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perspective on the interwar period -
Democracies and Totalitarian Regimes in the Interwar Period

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**Part 6: Breaking new ground?
On the achievements and shortcomings of a franco-german perspective
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Generally it is relatively easy to criticize history textbooks for all the points they fail to mention. If we account for the number of pages in question, which are usually strictly limited – and indeed Part Six comprises only 63 heavily illustrated pages on the topic of ‘Democracies and Totalitarian Regimes in the Interwar Period’ – the first question should address which focus topics are given consideration and which points are given emphasis. From this point of view, it cannot be denied that the authors of the section under discussion here (Michaela Braun, Martin Wicke, Bernadette Galloux; with dossiers from Bénédicte Toucheboeuf and Peter Geiss) have been highly successful, both in achieving a balanced presentation of the latest research in historical scholarship on selected focus areas and in conveying significant insights into the specific challenges of this era via well-designed didactic units. It appears appropriate in view of the book’s conception as a whole that particular attention is paid to the juxtaposition of German and French developments in the period under examination; the focus of the six lessons in the first sub-chapter on the ‘Crisis of the Democratic Constitutional States (1918–1933)’, however, is by no means restricted to this. The rise of Italian fascism is addressed on a double page alongside the important political turning-points of the French and German Republics following the First World War. Additionally, a dossier provides information about important processes of the Spanish Civil War. The attractive design of the book on the whole not least derives from two further dossiers of historiographical nature: one on the question as to whether the Weimar Republic was doomed to fall; the second on the problem of whether the fascism of the period was a ‘universal problem’. It is on these pages in particular that special weight is given to self-reflection, which – whilst highly praiseworthy – is rather unusual for textbooks. The pupils are not presented with an approach to history that reveals it as a series of events; rather, it is portrayed as a confrontation with different, sometimes contradictory, paths of interpretation. Additionally, double pages on methodological issues, one on caricatures and posters; the other, in Chapter 15, on the analysis of photography in the history of these media; in both cases linked to practical tips on interpreting selected sources. Essentially, the concluding historiographical dossier on the topic ‘Totalitarianism in Literature and Film’ in Part Six belongs in the same context, as the discussion here focuses on the influence inherent in fictional historical interpretations within popular culture, based on three classics from the history of literature and film: Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1948). This double-page feature is particularly positively striking in view of the recently intensified standards set by film producers and directors to convey a more sustained emotional

approach to the reality of totalitarian regimes than has been provided by the history lessons of the last decades.[1]The preference given to such a theoretically and methodologically conscious procedure equally lends structure to both further sub-chapters of Part Six. Chapter 14 – on the history of 'National-Socialist Germany' – thus initially addresses the ideological basis of the NS Regime before subsequently focusing on how the dictatorship could come about, the characteristics of the system and its rule of violence and terror. Four further dossiers provide additional information on these topics via an in-depth study of 'Racial Law and Discrimination' in National Socialism, social and economic development and policies regarding propaganda and culture, in each case for the period up until 1939. The concluding fourth dossier is also of a historiographical nature and discusses the role of Hitler as reflected by research. Once again, this selection appears highly successful, as it shifts the focus towards a topic that has attracted a great deal of public attention to significant academic debates since history began to document National Socialism. Compared with the portrayal of the NS dictatorship, those of the Bolsheviks and the Stalinist regime appear rather brief, comprising only 12 pages. Nevertheless, they are not by any means restricted to conveying the situation as a whole; rather, they deal with the 'Stalinist Cult', the construction and murderous consequences of the Stalinist-Gulag system. A further historiographical dossier presents totalitarianism as a 'controversial model of analysis', a concept to be reinforced by the chapter as a whole (pp. 294f.). It is in these sections especially that the particular potential of the Franco-German History Textbook becomes evident; the situation in the 1930s, both east and west of the Rhine, is illustrated with a conscious directness via a mutual, source-based portrayal. One of the advantages of such an approach is that it critically questions established clichés of Nazi Germans versus the democratic French. The concluding page on the 'Franco-German Change of Perspective', however, should further inspire its readers towards critical and fundamental reflection on the basic historical concepts of Part Six, for here it becomes clear how and why historical scholarship on the interwar period has placed different points of focus on each side of the Rhine. Extracts from the debate initiated by the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell on the echo of fascism in France in the 1930s should inspire discussion, as should the examples of the opposing interpretations of history between West and East Germany up until the end of the 1980s. Equally, the concluding comparison of National Socialism and Stalinism picks up on debates within contemporary historiography, thus providing insight – albeit cursory – into an important discussion, in turn revealing specific stances within the German and French positions. As the double-page topics begin with a leading question that is usually clearly formulated at the start, at the end then being concluded with a catalogue of 'questions and ideas', there seems to be no doubt that readers of the textbook might miss out on the principle messages of Part Six. The maps, statistics and illustrations, which for the most part have been well selected, serve the same purpose, although the picture gallery printed in the introduction to Chapter Six provides some initial indications as to which topics will be addressed on the following pages. These include – to name some examples – documentary photographs of a campaign scenario in the Weimar Republic, a speech given by Mussolini, a photograph of one of the first concentration camps in National-Socialist Germany following the 'Rise to

Power'; some large-scale propaganda from the fine arts or in poster form, concluded by a film extract from George Orwell's 1984. As all pictures printed in a small format in the three sub-chapters of this larger section appear again – enlarged and with captions – on the following pages, they provide the pupils with an initial atmospheric introduction to the general topic. A glance at the picture gallery suffices to clarify what the author responsible for this section considers the most important indicators of the interwar period in Europe: the political mobilisation of the masses and the ideological struggle, strikes and violent societal conflicts, public humiliation of those with different political ideas, socio-political support of the 'people's comrades' in excluding entire population groups on account of race, and the totalitarian rise to power. The selection does thus highlight the essential features of the interwar period without, however – to move on to critical objections – achieving a complete overview of the political history of these years, which indeed is the focus here.

This shortcoming is firstly due to the conception of the textbook as a whole; significant developments from the interwar period, such as new economic and societal as well as cultural aspects are dealt with in other chapters (chapters 5 to 8). If, however, the term 'consensual dictatorship' is used as it is – and correctly so – in the sections on National Socialism (p. 258), then this can only make sense in the light of the considerably more flexible options open to many people from the 1920s onwards, whether with a view to the roles of men and women (pp. 122f.), the new social relations in industrial society (pp. 118f.) or the 'cultural participation of the masses' (pp. 146f.). Whether these details become clear to the pupils via such a separate presentation of political, societal, social and cultural issues, however, appears doubtful. Secondly, the Franco-German structuring of the textbook proves to be a serious disadvantage when portraying important information on the interwar period. For, although the democratic crisis is briefly touched upon – at least with regard to Hungary and Poland – and the nationalistic factor is equally given consideration when addressing the rise to power of 'authoritarian regimes' (all on p. 236), the ethnic conflict situation in Eastern and Central Europe and the national and international tension that arose from it are barely given the attention they deserve. The double page on 'Europe after the Peace Treaties' (p. 224) cannot compensate for this shortcoming.[2] There is more that strikes the reader negatively, if we are to provide a list of detailed criticism here. The timeline (p. 234) depicts key dates from German and Italian history since 1919, whereas only the founding of the Communist Party is mentioned regarding France in the 1920s. Furthermore, the portrayal of the economic consequences of the First World War (p. 236) is missing an explanation – alongside the information provided on France's and Great Britain's financial dependence on the USA – of the fact that, essentially, the losers of the war, who ultimately included the Third Reich, managed to manoeuvre themselves into a similar position as far as post-war loans were concerned. Additionally, the short introduction to the British miners' strike (p. 237) does not appear convincing because the Times article printed claims that the miners had indeed questioned the political system, while a previous explanatory text declares that – unlike their counterparts on the Continent – they had refrained from doing so. And although the concluding exercises for the teaching units are generally of a good standard, they do tend to underchallenge the pupils. An example is to be found on p. 239, where a poster should be allocated to a

political group already explicitly named in the subheading. Many more details could be criticised: does it, for instance, really make sense to print a mechanical and somewhat confusing diagram of the Weimar Constitution, or would other illustrative or textual sources have been more convincing here? In conclusion, however, it seems more important to mention more fundamental considerations. First of all, it is problematic that the discussion of more recent research topics – an example would be Götz Aly's book on the National-Socialist 'People's State' – completely disregards the objections voiced by academic critics against the author's somewhat exaggerated ideas. Secondly, the fact that many extracts from sources originate from older works is unsatisfactory: 'History in sources' (published by the Oldenbourg Verlag) is a frequently given reference, although countless critical editions on contemporary history have been published in the meantime. The pupils thus miss out on highly significant details pertaining to the use of such sources. Thirdly, the textbook does not suitably exhaust the opportunities provided by the Internet, neither with regard to the sources, nor to scholarly literature. Although Part Six does include a couple of indications towards the World Wide Web, they are by no means sufficient for guiding future users towards a critical use of online historical material.[3] Finally, the team of authors have evidently not met their own standards in giving sufficient consideration to the European and even global dimensions in their portrayals.[4] The rather cursory pointers towards colonial history in Part Four certainly do not compensate for this; indeed, these do not by any means cover the significant involvement of Europeans with the 'non-European' world between the Wars. And yet despite these restrictive comments, the general impression left by Part Six is a positive one. For this section provides – above all for the political history of the interwar period – important pointers for developing a discursively orientated historical consciousness. Whether or not the book will indeed find the readers it deserves amongst teachers and pupils – in view of curricula planning on both sides of the Rhine and the ensuing narrowed allocation of lessons to the subject of history – remains to be seen, however.

[Übersetzer]

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- [1] Cf. Frank Bösch, 'Film, NS-Vergangenheit und Geschichtswissenschaft. Von Holocaust zu Der Untergang', in: Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 55 (2007), pp. 1-33.
- [2] Cf., for instance, Hans Lemberg (ed.), Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert (1918-1939). Stärke und Schwächen der neuen Staaten, nationale Minderheiten, Marburg 1997.
- [3] Cf. Christoph Cornelißen, 'Internet und Geschichtswissenschaft. Anmerkungen aus der Praxis von historischer Lehre und Forschung', in: Olaf Hartung, Katja Köhr (eds), Geschichte und Geschichtsvermittlung. Festschrift für Karl-Heinrich Pohl, Bielefeld 2008, pp. 147-158.
- [4] Cf. on the general context: Walther L. Bernecker, Europa zwischen den Weltkriegen 1914-1945, Stuttgart 2002.