

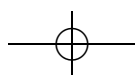
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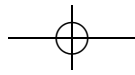
The Weimar Background

I

On 27 December 1918, just a few weeks after Germany's defeat, the scientist Richard Semon shot himself, wrapped in a German Imperial flag, in his Munich study. He was allegedly depressed by the German defeat.¹ Justifying one's suicide with reference to the defeat of 1918 was common among nationalist men in the war's immediate aftermath, reflecting despair at Germany's failure. In a similar case, Karl, the older brother of Baldur von Schirach, the later leader of the Hitler Youth, shot himself in November 1918. Allegedly, as Baldur von Schirach wrote in his autobiography in which he tried to justify why he became a Nazi, Karl committed suicide because he did not want to 'survive Germany's misfortune'.² For these suicides, the German defeat, the revolution of 1918, and the shift from a largely authoritarian monarchy to a seemingly chaotic republic amounted to a vast upheaval of traditional norms and values. Their known world had ceased to exist. Here was suicide presented as an act of patriotism, reflecting the military tradition of shooting oneself to maintain one's honour.

After 1918, contemporaries generally believed that times of general uncertainty, political disorder, and socio-economic hardship inevitably led to rising suicide levels. This obsession with rising suicide rates helped undermine the stability of the Weimar Republic. The Weimar background is crucial to an understanding of Nazi attitudes towards suicide in the Third Reich. The Nazis and other extremist political parties attacked the Weimar Republic by pointing to the high suicide rates. But not only extremist parties shared the belief that Weimar Germany was doomed with record suicide levels. Popular newspapers and ordinary people increasingly shared this notion. In order to understand how this assumption gradually turned into a mantra, we need to begin with a brief analysis of suicide levels and





their contemporary perceptions. Then we will turn to various discourses on suicide and finally to individual acts of suicide.

At the turn of the century, newspapers began to link suicide with urbanization and modernization. Newspaper articles on suicide had carried headlines such as ‘Tragedy in the Big City’ or ‘Defeated in the Struggle for Survival’.³ Many thought that the defeat and revolution of 1918 and the Versailles Treaty had overthrown the existing order.

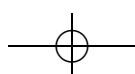
Observers pointed to rising suicide levels from the mid-1920s onwards. ‘Our country has been hit by an alarming suicide epidemic, which has reached a climax that has to be stopped by every means ... This is yet another representation of the enormously tragic fate of the German *Volk*.’⁴ Thus the Catholic *Kölner Tageblatt* claimed on 17 November 1925. Generally, contemporary observers not only blamed the defeat of 1918, the inflation and the Versailles Treaty for the increasing suicide levels, but also the impact of modernity and secularization.

Things were getting worse and suicide rates rose. The following 1925 article in *Der Berliner Westen*, a local paper, was typical:

In greater Berlin ... the terrible suicide epidemic ... is consistently causing casualties ... and it can be safely assumed that our people have not yet become so brutalized and indifferent, despite war and bloodshed, mass murder, and revolution that voluntary death does not move people and genuine philanthropists to help ... Misery is great, and voluntary death persists. Each hour of failure makes us guilty, since other people’s suffering, even if caused by themselves, is a concern for everyone ...⁵

Acts of suicide should thus have prompted other Germans to help each other and strengthen their sense of community to prevent others from killing themselves. The statistics, however, suggested that this did not happen or, if it did, it did not work. Suicide rates carried on rising. The general rise, however, concealed wide variations between different age groups, and within these, between men and women.

During the First World War, the suicide rate dropped. According to Durkheim, wars have a lower suicide rate, since almost everyone is drawn into the war effort. This mobilization prompts a higher degree of social integration.⁶ Some argued that during the war, the state authorities in charge of registering suicides did not have the necessary staff resources to do so adequately. Writing in 1940, at a time when many Germans glorified the experience of the First World War, the psychiatrist Hans W. Gruhle



dismissed this claim and commended the 'great communal experience' of the war.⁷ Of course, during the war, front-line soldiers could easily commit suicide by exposing themselves to enemy fire, and such cases would not be recorded as suicide. This might offer a partial explanation as to why suicide levels fell during the war. Nevertheless, the rise from 1917 to 1919 and then 1921 is still striking, but we cannot say with complete certainty that the war alone really led to lower suicide levels.

A detailed study of suicide compiled by the municipal statistical office of Frankfurt am Main in 1932 revealed that suicide had become a more common way of dying since the end of the First World War. In 1913, only 1.15 per cent of all deaths in Germany had been suicides. But in 1931, 2.5 per cent of all deaths were suicides. August Busch, the author of this study, explained this rise with reference to a drop in other causes of death, such as tuberculosis, in the city, so that the usefulness of this particular measure is questionable.⁸

Female levels were much lower than male levels. However, throughout the Weimar years, female suicide rates were much higher than they had been in 1913. Male rates only began to rise significantly above pre-war levels in the final years of the Republic, despite a slight jump in 1926. More than 2 million young men had died on the battlefields and in the trenches, so elderly people, generally more prone to commit suicide than young people, formed a higher proportion of the general population.⁹ With the deaths of so many young men, the surplus of women in the population increased.

The unemployed were more likely to kill themselves than others, many commentators thought.¹⁰ In particular, unemployed men, especially fathers of families, were more likely to commit suicide than single women without a job. For men with families, unemployment did not just mean the simple loss of earnings. It had much wider social ramifications. Jobless fathers of families felt unable to fulfil their role as breadwinners for their families. Such men thought that they had failed to conform to social expectations about what it meant to be a man.¹¹ In this devastating situation, many men committed suicide. Since the winter of 1925–6, unemployment figures had been rising, and for the rest of its existence, the Weimar Republic suffered from high unemployment. From 1929 millions of Germans were unemployed. The existing system of support could not cope, not even after crisis relief (*Krisenunterstützung*) for those ineligible for unemployment relief (*Erwerbslosenfürsorge*) was introduced in 1926. Most of the long-term

unemployed thus had to rely on welfare relief, paid by local authorities, which was substantially lower than unemployment benefits. These cuts in welfare provision created a feeling of hopelessness and despair and prompted, as we will see, many welfare recipients to threaten to commit suicide. Victimization was a widespread feeling in Weimar Germany. Ordinary people saw themselves as victims of insufficient welfare provisions and the political and economic uncertainty, while their need for welfare support constantly rose at the same time.¹²

Of course, unemployment alone does not explain suicidal behaviour.¹³ Nevertheless, it seems obvious that it must have been a factor in the rising suicide rates of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1932, the medical doctor Karl Freudenberg argued that the overall suicide rate had not increased since 1918 as a result of the inflation and mass unemployment, but rather because of the different age structure, with more elderly people living in Germany, and a lower birth rate.¹⁴ Freudenberg commented on the suicide rate among the male population of employment age: 'Despite the especially adverse conditions, the suicide rate is thus hardly higher than in 1913 ... This should prove that the main reasons for suicide do not lie in the environment.'¹⁵ A breakdown of suicide levels by age and sex surely invalidates this argument.

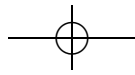
The following statistical analysis presents a broad survey of the quantitative extent of suicide in Weimar Germany. It furthermore enables us to identify potential distortions of suicide rates by commentators like Freudenberg and their reasons for deliberate misinterpretations of suicide rates. While conceding that many suicides were due to economic problems, an article in the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* on 29 January 1932 concluded, based on a recent survey by the Berlin Statistical Office, that 'these tragic reactions to a desperate economic situation have not increased so much in the years of crisis as is commonly assumed'.¹⁶ A closer analysis of suicide by age and sex yields some further conclusions. The more advanced the age, the higher the suicide rate.¹⁷ Suicide rates among young women did not increase significantly under the Weimar Republic: indeed they even fell slightly down to 1924. Although female suicide rates were higher than they had been before the war, they did not seem to be much affected by the ups and downs of the Weimar economy, except perhaps at the very end.¹⁸

Among 15- to 30-year-olds, both male and female rates were relatively consistent with pre-war levels. The lack of increasing rates among 15- to 30-year olds may conceal an increase among those in the twenties (a more

precise generational breakdown is unfortunately not available). Rates were generally very low among adolescents. Young men's energies may have been galvanised up to 1923 by crime and street violence in a general context in which political activity was on the rise among the young, although they probably did not affect a majority of them.

The increase in suicide levels in 1924 among young men was most probably due to the deflationary economic reforms that had brought the inflation to an end and the resulting sharp rise in unemployment. It became suddenly much more difficult to find a job.¹⁹ Men of working age had a higher suicide rate in 1924 and thereafter because of unemployment. Women's suicide rates were higher in the 15- to 30- age bracket during the inflation, when women's domestic role of finding food and shopping had come under considerable pressure, and jumped in 1923 when this role became almost impossible to fulfil. In 1924, the economic deflation and the consequent rise in unemployment for men coupled with the mass dismissal of female 'double-earners' had an almost equally severe effect. The great majority of young women still worked and earned wages only before they got married, so this age-group was especially vulnerable. Rising levels of suicide towards the end of the Republic may well have reflected rising female unemployment levels.²⁰

Suicide rates in the age group 30–60, where most men were working, or expected to work, and most women were bringing up children, or were engaged in the part-time, casual labour market, or both, were somewhat higher among those aged 30–60 than among 15- to 30-year olds in the early 1920s but became a great deal higher during the Great Depression. Rates among men rose in 1924, levelling off in 1926–7, and after a small decline, increased again from 1929 onwards. This correlates neatly with the rise in unemployment during the post-inflationary stabilization, the years of relative prosperity from 1925 to 1928, and the sharp rise in unemployment from 1929. The mass unemployment from 1929 until 1932 is clearly behind the rise in rates among 30- to 60-year olds. So huge was unemployment that older dependants were now suffering too. Suicide rates of males at working age were substantially lower than in 1913 until the mass unemployment of the Great Depression in 1930. From 1924 to 1931, suicide rates of females at working age were much higher than in 1913 due to the rise in female employment and subsequent unemployment. Suicide rates also increased among women of working age, reflecting female employment patterns and a new understanding of gender roles. The female unemployment rate rose,

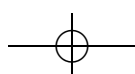


though not as sharply as among men, during the Great Depression.²¹ This was also a difficult time for housewives, with the husband or father often unemployed, and economic crisis hitting the household.

Suicide rates in the age bracket 60–70 were generally two to three times higher than those in the age group 30–60; the gap narrowed during the Great Depression but was still substantial. The same pattern, though less marked than among the younger age groups, is noticeable here too, namely a decline in the ‘good years’ of the Weimar economy and a rise during the Great Depression. The same factors were probably at work here too—unemployment and living standards. Many of the people behind these statistics (those 65 and younger) were still of working age and were hit by unemployment, perhaps more severely than younger people as companies tended to make elderly, rather than young people, redundant. Women were hit particularly hard. Female pensioners were affected badly by the inflation of 1923, when many lost their assets and during the Great Depression when the government cut pensions.

Among those aged 70 and above, where almost everybody was a pensioner or a dependant, suicide rates rose sharply during the inflation. This rise most probably reflected the severe economic difficulties this caused for these people, with savings and pensions losing all value. The suicide rate here in 1923 was extraordinarily high among men in particular. Here too there was a decline in the mid-1920s and then a rise in the Great Depression years, though by no means as striking as that of the inflation.

There was also a religious divide of German suicide rates. In Bavaria, largely Protestant areas such as Middle Franconia had substantially lower rates than Catholic districts, such as Upper Bavaria. Probably trying to prevent people from comparing Bavarian suicide levels to others, the Bavarian Statistical Office did not publish suicide rates, but only absolute numbers. This makes a comparison to other *Länder* impossible. Some comparative material is available in the national statistics however. Protestant Saxony’s suicide rates were almost twice as high as Catholic Bavaria’s. Saxony was one of the most densely populated and most heavily industrialized German states and had traditionally carried very high suicide rates.²² Gruhle’s monograph on suicide offers some revealing numbers for Bavaria. From 1919 until 1921, there were 19.6 suicides per 100,000 of the population in Middle Franconia, similar to national levels. Only 27.01 per cent of the Mid-Franconian population was Catholic. In Upper Bavaria, with a



91.06 per cent Catholic population, on the other hand, there were only 16.8 suicides per 100,000 at the same time. Presumably, Munich suicides made up the largest proportion of Upper Bavarian suicides. Indeed, in 1922, 136 of the 251 Upper Bavarian suicides took place in Munich. Contemporaries saw big cities, as noted earlier, as creating a suicidal environment.²³ Furthermore, Gruhle noted: 'In the countryside, it is much easier to conceal suicides and to pretend accidents and illness, while in cities, the statistical registration of suicide is more exact.'²⁴

Were Catholic suicide rates generally lower than Protestant rates? In Baden, a confessionally mixed area (38.2 per cent of Badeners were Protestant and 58.4 per cent Catholic), the average suicide rate for the years 1927 to 1935 was 31.2 per 100,000 for Protestants and a mere 18 for Catholics. Protestant levels broadly reflected the national average, while Catholic rates were substantially below it.²⁵ Protestant areas thus carried higher suicide rates than Catholic areas. The Catholic proscription against suicide was so strong that it either prevented Catholics from killing themselves or prompted relatives and doctors to conceal suicides.

Rural areas generally displayed lower suicide rates than towns. In the rural Buchen district of Baden, the average suicide rate for the years 1926 to 1935 was 10.3 per 100,000. The corresponding rate for the heavily industrialized and urban Mannheim district was 32.7.²⁶ Gruhle analysed suicides in Prussian towns and concluded that the denser the population, the greater the suicide levels. In 1924, Berlin's suicide rate was 45.4, while the average Prussian town with a population of 15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants had an average suicide rate of 22 per 100,000.²⁷ This rate still exceeded rural suicide rates. Gruhle blamed cities for causing higher suicide rates because of 'industrialization, more conflict and the dissolution of traditional milieus (church) and ... dubious, morally unstable persons'.²⁸ His statement reflected the anti-modern and anti-urban sentiment many contemporary observers shared, above all if they were writing in the Third Reich like Gruhle. Yet suicide rates were higher in towns than in villages. In villages, religious affiliations were generally greater than in cities, which might have prevented people from killing themselves.²⁹

Official suicide levels rose in the Weimar Republic. Amidst the ubiquity of public suicide discourses (discussed below), authorities may well have been more inclined to report suicides than they had been before 1918. However, the available evidence suggests that Weimar authorities largely used the same bureaucratic practices when compiling suicide rates as they

had done in Imperial Germany.³⁰ The increase was therefore a real one. Female suicide levels rose considerably. Socio-economic factors clearly did matter. Suicide statistics reflected these changes, which affected people's everyday lives. This rather detailed statistical analysis has identified broader motivations for suicide like socio-economic change and unemployment. Yet these statistics hardly shed light on people's personal motivations for killing themselves.

II

How did contemporaries deal with the problem of suicide and how did they interpret the statistics? Did these contemporary views on suicide have any bearing on actual individual suicides? The 1924 official government statistics, published by the Reich Statistical Office, claimed 'that suicide is first and foremost caused by insanity, neuropathy and physical illness. Thus... the frequency of suicide is only to some extent due to changing socio-economic circumstances.'³¹ In Weimar Germany, Social Darwinist views had widespread currency among the medical and criminological professions. Doctors such as Freudenberg often blamed inherited moral and physical weaknesses rather than socio-economic factors for the increase in suicide rates. These ideas date back to the late-nineteenth century when Social Darwinists such as the Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli argued that suicide was 'an effect of the struggle for existence and of human selection, which works according to the laws of evolution'.³² Elite views had gradually shifted. Rather than condemning suicide as a crime against oneself and against the supreme authority of God over life and death, suicide was widely coming to be seen as a biological and hereditarian problem. Not all Weimar commentators shared this diagnosis, of course, and many continued to see suicide as a socially determined problem.³³

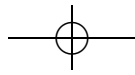
In an article published in 1926, for example, Karl Freudenberg was forced to concede that the suicide rate of men aged over 70 years had risen considerably during the inflation of 1923 'because of assets that had withered away'.³⁴ Socio-economic factors could thus not be entirely dismissed. Another contemporary observer opined:

It is not... the working class who... had to cope with little or no means at all in all these years, that has the strongest tendency to suicide, but the middle

class, which has seen better days, but was then suddenly impoverished by war, revolution and inflation and now has to face nothingness with no means and no work.³⁵

Although this view was widely shared among the middle classes at the time, there is no evidence that proportionally more middle-class people than workers committed suicide. A study of files held by the Berlin First Aid Office (*Rettungsamt*) on suicide and attempted suicide between April 1923 and March 1927 noted that suicides among the working class were much more likely to be registered by the police or the *Rettungsamt* than suicides among the middle or upper classes. Among higher echelons of society, relatives usually called private doctors to avoid the stigmatization of having a suicide in one's family.³⁶ Working-class pensioners with no assets or extra income other than their pension found themselves in total poverty. But the middle classes usually did not lose everything during the inflation. Middle-class people lost money invested in war bonds, but those who had borrowed some money before the inflation were now able to repay their debts for virtually nothing. In many cases, these two situations affected the same person.³⁷ So the incomes of the middle classes were not destroyed and there seems no socio-economic reason why their suicide rates should have been high.

Class determined the way in which people killed themselves, some observers claimed. Taking an average count for the years from 1924 until 1931, 37 per cent of manual workers and craftsmen who killed themselves in Frankfurt during this time hanged themselves, while 40 per cent of white-collar workers and civil servants who committed suicide during the same period shot themselves.³⁸ In Berlin, working-class suicides tended to gas themselves, according to the Berlin First Aid Office's files on suicide and attempted suicide.³⁹ In Kiel, between 1919 and 1921, male suicides tended to kill themselves by hanging and shooting, while most female suicides gassed or drowned themselves.⁴⁰ Many male suicides still had guns from the war, of course; and shooting oneself left one with almost no chance of survival and had very masculine connotations. Female suicides, on the other hand, preferred methods of suicide that still left them with a slight chance of survival, such as drowning themselves or slitting their wrists. Women were less determined to die than men, a contemporary male doctor claimed, and were therefore inclined to use 'soft' means of suicide.⁴¹ Means of suicide were thus gender-specific as were murder methods.⁴²



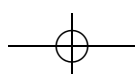
The terminology people used also reflected contemporary attitudes towards suicide. In German, there are at least two words for suicide. A distinction is made between *Freitod* (voluntary death) and *Selbstmord* (self-murder). *Freitod* has positive connotations, suggesting that the act of suicide is rational and voluntary. *Selbstmord* implies negative associations with murder or homicide. In 1933, the philologist Karl Baumann traced the origins of *Selbstmord* in the Christian taboo placed on suicide, evoking the idea that only God was allowed to decide between life and death. In contrast, *Freitod*, a term first used by the Austrian philosopher Fritz Mauthner in 1906, was a secular term.⁴³ In 1911, Mauthner had declared: ‘Against the older term, which suggests criminal law, I prefer the new, if not entirely neutral, expression *Freitod* because so-called ‘self-murder’ is indeed not an unnatural death.’⁴⁴ Karl Baumann declared that *Freitod* was ‘an almost symbolical expression of the complete secularization of religious and moral culture’,⁴⁵ and that it had been previously used in a different form, yet with a somewhat similar intention, by leading proponents of Social Darwinism such as Ernst Haeckel. In 1905, Haeckel had declared, brushing aside any Christian concerns:

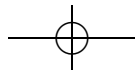
Voluntary death through which man brings his unbearable suffering to an end is in fact an act of redemption. Therefore, one should designate this act, which is also carried out with [the precepts of] reason, as self-redemption (*Autolyse*) and view it with the sincerest sense of Christian charity. We should not stigmatize it with the hypocritical scorn of our rotten morality.⁴⁶

This adoption of the concept of voluntary death by Social Darwinists would lead one to expect that the Nazis, generally believing in a vulgarized form of Social Darwinism, preferred *Freitod*. This was not so, however. Quoting a speech Hitler gave at the inaugural session of the Nazi charity (*Winterhilfswerk*) campaign in the October 1934, Baumann suggested that Hitler had denounced the notion of *Freitod* as the result of Jewish degeneracy. Commenting on suicide in the Weimar Republic Hitler insisted: ‘These irresponsible Jewish authors of this age described this abjectly as *Freitod*.’⁴⁷

In the Weimar Republic, the social democrats preferred *Freitod*, reflecting their generally secular ideology. The term was thus not necessarily Social Darwinistic. It was also an affirmation of agency, reason, and freedom. Leo Rosenthal, a social democratic writer, declared in 1924:

We socialists subscribe to the view that we bear within ourselves our own destinies and that we are the masters and judges over our own lives. For us,



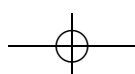


therefore, there is only one way to adjudicate the question whether one may consciously seek out voluntary death. The inalienable right to bring one's existence to a voluntary end belongs to any person who cannot be helped by other means.⁴⁸

In an opinion poll which Karl Baumann took in late 1932, Paul Löbe, SPD president of the Reichstag until 1932, also argued in favour of the word *Freitod*.⁴⁹ The usage of the various terms for suicide was divided along ideological lines. Those arguing for an anti-individualist notion of the body—such as the Nazis, the churches and the communists—dismissed *Freitod*, while those in favour of individualism welcomed it. Karl Baumann conceded that despite its ideological implications, *Freitod* gained more widespread currency in the Weimar years. The press, including the liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the *Vossische Zeitung*, as well as the communist *Rote Fahne*, and the socialist *Vorwärts* used *Selbstmord* and *Freitod* as synonyms.⁵⁰ Thus, in their everyday use, the two notions became blurred in the 1920s and 1930s.

III

Politicians and political commentators referred to suicide to illustrate the ostensible decline of morality in the Weimar Republic. This could take various forms. Looking back at the purportedly chaotic Weimar Republic in a 1935 publication, the right-wing commentator Roderich von Ungern-Sternberg blamed 'rising expectations' and 'the lack of endurance' of the German population in times of crisis for the increasing suicide levels. He accused the feminist movement and its demands for female emancipation of being behind the rise in female suicides: 'The rising frequency of suicide among women does not reflect well on the modern women's movement.'⁵¹ Another observer blamed 'seduction, which is much more widespread these days' for the increased suicide rate among young women, reflecting a widespread concern amongst conservatives about the freer sexual mores of the roaring twenties.⁵² An article in the *Deutsche Zeitung* in May 1931 blamed the 'German suicide misery' (*Deutsches Selbstmordelend*) on the Brüning government's welfare cuts by Emergency Decree. The article warned: 'The coming years will probably yield still further increases in suicide rates, brought on by the expanding economic privation.'⁵³ Supporters of the Weimar Republic, on the other hand, tended to reject



any connection with suicide rates. The social democratic *Abend* declared in 1931: 'Even now one can by no means speak of a suicide epidemic.'⁵⁴ Many commentators perceived Weimar Germany as an inherently suicidal environment irrespective of statistics. Commentators used suicide rates to attack trends of Weimar society, politics and culture they did not like—such as female emancipation. They were able to point to rising suicide rates as evidence for their claim that things were getting worse.

On the Left, writers predictably blamed suicides on the capitalist system. In Josef Maria Frank's novel *Unus multorum* (One of many), published in 1925 by the SPD-owned Dietz publishing house, an unemployed and impoverished artist kills himself in Berlin by jumping into the river Spree near the Museum Island. A rich banker, on his way to a restaurant, sees the man on the bridge, gets out of his car, and is handed a suicide note addressed 'To the last man who has seen me alive', before the suicide takes his fatal leap. Reading this letter at the restaurant, the banker learns that he himself was to blame for the suicide, since he had refused to give a loan to the artist. When he tells his friends at the restaurant, the suicide's girlfriend overhears this and shoots him in revenge. For Frank, suicide was clearly a result of the increasing social problems of the Weimar Republic, for which he blamed the capitalists.⁵⁵ Unemployment also figured in filmic representations of suicide. In *Kuhle Wampe* (1931/2), a film for which Bertolt Brecht wrote the script, suicide was portrayed as the last way out for unemployed workers. The first scene entitled 'One unemployed less' (*Ein Arbeitsloser weniger*) begins with a man jumping out of a window to his death. It is not the individual that is to blame for his suicide in this film, but society more generally and capitalist exploitation in particular.⁵⁶

Newspapers from across the political spectrum also ran headlines on the allegedly direct relationship between unemployment and suicide. The communist *Welt am Abend*, owned by Willi Münzenberg, widely known as 'the Red Millionaire',⁵⁷ reported suicides on an almost daily basis from the late 1920s onwards, reflecting the upsurge in unemployment and the increasingly hostile attitude of the more and more Stalinist KPD towards the Weimar Republic. It had already made the point on 12 July 1924 in an article 'On Suicide, Unemployment and Hunger', published as the post-inflation cutbacks were taking a grip and suicide rates among men of working age were rising.⁵⁸ On 14 January 1931, the front page story of the *Welt am Abend* was on 'Suicide at the Labour Exchange'. An unemployed

man had swallowed some cyanide at the Spandau labour office, for which the *Welt am Abend* blamed ‘chicanery by the authorities’. This perception was widespread among the communists and the many unemployed men who, at the end of the Weimar Republic, were the main supporters of the KPD.⁵⁹ On 31 March 1932, the headline ran: ‘12 suicides within 30 hours. Causes: deprivation, fear of dismissal, hunger’. The sensationalist article culminated in the claim that the KPD would eliminate the problem of suicides, which were, in the vast majority, motivated by economic deprivation:

Hardly an hour passes any longer without someone in Berlin taking his life. Yesterday, out of desperation, seven people voluntarily left this world, including married couples, an unemployed engineer, and an eighteen-year-old girl. By late this morning, five additional suicides had already been reported. Thus in less than thirty hours, there were no fewer than eleven suicides in the nation’s capital... Suicide levels increase, as does the misery, since suicides result mostly as a consequence of the politics of the lesser of two evils, of emergency decrees, downsizing, and mass-unemployment. Today and tomorrow, welfare support for the poorest of the poor is being cut, even as rents rise. The time has come for everyone to use the upcoming elections to put an end to this situation.⁶⁰

Continuing its attack on the Weimar Republic and capitalism, the same newspaper claimed on 30 May 1932:

The gruesome figures are incriminating... Over the last four months, 683 people in Berlin brought their lives to an end. 18,000 people within 365 days. This means that every day in the Germany of emergency decrees, roughly 60 people throw their lives away. But suicide is not the answer. Only the struggle of the working people following the example of the Soviet Union can bring bread and work for all.⁶¹

While 18,625 suicides were indeed officially recorded in Germany in 1931,⁶² the paper’s claim that this meant an average of 60 suicides per day was rounded up for effect (in fact, the daily average was only 51). But this propagandistic use of suicide statistics continued nonetheless after Franz von Papen’s right-wing cabinet cut state pensions in early July 1932.⁶³ Three people killed themselves almost immediately as the *Welt am Abend* claimed.⁶⁴ Only a Stalinist regime could solve Germany’s problems, declared the paper. It is impossible to verify the implicit claim that the Soviet Union had a lower suicide rate than capitalist states, since the Soviets refused to publish their suicide rates, following the assertion that Communism had

overcome the problem of suicide.⁶⁵ The *Welt am Abend* wanted to appeal to its readers with reference to a general suicidal atmosphere, symbolizing perhaps also the KPD's view that capitalism was self-destructing in an orgy of violence and despair.

KPD politicians took a similar view on suicide, particularly after the communist leadership had decided in 1929 to use the Reichstag as a stage for denouncing the Weimar Republic, its democratic system of government, and its main supporters, the social democrats.⁶⁶ In a Reichstag debate on the problems of the German economy on 18 June 1929, the communist deputy Ende insisted:

The issue is not the misery of your economy...but the desperate state of the proletariat, of whom millions are unemployed. Perhaps you even know that here in Berlin, a suicide occurs every five hours. But it is not a suicide whereby a person simply throws his life away, but rather suicide day by day, hour by hour, that arises directly out of the privation of the proletariat.⁶⁷

Ende referred to Berlin's suicide levels to denounce the Weimar Republic's legitimacy. However, his implicit calculations that there were around 1,800 suicides in Berlin per annum were rounded up for effect, with only 1,481 officially recorded suicides for 1928.⁶⁸ On 28 June 1929, the Reichstag debated the further cutting of unemployment benefits. ('Crisis benefits' a new and substantially lower form of welfare benefit than 'unemployment support' had already been introduced in 1926 amidst rising unemployment and declining state income in the wake of the Great Depression.) During the debate, the communist deputy Maddalena claimed that an unemployed man had tried to kill himself in the visitors' gallery of the Reichstag in protest against the government's plans to reduce unemployment benefits. The non-communist press did not report this case. The communists claimed that bourgeois and socialist newspapers fully supported the plans to reduce welfare payments.⁶⁹

The KPD's party organ, the *Rote Fahne*, reported suicides in particularly graphic detail. On 4 January 1933, it ran a story on a 35-year-old unemployed man, Arthur Müller, from Leipzig, who threw himself on the track of the Berlin underground at the busy Friedrichstadt interchange during the evening rush hour, allegedly leaving a suicide note saying: 'I did what I did because of hunger.'⁷⁰ Implicitly blaming the political order of the Weimar Republic for the increase in suicide levels, the communists contributed to the weakening of the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic.

IV

The press thus played a key role in encouraging a widespread interest in suicide and political parties made capital out of it. Already before the First World War, newspapers had regularly reported suicides and had associated them with life in the city and modernity. Not only political papers, whose circulation numbers were declining in the late Weimar years, but tabloids and broadsheets also ran regular reports on suicide. Newspapers that supported the Weimar Republic, such as the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the *Berliner Morgenpost*, Berlin's best-selling paper owned by the Ullstein family, and the *Berliner Tageblatt*, published by the liberal Mosse family, were generally more cautious and denied that there was a direct relationship between the Weimar Republic and suicide; nevertheless the Mosse and Ullstein papers ran sensationalist stories on suicides. Suicide featured so prominently in newspapers because it still aroused associations of something forbidden and was therefore morbidly fascinating, even among urban people. Suicides provided sensational 'human interest' stories to go along with murders and other crimes of passion.⁷¹

The press devoted a growing number of columns and inches to suicide towards the end of the Weimar Republic, in line with the widespread perception of living through hard times of record unemployment and political chaos. By winter 1930/31 there were more than five million unemployed, and in 1932, this number was to rise to six million.⁷²

The *8 Uhr-Abendblatt*, a tabloid published by the Mosse family, ran a headline story on the 'Suicide of a whole family because of unemployment' in May 1932. After being sacked from his job as a business clerk, a father had opened the gas pipe, and his wife and ten-year-old daughter died together with him.⁷³ Infanticide, murder and suicide of fathers of families due to unemployment featured quite prominently in newspapers of the time, not least because of their rather emotionally manipulative appeal. On 24 September 1929, the journalist Gabriele Tergit published a story in the local section of the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* about a 35-year-old former teacher turned farmer from Mecklenburg who had incurred debts of 3,000 Mark. This allegedly prompted him to kill himself and his six-year-old daughter with an overdose of Veronal pills and gas in his sister's flat in Berlin, taking advantage of the anonymity of the big city. The father had decided to kill his daughter allegedly because: 'The child was so much like

me and that's why I wanted to take her along. I didn't want her to have to go around forever tainted by the fact that her father killed himself.' But he and his daughter survived, since neighbours, smelling gas, had alerted the police and the fire service at the last moment. Accusing him of the attempted murder of his daughter, a Berlin court, taking into account a fate that must have been quite common at a time of increasing unemployment and socio-economic deprivation, sentenced him to one and a half years in prison.⁷⁴ So the nexus between suicide and unemployment, even if mythically exaggerated, had a tangible impact on the public perception of suicide. Suicide was the most radical expression of the failure of man's traditional role as *pater familias* amidst the socio-economic deprivation of the late Weimar years.

Suicides caused by problems in people's love lives also featured in newspapers. Articles reflected a fascination with romantic love and suicide pacts in which couples ended their lives together. In such stories, it was the man who killed his wife or girlfriend. He was then forced to kill himself, since otherwise he would have been charged with murder, which still carried the death penalty.⁷⁵ On 26 April 1932, the *8 Uhr-Abendblatt* reported a 'Double suicide with champagne' (*Doppelsebstmord bei Sekt*) in Berlin's Grunewald forest. The 20-year-old Richard Rath, son of a hotel owner, and the 18-year-old Hanna Röhl, daughter of an accountant, killed themselves after their parents had forbidden them to meet.⁷⁶ Most famously, perhaps, the so-called *Steglitzer Schülertragödie* in June 1927 dominated newspaper headlines in June 1927 and February 1928. Paul Krantz, a student taking his university entrance examination, was accused of murdering his friend Günther Scheller, with whom he had concocted a 'suicide pact' while drunk at a party at Scheller's house in Steglitz, a fashionable district to the south of Berlin, on 28 June 1927. Scheller shot his friend Hans Stephan and then himself, while Paul Krantz, in love with Scheller's sister Hilde, did not follow the agreement and failed to turn the gun on himself. Accused of murder, he was tried before the Moabit criminal court. He was acquitted in February 1928. This case, reflecting the life of the Berlin *jeunesse dorée* and adolescents' experiences of romantic love, dominated the headlines during the time of the trial, overshadowing the political crisis within the centre-right Reich government.⁷⁷

For the Nazis, this case was emblematic of the Weimar Republic's 'asphalt culture' and the loose sexual mores among the youth. An article in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi daily, blamed the corrupting influence

of the Jewish 'spirit of the Kurfürstendamm'. Only a Nazi regime could create a new, healthy 'German youth', thereby preventing 'suicides among youths resulting from moral depression'.⁷⁸

The press also reported some politically motivated suicides. On 24 February 1931, the 28-year-old unemployed and homeless shop assistant, Alois Broll, from Upper Silesia appeared at the official residence of Reich President Hindenburg in the Wilhelmstraße in Berlin, carrying a briefcase with official letters rejecting his claims for welfare payments. Challenged by a policeman in the anteroom to Hindenburg's office, Broll suddenly produced a pistol with which he wanted to shoot himself, and put his finger on the trigger. The policeman managed to seize the weapon and arrest Broll. According to a report in the *Vossische Zeitung*, Broll had not planned to shoot Hindenburg, but had rather wanted to speak to him, since he had been unable to find a job in Berlin. The communist *Berlin am Morgen*, emphasized Broll's misery, which almost inevitably drove him into suicide. The article declared:

The investigation revealed circumstances typical of a man unemployed for years ... Since 1923 he has had no steady work. He has compensation claims against the Reich. But the Oppeln district governor (*Regierungspräsident*) rejected all of his petitions. The situation at home has been dismal too, in that his father is retired and his brothers have also been without work or income for a long time ... In this dire situation, Broll decided to go to Berlin to make known to representatives of the Reich government his opinions about the injustice done to him. He appears in fact to have been obsessed with the naïve belief of such a possibility existing ... After he arrived in Berlin, Broll allegedly sought out the Reich Chancellery but by accident went instead into the office of the Reich President. Here, he explained his case to a criminal police officer. When he was once more turned away, he wanted to end it all. Broll emphatically denies that he intended to shoot the Reich President. His act is the act of a desperate scatterbrain who cannot comprehend that the state will not help him. If he could comprehend the 'Why' then his battle and the means he would choose would be different.

In the end, Broll was sentenced to six weeks in gaol, for illegal possession of a gun. Reflecting broader suicide discourses of the time, which blamed individual degeneracy rather than socio-economic factors for suicide, the judge insisted: 'According to the medical report, one must in the case of the accused account for the possibility of a psychopathic fit, with the result that he must be viewed as ... mentally inferior.' Hindenburg's State Secretary, Otto Meissner, probably embarrassed by the media attention lavished on

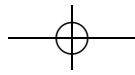
the case, commented that Hindenburg would accept this verdict.⁷⁹ Media and politicians conveyed the impression of a suicidal climate in the late Weimar Republic. A performative incident such as the one in Hindenburg's palace seems to be a reflection of that atmosphere. The fascination of the late Weimar public with suicide, which newspapers, either explicitly or implicitly, closely associated with what they saw as the political and socio-economic instability of the Weimar Republic thus contributed to the general lack of legitimacy of the first German democracy.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the Nazis used propaganda similar to that of the communists to denounce the Weimar Republic. On 15 January 1931, *Der Angriff*, a Berlin Nazi newspaper, edited by Joseph Goebbels, reported the suicide of Walter Bürkner, a 27-year-old unemployed SA man. *Der Angriff* declared:

Now he personally felt the Young misery [a reference to the 1929 Young Plan] which is burdening our Fatherland even harder than previously. He became withdrawn, unhappy about himself, and he was suffering increasingly from ... mental depression—until he just could not go on and took his own life which had become a torture.⁸⁰

The object of *Der Angriff*'s attack was not the capitalist system, but the Young Plan of 1929, an international agreement to reduce and reschedule Germany's reparations payments to the Allies in recompense for the damage caused to these countries by German aggression and occupation in the First World War. The Nazis had vehemently opposed the plan, arguing that reparations caused severe economic hardship and should be stopped altogether.⁸¹ A similar report in the *Völkischer Beobachter* of 15 April 1932 claimed that 'The Young deprivation (*Elend*) drives a couple with its three children into death.' A closer reading of the article shows that the family father, the 44-year-old businessman Karl Lehnert from Munich, had actually been tried for fraud at court. Nevertheless, the *Völkischer Beobachter* stereotypically insisted that 'hard economic difficulties' had been the main motive for the father gassing his wife and children and himself.⁸²

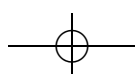
Top Nazis directly blamed the Weimar 'system' for suicide. In a speech on foreign policy at a party rally on 13 July 1928, Hitler declared: 'Today we are confronted with the following fact: Germany has 62 million people who live on 460,000 square kilometres. They cannot feed themselves. The consequence is that, on the one hand, hunger and desperation rage and, on the other, that 20–60,000 suicides take place every year.'⁸³ This was a



crude Social Darwinist view that saw the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the east as the solution to Germany's problems. In 1927, only 15,974 suicides had been officially recorded in Germany.⁸⁴ Hitler thus considerably exaggerated suicide levels on this occasion. After coming to power, Hitler claimed in an interview with a British journalist on 18 October 1933: 'Thanks to the Versailles Peace Treaty, it was the case up to now that, on average, 20,000 people voluntarily took their lives each year because of misery and despair.'⁸⁵ This was nearer the true figure: in 1932, the climax of suicide levels in Weimar Germany, 18,934 suicides had been officially recorded.⁸⁶ Like the communists, Hitler claimed that suicide was an inevitable result of adverse social and political conditions. These anti-liberal views on suicide helped to discredit the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic among communist and Nazi supporters. Suicide became a propagandistic lever across political divides, and a routine signifier of Weimar misery.

V

Suicide was the subject of discussion not only in politics and the media, but also among the churches. The Protestant and Catholic churches placed great emphasis on prevention. The leading national proponent of suicide prevention was the Protestant pastor Gerhard Füllkrug (1870–1948), one of the directors of the Central Committee of the Inner Mission, the Protestant church's welfare organization.⁸⁷ In two monographs published in the Weimar years, he complained about the 'crowd of antisocial elements' threatening society. In general agreement with Social Darwinist principles, he also saw the principle of the 'struggle for the survival of the fittest' as one of the main reasons for the increasing suicide rate after the end of the First World War. Füllkrug suggested the re-criminalization of suicide and a strengthening of societal cohesion by promoting a revival of religion. He thought that the suicide problem was directly linked to what many observers since Durkheim had seen as a radical individualization of society.⁸⁸ The decline of religious belief and practice was a key factor in his view. Without giving credible evidence, Füllkrug claimed that 'Schleswig-Holstein boasts the lowest numbers of attendance at the Eucharist and, accordingly, a very high suicide rate.'⁸⁹ His crusade against suicide had begun before the outbreak of war in 1914. For Füllkrug, as a pastor, suicide was a sin and he exaggerated the problem of suicide to gain public attention for the



issue. In April 1925, he gave a paper at the Dresden congress of the Inner Mission on 'The Fight against Suicide'. Without actually referring to any films which, at least until the late 1920s hardly thematized suicide, Füllkrug believed it necessary to close down cinemas. It was only natural that 'from these popular places of entertainment, there stems a widely corrupting influence on a wide range of people and ... movies are propaganda for suicide'.⁹⁰

Deeply conservative and nationalist officials of the Inner Mission, which became one of the central pillars of the welfare system of the Weimar state amidst the increasing social deprivation and mass unemployment of the late 1920s, perceived suicide as a curse of modernism and the socially and culturally chaotic post-war years.⁹¹ Not only did Füllkrug lament suicide, he also tried to prevent suicidal people from killing themselves. William Booth's 'Anti-Suicide Bureau', founded under the auspices of the Salvation Army in London in 1907, had pioneered suicide prevention, offering completely confidential advice to potential suicides. Confidentiality was crucial, given that suicide was still a criminal offence in England and Wales until 1961.⁹² In Berlin, the Protestant church founded a similar institution, the Suicide Counselling Service (*Selbstmordseelsorge*) in 1910.⁹³

But this would not do, Füllkrug thought. A stronger institution for suicide prevention was urgently needed amidst the record suicide levels allegedly caused by the German defeat and the inflation. In 1925, Füllkrug therefore set up the Permanent Commission for the Observation and Prevention of the Suicide Question (*Ständige Kommission zur Beobachtung und Verhütung der Selbstmordfrage*) in Berlin-Dahlem, based at the Inner Mission's Central Committee (*Centralausschuß für Innere Mission*). Füllkrug's anti-suicide commission consisted of deputies of the Berlin City Council, the Catholic and Jewish welfare organizations, the Salvation Army, the Berlin Welfare Office, and the Berlin Police President, following the pulling-together in March 1921 of various welfare organizations under a nation-wide umbrella organization.⁹⁴

The collaboration between state and church was close in the field of suicide prevention. While suicide had been decriminalized in the German states in the wake of the Enlightenment, state authorities felt responsible for preventing people from killing themselves, amidst the widespread perception of rising suicide levels after 1918.⁹⁵ State intervention could take on very practical forms. Writing on the role of the police in suicide

prevention, the Catholic policeman M Julier from Augsburg argued in *Caritas*, the trade journal of the Catholic Church's welfare organization, that 'the observation of river banks is also a way to prevent suicidal persons from taking the final step'.⁹⁶ This reflected contemporary ideas of policemen about the surveillance of public places by both police and public as a means of crime and suicide prevention.⁹⁷

More generally, the discourse of the people's community, in which the life, not of the individual but of the community, mattered, became gradually more important in the Weimar years.⁹⁸ Berlin's deputy police president, Bernhard Weiss, ordered his policemen to write down the names and addresses of all people who had attempted suicide and refer them either to Füllkrug's anti-suicide commission, or to the welfare office for help.⁹⁹ A draft letter to be distributed to those hospitalized for a suicide attempt, written very euphemistically, read:

Sorry for writing these lines to you concerning the event which took you to hospital. There must have been very serious reasons which led you to this step. But according to my conviction, such a throwing away of one's own life would only make sense if man really found rest in his grave from all his sorrowful thoughts, anxieties and concerns... Who knows whether even the worst thing will be overcome in due course, whether the worst illness will be defeated and the sun of life will shine again?¹⁰⁰

In penning this letter, Füllkrug only referred implicitly to religious ideas, perhaps since he knew that religion had lost much of its appeal in a big city like Berlin.¹⁰¹ Rather ironically in the light of his statement on movies causing suicides, Füllkrug designed a slide show in 1928 to be used during his lecture tours across Germany. The show neatly summarized the views he had already presented in his two books.¹⁰² In the slide show, Füllkrug drew an alarmist picture of suicide in Germany, which he described as a 'national disease' (*Volkskrankheit*) that had hit Germany particularly hard after the defeat of 1918. Lumping together unemployment, the Dawes Plan (an earlier version of the Young Plan) and increasing secularization, Füllkrug insisted:

The misery of the Fatherland broke the heart of many men. We see an explanation for the steady rise of the suicide rate even above that of 1913 in the continuously increasing economic misery... in unemployment, in the impact of the Dawes plan, but also in the growing secularization of almost all groups of our *Volk*.¹⁰³

Füllkrug implicitly argued that the collapse of the traditional male role as a breadwinner amidst mass unemployment would almost inevitably cause suicides. There is no evidence that the Dawes plan (1924), which saw the rescheduling of German reparations payments over a longer time span, prompted more people to kill themselves than before: economic deflation was a more likely general cause of the rise in suicide rates at this time. What mattered more to contemporaries than a precise statistical breakdown of suicide levels was the impression of living through hard times, reinforced by people like Füllkrug; a situation which many thought led unavoidably to higher suicide numbers.

Catholics also started a campaign against suicide, led by the journalist Hans Rost. A debate developed between representatives of the Protestant and Catholic churches, focusing on the question of which faith was better at preventing people from killing themselves. This reflected a wider dispute between the Protestant and Catholic welfare organizations that was going on in the late 1920s.¹⁰⁴ Rost had already argued in 1905 that Catholics were less prone to commit suicide than Protestants. Indeed, as noted earlier, statistics support this view, although suicide statistics of Catholic regions were probably gross underestimates due to the Catholic ban on suicide. By contrasting the traditionally high suicide levels of Protestant Saxony with the relatively low ones of Catholic Spain, Rost insisted that 'the impact of confessions on suicide is everywhere a positive one for Catholicism'.¹⁰⁵

The Catholic Rost effectively agreed with the Protestant Füllkrug that modernity was one of the core reasons for suicide. Rost also introduced anti-Semitic overtones into the debate on suicide. He argued:

The basic problem is the increasing irreligiousness, the lack of humility and submission and a hedonism that is going beyond any sensible extent. Social democracy, the liberal and, not to mention, Jewish *Weltanschauung* have moved the centre of gravity of being to this life. The masses of people are told that the hereafter is a popish swindle and that pleasure is the only aim of life that is worth pursuing.¹⁰⁶

An official from the Protestant *Oberkirchenrat* attacked Rost in 1928 in an internal memorandum. He declared:

He [Rost] is known in professional circles as a tendentious statistician: from controversial statistics he only chooses with great care and cunning what is advantageous to the Catholic population. He ignores contradicting results (eg

from criminal statistics); the same applies to all results of confessional statistics, which portray the Catholic population as being backward in any respect. All refutations have no impact on him. Dr Rost just selects everything from the rich literature on the current subject (frequency of suicide) that suits him ...¹⁰⁷

Apart from editing a bibliography of suicide, a standard work to this day, Rost founded an international periodical devoted to suicide research and prevention in 1932.¹⁰⁸ Using medical analogies, Rost likened the fight against suicide to attempts to cure tuberculosis and cancer. He claimed that states suffering from the 'terribly harsh dictates of the Peace' and an alleged suppression of Christianity, such as Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, displayed particularly high suicide rates.¹⁰⁹ (Rost deliberately failed to mention that Hungary and Bohemia-Moravia, both largely Catholic, had already shown very high suicide levels before the First World War. This inconvenient fact would have undermined his own hypothesis that Catholic countries displayed lower suicide rates than Protestant ones.) Rost's views on suicide must have been influential, since he gave a broadcast on the Bavarian Radio on 14 November 1931. The defeat of 1918 had caused the increased suicide levels, Rost insisted. Suicide was less of a social than a moral problem, for which secularization and urbanization were to blame. Similarly to Füllkrug, Rost blamed newspapers, 'cinemas, some theatres and other entertainment venues', and, perhaps surprisingly, Schopenhauer's philosophy (with which very few listeners can have been familiar) for driving people, especially youths, into suicide.¹¹⁰ For people like Füllkrug and Rost, the root of the suicide problem was thus modernity, especially the allegedly destructive impact of mass culture and secularization, exacerbated after 1918 by what they considered to be an immoral cultural, social, and political chaos which included the breakdown of traditional gender roles. Many members of welfare organizations and the German middle classes shared this view.

Rost and Füllkrug's views were not undisputed, however. The Hamburg psychiatrist Richard Detlev Loewenberg attacked Füllkrug and Rost's claims in a study of suicide in Hamburg. Blaming psychological disorders for suicide, he declared: 'It is thus really no longer sufficient ... to go over these problems with reference to ... the lure of the big city versus simple country life or the evil curse of unbelief, which make people become desperate ...'¹¹¹ Reflecting his general concern about suicide rates, Füllkrug persuaded the members of his commission to announce a prose competition on suicide on 1 May 1926. He had secured the Prussian Welfare Ministry's

sponsorship. The Ministry was itself concerned about suicide levels and allocated the considerable sum of 1,000 Reichsmark for the ‘purposes of hygienic popular education’ (*für Zwecke der hygienischen Volksbelehrung*).¹¹² The competition was advertised nationally and received many entries. Füllkrug wrote to famous authors of the time and asked them to act as prize judges and assess the literary quality of the entries. Thus on 5 March 1926 he wrote to the novelist and popular historian Ricarda Huch and invited her to sit on the prize panel; she politely declined.¹¹³ Walter von Molo, a right-wing author, agreed to sit on the panel but later came to the harsh conclusion, in literary terms at least, that ‘the result [was] catastrophic’.¹¹⁴

Many of the entries were manifestly quite motivated by Füllkrug’s lofty purpose. One contributor, for example, wrote:

You had this year announced an essay prize competition concerning a story ... The story narrates the case of a maid whose savings are taken away from her by a gallant cheat ... [She] wants to die in this collapse of money and love. The moral point of this work is how she is dissuaded from her decision by looking at her old savings book and her plan to make up for this setback by new work and saving more.¹¹⁵

As this plot summary suggests, suicide, thanks to coverage in the mass media and traditional assumptions shared by many people, was primarily associated with apolitical popular clichés, such as betrayed love and a loss of money. The prize panel found the entries’ quality so poor that they announced a new competition in July 1927. This received no fewer than 186 entries, reflecting suicide’s public significance. The winning entry, entitled ‘Night on the Bridge’, by Maria Kohn, has survived in the files. Its plot, featuring an unemployed and lonely man standing on a bridge, prepared to jump into his death, was far from original. But it did manage to combine Weimar Germany’s problems with a somewhat overdrawn religious element. After jumping into the river, the man is saved by a young boy’s dog.¹¹⁶ The prize panel found this quite appealing.

Rather than entering short stories into the competition, however, many correspondents, usually men, simply asked Füllkrug for money and threatened to kill themselves if he did not comply with their request, thereby using the religious taboo on suicide as a means of blackmailing the Inner Mission. These letters are a remarkably rich source, even if the intentions they state were not genuine. Most of the correspondents were

not necessarily church-going Christians; in fact, many probably wrote to Füllkrug because they had seen his anti-suicide commission mentioned in the press. On 25 May 1926, for example, the 25-year-old Richard M from Plauen described his sorrows and threatened that he was 'ready to take [his] life if [he] did not find some direct help by the end of this week'. He had embezzled 1,000 Reichsmark because he did not know what to do on a monthly income of 180 Reichsmark. He warned Füllkrug not to tell his 'parents, bosses, or the authorities', and thought that the Inner Mission might be able to help. Needless to say, Füllkrug and the anti-suicide commission had neither the will nor the means to pay M's debts.¹¹⁷

Social conditions had an impact on people, whatever the statistics. Erich S, a former clerk at the Siemens factory in Berlin, got in touch with Füllkrug in April 1930 to complain about his fate. Having worked for Siemens from 1906 until 1925, he had been made redundant in 1925 and 'could not stand his life after about five years of being unemployed'. Rather curtly, Füllkrug recommended him to get in touch with the Protestant Central Welfare Office in Berlin and refused to correspond with Siemens on his behalf.¹¹⁸ Pastors from across Germany started forwarding their correspondence with suicidal men to Füllkrug because they did not know how to cope with the suicide problem. In April 1930 pastor Hartmann from Rheine, a small town in Westphalia, wrote to Füllkrug. Karl L, a failed businessman, whom pastor Hartmann 'had known for some years', had previously complained to Hartmann that he had only had five hot meals since 29 December 1929 and that he could only afford to eat bread. He had asked Hartmann for some money to get a new business started, namely producing canned chicken, and threatened to kill himself if he did not get any money, since 'the horrible circumstances of the past four months had often driven [him] into greatest despair, but the hope for some improvement had always prevented [him] from the last step'.¹¹⁹

Despite his widely publicized stance on suicide prevention, Füllkrug usually did not take these threats seriously. When people threatened that they would commit suicide unless he helped them out with money, Füllkrug filed their begging letters, annotated with the statement 'Wants some money', as he did with a letter from Hermann L from Bad Kreuznach on 17 April 1930. Born in 1898, L had served in the trenches of the Western Front, where he was wounded. Because the inflation had ruined his father's estate, L claimed, he had had to drop out of university in 1927.

Now he asked Füllkrug for a loan of 8,000 Reichsmark to save what was left of his father's farm. He threatened to kill himself, and reminded Füllkrug of the 'French statesman who had spoken of Germany as being overpopulated, and who could not show any other way out than starving them'. Füllkrug politely replied on 25 April 1930 that his commission only dealt with cases from Berlin.¹²⁰ L directly linked his personal fate with the rather desolate state of Germany, as his reference to the French statesman, probably Clemenceau, reveals; his views here showed some congruence with those of the Nazis.

Füllkrug not only refused to respond to these suicide threats; he also turned away suicidal men who approached him directly at the anti-suicide commission's offices. In September 1930, amidst rising unemployment and suicide levels, Fritz Reppo, a reporter for the *Welt am Morgen*, wrote a very sarcastic and devastating undercover report on the way in which Füllkrug and the Protestant Church dealt with suicidal people. Reppo, dressed in rags, pretended to be tired of life and unemployed. He called on various Protestant welfare organizations in Berlin. Reppo first went to Füllkrug's office in the leafy Dahlem suburb 'where the extremely wealthy businessmen from the city live'. Füllkrug's wife answered the door and snapped at him that Füllkrug was not in. Reppo did not ask her for any money, and pretended that he simply wanted to have a conversation. Füllkrug's wife, far from being generous and helpful, offered Reppo some sausage sandwiches and 20 pfennigs. She then told him to go away. He should 'trust in God's mercy', she added, before referring Reppo to the local Welfare Office. Reppo then went to the Berlin City Mission. Here, a pastor accused him of 'complaining like an old woman'. This dismissal had been common since the First World War when doctors and welfare officials had been accusing soldiers seeking help of hysteria in order to reject their claims for support.¹²¹ Being dismissed as an 'old woman' undermined the confidence of unemployed men genuinely contemplating suicide in their male status as breadwinners. The pastor offered Reppo a two-night stay at the City Mission. Reppo decided to try his luck at the City Mission in Moabit, a working-class district. Here, a pastor boasted that he would go begging if he were in Reppo's situation. Finally, he sent Reppo away, giving him a meagre 50 pfennigs. Predictably, Reppo concluded that 'Christian welfare' was totally useless.¹²²

Füllkrug was not particularly helpful either to veterans whose benefit claims had been rejected. Hermann E, a man from Sorau in Silesia, wrote

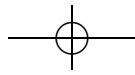
to Füllkrug on 22 April 1930. E did not threaten to kill himself. He insisted that most suicides were due to what he called the current ‘dispute over pensions’. After Füllkrug had politely told him that he could not provide any help, E wrote another, this time more aggressive letter, in which he accused the president of the Reichsbank, Dr Hjalmar Schacht, who had resigned from his office in 1930, of being corrupt:

It is not the sick and unemployed who are the biggest ‘welfare recipients’ and cause a burden for the economy, but gentlemen like Dr Schacht who has secured 50,000 Reichsmark for himself per annum or a golden handshake worth 1.5 million. I and my 5 children receive a disability pension of 965 Reichsmark per year, and for this, I have had to pay my contribution week by week for the last 20 years ...¹²³

The *Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten*, the SPD’s organization for those who had been wounded in the war, also drew an alarmist picture of suicide to counter the attempts of the Brüning government to cut down veterans’ pensions. In February 1931, the *Reichsbund* blamed the government for suicides among veterans. For war veterans facing impoverishment, suicide was the last way out, declared the *Reichsbund*, implying that poverty undermined the war veterans’ status as men. Allegedly, 49 members had killed themselves in the second quarter of 1931 alone. And in July 1931, the *Reichsbund*’s journal reprinted a suicide note that had reportedly been written by a veteran who had been severely wounded in the war. The letter read:

I just want to tell you what is happening to me. I’ve gone through a lot. I was in the war, started by the money-grubbers. My hand was hurt, I was hit twice in the shoulder and once in the head ... I worked from morning until night, and the only thing I have to show for it are debts. I asked the veterans’ office to guarantee a mortgage ... I told them that if they couldn’t help, my family and I simply couldn’t live any longer ... The office I asked told me that they couldn’t do anything ... I’ve had enough. I would have done this on the 20th, only I didn’t have a gun, and I want my family’s end to be quick and painless. We learned that in the war. I was always a good father and took care of my family ... And it’s just because I don’t want my family to have to live in poverty that I’m taking them with me. Maybe my action will help other disabled veterans ... Long live the world revolution.

After sending off this letter to a friend, the author is said to have shot his wife and three children, before turning the gun on himself. Even though we cannot be sure if this suicide note was genuine, it reflected the feeling



of many veterans that the Brüning government had let them down. Under these circumstances, killing one's family and then committing suicide seemed the only way out for this particular veteran.¹²⁴ Here was suicide presented again as the last way out for impoverished fathers of families.

In another remarkable case in 1930, Füllkrug wrote a stern reply to the 25-year-old Otto U who had complained about his inability to marry because of his lack of money and threatened to kill himself. Füllkrug sternly retorted:

If you read all of the letters which we received over the last few days, following a newspaper report on our work against suicide, you would no longer consider your situation as difficult. Thousands of fathers of families are unemployed these days... You, on the other hand, have a job, and are making 31 Reichsmark per week... In our opinion you do not have any reason for giving up the will to live. Every man has to cope with problems, and a healthy young man should take up the fight of life with joy and courage. Perhaps it would be worthwhile for you to have a serious word with your pastor.¹²⁵

Füllkrug's reference to many people being worse off than U was, many contemporaries felt, a reaction all too typical of Weimar welfare organizations to requests made by people in need. Whether or not Füllkrug's correspondents seriously considered suicide as a way out of their problems probably matters less than the fact that they threatened to. Suicide was a particularly apt theme, since in the popular imagination it was still associated with breaking a taboo due to the traditional religious ban on suicide, upheld since the early Middle Ages. Using suicide as a threat was, many people evidently thought, especially useful in shocking church officials like Füllkrug. For people in urban settings, the religious taboo probably mattered less than it did for rural people, but suicide continued to arouse associations of something disreputable, even at a time when newspapers were full of reports on suicide.

Füllkrug was not the only recipient of fraudulent suicide letters. On 4 March 1931, Ernst W, the owner of a pen factory in Vienna, left two letters near the Royal Palace in Berlin, one ostensibly written by a Baron and another one by a girl, together with a hat and a chest, and a photograph of Mussolini. A street sweeper found the box and passed it on to the police. A letter attached to the box promised 1,000 Reichsmark to the finder. In the suicide note, which W had penned himself, a Baron takes his farewell from life after receiving a letter from the girl brushing him off.

Leading the investigation, the head of the Berlin homicide squad, Ernst Gennat concluded on 5 March 1931 that this was the work of W, who had previously played similar pranks elsewhere in Germany. Back in Vienna, W was interrogated by the Austrian Security Service (*Sicherheits-Bureau*) on 9 March 1931. He explained that he had been motivated by a desire to seek the German judiciary's attention. In 1912, a Dresden court had sentenced him to three years in prison for fraud (he had been using the name Henckel von Donnersmarck), and his attempts at rehabilitation by the Dresden court had so far been without any success.¹²⁶

Newspapers reported the unusual find. The *Berliner Börsen-Kurier* quickly got the point and thought that W was just attention-seeking. The *BZ am Mittag* mentioned that the finder would receive 1,000 Reichsmark.¹²⁷ This prompted Anni M, a young woman from Berlin who had read an article about the find in a newspaper, to write to Gennat, requesting that he should give her the money. She wanted to marry soon, she said, and she and her family 'were also hit hard by the current economic situation'.¹²⁸ The promise of money was a deception, too. The quick response of newspaper readers, and the fact that people used suicide to seek attention, again shows the significance of suicide to Weimar people. On 25 March 1931, after losing her job, Helene B, a 31-year-old worker at the Sarotti chocolate factory, wrote a letter to the Berlin criminal police. She explained that she would commit suicide: 'The undersigned takes the liberty to let it be known that I have committed suicide, please say hello to my dead parents. Otherwise, just a final greeting from Helene B, born 13 March 1898 in Hanover-Döhren, who attended school in Tempelhof. It came to this because of lovesickness and unemployment.'¹²⁹ B was clearly suffering from some kind of mental illness. It is not entirely clear whether she killed herself, but the fact that she wrote a suicide note, which took up public clichés about suicide from the press, is revealing insofar as it confirms the great impact of newspapers on people's perception and interpretation of suicide.

On 1 April 1932, along with his colleagues, Füllkrug was forced to resign from the Central Committee of the Inner Mission in the wake of a slush funds scandal, which would have almost led to the Inner Mission's bankruptcy. This scandal also prompted a crisis of public confidence in the Inner Mission at a time when many people already distrusted the German welfare system more generally. By deliberately blaming the post-war order for suicide, Füllkrug and others had contributed to the undermining of the

Weimar Republic's legitimacy, right from its beginning.¹³⁰ The medical doctor and economist Hans Harmsen, perhaps more famous as an eugenicist and champion of racial hygienics and birth control,¹³¹ took over Füllkrug's position as chairman of what was now known as 'Help for those Tired of Life' (*Hilfe für Lebensmüde*) on 10 February 1933, just after the Nazis had come to power on 30 January 1933.¹³²

Füllkrug and the Inner Mission never really accepted the Weimar Republic and welcomed the Nazi takeover in 1933.¹³³ Still under Füllkrug's auspices, the anti-suicide commission drafted a leaflet in 1933, which was to be distributed on the streets. It portrayed suicide as a phenomenon of the Weimar years, now past. The authors blamed 'the terrible forces that overcame our people and Fatherland and against which we were defenceless' and 'Versailles, inflation and unemployment' for the 'more than 200,000 people' Germany had lost through suicide in the Weimar years. The leaflet went on to complain about the lack of 'community' and the 'active help of our national comrades' in the Weimar years, and promised that there would not be any suicides in the Third Reich.¹³⁴

The anti-suicide commission met irregularly after 1933. In one of the final sessions on 9 June 1937 the Berlin City Mission's deputy bluntly emphasized that most suicides no longer stemmed from economic problems such as unemployment which the Nazis had allegedly solved.¹³⁵ There is no evidence of meetings of the commission after 1937, which suggests that the commission ceased to exist. Füllkrug, who had remained on the board of the anti-suicide commission, and others, claimed that the Nazis had successfully combated suicide, so there was, by implication, nothing left for them to do.

VI

People not only threatened suicide in letters to welfare institutions, they also frequently wrote farewell missives before actually killing themselves. We have access to these documents from an unparalleled collection of investigation files compiled by the homicide squad of the Berlin criminal police, founded in 1926, and led by the detective superintendent Ernst Gennat, an enormously overweight man with an incurable craving for cake. These files shed light on the ways in which ordinary people represented their suicides.¹³⁶ What was the impact of the public debates on suicide,

discussed above, on individual suicides in the mass society of Weimar Germany where most people read newspapers on a daily basis?

In the Weimar Republic, policemen and criminologists were increasingly concerned with a typology of criminality and scientific explanations for deviant behaviour that saw criminals as inherently degenerate and incorrigible types. In the light of economic deprivation, social decline, and mass unemployment, many thought that suicide and criminality went hand in hand with each other. This view was shared in police circles, too. In 1927, a professor of criminology declared in a periodical read by criminal police members: 'The specific circumstances of a particular suicide are so strange that the preparation and the carrying out of the act itself must cast doubt upon the suicide's mental health.'¹³⁷

Following calls from criminologists who had demanded a more efficient and rational system of classifying and identifying criminals, Gennat compiled a systematic central index of murder and suicide.¹³⁸ An internal memorandum of 1928 stipulated that investigating policemen must pay close attention to suicide, since in many cases it was not entirely clear at first glance whether the dead person had fallen victim to a murderer. The criminal police, particularly Gennat's homicide squad (*Morddezernat*), took a keen interest in suicide, amidst a widespread perception of rising suicide levels. This prompted Gennat to start collecting the suicide notes which he and his men had found during their investigations of suicides. Once the police had established that someone's death had not been caused by another person (*Fremdeinwirken*), the criminal police usually closed the case. One of the most professionalized and technically well-equipped criminal police forces in Europe at the time, the Berlin homicide squad was well-known in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. Newspapers often asked readers to report any relevant clues to the police.¹³⁹

Policemen often found it very difficult to establish whether the cause of death had been murder or suicide. This prompted an officer to give detailed practical advice for policemen on the beat in 1922:

If a policeman on patrol is called to [investigate the death of] a hanged person, he should first of all cut off the noose. If the person can still be revived, the policeman should attempt to resuscitate him if he knows how to do so properly. Otherwise, a doctor is to be called. If the hanged person is male, there is a clear way to establish whether he committed suicide or was murdered, even if he is of an advanced age. The officer need only open the man's pants. If there is a fresh emission of semen on the shirt, one

undoubtedly has a case of suicide, whereas if the person was murdered, one will find excretion, the consequence of fear.¹⁴⁰

While the accuracy of this advice remains doubtful, the fact that such tips were circulated among ordinary policemen suggests that the Weimar police were concerned with distinguishing suicide from murder.

One theme, parents killing their children before taking their own lives, featured quite regularly in suicide investigations and, as we have seen, in newspaper reports on suicide in the Weimar years because the murder of children was particularly shocking. There was a notable gap between police investigations and press accounts of suicides. Newspapers often misrepresented someone's ostensible suicide motives to contribute to their respective political agenda.

Take the case of Klara Engwicht, a 33-year-old cleaner from a Berlin working-class neighbourhood. On 25 March 1932, Good Friday, Engwicht strangled her three children aged between two and six years before hanging herself. In an article entitled 'Welfare Recipient Goes into Death with 3 Children' the communist daily *Die Rote Fahne* emphasized Engwicht's proletarian lifestyle and went on to describe her house as 'typical proletarian accommodation'. Unable to pay her rent for three months, she was facing eviction from her flat. On top of that, she had become pregnant again. Inflating this case to an ideological battle, the article accused the social democratic *Vorwärts* of having lied about Engwicht allegedly receiving sufficient money from the welfare office.¹⁴¹ The article blamed those 'who are responsible for today's circumstances' for her death, and reduced suicide to a pre-determined act devoid of any personal motivations by claiming that 'life had already been taken from the woman before she took it from herself and her children'.¹⁴² In contrast to this orthodox communist view, the *Berliner Morgenpost*, Berlin's best-selling paper from the liberal Ullstein house, delivered a much more sober and realistic account, which confirmed that Engwicht had indeed received decent welfare payments. The *Berliner Morgenpost* emphasized the fact that her new lover had left her after promising to marry her as Engwicht's main suicide motive. The *Morgenpost* also mentioned her alcoholism, and the fact that she treated her children very badly even before she murdered them.¹⁴³

The communists distorted their accounts of the Engwicht case for political purposes. The police found out that Engwicht had indeed been pregnant and that she had been carrying on various sexual relationships.

The plumber Walter C, her neighbour, testified that he knew this for sure, since the walls were very thin in their apartment block. He also told the police that Engwicht had wanted to marry him, but he had refused since he did not find her attractive. After confirming that 'Miss Engwicht had been supported sufficiently by the authorities', he claimed that she had 'recently beaten her children quite often, sometimes even at night'. At times she had been working as a prostitute; and recently, C testified, Engwicht had told another neighbour that she wanted to commit suicide, but did not tell him why. It quickly turned out that Engwicht's current lover, Gustav G, had something to do with the case, as Ida S, another neighbour, testified. Engwicht had planned to marry G, the father of the child with which she was pregnant, but G's mother had allegedly banned this, since she found Engwicht's lifestyle immoral. G, an unemployed fraudster, had allegedly already planned to marry Engwicht in October 1931 but had had to put this off, allegedly since he was so poor that he could not afford any appropriate clothes for the wedding. He had only recently been released from prison. In addition, his mother had replied to a letter from Engwicht in which she had evidently broached the topic of marrying him, in scathing terms:

Dear Frau Engwicht!

I have to reply to your letter that it is not good to sleep with a man if one is not married yet and that I do not have any use for you, since my son will definitely get another one without children.

Best wishes, Frau G.

The police concluded that Engwicht had indeed murdered her children and killed herself, chiefly because of G's broken promise. They did not mention her alleged financial problems.¹⁴⁴

How did ordinary people react to suicides? And how did the police determine whether a death had been due to murder or suicide? Most of the suicides investigated by the Berlin homicide squad took place in working-class milieus, reflecting a traditional pattern of criminal police work. In December 1932, a local policeman had found the 27-year-old telegraph worker Willi W gassed in his flat in the Lichtenberg working-class district. Initially, the policeman assumed that W had committed suicide. Nevertheless, following the regulations, the policeman referred the case to Gennat's homicide squad, prompting a furious letter from Gennat to the man in charge of the Lichtenberg police precinct. Gennat doubted whether W had committed suicide and complained that policemen must

be more careful when examining similar cases. In the past, local policemen had not bothered to investigate suicides properly and had failed to compile reports. Gennat insisted: 'I am not at all in favour of producing too much paperwork. However, even theft of a rabbit and other trivial thefts are usually reported in much more detail than suicides.'¹⁴⁵

Convinced that W's death had been suspicious, Gennat interrogated W's widow on 29 December. In the dramatic interrogation, Frau W explained her miserable domestic situation in which she seems to have been the main breadwinner:

I have always said, so much rent, and I'm even working and then my husband gave me 8 mark for household expenses and then he always went out drinking and so then I opened the gas valve. People want their money, and I'm not supposed to talk about money matters with my husband and then what else can I say? I can't do anything more, like work; I can't just wipe out our debts. Everything was going down the drain and we worked so hard and then he cheats on me behind my back.

Although she had a part-time job, their combined debts amounted to the enormous sum of 800 Reichsmark. Only when she had some money to spare did she insert coins into the slot meter for gas. Otherwise the couple were without heating and cooking facilities. Gennat tried to calm Frau W down and commended her for telling him the truth: 'That is the best thing you could do. You are showing some remorse.'¹⁴⁶

The case also had a political dimension, since W was a Nazi, while his wife intended to vote for the communists. Frau W's mother testified in support of her daughter and confirmed that Herr W had indeed betrayed and mistreated his wife, allegedly telling her: 'I will get you to obey me.' Gennat showed some sympathy for Frau W, but nevertheless concluded that she had gassed her husband 'in a state of thoroughly righteous indignation and embitterment, caused by her husband's behaviour'.¹⁴⁷ Wrapping up the case, Gennat insisted that local policemen must carry out investigations more thoroughly. Gennat attached so much significance to the W case that he continued to try to track down the policeman who had been responsible in the first instance for the inaccurate reporting of the case until March 1933, when Gennat closed the file by concluding that he was going to use the case as teaching material.¹⁴⁸ Other murders went unnoticed by the police and were misclassified as suicides. To obtain more reliable statistics,

Gennat had already told his detectives to be more careful when filling out data sheets required for every suicide.¹⁴⁹

While Frau W did her best to disguise murder as suicide, some suicides, particularly from the middle class, tried to conceal the fact that they had killed themselves. Middle-class Germans, perhaps less secularized than the working class, were more likely to conceal their suicide and make it seem like a murder to avoid the stigma still attached with suicide. Families of those whose deaths had been officially recognized as suicide were not eligible to receive any payment from life-insurance companies, if they had subscribed to one.

On 21 July 1931 the former Yugoslav Honorary General Consul in Berlin Dr Ernst Barckhausen was found shot dead in the study of his house in the expensive Tiergarten district. During the Great Depression, Barckhausen had lost both his money and his position as consul. Nevertheless he tried to keep up his reputation as an influential and respectable man, boasting, for instance, that he was personally acquainted with the ex-Kaiser. Indeed, Barckhausen had been the representative of German business in Yugoslavia and had also been in charge of negotiating German reparations payments to Yugoslavia. In desperation, having accrued a massive debt of more than 100,000 Reichsmark, Barckhausen decided to cheat on his car insurance. He sank his car, a blue Graham-Paige, in the River Elbe, and told his insurers that someone had stolen it. Unfortunately, however, someone found the automobile in the River Elbe on 10 July 1931. On 12 July 1931, Barckhausen received the news that his car had been found. Aware that the police would prosecute him, thus destroying his social reputation, he decided to kill himself.¹⁵⁰

Life insurance companies were increasingly anxious about rising suicide levels at this time. In 1930, according to one source, ten per cent of their overall payments to relatives of people who had died were paid to the dependants of suicides. Many companies thus decided to introduce a waiting period (*Karenzzeit*), stipulating that a payment could only be made to suicide's relatives if the insurance policy had been taken out at least two years previously. Most companies extended this period to five years in 1932, reflecting the rise in claims for suicides.¹⁵¹ If the waiting period had not yet elapsed, life-insurance companies usually only made full payment of the sum insured to relatives of suicides who were officially

classified as mentally ill at the time of the deed (an interesting parallel to the traditional church policy that dictated that only those suicides who had been insane at the time of killing themselves were eligible for a funeral). Those who had taken out life insurance overwhelmingly belonged to the 'better-off classes', one expert claimed in 1934. Many such people, the expert went on, later killed themselves 'to find a desirable way out of their morally and economically life-threatening situation'.¹⁵² According to a contemporary newspaper article, self-employed middle-class professionals were more vulnerable to economic change and thus to suicide in the case of bankruptcy.¹⁵³

Barckhausen had insured his own life for the enormous sum of 200,000 Reichsmark. He was anxious that the sum should go to his family after his death, thus enabling them to pay off the debt. So he decided to arrange his suicide to look as if he had been murdered. Having set up the scene to look as if he had fallen victim to an armed robbery, Barckhausen was found dead, sitting behind his desk, where he had been writing a letter. He had forgotten to take the cap off his pen. Also, he had used his own revolver for blowing out his brains. Barckhausen's wallet had been found at a sorting office (he had left it in a public postbox so as to create the impression that he had been killed by a robber who had walked away with his money after shooting him). The criminal police attributed wider significance to this case and concluded: 'In the history of crime, there have always been so-called "borderline cases". Suicides have with outstanding skill been able to deceive people into believing that criminal circumstances surrounded their deaths.'¹⁵⁴ The *Vossische Zeitung* went further and interpreted this case as 'a unique example of a pretended murder, but also as a staggering document of human entanglement and guilt'. The newspaper put his death into the context of the increasing economic depression affecting Germany, and noted that it had coincided with the collapse of the *Darmstädter und Nationalbank (Danatbank)* on 13 July 1931, which almost led to the total collapse of banking in Germany.¹⁵⁵ The psychiatrist Richard Detlev Loewenberg did indeed reveal an increased incidence of suicide in Hamburg in the week of the crash of the *Danatbank*. From 13 July until 18 July, 17 suicides were registered in Hamburg. In the previous week, only five suicides had been reported, and in the week following, there were 12 cases. For Loewenberg and many others,

these figures proved that adverse economic conditions directly caused suicides.¹⁵⁶

In many cases, as in Barckhausen's, it was difficult for the criminal police to establish whether a death had been due to murder or suicide. Investigations often continued to rely on the interrogation of eyewitnesses. Social prejudices and clichés about suicide held by the criminal police and the public certainly also played a great role in determining whether a given death was classified as murder or suicide. Towards the end of the Weimar Republic, individual cases of suicide became increasingly politicized by the media as individual suicides within the ranks of the Nazis and the communists concerned the criminal police especially in the later Weimar years which saw increasing hostilities between the two parties. On 30 September 1930, the 23-year-old baker Franz G was found shot dead in his parents' flat in Herschelstraße in North Charlottenburg. Heavily politicized, people in this overwhelmingly working-class district fought their political enemies over the domination of their neighbourhoods. Particularly towards the end of the Weimar Republic, political violence turned almost into a civil war.¹⁵⁷ G, an active member of the Nazi party and a storm trooper, had been fighting the communist *Roter Frontkämpferbund* and had been arrested several times in 1927 and in 1929 for beating up communists who, in turn, had also attacked him. Assuming that G had been killed by the communists, the criminal police interrogated people from G's neighbourhood. On the night of 29 September 1930, the police established, G had shown up at two pubs, probably SA *Sturmlokale*, typical hang-outs for unemployed storm troopers. The landlord and an SA officer had evicted him, since he had been extremely drunk. On his way home, he had been overheard saying, 'If the Third Reich doesn't come about soon, I will finish myself off.'¹⁵⁸

G's motivation may not have been entirely political. The businessman Heinrich K, G's SA leader (*Sturmführer*), testified that G's father had contacted him directly after G's death and asked him how much money he would get from the storm troopers' life insurance company, now that his son had died (the storm troopers had been offering their own insurance to members, as did trade unions and left-wing political parties).¹⁵⁹ K then accused G's father, formerly a social democrat, of his son's murder. (G's father claimed that he had been a member of the SPD 'merely for monetary

reasons' to get promoted as a street cleaner.) Presumably K did not want the insurance fund to have to pay out, either because it would deplete it, or because G's father was not somebody he wanted to get the money. Three storm troopers would testify, K claimed, that G had already threatened to kill his son; to discredit him further, the storm troopers asserted that G's father was beating his daughter. Interrogated by the criminal police on 4 October, G's father explained that he had never had 'significant political arguments' with his son. He was anxious that his sons might get hurt during street fights, and asserted that he had only complained 'that they went out in public too often and took part in processions. And of course that they hung out on the street and in the pubs until 3 or 4 in the morning.' The police concluded that K's allegations were politically motivated and without foundation. G had clearly killed himself. Here, suicide had been politicized in a particularly direct way in the context of political conflict in the locality.¹⁶⁰

Similar cases happened elsewhere in the politically turbulent final years of the Weimar Republic. In Silesia, local storm troopers fought the communists and the social democrats, among others, in a particularly brutal way in the wake of the July 1932 Reichstag elections, which had failed to bring the Nazis into power. The radical SA terror campaign of August 1932 nevertheless led to a crisis within the Nazi movement between those in favour of political violence and others advocating a tactic of 'legality'.¹⁶¹ This atmosphere created a tendency to assume that almost any death of a politically active individual must be a political murder.

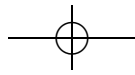
On 30 August 1932, the *Völkischer Beobachter* reported that the 26-year-old storm trooper Franz Rosemann had been run over by a train near Liegnitz. The Nazi newspaper insisted that communists had shot him, though not fatally, near the railway. The article claimed that Rosemann had been trying to run away from his would-be killers at the time when the train hit him. 'There was not the least evidence for suicide' in this case, declared the paper. The Nazis threatened to 'take the necessary steps', that is to retaliate against the alleged communist killers, since the 'political police had been satisfied with the assumption that it had been suicide'. Nevertheless, the investigation of the state prosecutor at the Breslau *Sondergericht*, a special court established to combat political unrest, reached a fundamentally different verdict. Rosemann had not in fact been killed by the communists, but had killed himself, as a railway guard who had witnessed his death testified. Rosemann had also been suffering

from lovesickness, as his father told the police.¹⁶² The Nazis' accusations against the communists were totally untenable in this case. After the Nazi seizure of power, Nazi lawyers went through the legal files of Nazis who had allegedly suffered from political 'persecution' in the Weimar years in order to reward their relatives and put their names on a list of fallen heroes. Rosemann, however, was not included in this list, and the Nazis accepted the view that he had killed himself.¹⁶³ Paradoxically, while both Nazis and communists emphasized and even exaggerated the prevalence of real suicide in the crisis-ridden final years of the Weimar Republic, they were only too often unwilling to believe it when it affected one of their own.

VII

Most suicides did not think of politics when they penned their farewell missives. Did public debates on suicide have any impact on them? The Berlin criminal police under Gennat began collecting suicide notes in 1926, ranging from the blackly comic to the utterly tragic. Bureaucratic interest in the phenomenon of suicide grew in the mid-1920s. In a draft of the new German penal code (never actually implemented), incitement to suicide was to be penalized, so Gennat thought that the material might also be relevant to the Reichstag's penal-code reform commission (*Strafrechtskommission*).¹⁶⁴ These missives allow us to reconstruct ordinary people's attitudes towards suicide. Given the uncertainties about their statistical repetitiveness and the often idiosyncratic style and contents of the notes, it makes sense, rather than analysing the suicide notes in a quantitative-systematic way, to use them as qualitative evidence.¹⁶⁵

Writing about the 'self-evidentiality of many suicide notes', one historian concludes that they reflect 'the basic structure of human freedom'.¹⁶⁶ However, only very few, if any, historical documents are 'self-evident', and merely reprinting them without contextualizing them is not sufficient. Suicide notes do in fact have the ability to tell us something about the social, economic and even political context within which they were penned. Farewell missives are the suicide's last means of communication. As we have seen, relatively few suicides leave notes, which are, of course, often written under great mental stress. However, those who write a farewell letter, be it to the police, the welfare office or to their relatives



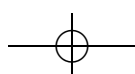
usually want to emphasize a particular suicide motive. Suicide notes thus offer a microcosm of the existential circumstances under which people took their lives. The ways in which people represented their suicides can be put into a historical context, which illuminates the circumstances of a suicide, alongside the main motive the suicide wanted to emphasize. As for the police, they took their own view of the circumstances, appending a brief note on the motivation for each case in the file with a red pencil. These files yield relatively little, if any, biographical information on the individuals presented here. Yet individual suicides are recoverable from these files, even without much background information about the individual suicides and their hopes and expectations.

In some cases, people who planned to commit suicide sent a note directly to the police in which they proposed arrangements for the disposal of their bodies. Probably only in Germany did suicides assist the police in this way. Most of them were from the working class and were too poor to have life insurance. Some wanted to ensure that friends and relatives were not accused of homicide, others wanted to protest against social conditions. Take the case of the 20-year-old chauffeur Ordulf Thomas, who shot himself in the Grunewald forest in 1928. Mocking the public media obsession with suicide, Thomas wrote a startlingly ironic letter to the local police office on the day before his death, detailing where the police could find his corpse:

For the rest, I ask you to refrain from putting any entertaining notes in the newspaper. You will certainly be interested in the motives that prompted me to take this step—so I'll satisfy your curiosity. Simply for a change. Life was too boring for me, and I wanted to convince myself of the existence of the 'Beyond'. I couldn't care less what you do with my remains. As far as I'm concerned you can put me on the Victory Column. So, that should do, and I wish you much pleasure with my cadaver.¹⁶⁷

While it is hard to say whether there was a literary influence here, Thomas's suicide note made fun of the public obsession with suicide and the genre of suicide notes, and mocked the romanticization of suicide in reports that attributed it to disappointment in love. His request not to be mentioned in the press, which the police observed, shows how some suicides tried to keep their death private, from whatever motives.

Emotional problems featured in many farewell missives. Oskar S, a 24-year-old unemployed waiter from the working-class Neukölln district



wrote on a scrap of paper, still stained with his own blood in the archive eighty years later, to his girlfriend on 4 April 1926: 'Dear Winnie! I couldn't go on. Thanks for everything. My body hurts, why.' On the reverse, he continued: 'Long live life. Thank you, my dear parents, for everything. But I'm finished.'¹⁶⁸ Somewhat apologetically, Oskar anticipated that his relatives might be gravely offended by his suicide. He ended by expressing his love for his girlfriend and family.

On the other hand, some suicides used their final statement to express hatred, as did Hermann L to his daughter on 8 July 1926:

When you find this note, do whatever you want, because I'm not coming back. I'm sick of you acting like an animal. It always reminds me of earlier times. You have no idea what a bitch your mother was. My disgust drove me away from her. Farewell and try to become a human being, *otherwise you'll perish, too*. Best wishes. Your Father.¹⁶⁹

Here was suicide presented as a kind of revenge, designed to cause feelings of guilt and shame in the surviving next-of-kin.

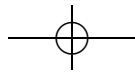
Some suicides made explicit political statements in their final communications, probably hoping that their suicide notes would be noticed by the press. The Italian citizen Antonio S was found hanged on 1 June 1927 in a goods train near the station of Sagehorn in Lower Saxony. There are no further details available on S, probably a political refugee from Italy. In his suicide note, translated by the police, he protested against the Fascist regime:

Persecuted and hunted like an animal, I had to leave my country in order not to lose my freedom. It was very hard for me to bring about my own death, but it's far better than being executed in the *Mussolini gaol*, because I am a political dissenter! Cheers to all decent people who do not violate their fellow citizens even when their politics are different.

It seems likely that S was facing extradition proceedings, and did not see any way out for himself other than suicide. The police tried to contact his relatives, but conceded on 20 September 1927 that 'the investigations in Milan were inconclusive'.¹⁷⁰

Count Ernst von L, a lawyer, wrote his own very patriotic obituary instead of leaving a suicide note to his family before shooting himself in 1927 in his flat in Spandau:

In accordance with his inner disposition, he remained to his core a loner. His heart was not tied to things of the ephemeral world. So outstanding

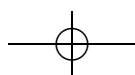


was his character that whatever the situation, he would not allow himself to go around flattering people, be they his superiors or others, at work or away from it. Toadying and pussyfooting were for him as good as having no character at all. His unabashed directness in dealing with his fellow men made him quite a few enemies ... He was a German to his very core and a monarchist, an unflinching and avid confessor of his faith, a fanatical devotee of Bismarck and last but not least one whose hatred of the French nation was unmatched.¹⁷¹

While it is not entirely obvious what had prompted his suicide, it is clear that he completely identified himself and his status as an ex-soldier with the fate of the German nation.

Material problems, especially unemployment, served as a primary motive in many suicide notes, as one might expect from the statistical evidence. Fifty-nine-year-old chauffeur Wilhelm S's suicide note, written before he gassed himself on 9 September 1932 in his flat in the Friedenau garden suburb of Berlin, reads like a short autobiography and as a self-justification vis-à-vis the police. A war veteran, S had had marriage problems and, to make things worse, was now unemployed. He accused his wife of having destroyed his life, and, by implication, causing his suicide. It seems as if he would have been quite pleased if she had got into trouble with the police. S declared:

I must unfortunately leave behind this last missive, because I cannot live any longer and so I must depart from life. I have indeed done my duty. I have been married since 27 December 1900. As early as 1903 I had already been alerted to the fact that she would make me unhappy. And so it continued year after year. Then the war came. I returned and it all started. Her siblings were with her and had a bad influence on her and moved from one place to the next. I moved to Manteuffelstrasse 19 in Tempelhof and then things really went awry. They both got on each other [s nerves]. She said the woman is making you unhappy, that was Wilhelm S and Emma S, nee L. Luise S was there, too. I complained that this should be kept a private matter, but it went to police station 178. Any of her siblings could have done it. [They] brought the whole matter to the attention of the Supreme Administrative Court (*Oberverwaltungsgericht*) at Hardenbergstr. 31. Everything is a mess. I had to take my wife to Buch [a Berlin mental asylum], but she was released. While my wife was in the mental asylum, I had to live with my daughter Else who did not make much money. She left on 1 May, packed up her stuff and [left me] some pennies. I used them [up] on the street but that wasn't enough for her so now my wife is taking everything over to her son who wouldn't even offer her a glass of water. He cannot eat and throws



everything into the dustbin. Willi S lives at Bahnstr 9 and now I have the pain. Now I'm unemployed, it's even worse now, getting worse. I could put down more thoughts. Phone Dönhoff 9127, Kommandantenstr 18, signed Willi S, chauffeur. I was inclined to set everything on fire, but I felt sorry for the neighbours.¹⁷²

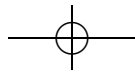
Here, in this confused but powerful note, was suicide in rage and despair, triggered by economic misery and problems with his family.

Ordinary people sometimes asked the police not to pass on any information about their suicide. The 53-year-old bank clerk Johannes L, who gassed himself in his flat in the Barn District of Berlin on 22 July 1931, specifically requested that the press must not be informed; the police would be able to draw an 'appropriate donation' from his estate if they kept the matter quiet. According to the police, he was suffering from paralysis of the legs. Writing a suicide note to the local police office's head, L explained that the police should know 'that this is not a crime when someone finds me dead in my bed'. He also requested not to be taken to a morgue, but directly to the cemetery, in a coffin, which was ready for him. If true, this reveals that L had meticulously planned his suicide beforehand.¹⁷³

Unemployment, despair and lost love were common motives for ordinary Berliners to justify their suicides. The case of the 25-year-old butcher, Hermann J from Glogau in Silesia, who shot himself in a hotel room in Berlin on 15 February 1931, is quite revealing in this regard. Leaving three suicide notes (one to his girlfriend, another one to his family and another one to relatives who had put him up in Berlin), J particularly emphasized his unemployment. In a letter to his family, he declared:

You'll be surprised to get this letter from me. Since I still haven't found work and I don't know where to go, I've decided to end it all. If I'd just found work, then everything would have been fine, but maybe that's just the way things were to be. You wouldn't believe just how horrible the job outlook is. I tried so very hard, but in vain. And I really can't ask my brother-in-law to keep feeding me here month after month. He did so much for me. He's helped me out since November with food and lodging. And so I ask you to give my things and some money to Fritz. Otherwise I don't know what else to write so I'll stop here. Best wishes ... Farewell.

Taking this explanation for granted, the criminal police laconically commented that the 'motive of the suicide [was] unemployment and economic misery'.¹⁷⁴ Male unemployment and male suicide were thought to be causally related to each other, and the police did not bother to investigate

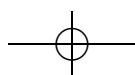


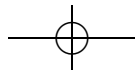
this suicide further. Many suicides justified their deaths with reference to an unbearable combination of highly personal and socio-economic causes, although some emphasized solely private matters. They saw no way out of a political, emotional or practical crisis: they were alone, abandoned or persecuted by their country, or their family. Suicide notes not only linked the suicide to his or her own environment; they also documented in more ways than one the suicide's final rupture from it.

VIII

In Weimar Germany, suicide statistics and the mass media helped to shape wider social and political representations of suicide. Suicide was widely associated with the political and socio-economic problems of the time, which many observers directly related to the defeat of 1918, the Versailles Treaty, the capitalist system, reparations, or modernity. For people from different classes and generations, suicide served as a focal point for their own beliefs and ideologies. In the public sphere, including newspapers, suicide, together with other manifestations of deviance such as crime and murder, entered the agenda as a focal point for conflicting ideologies. The churches, concerned with the implications of modernity, blamed secularization, urbanization, and the alleged atomization of society for the ostensible increase in suicide levels—which they considerably exaggerated. This prompted parts of the German public to relate Weimar society to a reversal of traditional, pre-1918 norms and values: an anomie prompting many suicides.¹⁷⁵

Political parties, especially those on the radical fringes of the political spectrum, like the Nazis and the communists, blamed the political and economic order for rising suicide levels. Ordinary people tended to justify their suicides with direct reference to the political and socio-economic difficulties of the time, and, of course, mentioned personal and emotional motivations, including the collapse of traditional gender roles for men. Some were very much aware of the ways in which suicide was discussed in public. People wrote lengthy justifications in their suicide notes either addressed to the state authorities or to their own families. Many still saw suicide as a disreputable, highly extreme, last resort for one's problems with which, by common agreement, other institutions, such as the church and welfare agencies, could no longer cope. Yet at the same time, thanks





to the impact of sensationalist newspaper stories, ordinary people began to accept that suicide was a mass phenomenon prompted by political and socio-economic disorder.

There was an interchange between personal suicide discourse and public suicide discourse, especially in the common emphasis of unemployment in the later years of the Weimar Republic. The political and socio-economic crisis of the Weimar years impacted upon individuals to the extent that many committed suicide in despair. The public and private representations of suicide overlapped, making it impossible to differentiate sharply between suicide as a discourse and the socio-psychological causes of suicide. Unresolved tensions therefore remain between these two levels. By 1933, suicide on an unprecedented scale had come to symbolize for many the disastrous, crisis-ridden epoch of Weimar. On coming to power in 1933, the Nazis promised to banish all this. Would they banish suicide too?

