

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2021

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

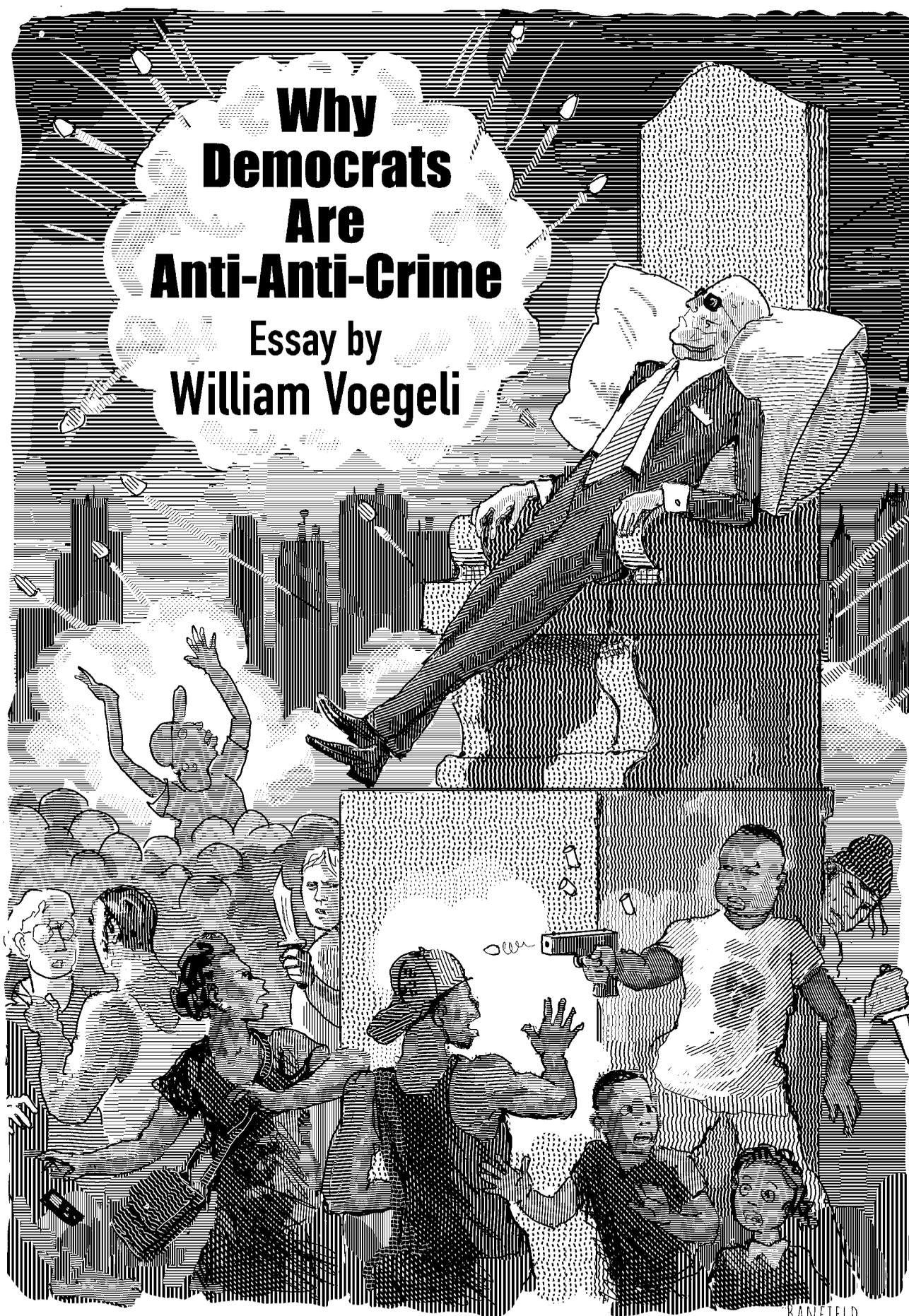
Jeffrey H.
Anderson:
**The Masking
of America**

Christopher
Caldwell:
**Twilight
of Italy**

James W.
Ceaser:
**The Big
Book of
Conservatism**

Glenn
Ellmers:
**Why
Harry V. Jaffa
Matters**

Amy L.
Wax:
**Raising a
Family
Today**



Michael
Anton:
**Texas vs.
California**

Eric
Kaufmann
♦
Peter C.
Myers:
**The Woke
Awakening**

Myron
Magnet:
**Pestritto's
Progressives**

Charles
Murray:
**The Tyranny
of Merit**

Larry P.
Arnn
♦
Christopher
Flannery:
**Patrick J.
Garrity, RIP**

A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$9.50

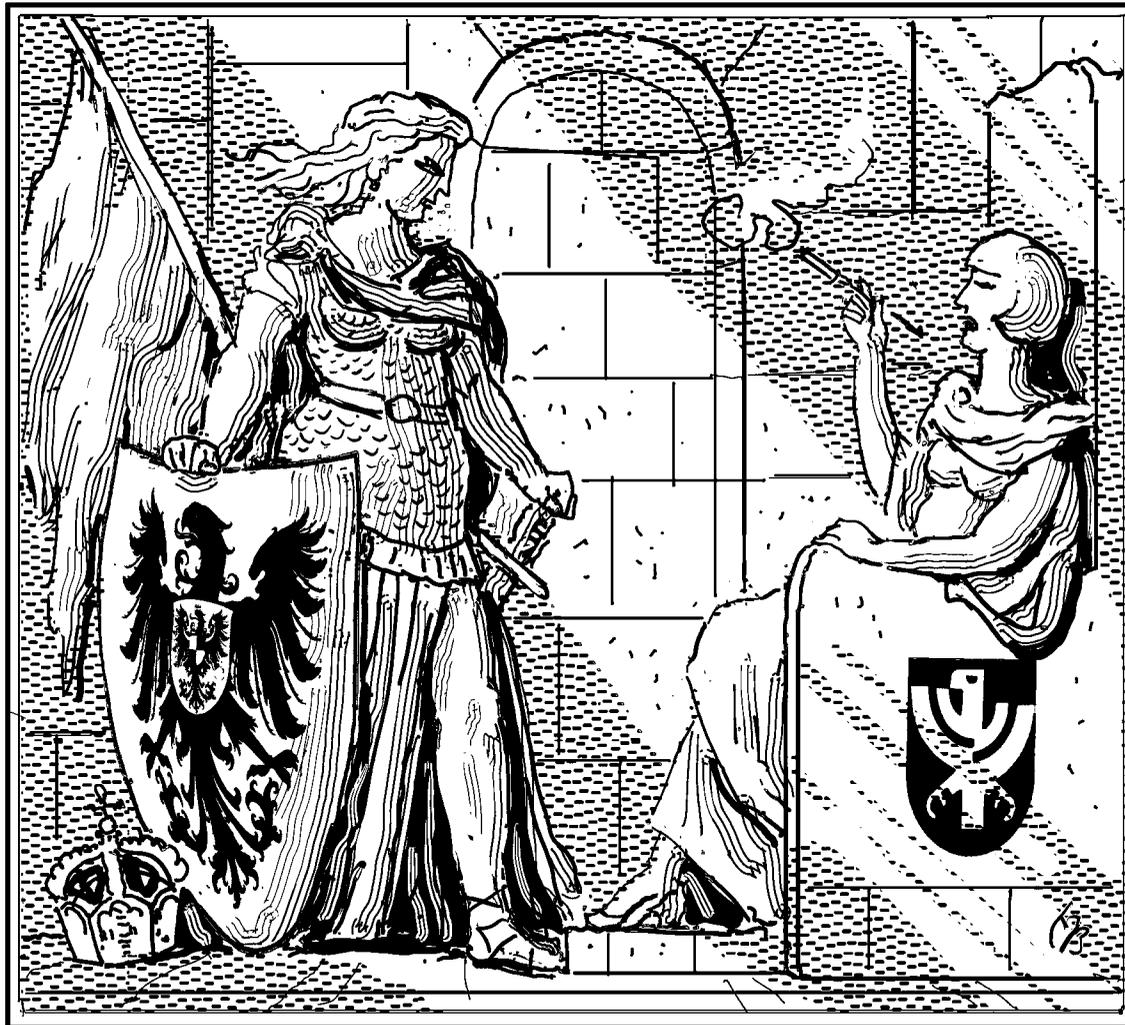


7 25274 57768 2

Book Review by Daniel Johnson

BETWEEN KAISER AND FÜHRER

November 1918: The German Revolution, by Robert Gerwarth.
Oxford University Press, 368 pages, \$25.95



THE GERMAN REVOLUTION OF NOVEMBER 1918 began with a sailors' mutiny. A million fresh American troops had joined the Allies on the Western Front, and the German army was in retreat. On the battlefield itself, almost everyone—with the exception of Emperor Wilhelm II—knew the war was lost. Back home, it was another story. The High Seas Fleet, the kaiser's pride and joy, had been bottled up by Britain's Royal Navy for four years when its admirals suddenly ordered their men to embark on a suicide mission—one last gamble as the Western Front collapsed. But the admirals had reckoned without their sailors, who refused to embark. The mutiny spread from the naval port of Kiel to Berlin, turning quickly into a workers' uprising. At last a reluctant kaiser, disabused by his own officers of fantasies that he would lead the

army home to fire on rebellious civilians, was instead persuaded to abdicate. A republic was declared, and the war ended with an armistice. The revolution proper was over by January 1919.

Revolutions, like wars, come to mean different things to different people over time. The French Revolution left hundreds of thousands dead; the Russian, millions. Yet both still have no shortage of defenders. The American Revolution had a supremely successful outcome, yet it has become fashionable to caricature the Founding Fathers as vicious slave-owning aristocrats. China's Cultural Revolution was aimed at the people by their rulers, who found them wanting—yet the Chinese call the overthrow of the Nationalists by the Communists a “war of liberation.” In the liberal imagination, only the Left has revolutions, the Right merely upris-

ings or coups. A conservative revolutionary is an oxymoron.

Perhaps this is why the German Revolution of 1918-19 has been far less well remembered than its bloodier predecessors in France and Russia. It created no iconography to compare with that of the Bolsheviks, and such mythology as it bequeathed was the work of its enemies—above all the black legend that Jews had engineered the empire's overthrow as a “stab in the back” to undermine the German war effort. The reality was far more pedestrian. There was nothing particularly memorable or even macabre about this revolution's leading personalities, apart perhaps from Communist firebrands Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, whose “Spartacist uprising” was intended to divert the revolution from its path toward parlia-

mentary democracy. Both Luxemburg and Liebknecht were executed by their opponents before they could realize any sort of Communist utopia.

INSTEAD THERE EMERGED THE SHORT-lived republic, whose constituent assembly held its first meeting in the city of Weimar. The members of that assembly considered themselves leaders of the German Reich in full; they were only subsequently demoted to a dismissive local appellation by their archenemy, Adolf Hitler. Hitler is in part responsible for the popular idea of the Weimar Republic as an aberrant detour in the course of Germany's history. But in *November 1918: The German Revolution*, Robert Gerwarth—a professor of modern history and director of the Centre for War Studies at University College Dublin—wants to rehabilitate the Weimar era as a moment of liberation and hope.

No sooner had a republic been proclaimed than the new Germany, led by two Social Democrats—President Friedrich Ebert and Chancellor Philipp Scheidemann—had the unenviable task of begging the Allies for an armistice. The subsequent “victors’ peace” of Versailles was a drastic disappointment to the German public, accustomed as they were to incessant bombast and militarism from a regime dominated in the latter stages of the war by the Prussian generals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. Given that the revolutionary regime carried defeat around its neck like an albatross, it is remarkable that the new republic was nevertheless able to accomplish Germany's most radical social transformation since Martin Luther. A contemporary observer, the philosopher Helmuth Plessner, saw Weimar Germany in retrospect as “the belated nation,” in that it represented a late transition to modern statehood and brought Germany up to speed with the rest of Europe. In fact, though, until the global economic crisis that followed the Wall Street crash of 1929, the republic was in many ways at the vanguard of modernity.

Thus Gerwarth dedicates *November 1918* to “two strong women”: his grandmother Gundi and aunt Helga, both of whom were born in the Weimar era. Indeed, one major social advance in that period was the emer-

gence of women as equal citizens. Already in January 1919, the National Assembly that convened in Weimar to adopt the new constitution had been elected by women as well as men—by comparison, the United Kingdom took a decade longer, and France until 1944, to embrace equal suffrage for women. As Gerwarth suggests, the choice of venue for the constituent assembly was deliberate: Weimar was the birthplace of Romantic poets Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. Thus a liberal “spirit of Weimar” was thought to pervade the place—though, in reality, such small towns were liable to be the most reactionary (and, in due course, pro-Nazi) places of all.

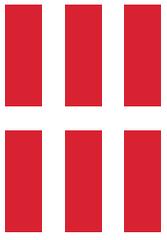
THE PERIOD GERWARTH COVERS extends from 1917 up to Hitler's thwarted coup, the Beer Hall Putsch, in 1923. For the rest of the 1920s, Germany enjoyed its first period of peace and prosperity for a decade. Gerwarth insists this could not have happened if Weimar had indeed been a “republic without republicans,” as some of its detractors have claimed. Despite political and economic instability, beacons of Weimar culture still exercise their influence today, from atonal music and Bauhaus architecture to expressionist art, film, and theater. The republic never actually implemented its plan to legalize homosexuality, but gay and transsexual subcultures flourished. So too did prostitution and pornography, as satirical prints by George Grosz and Otto Dix, or cabaret songs by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, remind us.

Berlin in the 1920s became a magnet that attracted foreign libertines such as Christopher Isherwood, but repelled more conventional Germans. The extremes of wealth and poverty in the metropolis were matched by extremes of behavior: Fritz Lang's classic 1931 movie *M* illustrates what had by then become a national obsession with sex crimes. Yet sexual liberation (or decadence, depending on whom you ask) outraged many. Once legal and social censures relaxed, what had hitherto been invisible became almost unavoidable. The dark side of Weimar was very dark indeed: not only demagoguery, hypocrisy, and hyperinflation, but eugenics, anti-Semitism, and assassination. The narrative of *November 1918* stops short of these later developments.

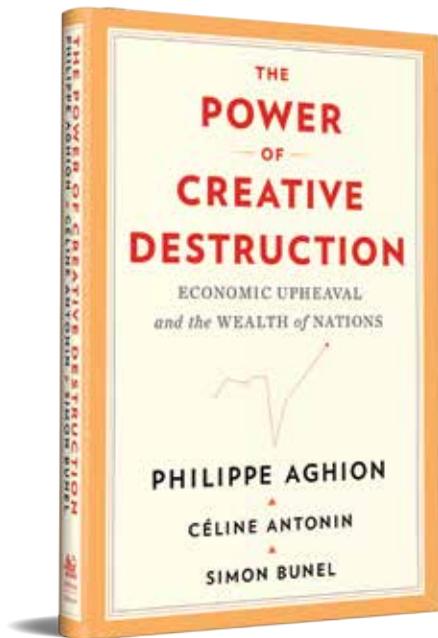
BUT GERWARTH DOES NOT SHY AWAY from nasty incidents that do fall within his purview, including two prominent political murders by the far-Right terrorist group Organisation Consul. The first victim, in 1921, was Matthias Erzberger, a leading figure in the Catholic Centre Party whose signature was on the Armistice that ended World War I. The other, in 1922, was Walther Rathenau, the foreign minister, who besides being one of the country's richest capitalists was also a genuine intellectual—and Jewish, too. Yet, as Gerwarth points out, the republic did not capitulate in the face of such violence. The government banned subversive organizations (including, albeit briefly, the Nazi Party), passed a Law for the Protection of the Republic (akin to the Patriot Act), swore officials to loyalty, and established a constitutional court. These measures sufficed to restore order, but ultimately proved insufficient to prevent the Nazis from usurping authority.

Gerwarth's focus, however, is not on the collapse of the Weimar Republic or its replacement by the Nazi regime—both of which have overshadowed the republic's achievements in the eyes of history. As a corrective to this, Gerwarth concentrates on the fall of the German empire and shows how well the revolutionaries played the impossible hand they were dealt. He begins in 1917 to show that the German high command—who had given Vladimir Lenin safe passage to the Finland Station in Petrograd—reaped the whirlwind they had sown in the form of mutiny and revolution. The arc of Gerwarth's narrative is thus one of imperial hubris and nemesis, followed by the birth of a new republic, its ordeal by fire, and its consolidation by the end of 1923. By his choice of dates, Gerwarth changes the perspective from the familiar one of impending doom to one of triumph in adversity. His account is written in clear prose and richly documented with eyewitness accounts from the most vivid diaries and correspondence of the period. As an audacious bid to restore the German Revolution to its rightful place in history, *November 1918* could hardly have been more skillfully executed.

Daniel Johnson is editor of the U.K.-based online platform TheArticle and founder of the monthly magazine Standpoint.

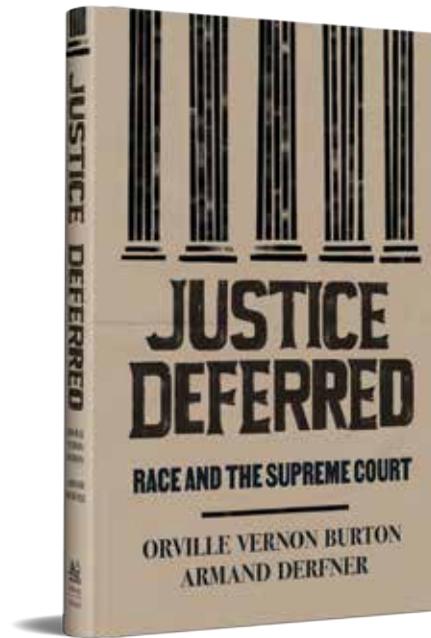


Harvard



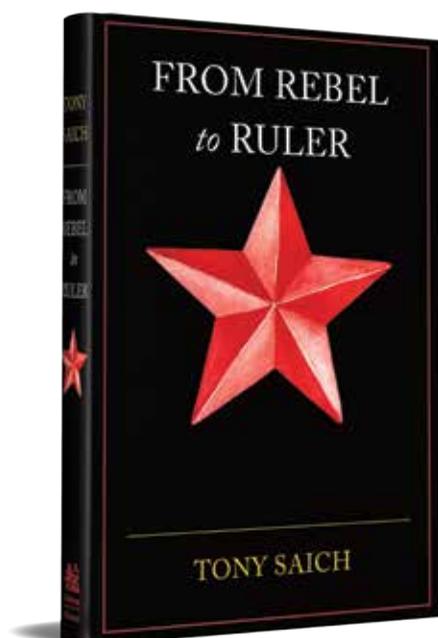
“Sweeping, authoritative and—for the times—strikingly upbeat . . . The overall argument is compelling and, with creative destruction falling out of political favor, it carries a trace of Schumpeterian subversion.”

—*The Economist*



“Spanning American history from the colonial era to the present day, Burton and Derfner offer copious evidence that justices have been influenced by the politics of their respective eras . . . This meticulous deep dive into the court’s mixed record on civil rights is a must-read for legal scholars.”

—*Publishers Weekly*



“The definitive, candid, and absorbing history of a political organization that counts 90 million members and indisputably rules as America’s most powerful rival . . . A vital account, based on magnificent research, that shows the party as a colossal, relentless, and enduring machine.”

—Jane Perlez, former Beijing Bureau Chief, *New York Times*

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to
the *Claremont Review of Books*

*“The Claremont Review of Books
is serious, lively, always sound
yet delightfully unpredictable, a
model of intellectual journalism
as a source of education and of
pleasure.”*

—Joseph Epstein

Subscribe to the *CRB* today and save 25%
off the newstand price. A one-year
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America’s premier
conservative book review, visit
claremontreviewofbooks.com
or call (909) 981 2200.

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS

1317 W. FOOTHILL
BLVD, SUITE 120,
UPLAND, CA
91786

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 504
UPLAND, CA