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### [Review of: K.H. Pohl (2019) Gustav Stresemann: The Crossover Artist]

Föllmer, M.

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**Gustav Stresemann: The Crossover Artist.** By *Karl Heinrich Pohl*. Translated by *Christine Brocks* with the assistance of *Patricia C. Sutcliffe*. *Studies in German History*, volume 23. Edited by *Simone Lässig* with the assistance of *Patricia C. Sutcliffe*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019. Pp. xii+314. \$140.00 (cloth); \$34.95 (e-book).

Gustav Stresemann, chancellor from August to October 1923 and foreign minister from that turbulent summer until his early death in the autumn of 1929, was a key protagonist of the Weimar Republic. He has also been a controversial figure among contemporaries and historians alike, owing to his shift from staunch nationalist, who advocated a continental Empire during World War I, to conciliatory chief diplomat, under whose leadership Germany negotiated a plan for its reparation payments, signed the Locarno treaty, and joined the League of Nations. For a long time, the debate was about the sincerity of this metamorphosis. Did Stresemann remain a cleverly disguised nationalist waiting

<sup>1</sup> Richard M. Watt, *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Germany; Versailles and the German Revolution* (New York, 1968); Otto Friedrich, *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s* (New York, 1972).

for an opportunity to wage war against Poland, or did he turn into a forerunner of post-1945 European unification? While steering clear of anachronism, the now prevailing interpretation stresses that he came to defend German interests pragmatically, marshaling his country's economic weight and endorsing cooperation with France, Britain, and the United States. Formulated in Peter Krüger's 1985 synthesis of Weimar foreign policy, it also provides the thrust of Jonathan Wright's authoritative biography, published in 2002, which moreover elucidates its protagonist's roles within the center-right German People's Party and as a skillful builder of cross-party compromise.

Stresemann, however, is not merely of interest to scholars of Weimar Germany's foreign policy and domestic politics. The son of a Berlin publican and beer merchant, he studied economics before becoming an industrial lobbyist and then a liberal politician in the state of Saxony. In addition to his PhD dissertation, a sober analysis of the bottled beer business in Berlin, Stresemann wrote literary pieces revealing a dreamy side of his personality. This lesser-known pre-1914 life and career lies at the heart of Karl Heinrich Pohl's illuminating study, first published in 2015 and now available in translation. Informed by *Bürgertumsforschung*, the research on the social and cultural history of the German middle classes that has emerged since the 1980s, Pohl consistently stresses Stresemann's efforts at self-construction and his will to rise within German society.

This approach yields a number of real insights. Pohl brings out just how much his protagonist sought to enhance his social, cultural, and economic capital, in the terminology of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He cultivated friendships with influential men and joined a student fraternity, the Freemasons, and a range of associations in Dresden, the Saxon capital. Shortly after experiencing rejection by what appears to have been his true love, he married Käte Kleefeld, an elegant woman from a wealthy and originally Jewish family with a penchant for the high society that her husband, with his lower-middle-class background, lacked. With regard to cultural capital, Stresemann styled himself a connoisseur of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's literary work, sang in a Dresden choir, and later founded a library at his former school. Moreover, he cleverly managed to ameliorate his finances, starting with his handsome salary as a lobbyist and publicist for the Saxon Manufacturers' Association and culminating in the generous allowances he received as board member of lobby organizations and a plethora of companies, the latter providing him with opportunities to acquire shares as a privileged insider.

These meticulously researched aspects alone add up to a rich portrayal of one of early twentieth-century Germany's most spectacular individual success stories. What does the book tell us about Gustav Stresemann the politician? Pohl persuasively analyzes how his protagonist's keen networking launched his ascent, bolstered his nationalist credentials through his involvement with the German Navy League and the Pan-German League, and secured his National Liberals a growing membership and substantial donations. He also elucidates Stresemann's little-known advocacy of collective wage agreements and insurance for salaried employees. This "social liberalism," as it was labeled at the time, first led him to join Friedrich Naumann's National Social Association, whose electoral prospects were, however, dire. Such a lack of perspective motivated a switch to the National Liberals, whose Saxon branch the eloquent and youthful man soon came to dominate, turning it into a more dynamic and progressive party.

Stresemann's skills and general flexibility continued to serve him well for the remainder of his political career. Pohl brings this out, and he also offers intelligent observations on his rhetorical style and public image as well as the tension between masculine assertiveness and an underlying insecurity. Still, the two chapters on World War I and the Weimar period are less innovative, also less based on new primary research than the previous ones. That he was "one of the most rabid annexionists" (172) emerges clearly but is well

known; a fresh interpretation is lacking. Much the same goes for his role in the foundation of the German People's Party, initial reservations against the Republican order, subsequent shift to a more centrist and conciliatory stance, and brief chancellorship. As in so many studies of Weimar Germany, the tone here becomes at times more pejorative than analytical. That Stresemann "could better relate to national, bourgeois, and traditionally liberal values than to a further, systematic democratization of state and society" (207) is a correct but unsurprising observation given his center-right convictions. It is also devoid of any comparative perspective, for could not much the same be said about, say, Raymond Poincaré or Stanley Baldwin?

With regard to the most important of Stresemann's roles, Pohl is critical toward the current consensus that German foreign policy of the mid-1920s combined a national with a European and global perspective. The evidence he offers on Stresemann's ongoing connections with figures of the radical right and occasional antisemitic remarks is interesting if inconclusive. Otherwise, his alternative consists in repeating the argument of his 1979 monograph that the influence of heavy industry limited the scope of cooperation with France, without engaging with Conan Fischer's recent counterinterpretation, or else in citing other somewhat dated studies. On the whole, it would have been better to write a conceptually and empirically strong study of Gustav Stresemann's pre-1914 life and career than to attempt a full biography that becomes patchier and fuzzier as it progresses and never quite succeeds in relating its "crossover artist" interpretation to Weimar-era politics. But the former is certainly contained in this book and makes reading it worthwhile.

MORITZ FÖLLMER

*University of Amsterdam*