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Introduction
Streets of Desire and Discontent

Joseph Goebbels in his 1932 memoir *The Struggle for Berlin* attributed the growing success of the Nazi party to its innovative use of city streets for propaganda. "The street," Goebbels wrote, "is now the primary feature of modern politics. Whoever can conquer the street can also conquer the masses, and whoever conquers the masses will thereby conquer the state."[1] Yet when Goebbels first took over as party leader in the German capital in 1926, the Nazis entered a streetscape already crowded with claimants and competitors. Hawkers, shopkeepers, pedestrians, window shoppers, automobiles, bicyclists, beggars, prostitutes, disabled war veterans, and the unemployed saturated public space. Moreover, in the period after the First World War, commercial advertisers and political partisans broke with previous views of the crowd as inherently dangerous and instead heralded "the masses" as the most important constituent and most desirable customer. They regularly experimented with techniques and technologies to ensnare and enthrall crowds. Berliners took advantage of new democratic freedoms promised by the 1918 German Revolution and, in doing so, transformed streets into the primary medium of communication, lens of perception, and stage of action for both political and economic life. Many diverse interests, therefore, fought a struggle for Berlin. And, despite Goebbels's triumphalist narrative, no one ever won this struggle completely. Urban space defied total control.

This book reconstructs the vibrant, volatile, and lost topography of interwar Berlin. It contends that city streets did not serve as a mere backdrop to events but played a central role in the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism. "Crisis" has long served as the primary explanation of this tumultuous history. But in recent years, historians have urged a reexamination of the term and its value.[2] They have challenged fellow scholars to avoid using "crisis"

[1] Joseph Goebbels, *Kampf um Berlin, Der Anfang, 1926–1927* (Munich: Eher, 1932), 86.
[2] Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf (eds.), *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2005).

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as either an established fact or as a shortcut for argumentation. This is a sensible corrective. "Crisis" is not a physical reality. One cannot encounter "crisis" directly but rather only its manifestations and signs. In other words, "crisis" is a subjective perception that depends on observation, interpretation, and the construction of meaning. Yet, for this very reason, the perception of crisis can have significant consequences for human action, especially for economic behavior and for politics. And the perception of crisis was ubiquitous during the Weimar Republic.

The key questions then become: how do perceptions of crisis form? And what are the consequences of these perceptions? This book argues that struggles over urban space shaped, linked, and magnified perceptions of crisis. After the First World War, political parties and commercial entrepreneurs took to the streets and fought for the attention of crowds with posters, light displays, parades, traffic obstructions, and violence. Rather than treat city streets as a backdrop to their lives, Berliners experienced, occupied, and shaped these spaces. Their competition for space and impact transformed the urban environment. The highly visible and physical nature of these confrontations intensified impressions of fracture. Berliners, as well as many international observers, turned a watchful eye to the streets to discern both present realities and signs of things to come. During moments of postwar recovery and prosperity, they saw dazzling display windows that radiated dynamism, opportunity, and new beginnings. At other moments, they confronted mass vandalism, antisemitic riots, and crime waves that pointed toward societal collapse. Urban space linked an individual's experience with mass phenomena. Interwar governments recognized this connection along with the power of urban space either to bolster or shatter their legitimacy. As a result, authorities pursued increasingly radical policies to renew the city and promote the appearance of harmony and abundance. These efforts culminated in Albert Speer's plan for Germania, a National Socialist capital designed to suppress the instabilities and uncertainties of the liberal, capitalist streetscape and, in the process, eradicate Berlin. By tracing the intersections of mass politics and mass consumption in the streets of the capital in the years between the two world wars, this book offers a history of the pivotal events of Germany's most tumultuous period from the ground up.

Berlin before 1918

The streets of Berlin were already crowded prior to the First World War. Like many European cities, Berlin expanded rapidly during the

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nineteenth century, and the pace of growth accelerated after it became capital of the newly formed German nation in 1871. As the administrative heart of both the nation and the empire, Berlin exerted a powerful magnetic pull on commerce, industry, and culture. Between 1871 and 1914, its population surged from 826,000 to 2.1 million. One journalist described the construction boom as "a bewildering, turbulent sea of buildings" rising up to meet demand.[3] Potsdamer Platz, once outside the old city's fortified walls and customs gates, became a major transit hub by the beginning of the twentieth century. The construction of rail, streetcar, and subway lines, as well as monumental department stores along the nearby street, Leipziger Straße, transformed this former periphery into an urban center. Friedrichstraße, a street known for decadent shops and nocturnal pleasures, drew traffic between this bustling commercial district and the stately avenue of Unter den Linden. Despite this avenue's historic connection to the Prussian monarchy, much of Unter den Linden's architectural embellishment coincided with the city's growing national and international stature. Promenading pedestrians, touring carriages, and troops on parade traversed its length from the Brandenburg Gate and adjacent Reichstag, past opera houses and university buildings, and over a statue-lined bridge. The avenue culminated at the imperial palace and Lustgarten, a square bordered by museums and a newly constructed grand cathedral. The wealthy initially clustered their residences around Unter den Linden's other terminus and the city's central park, Tiergarten. Fashion and the pressures of congestion later pulled the urban elite to the emerging high-end commercial and residential district around Kurfürstendamm and further westward to exclusive suburbs dotted with villas and lakes.

Although commentators admitted that Berlin did not yet match the liveliness of London, the audacity of New York, or the elegance of Paris, Berlin's fresh and clean surfaces struck locals and foreign tourists alike. These seemed to portend industrial capacity and economic dynamism not yet fully realized. After visiting the city in 1892, the American writer Mark Twain remarked: "It is a new city; the newest I have ever seen. Chicago would seem venerable beside it."[4] Prosperity continued to rise with higher per capita incomes and longer life expectancies. Emerging forms of media and leisure promised new metropolitan identities that

[3] Heinrich Schackow, "Berolina: Eine Großstadt-Ästhetik" (1896) in Iain Boyd White and David Frisby (eds.), *Metropolis Berlin, 1880–1940* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 22.

[4] Mark Twain, "The German Chicago" (1892), *The Writings of Mark Twain*, v. 21 (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1899), 502.

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might transcend deep societal divisions such as class, religion, ethnicity, and gender.[5] By the eve of the First World War, Berlin had become the capital of the greatest industrial power in Europe. Perhaps the most revealing symbol of Berlin's ambition to achieve world city status was not a monument to monarchy but an illuminated advertisement erected on a Friedrichstraße corner in 1912. Nightly, it drew a throng of spectators to watch as 1,600 incandescent bulbs spelled the brand-name "Kupferberg Gold" and poured electric champagne again and again into a gigantic shimmering glass.

At the same time, Berlin's bright facades and wide streets obscured the city's other potentialities, especially the discontent and pitiable living conditions of the working classes and urban poor. In the 1850s and 1860s, building ordinances and plans for city expansion called for spacious streets to ease the flow of traffic and speed the response of fire brigades. At the same time, anticipation of industrial and urban growth fueled real estate speculation. "Rental barracks" sprang up along outlines for the new wide streets. Block-length facades hid behind them receding layers of apartment buildings, deep interior courtyards, and the gloom of workers' dwellings. Workers crammed into these quarters near factories in the city's north and east. Even as these districts served as an engine of prosperity, respectable Berliners feared that they also incubated disease and socialism. Prompted by similar concerns, turn-of-the-century slum clearance projects penetrated but did not fully demolish or reconstruct the impoverished older parts of the city, such as the Scheunenviertel. Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe had settled in this area near Alexanderplatz in the 1880s and 1890s. As one of the most densely populated and politically radical neighborhoods in the city, the Scheunenviertel and its near environs elicited condemnation from officials but not sufficient investment to significantly improve conditions. Despite booming construction, chronic housing shortages and overcrowding plagued the city.

As in other burgeoning metropolises, the challenge of assimilating and managing the masses of new arrivals preoccupied Berlin's authorities. To these ends, the city's police relied on streets as the primary instrument of surveillance and control. Authorities feared that the heterogeneous masses could form into unruly mobs. Many rules regarding public space aimed to block this eventuality. In addition to preventing and investigating crime, law gave police sweeping duties to regulate traffic, commerce, politics, hygiene, noise, smells, and even architectural taste. In the course of the nineteenth century, municipal authorities increasingly pushed buying

[5] Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 49.

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and selling out of public spaces and into enclosed markets and retail shops. While the Revolutions of 1848 lifted many previous restrictions on political speech, legal measures in the reactionary aftermath nevertheless confined its expression to interior spaces: the newspaper, the reading room, the pub, and the lecture hall. Parties on the center and left vehemently protested this type of censorship with newspaper articles and pamphlets. Yet those who challenged this order with public strikes or demonstrations faced fines, arrests, and bodily injury. Altercations between police and working-class Berliners, particularly young men, flared up periodically, even seasonally.[6] Commentators at the time found these confrontations deeply disturbing. Yet they would pale in comparison to the scale, frequency, organization, violence, and multi-sided nature of clashes that later defined the Weimar Republic.

Although Berlin already possessed the demographics and infrastructure of a mass society in the imperial period, many rules restricted the use of urban space, and the authority of the state remained firmly intact if not unquestioned. The First World War dramatically altered these rules and, in the process, the commercial and political face of the city. The German government had a clear image of what a totally mobilized capital should look like: it should be solemn and industrious. Decrees and propaganda posters hung on surfaces throughout the city and called for discipline in eating, dress, movement, and leisure. If citizens failed to monitor their own habits, new ordinances with sharp penalties ensured compliance. In April 1916, the upper house of the German parliament instituted the world's first daylight savings time and more ambitious energy-saving policies followed. Shops closed early to cut back on coal use and to slow the sale of goods. Many streetcar and bus lines shut down. At the fairgrounds that dotted Berlin's open lots, carousels remained still and boxing rings emptied of spectators. Illuminated signs and shop windows darkened. Street lamps dimmed and, on quiet streets, extinguished all together. The colored veils of green gaslights, red and white incandescent bulbs, and blazing yellow arc lights fell to black. The flow of electric champagne ceased on Kupferberg's illuminated advertisement. Even as they restricted commercial activity, police permitted greater political expression, that is, as long as it galvanized nationalist fervor. As international tensions mounted in July and August 1914, the jubilation of crowds caught officials off-guard. Despite their initial wariness, police allowed several hundred thousand ardent Berliners to gather outside the palace and in the city center. Recruitment and war bond

[6] Thomas Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik: Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin, 1900–1914* (Bonn: Dietz, 1995).

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posters eventually replaced those that advertised for cigarettes, movies, and luggage. Alongside these patriotic displays, Germans' anxieties about the war and their frustrations with its effect on consumption found explicit and menacing expression with panic-buying, growing breadlines, and eventually looting of stocks.[7] These incidents portended possible dangers when politics, commerce, and consumption became so tightly bound together and their links so visible in the streets.

Mass politics and mass consumption experienced their true breakthrough moment in Germany's capital during the period between the two world wars. Urban space, particularly city streets, unleashed these forces and entangled them on an unprecedented scale and to unanticipated and far-reaching effect. Streets became the most significant urban mass media of the era. This was true for the spheres of both politics and commerce and for both the practices of expression and the experiences of reception. As the most visible sign of the 1918 Revolution, citizens seized the right to the street. They congregated en masse in previously restricted public spaces and papered city walls with posters that freely expressed their opinions and interests. These rights became enshrined in the constitution of the Weimar Republic. And yet diverse Berliners interpreted their rights in profoundly different and often mutually exclusive ways. The belief in the power of public space, the sense of new opportunities, and the pressures of endemic economic and political instability drove both entrepreneurs and partisans to stake out territory in the streetscape and with good reason. Unlike print, film, or radio, neither the barrier of price nor the taste of consumers limited the potential audience. The streetscape confronted urban dwellers regardless of their identities and choices. This was why so many different interests seized upon streets and tried to shape them according to their own agendas.

But space was a limited resource. And competition for it exacerbated social conflicts, commercial tensions, and political rivalries. Street space was not simply a discursive mass media. It beckoned with the promise of both voice and power. Berliners claimed the streets with physical occupations and confrontations. They did so as masses, sometimes made up of mere aggregates of individuals and sometimes mobilized as squads of partisans. The inability of authorities to effectively regulate this medium of expression or to manage competing claims emboldened citizens. It also aggravated their dissatisfactions. As an unintended consequence of such intense demand, streets broadcast not the single message of any one party or company but rather the many fractures of a society.

[7] Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

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It was neither a geographic nor temporal accident that the breakthrough moment for mass politics and mass consumption coincided with such a tumultuous period in German history. Through its inherent visibility, competition over the street and its uses sharpened the perception of economic and political fracture and precipitated the collapse of the Weimar Republic. But these persistent demands and divides also prevented the National Socialists from consolidating either a single vision for Berlin or complete power over its streets, despite the regime's unparalleled ambition and effort to do so.

History of Weimar and Nazi-Era Berlin through the Lens of the Street

Through its focus on Berlin's streets, this book provides a new perspective on interwar German history and the history of urban modernity. First, the book brings together two key narratives of interwar Germany that scholars often treat as distinct: the advent of modern consumer culture, on one hand, and the collapse of liberal political authority and rise of Nazism, on the other. In the cultural narrative, scholars describe the period of the Weimar Republic as an extreme expression of capitalist modernity.[8] They draw on texts from novelists, architects, journalists, and Frankfurt School theorists as guides to Berlin streets and spectacles. Through descriptions of office buildings, department stores, movie palaces, grand hotels, and traffic hubs, an urban landscape emerges that appears designed to generate crowds and manipulate their desires. In the political narrative, scholars convey a noticeably different landscape. They focus upon either interior spaces of rancorous parliaments and agitated government offices or on contested streets populated by demonstrators, street fighters, and police.[9] A different source base – newspapers,

[8] Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001); Sabine Hake, *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008). On consumer culture, urban space, gender, and modernity: Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Katharina von Ankum (ed.), *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

[9] Hans Mommsen, *The Rise and Fall of the Weimar Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Thomas Mergel, *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik: Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2002); Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists?: The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Gerhard Paul, *Aufstand der Bilder: Die NS Propaganda vor 1933* (Bonn: Dietz, 1992);

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government reports, and party papers – informs these accounts. These divergent approaches seem to describe two separate worlds or discrete chapters of German history.[10]

In contrast, this book emphasizes the interconnectedness of urban life. Berliners living in the 1920s and 1930s did not divide their actions and perceptions into such neat and distinct categories. Nor do urban dwellers today. Streets offer a useful case study for this interconnectedness because of their capacity to connect spaces and because of the diversity of actors who move through and shape them. In interwar Berlin, networks of transit, infrastructures of press and publicity, and systems of policing and administration emerged along and flowed through streets. Partisans, police, government ministers, municipal officials, disgruntled citizens, lawyers and lobbyists, hawkers, shopkeepers, customers, entrepreneurs, journalists, academics, novelists, painters, and photographers all engaged with city streets. Their varied experiences, perspectives, and impact enable the historian to integrate the concerns of political, cultural, economic, and social history. Such analysis traces a dialectical relationship among the lived experience of the capital, its interpretation and representation in various media, and the political uses of these representations.[11]

Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Marie-Luise Ehls, *Protest und Propaganda: Demonstrationen in Berlin zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997); Dirk Blasius, *Weimars Ende: Bürgerkrieg und Politik, 1930–1933* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); Pamela Swett, *Neighbors and Enemies: The Culture of Radicalism in Berlin, 1929–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Dirk Schumann, *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic: The Fight for the Streets and the Fear of Civil War, 1918–1933*, transl. Thomas Dunlap (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2009); Thomas Friedrich, *Hitler's Berlin: Abused City*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

[10] Synthetic works tend to separate these topics by chapter: Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic and the Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York, NY: Hill & Wang 1993); Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Eberhard Kolb, *Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich: de Gruyter, 2010). The essential sourcebook has a similar thematic organization: Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (eds.), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994). A recent synthetic work on European streetlife in the twentieth century similarly divides politics and culture into distinct chapters: Leif Jerram, *Streetlife: The Untold History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a recent set of case studies that attempt to bridge the gap, see: Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt, and Kristin McGuire (eds.), *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2010).

[11] By focusing on these dialectical relationships, the method draws inspiration of Henri Lefebvre's classic work, *The Production of Space* (*La production de l'espace* (in French). Paris: Anthropos, 1974; trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and the many urban scholars who have since analyzed the complex and rich dynamics of urban space.

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Furthermore, an analysis of interwar urban space reveals overlapping geographies of politics and commerce. Intersections between the two existed because of both coincidence and intent. Berlin's commercial axes ran parallel, intersected, and often overlapped with political flashpoints. At moments of state emergency, police and military troops converged on the transit and shopping center around Potsdamer Platz. In January 1933, the Nazi torchlight parade to celebrate Hitler's appointment as chancellor thronged Unter den Linden and bisected the cavalcade of amusements that lined Friedrichstraße. Election posters appeared side by side with commercial advertisements on thousands of posting columns that punctuated Berlin's streets and intersections. Such convergences were at times accidental but more often intentional and instrumental. Protesters targeted commercial sites because of their ready-made crowds. They endowed these sites with ideological meaning and staged actions there accordingly. National Socialists menaced the commercial elite on Kurfürstendamm in west Berlin as well as hawkers and petty shopkeepers in the immigrant district around Alexanderplatz in east Berlin as part of their strategy to expose the alleged Jewish infiltration of the capital. At Christmas time, Communists invested the same streets with different political meaning. They marched from the poor east to the elegant west to show disparities between industrial classes. Governments, too, used displays of commercial abundance to quell political disturbances and suppress impressions of social fracture. After 1933, the Nazi regime projected a pacified and unified image of the nation by bringing a nostalgic Christmas market and classical Olympic rituals to the Lustgarten, which during the Weimar Republic had served as a contested site of demonstrations.

This common geography makes it necessary to reimagine the politics of the Weimar Republic and Nazi era, namely, how a volatile urban environment shaped these dynamics, in terms of content, practice, regulation, and reception. Political campaigns and their outcomes look quite different from this angle. Scholars have long investigated the imagery and texts of propaganda to explain both the retreat of democratic parties during the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism.[12] Many histories of the period and museum exhibition catalogues reprint campaign posters and party leaflets in order to illustrate narratives and support arguments.

[12] Some examples: Donna Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Julia Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Siegfried Wenisch, *Plakate als Spiegel der politischen Parteien in der Weimarer Republik: Eine Ausstellung des Bayerischen Hauptstaatsarchivs* (Munich: Schmidt, 1996).

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But the interwar public did not encounter these materials in such a pristine state. They encountered them on the street. Similarly, photographs of demonstrations – as they appear in archives, old newspapers, or the plate sections of published histories – center on the participants. Yet a whole urban world surrounded them.

This study qualifies any reading of propaganda by emphasizing the cacophony of voices that filled public space. In the street, parties fought for attention not only against each other but also against the diverse distractions in the urban environment. At times of diminished governmental authority, texts and images colonized display windows, building facades, and other prohibited spaces. Wind and rain battered the posters. Bored children scratched them to pieces. Posters disintegrated into tatters and fell into gutters as scraps. Such a perspective draws focus to the edges and blurred depths of interwar photographs of Berlin and its political sphere – the toothpaste advertisement that bordered the Hitler billboard, the grocery store display windows that lined a parade route, the cigarette hawker who stood beside the partisan newspaper seller.

This context of reception – a shared yet contested urban geography – fundamentally shaped publicity practices. Well before the drama of mass politics entered the scene, commercial practices structured and patterned gazes and movement in the city. Political interests realized during the Weimar Republic how to harness and divert these structures and patterns. Commercial entrepreneurs honed many of the tools of mass communication that partisans copied for their own ends: the poster, the sandwich board, and the motorcade. Crowded and competitive public space limited the transmission of political messages. At the same time, this transmission entirely depended on intersecting and disrupting diverse urban traffic. Arresting the crowd's gaze was a fundamental principle for both mass commerce and mass politics. And this has explanatory potential. Textual and graphic strategies evolved rapidly in the 1920s and 1930s. Poster captions, for example, shrank in content and amplified in shrillness. This was true for commercial advertisements as well as for campaign posters. These strategies were desperate bids for attention in the midst of depressed consumption and frequent election battles. But these strategies also served as a defensive reaction against escalating competition for viewers' attention within a riotous cityscape.

By discerning the contours, meanings, and uses of Berlin's streetscape during the Weimar Republic, we may more fully comprehend how the Nazis mobilized it for their own ideological purposes yet also failed to do so. As political latecomers to Berlin, National Socialists inherited the built environment, its residents, and their existing sensibilities. In

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