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Hans Delbrück is widely regarded as the father of modern military history. From the 1880s onwards, he asserted the right of civilians to write military history against the historians of the German General Staff, who argued that Delbrück, a civilian, had no business commenting on the stratagems employed by Frederick the Great. This in spite of the fact that Delbrück was less a civilian than many military historians working today. Born in 1848, he fought in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870/71, and he tutored both Prince Waldemar, brother to Wilhelm II, and Emperor Frederick III, son of Wilhelm I, who reigned for 99 days in 1888. Delbrück was also a parliamentarian, serving in the Prussian parliament from 1882-1885 and in the Reichstag from 1884-90. In 1896, after having completed a habilitation on Neidhardt von Gneisenau in 1881, he succeeded Heinrich von Treitschke as holder of a chair at Berlin. Treitschke, in turn, had followed Leopold von Ranke after the latter's retirement. Delbrück held the chair until he eventually retired in 1921, dying in 1929 at the age of 80.

Although Delbrück's life, then, spans the length of the German Empire and most of the Weimar Republic, it is on the latter that Christian Lüdtkke's book is focused. This means we principally get an insight into the debates Delbrück engaged in in the last two decades of his life. The two main ones, as per the title, are the question of war guilt and the so-called 'stab in the back' myth. In embedding Delbrück in the intellectual landscape of the late German Empire and the early Weimar Republic, Lüdtkke argues that we might see him as a political barometer of a kind for the changes taking place in the political sphere (9). When Delbrück argued for a conservative republic against threats from both left and right, it was not that he had become more conservative, it was that the political spectrum, between war and revolution, had shifted under his feet (11). But in itself this idea explains little. Delbrück was 70 years old at the end of the war. Would it not have been more surprising if he *had* markedly changed his political opinions? In any case, Delbrück at the very least changed his mind on the monarchy, of which he had been a staunch supporter, coming to see, by 1918, according to Lüdtkke, that another way forward was needed (61).

In making Delbrück appear as a *Vernunftrepublikaner*, a republican out of pragmatism, Lüdtkke continuously places him at the centre of the political spectrum, where it is unclear he in fact belongs. In his intervention in debates around the new Weimar flag for instance, Delbrück championed the cause of the old colours, black-red-white. Writes Lüdtkke, "with the abolition of black-red-white one had taken from many people everything they believed in, and for which millions of sons, brothers, and fathers had remained on the battlefield" (175). In rejecting the colours of German democracy, black-red-gold, then, Delbrück was, in Lüdtkke's telling, offering a hand to those who opposed the very thing the new flag stood for. But Delbrück himself said that "it is clear, that large parts of our people, probably a significant majority, will never accept red-black-gold" (174). In attempting to pre-empt this antagonism, Delbrück offered to relinquish the fledgling democracy's most important symbol to those who would destroy the republic. Lüdtkke does not address the political implication: that making concessions to the enemies of the republic rather than appeasing them may mean that the republic might be held

hostage by them. How exactly Delbrück proposed this uneasy truce, if that is what he believed he might accomplish, would last, is left unexplored.

The source base of Lüdtkke's study is surprisingly narrow. He draws only on the *Nachlass* of Delbrück himself, the archives of the Delbrück family, and Delbrück's personnel file at the University of Berlin. This means there cannot be substantive engagement with others, who appear only as bystanders or passers-by. This leads throughout to a surprising lack of discussion of the debates engaged in by Delbrück beyond his own contributions. Around the mid 1920s, for instance, Delbrück seemed to believe technology had made war so brutal as to make it obsolete (83). In this debate, Lüdtkke focuses on Delbrück's uniqueness, when really there were many more who made such arguments. And indeed, there were of course many who disagreed, but no context is supplied and the focus on Delbrück serves to minimise, rather than illuminate, the debates which took place around these issues. What is noteworthy is the range of settings within which Delbrück's engagement took place, from the newspaper or the lectern to the intellectual salon (32-33). In considering these different spaces, Lüdtkke does well to take account of these varying fora and the way in which they structured expression and occasionally constrained Delbrück's utterances or ideas.

Lüdtkke identifies as the main target of Delbrück's intellectual agitation the "national fanaticism" of organisations such as the *Alldeutsche Verband*, which later advocated for a racist ideology not far removed from that of the Nazis (11). About the *Verband* we learn little, however, beyond the fact that it functioned as a foil for Delbrück, with Roger Chickering's groundbreaking 1984 study absent from Lüdtkke's bibliography.¹ His main reference point in the historiography seems to be Axel von Harnack, Delbrück's brother-in-law, who in 1952 argued that the ideological constant in Delbrück's thinking was his fight against the *Alldeutsche Verband* (18). Delbrück, writes Lüdtkke, "fought against these circles from the position of his conservative *Weltanschauung*" (12). Where this leaves the more radical conservative forces which sought to overthrow the republic is unclear, and Lüdtkke does not dwell on the question of the intellectual malleability of conservatism for these opposing political ends. At most there is a passing reference to the "democratic conservatism" of Thomas Mann, but no substantive engagement with such questions (14). Politicians or historians of the left mainly feature in Lüdtkke's account insofar as they laud Delbrück who, they argued, as a member of the bourgeoisie exposed the hypocrisy of his own class by arguing against the stab in the back myth. In situating Delbrück, Lüdtkke argues that we have an overly polarised set of references for intellectuals in the Weimar Republic which leaves "no room for Hans Delbrück" (13).

The question of war guilt is the first major debate Lüdtkke addresses, and he sketches Delbrück as a man who argued against the Treaty of Versailles, and for a shared sense of responsibility for the outbreak of the war. Delbrück, according to Lüdtkke, argued that the complexity of international relations before the First World War led to the contested meaning of events (22). Though at first glance this argument is insightful, it is unclear what is unique about the First World War in this sense. Lüdtkke's assertion that, "such an interpretation has only emerged in the last few years" (19) in the form of Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* (2012) and Herfried Münkler's *Der Große Krieg* (2013) is somewhat odd. Clark argued that Germany bore no special responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914, which means his book had broad appeal among German conservatives. Münkler, who is an important public intellectual in Germany, having for some time advocated for rehabilitating the concept of geopolitics for the political mainstream, did likewise.² But in the 1960s, when Fritz Fischer argued that Germany bore near complete responsibility for the outbreak of war, it was precisely against this sense of a shared or more diffuse responsibility that he was writing. Fischer's opponents in the German historical profession were so outraged

¹ Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1886–1914* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1984).

² Ian Klinkle, "Geopolitics and the Political Right: Lessons from Germany," *International Affairs* 94:3 (2018): 495-514.

that they even convinced the German Foreign Ministry to cancel his lecture tour in the United States, arguing that it went against Germany's national interest.³

Lüdtke does not mention that the thesis endorsed by Clark and Münkler is thus both historiographically and politically contentious. This in turn sits uneasily alongside his emphasis that Delbrück understood himself as “an academic in politics” (43), who viewed his scholarship explicitly as a political means to stabilise the Weimar Republic (240). How this ambition might have influenced Delbrück's scholarship, or his reading or selection of sources is not explored in detail. Lüdtke does note that Delbrück argued that a united German front on the question of war guilt was paramount, lest it undermine the German hope of renegotiating the peace settlement. Delbrück viewed an admission of German guilt as a criticism of the old regime, which would put the republic in peril. But the international dimension of the question of war guilt was not addressed by Delbrück, who was primarily concerned with domestic politics, nor is it addressed by Lüdtke. What is missing, too, is an appreciation that various aspects of the peace settlement were being revised, even as Delbrück was agitating against German war guilt, with the Dawes Plan (1924) and the Locarno Treaties (1925), for instance.

Lüdtke spends considerable space outlining Delbrück's international contacts. These conversations are presented in a number of distinct sections and each is concerned with a particular historian. It is important to explore these international connections, but when we learn that Delbrück issued a challenge to French historian Ernest Lavis, to debate him and clear up any remaining doubt in the question of war guilt (247-248), the fact of the challenge is significantly less interesting than what such a challenge might reveal about Delbrück's approach to history, his method, his epistemology, and other related questions. There are also serious oversights. Lüdtke's discussion of Delbrück's connection with James Wycliffe Headlam-Morley, a British historian, is one such example (256-257). We do not get a sense of who Headlam-Morley was. Rather, he appears fully formed, with no background provided. What would have been important here, both for our understanding of Headlam-Morley and of Delbrück, was that the two knew each other quite well. In fact, Headlam had studied under Delbrück in the 1880s.⁴ At the very least, this is important for contextualising the debate which ensued between Delbrück and Headlam-Morley in the pages of the *Contemporary Review*, and the details of which, according to Lüdtke, “showed the standing Delbrück enjoyed globally [*in der Weltmeinung*]” (260). One could just as easily argue that Delbrück enjoyed high standing with Headlam-Morley specifically due to their previous encounters. As with the discussion of politicians and academics on the German left, Delbrück's international contacts serve primarily as a means to enhance his standing, rather than to illuminate a set of debates or ideas.

After the question of war guilt question, the second major issue that Lüdtke addresses in his account of Delbrück's work is the ‘stab in the back’ myth. Proponents of the myth blamed the flames of revolutionary unrest at home, supposedly fanned by Communists and Social Democrats, for the defeat of the German army, which was said to have remained undefeated in the field. Lüdtke argues that Delbrück believed the German revolution in November 1918 might have been prevented by “domestic political reform and a desire for a negotiated peace” (74). But we might wonder whether Delbrück in fact rejected the myth entirely when he wrote in September 1923 that, though the change in government was “imposed by the victorious enemy, it was carried out by an elementary movement of the desperate masses,” and concluded that “it was more a mutiny than a revolution” (315). What is true is that Delbrück pitted himself against *General der Infanterie* Erich Ludendorff, who, alongside *Generalfeldmarschall* Paul von Hindenburg, had ruled Germany as a military dictator between 1916 and 1918, and whom Delbrück identified as a weak character and ultimately a poor military leader who was “but a child who has broken the German *Reich* like a toy in two” (319). But here, too, we learn nothing about the significance of the fact that historians like Delbrück “in honest pursuit of the truth” added to a legend which would form the backbone of militarist revisionism

³ Philipp Stelzel, *History after Hitler: A Transatlantic Enterprise* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2018), 107; for an overview, see Annika Mombauer, ed., ‘The Fischer Controversy after 50 Years’, *Central European History* 48:2 (2013); Fischer made his case most famously in, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegzielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961).

⁴ Alan Sharp, “James Headlam-Morley: Creating International History,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 9:3 (1998): 266-283.

(246), violent attempts at revolution against democratically elected governments, multiple attempted coups, and much besides.

In the final paragraph of the book, Lüdtke proposes Delbrück as a Cassandra-like character who was able to see the coming catastrophe which would emanate from “national-fanaticism,” this time in the guise of the Nazis, but remained unheard. “The Right”, Lüdtke argues, succeeded because it was “better organised” than the republicans (406). Not only is there no mention of the Left, but Lüdtke does not distinguish between different kinds of right-wing groups. And again, in asserting that the “superficial success of the national socialist regime swept along even the last skeptic,” Lüdtke overlooks the continuing opposition and resistance from the Left against the regime from its first days onwards. The ensuing war and genocide, writes Lüdtke, “cleansed” the German political class of “far right ideas” for the “long-term” (408). This statement is not only inaccurate at the present time, but it neglects the long history of far-right extremism and violence which have marked the political landscape of the post-war German states, East and West.⁵ In the final paragraph of the book, Lüdtke writes in summary that Delbrück was aware that “politics could not only be conducted rationally, but always required an emotional charge....that is the fundamental reason for which Delbrück could, in the end, not persevere” (408). Delbrück emerges, in Lüdtke’s highly revisionist telling, as a centrist anti-populist worthy of our own age. There is certainly utility in the present conjuncture in looking at those in the political centre who made regular concessions to radical opponents of democracy on the far-right. Lüdtke, however, makes little use of this opportunity.

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⁵ The book is based upon the author’s dissertation, Christian Lüdtke, “Hans Delbrück. Ein nationaler Mann im Kampf gegen “nationalen Fanatismus”, 1918-1929” (Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, 2016).