

## Britain and the Weimar Republic: The History of a Cultural Relationship

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In March 2011, BBC Two broadcast a 90-minute adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's *Christopher and His Kind* (1976).<sup>(1)</sup> Leaving aside its possible merits and/or shortcomings, the airing of this TV-dramatisation was indicative of an on-going fascination with Isherwood's portrayal of the decadent, Nazi-ridden Berlin of the Weimar Republic, captured most famously in his *Berlin Novels* and in Bob Fosse's 1972 film *Cabaret*. Undoubtedly, popular perceptions of the first German Republic in the Anglophone world have been and continue to be shaped primarily by accounts given by Isherwood and his friends W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender. Not only has popular imagination been dominated by Isherwood & co., but also, to a great extent, previous academic research on contemporary British interaction with the Republic. Colin Storer's well-researched, clearly organised and very readable *Britain and the Weimar Republic* seeks to remedy this unrepresentative picture of British intellectual attitudes towards Weimar Germany that has hitherto been presented.

As Storer outlines in his introduction, focus on the Isherwood-circle has obscured the 'sheer number of British intellectuals who visited Germany in this period, and the diversity [...] of these visitors' (p. 5), who have previously been discussed rather briefly, or unjustly forgotten altogether. While one might quibble slightly with the subtitle of the book – *The History of a Cultural Relationship* might lead one to expect discussion of mutual perceptions or two-way cultural relations – this can be overlooked as Storer clearly sets out his purpose in his introduction: 'to provide the first broad comparative study of the attitudes of British intellectuals towards Weimar Germany, examining the diversity of these attitudes, at the same time looking for areas of commonality in the discourse on the Weimar Republic' (p. 10). Storer also seeks to trace degrees

of change and continuity in British attitudes to Germany between the pre- and post-First World War eras, and to assess 'what made a country that had recently been an enemy in the most destructive conflict Europe had ever known so attractive and fascinating to British intellectuals in the 1920s' (p. 2). Having stated his aims succinctly at the start, Storer keeps to them clearly and consistently throughout his work, thereby succeeding not only in broadening the range of British commentators associated with the Weimar Republic beyond the Isherwood-Auden group, but also in challenging the dominant perception that the British fascination with Weimar Germany was almost exclusively based on two overriding aspects: its vibrant homosexual nightlife, on the one hand, and the apparently unstoppable rise of Nazism and inevitable collapse of democracy, on the other. In fact, Storer traces a wide range of ideas, issues and themes that attracted British intellectuals to the Weimar Republic – especially, but by no means only to Berlin – such as its association with crisis, instability and victimhood, as well as modernity, decadence, youth and rebelliousness.

One key aim of Storer's study, then, and one of its greatest strengths, is to bring to light previously neglected British accounts of Germany after 1918. While Isherwood and friends are not completely disregarded, since they were certainly important if overemphasised British observers of Weimar Germany, Storer draws together an impressive number of lesser-known figures who travelled to Germany between 1918 and 1933, and who recorded their experiences and impressions either in published or unpublished forms (e.g. correspondence, diaries, articles, books). The scope of the study is established in its broad understanding of 'intellectuals' (2), focussing especially on 'professional writers of one sort or another' (p. 3). In order to aid the reader who, quite understandably, might not be familiar with some of Storer's chosen intellectuals, an appendix of biographical notes is included to provide orientation for the main text. 22 individuals are listed in this appendix which gives a good indication of the breadth of Storer's investigation. (3) Reference is also made to memoirists, civil servants, military personnel and public figures, further enhancing and contextualising the wide-reaching perspectives examined. The range of examples that Storer has unearthed and analyses in his book, especially previously marginalised female accounts, therefore makes his claim to give a broader, more representative picture of British attitudes to the Weimar Republic wholly convincing and successful.

The book is organised into seven thematic chapters, each of which serves well as a stand-alone section while also fitting nicely into the bigger picture. Moreover, this thematic approach emphasises that diversity and those commonalities Storer has set out to highlight. Chapter one examines 'British travel and tourism in Weimar Germany' and expounds various motivations for visiting the Republic. Storer notes that at that time, Germany, and in particular Berlin, was a crossroads for European travel on both an East-West and a North-South axis. The war had temporarily interrupted British travel to Germany – which had been developing since the 18th century – but was quickly resumed after hostilities ended, albeit in considerably altered circumstances. Having distinguished between various groups of visitors to Germany, ranging from military personnel and diplomats to holiday-makers touring the western and southern regions, Storer outlines the diverse nature of British 'intellectual travel' to the Republic, setting the scene for the rest of the book. An unprecedented number of British intellectuals visited Germany after the war; some purely for pleasure, some in search of career opportunities or in professional capacities as correspondents or in order to research for books and articles, others wanted to observe the exciting and turbulent situation in the new Germany for themselves, seeing their trips as educational and, in some cases, acts of self-discovery and rebelliousness. The number of intellectual visitors peaked in periods of crisis – 1921–4 and 1929–33 – suggesting that it was precisely the Republic's instability, and the general feeling that history was being made in Germany, which attracted them to it. One could add other reasons for visiting Germany to those described here, for example, intellectuals who were invited by German political, social or cultural institutions or who travelled with the specific task of fostering intellectual understanding and co-operation, but since it is not Storer's intention to give a comprehensive account – he points out that this would be impossible in one volume (p. 6) – such examples would be welcome enhancements rather than necessary additions.

Chapter two presents a skilful analysis of the manifold ways in which the First World War and the peace settlement which followed it affected British views of Germany. Storer outlines the bitter 'war of words and

images' (pp. 34–5) waged by both sides during the war, which contrasted with a greater degree of 'professional comradeship' (p. 37) between opposing troops on the battlefield, and which 'rumbled on' (p. 35) long after the armistice was called, shaping and reflecting post-war attitudes. While some British intellectuals adopted uncompromisingly anti-German stances, others adhered to a longer standing theory of 'Two Germanies' which discerned between a 'bad' authoritarian, military, (Prussian) Germany and a 'good', liberal, cultural Germany.<sup>(4)</sup> This view remained influential after the war, especially with those who sympathised with an 'untainted' non-militarist Germany (p. 47). Strong pacifist desires to prevent future conflict after the horrors of 1914-18 led many, such as the writer and artist Wyndham Lewis, to promote understanding between Britain and Germany, almost unconditionally, whether they considered themselves to be basically 'pro-German' or not. Not only the experience of war but also a lack thereof affected the outlook of intellectuals who had not seen military service, while floods of war literature after 1918, including the popular reception of German war writings, fictional and non-fictional, reflected British post-war attitudes towards the former enemy. Storer demonstrates how the subsequent peace settlement aroused great curiosity amongst Britons towards the Weimar Republic. Although the atmosphere was still tense, sympathetic attitudes were widespread and diverse, and not necessarily a sign of 'pro-Germanism' (p. 52). This was largely due to the feeling that the Treaty of Versailles was too harsh and would be dangerous for Europe's future. The peace and its consequences therefore generated British perceptions of German victimhood and instability, accompanied by dismay at unfair and 'un-British' (p. 56) treatment of Germany, so that Treaty revisionism was not only an expression of resentment in defeated Germany, but also found much support in Britain. Critics included intellectuals who had been present in Paris but felt let down by the conduct and outcome of the conference, such as Harold Nicholson, W. H. Dawson and J. M. Keynes, all of whom feature prominently in this highly instructive chapter.

Chapter three expands on this interest in the long-term effects of the war and peace settlement by examining the 'differing and often contradictory accounts' of British visitors to the occupied Rhineland. This chapter is particularly interesting as it provides 'a valuable alternative perspective' (p. 63) on British views of the Weimar Republic' beyond more familiar accounts of Weimar Berlin. Storer explains that the Rhineland was a 'vantage point' from which British commentators observed developments in Germany (p. 62), not least because it was a 'safe' location, which was also the 'focal point' (p. 63) for matters arising from the peace settlement. Many early accounts were attempts to make sense of the post-war world, while others sought to raise awareness of conditions in Germany, highlighting disease and food-shortages under the Allied blockade – particularly amongst women and children – and economic turmoil. Fears of revolution and accounts of long-lasting physical and psychological burdens of the blockade and Treaty, which conveyed a sense of foreboding for the future, brought about shifts in British opinions towards Germany throughout the 1920s. Reports on the extent and nature of contact between Britons and occupied Germans varied; in some cases there was little contact, others saw the Rhineland as a 'haven for international co-operation and reconciliation' (pp. 69–70), others still experienced hostility from their German hosts, especially after the Ruhr crisis. Additionally, some accounts compared the British occupation with the French occupation, often highlighting French deployment of colonial troops and playing on racial prejudices to reflect more positively on the British occupiers, while other accounts ignored the French aspect. Overall, the diversity of British experiences and perceptions of the situation in the Rhineland stands out in this chapter which greatly deepens our understanding of British intellectual attitudes to post-war Germany.

Storer's analysis of British attitudes to Berlin in the Weimar period in chapter four gives a much-needed nuanced account of British views and experiences of the German capital city, which have often been oversimplified in previous research. Usually associated with the homosexual encounters of Isherwood and friends, Storer agrees that Berlin did attract many 'sex tourists' (p. 103), but shows that even Berlin's nightlife was multifaceted: on the one hand, it boasted modern dance, jazz and cabaret acts, a centre of 'sexual tolerance, [...] freedom and hedonism' (p. 88), on the other hand, prostitution, drug-dealing and gambling were the 'unsavoury professions' (p. 90) of Berlin's 'criminal underworld' (p. 91) which many Berliners turned to in order to deal with the financial hardships of the post-war period. While many British visitors were attracted by Berlin's decadence, others were disappointed and some even appalled by it. Yet in other accounts, Berlin's notorious nightlife did not even feature. It was above all Berlin's modernity that

drew in its visitors and the excitement and fervour it exuded in politics, the arts and lifestyle more generally. Berlin offered experimentation, innovation and was a centre for avant-garde culture: Storer includes particularly fascinating passages on Alfred Hitchcock's formative experiences in Berlin in 1924, German influences on his films, and Weimar cinema's inspiration for the London Film Society. Alongside its promise for the future, Berlin's connotations as the capital of the former enemy, a place of revolution, progress and rebellion made it a 'daring place' (p. 104) to visit for many British intellectuals, but was also sometimes considered – especially in retrospective accounts – quite depressing, a 'freak show' (p. 93) and rather fragile. Given the popularity of Berlin as a destination for British intellectuals, there was a tendency to see it as 'emblematic' not only of the 'zeitgeist of the 1920s' (p. 105) but also of the entire country, which points at once to the need to treat generalisations made about the Republic based on experiences in Berlin with caution, as well as to the central importance of these views of Berlin to our understanding of attitudes to post-war Germany as a whole.

Chapter five focuses on 'Female intellectuals and the Weimar Republic' thereby remedying the previous male-bias in understandings of British attitudes to Germany in this period. Storer's chosen female visitors range from more conventional, though feminist figures like Vera Brittain to the rebellious Jean Ross, and many in between, and were often drawn by similar issues as their male counterparts, such as crisis and victimhood, youth, modernity, artistic creativity and the opportunity for 'alternative lifestyle[s]' (p. 107). But there were also notable differences between male and female perspectives, the latter being concerned just as much with the Treaty and occupation, for example, as other so-called 'women's questions' (p. 108) such as childcare, education, reproductive issues and the position and role of women in society and politics. While often engaging with topical issues like the (in)famous figure of the 'new woman' (p. 113) and the illegality of abortion, most British women were uninterested or unimpressed with Berlin's nightlife, which serves as an important qualification to the previously held idea that Berlin's decadence dominated British views of the Republic. In uncovering a range of women's accounts, Storer shows how these 'doubly highlight the diversity in British attitudes towards the Weimar Republic' as they differed from one another as well as the 'majority discourse provided by their male compatriots' (p. 122).

Chapter six questions how far fictional accounts of the Republic went towards creating a lasting 'Weimar stereotype'. Storer problematises the issue that Isherwood's novels have not only dominated Anglo-American visions of the Weimar Republic, but have also often been seen 'as works of contemporary reportage, or even history, rather than fiction' (p. 123). Examining a wider set of fictional works set in Weimar Germany by authors such as John Buchan, Robert McAlmon and Winifried Holtby, Storer sees these representations as a 'prism' through which to view contemporary attitudes towards Germany and its citizens. Continuity and change is important here: pre-war representations tended to divide Germans into 'good', soulful intellectuals versus 'bad', threatening 'Hunnish' militarists (pp. 144–5), with the latter then dominating wartime propagandistic images of the enemy. Post-war depictions portrayed Weimar Germany as quite different to its imperial predecessor, creating a 'complicated and multifaceted' stereotype (p. 145) which incorporated many of the themes we have already encountered such as the Treaty and occupation, Germans as dignified victims in the face of defeat and upheaval, Berlin's colourful social scene, and a near obsession with youth and vitality in the Republic, all of which were seen with varying degrees of sympathy and criticism. Interestingly, however, Storer notes some 'echoes' (p. 146) of pre-war images, with many works still containing notions of 'good' and 'bad' Germans, and sometimes suggesting an underlying possibility that the modern dynamism, youthfulness and economic potential of the new Germany could outstrip Britain, which can be seen as 'strikingly close' (p. 147) to pre-war anxieties.

The final chapter examines British attitudes to Nazism in the 1920s, in order to test the validity of the common perception that the Weimar Republic was a 'doomed democratic experiment [...] whose eventual replacement by the National Socialist dictatorship was inevitable' (p. 148). Storer demonstrates that this was not a contemporary perspective, and that opinions on Nazism ranged from out-and-out opposition, to ambivalence, to outright admiration and apology, all for varied reasons. In the early 1920s, British comment on Nazism was rare and saw the so-called '*Fascisti*' (p. 149) as a marginal Bavarian phenomenon rather than a national political party. Interest in National Socialism increased throughout the period and often reflected

the political fortunes of the Party. Storer detects a good deal of confusion in British accounts of Nazism, especially about where to place it in the political landscape, which can be largely explained by the movement's own contradictory nature and ideology. While some saw the Nazis as 'agents' of renewal and traditional values, a solution to Weimar's ills and weaknesses, others recognised that their ideas were new and 'just as alien to the old Germany as the Republic' (p. 163). Sympathy came from Britons who saw in Nazism a vital 'bulwark against Bolshevism' (p. 164) and hoped for Treaty revision, while reservation was expressed by those who found their violent tactics unsavoury. No matter what their stance on the Nazi movement itself, however, and despite a widespread perception of crisis and instability, none of Storer's selected intellectual visitors thought that the Republic was doomed to collapse, or that a Nazi seizure of power was imminent. Moreover, whenever there was talk of a prospective Nazi government, it was expected to be within the constitutional system and moderated by coalition partners. This chapter successfully provides a differentiated picture of British views of Nazism, while also reflecting on attitudes to the Republic as a whole. Storer's discussion of British perspectives of Weimar politics and prognoses for its democratic system might have been enriched further by considering opinions on other parties and movements where possible, although this would have entailed either the reconceptualisation of this particular chapter, or the addition of an extra one. Indeed, any questions raised about aspects or angles not covered in Storer's study are entirely a reflection of its strength and the reader's desire for more of the same.

Storer provides a great deal of fascinating detail which is not only useful but makes the book a compelling read. Inevitably, there are a number of unfortunate minor typographical errors, while the header of chapter one – 'Germany wants to see you' – is also intriguingly used to head the introduction, and there are one or two factual ambiguities: the term 'Weimar Republic' might not have been in English usage before 1933, but it is not strictly a 'construct of historians' (p. 4), as it certainly appeared, if rarely, in German discourse in the late 1920s (5), and the aggressive German wartime manifesto signed by 93 academics and intellectuals was published in October 1914, not 1917.(6) However, these slight criticisms, while worth mentioning, by no means detract from the quality of the work as a whole.

Storer successfully fulfils his stated objective to correct and broaden our understanding of British attitudes towards the Weimar Republic beyond the previous preoccupation with the Isherwood-Auden circle. Yet the fruits of this investigation can also be seen in a wider research context. Despite much general work on Anglo-German relations after 1918, cultural relations remain remarkably under-explored, which makes any contribution such as Storer's most welcome. While this is not a work on mutual Anglo-German perceptions, it is of great interest to students of Anglo-German intellectual relations after the First World War since it offers valuable insights into the British side of this cultural relationship, while also telling us much about the Weimar Republic itself. Scholars of Weimar will appreciate Storer's situating the Republic in an international context, something not often considered beyond formal foreign policy. Finally, Storer's work also contributes to a recent academic trend of presenting differentiated analyses of diverse aspects of Weimar, in order to advance our understandings of the Republic beyond its longstanding dichotomous association with 'Glitter and Doom'.(7)

## Notes

1. *Christopher and His Kind* broadcast on Saturday 19 March 2011 on BBC Two. For more details see <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00ztf19> [2]> [accessed 9 May 2011].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Storer works with an understanding of 'intellectuals' as 'leading cultural figure[s], the creator[s] of ideas and the shaper[s] of opinion' and as a 'catch-all term encompassing writers (of both fiction and non-fiction), artists, academics, critics and some journalists' (p. 3).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Biographical information is given for: Evelyn, Princess Blücher; H N. Brailsford; Claud Cockburn; W. H. Dawson; Norman Ebbutt; A.G. Gardiner; G. E. R. Gedye; Cicely Hamilton; Gerald Hamilton; Winifred Holtby; John Maynard Keynes; Wyndham Lewis; Robert McAlmon; Edmund Dene Morel; Geoffrey Moss; Lilian Thompson Mowrer; Harold Nicolson; Morgan Philips Price; Jean Ross; Edward Sackville-West; Frederick Augustus Voigt. The book also features other, better-known

- figures, such as Graham Greene and Vera Brittain, whose biographical information is assumed to be known to the reader, so the range of examples is even greater than the appendix suggests.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. On this theory of ‘two Germanies’ see, for example, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860–1914* (London, 1980), p. 398.[Back to \(4\)](#)
  5. The history of the term ‘Weimarer Republik’ has been the subject of recent German historical research, see Sebastian Ullrich, ‘Mehr als Schall und Rauch. Der Streit um den Namen der ersten deutschen Demokratie’, in *Die “Krise” der Weimarer Republik. Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters*, ed. Moritz Föllmer & Rüdiger Graf (Frankfurt/Main, 2005), pp. 187–207.[Back to \(5\)](#)
  6. On this notorious ‘Manifesto of the Ninety-Three German Intellectuals’ see, for example, John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2001), pp. 280-285, and Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg and Wolfgang von Ungern-Sternberg, *Der Aufruf ‚An die Kulturwelt!‘. Das Manifest der 93 und die Anfänge der Kriegspropaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart, 1996).[Back to \(6\)](#)
  7. ‘Glitter and Doom’ was the title of a 2006 exhibition of 1920s German portraits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and is just one example of many titles which encourage dichotomous assessments of the Weimar Republic. This has been challenged in recent Weimar scholarship, as demonstrated, for example, by a conference which took place in London in 2010 entitled ‘Beyond Glitter and Doom: New Perspectives of the Weimar Republic’. For more details see the conference website: <<http://weimarperspectives.wordpress.com/> [3]> [accessed 9 May 2011].[Back to \(7\)](#)

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