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Courtroom to Revolutionary Stage: Performance and Ideology in Weimar Political Trials

Henning Grunwald

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What role did the courts play in the demise of Germany's first democracy and Hitler's rise to power? *Courtroom to Revolutionary Stage* challenges the orthodox interpretation of Weimar political justice. Henning Grunwald argues that an exclusive focus on reactionary judges and a preoccupation with number-crunching verdicts has obscured precisely that aspect of trials most fascinating to contemporary observers: their drama. Drawing on untapped sources and material previously inaccessible in English, Grunwald shows how an innovative group of party lawyers transformed dry legal proceedings into spectacular ideological clashes. Supported by powerful party legal offices (which have hitherto escaped scholarly notice almost entirely), they developed a sophisticated repertoire of techniques at the intersection of criminal law, politics, and public relations.

Harnessing the emotional appeal of tens of thousands of trials, Communists and (emulating them) National Socialists institutionalized party legal aid in order to build their ideological communities. Defendants turned into martyrs, trials into performances of ideological self-sacrifice, and the courtroom into 'revolutionary stage', as one prominent party lawyer put it. It is this political justice as 'revolutionary stage' that most powerfully impacted Weimar political culture.

While it helps to explain Weimar's demise, this argument about the theatricality of justice transcends interwar Germany. Trials were compelling not because they offered instruction about the revolutionary struggle, but because in a sense they were the revolutionary struggle. The ideological struggle, their message ran, left no room for fairness, no possibility of a 'neutral platform': justice was unattainable until the Republic was destroyed.

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