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978-1-107-02889-0 - Contested Commemorations: Republican War Veterans and Weimar  
Political Culture

Benjamin Ziemann

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## Introduction

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When the bloodshed and fighting of the First World War ended on 11 November 1918, Germans, along with the people of other belligerent nations, began to transform their war experiences into a set of personal recollections and memories. This was a highly selective process: while some aspects of the war receded quickly into the background, others acquired a heightened symbolic meaning with growing temporal distance from the actual events. These personal recollections, to be sure, not only had relevance for the individual and his close family and friends; they also fed into a pattern of public commemorations of war that ultimately served political purposes. German veterans' associations in particular were highly politicised, and dwelled upon those commemorative themes that they knew would resonate among their members. Compared with France and Great Britain, however, the commemoration of war in Germany took place in a radically altered political context. Only two days before the armistice, on 9 November 1918, Majority Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann had pronounced the German Republic from the Reichstag in Berlin. Yet there was more than only a temporal coincidence between the abolition of the Hohenzollern monarchy and German military defeat. In the recollection of many German war veterans, the proclamation of the Republic was the positive corollary of a defeat that had been, in the first instance, the result of the extreme imperialist ambitions of the monarchy and its ruling elites.

These pro-republican recollections of the First World War are the subject of this study. This book will investigate the shaping of those war memories that were, in one way or another, supportive of the Weimar Republic as a political project. It will scrutinise the symbolism, language and performative power of public commemorations of war that were based on these more private reminiscences. With such a focus, this book goes against the grain of a long-established interpretation that found its seminal formulation in the late George L. Mosse's comparative study of war remembrances. Here, Mosse analysed a pattern of public

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representations and symbols that he called the ‘myth of the war experience, which looked back upon the war as a meaningful and even sacred event’. This myth ‘was designed to mask war and to legitimize the war experience’.<sup>1</sup> While such mythological representations of the front-line experiences emerged in all belligerent nations, they were most ‘urgently needed’ and most widely appreciated ‘in the defeated nations’. But it was only in Germany, Mosse insisted, that nationalist war remembrances ‘informed most postwar politics’, and it was this country that ‘proved most hospitable to the myth’.<sup>2</sup> This argument chimes in with the more general and widely accepted point that post-war Germany was in denial about the inevitability of military defeat in 1918, and that the majority of German war veterans had tremendous difficulties adapting to peace and contributing to a ‘cultural demobilization’.<sup>3</sup>

Experts in the field have argued for some time that it would be wrong to assume that the war experience forced a whole generation of former German soldiers to seek refuge ‘in a life of violence in paramilitary uniform’ or at least to ‘glorify violence and things military’.<sup>4</sup> Such an interpretation of war remembrances in Weimar Germany is, as Richard Bessel has pointed out, ‘inconsistent with the fact that the largest interest-group formed by veterans’ was actually organised by Social Democrats.<sup>5</sup> The ‘Reichsbund of War Disabled, War Veterans and War Dependants’ (Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegsteilnehmer und Kriegerhinterbliebenen), founded in the spring of 1917, and with a

<sup>1</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 10. It is a testament to the innovative nature of Mosse’s research that he actually discussed the war experience as a challenge for the post-1918 political left, particularly in Germany, also touching upon the Reichsbanner. As often, however, he presented sweeping generalisations, here on the militarism of the Reichsbanner and its ‘imitation of the right’, with hardly any empirical evidence. See George L. Mosse, ‘La sinistra Europea e l’esperienza della guerra (Germania e Francia)’, in *Rivoluzione e reazione in Europa, 1917–1924: Convegno storico internazionale, Perugia, 1978* (Rome: Avanti, 1978), pp. 151–67 (quotes on p. 159).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (London: Granta, 2004), pp. 189–230; Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1933* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2003); Laurence Van Ypersele, ‘Mourning and Memory, 1919–45’, in John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I* (Chichester: Wiley, 2010), pp. 576–90 (p. 583). On the notion of ‘cultural demobilization’ see John Horne, ‘Kulturelle Demobilisierung 1919–1939: Ein sinnvoller Begriff?’, in Wolfgang Hardtwig (ed.), *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1939* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), pp. 129–50.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 258. See also the pathbreaking study by Bernd Ulrich, *Die Augenzeugen: Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914–1933* (Essen: Klartext, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Bessel, *Germany*, p. 258.

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peak membership of 830,000 in 1922, was by far the largest of all associations that represented disabled war veterans in Weimar Germany.<sup>6</sup> In the latter half of the 1920s, the Reichsbund often collaborated with the 'Reichsbanner Black-Red-Gold' (Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold), established in the spring of 1924 as a 'League of Republican Ex-Servicemen'. The designated purpose of the Reichsbanner was to defend the Republic, and support the campaigning of the parties that had formed the Weimar coalition in 1919, i.e. the Social Democrats, the Catholic Centre Party and the left-liberal German Democratic Party (DDP). In practice, however, the Reichsbanner was dominated by members and supporters of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), who accounted for 90 per cent of its membership. With its very substantial presence in a wide array of associations in the socialist working-class milieu, the Reichsbanner and its approximately one million members played a pivotal role in the representation of republican war memories both for individuals and the wider public. As the following chapters will demonstrate, Reichsbund and Reichsbanner were at the forefront of attempts to develop a pro-republican language of war remembrance, and to elaborate an appropriate set of commemorative symbols and rituals in the public sphere. Yet these champions of a democratic commemoration of war did not act in a political vacuum. Rather, their interventions have to be understood against the backdrop of narratives established in nationalist circles, by, for example, former members of the *Freikorps*, writers and novelists who wrote using the tropes of soldierly nationalism, and, last but not least, the Stormtroopers and other members of the National Socialist Party.<sup>7</sup>

### Contested commemorations

Throughout the Weimar Republic, right-wing authors and associations on the one hand, and Social Democrats on the other, were locked into an intense and often bitter dispute over public representations of the war experience. For this reason, and owing to the substantial range and

<sup>6</sup> Robert W. Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> On these nationalist narratives and mythologies, see, among others, Matthias Sprenger, *Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich? Zu Genese und Wandel des Freikorpsmythos* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008); Roger Woods, 'Die neuen Nationalisten und ihre Einstellung zum 1. Weltkrieg', *Krieg und Literatur/War and Literature* 1 (1989), 59–79; and Gerd Krumeich (ed.), *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext, 2010); as well as the older but still valuable study by Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1978 [1962]), pp. 93–111.

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presence of pro-republican recollections of the Great War, there was 'no dominant memory of the war' in Germany until 1933, as Alan Kramer has observed.<sup>8</sup> When members of Reichsbund and Reichsbanner contemplated the meaning of their front-line service and constructed its memory in various ways, their contributions were part and parcel of the contested commemorations of the Great War in Weimar Germany. In the highly polarised public sphere of post-war Germany, the mechanisms of contestation worked both ways. Social Democrats were indeed able to deny the legitimacy of many powerful right-wing war myths. But when they offered their own symbols and narratives of the war experience and claimed that these would express popular sentiment more properly, their interventions also reflected the discursive limits imposed by the already existing nationalist framework of interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

In the following, I will focus on the two associations, Reichsbund and Reichsbanner, in order to investigate the politics of republican commemorations of war, to analyse the selective nature of these memories and to unravel the key narratives that Social Democrats used to engage with their past participation in a brutal conflict. Such an endeavour requires more than a simple, conventional institutional history of these two associations and their relative position in the field of German veterans' politics.<sup>10</sup> As far as the primary source material allows, the construction of war memories will be contextualised in the

<sup>8</sup> Alan Kramer, 'The First World War and German Memory', in Heather Jones, Jennifer O'Brien and Christoph Schmidt-Supprian (eds.), *Untold War: New Perspectives in First World War Studies* (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2008), pp. 385–415 (p. 390); Bernd Ulrich, 'Die umkämpfte Erinnerung: Überlegungen zur Wahrnehmung des Ersten Weltkrieges in der Weimarer Republik', in Jörg Duppler and Gerhard P. Groß (eds.), *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis–Wirkung–Nachwirkung* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999), pp. 367–75 (p. 368).

<sup>9</sup> As a first provisional outline of this argument see my 'Republikanische Kriegserinnerung in einer polarisierten Öffentlichkeit: Das Reichsbanner Schwarz–Rot–Gold als Veteranenverband der sozialistischen Arbeiterschaft', *HZ* 267 (1998), 357–98. For Austria, see now the innovative study by Oswald Überegger, *Erinnerungskriege: Der Erste Weltkrieg, Österreich und die Tiroler Kriegserinnerung in der Zwischenkriegszeit (1918–1939)* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The standard account on the Reichsbanner is Karl Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner Schwarz Rot Gold: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Struktur der politischen Kampfbünde zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966); two valuable regional studies, on Munich and Saxony respectively, are Günther Gerstenberg, *Freiheit! Sozialdemokratischer Selbstschutz im München der zwanziger und frühen dreißiger Jahre*, 2 vols. (Andechs: Edition Ulenspiegel, 1997); and Carsten Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung: Das Reichsbanner Schwarz–Rot–Gold und der Rote Frontkämpferbund in Sachsen 1924–1933* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009). All three studies touch upon the commemorative politics of the Reichsbanner only briefly, and are mostly concerned with its role as a republican defence league. Cf. James M. Diehl, 'Germany: Veterans' Politics under Three Flags', in Stephen R. Ward (ed.), *The War Generation: Veterans of the First World War* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975), pp. 135–86.

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associational culture of the local Reichsbanner branches in particular. Both Reichsbund and Reichsbanner were democratic and hence by definition pluralistic organisations, in which ordinary members were able to voice the symbols, ideas, and narratives that they thought best represented their personal memories of the Great War, in meetings, in articles for the membership journals and in public speeches. Little is still known ‘about the historical circumstances that encourage practices of personal remembering and vernacular commemoration’.<sup>11</sup> It is thus necessary to question whether Reichsbanner members tended to gloss over memories of hardship and disillusionment at the front and started to frame their recollections in more positive terms, emphasising their ability to cope with and endure the circumstances of war. Which notions of German national identity did pro-republican war veterans prioritise, and how were they embedded in their own personal experiences, both during the war and in post-war society? Situating republican war memories in their proper social and cultural context also requires an understanding of the problems and constraints Reichsbanner members faced when they tried to reconcile their personal recollections with the public discourse on the mythologised ‘war experience’.

### Performative aspects of Weimar democracy

As an investigation of republican war memories in Weimar Germany, this study contributes to the growing literature on the remembrance of the First World War, both with regard to Germany, and in a wider, European perspective.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is necessary to admit that memory as a field of research, as Alon Confino noted fifteen years ago, does ‘not offer any true additional explanatory power. Only when linked to historical questions and problems’ can it be ‘illuminating’.<sup>13</sup> Heeding this

<sup>11</sup> Peter Fritzsche, ‘The Case of Modern Memory’, *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001), 87–117 (p. 108).

<sup>12</sup> On Germany, see in particular Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Greg Caplan, *Wicked Sons, German Heroes: Jewish Soldiers, Veterans and Memories of World War I in Germany* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008); Philipp Stiasny, *Das Kino und der Krieg: Deutschland 1914–1929* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2009); and Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton University Press, 2009). More generally, see the seminal studies by Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); and *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Alon Confino, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method’, *American Historical Review* 102 (1997), 1386–1403 (p. 1388). An excellent overview on the growing literature on memory studies is Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and

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important suggestion, this study of republican war memories above all aims to contribute to our understanding of the participatory potential and performative power of Weimar democracy. Earlier historiography on Germany after 1918 faced no difficulties at all when explaining the failure and ultimate destruction of the republican system by the Nazis in 1933 in terms of a multiplicity of problems. Inherent weaknesses of the republican settlement were crucial in this historiographical framework, as was the assumed ‘lack of legitimacy’ of the democratic system, which seemed to be based on a more general ‘lack of active commitment to the new order’.<sup>14</sup> The determination and brutality of those who resented the Republic from its inception added to these difficulties. By drawing lines of continuity from the war experience, and especially from the experience of the trenches, it seemed appropriate to explain the rise of Nazism and the concomitant surge of political violence in the post-war period in terms of a brutalisation thesis. Participation in the killing and shelling from 1914 to 1918 had prepared the ground for authoritarian attitudes and hatred against Jews, and indeed anyone else who seemed to symbolise the democratic system.<sup>15</sup> All in all, then, the primary aim for historians was to account for the failure of the Weimar Republic.

However, the historiographical agenda has fundamentally changed, instigated by a landmark article by Peter Fritzsche, in which he asked the provocative question, ‘Did Weimar fail?’<sup>16</sup> His intention was not to suggest ‘no’ as a possible answer. Rather, his essay was an invitation to think outside the box and to develop more imaginative lines of argument for the study of the first German Republic. In this view, it seems appropriate to consider Weimar as a laboratory of modernity, in which a broad range of social, political and cultural experiments were conducted, and people tried to grapple with the modern condition in a variety of ways. Some of these experiments led to no conclusive results, some were disappointing, others ended soon in outright failure even before the Nazi seizure of power moved the goalposts in the political field. But seen together, all these experiments make it abundantly clear

Jay Winter (eds.), *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe* (Manchester University Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Again, Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, pp. 159–81, was a crucial reference point. As a critique, see Benjamin Ziemann, ‘Germany after the First World War: A Violent Society? Results and Implications of Recent Research on Weimar Germany’, *Journal of Modern European History* 1 (2003), 80–95.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Fritzsche, ‘Did Weimar Fail?’, *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996), 629–56.

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that the history of the Weimar Republic cannot simply be written as a narrative of tragic demise.<sup>17</sup>

Amidst this wider shift in the overall framework of historical work on Weimar, two aspects are of particular importance with regard to the contested republican commemorations of the Great War. First, this shift has led to a renewed emphasis on the semantic structures that framed temporality and informed the horizon of expectations among contemporary actors. From this perspective, it makes sense to investigate the present futures, i.e. the possible states of politics and society in ten or fifteen years as they were anticipated and expressed at any given point after 1918. Such an inquiry reveals the large number of rather optimistic visions of the future throughout the 1920s. Even after the carnage of war, Weimar contemporaries did not simply abandon their belief in the possibility of progress, not least because the constitutional framework of the Republic itself opened up a whole raft of promising opportunities and allowed people to work towards positive change.<sup>18</sup> This reassessment of the semantics of the future has crucial implications for the attempts of Social Democratic war veterans to boost support for the republican project. Leaders of the Reichsbanner in particular used every opportunity to stress that they were working towards a better future for Germany, and that only a fair and democratic society could ensure a recovery of the nation. Yet such a rhetorical orientation towards the future stood in a stark contrast to the ceaseless exploitation of the legacy of the fallen soldiers. With their immersion in the remembrance of the First World War, the Reichsbanner members defended the Republic against right-wing mythologies. But at the same time, they tended to neglect or perhaps even to obfuscate Weimar's present future, a temporal marker that was of paramount importance as a motivation for republican activism. In that sense, the obvious obsession of a veterans' association with the past hindered the equally necessary engagement with the future.

A second relevant aspect of this historiographical shift is the attention devoted to the performative aspects of politics. In this perspective, the theatrical dimensions of the political process are seen not only as a mere façade or an empty shell that adds nothing to the political content. On the contrary, this approach focuses on the ways in which rituals and public speech acts regulate change in the status of individuals

<sup>17</sup> For further references and reflections see Benjamin Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar: Politics, Culture and the Emplotment of the German Republic', *German History* 28 (2010), 542–71.

<sup>18</sup> See Rüdiger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik: Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008).



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or institutions and facilitate or reintegrate challenges to an established social order.<sup>19</sup> Such a perspective is vital for an understanding of the promises and pitfalls of republican politics in the 1920s. The new regime itself was based on the transition from monarchy to a republic, and hence lively and attractive performative rituals were required in order to make the structures of a participatory democracy tangible.<sup>20</sup> Earlier historiography has often stated that the proponents of Weimar, and the Social Democratic left in particular, tended to underestimate the significance of symbolic politics. Based on a sober, rationalistic notion of politics as a debate among the reasonable, they neglected the persuasive potential of colourful and emotional rituals, speech acts and other symbolic performances.<sup>21</sup> Recent research, notably the important study by Nadine Rossol of the ‘staging of the republic’, has substantially revised this interpretation. These studies have highlighted how the office of the Reichskunstwart and its ambitious head, Edwin Redslob, who was responsible for the official state pageantry and the shape of state symbols, aimed to develop an appropriate symbolism for the Republic. One important part of these endeavours was the festivities on 11 August. From 1921 onwards, the day on which Reich President Friedrich Ebert had signed off and thus promulgated the constitution in 1919 was celebrated as Constitution Day. Beginning on 11 August 1924, the Reichsbanner was a key driving force for attempts to stage marches, speeches and other Constitution Day festivities in even the remotest corners of the Reich, and thus to shape a distinctively democratic and inclusive political ritual around the founding document of the new polity.<sup>22</sup>

Against this backdrop of recent work on the performative aspects of Weimar democracy, pro-republican commemorations of war have a wider significance that goes far beyond the field of memory studies.

<sup>19</sup> In memory studies, performative aspects were analysed in the pathbreaking study by Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> See Ziemann, ‘Weimar was Weimar’, pp. 560–4.

<sup>21</sup> See the references in Manuela Achilles, ‘With a Passion for Reason: Celebrating the Constitution in Weimar Germany’, *CEH* 43 (2010), 666–89 (pp. 666f.).

<sup>22</sup> Nadine Rossol, *Performing the Nation in Interwar Germany: Sport, Spectacle and Political Symbolism 1926–1936* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), esp. 58–79. See also Achilles, ‘Celebrating’; and Manuela Achilles, ‘Performing the Reich: Democratic Symbols and Rituals in the Weimar Republic’, in Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt and Kristin McGuire (eds.), *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 175–91; Bernd Buchner, *Um nationale und republikanische Identität: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie und der Kampf um die politischen Symbole in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 2001).



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The legacy of the First World War was one of the pivotal political battlegrounds in Weimar. When Reichsbund and Reichsbanner members intervened in this field, they not only offered an alternative reading of past events that were of primary interest for the community of war veterans, widows and orphans. Unveiling a war memorial, paying tribute to the fallen soldiers on Constitution Day or on other national holidays, or displaying military decorations during a republican rally were only some examples of a whole raft of symbolic performances that ultimately contributed to the political fabric of Weimar democracy. From this perspective, it should also be clear that the history of republican war remembrances is more than a mere complement to the existing historiography on the nationalist war mythologies of the anti-democratic right. To be sure, a proper assessment of the memory politics of Social Democratic war veterans can add both nuance and substance to the already established arguments about the contingent nature of Weimar's collapse, and for the openness of political possibilities in the 1920s.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, the story of the Reichsbund and Reichsbanner war veterans is not simply a straightforward alternative narrative that can offer consolation and historical optimism, based on the insight that not all German war veterans were brutalised, ready to glorify violence and use war remembrances for an assault on the Republic. The history of republican war memories has to be cast in a wider and more complicated fashion. It should not merely underpin a superficial success story, and should instead highlight the ambivalence of Social Democratic engagement with the past. These ambivalences stemmed from the fact that Social Democrats had their own difficulties in coming to terms with the initial support of the party for the war in 1914, and the subsequent division into pro- and anti-war factions as the fighting continued.<sup>24</sup> However, these legacies of the decision to support national unity in 1914 were not the only ambivalence of republican commemorations of war. As the following chapters will explore in more detail, Reichsbanner activism was characterised by substantial inherent contradictions, especially with regard to the articulation of gender roles and the formulation of a coherent anti-war stance. While the association affirmed progressive Social Democratic ideals of female emancipation in principle, it did not

<sup>23</sup> As a summary, see Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar'; an important case study is the book on the political culture of parliamentary debates by Thomas Mergel, *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik: Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> The most thorough account of this decision and its consequences is Wolfgang Kruse, *Krieg und nationale Integration: Eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedenschlusses 1914/15* (Essen: Klartext, 1993).

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admit women as members and thus excluded them from pro-republican work. Additionally, although Reichsbanner members supported moderate pacifist and anti-militarist ideals, they presented themselves – at least to some degree – as a paramilitary formation. These are only the two most important contradictions in Social Democratic attempts to turn the trauma of war from a liability into an asset of the new democratic system.

However, it would be unbalanced and counterintuitive to stress only ambivalence in the attempts by moderate socialists to come to terms with their own participation in total war, and to foster political allegiances on these shared memories. Republican commemorations of war were an important element of the political culture in 1920s Germany. They mattered because they injected a convincing point of reference and a strong sense of commitment and emotional justification into the social democratic discourse on the Republic, harking back to the injustice workers had experienced in the Imperial Army. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the term ‘republic’ had not lost semantic currency, but encapsulated the hopes and achievements of the many front-line soldiers among Weimar’s Social Democrats.<sup>25</sup> It is all the more surprising that historians who have studied the rich organisational culture of Social Democracy during the Weimar period, and the attempts of party members to defend the Republic against the onslaught from the right, have failed to identify war remembrances as an important cultural element in the tightly knit associational fabric of the Social Democratic milieu.<sup>26</sup>

### Comparative aspects

Thus, a historical investigation of republican war remembrances has relevance beyond the field of memory studies. It casts light on the wider problem of how the moderate German left tried to turn the social and cultural legacy of total war into symbolic capital that could strengthen their overall political stance. Ultimately, such a re-description of collective war remembrances in Weimar Germany also has implications

<sup>25</sup> For the claim that the term ‘Republik’ had lost semantic currency, see Dieter Langewiesche, *Republik und Republikaner: Von der historischen Entwertung eines Begriffs* (Essen: Klartext, 1993), p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> See for instance Peter Lösche and Franz Walter, ‘Zur Organisationskultur der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik: Niedergang der Klassenkultur oder solidargemeinschaftlicher Höherpunkt?’, *GG* 15 (1989), 511–36; Donna Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).