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The Politics of Prophecy: Reformation Memory and German Exceptionalism in Weimar Thought

Abstract
*In the German-speaking world, the memory of the Reformation has often been closely connected to the theory of German historical exceptionalism, the idea that Germany's historical development took a 'special path' (*Sonderweg*) to modernity. Yet considering how much attention has been paid to the question of a German* Sonderweg *and the significance of Weimar as a turning point in the story, scholars have paid little attention to the ideology of exceptionalism in the Weimar Republic itself. This article contributes to the historiography of the* Sonderweg *debate by examining the complex ways in which the poet Hugo Ball (1886-1927) and the philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) traced a narrative of German exceptionalism back to the Reformation era. It argues that these writers appealed to the intellectual and political legacies of the Reformation in an attempt to explain the formative events of their own time: the First World War, and the Russian and German Revolutions. The divergent ideological conclusions they drew reveals much about the conflicted atmosphere of Weimar thought, in which German intellectuals struggled to bridge the gap between crisis and tradition.*

Key words: Sonderweg, Weimar thought, Reformation memory, Ernst Bloch, Hugo Ball, Thomas Münzer

In the German-speaking world and beyond, the memory of the Reformation has often been closely connected to the theory of Germany's historical exceptionalism. In the eighteenth century, with the German Enlightenment in full swing, thinkers such as Lessing and Herder saw the Reformation as the source of an independent, unified German culture. Both men saw Luther, in particular, as a German folk hero, whose translation of the Bible into German, Lessing argued, railed against the clerical orthodoxy that 'it would be better if [it] were not read by the common man in his own language'. [1] Herder shared Lessing's view of Luther as a champion of the people, describing him as a 'great patriotic man' and the 'teacher of the German nation'. Through the power of Luther's language, Herder claimed, a 'popular literary public' had emerged in Germany for the first time, and his radical ideas had 'shaped the whole of enlightened Europe'. [2] Long before Germany was a unified polity, then, German-speaking thinkers saw the Reformation as the positive source of German cultural unity, specificity, and influence in the world.

[1] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd. 8: Philosophische und theologische Schriften II (Berlin/Weimar, Aufbau Verlag, 1968), in Johann Baptist Müller (ed.), *Die Deutschen und Luther*. *Texte zur Geschichte und Wirkung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983), p. 39.
[2] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*. Bd. 17, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Hildesheim: Olms, 1967), in Müller, 1983, p. 40.

A hundred years later, in the decades after 1848, socialist thinkers sought to excavate a different history, one that accorded more readily with their own aims and objectives. Not Luther, but the radical theologian and leader of the German Peasants' War Thomas Münzer was the hero of their tale. Nevertheless, they too saw in the Reformation the origins of a German exceptionalism, albeit one drawn now in more negative terms. In *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (1850), Friedrich Engels argued that the failure of the 1848 revolution was characteristic of the peculiar 'misery' of German history. Engels argued that Luther's coalition with the princes against a rebellious Münzer with his more radical social demands had inaugurated a tendency in German history towards conservative compromises with authority. [3] Like Engels, the communist theorist Karl Kautsky pictured Münzer as one of the 'forerunners of modern socialism', and sought to position the contemporary German labour movement as the heir to his suppressed legacy.[4]

A century later again, and half the globe was fighting European fascism. Thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic were desperate to explain how a modern, democratic, technologically advanced society like Germany could have descended into such total barbarism. A discourse emerged of a German historical *Sonderweg*, or special path, according to which Germany's path to modernity had been marked by the persistence of illiberal and authoritarian attitudes. For William Montgomery McGovern and others, the roots of this phenomenon were to be sought in the sixteenth century. Tracing an intellectual lineage 'from Luther to Hitler', McGovern and many others in the years after the Nazi rise to power saw in the Reformation the origins of fascist ideology.[5]

These three vignettes trace an arc in which the narrative of German historical exceptionalism, as viewed through the lens of the Reformation legacy, moved from a positive vision to a more negative one. Broadly speaking, that is the shape the more general historiographical debate over the German *Sonderweg* took in the twentieth century. Whereas in the late nineteenth century, Germany's exceptional stability and prosperity was seen to derive from its rule through 'reform from above'—as opposed to British liberalism, French revolutionary republicanism, and Russian despotism—after the Second World War, this picture began to be seen in a very different light. In the post-war period, many historians, particularly those working outside Germany followed McGovern in seeing the rise of fascism as the inevitable result of long-term tendencies in Germany's history.[6]

Starting in the 1960s, this picture began to be reassessed. Although historians such as Helmuth Plessner, Fritz Fischer, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler no longer followed McGovern and his successors in tracing the roots of German exceptionalism back to the Reformation era, they nevertheless continued to see the origins of National Socialism in Germany's 'belated nationhood', and in the country's continued domination into the twentieth century by arch-conservative, anti-Semitic *völkisch*

[3] Friedrich Engels, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* in *Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels – Werke*. Bd. 7 (Berlin: Dietz, 1960) pp. 327-413; cf. *The Peasant War in Germany*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 10 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), pp. 397-482.
[4] Karl Kautsky, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus* (Berlin: Dietz, 1895).
[5] William M. McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* (George G. Harrap & Co., 1941).
[6] See, for example, Lewis Namier, *1848: The Revolution of the Intellectuals*, Raleigh Lectures on History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944); A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London: Hamilton, 1945) and *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamilton, 1961); William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

elites.[7] Thinkers such as Fritz Stern, and George Mosse augmented the *Sonderweg* thesis by claiming that these elites sabotaged the attempt to build democracy in the Weimar Republic, thus creating the context that most immediately facilitated the rise of German fascism.[8] Although today the *Sonderweg* thesis has all but been discredited as an explanation for Nazism, some historians continue to find it relevant to understanding the pervasive sense of crisis that plagued the Weimar Republic, and eventually contributed to its collapse.[9]

Considering how much attention has been paid to the question of German exceptionalism and the significance of Weimar as a turning point in the story, scholars have paid little attention to the ideology of exceptionalism in the Weimar Republic itself. Mosse's influential analysis of the roots of Nazi ideology examined the Weimar context closely, but his emphasis was on how certain ideological continuities between Weimar and the Third Reich could be observed that constituted a *Sonderweg*, rather than on how the idea of a *Sonderweg* was perceived in the Weimar Republic itself.[10] Similarly, Stern's examination of the conservative revolutionary movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrated how a 'politics of cultural despair' dominated the period, and asserted that such attitudes formed the ideological bedrock of Nazism.[11] And although his work necessarily touches on the question of how thinkers such as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck imagined Germany as a 'special' historical case, the status of the *Sonderweg* idea in the Weimar Republic was also not Stern's central concern.

The decline in currency of the *Sonderweg* thesis has meant that there has been no detailed study of how German exceptionalism was perceived among Weimar thinkers.[12] Yet this question is essential if we want to historicise a discourse of German

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[7] Cf. Helmuth Plessner, *Die verspätete Nation. Über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1959); Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War, 1914-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967) (originally published in 1961 as *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegzielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918*); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Band 3: *Von der „Deutschen Doppelrevolution" bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges. 1849–1914* (Beck: München 1995).

[8] Fritz Stern, The Politics Of Cultural Despair; A Study In The Rise Of The Germanic Ideology, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961, 1963); George L. Mosse, The crisis of German ideology: intellectual origins of the Third Reich (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

[9] For more on the Sonderweg debate, see: Sherri Berman, 'Modernization in Historical Perspective: The Case of Imperial Germany', World Politics Volume 53, Number 3, April 2001, pp. 431–462; David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, The Peculiarities of German History: bourgeois society and politics in nineteenth-century Germany (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), a revised and expanded translation of the same authors' Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung: Die gescheiterte bürgerliche Revolution von 1848 (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 1980); Helga Grebing, Der deutsche Sonderweg in Europa 1806-1945: Eine Kritik (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986); Theodore S. Hamerow, 'Guilt, Redemption and Writing German History,' The American Historical Review, February 1983, pp. 88:53–72; Konrad Jarausch, 'Illiberalism and Beyond: German History in Search of a Paradigm,' Journal of Modern History, Volume 55, 1983, pp. 647–686; Ian Kershaw, The Nazi Dictatorship Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation (London: Arnold Press, 2000); Jürgen, Kocka, 'German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German "Sonderweg,"' Journal of Contemporary History, 23(1), Jan 1988, pp. 3–16; Robert Moeller, 'The Kaiserreich Recast?: Continuity and Change in Modern German Historiography,' Journal of Social History, 1983–1984, 17, pp. 655–684; Wolfgang Mommsen, 'Review of Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung,' Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, Vol. 4, 1980, pp. 19–26; Detlev Peukert, Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), translated into English as The Weimar Republic: the Crisis of Classical Modernity (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); Helmut Walser Smith, 'When the Sonderweg Debate Left Us,' German Studies Review, May 2008, 31(2), pp. 225–240; Hans-Ulrich Wehler,, "'Deutscher Sonderweg" oder allgemeine Probleme des westlichen Kapitalismus,' Merkur, 5, 1981, pp. 478–487.

[9] Engels, 1978.

[10] Cf. Mosse, 1964.

[11] Cf. Stern, 1963.

[12] George Steinmetz treats it in his chapter 'German Exceptionalism and the origins of Nazism: the career of a concept' (in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds.), Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison

exceptionalism that was at the centre of thinking about European crisis for decades if not centuries. For it was in the Weimar Republic that the idea of German exceptionalism assumed the dimensions of a political prophecy. In the 1920s and 30s, the idea that Germany had a unique world-historical mission to fulfil against the interests of global—'Jewish' and 'Bolshevik'—elites came to underpin the propaganda machine of the radical right. However, left-wing thinkers also appealed to the exceptionalism argument in order to explain what many increasingly saw as Germany's inexorable descent into barbarism. One of the most prominent Marxist historians of the Weimar era, Eckhart Kehr, for instance, identified Germany's specificity in the fact that it had traditionally been dominated by an atavistic elite.[13]

Not all Weimar engagements with the idea of German exceptionalism were as clear-cut as this right-left dichotomy of might suggest. Indeed, given what Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick have called the 'unity and diversity' of Weimar thought—a seemingly heightened level of 'anxiety' and internal contradiction that resulted from a pervasive sense of crisis—this is to be expected.[14] This article contributes to the historiography of the *Sonderweg* debate by examining the complex ways in which two Weimar writers, the poet Hugo Ball (1886-1927) and the philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), construed the theory of German exceptionalism.[15]

Anticipating the arguments of many post-1945 writers, both Ball and Bloch took the Reformation as a starting point for philosophies of history capable of explaining what had led Germany into war in 1914, why revolution had failed there in 1918 where it had succeeded a year earlier in Russia, and what was next for Germany, Europe, and the world. While Bloch's utopian vision was intended to be inclusive and universalist, the future Ball imagined was tinged with an elitist racial nationalism. Nevertheless, the logic of their arguments was essentially the same: for them Münzer, not Luther, was the prophet of a German world-historical mission yet to be fulfilled.

The article begins by situating Ball's and Bloch's interventions in the context of political instability and intellectual and artistic fecundity in the early Weimar years, and analyzing the commonalities in their perspectives. The second section then goes on to explore some of the divergences between Bloch and Ball, while the third section attempts to explain these differences in the broader context of their thought and time. A conclusion opens out the discussion, asking what the analysis of Bloch and Ball reveals about both the discourse of German exceptionalism as well as the 'contested legacy' of Weimar thought. Gordon and McCormick have argued that Weimar thought was uniquely characterised by a tension between crisis and tradition, and indeed these thinkers' invocation of Reformation memory is interpreted as an attempt to respond to crisis by appealing to tradition. However, as we will see, this intellectual move did

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 251-284), but given the scope of Steinmetz's perspective, Weimar can only be briefly glossed.

[13] Eckart Kehr, Battleship Building and Party Politics in Germany, 1894-1901 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1973).

[14] Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick, 'Introduction: Weimar Thought: Continuity and Crisis' in Gordon and McCormick (eds.), Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy (Oxford/New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1-14, p. 2, 4.

[15] Ernst Bloch, Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution (München: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1923); Hugo Ball, Critique of the German Intelligentsia, trans. Brian L. Harris (Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 37; Die Folgen der Reformation. Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz, ed. Hans Dieter Zimmermann (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005).

not map neatly onto a left-right axis, an insight that can be seen to challenge a narrow association of German exceptionalism with reactionary thought.

'The German revolution is yet to take place'

The German state that existed between 1919 and 1933 is known as the Weimar Republic because the assembly that adopted its constitution met in Weimar from 6 February to 11 August 1919.[16] Yet the term was not used by contemporaries: in its first recorded use, in a speech delivered by Adolf Hitler in February 1929, the term 'Weimar Republic' is shot through with a sense of bitterness that engulfed both right and left in these decades. The decision in early November 1918 by German military leaders to fight on in the First World War under impossible conditions triggered mutiny and revolt that quickly spread throughout the country. Soldiers' and workers' councils began to take control of cities and towns: in Munich, King Ludwig III was forced to abdicate, setting in motion a domino effect that would see all German monarchs toppled by the end of the year. In Berlin, Friedrich Ebert, leader of the SPD, which held the balance of power, convinced Maximilian I to abdicate and on 9 November a Republic was declared outside the Reichstag. Across town, however, at Berlin City Palace, Karl Liebknecht, a leader of the radical Spartacus League, also declared a republic, but one that would be led by people's councils based on the Soviet model.

The double declaration traced a fault line within the German left on the question of war. When the Kaiser declared war in 1914, the majority of the SPD, led by Ebert, supported it, creating serious tension between interventionists and pacifists within the party. As the war dragged on and the death toll rose, the issue only became more divisive. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, which galvanised many within the party to take a more radical stance, Ebert expelled opponents of the war from the SPD, who formed an independent party.

With revolts still raging in Berlin well into 1919, the majority SPD-led assembly had met in Weimar to draft a constitution that was intended to bring democracy and stability to war-torn Germany. The revolution ultimately failed, and though the constitution passed, only a fragile consensus was achieved. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, German fascist paramilitaries clashed increasingly frequently with far-left groups in the streets. The Weimar Republic was thus riven from the very start by tensions between left and right, though their ideological differences were often less clear than they appeared to be on the surface. The radical left felt betrayed by the SPD over the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, murdered by the far-right mercenary Freikorps at Ebert's behest for fear their uprising would threaten the establishment of order. Meanwhile, on the right, the idea took root that nationalist forces would have won the war had the SPD government not capitulated. This stab-in-the-back-myth animated the increasingly violent nationalist discourse that grew up in the Weimar

[16] For more on the history of the Weimar Republic, see Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: the Outsider as Insider* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001); Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992 [1987]); Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008 [1988]); Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, Edward Dimenberg (eds.), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1995); Ruth Henig, *The Weimar Republic, 1919-1933* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002); Colin Storer, *A Short History of the Weimar Republic* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

years, and the ill-feeling was only exacerbated by the enormous war reparations that Germany was required to pay as part of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

Yet against this background of what Detlev Peukert has called 'political breakdown and social misery', intense 'avant-garde cultural achievement' flourished. Weimar was a hotbed of new approaches to art and culture, many of which had explicitly political aims.[17] Expressionists and Dadaists sought to extend their political influence in order to benefit the working class, but were in practice often alienated from left-wing political parties and movements. Theirs was an alternative politics, a politics that aimed to move the body and soul rather than the mind. As the posters that popped up all around Berlin in 1920 would put it: 'Dada is political [...] Dadaist man is the radical opponent of exploitation [...] DADA is the voluntary destruction of the bourgeois world of ideas'.[18] Philosophers were moved by many of the same impulses as artists. Among Weimar thinkers, a new interest arose in culture as a route to understanding history and human nature. Bloch was heavily influenced by these trends: both his early work *Spirit of Utopia* (1918) and later his *Principle of Hope* (1959) sought to understand the relationship between history and utopian desire by analyzing the utopian content of cultural products and artefacts.[19]

Born within a few months of one another, Bloch and Ball belonged to a generation in revolt against what they saw as the decrepit social and political order that had led Germany into war.[20] Both pacifists, Bloch opposed the First World War from the beginning, and after a brief flirtation with the idea of serving, Ball changed his mind after visiting the front lines in 1914. Their pacifism put the pair squarely at odds not only with German conservatives and liberals—Bloch denounced his Professors Georg Simmel and Max Weber over their support for the war, while Ball broke with his teacher Max Reinhardt—but also with the leadership of the Social Democratic Party, which had abandoned its previously antimilitarist stance in support of the war effort. As conscientious objectors, the two men were forced into exile, and it was thus that they met in Switzerland in 1917.

When Ball moved from Zürich to Bern in September that year, Bloch had already been there for several months. Bern was a hotbed of anti-war activity coalescing around the *Freie Zeitung*, the leading anti-Kaiser publication in German-speaking exile. The two men struck up a friendship, and engaged in an intense intellectual exchange: Bloch specifically recalls that the pair discussed Münzer extensively during the years 1917-1918.[21] Both he and Ball became prolific contributors to the paper, which supported

[17] Peukert, 1992, xiii.
[18] Sarah Ganz Blythe & Edward D. Powers (eds.), *Looking at Dada* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), p. 5.
[19] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), *Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
[20] No comprehensive biography of Bloch exists in English. The fullest German account is still Peter Zudeick, *Der Hintern des Teufels. Ernst Bloch, Leben und Werk* (Elster: Moos, 1985). English readers without German will find much of introductory value in the 'Translators' Introduction' to Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. xix-xxxiii. The situation with Ball is a little better. Philip Mann's *Hugo Ball: An Intellectual Biography* (London: University of London Press, 1987), is the publication of a doctoral disseratation that is more than serviceable. German readers will find Wiebke-Marie Stock, *Denkumsturz: Hugo Ball: eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012) an acceptable alternative. Meanwhile, John Elderfield's editor's introduction to *Hugo Ball, Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1996), pp. xiii-xlvi, contains a good overview.
[21] cf. Rainer Traub, Harald Wieser (eds.) *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 32.

the Entente and Wilson's Four Points while consistently denouncing German militarism, nationalism and the corrupt Prussian aristocracy.

Although Bloch and Ball were united by their common opposition to war, their intellectual, spiritual, and political trajectories nevertheless differed in significant respects. Bloch, who had been born into an assimilated Jewish family, was a self-declared atheist, though he deeply believed in both the philosophical significance of religious motifs and their power to move people to action. His first wife, Else von Stritsky, was a devout Protestant interested in mysticism, and she influenced him towards a positive view of Christianity. Ball meanwhile was raised in a deeply pious Catholic household, and although he initially turned away from religion, he was profoundly marked by his faith, to which he would return in the early 1920s. Though neither man was ever officially politically aligned, Bloch was drawn to Marxism early on, particularly after his friendship with Georg Lukács. Ball had more anarchistic leanings: he read Bakunin and Kropotkin, and sometimes criticised Marxist ideas.

Despite these differences, however, two questions loomed equally large for Bloch and Ball in the early Weimar years: what had made Germany pursue war so enthusiastically in 1914, and why had the German November Revolution of 1918 failed where the Russians had succeeded a year earlier?[22] They both sought answers by looking to the apparent specificities of Germany's past. In his *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, Ball claimed that the question of German 'isolation' had occupied him since 1914, and declared his aim to 'trace the principles that have put the German character at odds with the rest of the world'.[23] Ball believed it was necessary to 'go back into the depths of the Middle Ages' in order to understand Germany's contemporary situation, namely to the history of the Reformation and its consequences.[24]

The opening section of Bloch's Münzer book makes it clear that his aim is to interpret Reformation history through the lens of contemporary events. 'We want always to be with ourselves', the passage begins, and continues: 'So here too we are in no way looking backwards. Rather we intervene vitally ourselves. In the process so do the others also return, transformed, the dead rise again, their action wants to be realized once again with us'.[25] For Bloch, the 'observer' of history is 'active', and the purpose of invoking Münzer was a consciously political one: 'he and his and everything that is gone which deserves to be written down', Bloch argues, 'is there to oblige us, to inspire us to build ever more expansive support for that which is always intended for us'.[26] What was 'always intended for us' in Bloch's eyes was, in a word, utopia, and he invokes the spirit of Münzer in its pursuit.

By betraying the revolution that Münzer hoped to bring about through the peasants' uprisings, Ball argued, Luther had ushered in a reformist tendency that had paralysed

[22] Writing in the *Critique*, Ball argued that in November 1918 one could see 'with the so-called revolution how social democracy, right down to the ranks of the unaffiliated, allows itself to be used as a police and security institution'. Meanwhile Bloch's invective against the Social Democrats was copious in the pages of the *Freie Zeitung*. In 1919, reflecting on the outcome of the failed November Revolution, he described the parliamentary Social Democrats as a 'dictatorship of the minority', and claimed that the struggle for true freedom was a struggle 'against the corridors of Weimar'. Ernst Bloch, 'Wie ist Sozialismus möglich?' in *Kampf nicht Krieg: Politische Schriften 1917-1919* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 563-569, p. 563. Originally published in *Die Weißen Blätter* in May 1919; Ernst Bloch, 'Entfesselung der Pressefreiheit' in *Kampf nicht Krieg*, 449-453, p. 451.
[23] Ball, 1993, p. 1.
[24] Ball, 1993, p. 17.
[25] Bloch, 1923, 13.
[26] *Ibid.*

Germany's historical development as compared with other European states. 'During Luther's time the German bourgeoisie sided with feudalism', he writes, 'and that alliance has survived all European revolutions and is determined now to gag and suppress Europe'.[27] Whereas the 'rebellious spirit of the rest of Europe moved in opposite directions to German institutions, away from that feudal ethos of rulership', according to Ball, Luther had charted a course of secular, defensive autocracy that had resonated down the ages.[28] Ball claimed that the establishment's wish to suppress German desires for revolution explained why Luther was portrayed as a national hero in German schoolbooks from which Münzer and the Peasants' War were conspicuously absent.

In *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, which appeared just two years after Ball's *Critique*, Bloch would trace a similar narrative. For Bloch as for Ball, the path Germany took after the Reformation and Peasants' War had been decisive. 'How difficult it was for the German peasant and burgher to recover from the defeat of his great, singular uprising', he writes.[29] In its aftermath, the 'servility of the people, brutality of the lordly class became for long years his fate, while freedom became associated exclusively with the invisible, the fleeting, the singular, that without example'.[30] Bloch's account mirrors Ball's insofar as Luther emerges from it as the 'lord' of a peculiarly 'German quietism' who had quelled the 'belligerent orientation' associated with Münzer's Christianity by making the idea of rebellion appear sinful.[31] Both men thus saw Münzer as the herald of a distinctly German historical path that had, however, not yet been taken.

A 'ploy' had evolved of 'always talking about the Reformation, but never about the revolution that gave the period its salient character'.[32] Ball argued that 'Thomas Münzer stands at the beginning of a development that has not yet run its course'.[33] His comments on the Peasants' War would be echoed by Weimar poet and journalist Kurt Tucholsky a decade later. Writing in the aftermath of the November Revolution that had seen the reformist Social Democratic leadership order Freikorps mercenaries to put down rebelling socialists in Berlin—leading, among other things, to the execution of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg—Tucholsky argued that the 'German Revolution' was 'yet to take place'.[34] Tucholsky's remarks remind us that this pattern of historical thinking, according to which November 1918 stood in a lineage of failed or betrayed revolutions that would be avenged, resonated down the years in the Weimar Republic. Bloch and Ball were among the first to make such a claim after 1918, and for them Münzer became the historical representative of the promised revolution.

'To mobilise the secret powers of the nation'

If both Bloch and Ball sought to trace the origins of German belligerence back to the course taken by Luther, significant differences between their perspectives emerge when we compare their divergent interpretations of Germany's historical relationship

[27] Ball, 1993, p. 21.
[28] Ball, 1993, p. 47.
[29] Bloch, 1969, p. 91.
[30] Bloch, 1969, pp. 91-92.
[31] Bloch, 1969, p. 175; p. 92.
[32] Ball, 1993, p. 34.
[33] Ball, 1993, p. 41.
[34] Kurt Tucholsky, alias Ignaz Wrobel, 'November-Umsturz', *Die Schwarze Fahne,* 1928, Nr. 44, in Tucholsky, ed. Ute Maack, *Gesamtausgabe Texte und Briefe 10: Texte 1928* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001), p. 496.

to Russia. Both men lamented the fact that revolution had succeeded in Russia where it had failed in Germany. In *Geist der Utopie*, Bloch regretted that the Germans had 'become so Prussian instead of turning towards our Russian selves', and wrote that this was Germany's 'tragedy and…true humiliation.'[35] Meanwhile Ball asked a year later in his *Kritik*, 'Where in Germany was to be found that spirit of freedom that had racked the conscience of the Russian people with such birth pangs since 1825?'[36] However, Bloch was clear that the spirit of freedom behind the Russian Revolution stemmed from Germany, albeit 'from another Germany, not yet entered into history – Karl Marx, the socialism of science, German philosophy.'[37] In *Geist der Utopie*, Russia and Germany, together with Judaism, form a trinity through which Bloch saw the messianic impulse of the age channelled:

> 'there is no doubt that through a thousand energies, through the age old lens of a new proclamation Judaism, together with German-ness, again has a final, gothic, baroque meaning, in order, united with Russia, this third recipient of abidance, of God-bearing power and messianism, - to prepare absolute time.'[38]

Ball, meanwhile, admired Russia's rise to greatness *in spite of* what he referred to 'Bolshevism and vengeful Jewish terrorism.'[39] Ball's anti-Semitism distinguished his interpretation of German exceptionalism sharply from that of Bloch, who, as a 'racially conscious Jew', ultimately broke with his former friend over the issue.[40]

When in November 1918 Ball wrote an anti-Semitic piece in *Die Freie Zeitung*, Bloch was shocked and deeply critical.[41] In his article, Ball lashed out against 'anational Israelites' and declared that Germany must disavow 'the business makers and the opportunists' in order to become 'a great, truly purified nation'.[42] Eight days later, in a letter to his patron Wilhelm Muehlon, Bloch said that he had written to Ball objecting to the 'astonishing concluding sentence of [his] editorial'.[43] Although he had not previously believed Ball to be an anti-Semite ('otherwise he could not be my friend'), Bloch claimed he had now told Ball his anti-Semitism was 'scandalous, no matter how he means it'.[44] When Bloch left the paper in December that year, Anson Rabinbach speculates that it was on account of this 'not very pretty' reason.[45] Given their split, it is difficult not to read Bloch's comment in the afterword to *Thomas Münzer*—that his book was the first biography of Münzer to appear since Engels'—as an oblique response to Ball, who claimed in his own book that Münzer had 'had no successful biographer'.[46]

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[35] Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie. Erste Fassung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985 [1923]), p. 295. Translation mine. The first edition of Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* was published in 1918 by Duncker & Humblot; a second edition followed in 1923, on which the version included as volume 2 of Bloch's *Gesamtausgabe* is based. A facsimile edition of the 1918 text is included as volume 16 of the *Gesamtausgabe*. That edition is cited here, as discrepancies exist between the texts.
[36] Ball, 1993, p. 13.
[37] Bloch, 1918, p. 298.
[38] Bloch, 1918, p. 332.
[39] Ball, 1993, p. 19.
[40] Ernst Bloch, *Briefe* I (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 232-233.
[41] Cf. Volker Knüfermann "Hugo Ball und Ernst Bloch als Beiträger der "Freien Zeitung" Berne 1917-1919" in *Hugo Ball Almanach* 12 (1988), pp. 31-33.
[42] Cf. Anson Rabinbach, 'The Inverted Nationalism of Hugo Ball's Critique of the German Intelligentsia', in Ball, 1993, p. xxvi.
[43] Bloch, 1985, pp. 232-233.
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] Rabinbach, 1993, p. xxvii.
[46] Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main Suhrkamp, 1969), p. 230 (NB: this was an addition and did not appear in the first edition); Ball, 1993, p. 37; *Die Folgen der Reformation. Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*, ed. Hans Dieter Zimmermann (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005).

Ball's anti-Semitism is on conspicuous display in the *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, though in early editions many of the most offensive passages were excised.[47] However, as Rabinbach makes clear in his introduction to the un-sanitised reissue of the text, 'Ball leaves no doubt that he believes the great intellectual betrayal of 1914 can be ultimately be traced back to the principles of the Old Testament venerated by Luther and that the Protestant conception of the state as an instrument of power is ultimately derived from Jewish theology'.[48] On the very first page of the original edition, Ball speaks of a 'conspiracy of Protestant and Jewish theology (since Luther) and a conspiracy of both with the Prussian powers (since Hegel) seeking to subjugate Europe and the world, and bent on the universal destruction of religion and morals'.[49] He concludes that 'this conspiracy is more firmly and deeply rooted than is commonly believed' and resolves to 'mobilize the secret powers of the nation' against it.[50]

Thus although Ball declares in the *Critique* that he is 'demanding democracy' in the aftermath of the war, and that 'incorporating Germany into a league of European nations' in this context was 'an inescapable demand', in the end neither Western liberalism nor Russian Bolshevism was in his view capable of ending the spiritual malaise of the German people.[51] His vision of German particularism was shot through with the same kind of racist nationalism espoused by many among the very intelligentsia he set out to criticise. As Rabinbach has argued, Ball had himself assimilated a form of racist nationalism, even if in a 'negative' or 'inverted' form.[52]

Bloch's vision of German exceptionalism and of Münzer's place in that narrative was somewhat different. To be sure, like Ball, at this time Bloch was a supporter of the Entente powers and not uncritical of Bolshevism, which he described in 1918 as a form of 'red Tsarism'. Yet Rabinbach goes too far when he claims that Bloch saw communism as just another item on 'the list of political disasters the war had produced'.[53] For Bloch at that time, as for so many of his contemporaries, democracy and communism were not at odds with one another, in fact they were synonymous. Consequently, Bloch's effort to excavate the memory of Münzer and the Peasants' War cannot be properly understood outside the framework of his engagement with Marxism.

For Bloch, the legacy of the Reformation was an alliance between Lutheranism and capitalism, and the power of the memory of the Peasants' War lay in motivating class struggle and political revolution in the present. In the aftermath of the First World War, Bloch claimed that the 'military and princely class' to whom Luther had dedicated 'all the strength of his demonic nature and all the perversion of his paradoxical concept of freedom and faith' had finally been demolished in Germany. By associating Münzer explicitly with the murdered socialist Karl Liebknecht, Bloch made the latter into a martyr of the German revolution.

He went further still by drawing parallels between Münzer and Lenin, and arguing that Münzer anticipated the innermost spirit of the Russian revolution. In deeply prophetic

[47] Cf. Rabinbach, 1993, pp. xxxv-xxxvi.
[48] Rabinbach, 1993, p. xxv.
[49] Ball, 1993, p. 1.
[50] Ball, 1993, pp. 1-2.
[51] Ball, 1993, pp. 8-9.
[52] Rabinbach, 1993, p. xxvii.
[53] Rabinbach, 1993, p. xx.

language, Bloch claims that those struggling for social justice in his own day were the heirs of Münzer's political-theological crusade:

> 'Now the descendants of Münzer's apprentice weavers and cloth-making boys stand fully grown and not to be banished from the revolutionary plan. Time marches upright under their weight, their mission; the last socially possible class, heir of the peasantry, the tangential power breaking out into the infinite, is freed, the explosion of the principles of class and power, the final earthly revolution, is being born'.[54]

As we can see, Bloch was explicit about his ambition to mobilise Münzer's memory in the interest of advocating proletarian revolution, a 'universal' revolution whose intellectual roots he identified as specifically German, even if he saw the main locus of that prospect now in Russia.

As Wayne Hudson has argued, '*Thomas Münzer* showed that Bloch's unorthodox sympathies could lead to original orientations in Marxism [...] and an anticipation of a possible Marxist inheritance of the political theology and subject-laden Christianity of the heretical sects'.[55] The originality of Bloch's perspective on Münzer can be seen partly in the fact that, although he engages with the contribution of earlier materialist historians such as Engels and Kautsky, his own intervention went decisively beyond these accounts. Both Engels' and Kautsky's focus on the class struggle dimension of the Reformation period saw them pit Luther and Münzer against one another as representatives of a nascent bourgeoisie and disenfranchised rural proletariat respectively. The rigid atheism of their perspective, meanwhile, meant that they broadly eschewed explanations of Reformation history that foregrounded either theology or popular belief as a motive force. Bloch, on the other hand, was keenly aware of the power of religious faith and discourse to motivate people to action. For him, Münzer was a prophet of a revolution that would be simultaneously social and spiritual.

As the next section will argue, Ball also saw Münzer as the harbinger of Germany's spiritual renewal, if in terms quite different from Bloch. Meanwhile, however, though Ball could not be straightforwardly called a socialist—he never mentions Engels except in the context of his critique of Marxism—structurally his account of the Reformation tacks at least as closely to the Engelsian line as does Bloch's. In Ball's account the reformer Luther is cast squarely in the role of the villain of German history, while the revolutionary Münzer is the messiah of a German fate that had hitherto been suppressed. From Ball's perspective, the legacies of Münzer and Luther come to stand for a 'new good and a new evil', as he puts it in his curious inversion of the Nietzschean dictum.

'He who speaks in tongues improves himself, but he who prophesies improves the congregation'

If both Bloch and Ball saw Münzer as the herald of a new, spiritualised politics, the reactionary tendency that Ball traced back to Luther had a heavily confessional flavor. According to Ball, Luther's reforms had quashed the 'enthusiasm' of Münzer's social

[54] Bloch, 1969, p. 110.
[55] Ball, 1993, p. 21; cf. Wayne Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), p. 8.

movement, which he believed was powered by Catholic mysticism.[56] Moreover, given that, since Luther's time, the educated intelligentsia in Germany had been predominantly Protestant, Ball claimed it had tried to suppress the fact that 'it was Luther who kept Germany from taking the lead in liberal civilization'. [57] Luther, Protestantism and Judaism, illiberalism and rationalism were thus allied for Ball against Catholicism, intuition, universal love and freedom.

Unlike for Ball, the distinction between progress and reaction did not map onto confessional differences for Bloch. If, as Bloch saw it, in the Lutheran tradition freedom 'disappeared into the lonely soul', it fared no better under Catholicism, where it was absorbed into the 'dualistic consolations of the…hereafter, so that the unconditioned should remain always only in the mind and heaven always only in the afterlife'. In his *Atheism in Christianity*, Bloch would claim that 'the best thing about religion is that it makes for heretics', and it was the repression of Münzer's heresy by Luther's orthodoxy that Bloch saw as definitive of the German trajectory.[58]

When Ball published his *Critique of the German Intelligentsia* in 1919, his (re-)conversion to Catholicism was yet to take place, but the wheels were clearly already in motion: the book calls for a 'new international organization of the religious intelligentsia', on whose corruption by Protestantism he blamed the decadence that had led to war.[59] Ball's claim in the book that responsibility for war lay not only with 'the governments of the central European powers', but must be extended to include 'the ideology of the classes and castes that have supported these governments and made them possible' evinces an increasing sense of political apathy.[60] In Ball's eyes, the scale of political change that would be required to atone for the violence and prevent a recurrence appeared so great as to be insurmountable. Ball's invocation of Münzer in the foreword to the *Critique* is accompanied by a dedication to the leaders of a 'moral revolution', revealing a far stronger emphasis on the spiritual over the political dimension of renewal.

Ball opposed Marxism as the 'Jewish' ideology of the German intelligentsia, and associated it with a 'mentality of the masses' which he believed was 'the sum of aimlessness, restlessness, of despair and faint courage, of opportunism and indolence, of masked sentimentality and inflated arrogance'; He pitied any country 'where that mentality outstrips intelligence […], where that mentality alone is in power and regards itself as intellect'.[61] Thus although Ball despised the institutions of dynastic feudalism, which he argued had been 'strengthened' by Luther, he also associated the 'unpropertied class, the proletariat', who was 'trying to rise up again and spread from Berlin' with the 'same universal state of the Middle Ages' he wanted to overcome.[62] In order to do so, Ball argued, a new 'hierarchical structure of thinkers able and strong enough to supplant the medieval spiritual hierarchy' was needed, a society of 'invisible gradations' led by 'an elite group of exemplary individuals'.[63]

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[56] Ball, 1993, p. 35.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity* (London: Verso, 2009), p. xxv.
[59] Ball, 1993, p. 2.
[60] Ball, 1993, p. 1.
[61] Ball, 1993, p. 7.
[62] Ball, 1993, p. 21.
[63] Ball, 1993, p. 20.

Seth Taylor has described the political-intellectual current that dominated the pre-Weimar era in which Ball and Bloch had been socialised and educated as a form of 'left-wing Nietzscheanism'.[64] Yet it is in his elitism that Ball's Nietzschean philosophical beginnings are most conspicuously on display in the *Critique*. Even if Ball ostensibly wanted to move beyond Nietzsche with his claim that the 'Overman must yield to the Compassionate Man', the trace of his influence remains in Ball's suspicion of and contempt for 'the herd'.[65] Meanwhile, although Bloch's early work also bears the trace of a Nietzschean influence, it is a Nietzsche read through the lens of his messianic Marxism. In the Münzer book he argues that there was 'never a revolution that did not stamp out slave morality in order to destroy its protector and product: master morality'.[66] Here Bloch subverts Nietzsche's association of Christianity with 'slave morality' by pitting Münzer against Luther as the symbol of its combative *Aufhebung*.

Whereas Bloch associated Münzer with collectivist political ambitions, Ball was more interested in inspiring revolution in the individual. It was Ball's blend of Christian mysticism with the anarchist thought of figures like Bakunin and Max Stirner that prompted Bloch to describe him as a 'Christian Bakuninist'.[67] Stefan-Sebastian Maftei has argued that under Nietzsche's influence, Ball's anarchism took shape as a cultural utopia, which, although it constantly exhibited social and political aspirations towards emancipation and revolution, in fact never sought to relate these goals to concrete political actions.[68] Ball had always felt himself riven by a conflict between his 'aesthetic' and 'political' halves, and his politics arguably found their ultimate and most progressive expression in his art.

In sound poems such as *Karawanne*, published in the tumultuous year of 1917, he sought to abandon the language of signs in search of an Adamic language of innocence, resurrecting a speech beyond war and catastrophe. Through sound poetry, Ball rediscovered the tradition of speaking in tongues, a kind of language that could be intuitively understood beyond a merely rational meaning. At the first Dada meeting in November 1916, Ball professed to be seeking a language freed from the constraints of communal rules. 'I don't want words that other people have invented. All the words are other people's inventions.'[69] Ball's turn towards linguistic irrationalism was inspired not only by his search for an authentic spirituality and creativity, but also by his reception of Nietzsche, who had argued that all linguistic meaning is humanly defined rather than representing an external truth. Yet if the practice of speaking in tongues created a mystical sense of community among early Christians and Gnostics, it nevertheless precludes communication, and thus has a strongly individualistic dimension, a facet that also accords with Ball's Nietzsche interpretation.

Bloch, too, was sensitive to the inadequacy of conventional language to express our innermost desires and our experience of crisis. In these contexts, he argued, the

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[64] Cf. Seth Taylor, *Left-Wing Nietzscheans: The Politics of German Expressionism 1910-1920* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990).
[65] Ball, 1993, p. 21; cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[66] Bloch, 1969, pp. 176-177.
[67] Ernst Bloch, 'Über einige politische Programme und Sozialutopien in der Schweiz', *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 46, no. 1 (1918), p. 161.
[68] Stefan-Sebastian Maftei, 'A Cultural Revolution for the "Free Spirits": Hugo Ball's Nietzschean Anarchism,' in *Art, Emotion and Value. Proceedings of 5th Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics*, 2011, pp. 63-74.
[69] Hugo Ball, 'Manifest zum 1. Dada-Abend in Zürich, 1916,' in Otto F. Best (ed.), *Theorie des Expressionismus* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976), p. 236.

'simplest word is already too much, the most sublime word too little'.[70] Nevertheless, unlike Ball, Bloch held fast to the need for communicability in order to achieve real change. Paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 14:4, in *Spirit of Utopia* Bloch wrote that 'Certainly he who speaks in tongues improves himself, but he who prophesies improves the congregation'.[71] That is not to say that Bloch simply put the needs of the collective above those of the individual. It was equally important for him that 'the self that improves itself not be lost in the world'; in other words, that individual autonomy be realised in and through, rather than at the expense of, collective action.[72] The point was rather that without the ability to communicate rationally, social and political change could not be achieved.

The worldly import of Münzer's teachings was especially important for Bloch, who as we have seen interpreted the former's revolutionary mysticism as a kind of Marxist messianism *ante rem*. Bloch equated Münzer's 'work on the world' with 'the 'renunciation' of the 'more comfortable, more tolerant peace' represented by a merely 'individual salvation', which comes 'before at least the external path to the right life stands open to all brothers'.[73] Meanwhile, although Ball explicitly rejects Judaism, Protestantism, and indeed Catholicism at various points throughout the *Critique*, he nevertheless sees in Münzer's mysticism the chance to 'establish the superiority' of a non-specific form of 'religious thinking over secular modes of thought'.[74] Ball believed that the strength of the Catholic mystics lay in the fact they had 'secularised the transcendence of the Church in order to turn it toward life [...] interceding for the poorest and most humble among the people'.[75] Yet for him, the value of mysticism lay not in its ability to provide spiritual sustenance for the political struggle of the masses, as it did for Bloch, but rather in the power it could offer a new 'intellectual-spiritual elite'.[76] Whereas for Bloch, Münzer was the prophet of a universal *political* revolution, ultimately, as Ball wrote in a letter to his sister in 1915, his politics increasingly concerned 'only the spiritual,' and as such the revolution Münzer prophesied for him was fated to remain a merely moral one.[77] The fact remains, however, that both Ball and Bloch imagined revolutionary change emanating from Germany in the figure of Münzer, and both of them saw Germany spiritually 'backward' in Luther's wake.

Conclusion

Attempts to historicise the discourse of German exceptionalism have sometimes sketched a narrative according to which idea has more positive associations early on, and only later, particularly with the rise of fascism and afterwards, acquires negative connotations. George Steinmetz has argued in this vein that the idea of German exceptionalism comprises 'a positive strand, which praises Germany's differentiation from the West, and a critical strand that codes this deviation as backwardness'.[78] Steinmetz locates the origins of a positive exceptionalist narrative in the Reformation period itself, which then crystallised in the late nineteenth century and into the Weimar

[70] Ernst Bloch, *Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 193.
[71] Bloch, 2000, p. 187; cf. *New International Version Bible*, 1 Corinthians 14:4: 'Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church'.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Bloch, 1969, p. 174.
[74] Ball, 1993, p. 47.
[75] Ball, 1993, pp. 36-37.
[76] Ball, 1993, p. 6.
[77] Cf. Taylor, 1990, p. 174.
[78] Steinmetz, 1997, p. 257.

era. Meanwhile, although Steinmetz sees the critical discourse as originating in antiquity with Tacitus' *Germania*, for him, the more radical version of this view, according to which Germany was 'dominated by an atavistic elite and an outdated culture' emerged only during the First World War. Although he doesn't mention Ball in this context, Steinmetz cites Bloch as one of the representatives of this view in the 1930s, particularly in his book *Heritage of Our Times* (1935).[79]

A comparison of Ball's and Bloch's accounts of exceptionalism during the Weimar years demonstrates just how ideologically conflicted accounts of German exceptionalism were during this period, such that even Steinmetz's nuanced account does not fully capture the texture of their interventions. Ball declared himself on the side of peace and liberalism, yet argued that a German national revival, heavily overtoned with anti-Semitism, was the only way to arrest universal spiritual and cultural decline. And though Bloch rejected the racial nationalism inherent in Ball's vision, his own claim that the seeds of a (Marxist) world revolution had been sown in Germany is structurally consonant with Ball's claim that Germany had some sort of unique, mystical, world-historical mission to fulfil.

Ultimately, by following the prophet Münzer down a rabbit hole of individualistic, anarchistic glossolalianism, Ball's politics were visibly more elitist and exclusive than Bloch's. Nevertheless, their closeness at so many points gives the lie to any idea that German exceptionalism can be neatly parsed into politically radical and reactionary strands. Paradoxically, in the anxiety- and conflict-ridden early years of Weimar Germany, it is precisely the idea of exceptionalism's inscrutability that seems to make most sense.

And what of the role of the Reformation in all this? Why did both Ball and Bloch seek to hang their arguments on the hook of the sixteenth century? The obvious answer, it seems to me, is that there was already a tradition of doing so that dated back at least to the German Enlightenment. As simple as this response may seem, however, it makes visible an important characteristic of Weimar thought that has very often been overlooked. Gordon and McCormick's argument that 'crisis' was the 'one theme that seems to appear across the entire range of Weimar intellectual history' presents us with a commonplace vision of the intellectual culture of the era. [80] It recalls Peukert's analysis cited earlier, of our schizoid perception of Weimar as on the one hand dominated by deep anxieties, and on the other a cradle of much of the most fruitful modern art and thought. Yet as Gordon and McCormick also remind us, crisis 'is only intelligible given the strength of preceding and persistent tradition', and indeed in many ways Weimar thought remained deeply connected to the ideologies, beliefs, and values of the *Kaiserreich*. [81] Indeed, among those who still find in the *Sonderweg* thesis a convincing explanation for the trials of Weimar point to the centrality of this vexed relationship between tradition and crisis. Continuities with the ideologies and attitudes of the *Kaiserreich*, they argue, stood in direct conflict with the Republic's democratic and progressive aspirations.[82]

Ball's and Bloch's interpretations of the Reformation offer exemplary illustrations of this contradiction. Both attempted to explain their contemporary experience of crisis

[79] Steinmetz, 1997, p. 258; Ernst Bloch, Heritage of Our Times, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), first published in Germany as Erbschaft dieser Zeit in 1935.
[80] *Ibid.*
[81] *Ibid.*
[82] *Ibid.*

by appealing to what Walter Benjamin would later call a 'tradition of the oppressed'—in this case, an oppressed desire for revolution that both believed dated back to Münzer's defeat.[83] To be sure, for Ball, who clearly bought into the idea prevalent among German conservatives, that Germany had been betrayed in the First World War, it was the 'true' German nation itself that had been oppressed by a cabal of sinister anti-German forces. For Bloch, it was the desire for a socialist revolution that had been stifled, which despite what he saw as its distinctly German roots was meant to benefit the whole of humankind. Just as they identified a neglected tradition in German history, both Bloch and Ball sought a tradition with which to legitimate both their interpretations of contemporary crises, and their strategies for a different future. They found one readymade that dated back to Lessing, Herder, Engels, Kautsky, and others. Situating themselves in this intellectual lineage allowed Ball and Bloch to invoke Reformation memory in their attempts to reconcile the most characteristic tension in Weimar thought: that between crisis and tradition.

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[83] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' in Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 389-400.

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