so many into the Nazi camp: as late as December 1929 the Nationalist-Nazi referendum against the Young Plan mustered fewer than six million votes, one million fewer than the same parties had polled in the general election of May 1928 at the height of prosperity.

Moreover, the failure of von Papen's efforts in 1932 to achieve decisive alterations in the Versailles treaty in Germany's favour did not result in an increase of the Nazi vote, which considerably declined between August and November. Although one of the most prominent German historians, Professor Gerhard Ritter, has recently stressed that it was the "serious and humiliating failures of foreign policy," "all the disappointments of the League of Nations," that drove the masses into the Nazi camp,² this is not borne out by the facts.

It remains true, however, that an earlier and a more vital success in the field of foreign policy would have greatly strengthened the hand of Brüning and other Chancellors of the time. Yet the major causes of the failure of the Weimar Republic must be sought in internal developments.

The rapid decline of German Liberalism, which deprived the Social Democrats of their most natural coalition partner, was due, at least in part, to much earlier developments. The liberal movement had never embraced more than certain sections of the urban population; in the nineteenth century, its attempts to unify Germany were twice defeated, by the Prussian army and by Bismarck, and from this double defeat it never recovered; even the National Liberals were more national than liberal and strongly supported Bismarck's policy.

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The Progressive Party remained weak after its defeat and split during the 1860's; the rise of the Catholic and Social Democratic parties deprived it of its role as the leading opposition party. Thus the importance of its successor, the Democratic Party, proved very short-lived: it polled 18.6 per cent of the vote in 1919, but was reduced to 8.3 per cent as early as the following year, to decline to 3.8 per cent in 1928, and to 1 per cent in 1932. Even today the Free Democratic Party is by far the weakest of the three main parties of Western Germany, and is truly liberal only in the south-west and the Hanseatic towns where there survives a genuine liberal tradition.

The German middle classes, at least in the Protestant districts, were won over by the success of Bismarck; and later they looked back with longing eyes to the days of the Hohenzollern Empire. They deeply resented the political and economic changes, which deprived them of their customary positions, and held the new regime responsible for all the ills that had befallen them.

The new Republic with its despised flag, its lack of political symbols and ceremonies, its sober and colourless ways, was unable to gain their loyalty, to fashion any ties binding the citizen to the state. As to the Catholics, their attitude to the Republic had always been somewhat equivocal, especially in Bavaria; they were not middle class parties, but were strongly supported by Catholic peasants and workers, the Christian trade unions, and the many religious and social organizations of the Church, as well as by local particularism which was opposed to Berlin and its centralizing tendencies.

This in part explains their extraordinary cohesion at a time of general disintegration, a cohesion shown anew in the success of the Christian Democrats in present-day Western Germany with its Catholic majority. The Social Democrats were in a similar position with regard to the members of the Free trade unions, and the workers' sports and welfare organizations. This strong framework to a large extent withstood the blows directed against it from left and right.

Several factors are enumerated by Dr. Bracher as structural weaknesses of the Republic, only some of which are well known. In his opinion, the power of parliament was not sufficiently strengthened, the old bureaucratic machinery remained largely intact, and the legislature was too weak. Parliament too seldom used its vital rights of supervision through committees of enquiry and left the administration to the government departments and the civil service: ministers came and went, but the bureaucracy remained.

Even in the legislative sphere, parliament showed little initiative and did not offer sufficient resistance to the growing power of extra-parliamentary forces. It never satisfactorily fulfilled its two most important tasks: the framing and control of policy and the democratic solution of social and political conflicts through a working compromise.

Throughout, parliamentary work was hampered by the irreconcilable attitude of reactionary monarchist and nationalist groups, as well as by the disappointment and indifference of the Socialist masses, who believed that the radical principles of the revolution had been betrayed. The extremist parties of the right and of the left did not permit the functioning of a constructive, responsible opposition.

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Thus the basis of parliamentary government remained too small, and the decline of parliamentary power began long before the final crisis. The deepest cause of this was the non-political attitude of the Germans. They felt that they had no share in the state, yet at the same time they displayed a non-political veneration for power. These sentiments were both legacies from the Bismarck period. To this one might add that before 1918 the Germans had had no opportunity of assuming political responsibility.

Parallel with the decline of parliamentary influence went an increase not only of the powers of the bureaucracy, but also of those of the President. This was due to the demand for a strong head of the state, able to intervene personally in the many internal and external crises of the post-war years, the strength of the monarchical tradition, the desire for an *Ersatzkaiser*, made legitimate by a plebiscite of the whole nation.

This desire in 1925 manifested itself in the election of Field-Marshal von Hindenburg, which gave renewed vigour to the forces of restoration and anti-Republicanism.

Exactly as the French in 1873 elected Marshal MacMahon President of the Republic to prepare the way for the restoration of the Bourbons, so the Germans turned towards the commander of the defeated army, an octogenarian utterly unqualified for high political office, who looked at the state as if it were an army, who mistook political life for a battlefield, and political responsibility for military obedience. He was unable to overcome his deep-seated suspicion of the republican parties and looked at the political Right (as he told von Papen in 1932) as "his own people," the side to which he belonged.

Another structural weakness of the Weimar Republic was that the army was not clearly subordinated to the state, and that its loyalty towards the constitution remained questionable from the outset. Throughout these fifteen years, it showed centrifugal and autonomous tendencies.

Professor Ritter, in a violent attack on Mr. Wheeler-Bennett's *Nemesis of Power*, has recently asserted that under the Hohenzollern Empire the army formed indeed a state within the state, but that this ceased to be the case under the Republic because the army was subordinate to a civilian minister of war, who was responsible to parliament, and to the President as the commander-in-chief:³ as if such issues could be decided by provisions of the constitution and the legal chain of command. The more topical is the wealth of evidence in Dr. Bracher's study proving that the Reichswehr continued to be a state within the state. This was the achievement of General von Seeckt, who created for himself the position of "Chief of the Army Command" (*Chef der Heeresleitung*) and limited the minister of war to departmental functions: he alone without any political ties was to represent the interests of the Reichswehr.

The minister of war lost the military command and became a removable official, dependent on the goodwill of the military commander, so long as the latter maintained good relations with the President. The officer corps recognized von Seeckt as its "political leader," as the "king of the army he became a substitute for the "royal shield" they had lost in November 1918.

The army preserved its neutral attitude towards the Republic and its constitution, all efforts to forge closer ties between the army and the Republic being skilfully sabotaged. Instead, the army command supported the right-wing para-military *Stahlhelm*, which in 1928 proclaimed its undying hatred of "the state structure of the moment, its form and its content," and the protector of which was President von Hindenburg.

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Many army recruits were furnished by this organization, and many an officer believed that "right-wing extremism was useful to gain the favour of the Chief of the Army Command, in spite of all explicit orders to the contrary which nobody took seriously," as General Groener wrote in 1931.

This attitude von Seeckt himself strikingly demonstrated after his dismissal by appearing, together with many former princes and generals, at the Harzburg rally of the extreme right in 1931, and by supporting Hider's candidature for the post of President against von Hindenburg in 1932.

In 1930 Generals von Schleicher and Groener used the influence of the army to secure the appointment of Brüning as Chancellor, because they hoped that he, a former officer, would support the army's interests. Two years later, however, the army leaders, and in particular von Schleicher, procured the dismissal of their own chief, Groener, as minister of war and minister of the interior, because he had not fulfilled their expectations and had taken strong measures against Hitler's storm-troopers.

This was followed by the dismissal of Brüning himself and his replacement by von Papen, a move engineered by von Schleicher with the aim of "taming" the Nazis and giving them a share of political responsibility. Yet a few months later these hopes proved illusory: the Nazis had not been "tamed," nor had von Schleicher been successful in splitting them.

He himself had to assume the Chancellorship, to be ousted by the same weapon which he had so successfully wielded against his predecessors—intrigues this time not emanating from the generals, but from bankers, industrialists and agrarians, from von Papen and the entourage of the ancient President, especially his son.

It has often been said that in this hour of emergency the army leaders contemplated armed resistance to keep the Nazis out; it has more recently been maintained, by Mr. Wheeler-Bennett and Professor Craig, that they intended to use the army to bring the Nazis into power. In the light of the evidence collected by Dr. Bracher both alternatives seem rather unlikely.

Von Seeckt's successor, General von Hammerstein, denied both emphatically in a memorandum of January 1935 (now published for the first time). The army leaders strongly objected to the use of the army for political purposes which would endanger its military preparedness; as late as January 27th von Hammerstein went to the President to inform him of the army leaders' objections against a Hitler cabinet.

On January 28th von Schleicher counselled von Hindenburg against a reappointment of von Papen and advised a co-operation with the Nazis on the basis of a parliamentary majority. It is true that he counted on his being retained as minister of war, but he was outplayed by the appointment of von Blomberg, a Nazi sympathizer. Even then, von Schleicher does not seem to have thought of armed resistance, least of all to secure a Hitler government and thus his own dismissal.

Thus Hitler was put into the saddle not by a popular movement—which was already declining—but by "a very small circle of busy-bodies," by "utterly irresponsible, extra-constitutional exponents of political and economic tendencies and illusions."

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Hitler was equally helped by the false tactics and the lack of realism of the democratic forces, the weakness of liberal and democratic traditions, the structural faults of the Republic, and the radicalizing of politics that followed upon the slump. His assumption of power was not an historical necessity, but the result of a large number of individual factors and actions, only the combination of which proved fatal to the ailing patient.

To what extent has the Germany of the present day learnt the lessons of the history of the Weimar Republic? Today the President is not an anti-democratic Field-Marshal, but a politician of proved liberal convictions; his powers have been severely curtailed; he is no longer elected by a plebiscite. The Republican flag and symbols are generally respected. The Federal Parliament is making great efforts to assert its influence over the executive, the bureaucracy, the new army and its personnel. The opposition is no longer anti-democratic, using Parliament merely as a means of destroying it.

Although not sufficiently consulted by the government, it is taking an active part in the shaping of legislation, in the work of the parliamentary committees, in the supervision of the bureaucracy and of the nascent army.

This army did not exist before there was a Parliament and a constitution, but has been created and shaped by decisions of Parliament, in contrast to the Weimar precedent. On the other hand, in Western Germany the forces of restoration and reaction are still strong; there is a ruling party with marked conservative tendencies; many observers are reminded not so much of the days of the Weimar Republic but of those of the Second Empire; indeed, in some ways Western Germany is trying to put the clock back to the nineteenth century.

There is again the power wielded by strong pressure groups and complete *laissez-faire* in economic matters; there are deep social cleavages, and a general political apathy. The problem still is how to interest the ordinary citizen in the life of Parliament. All these are mere symptoms, not imminent danger signs.

Today there is no fundamental crisis of authority, no power vacuum, as under the Weimar Republic. There are no strong extremist parties, determined to undermine the state and the constitution, no army attempting to arbitrate between the state and its enemies, claiming to be "above party," making and unmaking cabinets. If the lessons of the past are truly learned, such a state of affairs need never return.

¹ *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik—Eine Studie zum Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie*; Ring-Verlag, Stuttgart & Dilsseldorf, 1955.

² "The Historical Foundations of the Rise of National Socialism," in *The Third Reich*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1955, pp. 407-9, 411.

³ "Nemesis der Macht?", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 20th, 1955, p. 6.

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Stresemann and Weimar

Prophet of European unity or pre-Hitler nationalist bent on wiping out Germany's Versailles humiliation? Sixty years after his death, Jonathan Wright reassesses the career and motives of Germany's leading statesman of the 1920s.

[Jonathan Wright](#) | Published in [History Today Volume 39 Issue 10 October 1989](#)

Gustav Stresemann, who became foreign minister of the Weimar Republic in 1923 and remained in that office until his death in October 1929, is one of the most controversial of the German political leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He ranks, with Bismarck, Hitler, Adenauer and Brandt, as a figure who exerted a profound influence on Europe. From being a violent nationalist in the First World War, he became the leading statesman of the Weimar Republic. Together with the French foreign minister, Aristide Briand, and the British foreign secretary, Austen Chamberlain, he negotiated the Locarno Pact in 1925. This held out the promise of peace after the ravages of war and the turmoil of the immediate post-war period. Yet, over this achievement hangs a question mark. Was Stresemann's goal a peaceful Europe in which Germany was a reliable partner, or was his aim rather the step by step revival of Germany as a great power until it had regained a position of dominance?

His career provides evidence for both interpretations. He was born in Berlin in 1878 into a modest home. His father had a small business bottling beer and their house doubled as a bar. His grandfather had taken part in the revolution of 1848 and left a collection of radical books. The young Stresemann read these avidly and identified with the ideas and language of the intellectuals of the 1840s, a heady brew of nationalism and liberalism. This mixture, in origin the reaction of the German middle classes against the division of Germany under more or less autocratic rulers, stayed with him all his life. It is the first key to understanding his career and also the first obstacle, because it was itself ambiguous. Was the legacy of 1848 one of liberalism or nationalism? It was both.

Stresemann recognised this ambiguity. Referring to one of his favourite poets, Georg Herwegh, in 1923, he wrote that his verse 'might appear as Pan-German to many who call themselves Democrats today'. The traditions of nationalism and liberalism parted in the process of unification under Bismarck and the extremes of each side were ranged against each other by the end of the First World War. The Left-Liberals (or Democrats as they became in 1919) stood for constitutional reform and a negotiated peace and the right-wing nationalist groups, like the Pan-Germans, stood for preservation of the authoritarian structure of the Empire and a German dominated Europe. Where did Stresemann belong?

He had already established himself in a business and political career before 1914. His first success was in building up a manufacturers' association in the-state of Saxony. He did this by exploiting the conflict of interest between the relatively small firms he represented and the dominant lobbies of the empire, those of coal and steel in the Ruhr, and of agriculture. Stresemann's clients tended to be exporters and they favoured low tariffs to keep down the cost of imported raw materials and to prevent retaliation by foreign countries. The Ruhr and agriculture, however, wanted to protect their home markets by high tariffs and in general they succeeded. They resented Stresemann's organisation and regarded him as a dangerous upstart.

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Stresemann demonstrated his political talents first in Saxony by promoting candidates who were members of his association and overturning the Conservative monopoly of power there. In 1907, he was elected to the national parliament, the Reichstag, in a snap election called by the Reich chancellor, Billow, in defence of his colonial policy. Stresemann stood as a National Liberal candidate for a poor constituency. He was fortunate to benefit from a general surge of nationalist sentiment which enabled him to defeat his Social Democratic opponent by a narrow margin. Still only twenty-eight, he was the youngest member of the Reichstag.

The National Liberal Party which he had joined was only a shadow of its former glory. Founded in 1867 to support Bismarck's policy of unification, it had enjoyed its heyday in the 1870s when it was the strongest single party. Already divided from the Left-Liberals by its support of Bismarck, in 1881 it split again over tariffs. Nevertheless it was still a significant force in a system where no party had an overall majority and where one large party, the Social Democrats (SPD), was isolated from the rest by its programme of revolution. This meant that the Reich chancellor required the support of at least two of the remaining three groups of parties: the Conservatives, the Catholic Centre Party and the Liberals. In 1907 the Conservatives and the various Liberal parties concerted their tactics in support of Chancellor Bulow and emerged successful.

Stresemann was an ardent nationalist, a member of the populist Navy League, and an advocate of colonial Empire. His choice of the National Liberals was therefore a natural one but some aspects of it made him uncomfortable. Its right wing was under the influence of Ruhr coal-owners who wanted the party to be closely aligned with the Conservatives in domestic as well as foreign policy. Stresemann distrusted the Conservatives. His suspicions were confirmed when they refused electoral reform in the state of Prussia and estate duties to help pay for the increase in national expenditure on defence. The Conservative-Liberal block broke down in 1909 and Bulow, who had already lost the favour of the kaiser, was forced to resign. Stresemann never forgave the Conservatives. He argued later that their selfishness had deprived the chancellor of support at a time when a stable coalition in the Reichstag might have enabled him to restrain the kaiser and move towards a system of parliamentary government. He also blamed the Conservatives for the electoral landslide to the SPD which followed in 1912 and ridiculed their threats to make the SPD illegal (as Bismarck had) or to suspend the Constitution. 'Desperado' tactics of this sort would, he warned, simply prepare the way for revolution from the Left.

In retrospect, it is easy to find in Stresemann's political experience before 1914, important clues to his position in the Weimar Republic. His distrust of the Conservatives and his belief in constitutional government made it natural for him to want to join the middle ground of politics. However, this was far from clear in the immediate post-war period when he was treated as a pariah by the Republican leaders and responded with bitter opposition. The reason for their antagonism was the extreme nationalist stand he took in the First World War. This brought him into conflict with the alliance of the SPD, Left-Liberals and the Catholic Centre Party which formed a majority in the Reichstag in July 1917 to pass a resolution in favour of a negotiated peace and which came to power after the war in January 1919.

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Stresemann's wartime record was indeed a reckless one. Declared unfit for military service, he saw his duty as mobilising popular support for a victory which would make Germany secure in the future. He threw himself into the task of propaganda for a 'greater Germany'. He advocated expansion westwards, over Belgium and the Channel ports, to open the way to a German colonial empire. He pressed for unrestricted submarine warfare, which proved disastrous when it was adopted in 1917, because it was overcome by the convoy system and helped to bring the United States into the war. When Russia collapsed, Stresemann defended the drastic amputation of its territory demanded by the high command in the persons of Hindenburg and Ludendorff and enacted by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. He earned the reputation of being 'Ludendorff's young man'. Beside this record, it mattered little that he had also consistently supported moves towards parliamentary government. In 1919 the National Liberal Party, whose leader he had become in 1917, broke up. Its different wings had been united only in the hope of victory and now lacked a common purpose. The greater part went over to the new Democratic Party with the Left-Liberals, from which Stresemann was excluded. His career which had looked so promising in 1917 appeared to be over. His enemies wrote him off as a political bankrupt.

Resentful at the way he had been deserted by his colleagues, Stresemann founded a new party, the German People's Party (DVP), and attacked the revolution and the republic. Yet from the beginning he intended to regain the middle ground and enter government. He was careful to maintain his distance from the Conservative groups on the right, re-founded as the German National People's Party (DNVP). Despite his emotional hostility to the republic, his view of the party system and of how he could be effective within it had not changed. This acted as a bridge for him from the empire across the divide of the revolution to, in time, pragmatic acceptance of the republic. Indeed, he was to become the most notable example of a Vernunftrepublikaner literally a 'rational Republican'. This did not happen at once. At the time of the Kapp putsch in March 1920, a military revolt against the republic, Stresemann did not at first condemn the putsch though he tried to find a peaceful solution by mediating. The elections which followed were a triumph for his party. He gained from the reaction against the Treaty of Versailles which put the Republican parties on the defensive because they had hoped that a democratic Germany would benefit from the idealism of the American president, Woodrow Wilson. They lost their majority and Stresemann recovered the vote which had gone to the Democrats in 1919. With sixty-five seats in the Reichstag, his party became a contender for power. For the next three years, Stresemann did not himself gain office although the DVP was represented in government for part of the time. Stresemann worked to keep the party in the middle of the political spectrum and whenever possible in government. This was not easy. They had been elected on a platform of opposition to the very parties with whom Stresemann was now prepared to join in coalition. In addition, the republic had to face demands from the allies for reparations under the Treaty of Versailles. Submitting to these demands went against the grain of a nationalist party like the DVP, yet the alternative of allied occupation of the Ruhr threatened catastrophe.

In these circumstances, Stresemann's consistent leadership to associate the DVP with the republic was impressive. It marked him out as a politician committed to a far-sighted strategy despite its unpopularity. This period also saw him come to terms with the republican constitution as the indispensable basis for politics based on law and consent and the only dyke against civil war from the left and dictatorship from the right. When the Republican politician, Matthias Erzberger, and the foreign minister, Walther Rathenau, were assassinated by right-wing gangs, Stresemann led his party in condemning the outrages and in voting for legislation against the activities of anti-Republican groups which followed.

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Stresemann's credentials as a liberal from his pre-war political roots to the mature statesman of the Weimar Republic rest on firm foundations. Through all the changes he remained a believer in parliamentary government and in making parliamentary government work. What of the other half of the legacy of 1848 - nationalism? How had his views of foreign policy developed after his support for German expansion across Europe and overseas in the First World War?

Here the record is much less consistent. Stresemann's initial reaction was to blame the Kaiser and the military by revolution at home. This was the foundation for a realist re-thinking of his foreign policy. Like most Germans, Stresemann was determined to secure the revision of the Treaty of Versailles. He understood Germany's military weakness after 1919. But he hoped it could use its economic importance as an instrument of revision. Germany was rich in coal which France needed and it was an important consumer of exports from the rest of Europe. From the early 1920s therefore he argued that Europe would not recover until the allies gave up trying to extract unrealistic reparations. In 1921 he predicted confidently, 'international understanding... will come because it must'. The French, however, were unwilling to settle for what the Germans would accept. They wanted to see an irreversible shift of resources from Germany to France because anything less would simply confirm Germany as the leading industrial power on the Continent. In January 1923, tired of German prevarication, the French and Belgians occupied the whole of the Ruhr to give them control of the mines. This brought the crisis to a head and Stresemann came to be seen as the man to meet it. In August, he was appointed chancellor as the unanimous choice of a coalition of the centre parties and the SPD, the position to which he had long aspired.

It was an unenviable time to takeover. The policy of supporting passive resistance to the French, which had been started by the previous government, caused runaway inflation. By October 1923 the currency was virtually worthless. Stresemann had no alternative but to stop support for the Ruhr. This meant that resistance to the French was bound to collapse and that, in turn, was a signal for a challenge to the Reich from Bavaria which had become the rallying ground of extreme nationalist groups. At the same time Stresemann faced a threat of Communist revolution in Saxony and Thuringia. It was the worst crisis of the Reich since its foundation in 1871. It might quite easily have broken up. Stresemann displayed great determination and luck was on his side. The army reasserted the Reich's authority in Saxony and Thuringia. And the commander-in-chief, General von Seeckt, to whom anti-Republican groups had looked for leadership drew back from overthrowing the government in Berlin. The threat from Bavaria collapsed when Hitler attempted to force the situation and his putsch was put down by the Bavarian authorities themselves. Most important the French premier, Poincare, feeling the need for British and American support, agreed to an investigation of Germany's capacity to pay.

Stresemann did not survive as chancellor but he remained as foreign minister in all the succeeding governments to his death in October 1929. The next three years brought a dramatic improvement in Germany's international position and a measure of stability to the Republic. The basis was an Anglo-American plan to restore the German economy by a large foreign loan to enable it to pay reparations. Known as the Dawes Plan, after the American chairman of the committee that put it together, it was agreed at an international conference in London in July 1924. It marked a decisive victory for Germany over France, which was forced to abandon its Ruhr policy and accommodate itself to the revival of German industrial power.

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Stresemann realised that France's underlying fear was for its future security as Germany recovered. He was anxious that this should not lead to a new alliance system against Germany. In February 1925, he therefore revived a previous offer for an internationally guaranteed non-aggression pact to secure the Rhine frontier. This became the core of the treaties negotiated at Locarno in October 1925. Germany's frontiers with France and Belgium were mutually guaranteed by each of them and also by Britain and Italy. In practice, this meant that Germany gave up its claims to Alsace-Lorraine (which had been annexed from France in 1870 and lost again in 1919) and France gave up the policy it had followed since 1918 of trying to extend its influence across the Rhine. For Stresemann, the great gain of Locarno was that it decided this issue once and for all. The Rhine and Ruhr would remain German. Locarno and German entry into the League of Nations, which followed a year later, aroused high hopes. Austen Chamberlain called Locarno 'the real dividing line between the years of war and the years of peace'. Chamberlain, Briand and Stresemann were awarded Nobel prizes. Since the Second World War, however, their achievements have been subject to critical scrutiny. Historians have pointed to the problems which they did not resolve. Instead of a solid foundation for peace, there is a tendency to see Locarno as a limited bargain and for Germany merely a stepping-stone on the road to recovery of great power status.

How valid is this criticism? There is much to be said for it. Stresemann made it clear at Locarno that he was not prepared to accept the same status for Germany's eastern frontiers as he was in the west. He did sign arbitration treaties with Poland and Czechoslovakia but he refused to recognise their frontiers or to accept France as a guarantor of these treaties. The key issue was the Polish frontier, which was seen by Germans of almost all parties as a symbol of the injustice of Versailles. German policy was to regain the port of Danzig (which had been put under League of Nations control) and the territory which divided East from West Prussia and gave Poland access to the sea at Danzig, and the important industrial area of Upper Silesia which had been given to Poland in 1921 despite a plebiscite showing an overall majority of Germans.

Stresemann was bound to pursue revision of the Polish frontier. Does it follow that his commitment to European peace at Locarno was hypocritical? Had he, as the English journalist Claud Cockburn observed, 'discovered that the way to get away with being a good German was to pretend to be a good European? Stresemann certainly provided fuel for this view. Defending himself to nationalist critics at home, he adopted their goals and language but argued that there was no alternative to his policy given Germany's lack of military power. He drew a comparison with the way Prussia had recovered from defeat by Napoleon, by evading decision until it was strong enough to join a victorious alliance. He also belittled the importance of the commitment in the arbitration treaties to peaceful resolution of disputes in the east.

How should these remarks be understood? They were intended to overcome bitter opposition on the right and scepticism even in his own party. He could identify with the feelings of his critics because he too was a nationalist. But there is reason for thinking that his own views were more complex. He aimed to make Germany in his own words 'alliance-worthy' again. He knew that isolation had led to defeat in 1918. More than this, it had become obvious by 1923 that recovery depended on establishing good relations with France, Britain and, in order to attract credit, also the United States. The alternative of alliance with the Soviet Union, which was popular amongst nationalist leaders and the army and which led to the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922, offered no substitute.

History

Neither militarily (despite the secret programme of co-operation with the Red Army) nor economically was the Soviet Union in a position to help Germany against the Western powers. Stresemann referred to those who wanted an exclusive alliance with the Soviet Union as the 'maddest of foreign policy makers' and warned the crown prince prophetically that flirting with Bolshevism could end with the Russians on the Kibe and the red flag waving from the royal palace in Berlin. Maintaining good relations with the Western powers had to be Stresemann's priority and this was bound to limit his ambitions for revision of the Versailles Treaty.

How did Stresemann hope that revision would occur? The best prospects seemed to be in the West, building on the detente with France. In September 1926 Briand and Stresemann discussed a 'complete solution' of the remaining problems between them, of which the most important were Allied military occupation of the Rhineland (which under the treaty could last until 1935) and the return of the Saar coalfield to Germany (which would also not occur before 1935 under the treaty)- Germany was to pay for the Saar mines and also make an advance payment on reparations which the French needed to stabilise the franc. However, nothing came of this because Briand faced the same kind of nationalist resistance as Stresemann and Poincare succeeded in stabilising the franc anyway. The momentum was lost and it was not until a final reparations plan had been concluded in 1929 that France agreed to withdraw its remaining troops and this eventually took place only in 1930 after Stresemann's death. When the Saar was returned in 1935, it came as a trophy for Hitler.

Stresemann's hopes for revision of the Polish frontier were more speculative. He imagined a crisis of some kind, perhaps because of a collapse of the Polish economy, perhaps because of war between the Soviet Union and Poland, leading to a new international settlement where Germany would be able to achieve frontier revision. Again success would depend on Germany being on good terms with all the powers that counted. Where Poland was concerned, this included the Soviet Union which had its own claims on Poland's eastern frontier. Although Stresemann gave priority to France and Britain, this meant it was important for him to maintain a link with the Soviet Union to exploit their joint interest against Poland.

To maintain the link with the Soviet Union, while pursuing detente with the West required the most delicate diplomacy. Stresemann succeeded by insisting that Germany could only join the League, if it was allowed an interpretation of its duty to take collective action against an aggressor which took account of its status as a disarmed power. It was clear that what he had in mind was a Soviet attack on Poland, in which case he wanted Germany to be able to maintain strict neutrality. France and Britain did riot much like this argument but they accepted it, knowing that collective action was impossible to enforce anyway. The importance of this concession for Stresemann was that it was enough to persuade the Soviet Union of the advantage of its ties with Germany which were renewed by the Treaty of Berlin in April 1926. Stresemann described Germany with satisfaction as the 'natural great mediator and bridge between East and West'.

He was not able, however, to exploit this position during his lifetime. He had constructed an ingenious system but he was unable to make it work. Germany was both too weak to force its demands on the other powers and also potentially so strong that its recovery was bound to arouse fear and resistance. Of his other goals, he knew that France would not agree to self-determination between Germany and Austria, and Chamberlain firmly rejected German claims to colonies.

History

Even had the republic survived and Stresemann remained as foreign minister, it is not clear how this resistance could have been overcome peacefully. Poland was unlikely to agree to frontier revision short of defeat in war. If Germany were to persuade the other powers to allow it to rearm and then tried to achieve its aims by force, however, it would risk isolation and defeat again. How could a framework be found in which Germany could achieve revision without Europe going to war? By the time he died, aged only fifty-one, Stresemann had found no answer to this problem and his policy was increasingly under attack at home. The republic thereafter rapidly disintegrated under the impact of the Depression and the rise of Nazism. What was his legacy?

Stresemann did not anticipate the sudden breakthrough of the Nazis from a fringe extreme movement to the mass party which they became between 1930 and 1933. He did understand the appeal of radical nationalism. He had won his first election on such a platform and supported it enthusiastically throughout the First World War. But there was a great gulf between him and the Nazis. Above all, he rejected the idea of dictatorship of one part of the nation over another. He was also not an anti-Semite and his wife, to whom he was devoted, was the daughter of a Jewish manufacturer. Despite similarities between the extent of Hitler's empire in the 1940s and Stresemann's goals in the First World War, there were vital differences. Stresemann would have been revolted by the fanatical racialism of the Nazis, the slave states they established in the east and the extermination of the Jews. Stresemann had also become convinced in the 1920s, like Bismarck after 1871 whom he frequently quoted, that Germany needed peace. It would have been quite out of character for him to have taken the risk of another world war.

There are more interesting comparisons to be made between Stresemann's policy and the German Federal Republic, established after the Second World War in 1949. The first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, turned for security against the victorious Soviet Union to making West Germany part of a unified Western Europe in close alliance with the United States. Willy Brandt, who became the first SPD Chancellor of the Federal Republic in 1969, developed a new policy towards the east, aimed at improving the conditions of Germans living in the Soviet controlled German Democratic Republic. The purpose of his Ostpolitik was to normalise relations with the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. He drew a parallel between his own policy and Stresemann's saying that Germany's position in the centre of Europe required it to pursue a two-sided policy.

Since Brandt, the Federal Republic has remained an advocate of detente between the super-powers which affords it the best opportunity of developing its links with the GDR. There is no exact parallel with Stresemann's situation. But he would have had no difficulty in recognising the dilemma of how best to advance German interests in alliance with the West and in understanding with the Soviet Union, without upsetting either.

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Henry VII and the Shaping of the Tudor State

Sean Cunningham highlights the importance of 'rule by recognisance' in the reign of the first Tudor monarch.

[Sean Cunningham](#) | Published in [History Review Issue 51 March 2005](#)

In William Shakespeare's *King Richard III* the victorious Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond, has a surprisingly undeveloped role as the saviour of England from Richard's tyranny. Looking back from 1597, Shakespeare saw the fruits of the Tudor victory, and he captured the significance of the battle of Bosworth with the lines:

*All that divided York and Lancaster
United in their dire division.
O now let Richmond and Elizabeth,
The true succeeders of each House,
By God's fair ordinance conjoin together,
And let their heirs - God, if his will be so -
Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace.*

Generations of historians agreed that Henry Tudor's marriage in January 1486 to Princess Elizabeth, heir to the Yorkist king Edward, heralded a new period of English kingship that swept clean many defects of medieval government. The overmighty nobles and private armies of the fifteenth century were put under the king's control. The monarchy broke away from a reliance on parliament for money. The crown by-passed the local influence of noble landholders and placed power in the hands of junior men, lawyers, and professional administrators to begin a revolution in the way England was ruled. Henry VII's reign was traditionally seen as the first step in a period of rapid change in the ancient ruling structures of medieval England. The ruthless grip on power he achieved was the key factor in creating conditions for later sixteenth-century developments to thrive. While not exciting enough for Shakespearean drama, Henry VII's reign nevertheless was the pivotal point between medieval and more modern forms of English government.

Assessments of Henry VII

Shakespeare's later Tudor view of Henry VII changed very little between the first study of the reign by Francis Bacon in 1622 and Henry's last academic biography, by Stanley Chrimes, in 1973. Both emphasised his focus on security, government, and the law, but neglected the politics and personalities of this fascinating period at the end of the Wars of the Roses. This established view remained unchallenged until very recently, perhaps because medieval and Tudor historians each have their own sources, techniques and approaches that do not easily cross the boundary that 1485 has become.

History

Yet a revival of interest in Henry VII has occurred. This has challenged the established view of Henry as an innovator. Christine Carpenter has developed Geoffrey Elton's arguments that the early Tudor period was one of evolution not revolution in government. She suggests that because Henry's lack of royal skill forced him to continue the policies of fifteenth-century kings he was locked into an existing process of growing royal power. His isolated exile in Brittany and France between May 1471 and August 1485 gave him little understanding or experience of how English government worked. Henry Tudor could not understand the problems he faced, and was essentially a bad medieval king. He could only have changed their policies after he had learned how to be an effective king. However, this interpretation takes little account of Henry's particular circumstances in 1485. It was precisely because of his unique upbringing and disconnection from England that Henry Tudor was able to bring new ways of doing things to his kingdom. Between about 1480 and 1520 England was certainly transformed from what Nicholas Pronay described as the 'merry but unstable England ruled by Edward IV to the tame, sullen and tense land inherited by Henry VIII'.

Inexperience and Innovation

When Henry VII took the crown from Richard III he inherited all of the authority and royal resources that previous kings had enjoyed. Yet his exile meant that, unlike many of his knights and lords, he did not have the practical experience of running manorial estates or of managing a complex network of servants (called an affinity or retinue). Henry lacked sufficient knowledge of how English government worked. This restricted how he could exercise his authority, especially in the reform of government departments and processes. For example, many lords, knights and gentlemen were familiar with what sheriffs did to control a county, or how taxation was collected and paid to the Exchequer, because they were part of the elite who did those tasks year-after-year. Changing the way that these and many other important jobs were done would have brought administrative chaos when the king's political control was also weakest.

What Henry VII did have great expertise in also grew from the circumstances of his exile. Henry had watched how the Breton and French courts worked. More specifically, he had learned how people could be manipulated by reward and coercion into doing what rulers wanted; how faction and political conspiracy operated; and how attention to detail was vital to a king's security. It was control of personal relationships and mental attitudes among the people who represented the king that Henry VII saw as the key to forcing change upon the medieval ruling structures he inherited.

Many of the specific policies, such as a reliance on bonds, recognisances and obligations as tools to control behaviour, did not survive beyond 1509. But their effect on how England was ruled did. In fact the novelty of Henry VII's rule created a backlash that in August 1510 condemned to the block its two leading officers, Edmund Dudley and Richard Empson. The success of Henry's shake-up of the relationship of the crown with its leading subjects may have set back the acceptance of change for many years. Henry VIII's early years, with a vibrant youthful court and military glory in France and Scotland, were certainly more like those of Edward IV's second reign (1471-83) than the more sombre final years of Henry VII's. It was only in the 1530s that a new generation of officials was prepared to implement revolutionary policies on a grand scale.

History

Clearly Henry VIII did not share his father's interest in fine-tuning the minute details of policy. He was able to neglect the mundane aspects of his royal duties because Henry VII had done the hard work in developing the administrative structure that allowed the departments of state - the royal council, chancery, Exchequer and the state paper office - to be run without the king's constant intervention. That Henry VIII became such a gross figure of monarchy must be due partly to the freedom given to ministers like Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell to direct royal policy. While Henry hunted, jostled and worried about the royal succession, his top bureaucrats ruled semi-autonomously. But this was done strictly for the benefit of the state and the crown's control over it. This was an extension of exactly the type of role that Empson and Dudley had enjoyed in the previous reign.

Ideology and Allegiance

What seems to be different about Henry VII was his attempt to create and enforce a new ideology of service and loyalty to the crown that enhanced the medieval concept of allegiance to an immediate lord, the king and the nation. This stood alongside Tudor restructuring of existing institutions, to transform the mentality of the ruling elites. It is also a practical example of what Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer have called the 'moral regulation of the state'. In the conditions attached to the thousands of bonds issued during the reign, Henry demonstrated his authority (through the demand for payments), defined acceptable behaviour, and enforced an obligation of loyalty upon the powerful figures of the nation. This attitude was universal: it was applied against pardoned political suspects as well as allies commanding important castles or occupying official posts. By emphasising his royal supremacy, Henry VII also began to free the crown from the direct influence of the aristocracy. Fifteenth-century kings, dukes and earls were royal cousins with a common descent from Edward III (1327-77). They held a shared elite outlook. Henry VII arrived from relative obscurity in 1485 and began to rule more like a landlord than the first among aristocratic equals. His management of the crown lands, royal patronage, the creation of peers, and the punishment of offenders, began to elevate the position of the king above the ruling elite from which previous English rulers had emerged. This change allowed the king to dominate the structures of the state rather than to share in their development as part of the ruling class. But it did not force the king to rule personally. Rather, it allowed him to function like the chairman of a massive modern corporate business. Henry managed strategically, while well-trained and closely allied bureaucrats projected royal power under his watchful eye.

Henry VII stayed closely involved in the daily tasks of ruling because he had a suspicious personality and was obsessed with the security of his Tudor dynasty. He chose to do this despite developing a framework that allowed him to withdraw physically and administratively from the process of ruling. In 1493-95 the treason of the leading officers in his household, the chamberlain Sir William Stanley and the steward John, Lord FitzWater, prompted Henry to create the privy chamber. This office was staffed by very junior grooms who served the king in his private time. It removed the politically active gentry from the king's personal chambers, although over time figures such as the groom of the stool, Hugh Denys, became important because they had the ear of the king. The great figures of the kingdom had previously surrounded the monarch and projected his power into the counties where they held their land and dominated local society. After 1495, the day-to-day isolation of the lords and leading knights from the king meant that their main role became part of the pageantry and magnificence of court life. They remained close to the crown as an institution when they sat in the royal council or on local commissions, but Henry began to select his servants for their ability, flexibility, and loyalty. Rank and prestige no longer ensured a natural right to be close to the king.

History

Tudor Support

Henry's permanent adult exile separated him entirely from England's ruling elite, both literally and in terms of his outlook and experiences. On the one hand, this gave Henry an opportunity to unlock the closed network of personal service that had surrounded medieval royal heirs as Princes of Wales or royal nobles. On the other, it created a great dependence upon the advice and skills of others. Some, like Sir Giles Daubeney and Sir Edward Poynings, had joined Henry after 1483 in opposition to Richard III. Others, like John de Vere, earl of Oxford, followed Henry because he was the only chance they had of recovering their lands and influence. Henry could not fully trust them to remain loyal if political circumstances changed again.

Henry's power base of support did cut across existing and inherited allegiances. This was an advantage if it could be transformed into Tudor loyalty. As a result it was fundamentally important to Henry's success in establishing a stable regime. Henry used his skills to overcome previous vested interests as the Tudor regime stabilised and then flourished. There were some uncomfortable periods when the nature of his support actually allowed conspiracy to reach the heart of the regime. This was most obvious with the pretender Perkin Warbeck's call upon the loyalty of former servants of Edward V for most of the 1490s. Henry did try to heal the factionalism that had prevented a harmonious resolution of the civil wars in earlier reigns, and he did this by reshaping the political loyalties of the ruling classes.

The Law

The way English government worked had always been defined by the king's power in relation to the law. Although Henry was keenly aware of the weakness of his claim to the throne through descent - which explains the often-gaudy display of Tudor imagery and heraldry - he certainly did not underestimate the hereditary rights of the monarch. Henry pressed these prerogative rights to the very edge of the law, and many subjects complained of injustice. But the ability of the crown to intervene in their life became much more apparent. Pressure on local networks was increased by greater challenges to the manipulation of justice. Offences like embracery (corruption of juries) and maintenance (interference in legal cases by those otherwise uninvolved) were confronted. Members of regional political communities managed the interaction of the law and society at this local level. By regulating their roles as JPs, sheriffs, escheators and jury members, the Tudor crown further encroached upon the political and social freedoms of the ruling elite. Under weak leadership in Henry VI's reign (1422-61), they had been partly responsible for the descent into lawlessness and civil war. The Tudor king sought to remedy both deficiencies.

Lordship

Henry created few new nobles and was reluctant to promote or reward his servants excessively. There were some restorations on the king's terms, such as Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey, and Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, but rebellion and attainder after 1485 further reduced the pool of leading peers. Henry also kept the personal estates of the crown (the demesne lands) in his own hands. With little royal family to endow, it was easier for him to make the royal lands work harder for the crown rather than to give them away. Where land was granted, it was primarily as stewardships or leases. Henry deliberately split up forfeited estates, such as those of the rebel Sir Humphrey Stafford after 1486. This prevented the build up of blocks of concentrated power even among his own followers. It also disrupted the traditional means of lordship, and is seen by Christine Carpenter as Henry's failure to understand the system of medieval lordship and the king's place within it.

History

Yet this policy sharply defined the network of king's supporters in the regions and created a clear role for royal stewards and officers. In many cases it conflicted with traditional arrangements for effecting local rule through gentry retinues. Conflicts between the Lancashire Stanley family and Sir Thomas Butler, or the earl of Northumberland and Sir John Hotham in East Yorkshire, emerged for this reason as the king's servants were promoted against noble power. The king's men soon learned that they could still wield great power: Sir Thomas Lovell's retinue, based on a number of scattered crown stewardships, was as large as any noble connection during this period. But Henry's knights were closely monitored. In another case, the king was willing to sacrifice Sir Richard Guildford's influence in Kent, when it became clear after 1504 that he could no longer represent the crown's interests effectively.

Towards the end of Henry VII's reign, members of the elite were competing for office and influence within a clearly defined structure of crown service. They were not challenging independently for resources of land and men that could threaten Tudor stability. Nobles could still be great landowners, courtiers or commissioners, like the restored earl of Surrey in the north before 1500. They were, however, obliged to be the king's loyal men. They were important because Henry allowed them a degree of power suitable for the role he expected of them. By about 1506, noble title, status or inherited rights were no longer enough to command major influence within a region. When the Stanley family was given stewardships and mining rights in Lancashire in 1504, the grant was limited by strict conditions that included tax collection. This emphasised that Stanleys were answerable to the crown. The king's control of this system of lordship became more centralised and structured than it had been. It was also policed in a new way.

Bonds and Recognisances

Henry VII's reliance on the policies of his Yorkist predecessors is well known. It is most obvious in his reliance on the royal chamber as the financial engine house of the reign. In his use of bonds Henry also followed existing practice but expanded this normal legal procedure to become the foundation on which all other reforms were built.

Most historians agree that the reliance on these instruments increased after 1500, when they helped to enforce Henry's feudal superiority. Bonds were accepted as part payment of fines upon inheritance to aristocratic lands, to buy the king's pardon or favour, or to secure lucrative grants. Bonds were aimed specifically at the nobility only because they had the strongest feudal connection to the crown. Yet by 1500, most of the major political crises had been overcome and the Tudor dynasty seemed secure: bonds enforced rather than achieved security. No historian has so far explained how Henry VII gained a foothold on power long enough to exploit the few advantages he held in 1485, or how he withstood the very serious early threats to his dynasty. My research in analysing hundreds of new bonds begins to explain how Henry's regime came to be successfully established, despite its shaky start.

Henry VII began to use these tools on a large scale to enforce loyalty during the conspiracies of the first decade of Tudor rule. The backlash to the Tudor accession arose in the heartland of Richard III's support in Yorkshire. Initially, Henry had to rely on the experience of those who had served his enemy. When the leaders of this group, such as Sir John Conyers, flirted with rebellion after 1485, they were deprived of local office and hauled before the king. Conyers and many of his gentry friends were placed under massive bonds with restrictive conditions. Re-admittance of suspected men to the local networks they had previously dominated depended on observance of oaths of loyalty; forced residence in the royal household; and reporting of conspiracy to the king's councillors. To keep their status these men became agents of the Tudor crown.

History

Bonds were effective because the crown screened the selection of other men to guarantee that conditions were met. These sureties were not only other suspected conspirators, but also the crown officials, stewards and constables newly installed around the country. For example, the king's constables at Sheriff Hutton, Pontefract and Penrith castles became entangled in a mesh of shared responsibility after three rebellions emerged in Yorkshire by 1489. Henry quickly acted on forfeitures and called in the enormous fines when necessary. When this happened, payments were scaled down to ensure that offenders were restored on the king's terms. Thomas Metcalfe, Richard III's leading administrator in Yorkshire, forfeited and paid over £650 in 1488. By 1493 he was a Justice of the Peace and loyal Tudor servant.

This system was also self-perpetuating. As more people within a community became responsible for their own collective loyalty, the links of marriage, service and landholding, which created that community in the first place, soon forced it to remain loyal. If people were provoked into rebellion they did so in increasing isolation. Sir John Egremont's attempt to raise a rebellion in Yorkshire after the earl of Northumberland's murder in 1489 attracted no prominent supporters because most possible rebels had too much to lose once Henry's bonds threatened their estates. Many of these bonds were also never cancelled. Sureties were replaced often decades after the original agreement. This system had rational and straightforward rules. If all parties obeyed the conditions of the bonds then they were free to develop careers as crown servants. If the system worked as Henry VII intended it to, then little revenue would be generated from this source. The extent to which this aspect of the use of bonds was developed has been hidden from most Tudor historians. It has been overlooked because of the emphasis on Edmund Dudley's use of barely-legal obligations in the search for feudal income and lapsed fines that marked Henry's vulnerable reign after the queen's death in 1503. The existence of this more constructive use of bonds to shape allegiance proves that Henry VII's successes in reforming government were hard earned by effort and vigilance within a clear programme.

This evidence of an early Tudor ideology of absolute loyalty provides an excellent opportunity to look again at Henry VII's reign as the basis of more modern forms of government. The peace he achieved may have been 'smooth-faced' but it required constant awareness, a vast personal knowledge of landholders and their connections, and a mastery of archived documents at a level not reached by previous rulers. Henry VII's reign therefore remains an intriguing period to study. With several historians now working exclusively on Henry, we can expect a major growth in our level of understanding of the first Tudor reign in the near future.

Issues to Debate:

In what ways did Henry VII's experiences before 1485 influence the ways he ruled England?

To what extent do you think Henry VII introduced a specifically Tudor ruling ideology after 1485?

How did Henry VII try to ensure his own security through the use of bonds and recognisances?

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Henry VII, Pretenders and Rebellions

Jez Ross argues that Henry VII was more secure than he realised

[Jez Ross](#) | Published in [History Review Issue 72 March 2012](#)

King Henry VII holding a Tudor Rose, wearing collar of the Order of the Golden Fleece, dated 1505, by unknown artist,

Henry VII was never in serious danger of losing his throne to either a rebellion or a conspiracy. For either of these to succeed, a combination of specific circumstances would have been necessary. First, those seeking the throne needed to be credible and viable alternatives to him. Second, Henry VII had to be isolated and there needed to be enough domestic support for an invasion to ensure that it did not look like a self-interested act of political speculation by either foreign powers or isolated English malcontents. Third, foreign powers possessed of the requisite military and financial muscle had to be prepared to support an invasion. These circumstances never fully materialised.

The Claimants

For Henry VII to be seriously threatened by any of the challenges he faced, these needed to be mounted in support of a viable alternative claimant. Viability in this context does not just mean having a decent claim to the throne. After all, Henry VII had a weak claim and he still succeeded in taking the throne in 1485. In fact, historians tend to set too much store by Henry's weak claim in terms of measuring his security in 1485-87 and have overlooked what really made the difference for him. This was the fact that he was not the political pawn of a narrow self-interested clique as were Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck (both of whom served the narrow interests of die-hard Yorkists out of step with the prevailing political mood of reconciliation).

Instead, Henry Tudor was the embodiment of the rapprochement between York and Lancaster and the means by which the unpopular Richard III could be overthrown. Hence Henry's political importance transcended the weakness of his claim. This is not, of course, to argue that he won the backing of the entire political nation; but he did win vital support from Lancastrians and most of Edward IV's supporters. This was important both in mobilising the crucial military support en route to Bosworth which brought him victory there and in terms of securing the regime upon sufficiently broad support amongst the political nation in the subsequent short and long term. Of course, for the rest of his reign he remained a usurper with limited claim on the natural obedience owed to the legitimate monarch by his nobility (on which, with a very few obvious exceptions, even as disastrous and incompetent a king as Henry VI could rely). However, this did not necessarily make him vulnerable, even in the early years of his reign. The point needs to be remembered that, unlike Edward IV in 1461 and, most obviously, Richard III in 1483, Henry VII did not overthrow a 'legitimate' monarch but, rather, another usurper and, indeed, one whose means of seizing the throne was conspicuous for its bloodletting even in an age weaned on violence.

So, Henry's role in 1485 was very different from that played by pretenders such as Simnel in 1486-87 and Warbeck in 1491-97. They were clearly political pawns (albeit that Warbeck quickly became a free agent) in the hands of ambitious politicians (John de la Pole, earl of Lincoln, and Sir William Stanley) or unscrupulous foreign powers (Margaret of Burgundy, Maximilian of Habsburg and James IV of Scotland). In other words, their role was nothing more than to satisfy the dubious interests of their backers: they were certainly not the means by which erstwhile enemies could be reconciled and a regicidal usurper could be ousted.

History

Henry VII's Popularity

The first Tudor monarch was never sufficiently weak or unpopular to support the view that he was vulnerable to being overthrown. Of course, there were times when he may well have been unpopular – and the events of 1489 and 1497, especially this latter year, seem to bear this out – but it would be difficult to argue that he was weak enough to be an easy target for a usurper since he enjoyed a position of relative strength. Neither of his uncles, Jasper Tudor, duke of Bedford, or Thomas Stanley, earl of Derby, were 'Kingmakers' proper; the childless widower Richard III was dead and unmourned by the vast majority of the political nation (especially in the heartland counties of the south where the intrusion of his northern clients had caused so much offence); and there were very few 'super nobles' capable of offering significant support to a rival claimant (for example, Edward Stafford, duke of Buckingham, was seven years old in 1485). Henry VII, by virtue of his multiple inheritances – from Richard III, Edward IV, Elizabeth of York and so on – was infinitely more powerful in terms of land than any of his predecessors had been and any of his nobility were (and the extent of these landholdings enabled him to extend the range and size of local crown affinities). Furthermore, he had received early recognition of his right to rule by the pope, who issued a bull warning those who refuted the legitimacy of Henry VII's claim that they would be excommunicated.

On the surface, this does not seem to square with the fact that in 1487 Henry was obliged to fight a pitched battle at Stoke, with all of its obvious attendant risks, in what looks like a 'Bosworth mark II', in order to keep his throne. Indeed, Professor Loades argues in *Politics and the Nation* that Henry's victory was by no means a foregone conclusion, stating that 'there had been an ominous reluctance to join the royal standard, and even on the field itself a part of the army held back as though unwilling to be committed'. Yet this does not prove that Henry was weak and vulnerable. Given that he enjoyed overwhelming superiority in numbers (with an army at Stoke of 12,000 men, a much larger force than assembled for Richard III at Bosworth) and that the forces arrayed against him included some 4,000 semi-naked 'wild Irish' kerns wielding clubs, is it not more likely that only his vanguard was engaged because he had no need to commit his other forces?

Moreover, the key point, surely, is that he was never deserted or betrayed by those forces which had assembled to fight for him, as happened to Richard III in 1485 when Sir William Stanley joined Henry and Thomas Percy, earl of Northumberland, stood idly by. It may, indeed, be Northumberland to whom Professor Loades was referring when he wrote of 'an ominous reluctance to join the royal standard' since, according to Susan Brigden, 'The earl of Northumberland, with the largest private army in England, moved, not south to aid the King, but north'. Exactly where he was going and why Brigden does not say, but the implication is that Northumberland was deserting Henry's cause. However, this is not necessarily so, for two reasons. First, there was no subsequent fall from grace: Northumberland continued to occupy the militarily sensitive role of Warden of the East and Middle Marches, which would not have been the case had he betrayed his king. Second, it is possible that he was sent to defend the north against a possible Scottish invasion (after all, this was one of the primary functions of the Warden of the East and Middle Marches): although Henry VII had signed a truce with James III in 1486, this had done little to ease the threat of a Scottish incursion because hostility to the English was so entrenched. Henry VII, then, was not in a weak or isolated position.

History

Popular Enthusiasm

There was little support within the political nation for a rebellion against Henry. During the Wars of the Roses there had been a declining interest from the nobility and leading gentry in engaging in factional conflict and struggles for the crown: the risk of backing the wrong side meant that there was too much to lose. From the high point of 1459-61 when some 55 noble families had been engaged in the conflicts, 18 fought in 1471 and only 12 at Bosworth. Given this sharp decline, it is hard to see where the domestic support for a usurper might have come from. Of course, John de la Pole, earl of Lincoln, rejected Henry's attempts to reconcile him (despite being a Yorkist and a supporter of Richard III he had been made a councillor in 1485) and joined the conspiracy bankrolled by Margaret of Burgundy, Edward IV's sister and a committed Yorkist, to put Lambert Simnel on the throne as 'Edward VI'; but he failed to rally any support from nobles and their retainers (Lord Lovell, the other main noble conspirator, had joined the conspiracy before Lincoln).

Conversely, when Henry VII fought at Stoke, he could rely upon the retinues of his core supporters, the duke of Bedford, the earl of Derby and the earl of Oxford, as well as a multitude of Midlands gentry. Of course, Henry VII did face a serious rebellion in 1497. However compelling is the case of Ian Arthurson that the Cornish Rebellion was less about taxation than a conspiracy to overthrow Henry and less about Cornwall than a more general rising against Henry's government (which, according to Arthurson, extended north to Devizes, south to Dorchester and east to Winchester), the fact remains that only one noble, James Lord Audley, and 22 gentry were on the side of the rebels. By contrast, the retinues of 18 nobles, more than one third of the nobility, fought at Blackheath for their king and crushed the rebellion.

The only time when significant elements of the political nation became embroiled in a conspiracy against Henry VII was in 1493-95 when Sir William Stanley (Henry's Chamberlain) and others such as Sir Simon Mountford (a leading Warwickshire gentleman) became implicated in a plot in support of Perkin Warbeck (who claimed to be 'Richard IV', the youngest son of Edward IV). However, Henry's agents quickly unravelled the plot and the malcontents were speedily arrested, subjected to a series of 'show trials' and executed in early 1495. Although any conspiracy which involved men who had free access to Henry was a very serious matter, the fact remains that the plot posed no threat to Henry. Whereas in 1487 he was taken completely by surprise by Lincoln's flight, he knew of the involvement of Stanley and others and the real identity of Warbeck before the plot became serious. Indeed, it had been Lincoln's betrayal that made him more vigilant and led to the creation of a network of agents who were able to protect him from conspiracies. As a result of the work of these agents (and the fact that Warbeck was a political pawn with a desultory claim to be the younger of the 'princes in the Tower'), when Warbeck attempted his landing at Deal in Kent in July 1495, in an expedition supported by Margaret of Burgundy and Maximilian of Habsburg, the duke of Burgundy, he was beaten off by local levies. Indeed, this failure to make any headway against a secure Henry VII convinced the Habsburgs that Henry's sharp trade embargo against their increasingly resentful merchants (imposed between 1493 and 1496 to force Maximilian to bring Margaret under control) was too high a price to pay for an objective that had no chance of being achieved. This is why he dropped Warbeck who was then obliged to turn for support to even weaker powers, such as James IV's Scotland (and the Scottish invasion of September 1496 on his behalf was little more than a glorified border raid).

History

Foreign Powers

Foreign backing from a strong power such as France was a vital component for any realistic attempt on the throne (as Henry's own experience in 1485 made clear) – but only if there was also domestic support and a claimant who was a credible alternative to an unpopular incumbent. (Lambert Simnel had significant foreign support in 1487 but no domestic support because he was not a credible alternative to Henry VII.) Nevertheless, had the French been committed to replacing Henry VII then doubtless the plots against him would have assumed greater significance than they did. However, although Charles VIII contemplated supporting Warbeck to prevent Henry from aiding Brittany against his plans to annex it, by the Treaty of Étapes of October 1492 Henry recognised Charles's claim to the duchy in return for a promise that the French would not support his enemies. More important than Henry's diplomacy, however, was the fact that Charles became preoccupied with pursuing his claim to the kingdom on Naples after 1494.

Without the backing of Europe's major power, would-be kings of England such as Warbeck were forced to rely on the scraps fed to them by the impoverished Habsburgs, the Scots and Margaret of Burgundy (whose resources never seem to have recovered after supporting Lincoln's rising in 1487). Of these, the most serious problem had been Margaret of Burgundy. Yet the strength of Henry's position by 1495, combined with the impact of the trade embargo, persuaded Maximilian that he had better rein in Margaret's independence (which she enjoyed as a result of her dowager lands). The *Intercursus Magnus* of 1496 stipulated that neither government would support the other's pretenders and that if Margaret did not follow this directive she would lose her lands. In fact, it was not until 1498 that she made a genuine reconciliation with Henry, writing to him in September to ask his forgiveness for supporting his enemies. Subsequently, Margaret devoted herself to her proxy Habsburg grandchildren and great-children. Thus it was that Margaret ceased to be politically active five years before her death in November 1503, although news of her demise was doubtless received in England with some sense of relief.

Reducing Regional Power

Henry VII's troubles were still not entirely over. In 1501 Edmund de la Pole, earl of Suffolk (and Lincoln's brother), fled to the Continent to seek the support of Philip of Habsburg against Henry. Again, though, the strength of Henry's position prevailed. Firstly, his financial muscle was enough to keep Maximilian's successor on his side (for example in 1505 he gave a 'loan' of £138,000 to Philip). Secondly, he made sure to neutralise Suffolk's power-base in East Anglia in order to eliminate any risk of a rising by his tenantry. As a result, Suffolk's attempts to rouse his tenants to rebellion were completely extinguished by the earl of Oxford in the autumn of 1501 with large numbers of his adherents being forced to swear bonds for their good conduct. In fact, many de la Pole clients changed their allegiances after 1501 and the region was brought under even closer royal control as many of these sought service with Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey.

Not satisfied with these measures, Henry VII targeted Suffolk's relations: there were a number of executions, including that of Sir James Tyrell, some imprisonments and 17 attainders in the 1504 parliament. Finally, in 1506, by dint of good fortune, a storm blew Philip of Habsburg into seeking the protection of an English port, whereupon Henry was able to press him successfully for the deliverance to the Tower of de la Pole. There he languished until 1513 when, as a security measure in response to Henry VIII's departure on campaign to France, he was executed.

History

Conclusion

Although Henry continued to face challenges almost up until the end of his reign, he was never truly threatened and from 1499 onwards he had little to fear. This raises the question of why it was, from about this time, that he began his assault upon the English nobility through the arbitrary imposition of bonds and recognizances. Although there is not the space here to address this in much detail, the suggestion is that it came about from a combination of factors. First, there was the realisation that the Cornish rebellion was not just about resentment against an unpopular tax in a distant region. Arthurson has shown how investigations into the causes of the rebellion continued into the early sixteenth century, a sure sign that the government was nervous. Second, his heir, Prince Arthur, died in 1502. Finally, there was the revelation of the 'Calais Conspiracy' of 1504, when captains of the garrison discussed the virtues of Edward Stafford, duke of Buckingham, and Edmund de la Pole, earl of Suffolk, as worthy successors to Henry VII but not Henry, Prince of Wales, coupled with Henry own illness after 1504. Paradoxically, then, it was at the time when he was most secure from conspiracies that the ever vigilant Henry VII felt the most vulnerable.