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## From Schleswig to Anschluss: The Plebiscites and Referendums of Interwar Germany

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**From Schleswig to *Anschluss***  
**The Plebiscites and Referendums of Interwar Germany**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

Colby College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Waterville, Maine

May 2023

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When I embarked on this honors project in the summer of 2022, I assumed that it would be a solitary process. How collaborative can one be when writing a draft, researching in an archive, or ordering an endless stream of books through interlibrary loans? Upon returning to Colby in the autumn, I realized how wrong I'd been. This entire year, I've received so much support from so many people.

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## **Introduction**

On 12 March 1938, after a tense standoff with the Austrian chancellor, Adolf Hitler ordered the *Wehrmacht* to invade Austria. Within a day, the German army had toppled the Austrian government and ended the independence of their small neighbor. Following his conquest, Hitler declared that “Dem österreichischen Volk nunmehr in kürzester Frist die Möglichkeit geboten wird, durch eine wirkliche Volksabstimmung seine Zukunft und damit sein Schicksal selbst zu gestalten” (“The Austrian people are now finally given the opportunity, in the shortest possible time, to shape their future and thus their own destiny through a real referendum”).<sup>1</sup> This statement appears out of character for Hitler, one of history’s most totalitarian leaders. Why did he promise to administer a referendum, a tool of direct democracy, after violently annexing another sovereign state? What could an autocrat possibly gain from letting his people vote? How was a referendum even compatible with the ideology of the Third Reich, which demonized liberal democracy and civil liberties, and what role would referendums play in the Nazi regime? To make sense of Hitler’s statement and answer these questions, one must look to the beginning of the Third Reich, the tumult of the Weimar Republic, and the final months of the First World War.

Two sets of plebiscites affected Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. The first set, which this paper will call the immediate postwar plebiscites, took place in the years following the First World War, from early 1920 to mid-1922. In the Treaty of Versailles, the victorious powers outlined a series of plebiscites that they hoped would settle territorial disputes in the lands of the former German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. There were six votes in total.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Michaelis and Ernst Schraepler, eds., *Ursachen und Folgen. Vom deutschen Zusammenbruch 1918 und 1945 bis zur staatlichen Neuordnung Deutschlands in der Gegenwart. Eine Urkunden- und Dokumentensammlung zur Zeitgeschichte* (Berlin: Dokumenten-Verlag, 1959), IX:652, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.uibk.ac.at/zeitgeschichte/zis/library/steininger.html>.

The first of these plebiscites occurred in Schleswig, a region on the Danish-German border, in February and March 1920. The second and third votes happened simultaneously in two geographically close regions: Allenstein and Marienwerder, which were parts of East and West Prussia, respectively, both voted in July 1920. The fourth took place in the Klagenfurt Basin, a borderland between the newly formed Republic of Austria and Yugoslavia, in October 1920. The fifth and sixth plebiscites both occurred in 1921—the one in Upper Silesia, a disputed region between Germany and Poland, happened in March, while the one in Sopron, an area on the Hungarian-Austrian border, happened in December. Despite taking place in 1921, these final two votes both bled into 1922. The victorious powers administered and counted the votes for each of these votes. In their discussion at the Paris Peace Conference, the international meeting at which they drafted the Treaty of Versailles, they planned other plebiscites in Austria and Lithuania, although they never materialized. This paper will focus on the plebiscites in Schleswig, Allenstein, Marienwerder, and Upper Silesia, as these pertained to the borders of Germany.

The second set, which this paper will call the Third Reich's referendums, took place in the 1930s under the regime of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP or Nazi, for short), starting about thirteen years after the first group. While the immediate postwar plebiscites were mostly democratic, these referendums were decidedly not. Another important difference is that while the earlier set of plebiscites pertained to sovereignty and territory, this set addressed questions of Germany's domestic and international politics. The first referendum took place in 1933 and asked German citizens if they supported Hitler's decision to leave the League of Nations. The second happened a year later and changed the German constitution. After a two-year hiatus, the Third Reich hosted another referendum in 1936, asking its people if they agreed with the government's remilitarization of the Rhineland. The fourth and final referendum

occurred in 1938 following the Third Reich's invasion of Austria—this is the referendum about which Hitler was speaking in the above quotation. The Third Reich posed this question to the citizens of both Germany and Austria. This paper will discuss each of these referendums.

This paper will also briefly discuss the 1935 Saar plebiscite, which is an outlier that complicates the above groupings. In the Treaty of Versailles, the victorious powers granted France a monopoly on the industry and resources of the Saar, an overwhelmingly German region on the Franco-German border. They turned the territory into a League of Nations protectorate, severing it from the Weimar Republic. The protectorate and French economic monopoly were set, however, to last only fifteen years, from 1920 to 1935. When 1935 arrived, the League of Nations administered a plebiscite to determine the Saar's fate. Like the immediate postwar plebiscites, this vote occurred under mostly democratic conditions and revolved around an issue of territorial sovereignty, yet unlike the earlier votes, democracy was a much weaker force in Europe. Although it had no power in the Saar until after the vote, the Third Reich invested huge sums into a propaganda campaign there, so in some ways, the Saar vote resembled the referendums of Nazi Germany.

For both sets of referendums, the body of scholarly literature is relatively light, although the immediate postwar plebiscites have received more attention than the Third Reich's referendums. In 1933, Sarah Wambaugh, the world's foremost expert on plebiscites and an advisor to the body that administered the Saar vote, wrote *Plebiscites since the World War: With a Collection of Official Documents*. Even though it is ninety years old, this two-volume set is still the most comprehensive source on the immediate postwar plebiscites. Wambaugh begins by outlining the history of modern plebiscites and the discussions at the Paris Peace Conference that caused the victors to adopt plebiscites as an official program. She then delves into an analysis of

each plebiscite, beginning with Schleswig and ending with a chapter on Sopron. She also devotes some of the book to attempted and hypothetical plebiscites, such as that in Vilnius, Lithuania. Within each chapter, she examines the conduct of the plebiscite commissions, the bodies that administered the votes, and estimates the extent to which the outcome reflected the desires of the voters. In her conclusion, she argues that the plebiscites proved to be a useful tool and “a successful attempt to apply the principle of self-determination to a limited number of areas.”<sup>2</sup> Wambaugh’s work provides much of the foundation for this paper’s first chapter.

The literature on the Third Reich’s referendums is fairly scarce. Ralph Jessen and Hedwig Richter, professors at the Universität zu Köln and the Universität der Bundeswehr München, respectively, are some of the most prolific scholars in this niche. In *Voting for Hitler and Stalin: Elections under 20th Century Dictatorships*, which includes a few articles from other scholars, they argue that when conducting its referendums, the Third Reich, especially its most important leaders, such as Hitler and Wilhelm Frick, the Third Reich’s Minister of the Interior, took the referendums seriously, as it could use them to show the world how much Germans supported the regime. Because the referendums were an important propaganda strategy, Hitler tried to make the votes seem secret and fair, though of course they were not—if the international community questioned the results of the voting, then Hitler could not claim, as he had done, to represent the German people. Though they never state it so explicitly, Jessen and Richter imply that the roles of voter fraud and intimidation in Nazi elections were less extreme than scholars have assumed—many Germans enthusiastically voted for the measures.<sup>3</sup> Otmar Jung, a lecturer at the Freie Universität Berlin, has written the most on the Third Reich’s referendums. In *Plebiscit und*

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since the World War: With a Collection of Official Documents* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1933), 1:485, accessed September 25, 2022, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015057996764>.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Jessen and Hedwig Richter, eds., *Voting for Hitler and Stalin: Elections under 20th Century Dictatorships* (New York: Campus Verlag, 2012).



*Diktatur: die Volksabstimmungen der Nationalsozialisten: die Fälle Austritt aus dem Völkerbund (1933), Staatsoberhaupt (1934) und Anschluss Österreichs*, Jung explores the 1933, 1934, and 1938 referendums through a political science lens. He analyzes election data, discusses a bit of history, and considers the legality of each election under the laws of the Third Reich. Because he approaches the referendums from the perspective of a political scientist, his work is useful only in providing context for this paper's second chapter. Jung also chooses not to address the 1936 referendum, a decision he never explains.

This paper aims to bridge the gap between the immediate postwar plebiscites and the referendums of the Third Reich. To this point, the literatures on these sets of votes have remained completely separate. No scholars have considered the NSDAP's votes in the context of the postwar votes. By comparing and contrasting these groups of plebiscites for the first time, this paper will shed light on the democratic backsliding of interwar Germany. In 1920, plebiscites were a liberal tool that fit into Europe's new democratic order; however, by 1933, they had become a tool that bolstered Hitler's totalitarianism. Because this transition models Germany's slide from parliamentary democracy to fascist regime, an analysis of these referendums is a good proxy by which to measure the fall of the Weimar Republic and rise of the Third Reich.

This paper argues that when planning their referendums, the leaders of the Third Reich had the immediate postwar plebiscites in mind and were, in some cases, subtly responding to them. Because no scholarly studies address this link between the plebiscites of the 1920s and the referendums of the 1930s, this paper will rely on primary documents—and mix in relevant secondary sources when necessary. In Chapter One, it will look at the writings of Woodrow Wilson, conversations from the Paris Peace Conference, excerpts from the Treaty of Versailles, maps of the Schleswig plebiscite area, speeches from local politicians, and other sources that

help determine the fairness, effectiveness, and character of the immediate postwar plebiscites. In Chapter Two, it will analyze speeches from Hitler, letters between NSDAP organizations, posters from the Ministry of Propaganda, and other documents that help discern the extent to which Nazi leaders thought about the immediate postwar plebiscites. When searching for signs of the postwar plebiscites in the Third Reich's referendums, it will look at three metrics: direct allusions, voting procedures, and propagandistic messaging. Direct allusions are the most desirable evidence. Though less powerful than specific references, similarities in voting procedures and propagandistic messaging can also be strong evidence, as they can show that the Third Reich considered and responded to the same problems as the planners of the postwar plebiscites.

Before continuing, this paper must define *referendum* and *plebiscite*, its key terms. In *Plebiscites and Sovereignty: The Crisis of Political Legitimacy*, Lawrence T. Farley, an associate professor at Lock Haven University, argues that a referendum is any proposal put to the people for a vote, while a plebiscite is any proposal put to the people for a vote that pertains to sovereignty. Plebiscites, therefore, are a subset of referendums.<sup>4</sup> While these definitions are promising, Farley does not substantiate them, and this paper has found no other scholar who echoes his definitions. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *plebiscite* is approximately a synonym for *referendum*. The *OED* defines *referendum* as “the process or principle of referring an important political question (e.g. a proposed constitutional change) to be decided by a general vote of the entire electorate” and *plebiscite* as “a direct vote of all the members of an electorate

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<sup>4</sup> J. Tobin Grant and Yasuko Taoka, "The Referendum Conundrum: Referenda or Referendums?," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 03 (June 28, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511000667>. The proper plural form of *referendum* is ambiguous. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists both *referendums* and *referenda* as proper plural forms, although *referendums* is much more common. In their article, however, Grant and Taoka conclude that *referendums* is the only correct plural form of *referendum*. Because of these sources, I will use *referendums* as the plural form of *referendum*.

to decide a question of public importance.”<sup>5</sup> While *referendum* technically emphasizes the process of a popular vote more so than *plebiscite* does, their usages are essentially the same. According to Matt Qvortrup’s article in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Self-Determination*, thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century sometimes assigned a negative connotation to *plebiscite*, using it only for the rigged votes under authoritarian regimes.<sup>6</sup> While this paper will remember this usage when analyzing secondary sources, the *OED* does not recognize this connotation as existing during the interwar years. Because the *OED* provides the most straightforward and substantiated definitions, this paper will treat *referendum* and *plebiscite* as synonyms.

While *referendum* and *plebiscite* have functionally the same definition, their usages differed in the first half of the twentieth century. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, politicians used *plebiscite* almost exclusively. One would never hear Lloyd George, Wilson, or Clemenceau refer to the postwar votes as *referendums*. This usage began to change in the mid-1920s. In 1926, when Germany held its first self-administered referendum, most Germans referred to it as a *Volksentscheid*, which translated to a “people’s decision” or *referendum*. Although they still used *Volksabstimmung*, a “people’s vote” or *plebiscite*, it did not have the same prominence as in the early 1920s. This trend continued into the 1930s. To honor these historical usages, this paper will, generally, refer to the immediate postwar votes as *plebiscites* and to the Third Reich’s votes as *referendums*, though one should note that this difference in diction does not imply a difference in meaning. Giving different names to the two groups of votes also improves clarity.

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<sup>5</sup> "referendum, n.", *OED Online*, September 2022, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/160850?redirectedFrom=referendum#eid> (accessed September 29, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Matt Qvortrup, "Plebiscites: Introduction/Definition," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Self-Determination*, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/571>.

## **Chapter One: The Treaty of Versailles and Postwar Plebiscites**

### **The New International Order**

In April 1917, France and Great Britain were growing frustrated with the First World War. After years of fighting, neither side had achieved a decisive breakthrough. Each routinely sacrificed thousands of lives to advance a few miles at most.<sup>7</sup> Only months earlier, in December 1916, the nine-month-long Battle of Verdun ended with France and Germany each losing more than 300,00 soldiers.<sup>8</sup> To compound the plight of the war-weary French soldiers, in April 1917, General Robert Georges Nivelle launched an offensive about which the German High Command had already known. The German line, as a result, was so strongly defended that many French soldiers refused to cross No Man's Land, as doing so amounted to suicide. In response, some French officers shot their own troops for disobeying orders.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to the heavy casualties and poor leadership, the spirits of the Allied soldiers could not have been lower.

When the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, the promise of fresh American troops encouraged the French and British—from this point until the Americans arrived in June, the French army was mostly waiting for these reinforcements. With the outcome of the war largely depending on his country, President Woodrow Wilson had great influence over the political and ideological platform of the Allies. He used this leverage to enforce his vision of peace at the war's end. Many of the theories that undergirded Wilson's vision, however, were ambiguous, hypocritical, and based on misunderstandings of the pre-1914 world system.

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<sup>7</sup> William Philpott, "Warfare 1914–1918," 2021, in *1914–1918-online International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.), accessed January 8, 2023, [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/warfare\\_1914-1918](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/warfare_1914-1918).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 261.

<sup>9</sup> Norman A. Graebner and Edward M. Bennett, *The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy: The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 21.

Even before the United States entered the war, Wilson had developed new ideas about the future of international politics. He believed that Europe, which controlled much of the globe's territory, had led the world poorly. Because of unwise leadership and bad diplomacy, Europe had caused wars to erupt around the world, multiplying the suffering of millions. He believed that unlike Europe, the United States, with its unique democratic tradition, could create a more peaceful world. In his "The Meaning of Liberty" address, which he delivered on 4 July 1914 at Philadelphia's Independence Hall, Wilson called for the world to "turn to America for those moral inspirations which lie at the basis of all freedom" and to remember that the United States places "human rights above all other rights."<sup>10</sup> Although the First World War had not yet started, Wilson delivered his speech during a tense moment in international politics. Six days earlier, a terrorist funded by the Serbian government assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, and his wife, Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg. As Europe's two major blocs—the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance—slid toward war, Wilson saw an opportunity for the United States to expand its influence. In this speech, he hints at themes that he would develop in the coming years. While his ideas were still vague at that time, one can detect his insistence on placing human rights, especially the right to choose one's government, over "other rights," such as a state's right to pursue political or economic gain. These are the first inklings of his concept of national self-determination.

By May 1916, after monitoring Europe's war of attrition for nearly two years, Wilson had refined many of the ideas in "The Meaning of Liberty." During the war, the League to Enforce Peace, an American civil organization dedicated to creating a postwar system of collective

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<sup>10</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "The Meaning of Liberty," speech presented at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, July 4, 1914, The American Presidency Project, accessed January 8, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-independence-hall-the-meaning-liberty>.

security, had gained considerable influence in Washington and the Wilson administration.<sup>11</sup> On 27 May 1916, Wilson addressed the League's first annual assembly with a speech entitled "American Principles." He told his audience that when the war ended, the United States needed to ensure that "every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live."<sup>12</sup> This statement is much stronger than any he advanced in his earlier speeches, and one can see the concept of self-determination solidifying in his thoughts. Importantly, however, he qualified this statement in two important ways. First, he did not recognize the right to *national* self-determination. When he discussed "every people," he was referring not to nationalities specifically but to political communities broadly, such as independent-minded territories within a larger state.<sup>13</sup> Second, he limited the definition of *self-determination*. He believed that every community had the right to govern itself. He did not believe, by contrast, that peoples had the right to secede from their state—instead, they had the right to political autonomy within the existing political framework.<sup>14</sup> Even as late as December 1917, Wilson reiterated that he "did not wish in any way to impair or re-arrange the Austro-Hungarian Empire."<sup>15</sup> As Europe's most ethnically diverse empire, Austria-Hungary had experienced many secessionist movements before and during the war, none of which Wilson intended to entertain.<sup>16</sup>

Based on these two points, Wilson reimagined the countries of East-Central Europe in the model of the United States: federal systems comprising semi-autonomous territories that,

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<sup>11</sup> Graebner and Bennett, *The Versailles*, 12. In 1915, the League elected William Howard Taft as its president.

<sup>12</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "American Principles," address presented at The First Assemblage of the League to Enforce Peace, May 27, 1916, The American Presidency Project, accessed January 10, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Allen Lynch, "Woodrow Wilson and the Principle of 'National Self-Determination': A Reconsideration," *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 2002): 434, accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097800>.

<sup>14</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:4.

<sup>15</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "State of the Union (1917)," address, December 4, 1917, Teaching American History, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/state-of-the-union-address-106/>.

<sup>16</sup> Based on these statements from Wilson, one can detect points on which the future victorious powers would potentially disagree. Although Wilson did not want to dissolve Austria-Hungary, the Allies had promised large chunks of Austrohungarian territory to Italy if it joined the war on their side.

nonetheless, shared a common, democratic culture.<sup>17</sup> Here, one can begin to see cracks in the Wilsonian vision for Europe. To think that he could graft Anglo-American traditions on Europe was a mistake, as conflict between nationalities was an important political force in East-Central Europe that was virtually nonexistent in America. East-Central Europeans were accustomed to thinking about nationalism in terms of ethnicity, so when they read Wilson's "The Meaning of Liberty" address, they interpreted his words through that lens.<sup>18</sup> Wilson thus became the unintentional leader of ethnic minorities who wished to separate from the multinational empires of Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary.<sup>19</sup>

Over the remaining months of 1916, the United States stayed out of the war, though American public opinion was shifting away from the country's traditional isolationism. Sensing that, sooner or later, his nation might become a belligerent in the Great War, Wilson believed that he needed to communicate his visions for the postwar world more assertively. On 22 January 1917, he delivered his "A World League for Peace" speech to the United States Senate, in which he presented a much more refined version of his thoughts on international relations. According to Wilson, the world system of the long nineteenth century (from 1789 to 1914) depended on volatile alliances and an unstable balance of power. By embracing the cynical power politics characteristic of that system, European empires had plunged the continent into the bloodiest war of its history (the Second World War later passed the First World War in casualties).<sup>20</sup> To avoid another Great War, Wilson argued that in the eventual peace settlement, the war's victors needed

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony Whelan, "Wilsonian Self-Determination and the Versailles Settlement," *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1994): 100, accessed August 23, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/760824>.

<sup>18</sup> Lynch, "Woodrow Wilson," 422.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, however, the two world wars had very different casualty demographics. In the First World War, the vast majority of casualties were soldiers, while in the Second World War, most casualties were civilians. "Research Starters: Worldwide Deaths in World War II," The National World War II Museum, New Orleans, accessed January 13, 2023, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>.

to subordinate their national interests to those of the entire international community.<sup>21</sup> Rather than pursuing their “several interests and immediate aims,” the victorious powers needed to produce a just treaty that would ensure a stable, good-willed status quo. Only by forgiving their hated enemies—at least in the treaty, if not in spirit—could they avoid the same pitfalls that led to the July Crisis and the subsequent war.<sup>22</sup> This was a radically new idea for the time that began to tease out a key tension in the postwar settlements: the tension between disinterested peace and self-interested power politics.

Wilson knew that many states would likely resist this reordering of international relations. Even if he could convince this war’s victors to set aside their interests for the sake of goodwill, no mechanism guaranteed lasting peace. He needed to create an international structure that could, in the long term, incentivize states to forfeit their own goals in favor of humanity’s best interests. This structure, which Wilson described in the “A World League for Peace” speech, would take the form of a mutual-defense organization, through which “moral” nations could defend one another from predatory rogue states. Instead of relying on a balance of power, which had been predicated on *Realpolitik*, this organization would rely on a “community of power.”<sup>23</sup> Such a community, Wilson believed, would be much more effective than a balance of power, for it derived its authority from the world’s “common strength,” not the overlapping interests of individual states.<sup>24</sup> In this speech, Wilson laid down the intellectual scaffolding for the League of Nations. Like with his thoughts on self-determination, however, Wilson’s plans to reorder international politics were based on faulty assumptions. Far from causing the war, European alliance systems actually gave flexibility to the pre-1914 world order and repeatedly deterred

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<sup>21</sup> At this point in 1917, no one was sure which side would win the First World War.

<sup>22</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "A World League for Peace," speech presented at United States Senate, Washington, D.C., January 22, 1917, University of Virginia's Miller Center, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-22-1917-world-league-peace-speech>.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, "A World," speech, University of Virginia's Miller Center.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



conflict. Abandoning them would make the world no more—and perhaps less—stable than in 1914.<sup>25</sup>

By April 1917, Wilson had comprehensively outlined the theories behind his Fourteen Points, a set of principles on which he wanted to base the future peace settlement. Although the Fourteen Points were far from perfect, nothing indicated that he and the eventual victors could not refine his ideas into a practical treaty. That possibility ended when the United States officially entered the war. As American troops gradually landed in Europe, Wilson ramped up his political rhetoric, as he wanted to further convince the American homefront that entering the war was essential in ensuring the security of the United States. He now recast the war as a battle between wicked autocracies—the Central Powers—and just, liberal democracies—the Entente, which now included a democratizing Russia, and the United States.<sup>26</sup> In his address to a joint session of Congress, during which he called for war against Germany, Wilson declared that democracy was “more precious than peace.” For the United States to “spend her blood” in the name of this cause was a great honor. Similarly, to save democracy for future generations, the United States needed to dedicate “everything that we are and everything that we have” to stopping Germany.<sup>27</sup> This ideological framing dangerously simplified the First World War. The July Crisis resulted from complex power politics and the distinct yet overlapping interests of the Great Powers—for example, although each had a different rationale, Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary all desired war.<sup>28</sup> Defending democracy was never a goal of the Allies, and to

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<sup>25</sup> William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> The United States never technically joined the Entente. It remained an “associated” power.

<sup>27</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Germany,” speech presented at Joint Session of Congress, Washington, D.C., April 2, 1917, National Archives, accessed January 17, 2023,

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/address-to-congress-declaration-of-war-against-germany#:~:text=In%20his%20speech%20before%20a,and%20to%20%E2%80%9Cbring%20peace%20and.>

<sup>28</sup> Mulligan, *The Origins*.

say otherwise was blatantly false—the Allies, until 1917, included the Russian Empire, the most autocratic state in Europe at the time. This ideological spin served only to feed Wilson’s savior complex and to further isolate Germany, which would remember this hypocrisy.

By misrepresenting the ideological goals of the two warring factions, Wilson encouraged the anti-German sentiment that would eventually poison the postwar peace negotiations. When Wilson set up this false ideological dichotomy, he referred more to the German government than to the German people, yet his administration encouraged Americans to erase the German-American culture that had existed since Germans began immigrating to North America in the nineteenth century. Vigilantes harassed German-Americans; schools refused to teach the German language; and, famously, grocers renamed sauerkraut to “liberty cabbage.” Wilson’s lieutenants also berated the German people in their speeches. On 16 June 1917, Secretary of State Robert Lansing delivered a speech at Princeton University in which he described Germany as a “wild beast” led by “assassins and butchers.” In another speech at Columbia University, Lansing called Germany an “abomination” against which the United States would inflict the “divine law of retribution.”<sup>29</sup> Lansing’s allusion to “divine law” was in line with the “holy war” idea that Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker explore in their book, *14–18: Understanding the Great War*.<sup>30</sup> After reading a third address that Lansing had prepared for New York University, Colonel Edward House, a diplomat and adviser to Wilson, declared that such aggressive anti-German sentiment would damage the future possibility of a trusting relationship between Germany and the United States.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Graebner and Bennett, *The Versailles*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014), 116. According to Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau, each nation claimed that God was on its side and that it had set out to defend civilization from its opponents’ barbarism.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Paris Peace Conference: Self-Determination versus Power Politics

By the autumn of 1918, the war had turned against Germany. Thanks to the fresh troops of the United States, the Entente could overwhelm the exhausted Germans for the first time in four years. As a result, in September, the German Supreme Command announced to the German people that they could no longer win on the Western Front. This announcement shocked many Germans, as they had defeated Russia, the ally with the fiercest prewar reputation, in the spring. A few weeks later, the Supreme Command asked for a ceasefire that abided by Wilson's Fourteen Points. The Entente, however, refused the ceasefire and would accept only unconditional surrender. It also insisted on dealing only with democratically-elected representatives, not aristocrats or military officers.<sup>32</sup> This "revolution from above" exacerbated the German people's frustration with Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had drawn much criticism throughout the war. In the final days of October, the "revolution from below"—a new era of political turmoil in Germany—began in earnest. Following widespread protests and a march in Berlin, Wilhelm fled into exile in the Netherlands on 10 November, and democrats set up Germany's first republic. A day later, the Supreme Council signed an armistice with the Allies, ending the First World War.<sup>33</sup>

The Paris Peace Conference, whose delegates would draft the peace settlement, convened two months later. As the leaders of the most powerful victorious states, David Lloyd George of Great Britain, Georges Clemenceau of France, and Vittorio Emanuele Orlando of Italy joined Wilson to become the conference's most important decision-makers (the Big Four). Although they had fought together in the war, these leaders had fundamentally different visions for postwar

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<sup>32</sup> Trygve Throntveit, "The Fable of the Fourteen Points: Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination," *Diplomatic History* 35, no. 3 (June 2011): 462, accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24916429>.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Gallus, "Revolutions (Germany)," 2014, in *1914–1918-online International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, n.d.), accessed January 31, 2023, [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/revolutions\\_germany](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/revolutions_germany).

Europe. Whereas Wilson was an idealist, Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Orlando embraced power politics. They rejected Wilson's "peace without victory" and hesitated to accept any plan that did not include "aggression and conquest."<sup>34</sup> Because they mixed idealism and *realpolitik* haphazardly, the Big Four poisoned the peace settlement and its accompanying plebiscites.

From the start of the Paris Peace Conference, an ideological gap opened between the Big Four. During the first years of the war, the Allies signed multiple secret treaties that carved up the territories of the Central Powers, prematurely dividing the plunder to avoid future squabbles. The most egregious of these agreements was the Treaty of London, which the Allies negotiated in April 1915.<sup>35</sup> In this treaty, the Allies promised chunks of Austro-Hungarian territory to Italy if it joined the war on their side. Such power politics ran contrary to the Wilsonian vision of peace. Upon arriving in Paris, Wilson knew about the secret treaties—Leon Trotsky had published them in 1917 after the Bolsheviks overthrew Russia's democratic, provisional government—and planned to eliminate their provisions from the peace settlement. This flagrant example of power politics, he believed, belonged nowhere near the conference. Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Orlando, however, intended to honor every letter of the secret treaties and were irritated when Wilson suggested otherwise. After an intense debate, Clemenceau said, "How can I talk to a fellow who thinks himself the first man in two thousand years to know anything about peace on earth?...Talking to Wilson is something like talking to Jesus Christ."<sup>36</sup> Lloyd George sarcastically described Wilson's mission as one "to rescue the poor European heathen from their age-long worship of false and fiery Gods."<sup>37</sup> Wilson knew that despite insisting they prioritize peace and "human rights above all other rights," he could not stop the Allies from enforcing at least parts of

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<sup>34</sup> Throntveit, "The Fable," 457.

<sup>35</sup> Rene Albrecht-Carrie, "The Present Significance of the Treaty of London of 1915," *Political Science Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (September 1939): 365–366, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2143483>.

<sup>36</sup> Graebner and Bennett, *The Versailles*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Graebner and Bennett, *The Versailles*, 40–41.

the treaties. The issue of secret treaties exposed the incomplete victory of Wilsonianism at the Paris Peace Conference. Although Wilson made the Allies accept his Fourteen Points as the basis for the peace settlement, he did not have enough leverage to enforce its every provision. He had not predicted that the other members of the Big Four would so staunchly resist his crusade against power politics.

Even though Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Orlando often defended their right to act in their countries' best interests, one can sense an anti-German sentiment underneath their supposedly practical concerns. They believed, for example, that harshly punishing Germany would ensure future peace. Clemenceau argued this point fervently, as his nation was the only one among the Big Four to share a border with Germany. He believed that because Germany had perpetrated two wars against France in the past half-century, a settlement harsh enough to hamper Germany's war-making ability was the only way to ensure peace.<sup>38</sup> If Germany were to rearm and again set its eyes on France, the Third Republic would be doomed, as it had lost about ten percent of its male population in the First World War and would not have enough soldiers to fend off an invasion in the near future.<sup>39</sup> Clemenceau wanted to seize the Rhineland from Germany and transform it into small buffer states. Because the Rhineland sat just east of the Ruhr valley, Germany's industrial and economic heartland, this plan would hinder German economic and military might, as Germany's most crucial infrastructure would be within striking distance of a French invasion. Clemenceau also wanted to annex the Saar, whose rich coal deposits could bolster the reserves of coal-poor France. And, of course, he demanded the return of Alsace-Lorraine, which Prussia had annexed in 1871.

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<sup>38</sup> The Franco-Prussian War lasted from July 1870 to May 1871. Although France technically declared war on Prussia, many leaders after the First World War saw it as an example of German aggression.

<sup>39</sup> Graebner and Bennett, *The Versailles*, 45.

In each of these demands, despite the explicit appeal to French security, there is a vengeful subtext. Clemenceau—and also Lloyd George and Orlando—believed that Germany had earned these punishments and deserved to suffer for its sins. In a debate over the future of the Saar, when Wilson called him hypocritical for placing national interests above peace, Clemenceau accused Wilson of sympathizing with Germany, an insult one would never expect from a leader who claims to prioritize European security above personal gain.<sup>40</sup> As much as Clemenceau designed his demands to benefit France, he designed them equally to hurt Germany. Throughout the peace conference, the Big Four (Wilson included, at times) often disguised their contempt for Germany with appeals to pragmatism and national security. For the victorious powers, anti-German sentiment and power politics reinforced each other. Because of this dynamic, Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Orlando killed much of Wilson's vision for postwar Europe. He had a massive platform and many eager listeners, but he could accomplish nothing without the goodwill of these leaders who, at least for the moment, were unwilling to shelve their hatred for the sake of lasting peace.

Of the theories that undergirded the Fourteen Points, self-determination was one of the most important, as Wilson needed it to rid Europe of the undemocratic empires that he believed caused the First World War and, therefore, threatened future peace. For such an important and powerful tool, however, it was dangerously ambiguous. When he first formulated self-determination, Wilson based it on the Anglo-American idea of civic nationalism, which was based on self-government. When arriving in Europe, he learned that East-Central Europeans understood nationalism as an ethnic rather than a civic concept.<sup>41</sup> Instead of individualism and democracy, blood and collectivism dominated their understanding of nationalism. So, he was

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<sup>40</sup> Graebner and Bennett, *The Versailles*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Throntveit, "The Fable," 447.

shocked to find the delegations of numerous ethnic minorities from across East-Central Europe waiting to meet him in Paris. Wilson admitted, “When I gave utterance to those words [that all nations had a right to self-determination], I said them without a knowledge that nationalities existed, which are coming to us day after day.”<sup>42</sup> This disconnect was a key problem with self-determination. No one in Paris—not even Wilson—knew how to define the *self* in *self-determination*. Did it mean a civic community, a nationality, or something else? And, for that matter, what defined nationality? Race, religion, language, history? The futures of millions depended on these questions, so finding their answers became a key task of the Big Four.

Besides its imprecise definition, self-determination sat on other faulty assumptions. Drawing clean boundaries in East-Central Europe was impossible. After centuries of migration and intermingling, the region looked like a patchwork. Wilson did not realize this until he arrived in Europe. He had not known, for example, that millions of Sudeten Germans lived in Czech territory.<sup>43</sup> No matter how they divided East-Central Europe, the Big Four needed to deal with the issue of national minorities, adding another layer of complexity to an already tense situation. Similarly, they assumed that language always correlated with national identity. In the countries of the Big Four, a shared language mostly overlapped with nationalism. Most Italian speakers, for example, identified with the Italian nationality. This was not the case in East-Central Europe. In the borderlands of East Prussia, many Polish-speaking civilians identified as Germans and preferred the Weimar Republic to the new Polish state.<sup>44</sup> Because it combined these issues with an ambiguous definition, self-determination was an unworkable concept at the start of the peace conference. To deliver on the hopes of millions of East-Central Europeans, the Big Four needed to overhaul Wilson’s original theories.

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<sup>42</sup> Lynch, "Woodrow Wilson," 426.

<sup>43</sup> Lynch, "Woodrow Wilson," 435.

<sup>44</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:103.

At this point, two of the peace conference's most important forces converged: the Big Four's power politics mixed with the ambiguous, susceptible concept of self-determination. Because the Big Four did not know what principles to follow when applying self-determination, they defaulted to deciding on a case-by-case basis.<sup>45</sup> Wilson knew that this was a dangerous decision—in the absence of clear, discernable principles, Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Orlando would surely use self-determination as a pretext to advance their national interests. Wilson reasoned, however, that the League of Nations, through arbitration, could repair any injustices that the victorious powers might have perpetrated at the peace conference. This was a crucial mistake. The other Big Four leaders did not want, as Wilson believed, to push only some petty issues of national pride, such as acquiring the coal deposits of the Saar. They were also determined to punish Germany for the millions of Allied soldiers who had died in the First World War.<sup>46</sup> Wilson allowed his idealism to blind him to the political realities of postwar Europe. He did not realize the extent to which the Allies saw punishing Germany as key to their mission in Paris. No debate in the League of Nations could ever repair the damage that they intended to inflict on the Weimar Republic. When Wilson conceded to deciding issues of self-determination on a case-by-case basis, he gave Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Orlando a potent tool with which to enact their revenge.<sup>47</sup>

As the Big Four drew the new borders of East-Central Europe, they applied self-determination hypocritically, taking land from their defeated opponents and giving it to new allies. Always fearful of a future German attack, Clemenceau insisted on strong Polish and

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<sup>45</sup> Lynch, "Woodrow Wilson," 426.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Betts, "Germany, International Justice and the Twentieth Century," *History and Memory* 17, no. 1–2 (Winter/Spring 2005): 49, accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/his.2005.17.1-2.45>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* Even though they wanted revenge, these leaders were still less hateful than the populations of their countries.



Czechoslovak states, both of which could be important allies against a resurgent Germany.<sup>48</sup> Thanks to French support, these states gained statehood in the name of self-determination and territory at the expense of others. Poland, for example, gained much of eastern Germany, including West Prussia and Poznan. It also received a strip of Pomerania that was inhabited almost exclusively by Germans because Wilson had promised it access to the sea in his Fourteen Points. Less than seventy percent of the new Polish state's population ended up being Polish.<sup>49</sup> Czechoslovakia experienced a similar boon. It received the Sudetenland, which was home to about three million Germans. On its southern border, it also gained territory containing 750,000 Hungarians, who, as members of a dominant nationality in Austria-Hungary, had also earned the ire of the Allies.<sup>50</sup> For its part, Italy annexed South Tyrol, a partly German-, partly Italian-speaking territory that the Allies had promised it in the Treaty of London. France reclaimed Alsace-Lorraine and controlled the economy of the Saar, both of which had majority German populations. After the Big Four finished their revisions, millions of Germans were to live as national minorities in Germany's neighbors. By contrast, none of the victorious powers freed their colonies or ceded territory to national minorities. Without much protest, Wilson allowed the Allies to play kingmakers in East-Central Europe, awarding territory to their allies in the name of self-determination and punishing Germany for losing the war.

After unilaterally splitting territory from Germany and other defeated powers, the Big Four knew that the world would frown on a few diplomats deciding what self-determination meant for everyone else. They needed a mechanism to affirm their decisions while publicly considering the opinions of East-Central Europeans. They found their tool in plebiscites.

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<sup>48</sup> Germany's chief strategic weakness is its location, as it was always susceptible to attack from both the west and east. France and Russia used this strategy in the First World War, and Clemenceau tried to replicate it here with Poland and Czechoslovakia.

<sup>49</sup> Graebner and Bennett, *The Versailles*, 50.

<sup>50</sup> Graebner and Bennett, *The Versailles*, 51.

Although they were popular political instruments from the French Revolution through the revolutions of 1848, plebiscites had fallen out of favor in the fifty years leading up to the First World War. Notably, Prussia ruined the tool's credibility when it annexed Schleswig without administering the plebiscite it had promised in the 1866 Treaty of Prague and when it annexed Alsace-Lorraine without a plebiscite in 1871.<sup>51</sup> After lying dormant for a half-century, plebiscites reappeared in the 1917 peace negotiations between Germany and the new Soviet government. At the Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference, the Soviet representatives demanded that Germany administer plebiscites in Eastern Europe so that each nation could decide its allegiance. Because it did not want to openly defy Wilson's principles, Germany agreed to host some plebiscites; however, it would use them only to ratify the independence of the Baltic countries, whose legislative bodies had already voted to separate from Russia.<sup>52</sup> Their independence benefited Germany. In the game of postwar power politics, Germany was not innocent. In the case of Brest-Litovsk, Imperial Germany had planned, like some of the Allies, to hijack self-determination.

Leading up to the Paris Peace Conference, although neither Germany nor the Allies had explicitly mentioned plebiscites in their armistice negotiations, the public expected them to play an important role in implementing self-determination. Wilson, at first, disliked plebiscites. He believed that because a perfect plebiscite could never exist—some uncontrollable factors would always favor one side—any plebiscite would necessarily taint self-determination. Lloyd George and his British delegation held an opposing view. They believed that plebiscites could legitimize the Big Four's decisions, regardless of whether they occurred under perfectly neutral

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<sup>51</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:3.

<sup>52</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:8.

circumstances.<sup>53</sup> Whether the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk inspired Lloyd George is unclear, though he and Germany both understood the power of plebiscites to affirm their decisions. Clemenceau had a less clear view on plebiscites. While he refused to acknowledge the possibility of a plebiscite in Alsace-Lorraine, he recognized, like Lloyd George, that they could be useful on the German-Polish border. Orlando had a much stronger view. He rejected any plebiscite that involved territory promised to Italy in the Treaty of London, driving a wedge between himself and Wilson. After some convincing from Lloyd George and Clemenceau, Wilson agreed that the League of Nations should administer plebiscites in select territories.

The Big Four decided that plebiscites would determine the fate of three German areas: Schleswig, a region on the Danish border; Allenstein and Marienwerder, which were parts of East and West Prussia, respectively; and Upper Silesia, an important industrial district on the Polish border. These plebiscites, they believed, would legitimize the territorial changes they dictated in the Treaty of Versailles. Each of these territories had substantial German populations and only minor geopolitical significance, so the Big Four could not justify unilaterally separating them from Germany.<sup>54</sup> Through the plebiscites, however, they could potentially split more territory from Germany while still appearing to abide by the principle of self-determination. Plebiscites also posed little risk to the victorious powers. If the population of a plebiscite zone elected to leave Germany, then the Allies had gained the pretext to further weaken Germany and strengthen potential allies, such as Poland. If a population voted to stay in Germany, however, it had little to no effect on France, Italy, or Great Britain. Their ability to determine where plebiscites would occur was one of the Big Four's greatest unrecognized powers. By

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<sup>53</sup> Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 217.

<sup>54</sup> In Danzig, by contrast, they used the city's economic importance to Poland as a pretext for separating it from Germany and transforming it into an independent city-state under the protection of the League of Nations.

implementing or withholding plebiscites, the Big Four could potentially separate any territory from the defeated powers while simultaneously appealing to self-determination, which gave them a solid pretext.

### **Germany's Reaction to the Treaty of Versailles**

On 7 May 1919, Clemenceau presented the Treaty of Versailles to Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, Germany's foreign minister and plenipotentiary to the peace conference. Because Germany "carried on without respite the merciless war which has been imposed upon [the Allies]," Clemenceau explained, "the time has now come for a heavy reckoning of accounts." If Germany had any comments on the draft, then they needed to submit them in writing, as Clemenceau had no time for "superfluous words" at that meeting.<sup>55</sup> Brockdorff-Rantzau declared that although he would never deny Germany's role in escalating and perpetuating the conflict, he refused to accept sole responsibility for the First World.<sup>56</sup> He was aware, however, that because of "the force of the hatred which confronts us here," the Allies would compel him to admit Germany's unique culpability—he only wanted everyone to know that he would be lying. For Brockdorff-Rantzau, Clemenceau's insolence capped off months of disrespect, frustration, and humiliation. He was furious that the Allies had forced such an unacceptable peace on his country and was humiliated that he could do nothing about it. Although he did not know it at the time, in his defiant speech, he echoed the widespread sentiment of the German people. When word of the treaty reached the Weimar Republic, the universal response was outrage. On 18 May, thousands of Germans marched through Berlin,

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<sup>55</sup>"The Presentation of the Conditions of Peace to the German Delegates" (conference session at Peace Congress (Versailles), Protocol No. 1, Plenary Session of May 7, 1919, Versailles, Paris, France, May 7, 1919), accessed February 6, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv03/d11>.

<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, Brockdorff-Rantzau admitted that Germany played a key role in the July Crisis.

demanding that the new government refuse to sign the treaty. To understand this response, one must reexamine the peace conference from the German point of view.

If one looked at the Treaty of Versailles in the context of other contemporary treaties, one would see that its provisions were not much harsher than its predecessors. The part of the treaty that most angered Germany was Part VIII, titled “Reparation.” Within this section, the Allies demanded that Germany pay them for the damage its armies did to Allied territory.<sup>57</sup> When they learned about this provision, most Germans were outraged that the Allies would so blatantly try to bankrupt their new republic. Great Britain, many Germans believed, had already inflicted needless economic and humanitarian damage by enforcing its blockade even after the opposing sides had signed an armistice, so this reparations clause was just another attempt to impoverish the German people. Despite their outrage, clauses like this were common in other treaties. For example, in the Treaty of Frankfurt, which concluded the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, Germany demanded that France pay a hefty sum—and France, which, like Germany in 1919, had a fledgling republic, did its best to pay.<sup>58</sup> Considering the damage done to France during the First World War far outsized that done to Germany in the Franco-Prussian War, the Allies had every right to ask their opponent for reparations, especially after the German army had gone out of its way to destroy French infrastructure while retreating. Most contemporary historians agree that, despite the contemporary German reaction, the Treaty of Versailles was not uniquely harsh.<sup>59</sup> This revelation raises an important question: why was Germany so outraged when it had inflicted similar punishments on France in 1871?

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<sup>57</sup> "The Treaty of Peace with Germany," June 28, 1919, accessed February 7, 2023, [https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/treaty\\_of\\_versailles-112018.pdf](https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/treaty_of_versailles-112018.pdf). The specific clause is Article 232.

<sup>58</sup> Ruth Henig, *Versailles and After, 1919-1933*, 2nd ed. (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2006), 63.

<sup>59</sup> Henig, *Versailles and After*, 61–62.

One can contribute this discrepancy to two factors: the lack of fighting on German soil and Wilson's promise for a new international order. When the war ended in November 1918, few Germans understood how handily they had lost the war. Thanks to a steady stream of propaganda, most Germans were unaware that, following the arrival of fresh American troops, the Allies had badly beaten their armies on the Western Front. This propaganda was so successful because the war-weary Allies preferred an unconditional surrender to invading metropolitan Germany, so few German civilians ever saw the fighting firsthand—there was some fighting in rural East Prussia in 1914–15 and in German overseas colonies but very little, if any, in Germany's urban centers. As a result, many Germans believed that their armies had never lost to the Allied forces.<sup>60</sup> They instead believed that the German homefront had collapsed in the face of the British blockade. Without a strong homefront to support it, the German army was forced to surrender. This line of thinking led many Germans to underestimate how utterly defeated they were. It also led them to believe that the Allies would not punish them excessively, as Germany had lost a “fine and clean fight.”<sup>61</sup>

Germans also had put too much faith in the words of Wilson. Over the first few months of the peace negotiations, they held onto the Fourteen Points “like a life raft.”<sup>62</sup> For years at this point, Wilson had emphasized that power politics had caused the First World War, so building a just and principled world order was essential to preventing future conflict. Most Germans assumed that because they had established a democratic republic, as Wilson had suggested, the Allies would use the Treaty of Versailles to forge the new international system about which Wilson had so frequently spoken. Rather than a treaty extorting it for the political gains of Great

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<sup>60</sup> Ross Kennedy, "'A Net of Intrigue and Selfish Rivalry': Woodrow Wilson and Power Politics During World War I," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 159, no. 2 (June 2015): 159, accessed February 7, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24640212>.

<sup>61</sup> Margaret Olwen Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003), 461.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Britain, France, and Italy, Germany expected a treaty of mild sanctions and some wrist-slapping. He had not only given his word but also had a vested interest in keeping Germany strong—here, one can again see the friction between Wilson’s vision and not-so-easily-erased power politics. Together, Wilson’s rhetoric and the Allies’ ostensibly incomplete victory led many Germans to expect a mild peace built on the Fourteen Points.<sup>63</sup>

From the start of the peace conference, however, the Allies showed the Germans that they were not welcome in Paris. Some early signs pointed to this. Even though it had much faith in Wilson, Germany remembered his cabinet’s staunch anti-German propaganda during the war. For the conference’s first four months, the Allies and associated powers discussed the terms of the peace without inviting the German delegates. On 28 April 1919, over six months after their government had signed the armistice, Brockdorff-Rantzau and his delegation left Berlin for Paris. Although they still hoped that the peace treaty would reflect Wilson’s promises, they expected that the Allies would likely treat them as outcasts. They were right. While they traveled by train through the French countryside, the engineer slowed down the train whenever they passed a particularly destroyed area, as if to say, one member of Brockdorff-Rantzau’s delegation remarked, “the sole responsibility for all the shattered life and property of these terrible four and a half years rests with Germany.” When they arrived at their hotel in Paris, their escort dumped their luggage on the ground and told them to carry it themselves. Armed French soldiers also guarded the premises for the “protection” of the delegates. Then, the Germans waited a week before the Allies presented the Treaty of Versailles to them on 7 May. Even until the night before the presentation, however, Brockdorff-Rantzau hoped that Wilson had succeeded. He prepared two speeches, a short, neutral one and a longer, more defiant one. He ended up using the latter.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Low, *The Anschluss*, 379.

<sup>64</sup> Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, 460–461.

When they received the treaty, the German delegation reacted so poorly because the Allies—and Wilson, especially—had betrayed the ideals on which they promised to base the peace. It expected a treaty based on Wilsonian principles, but it instead received a treaty based on pre-1914 power politics. Key to Wilson’s vision was the League of Nations, which would unite the world’s republics in a common defense organization. Germany, on Wilson’s request, overthrew its monarchy and established the Weimar Republic, hoping to distance itself from its imperial past and join Europe’s liberal nations. To their shock, the Allies had excluded Germany from the League of Nations, dashing hopes that the Allies might accept them into Wilson’s purported new order. For Germans, many of whom risked their lives in establishing Germany’s first republic, this was a disheartening betrayal.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, in Article 231, which was later named the “war guilt clause,” the Allies stated that the war, and all of its consequences, resulted from “the aggression of Germany and her allies.”<sup>66</sup> Even at this time, many recognized the complexities of the July Crisis and beginning of the First World War. Much of Germany felt that it had fought a defensive war—Russia had mobilized its forces first—even though the Kaiser’s government had certainly helped escalate the war when it issued the “blank check” to Austria-Hungary. For the Allies to so explicitly pin this complex war on their opponents felt like peak hypocrisy and a massive perversion of justice to Germany—perhaps more so than any other part of the treaty, Germans remembered the injustice of the war guilt clause. By excluding Germany from the League of Nations and blaming it for the war, the Allies tried to isolate it. The German delegation knew immediately that this was a calculating, power political move designed to justify the harsh penalties, such as the monetary reparation, that the Allies intended to impose. Wilson’s speeches about a post-*realpolitik* world apparently did not apply to the Allies.

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<sup>65</sup> Throntveit, "The Fable," 462.

<sup>66</sup> "The Treaty."



On top of failing to replace the old-school power politics with a more just international system, the Allies flagrantly violated the principle of self-determination, which offended Germans as much as, if not more than, the war guilt clause. The treaty granted many of Clemenceau's wishes. In Article 51, the treaty returned Alsace-Lorraine to France, a region inhabited primarily by German speakers. Although the German delegation anticipated this, as Wilson had included returning the territory in his Fourteen Points, they still believed that a plebiscite should have determined its future. In Articles 42, 43, and 44, the treaty ordered Germany to demilitarize the Rhineland. Wilson, Lloyd George, and Orlando were unwilling to split the Rhineland into small French puppet states; however, they agreed that any German forces on the French border were too dangerous to tolerate. Again, although Brockdorff-Rantzau and his staff anticipated this sanction, Germany did not want to surrender sovereignty over any of its territory.

The most infuriating articles, however, involved territorial losses that the delegates did not expect. Germany lost large tracts of land to Poland, while Belgium, Lithuania, and Czechoslovakia each nibbled off bits of territory. Despite its ninety-six percent German population, Danzig would become a free city and owe its economic allegiance to Poland. France would also have an economic monopoly over the Saar for fifteen years, including its valuable coal reserves.<sup>67</sup> While yelling into a phone at a colleague in Berlin, one German delegate summed up his nation's reaction: "The Saar basin ... Poland, Silesia, Oppeln ... and for all that we are supposed to say 'Thank you very much.'"<sup>68</sup> While Germany could accept the restrictions

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<sup>67</sup> "German Territorial Losses, Treaty of Versailles, 1919," map, United States Memorial Holocaust Museum, accessed February 9, 2023, [https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/german-territorial-losses-treaty-of-versailles-1919#:~:text=In%20sum%2C%20Germany%20forfeited%2013,6.5%20and%207%20million%20people\).](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/german-territorial-losses-treaty-of-versailles-1919#:~:text=In%20sum%2C%20Germany%20forfeited%2013,6.5%20and%207%20million%20people).)

<sup>68</sup> Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, 464.

on its army and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, a territory it had gained only fifty years earlier, it could not—yet was forced to—tolerate the losses of territory so integrally German.

For the Allies, needlessly violating the right of Germans to self-determination was one of the largest blunders of the peace conference. By emphasizing the importance of self-determination for years, Wilson brought nationalism to the forefront of German national consciousness, raising the hopes of many Germans that their new nation state might now include all ethnic Germans. This was a mistake because Wilson's promises reignited a dormant debate from Germany's political history. Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, most Germans lived in the Holy Roman Empire, a consortium of affiliated yet mostly autonomous principalities. When the French invaded in the early nineteenth century, Napoleon dissolved the millennium-old empire, opening a power vacuum in Central Europe. About four decades later, during the Revolutions of 1848, German statesmen began to think about the possibility of a united Germany. Would a German state, they wondered, include Habsburg Austria (*Großdeutschland*), or would it exclude it (*Kleindeutschland*)? After the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck ensured that Germany, at least for the time being, would exclude Austria.<sup>69</sup> Until 1918, *Kleindeutschland* dominated German political culture; however, that changed when the Central Powers lost the First World War and Austria-Hungary imploded. In the tenth of his Fourteen Points, Wilson declared that “The people of Austria-Hungary...should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development.”<sup>70</sup> On 12 November 1918, as one of the successor governments to Austria-Hungary, the Provisional Assembly of the Republic of German-Austria exercised its right to autonomous development by voting overwhelmingly to join the Weimar Republic and unite Europe's two major German

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<sup>69</sup> This war will become relevant again during the discussion of the plebiscite in Schleswig.

<sup>70</sup> Mario R. DiNunzio, ed., *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar-President* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 405.

states. For the first time since the 1860s, *Großdeutschland* resurfaced as a powerful thread in the German collective consciousness. Just as the *Anschluss* movement gained momentum in early 1919, the Treaty of Versailles, in Article 80, forbade Germany from joining with Austria. By so clearly violating Austria's right to self-determination, the Allies infuriated the adherents of this newly expanded German nationalism.<sup>71</sup> They were too late, however, to close Pandora's box: *Großdeutschland* would not vanish as it had before.<sup>72</sup>

In the first years following the peace settlements, many Austrians were unwilling to let their hope of *Großdeutschland* fade. On 10 October 1920, the Austrian Parliament decided that it would hold its own plebiscite on unification with Germany to show the victorious powers how flagrantly they had violated Austria's right to self-determination. Although the Allied governments pressured the federal Austrian government into abandoning this plan, some of Austria's provinces followed through on the plebiscite plans. The region of Tyrol held a vote on 24 April 1921. After the First World War, Italy had annexed much of Tyrol—and the German speakers in it—without a plebiscite, as this territory was part of its reward for joining the Allies in 1915. Angry that the Treaty of Saint-Germain, the peace settlement that the victorious powers negotiated with Austria, had split their province, the Tyrolese overwhelmingly approved the referendum—145,302 voted for union with Germany, while only 1,805 voted against it. Following Tyrol, the province of Salzburg scheduled its own plebiscite for 29 May. Even though the Austrian chancellor convinced the Salzburg Diet to cancel the referendum, the region's parties held the vote anyway in an unofficial capacity. On the question of “Is union with Germany demanded,” 103,000 Salzburgers voted “Yes,” and 800 voted “No.”<sup>73</sup> After some

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<sup>71</sup> Alfred D. Low, *The Anschluss Movement 1918–1919 and the Paris Peace Conference* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1974), 385.

<sup>72</sup> The Third Reich's 1938 *Anschluss* referendum, which this paper will cover in a later chapter, ties directly to this renewed concept of *Großdeutschland*.

<sup>73</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:583–584.

pressure from the national parliament, Austria's state governments stopped holding plebiscites; however, it was too late to remove the desire for *Großdeutschland* from the Austrian political consciousness. The memory of these plebiscites would linger into the 1930s.

### **The Plebiscite in Schleswig**

In Articles 109 through 114 of the Treaty of Versailles, the Allies outlined the first of the postwar plebiscites that would affect Germany. According to these six articles, the Allies would ask the people of Schleswig “to pronounce by a vote” if they would rather stay in Germany or join Denmark. After the vote, the Allies would set the national boundary “in conformity with the wishes of the population.”<sup>74</sup> After months of preparation, on 10 February 1920, the first vote in Schleswig—the plebiscite was split into two stages, the first for North Schleswig and the second for Central Schleswig—cemented a new era in European geopolitics and German political thought. As one of their first opportunities to defy the new Versailles order, Germans spared no expense in trying to win this vote. They relentlessly campaigned for months, all to retain a small, rural strip of land at the republic's northern extreme. Because it was the first region to host a postwar plebiscite, Schleswig set many precedents that the other regions—both those within Germany and those without—followed when administering their votes.

For such an important event, the votes in Schleswig have attracted surprisingly little attention from scholars. Wambaugh's *Plebiscites since the World War*, a relic from the 1930s, is still the authoritative source. Other than Wambaugh's work, Rudolf Heberle's is the most interesting. In 1943, he published a pair of articles called “The Political Movements Among the Rural Peoples in Schleswig-Holstein, 1918 to 1932.” Although they deal with the plebiscites only tangentially, these articles provide some interesting insight into Schleswig's reaction to the

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<sup>74</sup> "The Treaty."

plebiscite. According to Heberle, before and immediately after the First World War, Schleswig was a liberal, democratic stronghold. Even the region's conservatives were liberal by Imperial German standards. Over the 1920s and into the early 1930s, however, Schleswig drastically changed. In 1930, it voted for the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (the NSDAP or Nazi Party) at a rate of twenty-seven percent, the highest mark for the NSDAP in any electoral district that year. Two years later, fifty-one percent of Schleswig's citizens voted for Adolf Hitler and his party, making it the only region in which the NSDAP gained an absolute majority.<sup>75</sup> While he does not go into the votes themselves, Heberle says that some of the political organizations that were most important in steering Schleswig away from liberalism and democracy, such as the *Landespartei* and *Jungbauern Bewegung*, became politically active during the plebiscites.<sup>76</sup> He does not delve deeper than this, but based on the region's voting records, one can tell that the plebiscites marked a turning point in the dominant political ideology of Schleswig. In this section, this paper will explore some of the forces that could have led to this change.

Germans reacted to the plebiscites in Schleswig with varied responses, demonstrating the contradictory political threads that affected the new republic. Some Germans reacted with outraged disapproval. Because the Danish had not paid for this territory in blood, so to speak, this plebiscite stuck out to these Germans as a particularly spiteful part of the treaty. In the cases of Danzig, the Saar, and Alsace-Lorraine, one could, at least, argue that the Allies had strategic reasons for slicing these territories from Germany. Schleswig, by contrast, was a strategically insignificant strip that would have a chance to join a country unaffiliated that did not fight in the

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<sup>75</sup> Rudolf Heberle, "The Political Movements among the Rural People in Schleswig-Holstein, 1918 to 1932, I," *The Journal of Politics* 5, no. 1 (February 1943): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2125927>.

<sup>76</sup> Heberle, "The Political," 23.

war. Seeing the plebiscite as anything but a move to further weaken Germany was difficult.<sup>77</sup> Germans in Schleswig were especially appalled that the Allies would subject their home to a plebiscite. Many Germans, however, reacted in a much more measured way. Although they were also irritated that Denmark was granted this plebiscite despite not fighting, a few political parties, including the important *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD), decided that as long as the new border conformed with the principle of self-determination, they would tentatively acquiesce to the plebiscite. After all, compared to some of the other plebiscites, this one was not outrageous, as much of Schleswig had a majority Danish population.<sup>78</sup> Plus, by accommodating this first plebiscite, Germany might have been able to endear itself to the Allies. Throughout the process of preparing and administering the plebiscite, one can see these two different strains of thought develop in German society. Both groups of Germans disdained the Treaty of Versailles and the accompanying plebiscites; however, one group, for the sake of the new republic, wanted to defuse the tension, while the other, for the sake of nationalism, inflamed it further. This conflict would grow in the following years.

Although some Germans, especially in Schleswig, only exacerbated Germany's disillusionment with the Allies and Treaty of Versailles, they did raise an interesting question: How could the Allies justify including a neutral power in the spoils of the war? To find this answer—and to better understand the emotions generated by the plebiscite—one must look to the nineteenth century. For about seventy years, the “Schleswig-Holstein question” had lingered over European geopolitics. About midway through the nineteenth century, the Danish monarch ruled the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, two territories that, for various historical reasons, formed an inseparable union. In 1863, King Christian IX and the Danish Parliament passed a new joint

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<sup>77</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:93.

<sup>78</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:97.

constitution for Denmark and Schleswig, intending to draw the duchy closer to Denmark. This move offended many in Europe because by pulling Schleswig closer, Denmark would inevitably distance it from Holstein. This new constitution particularly upset the German Confederation, an association of German states that included Prussia and Austria. Since it counted Holstein as one of its members, the German Confederation would never let Denmark drive a wedge between the two inseparable duchies. To prevent the constitution from taking effect, in 1864, Prussia and Austria declared war on Denmark. Soon after, the British called a conference in London, during which they tried to persuade the parties to redraw the border of Schleswig in a way that satisfied both sides. The British suggested that they try a plebiscite, but the Danes rejected the idea. With no agreement, the Prussian-Austrian alliance invaded and quickly routed the small Nordic nation. In the following Treaty of Vienna, Denmark ceded Schleswig and Holstein to Prussia and Austria. This status quo would not last for long, however. In 1866, war erupted between Prussia and Austria. Although they fought the war mainly for dominance in the German Confederation, territorial disputes in Schleswig were the pretext. In the Treaty of Prague, which ended the Austro-Prussian War, Prussia agreed to settle the “Schleswig-Holstein question” through a plebiscite. A year later, however, it annexed both duchies without the promised vote, effectively freezing the Schleswig problem without solving it.<sup>79</sup>

So even though Denmark had not fought in the First World War, the Allies wanted to patch up a dispute that Prussia had used as the pretext for two major wars. The idea for the Schleswig plebiscite first arose in December 1918 when the Danish government appealed to the Big Four. In a letter to Lansing, the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Erik Scavenius, shared that the Danish Parliament wished that “a plebiscite be held at which the population of North

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<sup>79</sup> Hans Brems, "The Collapse of the Binational Danish Monarchy in 1864: A Multinational Perspective," *Scandinavian Studies* 51, no. 4 (Fall 1979), accessed February 17, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/40918633>.

Slesvig may be allowed to vote for or against a reunion with Denmark” in recognition of their “national rights.”<sup>80</sup> Important to note is that the Danish government wished to hold a vote only in North Schleswig, not the entire territory. While North Schleswig was predominantly Danish, the rest of Schleswig was majority-German or an ambiguous mixture of the two nationalities. The Danish government, whose country was much smaller than its southern neighbor, did not want to anger Germany by claiming territory that contained mostly German, as the thought of an embittered, irredentist Germany terrified the Danish government.<sup>81</sup> A few months after Scavenius sent his letter, in February 1919, the Danish government submitted an official request for a plebiscite to the Big Four. Although the Danes asked only for a plebiscite in North Schleswig, France and Great Britain wanted it to claim much more of the region. The Central Schleswig Commission, a non-governmental body representing the people of Central Schleswig, argued before the Big Four that Denmark should have claimed at least to the Sli-Dannevirke-Husum line, a frontier significantly further south than the Danish government felt comfortable claiming. Seizing any opportunity to punish Germany, the Big Four agreed with the Central Schleswig Commission and established three plebiscite zones in Schleswig, the southernmost of which plunged deep into majority-German Central Schleswig.

At this point, Denmark leaned into the Allies’ bitterness by portraying Germany as a bogeyman intending to prey on its smaller neighbor. It requested that the Allies compel the German military to vacate Schleswig and that they set up a commission to oversee the plebiscite. Only through such heavy-handed tactics, Denmark argued, could the Allies protect the Danes in Schleswig.<sup>82</sup> These requests were not absurd. During the war, Imperial Germany oppressed the

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<sup>80</sup> Ulysses Grant-Smith to Robert Lansing, "The Chargé in Denmark (Grant-Smith) to the Acting Secretary of State," December 5, 1918, 759.6214/19, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference, 1919, Volume II, United States Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute.

<sup>81</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:56.

<sup>82</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:57.



Danish communities of Schleswig by imprisoning their leaders and censoring Danish-language newspapers.<sup>83</sup> Considering Germany's general outrage at the Treaty of Versailles, further oppression was not out of the question. That said, the Danish reports of German violence were greatly exaggerated and played on stereotypes. For the Allies, who consumed a lot of anti-German propaganda, this alleged oppression resembled the German army's atrocities in Belgium. In reality, the new Weimar government intended to fully cooperate with the Allies and discouraged all violence. Nonetheless, by manipulating the Allies' anti-German sentiment, the Danish government started a trend in the handling of the postwar plebiscites: the Allies did everything possible to limit the power of German local governments and bureaucracies in the plebiscite zones the Allies feared that these bodies were the most likely to oppress national minorities, such as the Danish in Schleswig.

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<sup>83</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:53.



Figure 1: "Das Abstimmungsgebiet in Schleswig-Holstein," map, 1920–1921, R 904/463, vol. 2, fol. 1, p. 20, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde. This map shows the zones of the Schleswig plebiscite. Zone I is orange, while Zone II is brown.

In the final draft of the Treaty of Versailles, the Big Four heeded Denmark’s warning and set the plebiscite lines farther north; however, this did not end the controversy around the plebiscite’s geography. The plebiscite in Schleswig was actually two different votes in two distinct zones. Zone I covered North Schleswig, while Zone II covered the northern portion of Central Schleswig. Although the plebiscite covered far less territory than the Allies wanted,

many Germans were still upset because of how the Allies would count the votes. Zone I would vote as a bloc and join either Denmark or Germany in its entirety. Zone II, by contrast, would vote by commune—depending on how the votes went, some cities could join Denmark, while others could join Germany. Even though Zone I was likely to vote for Denmark, a few cities, such as Tønder and Højer, were predominantly German, so German officials lobbied for voting by commune in Zone I as well and complained when the Allies rejected their request.<sup>84</sup>

In the lead-up to the Schleswig votes, the Weimar Republic built an intense propaganda machine, producing numerous campaigns designed to win both zones for Germany. The timing of the votes put Germany at a distinct disadvantage. Because Denmark had remained neutral during the war, its economy had not suffered like Germany's from the British blockade in the North Sea. As a result, it offered the voters of Schleswig a much higher standard of living than the new Weimar Republic, a fact that featured prominently in contemporary Danish propaganda.<sup>85</sup> To counter this compelling reason for joining Denmark, German propagandists appealed to nationality and a reasonably accurate yet, at times, distorted retelling of the region's history. On 8 February 1919, months before the Weimar Republic signed the Treaty of Versailles, Hermann Todsén delivered a speech that epitomized the German propaganda efforts in Schleswig.<sup>86</sup> As the mayor of Flensburg, the largest and most important city in the Schleswig plebiscite zones, Todsén was a key leader in organizing the plebiscite's pro-German faction. In one of his speeches, entitled "Die Nordschleswigsche Frage" (The North Schleswig Question), Todsén reframed the plebiscite zones' history. Although the "Schleswig-Holstein question" pertained to the entire territory of the two duchies, Todsén said that the only part of the region

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<sup>84</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:82.

<sup>85</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:84.

<sup>86</sup> Hermann Todsén, "Vortrag des Oberbürgermeisters Dr. D. Todsén-Flensburg dem außerordentlichen Schleswig-Holstein Städtetage in Rendsburg am 8. Februar 1919 über die nordschleswigsche Frage," February 8, 1919, R 904/463, p. 31–39, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.

with an unclear allegiance was North Schleswig, the only area of Schleswig-Holstein that was predominantly Danish. By ignoring the rest of the territory, he implied that votes there would be meaningless, as it was, in his mind, indisputably German territory (while it was mostly German, a substantial Danish minority lived in Central Schleswig). At the same time, he implied that only predominantly Danish territory warranted a plebiscite. These were the dominant threads.

Todsén began his speech by recounting the historic German influence (*Deutschtum* or Germandom, in his words) in North Schleswig. He explained that for centuries, Germans and Danes lived together in peace, and they used German as the *lingua franca* of government and commerce. That changed in the 1830s, Todsén said. Denmark began suppressing German culture in Schleswig by trying to assimilate German speakers into Danish society. Schleswig's Germans, however, would not stand for such treatment so they rebelled against Denmark in 1848, one of Europe's many attempted revolutions in that year. This uprising, he believed, was evidence of Germans' desire to free themselves from Danish tyranny.<sup>87</sup> Although the uprising failed, the Danes also failed to forcibly assimilate those Germans into Denmark. At this point, Todsén's speech changes. While its first part consisted mostly of a partisan history of Schleswig, its second part offered a pointed yet nuanced rebuttal to Wilson's self-determination. Todsén pointed out that drawing a clean border through North Schleswig would be impossible because there were greater similarities between the Danes and Germans of Schleswig than there were differences. In the 1920s, regardless of nationality, most people in Schleswig spoke a dialect of *Plattdänischen* (Low Danish) and professed Lutheran Christianity. In effect, "Die deutsche und die dänische Bevölkerung ist somit an sich eine vollkommen gleichartige" ("The German and

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<sup>87</sup> Ironically, as Schleswig-Holstein tried to break away from Denmark and create an independent state, Prussia and the German Confederation initially supported it but soon backed down under pressure from Russia and Sweden, allowing Denmark to suppress this "German" revolt.

Danish population [of Schleswig] is, therefore, in itself a completely homogeneous one”). How, then, could the Allies draw a border through such a uniform group? The only difference between these people, he argued, were their national allegiances, which, he believed, did not meet the standard for requiring a plebiscite. Interestingly, what Todsén considers inappropriate grounds for a plebiscite—political differences—was what Wilson first understood as the basis of self-determination. By this point, the theoretical undergirding of self-determination had permanently shifted toward the East-Central European concept of ethnicity. Todsén argued that because dividing North Schleswig made no sense, the Allies ought to err on the side of caution and maintain the status quo, for *das alte Grundgesetz des Landes* (the basic or constitutional law of Schleswig) forbid the division of Schleswig-Holstein for any reason.<sup>88</sup>

Todsén’s speech was a great example of German propaganda because leading up to the votes in Schleswig, appealing to the region’s past was Germany’s dominant strategy. After four years of war, Germany was economically depleted and politically disheveled. It had little to offer the people of North Schleswig beyond crippling reparation payments and the ire of the world’s most powerful nations. German propagandists decided that prompting people to recall their German heritage and patriotism was their best chance at winning over undecided voters, especially Germans who might have been enticed by Denmark’s economic arguments. Common slogans included, “We wish to be Germans as our fathers before us” and “Shall the Danes reap what the Germans have sown,” both of which appeal to the same history as Todsén. German propagandists also stoked local pride in the indivisibility of Schleswig and Holstein: “Shall Schleswig be divided? Have we not been for 1,000 years one folk of brothers? Think of that!”<sup>89</sup> In this slogan, one can also detect an essence of the same *vollkommen gleichartige* (completely

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<sup>88</sup> Todsén, “Vortrag des Oberbürgermeisters.”

<sup>89</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:79.

homogenous) population that Todsén discussed. To win the plebiscite, Germans commonly broadened their nationalist narrative to include the Danes of Schleswig. Overall, the propaganda in Schleswig sparked a strategy of appealing to history and culture rather than to the concrete benefits of remaining in Germany.

In addition to their elaborate propaganda campaigns, Germans also ran comprehensive get-out-the-vote campaigns that took advantage of a loophole in the plebiscite. The peace conference's Commission on Danish Affairs (CDA) originally decided that to vote in the Schleswig plebiscite, one needed to be twenty years old and have lived in the area since 1 January 1900. The only exceptions were people that had been born in Schleswig but had lost their homes to expulsion. When the CDA passed this decision to the Drafting Committee, the body that put the many commissions' proclamations into legal jargon, the Drafting Committee misread the text. As a result, the Treaty of Versailles declared that anyone born in Schleswig, regardless of their reason for leaving, could return to vote.<sup>90</sup> Although this meant little for North Schleswig, as the Danish majority there was large, it had a massive effect on Central Schleswig, where the population was much more mixed. Although this error initially slipped under the radar, Germany soon realized that this mistake was to its advantage. The Weimar government formed the *Deutscher Schutzbund*, a national agency whose task was to hunt down Germans who could vote in the plebiscite and send them to the polls. It also established the *Grenzspende*, a fund that paid for the meals, housing, and transportation fees of Germans traveling to the polling stations. To entice voters, the *Schutzbund* often gave away free tickets to recitals and concerts.<sup>91</sup> The *Deutscher Ausschuss für das Herzogtum Schleswig* (The German Committee for the Duchy of

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<sup>90</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:62.

<sup>91</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:77.

Schleswig (DAHS)) also sent waves of postcards to German citizens who were eligible to vote in Schleswig.<sup>92</sup>

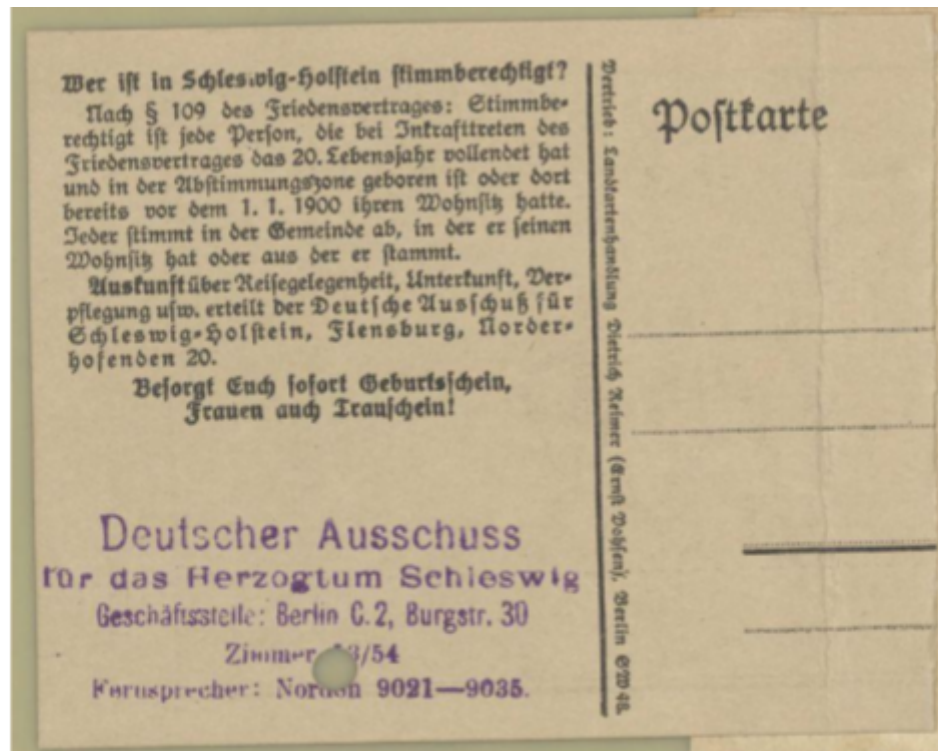


Figure 2: Postcard by Deutscher Ausschuss für das Herzogtum Schleswig, "Wer ist in Schleswig-Holstein stimmberechtigt?," n.d., R 904/463, vol. 2, fol. 1, p.19, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde. The *Deutscher Ausschuss* sent cards like this one to Germans who were eligible to vote in the Schleswig plebiscite.

Through its propaganda and get-out-the-vote campaigns, the Weimar government brought thousands of “outvoters” to the plebiscite zones, undoubtedly influencing the outcome of the vote in Central Schleswig. These campaigns, however, almost never happened. In early 1919, the DAHS asked the Weimar federal government to delay its campaigns because it hoped that a voting strike would encourage the Allies to change the rules of the plebiscite—it wanted either voting by commune in Zone I or a single voting district that covered all of Schleswig, which

<sup>92</sup> "Mahnung an die Deutschen Schleswigs" [Abomination to the Germans of Schleswig], *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten* (Dresden, Germany), February 3, 1920, 34th edition, BArchiv, R901/57297, vol. 9.

would have added the totally German region of South Schleswig into the voter pool.<sup>93</sup> The Weimar government honored this strategy until August 1919 when the DAHS realized that the Allies had no interest in helping Germany win the plebiscite. From then on, the DAHS cooperated with the federal government in trying to win the votes.

In January 1920, the plebiscite's on-the-ground preparations officially began. Until the people of Schleswig had decided on which nation they would join, the International Commission, an impartial-as-possible body of experts and officials, would exercise sovereignty over the plebiscite areas. The Commission comprised five members—two from Great Britain, one from France, one from Norway, and one from Sweden. As the first international body to administer a plebiscite, the Commission had no predecessor on which to model its behavior. On 24 January 1920, the day before the Commission was set to take over Schleswig, Germany evacuated its troops, signaling its good faith and desire to cooperate with the Allies' terms. The vote in Zone I was scheduled for 10 February 1920, only about two weeks after the temporary regime was established, so the Commission moved quickly to secure the area. For months already, Denmark had complained about German officials intimidating the Danes of Schleswig. Although these stories mostly played on the stereotype of the German bogeyman, some unfortunate instances, such as when German police officers roughly disbanded a Danish demonstration in Flensburg, did incriminate Germany. While the Commission took these Danish complaints seriously, it was much more concerned about the influence of German bureaucrats than about the specter of political violence. Throughout the peace conference and planning of the Schleswig votes, Allied leaders commonly believed that local German bureaucracies, after centuries of rule in some places, were so deeply entrenched that they threatened the efficacy of any plebiscite—Clemenceau used this excuse to preclude a plebiscite in Alsace-Lorraine, while

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<sup>93</sup> Ironically, putting more of its territory on the line gave Germany a better chance of winning.



Wilson raised this concern regarding the vote in Upper Silesia. The Commission, sharing the same fear, temporarily banned many elected leaders from Schleswig, like Todsén and the mayors of smaller cities in the Flensburg area. It also forbade a wide array of German officials, such as pastors and teachers, from influencing the vote in any way. They were not allowed to participate in public meetings or demonstrations. Ironically, the Commission was so obsessed with limiting the influence of local government for the sake of democracy that it stripped many German citizens of their rights to free speech.<sup>94</sup>

After months of preparation, propaganda, and conflict, 10 February arrived. Just over 100,000 people voted in Zone I. No one reported any instances of political violence. Although most people assumed that North Schleswig would vote overwhelmingly for Denmark, the Commission did not release the results of the vote until 5 March. The Danish victory was as resounding as expected—74.2 percent of voters chose Denmark—but that did not end the controversy. Some German towns in North Schleswig, such as Tønder, Højer, Aabenraa, and Sønderborg, elected to stay in Germany, yet because Zone I voted *en bloc*, these towns would join Denmark. Newspapers throughout Germany reported the result of the vote as an outrage and violation of self-determination.<sup>95</sup> Some German officials asked the Commission to change the method by which it counted the votes, but the Commission was unwilling to enact such a drastic change after the fact. These officials likely designed their appeals more as propaganda than as meaningful attempts to change the policy. Wambaugh believed that these appeals and their media coverage generated enough outrage to affect the results of the next vote.<sup>96</sup> On 14 March, the people of Zone II voted. Even though everyone expected a closer result than in Zone I, the

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<sup>94</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:80.

<sup>95</sup> Georg Hoffmann, "Tøndernsches Land. Zur Abstimmung in der ersten Zone" [The Country of Tønder. To the Vote in the First Zone.], *Frankfurter Zeitung* (Frankfurt, Germany), February 1, 1920, BArchiv, R901/57297, vol. 9.

<sup>96</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:82.

German victory in Central Schleswig was more resounding than the Danish victory in North Schleswig. Seventy-nine percent of voters chose to remain in Germany, and only three of the zone's 170 communities voted to join Denmark. Danish and German officials jockeyed for the territory around Flensburg, but besides that, the votes ended peacefully and with general satisfaction on both sides.<sup>97</sup>

### **The Plebiscites in Eastern Germany**

The votes in Schleswig were important because they were the first that an international commission administered and because they set important precedents for how the victorious powers could run the other postwar plebiscites. Despite its importance, the Schleswig plebiscite faded from the political memory of most Germans. In the late 1920s and 1930s, when Germans thought about the immediate postwar plebiscites, they most often recalled the votes on Germany's eastern border with Poland. Whereas the votes in Schleswig effectively ended the "Schleswig-Holstein question," the Polish plebiscites exacerbated or sparked conflicts that continued into the 1920s and culminated in 1939.

Of the territory Germany lost at the end of the First World War, the largest chunk of it went to the newly formed Polish state, the independence of which had been a goal of Wilson's from the start of the peace conference (it was his thirteenth point). For a few reasons, Germany would not forget these plebiscites as easily as the one in Schleswig. First, whereas most of the territory that Germany ceded to Denmark had a majority Danish population, much of the territory it ceded to Poland had a majority-German population. In the eastern plebiscites, Germans' right to self-determination was violated in a way that it was not in Schleswig. Second, while Germans mostly saw the Danes as equals, many Germans saw the Poles as inferior.

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<sup>97</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:86.

Anti-Polish sentiment had a deep history in Germany. During the *Kulturkampf*, an 1870s political battle between Otto von Bismarck and the Catholic Church, the German government frequently discriminated against the Poles within its boundaries, as they were a large Catholic minority. Bismarck's government tried to Germanize many Poles and generally repressed the Polish language and culture.<sup>98</sup> Although it relaxed after Bismarck left office, this anti-Polish sentiment lingered in Germany into the 1920s. Many Germans were insulted that the victorious powers would give their land to a people they saw as inferior. For these reasons, the Polish plebiscites imprinted themselves on the German political consciousness more sharply than the vote in Schleswig.

The three Polish plebiscites affected Allenstein, Marienwerder, and Upper Silesia. Because they happened on the same day and formed a contiguous territory, the Allies often grouped together the plebiscite areas in Allenstein and Marienwerder. Allenstein was located in East Prussia, a territory on the Baltic coast that was significant to German history, as its largest city, Königsberg (nowadays Kaliningrad), had been the original seat of the Prussian monarchy. It was mostly rural and agricultural. Marienwerder was located close by in West Prussia and shared a border with the Free City of Danzig. Marienwerder was much more strategically important than Allenstein, as it sat on the eastern bank of the Vistula River, the largest river in Poland—the Poles worried that because Marienwerder sat so close to the Vistula's mouth, Germany could use it to interrupt Poland's internal trade. It also contained the important Deutsch-Eylau railroad junction. These two plebiscites affected about 700,000 people in total.<sup>99</sup> Compared to the plebiscites in Allenstein and Marienwerder, the plebiscite in Upper Silesia was much more important. Sitting on Germany's border with both Poland and the new Czechoslovak state, Upper

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<sup>98</sup> Michael B. Gross, *The War against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-century Germany*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>99</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:99.

Silesia was the second-most-important industrial region in Germany (after the Ruhr) and supplied the country with a large percentage of its coal, lead, and zinc. The “Industrial Triangle” of east-central Upper Silesia was mostly urban, while the region’s north and west were much more rural. The Oder River was its most prominent geographical landmark. At the time of the plebiscite, about 2.3 million people lived there.<sup>100</sup>

Scholars have shown varying levels of interest in these plebiscites. Aside from Wambaugh’s all-important work, the votes in Allenstein and Marienwerder have received very little attention from historians. Similarly, the *Bundesarchiv* contains few files on these areas, most of which contain only official correspondence.<sup>101</sup> Piecing together information on these plebiscites was challenging. Richard Blanke, Professor Emeritus at the University of Maine, authored *Orphans of Versailles: The Germans in Western Poland, 1918–1939*, which was one of the most important works for the parts of this paper about Allenstein and Marienwerder. Silesia, by contrast, has received probably the most attention of any of the postwar plebiscites. Wambaugh, of course, wrote extensively about the region. In 1974, Joseph Harrington, then a professor at Framingham State University, wrote “Upper Silesia and the Paris Peace Conference,” an article that explores the debate and conflict pertaining to the plebiscite at the peace conference. Although it presents much about 1919, it is only tangentially relevant to this section, which will focus on 1920 and how Germans navigated the plebiscite. A more useful resource is T. Hunt Tooley’s *National Identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the Eastern Border, 1918–1922*. Tooley covers the history of conflict in Silesia from the Paris Peace

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<sup>100</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:206.

<sup>101</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:116–117. I found files on the plebiscite in Marienwerder but could not find any on Allenstein. Although I do not know why such a discrepancy exists, I guess that it relates to the Allenstein Commission’s relaxed notekeeping, which was much less thorough than that of the Marienwerder Commission.

Conference, through the plebiscite, and into the later years of the Weimar Republic and the Second Polish Republic. His book and Wambaugh's will undergird most of this section.

To understand the tension on Germany's eastern border in 1920, one must first understand the social classes that had entrenched themselves in this region. Before the First World War, Germany had modernized to such an extent that its economic output surpassed that of even the mighty British Empire; however, not all of Germany enjoyed this economic progress. In Allenstein and Marienwerder, whose economies depended on agriculture, aristocrats owned much of the land. Known as Junkers, these agricultural elites were conservative and exercised great influence over the peasants who worked their land. Even in predominantly Polish areas of Prussia, the Junkers were predominantly German. To keep their Polish workers in check, they regularly oppressed Polish culture. Just before the war, for example, the Junker-backed Prussian government outlawed the Polish language, except in the region of the Masurian Lakes.

As an industrial region, Upper Silesia had a social structure reflecting that of other German cities. It had wealthy industrialists, a middle class, a lower middle class, and a laboring class. Despite these differences from Allenstein and Marienwerder, Upper Silesian society was still stratified by nationality. Whereas most of the industrialists were German, most of the poorly paid, poorly educated workers were Polish. Here, too, local governments tried to stomp out the Polish language, but their efforts were much less successful than in East and West Prussia—in 1920, a majority of Upper Silesia spoke Polish.<sup>102</sup> Across Germany's eastern border, national conflict was commonplace even after the war. In mid-1919, for example, German officials declared martial law in Silesia, which they used to oppress Polish propaganda and civil organizations. At the same time, German propaganda was more prevalent than ever. Because of this nationalist conflict, the majority-Polish regions in eastern Germany were like dry timber.

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<sup>102</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:211.

Many of the oppressed Poles needed only a spark to retaliate against nearly a century of cruel laws. In 1920, the plebiscites provided that spark.

Unlike in Schleswig, where both Germans and Danes shared Lutheranism, the plebiscites in eastern Germany dealt with religious divisions that complicated national identity. Because the Prussian Junkers were predominantly Protestant and their Polish peasants were mostly Catholic, Polish propaganda incorporated Catholicism into its image of Polish nationalism. Wojciech Korfanty, the most prominent Polish activist and politician in the eastern German plebiscite areas, said, “Being Catholic means being Polish.”<sup>103</sup> Emphasizing this religious difference, they believed, would be an effective way of winning the plebiscites. In Allenstein, however, this effort backfired. Unlike most Poles, the Masurian Poles, who lived in Allenstein’s Masurian Lakes region, were Protestant and had been so for centuries. They had no interest in Polish nationalism or a Catholic state. In the 1912 Reichstag elections, for example, only forty percent of Poles in Allenstein voted for Polish candidates, an unthinkable low number in other regions of eastern Germany with a Polish minority.<sup>104</sup> As the largest group of Poles in Allenstein, the Masurians were an insurmountable roadblock for Polish activists who wished to capture the territory in the plebiscite. Upper Silesia had similar religious complications. Most Silesians, whether German or Polish, were Catholic, so capturing the support of the pope and local bishops was a key objective of both sides.<sup>105</sup> For some Upper Silesians, independence was more attractive than allegiance to either Germany or Poland, as Catholic Germans had been dissatisfied with the Prussian-dominated government since Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* in the 1870s, while Upper Silesian Poles had serious reservations about joining the new, untested Polish state. At one point,

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<sup>103</sup> T. Hunt Tooley, *National Identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the Eastern Border, 1918-1922* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 161.

<sup>104</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:101.

<sup>105</sup> Tooley, *National Identity*, 161.

in June 1920, British officials actually favored this solution and planned to present it at the Spa Conference, a meeting between the Allies and the Weimar Republic in Belgium. Although this movement slowly subsided, it showed that the German political consciousness was not monolithic. Many Germans wanted to form *Großdeutschland*; however, centrifugal forces also threatened to rip Germany apart. These divisions in religious and national consciousness were much less pronounced in Schleswig, where the people were more uniform in their faith, culture, and language.

In terms of their voting framework, the eastern German plebiscites borrowed a lot from Schleswig and, as a result, faced many of the same problems. Just as it had in Schleswig, the Treaty of Versailles permitted an unintentionally large number of outvoters to participate in the eastern German plebiscites. Following Schleswig's lead, Allenstein and Silesia counted all ballots together, regardless of their local or outvoter status. Marienwerder, by contrast, decided to count the votes of outvoters separately from those of locals. Although the plebiscites in eastern Germany counted outvoters in different ways, all three saw Germany gain a huge advantage thanks to the outvoters, as it was much better prepared than Poland to capitalize on this clause in the treaty. Germany's advantage in Schleswig was much smaller because the Danish government was better organized than Poland, which was busy establishing the institutions of its new government. With its experience in Schleswig, the *Deutscher Schutzbund* increased its efficiency and grew its outreach programs. Poland, whose war with the Soviets drew most of the country's resources, could not afford to fund a similar program. In Allenstein, for example, the *Schutzbund* transported 157,074 voters to polls, whereas Poland benefited only from a small number of Poles who paid their own travel expenses.<sup>106</sup> This massive discrepancy was largely the fault of the Polish leaders in Allenstein. For five weeks in April and May 1920, Polish delegates withdrew

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<sup>106</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:131.

from the Control Commissions, the bodies of German and Polish members that advised the International Commissions, striking what they saw as an unfairly early date for the plebiscite, 11 July 1920. This was a huge blunder. As the sole members of the Control Commissions, German delegates alone were responsible for compiling the lists of eligible voters. These lists included outvoters. With their unchecked power, these German bureaucrats sent voter applications to every German eligible to vote in Allenstein, even if they had not requested them. The International Commission of Allenstein condemned this action, but reversing the damage was impossible. Plus, the Commission was irritated that the Poles had been neglectful enough to allow this possibility.<sup>107</sup> Although the difference in outvoter numbers was less dramatic in Marienwerder and Silesia than in Allenstein, they still overwhelmingly favored Germany.

In each of the Polish plebiscites, Germans employed similar messages in their propaganda, though these messages differed from those in Schleswig. Compared to Denmark, Germany had a weak economy, so appeals to German financial strength were relatively ineffective in Schleswig. German propagandists knew this and stayed away from these topics. Compared to Poland, however, Germany had an attractive economic situation. At this point, the German mark was relatively stable and had not endured the hyperinflation crisis of 1921 to 1923. In Poland, by comparison, the currency was weak and unproven. Poland also needed to raise a lot of capital to build the infrastructure that a functioning nation needed. Inheriting the responsibility to pay this massive upfront cost, many German propagandists thought, could certainly dissuade some voters from choosing Poland. In one of its pamphlets for Allenstein, the East Prussian *Heimatdienst* asked, “Will you pay for Polish roads and canals, Polish officials and schools ... Do you think then that France will not have the interest and compound interest paid back on all the French capital used in Poland to build railways, roads, etc.?” As one of Poland’s

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<sup>107</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:124.



staunchest defenders, France provided Poland with loans to construct its state. Although the French had done the Poles a favor, some questioned their motivations, as the French government used these loans to exert influence over the Polish government, while French companies frequently violated Polish laws with impunity.<sup>108</sup> It made sense, therefore, that German propagandists would point out this undue French influence.

These economic appeals, however, were inseparable from nationalist and ethnic appeals. German propagandists focused on demeaning Poles and insulting their diligence and intelligence. In the same pamphlet, the *Heimatdienst* stated that Poland needs “you to [pay for its infrastructure] as good taxpayers, as the Polish population is too poor and too lazy to become prosperous.” It also asked, “Will you become slaves and serfs of the Polacks?”<sup>109</sup> While this pamphlet originated in Allenstein, it could have easily applied to Upper Silesia. Although this propaganda, like that in Schleswig, focused on nationalism, it was much more acidic than before. In Schleswig, German propagandists used history to simply distinguish between themselves and the Danes, a fellow Germanic people. In Poland, they spread German nationalism by promulgating Polish stereotypes and emphasizing their eastern neighbor’s uncertain economic, cultural, and political future. On the whole, the propaganda in the Polish plebiscites took a venomous tone, using fear and disgust rather than national pride as the driving emotions.

By April 1920, German Silesians had established a network of campaign organizations to spread as much propaganda—and oppress as much Polish propaganda—as possible, building on the momentum that the campaign in Schleswig had sparked. The most important organization was the Silesian Committee, which the Breslau People’s Council founded in late 1919 (Breslau

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<sup>108</sup> Jerzy Łazor, "Colonial Expansion or Vital Assistance? French Capital and Interwar Poland," *Nierówności Społeczne a Wzrost Gospodarczy* 57, no. 1 (2019): 279, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.15584/nsawg.2019.1.19>.

<sup>109</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:110.

was the largest city in Silesia). The Silesian Committee aimed to coordinate the themes and motifs of Germany's propaganda in Upper Silesia, as many of its subsidiary groups, such as the *Vereinigte Verbände heimattreuer Oberschlesier* (VVHO) and German Plebiscite Commissariat, were eager to publish posters and pamphlets but had little shared direction. With the money it received from Berlin, the Silesian Committee funded many different branches of its intricate propaganda network, the most important part of which was its press section. According to Tooley, most of the Silesian Committee's records had disappeared by the 1930s, so its spending on newspapers could have been more than historians will ever know. Thanks to an investigation by politician Rudolf Vogel, historians do know that every German newspaper in Upper Silesia received funding from the Silesian Committee leading up to the plebiscite. For example, it purchased a printing facility for the *Volkswille*, the SPD's regional newspaper. It also funded failing papers like the *Oberschlesische Volkswille* and staffed their boards with pro-German leaders.<sup>110</sup> As a subsidiary of the Silesian Committee, the VVHO owned many "battle organs" that published articles exclusively on the plebiscite. These publications often produced atrocity propaganda. The VVHO also purchased hundreds of thousands of subscriptions and distributed the newspapers for free in many Upper Silesian cities. In addition, the Silesian Committee published international propaganda, which successfully convinced many Allied delegates that while Upper Silesia was essential to the economy of Germany, it was only supplementary to that of Poland. The propaganda campaigns in Schleswig were never so comprehensive or centrally organized. Whereas many Germans were okay with letting the majority-Danish North Schleswig join Denmark, they were absolutely opposed to letting Upper Silesia join Poland, as the region had a large German population and was crucial to the German economy. One reason that the

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<sup>110</sup> Tooley, *National Identity*, 157.

plebiscites in eastern Germany became much more ingrained in German political consciousness than that in Schleswig was because of this intensity of this propaganda.<sup>111</sup>

The most important reason for the lasting memory of the Polish plebiscites, however, is that they were much more violent than Schleswig. Except for a few punches and the public burning of a Danish flag, the Schleswig plebiscite was completely peaceful. Because Denmark had remained neutral throughout the war, no recent tension existed in the area—some historical tension lingered, though this was mostly dormant before the Treaty of Versailles announced the plebiscites. In Poland, by contrast, violence was ubiquitous. German and Polish forces exchanged fire well into 1919, while Poland launched a massive invasion of Ukraine. In *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, Timothy Snyder, a professor of history at Yale University, argues that East-Central and Eastern Europe were the regions in which the Soviet Union and Third Reich enacted their bloodiest atrocities, turning them into Europe's most violent area for a large chunk of the twentieth century.<sup>112</sup> Although Snyder applied his thesis specifically to the period of 1933 through 1945, it also describes the years immediately following the First World War (perhaps these years were a prelude to the coming violence). Because Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union sought to expand their borders in this region in the 1920s, armed conflict continued past the end of the First World War. Between Germany and Poland, this violence especially revolved around the plebiscites. Besides the plebiscite areas' immediate practical value, symbolic causes motivated the violence of both sides. For Germans, winning the plebiscites became a point of national pride. They would spite the Allies by resisting the centrifugal forces—both those manufactured by the Allies and those resulting from organic causes, like the discontent of German Catholics in Upper Silesia—that threatened to pull apart

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<sup>111</sup> Tooley, *National Identity*, 158.

<sup>112</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

their new republic. For Poles, winning the plebiscites would prove to Germany that it could no longer oppress the Polish language or culture and that the Polish state had the right to exist (Ironically, many Poles preferred German to Russian rule during the First World War). With so much riding on these plebiscites—and with so much inflammatory propaganda already circulating—both sides looked to violent tactics.<sup>113</sup>

The amount of violence also varied from zone to zone. With their smaller, more rural populations, Allenstein and Marienwerder were significantly more peaceful than Upper Silesia, although they each experienced their share of isolated fighting and localized rioting. Like the Danes in North Schleswig, the Poles of East and West Prussia frequently played on the “German bogeyman” stereotype, accusing Germans, especially police officers, of harassing, intimidating, and, in some cases, murdering innocent Poles. Unlike in Schleswig, these accusations often held some truth. For example, on 7 March 1920, about three weeks after the International Commission had taken over in Allenstein, a German crowd attacked the headquarters of the Polish Consul General, as it was angered that he had hoisted a Polish flag over the building. The Commission, as a result, expelled the *Bürgermeister* of Allenstein (the city, not the plebiscite area) from the plebiscite zone. After this incident, the Commission often heeded Polish concerns about German violence.<sup>114</sup> In another instance, German protesters broke up a meeting of Polish nationalists in the town of Bischofsburg. They then beat some of the Poles with sticks. Following this violence, the International Commission of Allenstein sent British troops to keep order in the town. Because of these conflicts, in late May, the Commissions of Allenstein and Marienwereder stationed British and Italian troops throughout the rural centers of their zones. Thereafter, Allenstein and Marienwerder reached a tense yet peaceful status quo, though many Poles

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<sup>113</sup> Tooley, *National Identity*, 173.

<sup>114</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:119–120.

claimed that bands of roaming Germans were threatening them and their villages—little evidence supported any of these accusations.<sup>115</sup> Despite even more troops stationed throughout the zones on 11 July, the day of the vote, no one reported violence.

Although the plebiscite campaigns in Allenstein and Marienwerder were more violent than the one in Schleswig, neither was as violent as the one in Upper Silesia, the postwar plebiscite whose result most infuriated Germany. Like in the other plebiscite zones, before May 1920, the most extreme violence constituted bottle throwing. As the people of Allenstein and Marienwerder calmed down over the summer, however, the people of Upper Silesia grew more excitable. In August 1920, many Upper Silesian Poles participated in the Second Polish Uprising. Although Upper Silesia had grown more tense throughout 1920, the uprising's immediate cause lay in the north, where the Red Army was threatening to encircle Warsaw, a result of Poland's failing campaign against the Soviet Union. When the German workers' unions of Upper Silesia, who had never supported the idea of an independent Poland, decided to stop trains carrying ammunition for the retreating Polish army, a crowd of about ten thousand Germans took to the streets in Kattowitz to show their support for the unions. This peaceful demonstration, however, devolved into a riot after mounted French soldiers arrived on the scene. The rioters murdered a prominent Polish physician and ransacked the headquarters of the Polish Plebiscite Commissariat. Korfanty responded by organizing a paramilitary force of 50,000 and seizing control of the Industrial Triangle. The Commission's French troops sympathized with the Polish cause and did nothing to stop the insurrection. Only in early September, after nearly three weeks of disorder, did the International Commission regain control of the region.

As the most dramatic event of any postwar plebiscite, the uprising changed how the Allies approached the remaining plebiscites and how Germany approached Poland,

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<sup>115</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:124 & 128

consequences more drastic than from the limited violence in Schleswig, Allenstein, or Marienwerder. First, it drove a wedge between the British and French. Whereas the British delegates in Upper Silesia wanted to administer the fairest plebiscite possible, French General Henri Le Rond, the president of Upper Silesia's International Commission, and his troops tried to help Poland capture as much of the plebiscite area as possible, even if this meant turning a blind eye to the uprising. The British and, to a lesser extent, the Italians refused to let the French further hijack the plebiscite. Second, Germany lost an important advantage in Upper Silesia when the Commission dissolved the region's mostly German police force. After the uprising, the Weimar government decided that to have any chance of winning the vote, it needed to show Upper Silesians that Germany was more powerful and decisive than Poland. Germany, as a result, would take a harder line in its policy with Poland.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Tooley, *National Identity*, 186–190.

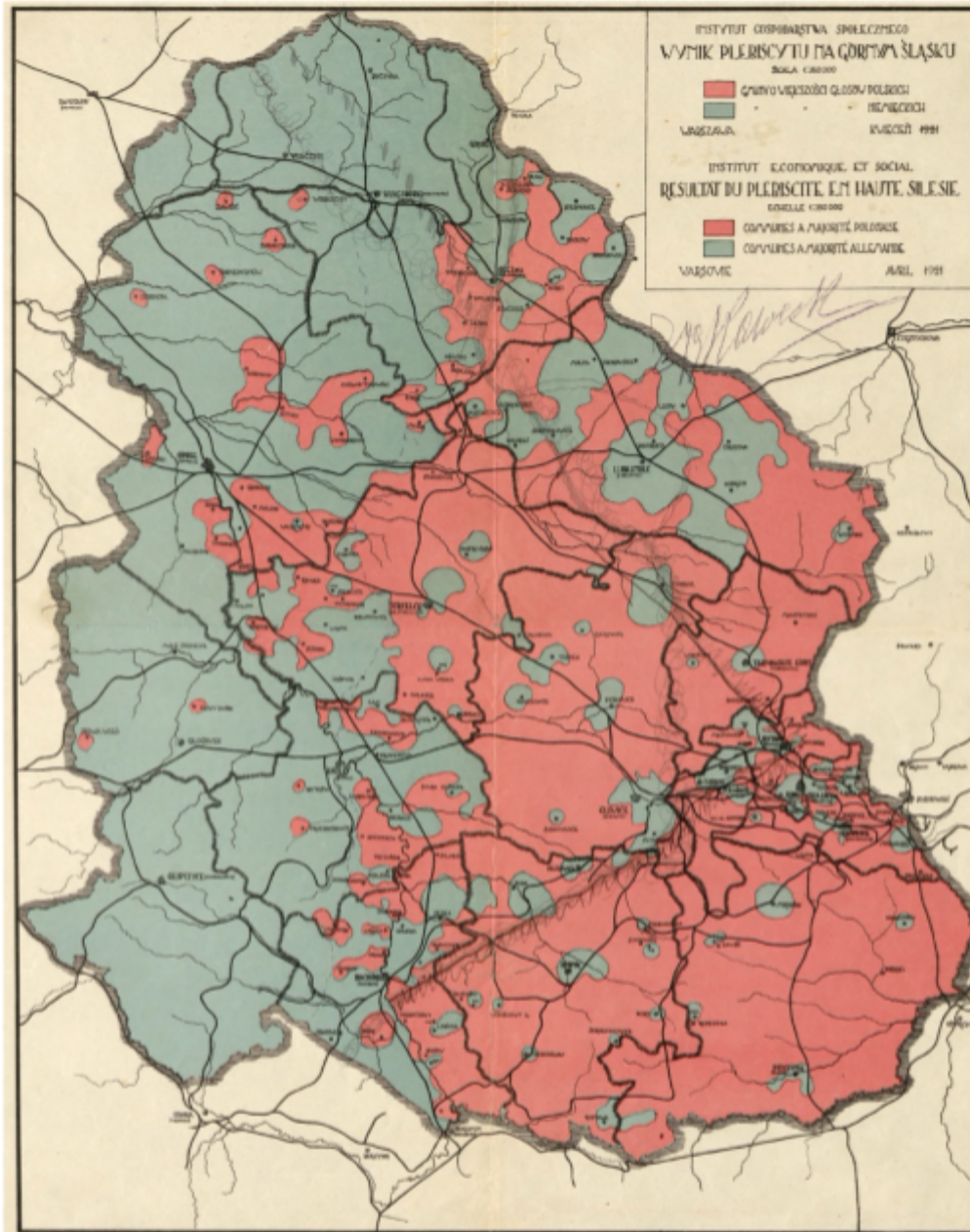


Figure 3: *Resultat du Plebiscite en Haute Silesie*, map (Varsovie: Institut Economique et Social, 1921), accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.lbi.org/dc/news/upper-silesian-jews/>. This map shows the results of the plebiscite in Upper Silesia. The blue areas are where Germany received the most votes, while the red areas are where Poland received the most votes. Notice how drawing a clean border that accommodated both sides was impossible.

About seven months after the violence in Kattowitz, the consequences of the Second Polish Uprising would again redefine the relationship between Germany and Poland, cementing

a legacy of distrust in the German national consciousness. On 20 March 1921, Upper Silesians headed to the polls with surprisingly little drama. Although it took nearly a month to tally the votes, everyone knew shortly after that Germany carried about sixty percent of the votes in Upper Silesian cities, which housed a majority of the region's population. On 7 May, the Commission released the official voting figures, revealing that 59.6 percent of votes and fifty-four percent of communes went for Germany. Even though it had three other German plebiscites on which to base its decisions, the International Commission of Upper Silesia still faced an unprecedented challenge: it needed to somehow split a single plebiscite zone between Poland and Germany. In none of the other zones had the vote been so split or the people so interspersed—the Schleswig's Commission split its territory, but it did so by predetermined zones, a luxury the Upper Silesian Commission did not have. Both German and Polish leaders submitted plans for a proposed border, although the Commission, thanks in part to the Second Polish Uprising, could not decide which to accept. While Le Rond favored a plan resembling the Polish one, the Commission's British and Italian delegates, who were sick of Le Rond's flagrant bias, proposed another border in the Percival-De Marinis report that would grant most of the Industrial Triangle to Germany, as this line would best reflect the wishes of the voters. When news of the "Percival-De Marinis line" leaked, Korfanty called for another Polish uprising. By 6 May, Polish insurrectionists occupied all of the Industrial Triangle. Remembering from the Second Uprising how the Commission struggled to regain control, the Weimar government covertly sent paramilitary groups to protect the region's German civilians, for it refused to let Poland bully its way to victory. The Commission got the situation under control by 7 July, but it still needed to finalize a new border in Upper Silesia. Eventually, because Le Rond and the Commission's British members could not reach an agreement, the newly formed League of



Nations drafted a plan for the final boundary. Although it awarded about seventy-five percent of the area, which contained about fifty-seven percent of the population, to Germany, it gave Poland the vast majority of the region's natural resources and all of its steel-producing facilities.<sup>117</sup> Because some of these resource-rich regions voted to remain in the Weimar Republic—and because of their importance to the German economy—many Germans saw the splitting of Upper Silesia as the greatest violation of Wilson's self-determination.

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<sup>117</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:259.

## **Chapter Two: The Referendums of the Third Reich**

### **The Weimar Republic and its Budding Plebiscitary Culture**

As Germans navigated the postwar plebiscites, they simultaneously faced an even greater challenge: reconstituting their traditionally hierarchical society on egalitarian principles. In *Germans into Nazis*, an authoritative work on how and why the NSDAP eventually seized power in 1933, Peter Fritzsche argued that “the definitive measure of Germany’s political future had now become the people, the great curbside republic of soldiers, workers, and consumers.”<sup>118</sup> Ironically, even though this description appears to adhere to the Wilsonian international order, the reality of early Weimar politics was much messier—rather than abiding by “liberal principles and parliamentary procedures,” many Germans embraced partisan politics that threatened the republic’s integrity.<sup>119</sup> During this messy time, plebiscites carved out an interesting niche in this burgeoning democratic system, developing contemporaneously with the immediate postwar plebiscites and setting important precedents for the Third Reich’s referendums.

In the first few months of the Weimar Republic, mobs, rallies, and protests were more important to the fledgling democracy than voting, elections, and bureaucracies. After Wilson’s “revolution from above,” German citizens initiated their “revolution from below” in late October 1918. German revolutionaries generally fell into a few camps on the left side of the political spectrum. The most extreme group was the Spartacus League. Led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the Spartacists embraced Marxism and wanted to govern the new German republic through workers’ councils, much like the Soviet Union. They also hoped that the 1918 revolution was the first step of a larger Bolshevik revolution in Germany. The larger and more moderate group was the mainstream SPD. With Philipp Scheidemann and Friedrich Ebert, the “reluctant

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<sup>118</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 81–82.

<sup>119</sup> Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 97.

revolutionary,” as their leaders, the Social Democrats wanted a democratic parliament to run Germany and insisted that electing a National Assembly should be the revolution’s top priority.<sup>120</sup>

During this first phase of Germany's democratic transition, one of the most important tools for both of these political factions was marching. German citizens were eager to express their outrage by taking to the streets after years of shortages and the shocking defeat to the Allies.<sup>121</sup> In November 1918, such a protest caused the Kaiser to abdicate. Both the Spartacists and Social Democrats realized that if they wanted to mold Germany in their vision, they needed to mobilize large crowds of people. In late 1918 and early 1919, as Germany was still struggling to develop its new identity, these plebiscites-by-foot became important political tools. In January 1919, for example, the Spartacus League launched an uprising in Berlin that aimed to overthrow Ebert’s provisional SPD government. Although the Spartacists successfully motivated 500,000 workers to march to Berlin, a crowd certainly large enough to have overthrown the weak government, their leaders could not agree on how to proceed, so the crowd went home. Ebert, in response, made a deal with the military, which, with help from right-wing paramilitary groups, crushed the uprising. Members of the *Freikorps*, one of the largest and most violent of these paramilitaries, murdered Liebknecht and Luxemburg. The Spartacist Uprising was an important example of the Weimar Republic’s burgeoning plebiscitary culture.<sup>122</sup> Because they could better mobilize their extralegal fighting forces, the Social Democrats ultimately defeated the Spartacists. While elections would soon replace plebiscites-by-foot as the primary vehicle for the German people to exercise their will, the importance of mass mobilizations would remain.

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<sup>120</sup> Gallus, "Revolutions (Germany)," in *1914–1918-online International*.

<sup>121</sup> Although historians do not consider Germany’s defeat a surprise, many Germans were shocked because the imperial government had controlled the spread of information tightly throughout the war. It had exaggerated German victories and ignored German losses, leading many at home to believe that victory was inevitable for the Central Powers.

<sup>122</sup> Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*.

Despite the importance of left-wing groups in the “revolution from below,” right-wing forces were a more ascendant force in the Weimar Republic. To combat the popularity of the Spartacists and Social Democrats among the working classes, the German right rebranded itself. Throughout Germany’s imperial age, the right was wealthy, elitist, and monarchist, preferring the conservative imperial bureaucracy to democracy in any form. During the First World War, however, it began to change. By 1918, the middle classes dominated right-wing politics. Though many monarchists remained, more right-wing Germans embraced a form of populist patriotism that harkened back to the August Days, those weeks immediately preceding the war when the horrors of mechanized slaughter had yet to supplant the euphoria of national unity. During the riots and protests of 1918, one was as likely to hear shouting about a *Volksgemeinschaft*, *Volksstaat*, or *Volkspartei* (people’s community, people’s state, and people’s party) as one was to hear “The Internationale.”<sup>123</sup> Although the German left demanded much attention during the revolution, one should not dismiss the importance of this right-wing populism. The right also understood the value of plebiscitary events, such as marches and festivals, and would gradually implement and then dominate these political strategies.

After the early tumult of the Weimar Republic stabilized into a democratic status quo, on 11 August 1919, the government ratified *Die Verfassung des Deutschen Reichs* (The Constitution of the German Reich), more commonly known as the *die Weimarer Verfassung* (the Weimar Constitution), replacing Bismarck’s imperial constitution with Germany’s first fully democratic one. The Weimar Constitution was one of the world’s most democratic and progressive constitutions, so it made sense that its provisions on referendums were innovative and a crucial part of the document. Building on the precedents of the immediate postwar plebiscites and the republic’s early political turmoil, it fleshed out a few different instances in which the government

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<sup>123</sup> Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 108.

might invoke a referendum. According to Article 73, the Reich president had the power to call for a referendum on any law enacted by the Reichstag. When Hugo Preuß, a German lawyer, first drafted the constitution, he gave only the president the right to call a referendum, but during the National Assembly (the constitutional convention of Weimar), the SPD demanded that all Germans had the right to initiate referendums.<sup>124</sup> The National Assembly, therefore, added a provision that the people could start a referendum if one-tenth of Germany's voting population signed a petition asking for it. Still, only the president could initiate a referendum on topics related to taxes, governmental budgets, or the salaries of government employees.<sup>125</sup> While this plebiscitary power appears far-reaching, the constitution's framers introduced an important limitation. If a referendum threatened to overturn a law that was passed by the Reichstag, then the result was valid only if a majority of eligible voters participated in the referendum. This meant that for most controversial referendums, not voting was functionally the same as voting "No." This limitation significantly raised the level of support that referendums needed to pass, preventing radical groups from using referendums as a tool to bypass the Reichstag and force through generally unpopular legislation. Others criticized this limitation as turning referendums into "a democratic embellishment," which was true, to an extent, as the framers of the Weimar Constitution never believed that referendums would be an important legislative tool in Germany.<sup>126</sup>

In addition to passing legislation without parliamentary approval, their most obvious purpose, referendums served a few other functions in the Weimar Republic. According to Article 43 of the Weimar Constitution, the Reichstag could call for a referendum to remove the president

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<sup>124</sup> Franklin C. West, *A Crisis of the Weimar Republic: A Study of the German Referendum of 20 June 1926* (Philadelphia: American philosophical Society, 1985), 16–17.

<sup>125</sup> Office of U.S. Chief of Counsel, trans., *The Constitution of the German Reich (Die Verfassung des Deutschen Reichs vom 11 August 1919)* (Reichgesetzblatt, 1919), 13, accessed April 11, 2023, <http://s3.amazonaws.com/cul-hydra/nur/nur01840/pdfs/nur01840.pdf>.

<sup>126</sup> West, *A Crisis*, 17.

from office. If the referendum succeeded in a general vote, then the president would be removed from power. If the president defeated the referendum, however, then his seven-year term would be renewed and the Reichstag would be dissolved—this punishment was designed to keep the Reichstag from abusing its recall power. The Weimar Constitution also had a provision for referendums that reflected the Wilsonian international system. Like the United States, Germany had a strong history of federalism. The German Empire had comprised many subsidiary principalities, while the Weimar Republic divided itself into states (*Länder*) that often reflected the historic borders of these older kingdoms. In Article 18, the Weimar Constitution granted German citizens the right to change the borders of the country's states. If enough citizens—a third of those living in the affected area—complained about Germany's internal borders, then the chancellor needed to order a plebiscite on that issue. Then, if a majority of eligible voters participated and sixty percent of them voted in favor of the plebiscite, the Reichstag would make the requested border adjustment. This plebiscitary provision appealed directly to Wilsonian thought, as Wilson originally conceived of self-determination as an issue of self-government. Because their purpose was to draw or change borders, these *Länder* plebiscites also reflected the postwar plebiscites.<sup>127</sup>

Although the above scenarios appear identical in their functioning—whether the referendum pertained to state borders or a piece of legislation, it invoked the will of the people to make a decision—the Weimar Constitution lexically distinguished between different types of referendums. For the most straightforward form of referendums, those in which the people voted directly on a piece of legislation, the constitution used the term *Volksentscheid*, which translates to “referendum” (literally a “people’s decision”). For votes on removing the president from office, it used the word *Volksabstimmung*, which translates to “plebiscite” (literally a “people’s

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<sup>127</sup> Office of U.S. Chief of Counsel, *The Constitution*.

vote”). Finally, for votes that could change the states’ borders, it used the word *Abstimmung*, a general term that could refer to any vote, whether a referendum or otherwise (“Der Wille der Bevölkerung ist durch Abstimmung festzustellen”).<sup>128</sup> The interesting distinction here is between the words *Entscheid* and *Abstimmung*. Did they imply any real difference in meaning, and, if so, what? The secondary literature is unclear, and scholars and politicians still debate the difference between a *Volksabstimmung* and a *Volksentscheid*. According to “Volksbegehren, Volksentscheid, Volksabstimmung: Begrifflichkeiten und Modelle,” a report published by the German Bundestag in 2009, many Germans understand *Volksabstimmung* as a generic term for all instances of direct democracy.<sup>129</sup> Others argue that *Volksabstimmung* is a broader term that encompasses *Volksentscheid*, while a third group believes that the two terms are semantically identical. For the sake of clarity, this paper will understand *Volksabstimmung* and *Volksentscheid* as exact synonyms, just as it has with *referendum* and *plebiscite*.

Upon its ratification in 1919, the Weimar Constitution was one of the world’s most plebiscitary documents. Although it established a parliamentary system, it regularly included instruments of direct democracy and valued the will of the people, a thoroughly Wilsonian stance. How, then, did this plebiscitary state deteriorate into the totalitarian Third Reich fourteen years later? This question has prompted much historiographical debate. While it has faded into and out of popularity, the scholarly debate has, for more than a century, returned to the *Sonderweg* (special path) thesis. According to historians who advance this theory, such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Germany experienced a unique, tumultuous transition from aristocracy to democracy and from agrarianism to industrialization.<sup>130</sup> For example, whereas France and Great

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<sup>128</sup> Office of U.S. Chief of Counsel, *The Constitution*.

<sup>129</sup> Wissenschaftliche Dienste, *Volksbegehren, Volksentscheid, Volksabstimmung: Begrifflichkeiten und Modelle* (Deutsche Bundestag, 2009), 3, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/422954/13a6fb40c22e1a162e9ea3ad2cadcb4a/wd-3-237-09-pdf-data.pdf>.

<sup>130</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich: 1871-1918*, 7th ed. (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1994).

Britain experienced a longer, more natural transition from absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy, Germany saw a near-instant, war-induced transformation.<sup>131</sup> This left Germany with a highly developed economy yet a poorly developed democratic culture, which, according to the *Sonderweg*, created the perfect opportunity for Nazism to overtake the Weimar Republic. Some historians, most notably Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn in their book *The Peculiarities of German History*, have argued that there was no “normal” path for political liberalization in Europe and that Germany was not particularly authoritarian for the time.<sup>132</sup> In “German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg,” Jurgen Kocka outlined the history of this historiographical debate. He concluded that while some structural issues in German society definitely contributed to the collapse of the Weimar Republic, one cannot conclusively say if those same factors contributed to the rise of the Third Reich. He reminded readers that rather than anachronistically assuming that the collapse of the republic led straight into the rise of the Reich, one must understand them first as two separate events.<sup>133</sup> Although this debate covers the breadth of twentieth-century German history—and has little to do with the specifics of plebiscites and referendums—noting its importance is crucial because this paper seeks to draw connections between the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. Drawing from Kocka, this paper does not assume a direct causal link between Germany’s failed democratic experiment and the rise of Nazism. It does not, however, dismiss it out-of-hand either. It recognizes that the Weimar Republic was not, as proponents of *Sonderweg* suggest, doomed from the start and that the Third Reich was not an inevitable result of the republic’s collapse. When comparing the postwar

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<sup>131</sup> Upon its inception in 1918, the Weimar Republic instituted universal suffrage for all German citizens, including women, who were at least twenty-five years old. Despite its monarchic history, Germany adopted universal women’s suffrage before both the United States and United Kingdom.

<sup>132</sup> David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>133</sup> Jurgen Kocka, "German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg," *Journal of Contemporary History* 23, no. 1 (January 1988): 13, accessed April 7, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/260865>.



plebiscites and referendums of the Third Reich, therefore, it will not assume that the budding plebiscitary culture of the Weimar Republic was destined to mutate into a tool for fascism.

As Kocka noted, however, important structural changes affected Weimar society and the ways in which it would use referendums. When the German Empire suddenly disappeared in 1918, it left a power vacuum, as the imperial bureaucracy, especially during the First World, had countered the centrifugal forces that could have ripped apart the state. The force that largely filled this void was nationalism.<sup>134</sup> Although nationalism had been important in Germany before the war, it took on a much greater role in the new republic. Nearly overnight, the *Volk* had replaced the emperor as Germany's highest authority, so a populist brand of nationalism naturally meshed with the new government (Germany's perceived slight at the hands of the victorious powers also fueled this intense nationalism). Two trends followed. First, Germans across the socioeconomic spectrum became much more engaged in politics. According to Peter Fritzsche in *Germans into Nazis*, "Germans insistently expanded the bounds of participation in the public sphere. Organization was the watchword, stridency the spirit of the times."<sup>135</sup> One of the earliest examples of this increased political involvement is the mob that forced the Kaiser to abdicate. The spirit that possessed these protestors endured throughout the Weimar Republic. Second, this growing political involvement prompted growing political polarization. More than any other factor, a left-right divide defined Weimar politics and German society. In the first years of the republic, right-wing militias, such as the *Freikorps*, frequently fought left-wing groups in the streets of many major German cities. They also assassinated politicians, such as Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau. Even after the street fighting subsided, polarization stifled progress in the Reichstag and infected civil society.<sup>136</sup> Both of these trends are important in understanding the

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<sup>134</sup> Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 8.

<sup>135</sup> Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 96–97.

<sup>136</sup> Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 135.

role of referendums in the Weimar Republic. Although Germany had no experience with referendums—outside of the postwar plebiscites, of course—they became an attractive tool, as they allowed for mass political participation and encouraged the political polarization on which many Germans thrived.

Even though the Weimar Constitution comprehensively addressed the situations in which they could call for a referendum, of which there were relatively many, German citizens did not immediately take advantage of this new right. The Weimar Republic experienced no national referendums throughout the early 1920s, except for the immediate postwar plebiscites. Both sides of the political spectrum still preferred marches to votes. The 1925 presidential election provides an illustrative example of this preference. It was also a turning point for the political right. In the second round of voting, Wilhelm Marx of the Centre Party ran against Paul von Hindenburg, the famed “Hero of Tannenberg” and leader of Germany’s military during the First World War. Even though the war ended nearly seven years prior, many Germans were still angry that their nation was suffering the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles. Many had also lost faith that the Weimar Coalition, the parties that had led the republic during its first years and most supported its democracy (namely, the SPD, DDP, and Centre Party), could ensure a bright future for their nation, as the hyperinflation crisis and occupation of the Ruhr valley in 1923 seriously hurt the Coalition’s reputation. For many on the political right, Hindenburg became a beacon of hope. He was conservative, patriotic, and appealed to a broad base.

Rumblings of the republic’s first major referendum began in 1925. Since the collapse of the German Empire, the Weimar government had struggled to decide what it should do with the property of the former princes. Some on the monarchist right advocated for the princes to keep their land, while many more on the left, especially the German Communist Party (KPD), called

for the government to confiscate the land without compensating the old lords. Most political parties fell somewhere in the middle. For example, the SPD, at first, wanted to confiscate the land but only if the government financially compensated the princes. In late 1925, after the states of Prussia and Thuringia made some controversial deals with their former monarchs (they allowed the princes to keep more of their property than many thought they should have) the German Democratic Party (DDP), a centrist to center-left party, introduced a bill in the Reichstag that promised to settle the issue of princely lands. Because it satisfied neither the right nor the left, the bill ultimately failed, but thereafter nearly every political party recognized the need to settle this dispute. Even though it was still weak in 1926, the NSDAP opposed the DDP's bill.<sup>137</sup>

After more debate in the Reichstag, it became increasingly clear that the parties would not reach an agreement through parliamentary means. On 1 December 1925, in the middle of the Reichstag debate on the DDP's bill, the *Berliner Zeitung* reported that some politicians believed that a referendum was the best means by which to solve the dispute over princely property. If the Reichstag could not reach an agreement, then maybe the people could. A day later, Philipp Scheidemann, an SPD member of parliament and former chancellor, became the first German politician to openly advocate for a referendum: "The land owes the princes nothing, the princes [owe] the land everything...There is inflammable material enough outside. Let us prevent sparks spreading which could cause great harm. Imagine how upset the people must be by a referendum ... I have no doubt what answer they would give."<sup>138</sup> By calling for a referendum, Scheidemann and the SPD leaders were trying to incentivize the Reichstag to compromise. Upon hearing this speech, however, the leaders of the KPD took the idea of a referendum quite seriously. They approached the SPD to ask if it would work with them to cosponsor a vote. Although it initially

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<sup>137</sup> West, *A Crisis*, 247.

<sup>138</sup> West, *A Crisis*, 55.

rejected the proposal, when the issue continued to stall in the Reichstag, the SPD agreed in January 1926 to work with the KPD on the referendum. By cooperating with the KPD, the SPD set a dangerous precedent: referendums could be a substitute for, rather than a complement to, parliamentary democracy. The KPD was not a democratic party and had no interest in a stable Reichstag, so to enable the KPD was a mistake on the part of the SPD. Most of the other political parties saw the referendum as a calculated move by the SPD to gain more power, further undermining trust in the polarized Reichstag.<sup>139</sup>

After about six months of preparation, the government held the vote on 30 June 1926. The ballot asked German citizens if they supported the seizing of princely property without compensation, a position that the SPD had originally opposed but later embraced after joining forces with the KPD. Of the 15.5 million citizens who voted, over 14.5 million of them voted “Yes.” The referendum enjoyed massive support in cities and industrial areas that had voted for left-leaning parties in the earlier Reichstag elections. Despite the strong turnout, the referendum failed because less than forty percent of eligible voters participated in the referendum. Even though the SPD hoped that the government would ignore this provision of the constitution, President Hindenburg insisted that the referendum had failed. Based on contemporary election data, had every eligible voter turned out, the referendum would have passed decisively, but many Germans stayed home because they figured that the referendum would never see the turnout that it needed to pass.<sup>140</sup> This result indicates that the Weimar Constitution had flaws its framers had not predicted. Although they designed the voter turnout rule to, in theory, protect the republic, in practice, it dissuaded German citizens from participating in elections. Germans soon realized that

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<sup>139</sup> West, *A Crisis*, 56–66.

<sup>140</sup> West, *A Crisis*, 276.

this flaw affected the results of the referendum, deepening the distrust between the referendum's "two great camps."<sup>141</sup>

For most Germans, the experience of the 1926 referendum was overwhelmingly negative. It further subverted Germans' faith in parliamentary politics, which had already been shaken by earlier crises. Despite this failure, in 1929, Germans turned again to a referendum. This vote, however, was much different from its predecessor. Whereas the SPD and KPD (center-left and far-left parties, respectively) had orchestrated the 1926 referendum, right-wing activists advocated for the 1929 referendum. In the story of Germany's plebiscites and referendums, this was the first time that the NSDAP became relevant. Throughout the 1920s, Hitler and his followers were still a fringe element in the Weimar Republic. Although Hitler had gained some attention for his failed Beer Hall Putsch, few regarded him as a serious force in German politics. In the May 1928 Reichstag elections, for example, the NSDAP earned only 2.6 percent of the total vote. Seven other parties earned more votes, with the SPD earning the most.<sup>142</sup> The NSDAP became involved in the 1929 referendum by associating with Alfred Hugenberg, a wealthy media tycoon who led the *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* (DNVP), the leading right-wing party throughout most of the Weimar Republic. After a disappointing showing for the DNVP in the 1928 Reichstag election, Hugenberg was searching for an issue around which he could unite a strong right-wing alliance. He found his issue in the Young Plan, a deal that the Weimar government had negotiated with the victorious powers throughout 1929. It was billed as the final answer to the question of Germany's postwar reparations, which had started at the Paris Peace

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<sup>141</sup> West, *A Crisis*, 284.

<sup>142</sup> Administration of the German Bundestag, "Elections in the Weimar Republic," *Historical Exhibition Presented by the German Bundestag*, Research Section WD 1 ser., March 2006, accessed April 17, 2023, [https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/189774/7c6dd629f4aff7bf4f962a45c110b5f/elections\\_weimar\\_republic-da.ta.pdf](https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/189774/7c6dd629f4aff7bf4f962a45c110b5f/elections_weimar_republic-da.ta.pdf).

Conference and resulted in the 1923 occupation of the Ruhr by France and Belgium.<sup>143</sup> Because the Young Plan said that Germany was responsible for paying almost 114 billion Reichsmarks over sixty-two years, many Germans were outraged that their government would agree to pay such a massive sum.<sup>144</sup> Hugenberg saw this anger as an opportunity to revitalize the DNVP, so he formed the *Reichsausschuß für das deutsche Volksbegehren gegen den Young-Plan und die Kriegsschuldlüge* (Reich Committee for the German Petition against the Young Plan and the War Guilt Lie), a group of right-wing politicians who would lead the referendum effort.<sup>145</sup> He invited Hitler to sit on the *Reichsausschuß* because, even though he was relatively insignificant, Hugenberg admired his energy.

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<sup>143</sup> Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, "Schedule of payments, May 5, 1921, prescribing the time and manner for securing and discharging the entire obligation of Germany for reparation under Articles 231, 232 and 233 of the Treaty of Versailles," *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference, 1919* XIII:863, accessed April 30, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv13/ch34subch4>. Although Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles never specified the amount for which Germany was responsible, the 1921 London Schedule of Payments set Germany's bill at 132 billion marks.

<sup>144</sup> Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, "Part VIII—Reparation: Adoption of the New (Young) Plan," *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference, 1919* XIII:399, accessed April 18, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv13/ch17>.

<sup>145</sup> Through the title of his committee, Hugenberg claimed that the diplomats negotiating the Young Plan were a part of the "war guilt lie," a conspiracy theory blaming democrats and Socialists for Germany's defeat in the First World War.



Figure 4: M. Wilke, *Als Weihnachtsgeschenk*, poster (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1929). This poster reads, “As a Christmas present: a burden of 114 billion in tribute. Thus, on the referendum on 22 December, vote with a ‘Yes’ for the Freedom Law.”

After months of planning and lobbying, the referendum was held on 22 December 1929. Although ninety-five percent of the votes were “Yes,” only fifteen percent of eligible voters turned up at the polls, meaning that the referendum was defeated.<sup>146</sup> That said, because it was the

<sup>146</sup> Doris Pfeleiderer, "Volksbegehren und Volksentscheid gegen den Youngplan," *Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg Archivnachrichten* 35 (2007) accessed April 17, 2023, [https://www.landesarchiv-bw.de/sixcms/media.php/120/Archivnachrichten\\_35\\_Quellen\\_34\\_kl.pdf](https://www.landesarchiv-bw.de/sixcms/media.php/120/Archivnachrichten_35_Quellen_34_kl.pdf).

first referendum in which the NSDAP was heavily involved, the 1929 referendum was a formative experience for Hitler in the area of direct democracy. While the referendum campaign did little to directly increase Hitler's popularity, it showed him how referendums provided a great opportunity for propaganda campaigns and political mobilization.<sup>147</sup> The NSDAP and other right-wing parties had already acknowledged and embraced the importance of propaganda in 1929; however, as members of the *Reichsausschuß*, they were allowed to participate in a propaganda campaign of, at that point, unprecedented scale. During the registration period in October, Hugenberg gave a speech nearly every other day, and the NSDAP held over 7,000 local meetings.<sup>148</sup> This massive campaign was effective, too. Joseph Goebbels, the leader of the NSDAP's propaganda machine and one of Hitler's most-trusted lieutenants, frequently attracted large crowds, yet even he was shocked at the number of people who showed up to his speeches about the referendum: "einen so unglaublichen Andrang ... hatten wir doch nicht für möglich gehalten" (Such an unbelievable crowd ... we had not thought it possible).<sup>149</sup> More than anything, the 1929 referendum showed Hitler and other Nazi leaders, like Goebbels, that referendums could create a political frenzy and force Germans to engage politically. When Hitler planned his own referendums in the Third Reich, he would remember this lesson.

### **The Third Reich's Referendums**

On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler became the chancellor of Germany. Over the next twelve years, the Third Reich regularly hosted votes, perhaps the last thing one would expect from a dictatorship. Of these, four were referendums—the years 1933, 1934, 1936, and 1938

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<sup>147</sup> Otmar Jung, "Plebiszitärer Durchbruch 1929? Zur Bedeutung von Volksbegehren und Volksentscheid gegen den Youngplan für die NSDAP," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 15, no. 4 (1989), accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40185513>.

<sup>148</sup> Jung, "Plebiszitärer Durchbruch," 502.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*



each had one. Although these referendums do not fit the typical story that historians have told about the Third Reich, they have much to add to the traditional narrative. Hitler's referendums were by no means free or fair; however, they were not rigged on a wide scale. On the whole, German citizens actually cast the votes that the Third Reich reported after each of its referendums. By juxtaposing the plebiscites immediately after the First World War with the referendums of the Third Reich, this chapter will analyze how the Third Reich twisted direct democracy to advance the regime's goals. It will also show how an analysis of the Third Reich's referendums can help historians track Germany's democratic backsliding in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Scholars have paid even less attention to the referendums of the Third Reich than they have to the immediate postwar plebiscites. The most comprehensive work on the subject is Otmar Jung's *Plebiscit und Diktatur: die Volksabstimmungen der Nationalsozialisten* (Plebiscite and Dictatorship: The Referendums of the National Socialists).<sup>150</sup> In this book, Jung adopts a political lens. Although he recounts the plebiscites' histories, he is mostly interested in the legality of the elections and how one might interpret the voting results. His conclusions provide important background information, though they are not immediately relevant to this paper's most important thread: the similarities and differences between the plebiscites of the 1920s and the referendums of the 1930s. On that note, Jung rarely mentions the immediate postwar plebiscites. They were not at the front of his mind when he wrote this book. Also, Jung deals only with the referendums of 1933, 1934, and 1938. While his analysis is helpful, he omits the 1936 referendum and the 1935 Saar plebiscite, both of which this paper considers crucial to the history of the Third Reich's referendums. Besides Jung, the most eminent scholars on this topic are

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<sup>150</sup> Otmar Jung, *Plebiscit Und Diktatur: Die Volksabstimmungen Der Nationalsozialisten : Die Fälle Austritt Aus Dem Völkerbund (1933), Staatsoberhaupt (1934) Und Anschluss Osterreichs (1938)* (Tübingen: Mohr, J.C.B., (Paul Siebeck), 1995).

Ralph Jessen and Hedwig Richter, who have collaborated on a few projects. In 2012, they coedited *Voting for Hitler and Stalin: Elections under 20th Century Dictatorships*, a collection of essays on the elections, referendums, and plebiscitary cultures of twentieth-century European autocracies. In this book, they authored a chapter titled “The Self-Staging of a Plebiscitary Dictatorship: The NS-Regime between ‘Uniformed Reichstag,’ Referendum and Reichsparteitag,” which briefly summarizes the history of the Third Reich’s referendums and explains how the NSDAP used referendums, rallies, and holidays to force its citizens to constantly reaffirm their support for the regime.<sup>151</sup> This chapter was important for the conceptual framework of this paper’s Chapter Two. Jessen and Richter also contributed a chapter, “Elections, Plebiscites, and Festivals,” to the *Oxford Illustrated History of the Third Reich*, which covers much of the same ground, although it delves deeper into the plebiscitary role of festivals in the Third Reich. Each of these referendums, particularly those in 1933, 1936, and 1938, are relatively untapped reservoirs of knowledge on Hitler’s regime.<sup>152</sup>

Throughout this chapter, this paper will analyze how the Third Reich’s referendums compare to the immediate postwar plebiscites on three different metrics. The first of these is direct allusion to the immediate postwar plebiscites in the propaganda and media surrounding the Third Reich’s referendums. Allusions provide the clearest evidence that Third Reich officials were thinking about the postwar plebiscites as they planned their own referendums. They are also relatively easy to pick out. The second metric is propaganda messaging. This paper will look to see if the propaganda pertaining to the Third Reich’s referendums emphasized similar themes to the propaganda of the immediate postwar plebiscites. Such a similarity would be evidence that the Germans of the Third Reich thought about the same issues as the Germans of the plebiscite

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<sup>151</sup> Jessen and Richter, *Voting for Hitler*, 42.

<sup>152</sup> Jessen and Richter, *Voting for Hitler*, 4.

zones when planning their votes. The third metric is voting procedures. During the postwar plebiscites, the Allied International Commissions pioneered how governmental authorities ought to run a successful vote. This paper will try to determine if the Third Reich followed the precedents of the International Commissions or if it deviated from them.<sup>153</sup> These three metrics will give this paper a comprehensive framework through which to analyze the similarities and differences between the postwar plebiscites and Third Reich's referendums.

### **Phase I: The Referendums of 1933 and 1934**

On 12 November 1933, just over nine months after President Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor, the Third Reich held the first of its four referendums. With this referendum, it also required German citizens to vote for their representatives in the *Reichstag*. Together, these two votes were the first in Germany since the NSDAP consolidated its grip on power with the Enabling Act in March 1933, a law that gave Hitler the power to enact laws without consulting the *Reichstag*. Based on the diaries of Goebbels, historians know that Hitler planned to hold this referendum since July 1933. Some hypothesize that the idea might have crossed his mind even earlier.<sup>154</sup> Although the purpose of the referendum does not allude directly to the immediate postwar plebiscites, it directly addresses the new world system that the Allies had set up through the Treaty of Versailles—and the postwar plebiscites were a part of this system. In this referendum, the Third Reich asked the German populace if they approved of Germany leaving the League of Nations, which epitomized the Wilsonian international order more so than any other organization. Hitler decided to put this issue to a vote after the negotiations at the Geneva

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<sup>153</sup> Of course, the Third Reich was a totalitarian dictatorship, while the International Commissions embraced democratically for the most part. Hitler, however, wanted his referendums to appear democratic to the international press, so investigating whether he, on the surface, applied some of the Commissions' methods is reasonable.

<sup>154</sup> Jung, *Plebiscit Und Diktatur*, 35.

Conference, a meeting at which the world's nations negotiated arms control agreements, halted. According to the Treaty of Versailles, Germany needed to disarm; however, the Allies were supposed to follow, thus preventing another arms race like the one that contributed to the start of the First World War. In 1933, however, the victorious powers still had not disarmed, so Germany demanded that either they disarm or allow Germany to rearm. After struggling to reach an agreement, especially with France, Hitler decided that his Reich would break from this hypocritical system.<sup>155</sup>

From its beginning, the 1933 referendum reflected the postwar plebiscites, as both the Big Four and Hitler shared some ideas on how plebiscites could serve their political goals. If one investigates the wording of the Third Reich's first referendum, one can see that it did not simply ask German citizens if they wished to leave the League of Nations. Although he wanted the people's support, Hitler would never leave such an important decision to a vote. Instead, on 14 October, Wilhelm Frick, the Third Reich's Minister of the Interior, declared that Germany would leave the League of Nations and that on 12 November, the German government would ask its people to either approve or disapprove of this measure. The final ballot read (English translation), "Do you, German man, and you, German woman, approve this policy of your national government, and are you willing to declare it as the expression of your own opinion and your own will and solemnly profess it?"<sup>156</sup> Interestingly, the wording of Frick's initial announcement was slightly different (English translation): "Do the German people approve of the Reich Government's policy presented to them in the Reich Government's appeal of 14 October 1933, and are they prepared to declare it to be the expression of their own views and

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<sup>155</sup> David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>156</sup> Jung, *Plebiszit Und Diktatur*, 35.

their own will and to solemnly profess it?<sup>157</sup> With its direct reference to the announcement of 14 October, this original version is even clearer in stating that the role of the German citizenry in this referendum was to approve or disapprove of an already finalized decision. Neither Hitler nor any other NSDAP official ever said that the result of this referendum would change the government's official policy. Although the Third Reich was far more extreme than the Big Four, one can detect inklings of the victorious powers' conversations at the Paris Peace Conference fifteen years earlier. Especially in the discussions concerning Upper Silesia, Lloyd George believed that plebiscites could be a powerful tool in justifying the decisions of the Big Four. He quickly recognized that under the Wilsonian international system, only the expressed consent of a people could justify a governmental decision—Wilson's "community of power" derived its authority from a democracy. Because many people in East-Central Europe enthusiastically adopted the Wilsonian vision, the Big Four would need to, in some way, appeal to the people before redistributing territory, lest their decisions seem arbitrary and rooted in pre-1914 power politics. In his 1933 referendum, Hitler similarly realized the power of appealing to the people to approve his decisions as a *fait accompli*. Rather than putting the question of Germany's League membership directly to the people, he could ask them about the government's policy on that question, thereby producing the illusion that the people approved his plan while simultaneously keeping the decision-making power. One cannot say for certain if the Big Four directly inspired Hitler; however, this conceptual similarity is profound. Hitler turned one of the Wilsonian system's weapons against it.

Along with this connection to the debates on the plebiscite in Upper Silesia, historical records indicate that before and during the referendum of 1933, the results of the Upper Silesian

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<sup>157</sup> Wilhelm Frick, "Verordnung zur Durchführung der Volksabstimmung über den Aufruf der Reichsregierung an das deutsche Volk," October 14, 1933, R 1501/125195, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.

plebiscite were at the front of many Germans' minds. The violence and manipulative tactics of Korfanty and other Polish leaders left a scar on the German political psyche. The Second Polish Uprising, especially, confirmed to many Germans that Poland was an enemy they could never trust. Wedged into a volume of documents from the 1933 referendum was a letter reflecting on the situation in Upper Silesia, the last German territory to have experienced a plebiscite. In this letter, Count Adelman, the German Consulate General at Kattowitz, the same city in which the Second Polish Uprising took place, complained that Polish authorities had arrested members of a youth organization from Siemianowitz, treating them like criminals and dispensing justice unfairly toward the area's German minority: "Es zeigt sich im vorliegenden Fall wiederum, mit welcher Brutalität seitens der polnischen Behörden unter Einschluß der Justiz gegen das hiesige Deutschtum vorgegangen wird" (The present case shows once again the brutality with which the Polish authorities, including the judiciary, acted against the local German population).<sup>158</sup> Adelman sent his letter to the German Foreign Office in Berlin on 6 November 1933, six days before the Third Reich's first plebiscite. Carole Fink, the foremost expert on minority rights during the interwar period, argued in her article, "The Weimar Republic and its *Minderheitenpolitik*: Challenge to a Democracy," that throughout the 1920s and '30s, every German government aggressively defended the rights of German minorities in Poland and other neighboring countries, perhaps to the point of demagoguery. The German public felt compelled to "castigate the Treaty of Versailles and the territorial settlement with Poland," pursuing "strongly and deliberately" a "throbbing, uncontrollable, and unfulfillable national cause."<sup>159</sup> When one considers Adelman's letter and Fink's research together, one can see that in the

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<sup>158</sup> Graf Adelman, "Verurteilung von 31 Minderheitsangehörigen aus Siemianowitz," November 6, 1933, R 3001/7347, vol. 4/12, fol. 3/8d, p. 76, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.

<sup>159</sup> Carole Fink, "The Weimar Republic and its *Minderheitenpolitik*: Challenge to a Democracy," *German Politics and Society* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 81, accessed March 14, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23736409>.

Weimar Republic and Third Reich, German identity was established in opposition to Eastern Europe, especially Poland. In 1933, well after the plebiscites in Allenstein, Marienwerder, and Upper Silesia, Poland was still Germany's top target, and, in the lead-up to the referendum, the Third Reich accentuated this history.

Some of the most interesting records on the 1933 referendum come from the German housewives' associations. They appealed to a massive segment of German society, published much propaganda, and regularly corresponded with the bureaus of the NSDAP. Thanks to this mix of factors, historians can learn a lot from these associations. In an April 1933 letter to the membership of the *Reichsverbandes Deutscher Hausfrauenvereine* (Reich Association of German Housewives, RDH), Dr. Anne-Marie Wissdorff and Maria Jecker, the association's leaders, reported that some Polish propaganda had claimed that the "Polish Corridor," a territory on the coastline of the Baltic Sea that belonged to Germany before the Treaty of Versailles, had always been Polish despite the region's overwhelming German majority. They condemned Poland for reinforcing the Polish-German border set during the postwar plebiscites, which the plebiscites established "against all justice and against all political reason" (English translation). They finished their letter by imploring every German woman to fight this "polnische Märchen" (Polish fairy tale).<sup>160</sup> This anti-Polish focus became the base on which the NSDAP and its subsidiary organizations, like the RDH, built their propaganda for the 1933 referendum. In an official statement on the referendum, however, the RDH declared that it stood in solidarity with the NSDAP's announcement from 14 October. The referendum, it argued, stood only for "die innere Ordnung und den inneren Wiederaufbau des deutschen Volkes" (the internal order and the

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<sup>160</sup> Anne-Marie Wissdorf and Maria Jecker, "An die Vereine des Reichsverbandes Deutscher Hausfrauenvereine," April 24, 1933, R 8083/25, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.

internal reconstruction of the German people).<sup>161</sup> In much of its propaganda, the Third Reich appeals to the concept of Germandom and a once-again united German people. By voting in unison, Germans could prove that they, despite the unjust war settlement, had prevailed and grown stronger as a people. German society would again resemble the unity it experienced during the “Augusttagen,” those days of collective euphoria before the start of the First World War.

Although the gap between the earlier anti-Polish sentiment and this internal focus on German unity might at first seem wide, further reading shows that the jump was small. Following the release of their official statement, Wissdorff and Jecker sent a letter to the RDH’s local chapters, explaining the purpose of the referendum in greater detail. Hitler, they wrote, would use the referendum to show how Germany, since the rise of the NSDAP, had rebuilt its national pride and now demanded “Gleichberechtigung und einen Frieden in Ehre” (equal rights and a peace in honor).<sup>162</sup> Here, the connection between the Third Reich’s xenophobia and nationalism becomes clear. Regarding the Treaty of Versailles, the Third Reich placed nations in a binary: those who unduly benefited from the new international order and those who unjustly suffered. As the alleged victim of the peace settlement, Germans were diametrically opposed to the nation that most benefited at their expense: Poland. Now, through this referendum, Germans would demonstrate their unity by abandoning the League that had denied them their right to national self-determination and had weaponized the plebiscite. In the Third Reich’s propaganda for the 1933 referendum, this messaging was everywhere.

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<sup>161</sup> Reichsverbandes Deutscher Hausfrauenvereine, "Die Deutschen Hausfrauen und Mütter hinter Adolf Hitler," 1933, R 8083/25, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.

<sup>162</sup> Anne-Marie Wissdorf and Maria Jecker, "Volksabstimmung," October 31, 1933, R 8083/25, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.



While the propaganda of the 1933 referendum connected to the postwar plebiscites, the legal standards of the 1933 referendum were much different from the earlier Allied-run votes. Although partisans tried to influence the postwar plebiscites, the voting occurred under free conditions. Even in Upper Silesia, the most violent of the plebiscites, the international community agreed that the vote accurately reflected the feelings of the region's people. Allied troops guarded polling stations, and the International Commissions threatened harsh punishments for anyone who disturbed the peace. In 1933, the Third Reich seemed to embrace similar protections. Because Hitler never rewrote the German constitution, the Weimar Constitution remained in place; therefore, its laws guaranteeing the right to secret, free voting also remained.<sup>163</sup> In public, Hitler actually took these laws quite seriously. More than anything else, the 1933 referendum was a way for Hitler to prove to the world that the German people supported his regime. If he wanted the world's great powers to respect the results of the referendum, then he needed its results to appear as the legitimate will of the people. Although many laws threatened harsh penalties for those who tampered with the election, poll workers and police officers frequently intimidated voters with a "wink."<sup>164</sup> As one might expect, voter intimidation was so widespread that historians could never possibly tell how many Germans truly voted in favor of the regime.<sup>165</sup> The Third Reich's consistent violation of democratic election standards was an important difference between it and the Allied-run plebiscites. That said, the referendum was actually freer than other elections under the Third Reich. With the plebiscite, the Third Reich held a Reichstag election. The ballot listed only one list of names—that of the NSDAP—and had a bubble for "Yes" but none for "No." As the image below

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<sup>163</sup> Jessen and Richter, *Voting for Hitler*, 41.

<sup>164</sup> Jung, *Plebiscit Und Diktatur*, 44.

<sup>165</sup> As Jessen and Richter noted, this is the main reason that scholars have shown little interest in the elections of totalitarian regimes.

shows, the 1933 referendum presented voters with an option for “Yes” or “No.” Interestingly, the Third Reich received a higher margin of victory on the plebiscite than on the Reichstag election (about 2.1 percent higher), showing that, in Germany, the League of Nations was more unpopular than the NSDAP was popular.<sup>166</sup>

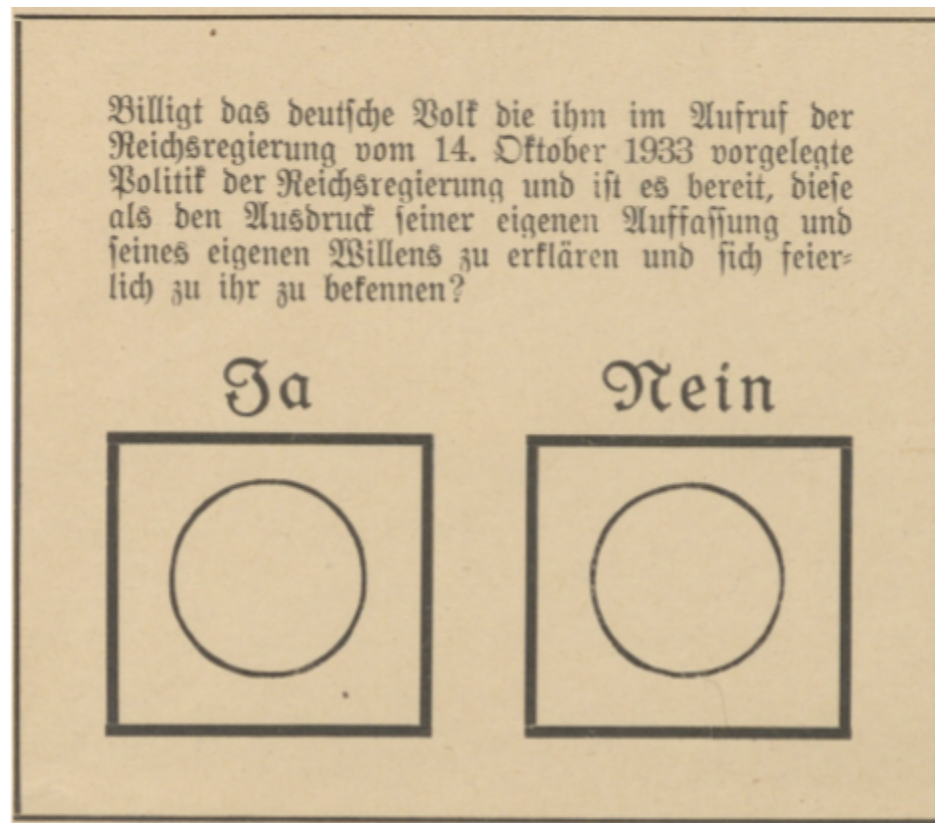


Figure 5: R 1501/125195, vol. 1, fol. 1. Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde. This ballot was a preliminary version that the German government changed before the vote. It reads, “Do the German people approve of this policy of the Reich Government presented to them in the Reich Government’s appeal of 14 October 1933, and they prepared to declare it to be the expression of their own views and their own will and to solemnly profess it?”

Following the voting on 12 November, Hitler and other NSDAP officials were overjoyed, as the referendum was a resounding victory for the Third Reich. Just over ninety-five percent of voters chose “Yes.” In only three constituencies—Berlin, Hamburg, and Leipzig—did less than

<sup>166</sup> Jung, *Plebiscit Und Diktatur*, 55.

ninety percent of people vote in favor of the Third Reich's decision to leave the League. Hitler also achieved much of his real goal: persuading the international press that the vote reflected the real wishes of the German people. After working on the 1929 referendum campaign, Hitler learned that referendums offered massive propaganda opportunities. In this vein, his ultimate goal when administering the 1933 referendum was for international newspapers to characterize his new regime as a vehicle of the German people's will.<sup>167</sup> A few hours after the vote, *The London Times* reported that "Hitler has standardized the German nation. Germany is Nazi. Officially there is no other sort of German."<sup>168</sup> Of course, many (perhaps most) Germans freely voted "Yes" on the referendum; however, the Third Reich coerced a large percentage of Germans through its threats of violence. *The London Times* and other newspapers gave Hitler a huge diplomatic victory by not better interrogating the freeness and fairness of Germany's vote.

Following the 1933 referendum, many in Germany hoped that Hitler would continue to rely on referendums and develop Germany's plebiscitary culture.<sup>169</sup> He confirmed their hopes when he promised to hold more referendums. In August 1934, he got the chance to fulfill his promise. Hindenburg died on 2 August at the age of eighty-six. With the last vestige of the old guard gone, Hitler moved to the final step in consolidating his power: merging the offices of president and chancellor into one, that of the *Führer*. He declared that on 19 August 1934, the German people would decide whether Hitler should occupy Germany's two most powerful positions. Importantly, this referendum did not ask about a personal union (this would have meant that Hitler held the two distinct offices simultaneously). It actually asked about amending

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<sup>167</sup> Enzo Fimiani, "Elections, Plebiscitary Elections, and Plebiscites in Fascist Italy and Nazi-Germany: Comparative Perspectives," in *Voting for Hitler and Stalin: Elections under 20th Century Dictatorships*, ed. Ralph Jessen and Hedwig Richter (New York: Campus Verlag, 2012).

<sup>168</sup> Special Cable to The New York Times, "London Sees Nation Standardized," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), November 13, 1933, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/london-sees-nation-standardized/docview/100845201/se-2>.

<sup>169</sup> Jung, *Plebiscit Und Diktatur*, 57.

the Weimar Constitution to abolish those two positions and replace them with the position of *Führer und Reichskanzler* (Führer and Reich Chancellor), a single office that would assume the formers' powers. Two important differences existed between the 1933 and 1934 referendums. First, the subject matter of the 1934 referendum better fit the traditional definition of a national referendum. In Western democracies, referendums were most commonly used to amend constitutions and the fundamental functions of government (e.g. combining the offices of president and chancellor). The focus of the 1933 referendum—affirming the decision to leave the League—was a much more unorthodox topic for a referendum. Second, the 1934 referendum pertained much less to the postwar plebiscites and the Treaty of Versailles. Unlike its predecessor, it focused on Germany's domestic politics, although Hitler still sought the international prestige boost that he received after the 1933 vote. Interestingly, even though the 1934 referendum focused on a more traditional issue, German citizens and the international press received it much less enthusiastically.

Although Hitler had planned on this referendum ever since the elderly Hindenburg became sick, he could declare it only after the president passed away. He wasted no time and declared the referendum a day after Hindenburg died, leaving only about two weeks before he would call Germans to the voting booths. This quick turnaround was a tactical blunder. Despite his age, Hindenburg was still mythical in Germany. When Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor, many Germans accepted Hitler only because they trusted Hindenburg's judgment. Few appreciated Hitler's obvious power grab mere days after the president's passing.<sup>170</sup> Immediately following Hitler's announcement, Goebbels and his organizations embarked on an unprecedentedly large propaganda campaign, trying to convince Germans that granting Hitler more power was necessary. Compared to the 1933 referendum, the messaging of this referendum

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<sup>170</sup> Jung, *Plebiszit Und Diktatur*, 72.

was much different. On 15 August, Hjalmar Schacht, the Reichsminister of Economics, helped with the propaganda effort by writing an article for the *Nachrichtenbüro* (News Office) in which he implored voters to vote “Yes” on the referendum. He first praised Hitler for rooting out Weimar corruption, which, he alleged, had resulted from democratic officials paying outrageous reparations payments and borrowing huge amounts without notifying the German public. In Schacht’s estimation, Germany had never experienced as much prosperity as it had under Hitler. Voters, therefore, ought to further rally behind Hitler, as he was Germany's only hope to escape the crippling economic situation that the Treaty of Versailles and Weimar government had inflicted on it.<sup>171</sup> Unlike the propaganda for the 1933 referendum, this propaganda focused on Hitler, his achievements, and his cult of personality. Considering the content of the referendum, such a focus was nearly impossible to avoid.

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<sup>171</sup> Hjalmar Schacht, "Ja für Hitler," August 15, 1934, R 43–II/498, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.



Figure 6: "Erlaß des Reichskanzlers zum Vollzug des Gesetzes über das Staatsoberhaupt des Deutschen Reichs vom 1. August 1934," ballot, 1934, R 43-II/498, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany. The 1934 ballot listed the proposed laws then asked voters, "Do you, German man, and you, German woman, vote for the regulation made in this law?"

By changing its propaganda focus from the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations to Hitler and domestic German politics, the Third Reich lost some of the success it enjoyed in 1933. The proportion of "Yes" votes dropped from ninety-five percent to 89.9 percent.<sup>172</sup> While this percentage was still overwhelmingly positive, it contradicted the NSDAP's

<sup>172</sup> Jung, *Plebiscit Und Diktatur*, 68.

doctrine of perpetual progress. Any reduction in support was unacceptable. Similarly, the percentage of entitled voters who actually voted dropped from ninety to 84.3 percent. Up from three in 1933, twelve constituencies registered “No” rates over ten percent—some districts in Berlin dropped below seventy percent.<sup>173</sup> In the weeks after the vote, the Third Reich’s security organizations investigated the causes of the decline. One report concluded that vocal “Neinsager” (naysayers) had caused other citizens to lose some faith in Hitler and his regime. It also found that torn-down propaganda posters and the rants of “angetrunkenen Abstimmungsberechtigten” (drunken voters) were important factors in the disappointing result.<sup>174</sup> Despite the subtle comedy of the NSDAP’s excuses, the Third Reich did not effectively market the referendum to its citizens. NSDAP security organizations recorded many more instances of disobedience, such as the ripping down of propaganda posters or outspoken defiance, than they did during the 1933 referendum. This change is significant because, between the 1933 and 1934 referendums, the regime had grown even more repressive, committing political murders more frequently, like during the Night of the Long Knives. Acting out in 1934 was riskier than in 1933, yet more people did anyways. The NSDAP had risen to power on its anti-Versailles rhetoric and won a great victory in the 1933 referendum by following the same formula. Deviating from this strategy earned it defeat in 1934.

Although Hitler and other top NSDAP officials were upset that they had lost ground with the German people in the 1934 referendum, they were even more worried about the reactions of the international press. Just as it had in the rules of the 1933 referendum, the NSDAP appealed to the Wilsonian worldview that informed the immediate postwar plebiscites. In an early August meeting with his ministers, Hitler reaffirmed how the referendum ought to appear free because

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Erich Deutschbein, "Berichterstattung in politischen Angelegenheiten," September 8, 1934, R 58/3471, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.

only then could he claim to be the avatar of the German people.<sup>175</sup> Capturing the expressed support of the people—for propaganda purposes, of course—was the most important reason that Hitler chose to hold a referendum instead of simply commanding the *Reichstag* to merge the offices of president and chancellor.<sup>176</sup> To create the appearance of a free and fair vote, Hitler publicly reiterated the importance of free and secret elections, the supposed foundation of the Third Reich. His government also drafted elaborate outvoter laws, similar to those from the postwar plebiscites, which it published in the *Reichsgesetzblatt*, a publication of the German government that outlined its recently adopted laws.<sup>177</sup> These outvoter laws, which covered German nationals abroad, on ships, and in prison, would ensure that everyone entitled to vote received the chance.

Despite reaffirming the commitment to Wilsonian democracy that he expressed in 1933, Hitler did not fool the international press this time. In early July, the Night of the Long Knives, during which Hitler ordered the murder of Ernst Röhm, the leader of the SA and Hitler's only conceivable rival, had finally discredited any claims that the Third Reich made about its supposedly democratic foundation. Few among the press held reservations about pointing out Hitler's role in Röhm's murder. In an article from 5 August 1934, Edwin L. James, the chief European correspondent for *The New York Times* throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, explained that, despite its propaganda, the NSDAP had fooled no one with its meaningless rhetoric and appeals to democracy: "Of course Hitler will win the referendum. The only political

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<sup>175</sup> Adolf Hitler, "Auszug aus der Niederschrift über die Ministerbesprechung," August 2, 1934, R 43-II/498, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.

<sup>176</sup> "Hindenburg in Deep Coma; Hitler to Extend Grip: Referendum on Absolute Rule by Nazi Chancellor Indicated; Dying Idol Urges Monarchy," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), August 2, 1934, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/hindenburg-deep-coma-hitler-extend-grip/docview/163260037/se-2>.

<sup>177</sup> Wilhelm Frick, "Reichsgesetzblatt: Beordnung zur Durchführung der Volksabstimmung über das Staatsoberhaupt des Deutschen Reichs vom 3 August 1934," August 3, 1934, R 43-II/498, fol. 1, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany.



interest in the voting lies in the relative strength of the opposition which may manifest itself.”<sup>178</sup> In an article from 21 August, two days after the vote and about two weeks after James’ piece, *The London Times* agreed that the international press cared only about the four million votes that had gone against Hitler, not the thirty-eight million that had gone for him.<sup>179</sup> More so than the decreased support among Germans, this scrutiny from the international press upset Hitler, as wooing British and American newspapers was the original point of the referendums.

Because of the 1934 vote’s disappointing results, referendums temporarily fell out of favor with Hitler. Although they gave Hitler an easy way to show Germany’s support for him at the start of his regime, they were also unpredictable and could produce undesirable results. Even with more intense political suppression, more Germans voted against Hitler in 1934—or did not vote at all—than did in 1933. For the Third Reich, the results of the 1933 and 1934 referendums led to two conclusions. First, referendums were not the source of easy publicity that Hitler and his lieutenants had once thought. Rather than holding a referendum each year, as he had promised, Hitler needed to carefully pick the moments in which he would use this tool. Second, because referendums were not as easily manipulated as the top NSDAP officials had thought, they needed to better control the procedures and messaging of future referendums. As far as propaganda goes, referendums focusing on the Treaty of Versailles, First World War, and experiences during the Polish plebiscites received near universal support, while referendums on domestic issues, especially those that seemed like nothing more than a power grab by Hitler, were much less popular. Conversely, embracing procedures that were reminiscent of the postwar

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<sup>178</sup> Edwin L. James, "Germans Are Now Rules by Reichsfuehrerschaft: Taking Over Complete Power, Hitler Wipes out the Presidency Held by Ebert and Von Hindenburg. Reich to Vote on August 19 Nazi Chief Believed to Have His Mind upon Domestic Problems in Seeking Popular Ratification of His Regime," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), August 5, 1934, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/germans-are-now-ruled-reichsfuehrerschaft/docview/101181713/se-2>.

<sup>179</sup> Jung, *Plebiszit Und Diktatur*, 78.

plebiscites, such as relatively unbiased ballots, comprehensive outvoter laws, and a strong—albeit superficial—emphasis on the will of the people as the most important factor in government, were ineffective for a regime pursuing constant progress. In other words, these referendums had still been too free to service the Nazi cause.

### **The 1935 Saar Plebiscite**

Only a few months after the 1934 referendum, the Third Reich had its third encounter with direct democracy. Unlike the first two referendums, however, the NSDAP did not organize this vote. The 1935 Saar plebiscite is the most unusual of the nine votes that this paper explores, as it bridged the gap between the immediate postwar plebiscites and the Third Reich's referendums. Since Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, France and Great Britain had governed the Saar Basin, a small territory on the Franco-German border, as a mandate on behalf of the League of Nations.<sup>180</sup> Although most Saarlanders wanted to remain a part of Germany, Clemenceau had coveted the region's rich coal mines, so the Big Four, in the Treaty of Versailles, gave France exclusive access to the mines for a fifteen-year period. Because this seizing of German territory sacrificed self-determination to French power politics, Wilson and Lloyd George required that the treaty include a provision (Article 49) for a plebiscite after fifteen years of French and British rule.

Compared to the Third Reich's referendums, the 1935 Saar plebiscite has received more scholarly attention. Much of this work, however, comes from the 1930s and is outdated. Like with the immediate postwar plebiscites, Sarah Wambaugh wrote one of the most important works

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<sup>180</sup> Following the First World War, "League of Nations mandate" was a term applied to territories in Western Asia, Africa, and Oceania that colonial powers ruled on behalf of the League. Although mandates were legally different from colonial possessions, European powers governed them as *de facto* colonies. The Saar Basin was the only League mandate in Europe. Besides these mandates, the League also deployed a few other governmental structures for its protectorates. For example, it transformed Danzig, a city on the Baltic coast, into a "free city," a city-state under the League's protection.

on this vote, *The Saar Plebiscite: With a Collection of Official Documents*, which she published in 1939.<sup>181</sup> She covers the Treaty of Versailles, preparations for the plebiscite, and the vote itself. Similar to her earlier study, *The Saar Plebiscite* focuses mostly on political history. In 1974, C.J. Hill wrote “Great Britain and the Saar Plebiscite of 13 January 1935.”<sup>182</sup> Adding to Wambaugh’s book, Hill analyzes the plebiscite from the perspective of the British government, which was extremely reluctant to involve itself in continental affairs. Following the 1970s, the scholarly interest in the Saar plebiscite faded. Most of the published resources come from the 1950s and 1960s, likely because a later referendum in the Saar, which occurred in 1955, sparked renewed interest in the 1935 vote. In the introduction to *Voting for Hitler and Stalin*, Jessen and Richter hypothesize that the proportionately large amount of scholarly interest in the Saar plebiscite derived from a common prejudice among historians. Because the Third Reich was a totalitarian regime, some historians have assumed that they could not possibly glean anything from its referendums, a tool that relies on free, fair, and secret voting. The Saar plebiscite, by contrast, was administered under League of Nations supervision and without direct interference from the NSDAP. Jessen and Richter argue that while the Saar plebiscite deserves the attention it has received, the Third Reich’s referendums deserve as much attention.

In January 1935, fifteen years had passed since the Treaty of Versailles formally took effect in 1920. Needless to say, since the Big Four (two of whom, Wilson and Clemenceau, had already passed away) had set up the Saar mandate, Germany and the international system had drastically changed. Rather than voting whether to join France or the Weimar Republic—a choice between two democratic states—Saarlanders would vote whether to join the Third

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<sup>181</sup> Sarah Wambaugh, *The Saar Plebiscite: With a Collection of Official Documents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

<sup>182</sup> C.J. Hill, "Great Britain and the Saar Plebiscite of 13 January 1935," *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 2 (April 1974), accessed May 4, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260050>.

Republic, a democracy, or the Third Reich, an ultranationalist regime that had made constituting *Großdeutschland*, of which the Saar was a part, one of its main propaganda points. Saarlanders also had a third option: to keep the status quo and remain an independent territory under League protection. Unlike any of the other plebiscites explored in this paper, the Saar plebiscite was administered by the League of Nations (the immediate postwar plebiscites were administered by the victorious powers, not the League). Because the League ran this vote, unlike the Third Reich's referendums, the Saar experienced a free and fair election. The Saar plebiscite, therefore, was a unique vote. Although it reflected the immediate postwar plebiscite procedurally and drew its authority from the same document, it was administered by a different organization and under different geopolitical circumstances.

Like during the immediate postwar plebiscites, many different groups tried to influence the outcome of the vote. Of these organizations, the most successful was the Deutsche Front, an alliance of right-wing political parties led by the Saar National Socialist Party. Although Catholic, Socialist, and Communist groups opposed the Front, none was large enough to rival the Front's organization and activity. In the months preceding the vote, it came to dominate the Saar's political sphere. In addition to the poor organization of its opponents, the Front succeeded for two important reasons. First, thanks to fifteen years of German propaganda that spanned the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, many Saarlanders believed that the French and League were conspiring to prevent the Saar from reuniting with Germany. When the Front began producing propaganda before the vote, its message reached sympathetic readers: "A docile proletariat, trained for thirteen years to think of themselves as persecuted and in chains, to denounce the Governing Commission and all its works, and to regard a vote for the League regime as a vote for France, offered to the National Socialist propaganda every advantage."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Wambaugh, *The Saar Plebiscite*, 124.

Second, the Front received the full financial support of the Third Reich's Ministry of Propaganda. By 1935, the NSDAP was adept at referendum-related propaganda, as it had experienced the 1929 Weimar referendum and its own 1933 and 1934 referendums. The Front's opponents, by contrast, had comparatively little money to spend on propaganda. The League contributed nothing, while France, which had eagerly acquired an economic monopoly of the Saar fifteen years earlier, did little.

Because of these decisive advantages, the Front dominated the Saar's political sphere leading up to the election. It harassed its opponents and enforced the Third Reich's irredentism. For example, in December 1934, the Front launched a campaign against the *Deutscher Volksbund für Christlich-soziale Gemeinschaft* (German Committee for Christian-Social Community). The Deutscher Volksbund was a recently formed Catholic organization that opposed Hitler. Although it hoped that the Saar could one day reunite with Germany, it would never join a state ruled by Hitler. It outspokenly supported the status quo option in the 1935 referendum. In response, the Front ran a propaganda campaign accusing the Deutscher Volksbund of accepting funds from France. This message was very effective because many Saarlanders saw any organization that cooperated with France as traitorous. On 7 December, the Front's press alleged that the *Neue Saar Post*, a Catholic newspaper and key member of the Deutscher Volksbund, had accepted funding from the French State Mines Administration. It had apparently learned this information from documents it had stolen from the Mines Administration's archives.<sup>184</sup> Although the Governing Commission, the League body that administers the Saar, denounced the report as fraudulent, the Front had already done considerable damage to the reputation of the Deutscher Volksbund. During the months leading up to the vote,

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<sup>184</sup> Wambaugh, *The Saar Plebiscite*, 273.

the Front showed just how much Saarlanders still thought about the postwar settlement. Even the slightest association with France was enough to sink a major political organization.

On 13 January, the day of the vote, one would have found members of the Front standing outside most of the polling stations in Saarbrücken, the capital and largest city of the Saar. While they were courteous and peaceful, many Saarlanders suspected that they were there to intimidate voters.<sup>185</sup> On 15 January, two days after the vote, the Plebiscite Commission, which had overseen the vote, announced the results. Of the 528,105 votes, about ninety percent (477,119 votes) were for union with Germany. About nine percent voted for the status quo, while the remaining one percent was split between union with France and invalid and blank votes. A few hundred of the invalid votes carried messages like this: “Für Deutschland—gegen Hitler” (For Germany—against Hitler).<sup>186</sup> At least some of these ballots came from the members of the Deutscher Volksbund. Following the vote, the French government accepted its defeat with grace. Pierre Laval, a French minister, said that “The people of the Saar had freely chosen their future. The Council of the League must decide for the reunion of the Saar with Germany” and that “The Council [of the League of Nations] had only to bow before such a decision and it should be glad to congratulate the German people on the return to its bosom of its sons of the Saar.”<sup>187</sup> Laval was civil and welcoming of the German victory, which ran contrary to the vengeance and power politics that Clemenceau had pursued at the Paris Peace Conference. Although France changed its attitude in the fifteen years since the First World War, many Germans, especially Saarlanders, certainly had not. They overwhelmingly voted to join Germany even though doing so would hurt the Saar’s economy, which relied on French markets, and replace the benign League government with the totalitarian Nazi regime. Reversing the Treaty of Versailles was the most important issue

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<sup>185</sup> Wambaugh, *The Saar Plebiscite*, 300.

<sup>186</sup> Wambaugh, *The Saar Plebiscite*, 304.

<sup>187</sup> Wambaugh, *The Saar Plebiscite*, 308.

for Saarlanders. During the Saar plebiscite, Germans constantly thought about the Treaty of Versailles and how it denied the Saar's right to self-determination in 1920.

## **Phase II: The Referendums of 1936 and 1938**

On 7 March 1936, Hitler ordered German troops to enter the Rhineland, the industrial heartland of Germany on the French border. This seemingly simple act of moving troops into another part of German territory was actually Hitler's then-greatest defiance of the post-First World War international system. The Treaty of Versailles and Locarno Treaties, a series of agreements between Germany and other European states that somewhat normalized relations, had both explicitly forbidden Germany from remilitarizing the Rhineland. With this decision, Hitler took a huge gamble. Because a demilitarized Rhine was so crucial to the Third Republic's defense plan, many expected France to respond with a preemptive attack on the Third Reich.<sup>188</sup> When no such invasion came, Hitler declared that he would ask the German people what they thought about his decision through a referendum on 29 March. Although it followed one of Hitler's boldest actions, historians have written the least about the 1936 referendum. In neither English nor German has a scholar explored this vote in any depth. In *Plebiszit Und Diktatur*, the most comprehensive book on the Third Reich's referendums, Jung discusses the 1936 referendum in about five pages and only the parts of it that are relevant to the 1934 and 1938 referendums. He devotes about twenty pages to each of the other referendums. No authoritative study of the 1936 vote exists probably because of how scarce the primary sources are. The *Bundesarchiv* contains almost nothing on this referendum, and what it does have is voting figures and results, which help this project only tangentially. Although much about this referendum is

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<sup>188</sup> Zach Shore, "Hitler, Intelligence and the Decision to Remilitarize the Rhine," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 1 (January 1999): 5, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/261191>.

still a mystery, it is as important to understanding the Third Reich's elections as any of the other referendums.

Compared to the 1934 referendum, which was the last vote the Third Reich administered before Hitler temporarily paused their use, the 1936 referendum marked a return to the messaging and propaganda that had originally endeared the NSDAP to the German people. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, one of the most contentious consequences of the Treaty of Versailles was the demilitarization of the Rhineland. At the Paris Peace Conference, even though Clemenceau had originally hoped to split the Rhineland from Germany and form smaller puppet states, the rest of the Big Four thought that demilitarizing the region was a better way to sate France's security concerns while also respecting German self-determination. About a decade later, Germans were increasingly unwilling to abide by this demilitarization, especially because the war's victorious powers had not also demilitarized as they had promised in the peace settlement. This hypocrisy was a key issue in the halting of negotiations at the Geneva Conference and Hitler's decision to leave the League. On the day of the vote in 1933, Edwin James, with shocking foresight, predicted that in the coming years, Hitler would most likely declare the Treaty of Versailles void and that "Germany can now do what she likes about her armaments and will take steps at once to give the Reich an army befitting the dignity of the position she should occupy."<sup>189</sup> James could not have better predicted Hitler's course. Remembering this massive diplomatic and symbolic victory, Hitler returned in 1936 to the strategy that had won him success in 1933: attacking the international system of the Treaty of Versailles. As he had a few years earlier, he demanded that the international community treat

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<sup>189</sup> Edwin L. James, "Reich Tries to Liquidate Defeat of 15 Years Ago: In Today's Referendum Germans Will Vote Approval of Hitler's Plan to Scrap Treaty of Versailles. Next Move Is up to the Nazis Britain, France and Italy Waiting to See What Turn Berlin Nationalism Will Take to Further New Foreign Policy.," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), November 12, 1933, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/reich-tries-liquidate-defeat-15-years-ago/docview/100819441/se-2>.



Germany as an “equal,” not as a vassal state. Instead of referring directly to Poland, as he had before, he spoke more generally, probably with the great powers as his intended audience.<sup>190</sup> In his “incessant propaganda,” he declared that his regime would no longer accept Germany’s second-class treatment.<sup>191</sup> On 29 March, after a tense three-week standoff, the German people gave Hitler his then-biggest diplomatic victory, with about 98.8 percent of voters approving of the remilitarization of the Rhine. Just as he had gambled in remilitarizing the Rhineland, Hitler had gambled in holding another referendum, the last of which had proven too unpredictable to serve the regime. Again, his gamble paid off, as he received the greatest electoral success of his career. The victory was so overwhelming that many journalists, even though they knew how thoroughly the Third Reich coerced voters, conceded that this referendum had proven the German people’s support for the Third Reich. The editor of *The Kansas City Star* wrote, “An electorate ridden by incessant propaganda, shut off by propaganda and subjected to a psychology of fear from secret police activities cannot be said in the ordinary sense to cast a significant ballot. On the other hand, there can be no reasonable doubt of the widespread popularity of the Nazi dictatorship and its policies today in Germany.”<sup>192</sup> By returning to the messaging that had produced victory in 1933, Hitler created an even greater success in 1936.

The 1936 referendum, however, returned to more than just the propaganda posters and talking points of 1933. It also returned to the debates of sovereignty, self-determination, and power politics that informed the Paris Peace Conference and resulting postwar plebiscites. In the

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<sup>190</sup> The United Press, "Hitler Wins 'Waror Peace' Record Vote of Germans: 98.79% of Poll Backs Feuhrer's Defiance to World Powers. Answer to Allies is due Tomorrow 44,000,000 Give Great Display of Solidarity and Nationalism. Germany," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 1936, accessed March 24, 2023, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/hitler-wins-waror-peace-recor-d-vote-germans/docview/150748309/se-2>.

<sup>191</sup> "With Other Editors: The Election in Germany," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 1936, accessed March 24, 2023, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/with-other-editors/docview/150820137/se-2>.

<sup>192</sup> "With Other Editors."

days following the 1936 referendum, the “Locarno powers”—France, Italy, Belgium, and Great Britain (with Germany, the original signatories of the Locarno Treaties)—tried to de-escalate the Rhine situation by submitting a memorandum of terms to the German government. On 1 April, three days after the referendum, the Third Reich answered the Locarno powers with its own demands. The Treaty of Versailles, the German government wrote, violated Wilson’s Fourteen Points, the doctrine on which Germany had originally agreed to sue for peace. Rather than doing “the fullest justice to the principle of self-determination” or creating “a new international order which should lead to better and permanent peace,” the Treaty of Versailles compelled Germany to surrender control over much of its territory. One of the most egregious examples was the forced demilitarization of the Rhine.<sup>193</sup> The Third Reich laid out its terms for peace, but it also noted that if the Locarno powers were unwilling to redraft the international order on the basis of equal rights for nations, then they would not reach an agreement with Germany. With this response, the Third Reich centered the 1936 referendum on the issue of sovereignty, the key concept of the peace settlement and post-First World War years. At its core, self-determination was a school of thought on the nature of sovereignty. It argued that a people, not a monarch, had the right to set up a government and the laws by which it would live. Despite publicly applauding this definition of sovereignty, the Big Four contradicted it in the Treaty of Versailles. It split majority-German areas from the Weimar Republic, forced Germany to demilitarize the Rhineland, and straddled it with so much debt that the German economy could hardly survive without external intervention. Through each of these actions, the Treaty of Versailles deprived the Weimar Republic of sovereignty over areas that were indisputably German, a possibility that

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<sup>193</sup> Wireless to The New York Times, "Text of Germany's Peace Proposals to the Locarno Powers," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1936, accessed March 24, 2023, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/text-germanys-peace-proposal-s-locarno-powers/docview/101930740/se-2>.

Wilson's Fourteen Points promised to prohibit. The Big Four also designed the immediate postwar plebiscites to limit German sovereignty. Denmark contributed nothing to the Allied war effort, yet it was still allowed to split off a piece from Germany (and received the opportunity to split off even more with the vote in Central Schleswig). Through his 1936 referendum, Hitler was responding to this history of violated sovereignty. He asked German citizens whether his government should reassert control over a definitively German area. They overwhelmingly approved of his decision, supporting Hitler's claim that he, unlike the Treaty of Versailles, was working on behalf of self-determination. As his government wrote in its response to the Locarno powers, the Fourteen Points "did not contemplate in any manner the limitation of sovereignty in the Rhineland."<sup>194</sup> By returning to this debate on sovereignty in his 1936 referendum, Hitler was refighting the postwar settlement that stripped Germany of its dignity.

Despite its return to earlier propaganda strategies and the debate on sovereignty, the 1936 referendum deviated from the immediate postwar plebiscites in its procedures and underlying theory. In the 1933 and 1934 referendums, the Third Reich gave its citizens a binary choice. On both of these ballots, one could vote "Yes" to approve of the government's policy or "No" to disapprove of it. Graphically, the two ballot options also occupied the same amount of space. Although the referendum's wording clearly favored the cause of the Third Reich, the ballot's layout did not push voters in any direction. This format mirrored the immediate postwar plebiscites. The victorious powers used plebiscites in the 1920s because they could legitimize their decisions by appealing to the people in a free and fair election. Hitler used similar reasoning in 1933 and 1934. To convince the international community that he represented the will of the people, the theoretical ultimate authority in the post-First World War world system, the Third Reich gave its citizens the freedom to choose between "Yes" and "No." These referendums were

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<sup>194</sup> Wireless to The New York Times, "Text of Germany's."

not free in reality, but they did give citizens an option to oppose the government. By giving its people, at least superficially, the freedom to choose, the Third Reich appealed to the Wilsonian theories that undergirded the immediate postwar plebiscites. In this way, the 1933 and 1934 referendums, to some extent, followed the same intellectual tradition as the postwar plebiscites. Beginning in 1936, however, the NSDAP changed its ballots. The 1936 referendum had, instead of equally-sized “Yes” and “No” options, a single “Yes” bubble.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, instead of a question, the ballot included only a list of candidates—to vote for this ticket, the Third Reich said, was to vote to remilitarize the Rhineland. This change makes sense when one considers the Third Reich’s experience with its 1934 referendum. After its failure in 1934, the Third Reich concluded that the will of the people was too unreliable for a regime that hunted ceaseless electoral progress. It decided that in 1936, it would not give its people an option: they could either vote “Yes” or not at all.<sup>196</sup> This procedural change resulted from a shift in theory. The Third Reich believed that if the people could not vote in their own best interest—which, by the NSDAP’s standard, meant approving Hitler’s decisions—then it would not give them the opportunity to make a mistake. By eliminating any choice on its ballots, the Third Reich finally and fully divorced itself from the Wilsonian school of thought that valued the will of the people. From 1936 onward, little about the procedure of the Third Reich’s referendums resembled the postwar plebiscites.

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<sup>195</sup> Jung, *Plebiscit Und Diktatur*, 84.

<sup>196</sup> In a way, this single-choice voting resembled the referendums of the Weimar Republic: abstaining functioned as a “No” vote.



Figure 7: Andy Holzman, *A 1936 German parliamentary election ballot is displayed at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute as part of the exhibit "Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away."*, March 22, 2023, photograph, accessed May 9, 2023. The top of the ballot reads, "Parliament for Freedom and Peace—Constituency of Hesse-Nassau." The candidate list reads, "National Socialist German Workers' Party—Adolf Hitler—Heß, Frick, Göring, Goebbels, Sprenger, Weinrich."

This change, in theory, molded the referendums better to Nazi political theory. Although referendums were compatible with Nazi theory, the way Hitler had run the 1933 and 1934 referendums was not. Though he embraced a democratic facade, one based on the postwar plebiscites, to earn the respect of foreign leaders and journalists, these plebiscites were anomalies in the Third Reich. The 1936 referendum, by contrast, was more rooted in Nazi ideology. The NSDAP was committed to retooling how modern governments worked and had a cadre of political scientists who developed the theoretical underpinnings of the National Socialist movement, such as Carl Schmitt and Alfred Rosenberg. One of Nazism's most important theories was the *Führerprinzip*. This theory, in Hitler's words, meant that "the Leader is the Idea, and each party member has to obey only the Leader." In practice, it was an organizing principle for the Nazi state. At each level of the political hierarchy, leaders demanded absolute obedience from their subordinates and were supposed to completely obey their superiors. It presumed, as its

guiding principle, that states run most efficiently when strong, fearless leaders take action and their subordinates follow their commands to the letter. One might be surprised to learn that at the top of the German hierarchy was not Hitler. It was the German people. As *Führer und Reichskanzler*, Hitler served as the steward of the German people and operated as the personification of their will.<sup>197</sup> He was less beholden to the people in reality than in theory; however, this principle did undergird the entire Nazi state. Through the *Führerprinzip*, Hitler framed himself as a somewhat democratic figure. Though he still rejected liberal democracy, he embraced his role as shepherd of the people and something amounting to National Socialist democracy. This Nazi democracy was what defined the 1936 referendum. As the personification of Germany's will, Hitler had the duty to guide German citizens to choose correctly in the referendum. That was how he could justify including only a "Yes" option on the ballot and replacing a question with his list of chosen candidates.

Between 1934 and 1936, the NSDAP lost faith in the German people to freely vote how the regime wished. Its change from binary to single-choice ballots during the 1936 referendum demonstrated this change in attitude. About a year after this referendum, the Third Reich further showed that it would not let the people decide Germany's fate, which was a decisive break from the philosophy of the postwar plebiscites. On 1 April 1937, the Enabling Act was set to expire. The Enabling Act, officially the *Gesetz zur Behebung der Not von Volk und Reich* (Law to Eliminate the Distress of People and Reich), was a key piece of legislation in Hitler's rise to power. Following the Reichstag fire of 27 February 1933, an act of arson that Hitler blamed on a non-existent Communist putsch, he convinced the Reichstag to pass this law, which granted him dictatorial powers, such as the ability to pass legislation without the consent of the Reichstag. In

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<sup>197</sup> Archie Brown, "Against the Führerprinzip: For Collective Leadership," *Daedalus* 145, no. 3 (2016): 112, accessed May 11, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24916692>.

1933, Hitler pitched the law as a way to protect Germany from revolutionary groups, but in 1937, as it was about to expire, he would have the freedom to amend the law however he so chose.<sup>198</sup> During a meeting of the Reich Ministry of the Interior on 19 January 1937, Hitler and his cabinet reviewed a draft for the extension of the Enabling Act. Unlike the first iteration of the law from 1933, this new draft read, “Die Reichsgesetze werden vom Führer und Reichskanzler erlassen” (The Reich laws are enacted by the Führer and Reich Chancellor).<sup>199</sup> This was a drastic change from the 1933 version, which read, “Reichsgesetze können außer in dem in der Reichsverfassung vorgesehenen Verfahren auch durch die Reichsregierung beschlossen werden” (Reich laws can also be passed by the Reich government in addition to the procedure provided for in the Reich constitution). Although the 1933 Enabling Act allowed Hitler, the head of the Reich government, to pass laws without anyone else’s consent, it never forbade other means of legislating that the Weimar Constitution permitted. Because they, like the Reichstag, were outlined in the Weimar Constitution, referendums were compatible with the 1933 version of the Enabling Act. The 1937 draft, by contrast, granted legislative power exclusively to Hitler. It would, therefore, forbid both the Reichstag and referendums from creating future laws. According to Jung, Hitler was aware of this implication. After some debate, his ministers convinced him that this draft would too obviously gut the authority of the Reichstag, so he settled on a draft that still permitted Reichstag laws and referendums. That said, through the Enabling Act, Hitler was more than willing to preclude the possibility of future referendums. The 1937 draft of the Enabling Act further shows that Hitler no longer saw referendums as a viable political tool, for the unrestrained will of the people was far too volatile for his regime.

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<sup>198</sup> Unlike in 1933, Hitler did not need to convince other parties in the Reichstag to pass his bill. In 1937, the NSDAP completely commanded German society, as all other political parties had long since disbanded.

<sup>199</sup> Jung, *Plebiszit Und Diktatur*, 85.

On 12 March 1938, about a year after this debate on the Enabling Act, German troops marched into the Federal State of Austria, toppling the government and establishing martial law. Shortly thereafter, Hitler annexed Austria, absorbing the largest German territory outside of the Third Reich. Nearly seventy years after Bismarck first excluded Austria from the German Confederation, *Großdeutschland* was finally a reality. The *Anschluss*, which translates to the “connection” in English, was Hitler’s boldest move yet, even more so than his decision to remilitarize the Rhineland. It was also imbued immediately with the spirit of the postwar plebiscites. Since Hitler had taken over Germany in 1933, a cadet branch of the NSDAP had been growing in Austria. In 1934, these Austrian Nazis plotted to spark a putsch by assassinating Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss. They managed to murder Dollfuss, but the Austrian government crushed their uprising. Over the next few years, many more Austrians joined the Nazi movement and demanded that Austria unify with Germany, as they believed that the existence of two separate states needlessly divided the German people.<sup>200</sup> Responding to these growing calls for unification, on 9 March 1938, Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg announced that four days later, the Austrian government would hold a referendum on the matter. In his speech, Schuschnigg declared that the referendum was “Für ein freies und deutsches, unabhängiges und soziales, für ein christliches und einigtes Österreich” (For a free and German, independent and social, for a Christian and united Austria).<sup>201</sup>

Believing that Schuschnigg ought to immediately surrender his country to the Third Reich, Hitler was outraged that Austria would schedule a referendum that threatened his irredentist plans. In response to the announcement, Hitler said, “Common blood belongs in a

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<sup>200</sup> Bruce F. Pauley, "From Splinter Party to Mass Movement: The Austrian Nazi Breakthrough," *German Studies Review* 2, no. 1 (February 1979).

<sup>201</sup> Jung, *Plebiszit Und Diktatur*, 110.



common Reich!”<sup>202</sup> Hermann Göring, one of Hitler’s chief lieutenants, threatened that the Third Reich would invade unless Austria canceled the referendum, removed Schuschnigg from power, and appointed Arthur Seyß-Inquart, the leader of the Austrian NSDAP, as Austrian chancellor. Even after Austria gave in to these demands, the Third Reich invaded its southern neighbor on 12 March, a day before Austrian citizens would have voted. From its outset, the *Anschluss* was a direct response to a referendum that was much in the vein of the postwar plebiscites—Austrians would decide on their state’s sovereignty just as the peoples of Schleswig, Allenstein, Marienwerder, and Upper Silesia had in the 1920s. Shortly after entering Austria, Hitler declared that he would host a real referendum—as opposed to Schuschnigg’s unreal one—through which Austrians could “seine Zukunft und damit sein Schicksal selbst ... gestalten” (shape their own future and thus their own destiny).<sup>203</sup> In Hitler’s rhetoric, one can sense a subtle arrogance: whereas other referendums had, according to Hitler, corrupted the will of the people, his referendums channeled it into meaningful change. Through this rhetoric, one can tell that Hitler saw his referendums, with their *Völkisch* tinge, as improved versions of the antiquated, democratic ones.

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<sup>202</sup> "'Cold' Anschluss Swastikas Over Austria (1) Peaceful Putsch Pressure From Il Duce No Help Offered Nazis Promoted From Vienna to Berlin Repercussions Buffer State Downing Street Debate 'Painful Surprise' What Will Hitler Say?," *The New York Times*, February 20, 1938, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/news-week-review/docview/102648359/se-2>.

<sup>203</sup> Jung, *Plebiscit Und Diktatur*, 113.

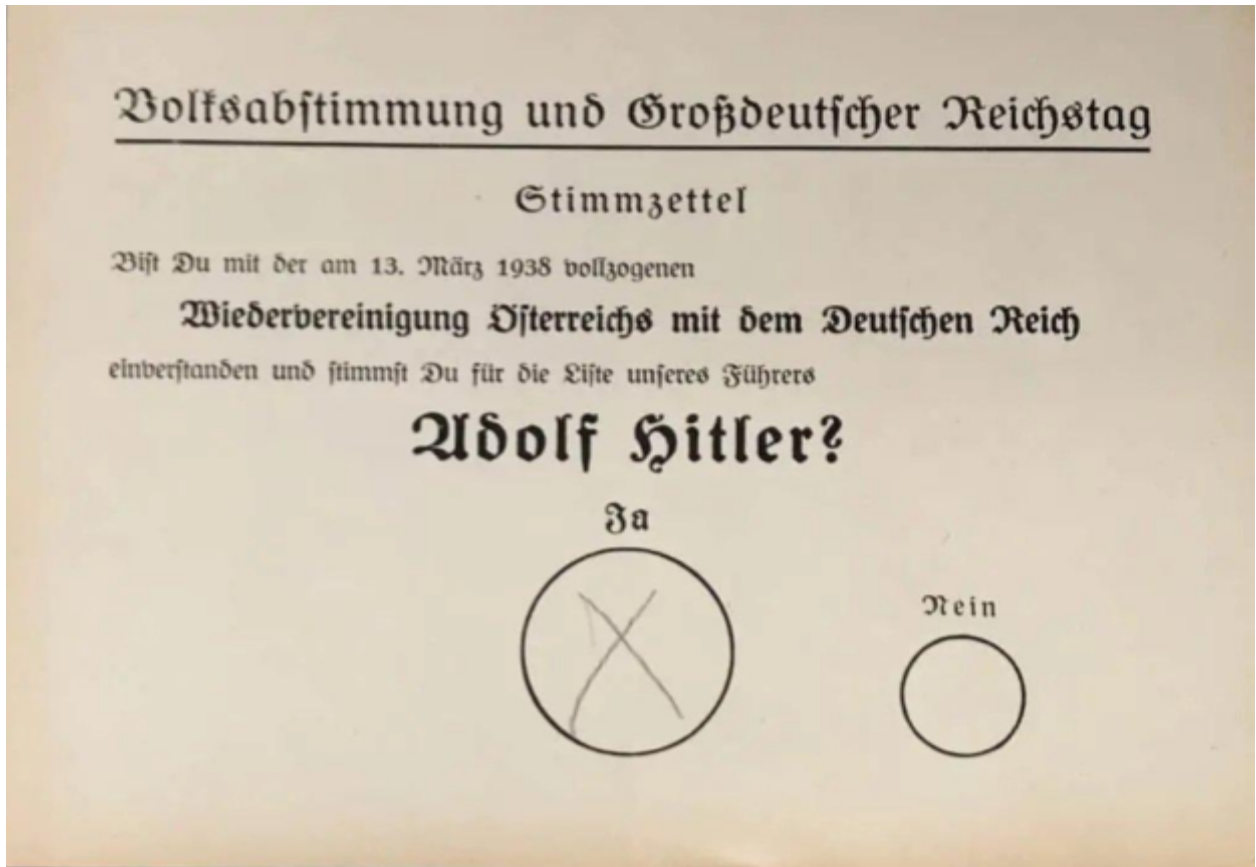


Figure 8: Gettysburg Museum of History, *Original 1938 German Adolf Hitler Reichstag Referendum Ballot: Vote "Ja" for Hitler!*, photograph, accessed May 9, 2023. The 1938 ballot asked Germans and Austrians, “Do you agree with the reunification of Austria with the German Reich that took place on 13 March 1938, and do you vote for the list of our Führer Adolf Hitler?”

Shortly after annexing Austria on 13 March, Hitler announced that on 10 April, both German and Austrian citizens would vote on a Reich-wide referendum. The ballot would ask citizens if they approved of the “reunification” of Germany and Austria and if they approved of the list of NSDAP candidates for the Reichstag, thereby combining two distinct questions into one false binary. As it had in 1936, the NSDAP made a popular foreign policy decision—first, remilitarizing the Rhineland; now, annexing Austria—synonymous with voting for Hitler. Interestingly, the 1938 ballot reintroduced the binary voting that the 1936 referendum had abandoned. The citizens of the Third Reich could vote either “Yes” or “No.” That said, the ballot

did not present the options on a neutral playing field. It placed the “Yes” bubble in the center of the ballot, while it relegated the “No” bubble to the page’s margins. The “Yes” bubble was also about double the size of the “No” bubble.

After considering each of the referendums, this paper can look at the evolution of the Third Reich’s referendum ballots. The 1933 ballot, in its words, clearly pushed voters toward approving of Hitler’s decision to leave the League of Nations, although it presented the “Yes” and “No” options neutrally, giving them the same size and prominence on the page. The 1934 ballot kept the same form of a leading question with a neutral graphic design. After the disappointment of 1934, the 1936 referendum eliminated the binary voting of the postwar plebiscites and the earliest of the Third Reich’s referendums by presenting voters with only a “Yes” bubble. It also substituted the question of the first two referendums with a candidate list, implying that a vote for the NSDAP ticket was a vote for remilitarizing the Rhineland. The 1936 ballot was a strong break with the Wilsonian principles to which the 1933 and 1934 ballots paid lip service. By contrast, the 1938 ballot was somewhere between the 1933 and 1936 ballots. Although it allowed citizens to vote “No,” it visually influenced them to vote “Yes” and conflated the Reichstag election with the referendum. The 1938 ballot, therefore, was a more nuanced and refined version of the anti-democratic ballot that the Third Reich designed in 1936. While maintaining the candidate-ticket-as-referendum system and clear nudging toward “Yes,” it reintroduced the binary voting options that allowed Hitler to claim that the results represented the wishes of the German and Austrian people. In other words, he could limit the role of the people while simultaneously claiming to have their support.

More so than in the propaganda of the three previous referendums, the propaganda of the 1938 referendum alluded to the immediate postwar plebiscites. The best example of these

references comes from a propaganda post entitled “Der Führer kämpft für Deutschland!” (The Führer fights for Germany!). It began with this appeal: “Jahrhundertealt ist der Traum des deutschen Menschen. Ein Volk—ein Reich! Ungezählte Blutzugeen gaben ihr Leben für die Erfüllung dieser heißen Sehnsucht.” (Centuries old is the dream of the German people. One people—one empire! Countless martyrs gave their lives for the fulfillment of this hot longing).<sup>204</sup> After this Third Reich-approved narrative of German history, the poster lists key dates in the prior two-and-a-half decades when Austria almost unified with Germany or exercised its right to self-determination. The poster reports that in 1919, for example, the Austrian National Assembly voted to unify with Germany, an event this paper discussed in Chapter I (Interestingly, this poster is wrong. The provisional Austrian government voted for the *Anschluss* on 12 November 1918, not in 1919). Conversely, it also reports that in 1919, the Treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain, the treaty that the Allies concluded with Austria, tried to break apart Germany. Although this was true, as Article 80 of the Treaty of Versailles had forbidden the two German states from unifying, the poster deliberately simplified the geopolitical reality. By juxtaposing these two statements and implying that the victorious powers violated Austria’s right to self-determination, the poster deceitfully ignored the reality that the Allies would never allow their two greatest opponents to join into a single state, regardless of Austrians’ desires.

This ridicule of the postwar settlements and the Wilsonian international order characterized much of the Third Reich’s propaganda in the 1930s; however, this poster is unique because of the events it addressed in the rest of its list. It noted that in 1920, “Die Deutschen in Kärnten bekennen sich in Abstimmungskämpfen für den Anschluss an das Reich” (The Germans in Carinthia profess their support for the *Anschluss* with Germany in the voting struggle).<sup>205</sup> The

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<sup>204</sup> “Der Führer kämpft für Deutschland!,” poster, 1938, NS 26/2077, fol. 1, Österreich—Flugschriften, Bundesarchiv, Lichterfelde.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

poster was alluding to the 1920 plebiscite in Carinthia (also known as the Klagenfurt Basin). Like Germany, Austria was subjected to postwar plebiscites. In 1920, the League of Nations administered a plebiscite in Carinthia, which settled the border between Austria and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia). The majority Slovene-speaking population voted to remain in Austria—one can draw parallels between this plebiscite and the one in Allenstein, during which many Protestant Poles voted to remain in Germany. Similarly, in 1920, the League also hosted a plebiscite in Sopron, a small region on the Austrian-Hungarian border. Hungary won the majority of the votes and the territory.<sup>206</sup> This poster contains the most direct reference to the postwar plebiscites that this paper has discovered. The most interesting part of this allusion is its labeling of the postwar plebiscites as “Abstimmungskämpfe” (voting struggles), thereby characterizing the votes not as democratic exercises but as fights that threatened to divide Germany. Interestingly, the poster also extrapolated the meaning of the plebiscite beyond its reasonable limit. It concluded that because fifty-nine percent of Carinthians, most of whom spoke Slovenian, voted to remain in Austria, the plebiscite was an overwhelming show of support for the *Anschluss*. The rhetoric of this poster shows that the Third Reich saw the postwar plebiscites as one prong of the victorious powers’ multi-faceted attempt to dismantle “Germandom.”

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<sup>206</sup> Wambaugh, *Plebiscites since*, 1:163 & 271.



Figure 9: "Der Führer kämpft für Deutschland!," poster, 1938, NS 26/2077, fol. 1, Österreich—Flugschriften, Bundesarchiv, Lichterfelde.

After it addressed the Carinthian plebiscite, the poster noted that in 1921, the citizens of Tyrol and Salzburg voted overwhelmingly in favor of unifying with Germany. It was alluding directly to the unofficial plebiscites that some Austrian states administered following the peace settlement. Adding these somewhat obscure votes to the discussion of an official plebiscite was an important rhetorical choice. Although the relevance of these votes was clear—they directly addressed the *Anschluss* issue—their importance was not. Unlike the League of Nations

plebiscites, the votes in Tyrol and Salzburg were relatively small-scale votes that sparked no changes in sovereignty. By presenting these Austrian votes alongside the Carinthian plebiscite, the Third Reich subtly pushed back on the victorious powers' postwar plebiscite program. Even though the plebiscites were billed as purely democratic tools, the victorious powers largely monopolized their use, often applying them to advance their own interests, as Chapter I of this paper explained. When the Diets of Salzburg and Tyrol hosted their own plebiscites, they were defying the theoretically Wilsonian yet practically flawed world system set up by the Allies. It made sense, therefore, that the Third Reich, the most anti-establishment state in Europe, would champion these votes. The final text of the poster read, "Darum tue deine selbstverständliche Pflicht, bekenne dich zum Führer und seinem Werk, zu Deutschland, und Stimme am 10. April mit Ja!" (So do your natural duty, confess to the Führer and his work, to Germany, and vote "Yes" on 10 April). By the logic of this poster, the 1938 referendum was the natural continuation of the local Austrian plebiscites of 1920.

Like the "Der Führer kämpft für Deutschland!" poster, another poster from 1938, entitled "Ein Volk—ein Reich—ein Führer!," touched on the history of referendums that had affected the Third Reich.<sup>207</sup> It embraced a similar style, as it too listed a series of years with a short sentence or two explaining their significance. Unlike the first poster, which addressed plebiscites from before the NSDAP's 1933 seizure of power, this poster addressed only those referendums officially sanctioned by Hitler. It began with 1933, noting how under Hitler's leadership, "Deutschland verläßt den Völkerbund" (Germany leaves the League of Nations), which was the first of its referendums and a huge success for the regime. The poster then noted that in 1935, "Die Saar kehrt heim" (The Saar returns home). This wording echoed the first poster, which

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<sup>207</sup> Gruppe 7 des Nationalsozialistisches Fliegerkorps, "Ein Volk—Ein Reich—Ein Führer!," poster, 1938, NS 26/2077, fol. 1, Österreich—Flugschriften, Bundesarchiv, Lichterfelde.

read, “Österreich ist heimkehrt ins Reich” (Austria has returned home to the Reich). And although the League of Nations administered the Saar plebiscite, the Third Reich organized a massive propaganda campaign and enjoyed a boost in international prestige when Saarlanders overwhelmingly voted to join Germany. After the Saar, the poster noted that in 1936, “Das Rhineland wird frei” (The Rhineland becomes free). Again, one can attribute this accomplishment to a referendum. After noting the improvements to Germany’s economy under Hitler, the poster concludes with this appeal: “Und das alles schuf der Führer. Dank ihm am 10. April mit deinem ‘Ja’” (And the Führer created all of that. Thank him on 10 April with your “Yes”). Important to remember here is how Hitler and other top members of the NSDAP thought about referendums. Rather than actual decision-making instruments, referendums were supposed to be tools of acclamation. They let the people approve or disapprove of government actions as a *fait accompli*. This understanding partly explains why the poster credits Hitler for these triumphs instead of the German people who voted for them in the referendums. Also interesting is how this poster omitted the 1934 referendum, the vote on combining the positions of chancellor and president. It left this vote off probably because it was not particularly relevant to Germany’s foreign policy and Hitler was ashamed of it—this lack of foreign policy relevance was also largely why the referendum failed.





Figure 10: Gruppe 7 des Nationalsozialistisches Fliegerkorps, "Ein Volk—Ein Reich—Ein Führer!," poster, 1938, NS 26/2077, fol. 1, Österreich—Flugschriften, Bundesarchiv, Lichterfelde.

Through its framing of the Third Reich's referendums, this poster tied them into a cohesive nationalist narrative. By listing the referendums in chronological order and concluding them with a call to vote for Hitler in the 1938 referendum, it implied that the *Anschluss* vote was the natural climax of a plan that Hitler had worked toward ever since he became chancellor. If one thinks about the Third Reich's 1933, 1936, and 1938 referendums, then this framing actually makes sense, as each defied the postwar international order in increasingly drastic ways. First, Hitler left the League of Nations, a nonviolent yet clear step toward rising hostilities. Then, he

remilitarized the Rhineland. Although this move was also nonviolent, it increased the prospect of war much more drastically than his decision to leave the League. Finally, in 1938, he invaded another sovereign nation without provocation, proving that his expansionist goals were far more ambitious than simply restoring the pre-1914 status quo. The poster also added in the 1935 Saar plebiscite as evidence that the Germans who were not under the thumb of the regime still wanted to join Germany. By ordering the Third Reich's referendums in a chronological list, this poster adds an important new perspective to the body of scholarly research on these votes.

In none of the works considered by this paper has any scholar argued that the Third Reich's referendums formed a cohesive propaganda program. In *Voting for Hitler and Stalin*, for example, Jessen and Richter argued that because Hitler and other top NSDAP saw referendums as far less effective propaganda tools than festivals, by 1936, they used referendums less for propaganda and more to force German citizens to endlessly demonstrate their fealty to the regime.<sup>208</sup> Although it appears true that the NSDAP saw festivals as more effective than referendums, this paper argues that referendums actually served an important propagandistic purpose: they gave the Third Reich benchmarks with which to show their progress in destroying the Versailles order. The poster "Ein Volk—ein Reich—ein Führer!" showed that a part of the Third Reich's propaganda efforts in 1938 included portraying the *Anschluss* referendum as the culmination of a series of votes that had steadily and increasingly dismantled the Treaty of Versailles using its own weapon against it. The Third Reich framed its referendums not as isolated, one-off phenomena but as interconnected events that built on one another. In 1938, this narrative amplified the purpose of the *Anschluss* referendum: rather than an arbitrary vote to justify an invasion, the vote became the climax of years of preparation and an even deeper history of fighting for *Großdeutschland*.

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<sup>208</sup> Jessen and Richter, *Voting for Hitler*, 247.

An important question is why did the Third Reich rarely allude directly to the postwar plebiscites in their propaganda. From analyzing the propaganda, procedures, and rhetorical framing of each referendum, this paper has shown that Hitler and his subordinates thought about and responded to the postwar plebiscites, yet they almost never referred to them outright. Even though the Third Reich clearly drew inspiration from the postwar plebiscites and even though the plebiscites, especially the one in Upper Silesia, left a lasting mark on German political consciousness, this paper found only one poster (“Ein Volk—ein Reich—ein Führer!”) that mentioned an international postwar plebiscite (the Carinthian plebiscite) by name—and this vote affected Austria, not Germany. Although more research is needed, the most likely answer is that the Third Reich, especially in 1938, was trying to form a counter-canon to the immediate postwar plebiscites. For many Germans, the postwar plebiscites epitomized the hypocrisy of the victorious powers and represented the new international order that had embarrassed their proud nation. Rather than recognizing—and implicitly legitimizing—the postwar plebiscites, the Third Reich emphasized other votes. In the poster “Der Führer kämpft für Deutschland!,” the NSDAP’s propaganda highlighted the votes in Salzburg and Tyrol as key votes in 1920 when really they were localized and produced no lasting impact. At the same time, it ignored the Sopron plebiscite that gave Hungary a chunk of Austrian territory. In the Third Reich’s 1938 propaganda, one can detect a systematic effort to promote much less influential votes that fit the NSDAP’s narrative over postwar plebiscites that embarrassed Germany. Together, these regime-approved plebiscites created a propagandistic counter-canon to the League of Nations’s postwar plebiscites.

## **Conclusion**

When administering their referendums, the leaders of the Third Reich thought about and responded to the immediate postwar plebiscites. First, the theory behind and procedures of the Third Reich's referendums show that the postwar plebiscites were an important influence. In 1933, as he prepared for his regime's first vote, Hitler publicly exclaimed how much he valued free and fair elections and the will of the German people. Through this proclamation, he was appealing to the Wilsonian thought that dominated the international system following the First World War. For the international community to accept him as Germany's rightful ruler, he needed to show that he enjoyed the support of his people. Hitler, therefore, claimed to support democracy even though his referendums were far from free. One can see his superficial adherence to democratic standards in the ballots of the 1933 referendum. Like the ballots in Schleswig that set the model for future votes, these ballots had two equally sized circles for "Yes" and "No." The 1933 referendum also reflected some of the Big Four's discussions in Paris. Just as the Big Four used plebiscites to confirm predetermined decisions, the 1933 ballot asked German citizens to approve an earlier government decision. In 1934, when the international press stopped giving him free publicity and his second referendum was a disappointment, Hitler shifted away from his gesturing to Wilsonianism. Because he could no longer convince the world that Germany was a democracy, he prioritized earning high approval ratings on his future referendums. The ballots of the 1936 referendum, for example, had no question and presented voters only with a list of regime-approved candidates. If you supported the referendum, the logic went, then you should vote for these candidates. Voters also had only an option for "Yes." These ballots were a sharp departure from the model that Schleswig had set. The 1938 ballots had a similar setup. They presented a candidate list alongside a leading question and a large "Yes"

circle and a small “No” circle. During its first referendums, the Third Reich tried to legitimize itself by tapping into the memory of the Wilsonian order and postwar plebiscites. When this strategy failed, it switched to a more authoritarian style that prioritized results over international legitimacy. This trend shows that the Third Reich thought about and tried to manipulate the memory of the postwar plebiscites.

Second, the propaganda surrounding the Third Reich’s referendums emphasized themes that originated during the postwar plebiscites. During the 1933 referendum, the regime’s propaganda implored the German people to resurrect Germandom and rebuild their strong nation by voting “Yes.” As the records of the Reich Association of German Housewives show, it set up this renewed German identity in opposition to Poland. The Poles, who had received, in the minds of many Germans, undue favor from the new international system, were entirely different from the Germans who received only the Allies’ ire. The plebiscite in Upper Silesia, with its uprising, French bias, and messy final border, was a key event in showing the difference between Polish and German treatment after the war. Similar to the propaganda in 1933, the propaganda in 1936 played on prejudices that developed during the postwar plebiscites. Defending his decision to remilitarize the Rhineland, Hitler stated that he was only exercising self-determination over Germany’s sovereign territory. This appeal was a direct return to the theories that undergirded the postwar plebiscites. Then, in 1938, one saw the Third Reich draw clear connections between their referendums. In the poster “Ein Volk—ein Reich—ein Führer!,” the Third Reich explained that the 1938 referendum was the climax of Hitler’s gradual dismantling of the Treaty of Versailles and the international system it established. The poster shows that the referendums of 1933 and 1936 were preliminary steps to the 1938 vote. Hitler started by leaving the League of Nations, then he remilitarized the Rhineland, and, finally, he annexed Austria. Rather than

independent, one-off events, the Third Reich's referendums constituted a cohesive propagandistic whole. Hitler was using a series of plebiscites to dismantle the system that had forced plebiscites on his nation in the 1920s.

Third, the Third Reich, in rare instances, directly alluded to the postwar plebiscites. The best example of such a reference is the 1938 poster titled "Der Führer kämpft für Deutschland!" It noted the 1921 plebiscite in Carinthia as an important instance of self-determination for Austrians. Even though most of the voters in Carinthia were Slovenian, the Third Reich considered the plebiscite a precedent for the 1938 referendum. Along with this plebiscite, it also presented a few other votes from the 1920s, namely those in Salzburg and Tyrol and that in the Austrian Parliament affirming its nation's desire to unify with the Weimar Republic. In this poster, one can sense that the Third Reich was trying to create a counter-canon to the postwar plebiscites. Rather than acknowledging the plebiscite that had embarrassed Germany, the Third Reich emphasized regime-approved votes that showed Germans' resolve and perseverance. Although direct allusions were rare, they are the most conclusive evidence that the Third Reich thought about and responded to the postwar plebiscites through its referendums.

After exploring the links between the postwar plebiscites and the Third Reich's referendums, one can understand why Hitler called for Austrians in 1938 "to shape their future and thus their own destiny through a real referendum." Through this "real" referendum, they would right the wrongs that Hitler and many Germans believed the Treaty of Versailles and postwar plebiscites had inflicted on their people. They would finally invoke the self-determination that the Allies had promised them many years earlier. By comparing the postwar plebiscites and Third Reich's referendums, one can see how far European democracy had fallen by the 1930s. What started as a tool of direct democracy and the Wilsonian system

became a tool of National Socialism and centrifugal forces threatening to destroy the international order. Historians should advance the work of this paper by continuing to study the links between the postwar plebiscites and the Third Reich's referendums. There is so much more to learn.

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