

Einstein and Freud on *Why War?*

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ABSTRACT. The paper sketches the context in which Einstein and Freud’s joint publication *Why War?* appeared under the auspices of the League of Nations in 1933. Instead of the authors’ holding a lack of rationality and the human proclivity for aggression responsible, the paper emphasizes the increasingly precarious relation between the observable historical situation of the late Weimar Republic (its *Wahrnehmungswelt*) and its imagined counterpart (*Vorstellungswelt*). A summary analysis of Einstein’s and Freud’s arguments is followed by an overview of the broadly accepted historical situation of the Weimar Republic from 1929 to 1933. By contrast, the Weimar Republic is then viewed in terms of the dominant sentiments of the day, against which Einstein’s and Freud’s explanatory strategy looks unsatisfactory. Foregrounding the human capacity of *imaginability*, the Conclusion replaces their emphasis on reason and instinct by the claim that under certain circumstances the *Wahrnehmungswelt* itself becomes irrelevant, instead becoming subservient to the *imagined* world. When the discrepancy between an actual historical situation and the imagined community becomes unbridgeable, anything, including the option of war, becomes preferable to the status quo.

Keywords: reason; *thanatos*; Weimar Republic; *Wahrnehmungswelt*; *Vorstellungswelt*; imaginability

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1. Introduction

The question “Why War?” is raised and answered in a certain way by Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud in their correspondence of 1932. Their letters, published under the original German title *Warum Krieg?* on 22 March 1933 and immediately translated into French as “Pourquoi la Guerre?” by Blaise Briod and English by Stuart Gilbert, emerged out of a specific historical, political and cultural context. (Einstein and Freud, 1972: 11–27 [1933]) Without this context, the ideas put forward

and the language employed by its authors would lack their decisive, historical motivation. To get a feel of the urgency of their exchange, we need to take into consideration the post-World War I European situation, the role of the League of Nations, and the rapidly worsening social, cultural and political climate of the Weimar Republic. Much the same demand for attention to historical specifics would be justified if we were to raise the question “Why War?” in the context of Japan’s invasion of China in 1931 or such contemporary phenomena as ISIS or “home-grown terrorism.” In looking at the Weimar Republic between 1928 and 1933, it is not however the empirical political and social data of the period that I believe are by themselves able to yield satisfactory answers to the topic question, nor do I think that either Einstein’s emphasis on a pervasive lack of rationality or Freud’s focus on *thanatos* have the explanatory force we tend to grant them. The utopic solution of nation states handing over sovereignty to a supranational body that would bar all war is mooted by both but declared a non-achievable goal as long as the conception of the nation state remains dominant. Another obstacle is seen to be a deep, innate human, pugnacious proclivity. As Freud argues, even the law imposing peace within national communities is ultimately no more than a form of violence by other means. That the return to the Einstein–Freud correspondence is by no means mere academic shadow boxing is well demonstrated by the current revival of tensions between those who persist on the sanctity of national borders and the controlled influx of immigrants and those who support the lowering of entry requirements for mass migration on moral grounds. China’s extension of its sovereignty across the South China Sea and sinocization of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the Republican revival in the USA, the Brexiting British Isles, and the global rise of conservative forces in a number of other countries are testimony to the resurgence of national feelings, while Continental Europe is struggling to negotiate a political path that would satisfy a progressive majority without endangering the cohesion of the European Union.

It is in this contemporary context, that I want to revisit the Einstein–Freud correspondence from a very different angle, the relation between historical *actuality* and its *imagined* alternative. The concept that I regard as operative in this relation I call *imaginability* (*Vorstellbarkeit*), (Wittgenstein, 2019: §395) redefined as “the human faculty of varying perception under social control,” (Ruthrof, 2013; 2016) a notion to which I will return towards the end of the paper. With regard to *Why War?* I want to reconstruct the peculiar tension that existed at the time between the German nation’s *Wahrnehmungswelt* and its *Vorstellungswelt*, the former referring to the perceptual world, a signifier whose signified has a specifically relevant etymology. It consists of “true” and “taking,” such that perception in German literally means “truth-taking,” that is, reliable perceptual grasp in the broad sense. A difficulty of translation arises here in that the term “perception” in English covers both the concept of observation and *Vorstellung*, that is, what is being experienced by the senses and what is being imagined, as in “the perception is that he is unreliable.” In this latter sense, the *Vorstellungswelt* is the world of our emotion-

driven mental projections, which we could define as our “imaginary variations of perception.” This imagined world can be personal and subjective or collective and intersubjective, as in Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community.” (Anderson 1991) In either case, the concept covers a broad range of mental modifications from minor variations of observations to all-encompassing *Weltanschauungen*. In Anderson, the emphasis is on how nationalism flourishes on an imagined conception of the community “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (Anderson 1991: 6) Which suggests that our intersubjective *Vorstellungswelt* typically overrides our *Wahrnehmungswelt*.

To the extent that the *Vorstellungswelt* diverges from the *Wahrnehmungswelt* in any actual historical situation, one could describe the former as a form of *false consciousness*, but certainly not as any version of *class consciousness*. (Lukács, 2000) Materialist conceptions that tie consciousness to class and means of production have little to say about historical moments marked by a sharp discrepancy between the *Wahrnehmungswelt* and *Vorstellungswelt* of a society. Apart from a small minority of dissenting voices, the military, workers, the intelligentsia, lumpenproletariat and bourgeoisie all tended to be swept up in the mass fantasy of a radical renewal of the community in the dying days of the Weimar Republic. Nor does an Althusserian conception of ideology as a screen that blinds us to historical actuality or Roland Barthes’ ideology as an opaque umbrella beneath which myths narrativize second-order signification capture the radical divergence of the *Vorstellungswelt* from the *Wahrnehmungswelt* that we observe in years before the ascent of German fascism. (Althusser, 1970; Barthes, 1977)

In the case of the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), I argue that the loss of the community’s perceptual grounding took an extreme form and was at the heart of why its demise made war an inevitable consequence. Against this background I want to analyse the way Einstein and Freud approach their topic. I look at their premises, arguments, and tentative solutions to the human propensity to engage in conflict. I then sum up the broadly accepted historical picture of the Weimar Republic between 1928 and 1933 in contrast with a sketch of the prevailing national sentiments. I do so in order to show that neither Einstein’s appeal to rationality, nor Freud’s explanatory path via *thanatos* are able to come to grips with the complexities that made the German population so vulnerable to the lure of National Socialism and so unable to resist engagement in yet another calamitous war, one that was to prove not only militarily disastrous but also one that was to cause irreparable moral damage to Germany as a nation. I propose that a more promising answer is to be sought in the unique tension between the prevailing *Vorstellungswelt* in Germany and the documented *Wahrnehmungswelt* as constructed in the relevant literature. As such, the dominant *Vorstellungswelt* of the German population, and especially its intellectual elite, was an imagined world that stood in sharp contrast to the political realities and especially the way Germany was viewed from the outside. The two worlds, one actual, the other imagined, I will argue, were at variance to such a

degree in the Germany of the later Weimar Republic that the nation's self-interpretation took on a character of catastrophe thinking.

2. Einstein and Freud: Premises and Arguments

Einstein

Einstein opens his arguments on the human propensity to wage war with the question "Is there a way of liberating humans from the disaster of war?" (Kaes et al., 1994) His letter to Freud develops a line of thinking which is only to be expected from a physicist in its reliance on the benefits of a certain kind of reasoning. His first premise is that given technological advance, it is disturbing that humankind has failed to behave according to the recognition that this very advance poses an existential threat to humankind. Einstein turns to Freud because his own professional mental habits appear to him ill equipped to delve into the depths of human "psychoses of hate and destructiveness" that must be at work in the yearning for conflict. Einstein also expresses the hope that Freud will be able to indicate the sort of educational measures that need to be embraced if we are to become less war-like creatures. The letter then distinguishes the "simple" problem of establishing an international order with the capacity to outlaw war, from the more difficult question of how it is possible that the demagoguery of a few is able to inflame hatred of others to the point of willing self-sacrifice. Einstein's answer to the first problem is that the path to international security would require the unconditional surrender of a certain portion of national sovereignty to an overarching international, peace-keeping body. In answer to the second source of war, the letter first draws a distinction between the masses of a society and a ruling minority in charge of education, the press, and also the religious institutions which tend to turn the mob into manipulable tools. Einstein's provisional answer is that humans must have a deep desire "to hate and to annihilate," an emphasis that is reinforced in Freud's reply and one that shows that both men "were haunted still by the memory" of the Great War and "the capacity for civilized man to tear away the thin shroud that separated him from the primitive reality of war." (Overy, 2016: xiii) By way of conclusion, Einstein expresses the hope that Freud would be able to suggest a way of guiding the evolution of the human psyche to make it resistant to the psychoses of hatred and extinction, ending on the anticipation of the positive contribution Freud's analysis will be able to make to global pacifism.

This is very much in tune with Einstein's unwavering international orientation: his firm desire to foster "cooperation and mutual trust" amongst nations; (Rowe and Schulman, 2013: 202; 211) his belief expressed already in 1924 in the necessity of a United States of Europe, as later proposed by Briand; his support of "the cause of internationalism" (Letter to Painlevé, 9 April 1930) and of "international solidarity" (Letter to Stresemann, 11 July 1929); his conviction that "the welfare of humanity must take precedence over loyalty to one's own country;" (Letter to Jacques Hadamard, 24 September 1929) and his immunity "from national bias."

(Einstein's letter to Sigmund Freud of 30 July 1932) Like most intellectuals of the time, Einstein drew a sharp dividing line between the intelligentsia of society and the "masses." Einstein's trust in reason led him to overestimate the power of "prominent personalities, who enjoy the respect of the man in the street" and so "constitute an effective weapon against the war spirit." (Letter to Jacques Hadamard, 24 Sept, 1929) He charges the intelligentsia with an obligation to lead by rational example, while the masses, naturally lacking in well-founded judgment, are to be led by the few. Tragically, it was precisely the educated elite that so despised the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic that they ran parliamentary democracy to ruin in its final years.

Einstein's invitation to Freud needs to be seen in the context not just of his role as a prominent public German intellectual but also against the background of his association with the League of Nations and the General Disarmament Conference in Geneva of February 1932. The invitation was "his last action as an Associate of the League of Nations," after having already submitted his resignation. In his broader international role, he had approached Chancellor Heinrich Brüning in 1931, urging "renewed cooperation with France in the wake of Japan's invasion of Manchuria" in September of that year. (Rowe and Schulman, 2013: 191) For Einstein, the abolition of war was not an unreachable chimera, but a realistic, political goal. This is why he vehemently objects to the metaphor of war as a game. "One cannot wage war by rules as one would playing games. Our fight must be directed against war itself." (Nathan and Norden, 1960: 90) Much in the same vein, Einstein insisted that "war cannot be humanized. It can only be abolished." (Rowe and Schulman, 2013: 224) As to his association with Freud, the relationship was not entirely smooth. Einstein had not supported Freud's nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1928, and in 1931 he still did "not believe in him" even though he appreciated his "concise style and his original, although rather extravagant mind." (Diary entry, 6 December 1931) It is only in 1932, in his invitation letter of 30 July, that indicates a change of mind. Then, having received Freud's contribution to *Warum Krieg?* Einstein expressed his approval in a letter of December 3, 1932: "You have delighted the League of Nations and me with a truly classical reply." (Ernst Freud et al., 1978: 333) Finally, writing to Freud again in 1936, Einstein makes Freud a generous compliment: "It is always a blessing when a great and beautiful conception is proven to be in harmony with reality." (Rowe and Schulman, 2013: 220) This resonates well with Einstein's grand vision of humankind living in peace on the basis of an all-embracing rationality conducive to an ultimate, global pacifism.

Such a super-rationality appears ill equipped to address the specifics of Einstein's questions, nor is it able to cope with the complexities of actual historical situations. By taking the opposite route via our biologically rooted drives, Freud offers another generalised solution which, it would seem, suffers from a similar analytical weakness. As David Riesman has remarked, "men such as Einstein and Freud, who suffer not merely an intellectual and emotional repulsion towards war, but 'a constitutional intolerance,' indulge in a gratifying fantasy which spares them the

pain of reality when they assure themselves that men and nations live steadily on a plane of morality.” (Kerr et al., 2015: 100) And yet it is this very plane that is questioned by Freud. As Giorgio Agamben echoes Freud’s position, “our very sense of guilt and morality are nothing if not inwardly directed aggression.” (Agamben, 1998: 211)

Freud

The Einstein–Freud correspondence of 1932 was not the first time Freud contemplated an investigation of war. Apart from his published writings on conflict in the wake of World War I, Freud had been invited in 1921 by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) “to write a monograph on ‘The psychoanalytic problem of war.’” Yet, shortly after having agreed to proceed, Freud “asked to be released from the contract.” (Sonnenberg, 2005; Paret, 2005; Rose, 1993; Levine, 2017) So, Freud’s acceptance of Einstein’s invitation looks like a second attempt at tackling the problem, which goes some way towards elucidating the apologetic manner of his reply to Einstein. Freud starts in a self-deprecating mode, conceding that he can do no more than elaborate Einstein’s insights. Yet his reply goes well beyond any such modest goal by placing the problem of war in a much broader frame of inquiry. Not only does Freud affirm Einstein’s views, but he also offers “a deeper analysis of the aggressive instincts which, along with erotic impulses, guide human behaviour.” (Rowe and Schulman, 2013: 192) Early in his rejoinder, Freud makes a remark in passing that seems to me at the heart of the sentiments that prevailed in the German speaking world at the time, namely that it is the practical task of politicians to tackle questions such as *Why War?* rather than that of ordinary citizens, who are incompetent in such matters. With this proviso, Freud then warms to the task of providing a psychological explication, taking up each of Einstein’s suggestions as he goes along. Freud links power, sharpened to the notion of violence, with legality, the latter being declared a cultural refinement of the former. Thus, individual violence is held in check by the community in which superior individual strength is replaced by the strength of a group. And so, “the law came to be represented by the power of those who were unified.” (Medoff, 2009: 437) With reference to Foucault, Agamben and Derrida, Anthony Sampson views political power more radically as “the perpetual reproduction of this rapport of force in a silent war waged through institutions, economic inequalities, in language, and even in the bodies of people,” concluding that “all political struggle in times of civil peace must be conceived as continuations of war.” (Sampson 2005: 89) As to relations amongst nations, war could be seen as resulting in large associations of communities under the law of one powerful conquering nation, as under the *pax romana* in Greco-Roman antiquity. Freud rejects this option since apart from involving violence it lacks the promise of permanence. What is required instead is a universally accepted higher-level institution equipped with the necessary power to enforce its rules. Alas, says Freud, the League of Nations cannot fulfil this condition since its member nations are unwilling to hand over their individual

sovereign power. This shortcoming leads Freud to isolate two requirements for a properly functioning superior authority: legal force and emotional identification.

In turning to Einstein's question of what makes humans so easily persuaded to embrace war, Freud gives a concise synopsis of his theory of our two basic, essential, and inseparable biological drives, *eros* and *thanatos*, one propelling us to produce, maintain and unite, the other being responsible for aggression and destruction. Accordingly, in all our actions, we can discover a peculiar mixture of both erotic and destructive tendencies. Although Freud concedes that such a narrative could rightly be regarded as a kind of mythology and suggests that one might consider all sciences in this light, he commits himself firmly to the position that it is impossible to rid humans of their aggressive instincts. This naturalistic pessimism on war was prefigured in Freud's "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" of 1915, where he declared that "we spring from an endless series of generations of murderers, who had the lust for killing in their blood." (Freud, 1981: 275–300; Nitzschke 1991; 1996; Solms, 2016) On this account, war is inevitable, a sentiment shared, for example, by Levinas, who views war as a "permanent possibility." (Levinas, 1979: 21) Freud also receives support in the writings of Melanie Klein (1975), Karl Menninger (1942), Anthony Sampson (2005), Robert Schuett (2007), and Messina and Anderson (2013). A less pessimistic uptake of the explication via our drives can be found in Antonio Damasio's *The Strange Order of Things: Life, Feeling, and the Making of Cultures* where an escape from *thanatos* is offered via the evolution of feelings, whose "job was never finished." (Damasio, 2018: 232f.) An outright rejection of Freud's pessimistic realism is proposed by Henri Parens in *War Is Not Inevitable: On the Psychology of War and Aggression*, where education, in combination with supranational institutions, are invoked as a way of diminishing our dependence on our destructive instincts. (Parens, 2014) Freud himself has explored a number of ways by which *thanatos* might be balanced. One would be a turn to *eros*, in the sense of loving one's neighbour as oneself, a rule which however he dismisses as too difficult to follow consistently. Another option is identification by emotional bonding, which Freud names as one of the essential building blocks of existing human communities. A third suggestion is the avoidance of misuse of authority, such as state violence and the undermining of critical thinking by the Churches. Lastly, Freud declares that the ideal human community would be one in which our biological drives are controlled by the dictatorship of reason, a solution though that is likewise abandoned as merely utopian. So much then for the usefulness of the unworldly theoretician, Freud concludes his reply.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Freud's exploration to the topic is the final section of his letter in which he addresses a question not raised by Einstein, the question of why a large number of people is so strongly opposed to war, in spite of the fact that it appears to be natural, biologically founded, and hardly avoidable. Again, Freud tries out a couple of possible answers: that war destroys promising human life; degrades us; forces us to murder; annihilates precious material values; has lost its promise of the realization of heroic ideals; and that any

future war may very well result in the destruction of both combatants. Yet he sees the main reason why we rebel against the idea of war in that those who do simply cannot help themselves. They are pacifists by nature, which then makes it easy to justify their disposition by way of arguments. The process that makes them so, Freud calls *Kulturentwicklung*, cultural evolution, a term he prefers to the alternative signifier “civilisation.” Accordingly, humans gradually undergo both physical and psychological transformations, such that cultural evolution affects especially the directionality of our drives and with it our ethical and aesthetic conceptions. At this point, Freud isolates two psychological features of culture: the increasing domination of our drives by the intellect, on the one hand, and, on the other, the concomitant inward turn of our aggressive tendencies. As a consequence of cultural evolution our psychic disposition of advanced thinkers, then, is fundamentally opposed to war, an opposition that has become an idiosyncratic, “constitutional intolerance.” Freud ends his investigation with the hope that the combination of this emerging pacifist, cultural disposition and the justified dread of the effects of a future war will herald the end of military conflicts. In this respect certainly, Freud was soon to be proven tragically wrong. His assumption that “everything that fosters cultural evolution will also work against war” failed to take into account that other side of the cultural coin, namely that culture also kills. Perhaps the notion of civilization would have been preferable after all. But then, Freud had famously rejected the distinction between the two: “I scorn to distinguish between culture and civilization.” (Freud, 1981: 6; cf. also Freud, 1985) However, this remark ought to be read cautiously since Freud’s German terms *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* are conceptually not entirely congruent with their English equivalents.

Politically, Freud and Einstein only appear to share roughly the same pacifist and international convictions towards the end of the Weimar Republic. Freud’s political sense was by far not as well developed as Einstein’s. During World War I, Freud still held on to the naïve nationalist hope that the “arrogant” British might be defeated after all. (Gay, 1988: 353–357) On April 26, 1933, Sigmund Freud sent a copy of his correspondence with Albert Einstein to Il Duce with the dedication “Benito Mussolini with the devoted greeting of an old man, who recognizes the cultural hero in the ruler.” (Weiss, 1973: 34f.; Sokolowsky, 2016) We should, however, not read too much into this in terms of political leanings. After all, Freud’s opposition to and fear of fascism in all its forms is well documented. (Zaretsky, 2015) As the Italian psychoanalyst Edoardo Weiss recalls, the gift was a favour asked for by a friend of *Il Duce*, the father of a young patient, a request which Freud found difficult to deny. Given his unequivocal commitment to pacifism in the correspondence, on the one hand, and Mussolini’s declaration of his military expansionist goals since 1915, on the other, the main reason why Freud did not refuse the invitation could be seen in his misguided hope that Mussolini might be able to prevent Hitler from incorporating Austria into the Third Reich. In August 1932 Freud writes to Arnold Zweig that he “had heard that immediately after Einstein’s departure for Leiden you too were forced to leave Berlin because of

threatening letters. So it is not yet as bad as that [here in Vienna].” In 1933 Freud was also still convinced that the League of Nations would protect Austria’s independence and that “France and its allies would never allow” a German invasion. (Gay, 1988: 593) As late as three weeks before the *Anschluss*, a similarly naïve political sentiment comes across in Freud’s remark to his son Ernst on 22 February 1938, “The Catholic Church is very strong and will offer strong resistance.” (Gay, 1988: 617f.; Ernst Freud, 1970) In “Moses, His People and Monotheism” Freud expresses his trust in the Catholic Church as a bulwark against the German relapse into “almost prehistoric barbarism.” (Freud, 1972: 157) That the Catholic Church was then, and still is today, powerful in Austria is not in doubt. What should have been is the assumption that the Vatican was even willing to mount any resistance to the Nazi leadership. It did not do so when on March 12, 1938, the new pro-Hitler Chancellor of Austria, Seyss-Inquart, invited the German army to cross the Austrian border and the *Anschluss* was declared the next day to the jubilant applause of a vast majority of mostly Catholic Austrians welcoming their son Adolf Hitler with open arms. Only when this was followed by a tsunami of anti-democratic and anti-Semitic hatred in Vienna and across other cities and villages did Freud realize his political naivety. Now Catholicism appeared to him to have been an “unsteady reed.” (Freud, 1972: 159) Freud finally left Vienna for England on 4 June, 1938, but only after the Gestapo had entered his flat and taken his daughter Anna away for interrogation.

3. The Weimar Republic 1: Sketching the Historical Situation 1929 to 1933

The final period of the Weimar Republic saw the acceptance of the Dawes-plan as trade-off for French troops ending the occupation of the Ruhr and the acceptance of the Young-plan for the French withdrawal from the Rheinland, as well as the Liquidation agreement between Poland and Germany for the retention of German farms in Poland. In 1929/30 the two den Haag Conferences ended with their final protocol on 20 January 1930. As a result, the growing trend towards national tariff protectionism proved a major hurdle for German exports. The *Reichsbank* demanded 450 million Reichsmark through tax increases and spending cuts, a demand that led to the last parliamentary Weimar Cabinet collapsing on 27 March 1930. The dissolution of the grand coalition followed as a result of the failure of the major parties to agree on a common finance and social policy in the face of huge unemployment. (Evans and Geary, 2015) Because the SPD failed to come to an agreement with the Zentrum party under the leadership of Heinrich Brüning, Brüning was asked by President Hindenburg on 28 March 1930 to form a minority government, supported not by parliament but by the President himself, thus creating the “Hindenburg cabinet.” When on 16 July 1930 Brüning’s austerity measures were rejected by the KPD, the SPD, the Zentrum and the NSDAP, he invoked Article 48 of the Constitution, an emergency measure not designed for such cases, in order to dissolve the Reichstag and schedule new elections for 14 September, in which the NSDAP

increased its seats from 12 to 107, with the Zentrum holding its numbers and a slight reduction for the SPD to 143 seats. (Falter et al., 1986) Ruling by “emergency measures,” rather than parliamentary consensus, meant the transition of the Weimar Republic towards a presidential republic. (Kolb, 2002; Rosenberg, 1961) When the US plunged into its deepest financial crisis, the British pound was devalued by 30%, and international loans dried up for Germany, Austrian and German banks declared insolvency. But when Austria and Germany negotiated a customs agreement, the French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand threatened with a declaration of war. On 5 September 1931, the International Law Court in den Haag, under pressure from France, ruled with 8 to 7 votes against such a Union.

And yet, at the same time, the international climate appeared to be gradually on the mend. In May 1930 the French government submitted a proposal for a European Union which, however, was rejected by both the UK, because of its intricate relations with the Commonwealth, and by Germany because of massive opposition from the radical right and Brüning’s fear that this would spell the end of any hope for a revision of Germany’s eastern borders imposed in the Treaty of Versailles. A further glimpse of hope was that on 20 June 1930, US President Hoover proposed an international moratorium on all debts, with reference to the Young-plan. As had been made clear in the Benuce Report of the end of 1931, the debt payments had been designed on the false assumption that the global economy would strengthen rather than sharply decline. Tragically, however, the Geneva Disarmament Conference of February 1932 and the Lausanne Conference of 11 December of the same year, instead of following upon those positive developments, led to a general agreement on re-armament.

After seven years as President, Hindenburg stood for re-election in 1932 declaring that he wanted to prevent a representative of “one-sided and extreme views” to be elected. On 10 April 1932, Hindenburg was re-elected with 19,4 million votes, compared to Hitler’s 13,4 million and Thälmann’s 3,7 million. This meant that two thirds of the German voters rejected Hitler, in spite of the fact that unemployment had reached a pinnacle of nearly seven million during the winter preceding the presidential election. On the strength of this result, Brüning, on the advice of General Groener, who headed both the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior, declared both the SA and SS prohibited organisations in the entire Reich. When things appeared to be reasonably under control, Hindenburg unexpectedly dismissed Chancellor Brüning on 30 May 1932. It appears that the ageing Hindeburg was no longer able to withstand the mounting opposition to Brüning from many sides, especially the agrarian Junker faction, his right-wing opponents, the French Ambassador Francois-Poncet, as well as murky personal intrigues. (Gebhardt, 1965: 174) Brüning’s successor von Papen, a member of the Zentrum, was leaning towards a rapprochement with the NSDAP by lifting the ban on the SA and appeasing Hitler by holding national elections in July 1932. Although Hitler gained 230 seats in Parliament, he was once more rejected by two thirds of the German population. In addition, Chancellor Franz von Papen had achieved a major break-

through at the Lausanne Conference of June 1932 by reaching agreement on the ending of the unworkable reparation payments. But just when Hitler's attractiveness began to decline, in the elections of 6 November Hitler received a serious rebuff by the German voters, he was granted an unforgivable boost by the centre right parties and the German Churches. On the misguided assumption that he could engage the cooperation of the NSDAP, von Papen repealed the ban of the SA and SS. More tragically, his *Zentrum* Party, in which especially the Catholic Church was strongly represented, by siding with the NSDAP instead with the SPD on 30 January 1933 and again decisively on 23 March 1933, in the end made possible the "Empowerment Act" ("Gesetz zur Behebung der Not von Volk und Reich" [Law to Remove the Distress of the People and the Reich; also referred to in the literature as the "Enabling Act"]), which was passed with 444 out of 538 votes, with the 94 SPD delegates voting against the bill. Likewise noteworthy is that the National Socialists, instead of rewarding the *Zentrum* delegates for their support, pressured the party to dissolve itself on 5 July 1933, a party that had been founded in 1871 as the Catholic Centre Party. Had the Churches remained committed to the Social Democrats rather than supporting the Fascists, Hitler's shaky grip on power could very well have been loosened. After all, the NSDAP had only managed to gain 44% of the seats in the elections of 5 March, 1933. After the decisive vote on the Empowerment Act, Otto Wels, the leader of the SPD, declared that German democracy had now been buried. His words were the last free words uttered in the Weimar parliament. (Aleskerov et al., 2014)

Five crucial factors, then, were responsible for the destruction of the Weimar Republic: the chronic economic and social crisis without any hope for reprieve for the next half century, a hope for which the Lausanne resolution came too late; the diminishing legitimacy of a Constitution that was as unwanted as it was unworkable; the fervent determination of anti-republican elites to destroy the parliamentary institutions; the concomitant polarization of political life; (Peukert, 1991: 266f.) the suspension of the Weimar Constitution from 28 February 1933, and the ringing of the death knell by the *Zentrum* Party when they joined the National Socialists by voting against the Social Democrats and for the Empowerment Act on 23 March 1933. It should not have come as much of a surprise that by the end of 1933 some 30,000 German citizens were imprisoned for alleged political crimes.

4. The Weimar Republic 2: The German *Vorstellungswelt* 1929 to 1933

Against the background of such discernible data broadly accepted in the literature, we can attempt to reconstruct the kind of collective "mentality" that characterized Germany in the period immediately before 1933. Important for political theorization of the period were the writings of Carl Schmitt, who argued that once the state was shaken by class conflict, its constitution was in a continual state of emergency, with its legal substance progressively diluted by emergency laws, and who ever controlled the state of emergency was *de facto* in control of the state. (Schmitt,

1996 [1932]) Schmitt juxtaposes the capacity of the total state to act to the ineffectual pluralism of parties, reducing parliamentary negotiation to the relation of friend and enemy. Leaving aside Schmitt's political theory, his writings fuelled a general emotional radicalisation reflected, for example, in the public response to the occupation of the Ruhr, with Poincaré being referred to as "the villain of the Ruhr." (Heiber, 1993: 170) Likewise, there is a marked discrepancy between the facts of the occupation of the *Rheinland* and its affective, popular reading. The "Entente troops were almost invisible, their cost being subsumed under the reparation account," except if Germans "were determined to take offence at all cost," which they did in speaking of the "black shame on the Rhein." As Heiber notes, "what do rational considerations matter in an issue of such heartfelt concern?" (Heiber, 1993: 155)

While it was the case that the Young Plan signed on 7 June 1929 offered no reprieve on the reparations and Germany had to borrow to pay and then pay interest on the borrowings, a burden to continue until 1988, those harsh conditions could have been renegotiated as the tensions with France and Britain lessened. Instead, the depressingly long-term debt turned into what Feuchtwanger has called a powerful "psychological incubus," (Feuchtwanger, 1995: 209) which very much desensitized the public to the threat of another war. The signatories to the Treaty of Versailles were referred to as "the November criminals," Article 231 on the German responsibility for the war was widely referred to as the "war-guilt lie," and the Young Plan was known as "the yoke of Young's bondage." (Heiber, 1993: 157) When the Reichstag ratified the Young Plan on 12 March 1930 with 270 against 192 votes, a decision backed by the *Reichsrat* the next day, and Hindenburg signed the bill, the right-wing parties howled the President down, demanding that he be stripped of the right to wear the Reichswehr uniform.

Still, while Versailles had produced a wide-spread and powerful sense of injustice and the German public regarded the political events in the Reichstag as mere shadow-boxing motivated by "narrow party egotism," (Feuchtwanger, 1995: 211) harbouring a deep "disgust with the multi-party state," combined with "a yearning for authority," (Heiber, 1993: 160) in 1929 Hitler was still regarded by the majority of Germans of all walks of life as a slightly mad "Goliath of the beer-cellars" and his followers as "hooligans." (Heiber, 1993: 157f.) At the same time, the Weimar Republic of the late twenties and early thirties was characterized by a "series of countercultures, communes and alternative societies," with an entire new generation disillusioned with traditional values. De Jonge has described Germany of the time as a republic with a total "lack of conviction" and "with a hole in its heart," and its democracy as no more than a foggy abstraction revealing "a feebleness born of decency." This is one reason, writes de Jonge, why the Nazis in the end were able to persuade many that the Weimar *Systemzeit* was a "betrayal" of the German people. (de Jonge, 1978: 171; 185–187)

It was no surprise then that so much energy was absorbed by the arts and science rather than by politics. The political chaos stood in sharp contrast with major

achievements in those areas. Physics, chemistry, pharmacy, and medicine were thriving, as were the arts. Bertold Brecht, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Kurt Weill, Martin Heidegger and others were producing highly original works. The paintings, drawings, and etchings of Otto Dix, such as *War Cripples* (1920), or the aquatint *Corpse in Barbed Wire* (1924), and the woodcuts of Käthe Kollwitz, as for instance the *The People*, *The Parents*, *The Volunteers* (all from 1923) are still haunting reminders of the interpretive power of the art of the period. (Willet, 1978) The Bauhaus movement under the leadership of Walter Gropius achieved international reputation and influence. At the same time, society was restlessly exploring new lifestyles. *Nacktkultur* and primitivism were celebrated by a rootless and gullible community, entertained by fraud and criminality never experienced before. Germany was “full of confidence men, gurus, charlatans, astrologers, alchemists and miracle workers,” as well as “occultists and clairvoyants.” (de Jonge, 1978: 177ff.) Satire reached a climax in the writings of Kurt Tucholsky and others, experimentation in the arts was fruitfully fermenting, and cabarets provided volatile political and social critiques.

In this climate of the late twenties, Germany was yearning for some kind of relief from the political and social chaos. Yet, even the deepest emotions of disgust and a desperate longing for a solution were insufficient to let go of democracy until “economic distress and total hopelessness would seize the masses by the throat.” (Heiber, 1993: 161) Although Hitler thrived on slogans such as Spengler’s “the last fight of Western civilization” will be “the fight of blood against money,” (de Jonge, 1978: 185) it was not the slogans that persuaded either the people or the Reichstag. As Heiber observes, Hitler owed his success “exclusively to the economic crisis.” For “we can imagine his success with the masses without many of the factors which contributed to it – but not without *this* one.” (Heiber, 1993: 161)

The Nobel Laureate Werner Heisenberg, who was denounced as a “white Jew” by fascist colleagues, remained in Germany, as did the older laureate Max Planck, while the other physics Nobel Prize winners Einstein and Erwin Schrödinger fled the country just in time. When *Warum Krieg?* was published in early 1933, largely unnoticed, the unemployment figure had reached almost seven million and one third of the population was on the dole. Under these conditions, war was not a primary concern of the suffering population, neither as something to embrace as a resolution, nor as something that held much of a threat. War was, however, firmly on Hitler’s agenda, an agenda tragically taken by the people and the Reichstag as bluster rather than openly declared and committed policy. (Weitz, 2007)

5. The Austerity of the Einstein–Freud Account

Why then are humans so militant when the realisation of their dream world seems impossible? Neither Einstein’s “militant” pacifism, nor Freud’s unconscious seem to me promising paths towards answering this question. Made wiser by historical hindsight, we can see now that the desire for war draws on a broad palette of

specific social dispositions together forming an unbearable collective mental world. Neither Japan's invasion of China in 1931, nor the final years of the Weimar Republic that made Germany's slide into the most disastrous of all its wars inevitable, nor indeed the aggression and suicidal religiosity characteristic of ISIS, are made more transparent by looking for a lack of rationality or the death drive of the species. What is missing are the fundamental features of a community's historical self-interpretation and the perception of events that cumulatively make the present state of affairs unacceptable to the point of destruction and self-sacrifice. So, what is missing in the Einstein–Freud correspondence of 1932? To the extent that the correspondence offers a lowest common denominator approach to historical situations of military conflict it is bound to be unsatisfactorily reductive. At the same time, both Einstein and Freud are committing a kind of *petitio principii* in that their broad proposition “If we could all be reasonable and control our death drive, war would be a thing of the past” fails to address the problem of what makes us unreasonable and unwilling to transcend our biology. Our historical analysis of the later years of the Weimar Republic then functions as a platform on which to assemble some of the specifics needed to fill the ground vacated in their analysis. In criticising the paucity of an analysis based on rationality and its absence in the case of a people's acceptance or even yearning for war, I do not wish to run the kind of argument put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer that the notion of uniformity that emerged from Enlightenment thinking can be regarded as a major source of Fascist Germany. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1986) Nor do I think that the sharpening of their position in Lyotard's slogan of the extermination of the promise of modernity in Auschwitz is convincing. (Lyotard, 1993: 18) There are more likely candidates for the rise of Fascism than the core thinking of the Enlightenment. Such analyses bury too much. They fail to address the broad spectrum of achievements in the wake of the liberation of reason from state and Church authority. More specifically, they fail to account for the opposite of uniformity as argued by Kant in his distinction of seven forms of reasoning that concludes the work of the three *Critiques*, wrapping up the most radical reassessment of rationality and social concerns since the publications of Newton and Locke in the late seventeenth century. Works on non-oppressive tolerance by Locke and Voltaire, the writings demanding freedom of the press and the end of torture and the burning of witches, as well as a long list of other ideas that have since become enshrined in democratic thought do not sit well with the kind of Enlightenment bashing initiated in *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Instead of confusing the Enlightenment with European militarism it would be more sober to redefine modernity as “moments of the acceleration of the splitting of reason,” as it occurred sporadically in Hellenic antiquity, during the height of Arabic philosophical thought between 800 and 1200AD, and most forcefully during the European Enlightenment. (Ruthrof, 2006) To allow for a richer reading of the historical complexities in the dying days of the Weimar Republic, I suggest that an investigation of the relation between sobriety in the perception of

actuality and a yearning for a more promising, imagined community may have greater explanatory force.

The following list then serves as no more than as a summary of some of the features that so disastrously widened the gap between the *Wahrnehmungswelt* and the *Vorstellungswelt* of the German population in the last years of the Weimar Republic. We observe a deep fear of political and social chaos, massive unemployment, (Evans and Geary, 2015; Stachura, 1986) and an unmanageable economic situation; a distrust of democratic institution amongst the military, high finance, and intellectuals; a yearning for authority exasperated by a deeply rooted sense of subservience producing the dutiful *Untertan* (obedient subject) who believed in the divine investiture of government leadership; the emergence of a nationalism born out of Romanticism; distrust of a Bolshevik political program; and a decisive lack of political education at all levels culminating in the absence of Political Science as an independent discipline at the otherwise well-functioning German universities. Critical too was the all-pervasive and festering sense of injustice in response to the Treaty of Versailles. Arguably most crucial however was the calamitous collusion of the German Churches with Hitler, when the *Zentrum* Party legitimated the NSDAP by their increasing opposition to the Social Democrats in parliament, a debacle that is almost as embarrassing to German historians as is the country's handing over leadership to a high school dropout Corporal. How could all this be an appropriate description of *the country of poets, philosophers, musicians, engineers, and Nobel Laureates*? The gap between reality and imagined community had become unbearable.

While Einstein, at a loss why entire populations choose the lemming way, is holding up rationality as a remedy and Freud is fathoming the deep ground of the unconscious, both miss the obvious: the fact under certain circumstances *imagined worlds tend to override the perceptual world to the point of self-destruction*. This tendency may have an origin other than the mathematical management of the universe or biological drives. Perhaps the deep ground to be scoured, however speculatively, is the *social evolution* of humankind. From the very social origins of hominid existence, survival demanded that the precarious perceptual world be mastered by ingenuity. Being able to vary the observable world by imaginative scenarios must have afforded hominid communities a significant evolutionary advantage, one that was bound to evolve into the most elaborate social-mental alternatives to perceptual reality, such as paradise. For the “*Urmensch* who depended on grasping the external world with the help of his own bodily sensations and corporeal contingencies,” (Freud, 1972: 9) *imaginability*, as the organism's pre-linguistic ability to vary what the senses furnished, may very well be the foundation for what makes us human. Moreover, is it not plausible that once imaginability had reached a critical stage, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the invention of natural language, as symbolic and economizing matrix superimposed on communal perception and nonverbal communication, became an inevitable consequence? (Ruthrof, 2016) Whatever the origins of imaginability in the distant

mists of the world of our hominid ancestors, human cultures have been profoundly characterized, for better or worse and throughout recorded history, by the relation between the sobriety of perceptual grasp and the seductive force of its imaginative variations.

6. Conclusion: Culture Kills and Reason Is Subservient to *Vorstellung*

It would seem that in *Why War?* both Einstein and Freud underestimate the principle that the imagined world of a community can, under certain circumstances, override not only the world of perceptual reality, but even the very will to survive. What is at stake here is not rationality or the control of drives. Under extreme social conditions, both tend to be relegated to secondary functions. What is at stake instead is *cultural value*. This typically occurs when the threatening annihilation of a celebrated, imagined community makes self-sacrifice the right ethical choice, as in the case of the Balinese committing mass suicide when the island was taken over by Dutch invaders, or when, at the end of World War II, the Japanese were prepared to die rather than accept the unthinkable abdication of their Emperor. The general principle underlying the discrepancy between a realistic description of a community and its imagined, cultural form can be termed *imaginability*, a human faculty that can afford a culture great benefits or lead it to disaster. In the first case, rationality and the control of *thanatos* are put to use in the perpetuation of a community's survival; in the case of a *Vorstellungswelt* fundamentally at variance with perceptual reality, reasoning and the control of *thanatos* serve imagined goals, no matter how irrational or insane.

Neither rolling the universe into a mathematical ball, nor curing us of the excesses of *thanatos* provide a promising ground on which to look for satisfactory answers to the question of "Why War?" From the privileged position of historical hind-sight, the paper has made the broad claim that if the discrepancy between the actual situation of a society and its *imagined community* becomes unbridgeable, war may no longer be regarded as the ultimate threat. Toward the end of the Weimar Republic, the rift between actual conditions and the self-interpretation of the majority of Germans, the elite as much as the masses, led the nation to court disaster. The final lift into the stirrups of power of the NSDAP, foremost by the German Churches voting against the Social Democrats in 1933, demonstrates that the people no longer feared war as being more calamitous than the feeling of ambient social misery and the political chaos of the parliament. The decisive motivation appears to be the preference of a communal intentionality of a superior imagined world over a degrading reality. If so, then we are dealing here with two radically "incommensurable evaluative regimes." (Frow, 1995: 134) While the German *Wahrnehmungswelt* from the late Weimar Republic to 1945 went from abject misery to the celebration of Fascism, the gradual comprehension of the reality of a dictatorship they had wished for, and suffering on a global scale, the concomitant *Vorstellungswelt* was transformed from a sense of chaos, despair, and hopelessness to an all-consuming

intoxication with National Socialism, then resignation, and finally a deep sense of guilt and shame. Cities can be rebuilt and the economy made to thrive for all to see, what is less obvious may very well be an irreparably damaged Germany as an *imaginable community*. Today's deep political divisions at the heart of Europe appear to indicate as much.

Author Contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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