



SUFFRAGE GAINED AND LOST IN GERMANY

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This August, the United States will celebrate one of its most important milestones. One hundred years ago, in August of 1920, women in America secured the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment. We came to the game far later than we should have, trailing England by 18 months, and riding Germany's coattails by almost a full year. Considering just how hard-won women's suffrage in the U.S. was, it might behoove us to take a deeper look at Germany, and to realize just how quickly rights won became rights lost, and exactly how it happened.

As the tide of World War I continued to turn against Germany, the prospect of losing the war and the advantages of suing for peace became impossible to dismiss. Once the mighty nation faced the seemingly inevitable, a series of events took place in relatively rapid succession. Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated in November of 1918, the same month and year in which German women gained voting rights. The following month, Germany elected a National Assembly for the purpose of creating a new parliamentary constitution. Just a few months later, in February of 1919, the National Assembly met in Weimar, and what came to be known by history as the Weimar Republic was born.

The Weimar Constitution, created in August of 1919, provided for the equal status of all German citizens, and granted all Germans "the same civil rights and responsibilities." Under Article 109, women were guaranteed the same right to vote and hold office as men. During the first year of the Weimar Republic, women not only voted in droves, but they held 10 percent of the seats in the Reichstag. That number would grow even larger in the years still to come.

So what happened? After all, Germany has the misfortune of being far more associated historically with Hitler's fascistic Nazi regime than with the promise of Weimar. How did things change so much so fast? The answer is complex, but can be simplified for the purpose of this article with just one word – economics. The German economy after WWI was problematic from the word go, thanks to a long list of factors too extensive to list here. Any time a nation is experimenting with its first attempt at democracy, there are going to be problems. When that democracy is born in the ashes of a former military and economic powerhouse, and thus must weather political growing pains and the struggle for economic renewal at the same time, those problems are accelerated exponentially. At certain points during Weimar's brief lifespan, it looked as if Germany might survive its economic hardships and emerge intact. Unfortunately, the stock market crash of 1929 put the final nail in Weimar's economic coffin.

During the next four years, as hunger and lack continued to bound, Hitler and the Nazis were able to successfully exploit the fear, bitterness, and anger of the German citizenry and harness those factors into political support. In September of 1930, the Nazis received 18.3 percent of the vote in the Reichstag and became Germany's second largest political party. Two years later, in July of 1932, they received 37.4 percent of the vote and became the nation's largest political party. In an effort to keep his growing power in check, President Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor in 1933. That same year, Hitler capitalized on the burning of the Reichstag and was able to ban the Communist party from participating in German politics. He held new elections in 1933, in which the Nazis won 44 percent of the vote, and four months later all other political parties were banned in Germany.

In just 14 short years, the civil rights promise of the fledgling Weimar Republic had given way to the cold hard fist of totalitarianism, a transition tragically made possible by not only a combination of fear and resentment, but by the abandonment of logic, reason, and humanitarian principles that too often accompanies those and similar emotions. One of the ironic results was that the Nazi Party, a party that a number of German women helped vote into power, turned around and betrayed those same women with a policy that officially excluded them from any political involvement, not that there would have been anything to vote for anyway, as there were no longer any elections or competing political parties. America has been more fortunate. One hundred years have passed, and the political rights of women are still in place. German women lost theirs in less than two decades.

We are, however, experiencing a time of fear, anger, and economic uncertainty. Everyone wants the return of a strong economy. Everyone wants the country to regain its health in other ways as well. That said, the pandemic and its myriad financial and social aftershocks have drawn much-needed attention to long neglected humanitarian concerns that are just as important in our time as women's suffrage was 100 years ago. It would be a shame if we failed to move forward and find solutions to these inequities. It would be a shame as well if we moved in reverse, and gave up rights for the sake of preserving the illusion of job security. The notion that civil rights and a healthy economy are separate issues, and that a productive society cannot address both simultaneously is a lie, one that has plagued humankind for far too long. Let's learn from Germany's mistake and refuse to sacrifice justice and parity on the altar of the economy.

MY JOURNEY TO THE MISSOURI HISTORY MUSEUM

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Working as a docent volunteer since 2014 at the Missouri History Museum has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my retirement in 2010 as an Aerospace Engineer at Boeing for 34 years. The socialization with staff, volunteers, and mostly visitors has been simply exhilarating and an important contribution to my life, making me a more well-rounded person.

Have you noticed that the strangest events take place to take you into a new exciting adventure in life when you didn't even plan them? That's what happened to me in becoming a volunteer for the MHS. I was enjoying working as a docent tour guide at the Holocaust Museum and Learning Center (HMLC) since 2012 when one day, I get this e-mail asking if any Holocaust Museum docent wants to help volunteer giving tours of the "soon to open" exhibit at the MHM on "Nazi Propaganda".

At first, I was concerned if I could make the transition from middle and high school audiences to adults, but thank goodness I took a chance and volunteered. It was the best decision in my life (other than deciding to marry my wife)! Now, I was able to combine my experiences as a docent tour guide at both institutions and build upon helping people of all ages make their own interpretations of the stories and artifacts in the exhibits. It turned out that the job as docent at the MHM was much more challenging since the exhibits constantly change. These past six years since serving as a docent have seen an amazing assortment of over 10 exhibits covering a wide diversity of topics. One thing in common at all of the exhibits is the reaction and connection the visitors make to what they experience and the joy of helping them draw their own interpretations to their own lives.

One of the most rewarding experiences in talking to visitors about the exhibits was at the conclusion of my tour to senior residents at the "A Walk in 1875" exhibit. A man and woman who did not know each other happened to realize that they grew up on the same street featured in the exhibit. After helping them make this conclusion, the two appeared to become best friends based on this connection in their childhood. It was a delight to see these two strangers living in the same residence make friends simply because of their visit one day to our museum.