

Thuringia in the Weimar Republic

The November revolution of 1918 paved the way for the solution of the 'Thuringian question' and initiated the forceful end of single state dynasties. In the period from November 9-25, the dukes of following states had to resign: Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, Saxe-Meiningen, Saxe-Altenburg, the two principalities of Reuss – Greiz (the older descend) and Gera (of the younger descend), Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt and Schwarzburg-Sondershausen. The member states of the Kaiser Reich transformed into free, republican states, so-called "Freistaaten".

At first, the governments operated on a provisional basis and became later legitimized through elections. The two Reuss principalities merged into one state – the "Volksstaat Reuss". From January 26 until March 16, 1919, the elections of the newly established parliaments (Landesparlamente) took place, resulting in mandate majorities for the two socialist parties and the SPD-DDP coalitions (Social Democratic Party/German Democratic Party). The DNVP (German National People's Party) and DVP (German People's Party) remained in opposition. In May 1919, another party was founded – the "Thüringer Landbund – ThLB", which operated as a right-wing, conservative opposition party without seats in any of the parliaments.

These constellations antagonized social milieus and political camps. This was especially the case for Gotha, where a confrontation between the fundamentalist opposition of bourgeois camps and the USPD government (Independent Social Democratic Party) provoked military intervention. In the remaining Thuringian states, the revolutionary process continued calmly and non-bloody.

It appeared that the common goal of an unified Thuringia demanded cooperation and unity. The centers of the unification initiatives became the negotiating and leading Weimar, which showed clear hegemonial interests, "Reuss-Gera", where the united "Volksstaat Reuss" saw itself in a vanguard role and the Prussian Erfurt, where a circle around the museum's director Edwin Redslob published a serial paper of "Das neue Thüringen" (The new Thuringia), proposing a great Thuringian Union. The great Union was to include all small states and regions, hence all primary divisions of a Land, with Erfurt being the political center.

A publication from the city of Halle, which was called "Die Thüringische Frage" (The Thuringian Question) was opposing the idea of a great Thuringian Union and proposed instead the annexation of the small Thuringian states to the Prussian province Saxony. Both

options failed. The great state Prussia was not willing to hand over any territory to the Thuringian Union and the Thuringian states had no intentions to become a part of the province Saxony or a new Prussian province 'Thuringia'.

Some of the Thuringian states were searching feverishly for alternatives, for example, Coburg and Meiningen hoped for an affiliation with Bavaria and Altenburg was looking to join Saxony or to be part of a central German Union ("mitteldeutscher Verbund").

The Founding of the Land

The first unification initiatives derived from several sources: the revolutionary government in Weimar led by August Baudert (SPD); from the workers and soldiers councils of the 36th Reichstag-constituency (formed November 30, 1918); from Erfurt's Redslob circle and from the industrial trading associations. The consultations of the councils and state representatives culminated in the foundation of the province Thuringia as part of an integrated republic of Germany on December 10, 1918. A committee of twelve members was appointed that should carry the preparatory responsibility of the impending Thuringian unification. Albert Rudolph (SPD, Jena) became chairman. In the beginning of 1919 the 'Great Thuringia'- conference was held in Erfurt and included trading associations and the Redslob-circle.

Despite continuing debates over the December initiative, there was no conclusion on the question, whether Thuringia should become a federal province or an independent 'Bundesland' Thuringia. This also depended on the decisions made on the national level about the integrated whole of Germany.

By January/February 1919, a compromise emerged within the state committees, the National Assembly and the Constituent Assembly – leading to the establishment of an unitarian, federal state with extended competencies of the Reich combined with a federative structure and state-territorial status quo. The state Prussia continued to exist and a complete restructuring of the Reich did not take place. The only possibility was to build a Thuringian Union on the federative level and hoping for negotiations with Prussia.

From this point in March 1919, the Weimar state government led by Arnold Paulsen (DDP) and Eduard Rosenthal (DDP) and the secretary of state of Reuss, Carl Freiherr von Brandenstein (SPD) pushed the initiative of restructuring Thuringia forward. Those governments that were willing to cooperate with each other agreed on a joint contract and

formed a Thuringian Council of States as a provisional government under the chairmanship of Arnold Paulssen. Negotiations with Prussia and Coburg over an extended joint contract failed. Meiningen was only willing to enter the council of the Thuringian Union after it negotiated special conditions.

After a plebiscite, Coburg joined the Land Bavaria on November 30, 1919. Ultimately, a smaller Union of following, seven states emerged: Weimar, Gotha, Altenburg, Meiningen, Rudolstadt, Sondershausen and Reuss.

In December 1919, the the people's council of Thuringia ("Volksrat von Thüringen") was formed by the parliamentarians of the entry states in Weimar. The council confirmed the agreement with Meiningen and adopted the joint contract, which was ratified on January 4, 1920. In March/April of the same year, the right-wing Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch casted a shadow over the consultations on the constitutional draft that had been designed by Rosenthal and led Thuringia into a civil war situation and to the "Reichsexekution" of some Thuringian states and the "Freistaat" Gotha (the Reichsexekution was an intervention against a single state led by the central government in Berlin). The founding of the Land followed per Reich decree (April 23, 1920) and came into force May 1, 1920. The people's councils accepted the provisional constitution ("Landesverfassung") in May 1920.

On June 11, 1920, the people's council stopped operating, followed by the elections of the first parliament of Thuringia (Landtag von Thüringen) on June 20, 1920. Weimar became the designated capital, where the parliament came together for the first time.

The first government was formed November 10, 1920. In March 1921, the parliament passed the working constitution of the Land Thuringia and the law over the coat of arms (Landeswappen) with seven stars as symbols of the seven former states, now territories.

The Protestant church of Thuringia developed in a similar rhythm. In December 1919, the synods of the respective states decided to merge into one church – the Thuringian Protestant Church with its chair being in Eisenach. In October 1920, the first Protestant Church Congress was constituted. Four years later the Thuringian Protestant Church ratified its constitution.



Foto LZT

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller monument in front of the National Theatre in Weimar. The Weimar Constitution (1919) was deliberated in this building

Similar to the Prussian territories of Thuringia in the province Saxony, so remained the Protestant church congregations with the church province Saxony and the Protestant church of the Greiz territory independent until 1934. Despite the shortcomings and failure of the ambitious concept of a Greater Thuringia, the founding of the Land Thuringia and the Thuringian Protestant Church represents the most extensive territorial- and church restructuring in Germany since 1866.

Constitutional and Administrative Structure

The Weimar Republic was a democratic, federal state with extensive competencies – particularly on the economic, social, financial and political level. Consequently, the Länder lost on independence and state responsibilities. They were primarily concerned with policing, cultural and educational policies and the related administrative organisation. They became financially dependent on the Reich.

The constitutions of the Länder did not contain any civil rights, because they were seen as integral part of the Weimar constitution that already guaranteed a catalogue of civil rights. According to the regulations of the Weimar constitution of March 1921, the new state construct was a republican 'Freistaat' (Free State) and member of the German Reich with corresponding parliamentary structure and separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers. The official state name was "Land Thüringen". The Higher Regional Court and the Higher Administrative Court of Jena exercised the highest level of judicial authority. The 'Landtag' (parliament) held the legislative and budget powers. It also controlled the administration and appointed the government. At the top of the state ministry (Staatsministerium) stood a leading secretary of state. He was often responsible for several departments; the composition of those departments could change.

The former single state territories were represented in the government (Landesregierung) through state councillors. The territories had their own representations (Gebietsvertretungen) until 1923. By 1922, various communal and district administrations became standardized with the help of decrees that had been issued. The Regional Administration Act brought this process to an end in 1926. Within the framework of the Land, new organisations, institutions and structures developed, for example: the "Landessiedlungsgesellschaft" (regional settlement association) in 1921, the "Thüringische Staatsbank" (Thuringian state bank) in 1922, the "Elektrizitäts-Thüringenwerke AG" (public limited company for electricity) in 1923, and the "Thüringische Werke AG" as holding of smaller, regional companies in 1926.

In the industrial sector, a law of 1923 regulated the structure of the Chambers of Industry and Commerce (Industrie und Handelskammer, IHK) Weimar, Gera and Sonneberg. Weimar's Chamber of Industry and Commerce operated simultaneously as main office of the 1909 founded association of Thuringian Industrials (since 1922 it was called 'Association of Midland Industries'). Within the agricultural sector, the ThLB (Thüringischer Landbund) cooperated with the Chamber of Agriculture in Weimar ("Hauptlandwirtschaftskammer") united by many common interests. In 1920/21, an integration- and transition period was agreed, which ended with April 1, 1923. Shortly before, a decree had regulated the appointment of assets and liabilities with the former independent territories.

Until 1923, the Land Thuringia had taken on the responsibility for the cultural- and academic infrastructure and the communal agencies of the former single states. It expanded the capabilities of agencies and infrastructure, ensuring that those could easily adopt to new research- and development trends.

The Ernestine University of Jena became Thuringia's principle university, allowing it far-reaching academic self-determination and administration. The same was done with the "Staatliche Bauhaus Weimar", the statistic offices, the state archives and the remaining theatres and cultural property of the former dukes. The maintenance and the related financial responsibility of cultural property, such as theatres continued to be debated between Land and communal administrations. The Thuringian ministry of education performed a control function over the Carl-Zeiss institute in Jena and the universities (University of Jena, the 1925 founded Staatliche Bauhochschule Weimar, the school of fine arts associated with the Bauhaus-opponents founded 1921 and the Weimar music school of 1930).



Foto LZT

The 'Bauhaus' resided in Weimar in the time of 1919-1925 and soon became world-renowned

The Land took over the settlement agreements and deeds of arrangement of which the single states had agreed with the duchies in 1918/19. In October 1921, Thuringia came to an agreement with the former great dukedom Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach. It followed the foundation of the jointly administrated 'Wartburg trust'. The 'Freistaat' Gotha had expropriated the former ducal property in an unrecompensed manner and with help of a compulsory purchase act. This act was the only one of its kind across the Reich and was annuled by the Reich court in June 1925 and replaced with a settlement agreement.

Without Erfurt, the clandestine capital of Thuringia and without the central territories of the Prussian government district Erfurt, it appeared to many contemporary observers that the newly founded 'Land' was a provisional solution, finding itself in a transition period to a still propagated 'Great Thuringian Union' or unified administration of central Germany. With 10 towns, 15 Land districts and 1,6 Million inhabitants (1925), Thuringia belonged in terms of area- and population size to the mid- to smaller states of the German Reich. Among the then 18 Länder, Thuringia was far behind Prussia, Bavaria and Saxony and just narrowly behind Wurttemberg and Baden. It could position itself just in front of Hesse-Darmstadt at 6th position.

The highest tax authority of the Land Thuringia was the 'Landesfinanzamt' (regional tax administration) of Rudolstadt that had been established through a tax reform across the Reich in 1919/20. After the Reich-arbitration act (1923) the Land constituted the tariff-and arbitration district Thuringia (the arbitration tribunal was based in Weimar, later it was transferred to Erfurt) that integrated into the district 'Mitteldeutschland' (Central Germany).

Within the boundaries of the 1927/28 established labour-administration of the Reich, Thuringia belonged to the regional employment office 'Mitteldeutschland', based in Erfurt. Since 1920, the Land Thuringia and the Prussian Thuringia, the governmental district Erfurt (province Saxony) and the district of Schmalkalden (province Hesse-Nassau) formed the Reichstag constituency 12 with a population of 2,2 Million (1925). The population density distributed itself evenly, in form of a network of villages, many smaller and a few larger towns, by a slightly above-average degree of industrialisation and average degree of urbanisation. The Prussian Thuringia was marked by deeply engrained contrasts. Here the agricultural areas were widely spread, yet there were significantly less industrial areas and cities compared to the Land Thuringia. On the other hand, Prussian Erfurt was the only larger city with 140.000 inhabitants and the most significant traffic junction in the region. Erfurt also held distinct, well-developed, centralized and partly national, administrative, infrastructural, industrial and academic functions.

In contrast, Weimar as the capital of the Land counted only 46.000 inhabitants and the industrial- and university town Jena counted 52.500. Jena's bigger companies 'Zeiss' and 'Schott' operated on an international scale. These companies belonged to the prospering "new industries" and were supporting and leading the large-scale 'Saale' dam projects.

Despite this, Thuringia remained in the shadow of the dynamic, chemical- and energy producing/generating regions of central Germany, characterized by 19th century industrial standards and the economic consequences of the world war. Thuringia endured profound structural crisis and adjustment fatigue. It belonged long before 1929 to the crisis-ridden regions of Germany due to a general agricultural crisis (since 1927) that also affected the Thuringian agricultural sector.

Electoral Behaviour and Regional Politics

Similar to the first Reichstag elections on June 6, the elections to the first Thuringian parliament (Landtag) on June 20, 1920 were conducted under the shock and repercussions of the Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch. Both elections showed a dramatic shift to the right in the electoral behaviour of the bourgeois, landowning middle class. The DDP (German Democratic Party, 4 mandates) suffered great losses to the DVP (German People's Party, 8 mandates).

At the edge of the rightist block the ThLB, which took part in the election for the first time, overtook the DNVP (German National People's Party, 4 mandates) and reached the same number of mandates as the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany, 11 mandates). In significant contrast to the trend across the Reich, the USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party) became the strongest party in terms of voters and mandates (15). However, the USPD disintegrated soon after. One part of the former USPD members joined the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) at the end of 1920, despite the KPD not having any mandates. With a tight majority of mandates for the right-wing and center-parties against to the SPD and the USPD, the DDP was able to tip the scales. Only with extensive efforts, it was possible to form a minority coalition government of DDP and SPD led by Paulssen (DDP) and tolerated by the USPD. The coalition was proven to be unstable and failed after only 6 months – the parliament dissolved prematurely. The elections of the second Thuringian parliament on September 11, 1921 led to a mandate majority for the SPD (13), USPD (9) and KPD (6) and therefore to a SPD-USPD coalition tolerated by the KPD. This coalition was chaired by August Frölich (SPD) and the resolute school reformer Max Greil (USPD/SPD) as secretary of education.

Similar to Braunschweig and Saxony, it became evident that left-wing, republican reform politics could be a possibility to consolidate the Länder and posed an alternative to right-wing pressures within national politics. This meant a two-dimensional task for the Frölich-Greil government. It had to continually push the building process of the Land itself, and ensure the strengthening of unity and the fragile political culture in Thuringia. Therefore the government emphasized civic education and information; republican, constitutional patriotism and an appropriate, commemorative culture. They appointed republican and socialist officials, prohibited extreme right-wing organisations after the Rathenau-murder in 1922 and attempted to modernize the structure and staff situation of the higher education system. This way Thuringia developed to the center of reform in the early Weimar Republic. The series of reforms were partly coordinated with Saxony and Braunschweig and opened new perspectives for the young German democracy, yet became an increasingly difficult stand. The success of the reform series depended on the acceptance and behaviour of the KPD that was torn between shaping developments and instigating left-wing coups. Secondly, it was confronted with the bitter resistance of the rightist parties, of the establishment, of the bourgeois and educated elites and the conservative majority of university professors, particularly at the philosophical faculty of the Landes university and last but not least of the Bauhaus-opponents, who extended their attacks against this 'pinnacle' of cultural modernism/modern arts to the level of the Land.

Finding itself in this political dilemma and confronted with this 'unholy alliance' of its right-wing opponents, the situation of the Thuringian socialist government (Landesregierung) worsened dramatically, particularly in the year of crisis 1923. Its opponents forced the Reich to intervene.

The fact that Frölich formed a coalition with the communists (KPD), in order to expand his governmental basis, appeared to be particularly provoking to the opposition. Beside the threat of a right-wing putsch, a left-wing coup was also to be feared in the center of Germany, mainly because some members of the KPD were striving for a "German October" with potential help from the Soviets. The leadership of the German army demanded the Reich's intervention in Saxony and Thuringia, yet blocked the same measures in the case of Bavaria. Being under such great pressure the central government in Berlin ordered the intervention of the troops and withdrew all executive powers from the Land-governments of Saxony and Thuringia. It appointed a commissioner in Saxony and convened committees of enquiry in Thuringia. Only the exit of the KPD from the government (November 12), the resignation of the Frölich-Greil government (December 7) and the dissolution of the

parliament saved Thuringia from formal exekution' (unlike Saxony). Once again the elections were brought forward and the mandates for the 3rd Thuringian Parliament were extended to 72 on February 10, 1924, all this still within a state of emergency with special provisions and regulations. The parties of the "Thüringischen Ordnungsbundes" (Thuringian Union for Order, included ThLB, DNVP, DVP, DDP) received 35, the through the remaining members of the USPD extended VSPD achieved 17, the KPD 13 and the united National Socialist groups 7 mandates.



Foto LZT

The former building of the Thuringian Parliament (Landtag), where parliamentary debates took place in the period of 1919-1933

For the first time it was possible that the National Socialist entered the parliament - soon after the success in Thuringia this was also to happen in other parliaments and even in the Reichstag. On February 24, 1924, the 'Thüringer Ordnungsbund' was able to constitute a minority government led by Richard Leutheusser (DVP) and supported by the National Socialists. For a moment, the change of political constellations and the era of the "Thüringer Ordnungsbundes" seemed to have a calming effect in a phase of relative stabilisation in the

Weimar Republic. Ultimately, it was proven to be disastrous. The “Ordnungsbund” – government created a distinctively different political and cultural climate and weakened the already meagerly developed republican, political culture in the Land. The government dismissed republican and socialist officials and drove the Bauhaus out of Weimar. Until 1923, National Socialist groups were operating in opposition and as subculture, now they became the chance to develop and display their radical ideology in Thuringia.

Adolf Hitler was allowed to speak publicly, despite his national ban on public speaking. In 1924, Erich Ludendorff's “Deutsch-Völkische Freiheitspartei” and the newly found NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party) conducted their Reich-party conferences in Weimar. The NSDAP-district Thuringia was established in 1925, after a few conceptual and staffing errors. It advanced, since 1927 under the leadership of the new “Gauleiter” Fritz Sauckel, to the most reliable districts of Hitler's party that was busy to reorganize itself after the failure of the Munich putsch in 1923. Hitler's party was feverishly preparing for the legal take-over of state power. In 1927, the era of the “Ordnungsbund” came to an end. The only regular elections of the 4th Thuringian parliament strengthened the position of the left-wing parties and weakened the union of ThLB, DNVP, DVP. Within a very short period of time, three governments were formed and dissolved due to unstable party-political conditions: the government led by Leutheusser in October 1928 and the governments led by Paulssen of April and October 1929. The parliament was dissolved repeatedly and re-elections were held.

The re-elections took place after the outbreak of the world economic crisis and just before the political crisis of the Weimar Republic, followed by the transformation to a presidential system. Similar to other parliamentary and communal elections, this election signaled the dangers of the NSDAP and its attraction to bourgeois, landowning sections of the electorate that caused a landslide election victory for the NSDAP at the Reichstag elections in September 1930. With the election of the Thuringian parliament, the NSDAP managed to triple its votes at the expense of the traditional parties. With 6 members of parliament the NSDAP was able to tip the scales and easily change the balance of power. This constellation was an opportunity for Hitler and the NSDAP Reichs-leadership to test the waters on a regional level for the planned, legal take-over of power - it was the debut.

On January 23, 1930, a coalition of ThLB, DVP, WP (Economic Party of the Middle-Classes) and NSDAP led by Erwin Baum (ThLB) became reality. Within the coalition, the NSDAP could appoint one state councillor and took on the key areas of responsibility, of cultural and educational policy under Wilhelm Frick. This was the first time that the NSDAP was part of a

government and it made sure to maximize this opportunity. W. Frick offered the author and racist propagandist Hans F.K. Günther a chair at the University of Jena, and the radical nationalist architect and critic Paul Schultze-Naumburg the top position of the architecture and art schools of Weimar (Vereinigte Weimarer Architektur- und Kunstschulen). Frick set an example for the Reich with his cultural- and educational-, administration- and staff policies and prepared in many regards the ground for the latter power take-over-, "Gleichschaltung"- and ethnic cleansing practices common to the Nazi dictatorship, without suffering any significant intervention by the Reich. (Gleichschaltung was the Nazi method of bringing everything into line from administrative structures to the elimination of the opposition).

Although the 'Thuringian experiment' could only be maintained for the period of one year, it managed to catch on and spread into other regions. Just one year later, a similar coalition was formed in Braunschweig. In April 1931, the Baum-Frick coalition government failed. The 'skeleton' government led by Baum had to resign and dissolve the parliament prematurely in July 1932.

In the early elections of the 6th Thuringian parliament, which took place simultaneously to the Reichstag election, the NSDAP managed to get 42.5% of the votes. Like in Anhalt, Oldenburg and Mecklenburg-Schwerin, it came to the formation of a government under the NSDAP 'Gauleiter' Fritz Sauckel, supported by ThLB and DNVP in August 1932.

Early, even before the Nazi take-over, Thuringia belonged to the Länder governed by the National Socialists in the Reich.

Herausgeber: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen

Regierungsstraße 73, 99084 Erfurt

www.lzt.thueringen.de

Author: Jürgen John

Translation: Julia Palme

2008