



## German History in Documents and Images

Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19–1933

Felix Gilbert on Berlin in the 1920s: The Weimar Generation (Retrospective Account, 1988)

Felix Gilbert's mother, Cécile Mendelssohn Bartholdy, was a member of the distinguished and highly regarded Mendelssohn family. As a result, Gilbert grew up within the rarified milieu of Berlin's bourgeois elite. In this excerpt from his memoirs, he describes the political and social factors that shaped the outlook of the young "Weimar Generation."

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Although the circle of contemporaries in which I lived was divided by professional activities and interests, there was a strong bond among us. We were—very definitely—a postwar generation. We felt we were different from those who had grown up in the pseudo-splendor of the Wilhelminian Empire and had taken part in the war. We actually disliked stories about war experiences, although we were well aware that the soldiers had only done what duty demanded. But in our view the war had been a questionable business, and we considered it better to be silent about the role one had played in the war than to boast about it. We were pacifists, or at least pacifistically inclined, and happy that we were no longer living in a monarchy.

At the same time, however, formed in the turbulent years of defeat, revolution, civil war, and inflation, we had little belief in the duration of stability. The one certainty we had was that nothing was certain. Since none of the political movements that had started with the end of the war had fully reached its goal, we wondered whether unrest and turmoil was really abating or only reassembling for a new attack. On the other hand, we also differed from the generation that followed ours: those born in the second decade of the twentieth century. They grew up in the relative security of the second half of the twenties, and were much less conscious of the fragility of the social world than my generation. They were more demanding in what they considered their due, or Germany's due.

Nevertheless, the critical difference was whether one had grown up before 1914 or after. We felt strongly that the postwar generation was something new. We enjoyed shocking our elders by not wearing hats in the summer, by not wearing tuxedos when we went out in the evenings, and by sitting for long hours on high chairs in bars instead of going to suitable wine restaurants. We liked to live our own lives, not bound to firm, tight schedules.

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