

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Daniel Bessner. *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual.* The United States in the World Series. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 312 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5303-8; \$16.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-5017-1203-6.

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Published on H-War (October, 2019)

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A consensus should exist that Daniel Bessner's *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* succeeds as an intellectual biography. Speier, who left Nazi Germany in 1933 for the United States, became a key contributor to the "military-intellectual-complex," and he provides a fascinating vehicle for examining the relationships between intellectuals, policy formation, and American institutions in the twentieth century. Bessner's study also exemplifies a positive trend in scholarship among intellectual historians with interest in how and why the United States has embraced overly military-oriented foreign policy since the Spanish-American War. A fundamental factor in Bessner's argument centers on "appeals to crisis" as a means with which to enact and legitimize emergency measures, such as limiting democratic procedures or civil rights, to achieve efficient governance. Through the Cold War, Bessner shows how an institutionalization of emergency governance, guided by defense intellectuals such as Speier, came to define American foreign policy at the expense of greater civic participation. "The irony of Speier's life," Bessner explains, "was that the trauma of National Socialism's rise compelled him to limit the open society for which he stood in an attempt to defend it" (p. 12).

The origins of Speier's traumatized perception of democracy originated with its vulnerability to manipulation through the destruction of the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s. As a result, Speier began to promote a form of democratic consciousness that democracy must be limited or controlled by elites in order to

ensure its survival in times of crisis, such as World War II and later during the Cold War. This was an intellectual development already promoted by Walter Lippman in the 1920s, which argued that experts were required to help statesmen make wise decisions while limiting public influence. The Weimar Republic's subversion guides *Democracy in Exile*, and in a 2017 article, Bessner argues that Speier "viewed all politics through the prism of the failed (Weimar) republic."^[1] In turn, Speier, a committed anti-fascist, used his knowledge and social science skills to support the Office of War Information (OWI) during World War II, and later in the service of anti-communism at the RAND Corporation along with several other institutions. A strength in Bessner's account is that readers unfamiliar with the Weimar Republic's history still gain a clear understanding behind Speier's trepidation over the fragile nature of democracy that Nazi Socialism undermined to create the Third Reich.

Democratic procedural manipulation, led by Chancellor Adolf Hitler and the German cabinet in 1933, legally amended the Weimar Constitution to exile democracy—as Speier perceived it—by establishing the Enabling Act of March 1933. The title for Bessner's book, *Democracy in Exile*, insightfully references not only Speier's sense of a failed democracy in the Weimar Republic but also Speier's exile to the United States. The legal procedures undermining Weimar, notably the Enabling Act, gave Hitler and the German cabinet power to create laws without involving the Reichstag, and this, effectively, epitomized the manipulation of democratic

procedure to dismantle democracy. Speier, undoubtedly, knew that the very idea of “political crisis” that could be manufactured for further manipulation was the critical process behind events leading to the Enabling Act. Bessner does not dig into these origins at great length but does provide readers with enough context to recognize how German politics boiled into a crisis beyond containing when, allegedly, a Sturmabteilung (SA) arsonist burned the Reichstag, thus setting Weimar’s political destruction in motion.

The Reichstag fire conspiracy led to the Reichstag Fire Decree, which was proclaimed in February 1933. The decree enabled targeting of Nazi political opponents, culminating in the far more comprehensive Enabling Act in March 1933. The Fire Decree and Enabling Act created legal process the Nazis called *Gleichschaltung*, or “coordination,” through which Hitler gained power after becoming chancellor in January 1933.[2] The sequencing of the Weimar Republic’s subversion through democratic means, Bessner makes clear, traumatized Speier and all of Europe, really, to create a fear of democracy’s vulnerability to manipulation that remained with him after exile to the United States. Speier, Bessner writes, “became convinced that ordinary people from all classes, whose support had paved the Nazi’s path to power, could neither be trusted nor educated to make correct political decisions” (p. 1). As a result, Speier rejected the idea that the public had an active role in creating policy through elections, let alone influencing policy through public pressure. Much of this, Bessner explains, originated with Speier’s disillusionment with a German working class that sought prestige and social mobility rather than unity as a Socialist-leaning proletariat that would mobilize for positive social change, let alone defeat the Nazi’s fascist agenda.

Speier’s disillusionment with the working class subsequently evolved into a fear of democratic governance. While Speier perceived Nazism as an existential threat, its defeat in 1945 did not mean the end to a “crisis of politics” for Speier. The onset of the Cold War and the development of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union soon created another existential threat that had no end in sight. This transference of a crisis in Speier’s thought enables Bessner to create a remarkable sense of progression in Speier’s thought. Bessner explains, “Once Speier learned in September 1949 that the Soviets had detonated an atomic bomb—and therefore could theoretically eradicate humanity—he re-embraced the logic of crisis that he had used to understand international relations in the 1930s and began to assert that the Soviets were an existential threat akin to the Nazis.... Speier transformed his

earlier, time-limited moment of crisis into an indefinite era of crisis, in which previously extraordinary measures became permanently normalized” (p. 150).

Bessner provides convincing and sympathetic explanations for Speier’s understandable fear. Direct public participation in democracy possessed, in Speier’s view, too many vulnerabilities making it rife for potential future subversion. Unlike Speier, younger émigrés with experience of Nazi Germany, such as Walter Laqueur and Fritz Stern, but also other scholars with expertise in Indochina, such as Bernard Fall, did not share Speier’s sympathy for illiberal means to protect democracy, a point Bessner makes in his book and an article.[3] More broadly, Bessner demonstrates a strong sense of applied history that calls for thinking historically and using historical analogues with scrutiny.[4] Methodologically, Bessner’s intellectual biographical approach to Speier also exemplifies how *Democracy in Exile* contributes to a reinvigorated and positive trend in historical scholarship using biography. The legacy of examining complex ideas and learning from the lives of others, of course, goes back to Plutarch and other founders of history beginning with Herodotus.[5]

The historical background of Speier’s early academic life in Germany, and the progression of his exile in the United States in the years before war broke out, is therefore a strength in Bessner’s account. The influence of intellectuals, such as Karl Mannheim’s 1929 publication *Ideology and Utopia*, along with the milieu Speier joined as a member of the University in Exile—a group of like-minded Germans who gravitated to the New School in New York City forming a “University in Exile”—is cogent and detailed and illuminates why these individuals self-professed their superiority over other intellectual groups.[6] Bessner is balanced in his judgments but correct to write that “by World War II, the Graduate Faculty [of Political and Social Science located at the New School] was recognized as one of the most important collections of exiled European scholars in the United States, if not the world” (p. 53). Despite his obvious admiration of these scholars, Bessner also demonstrates a capacity for articulating alarm over these elites’ anti or “militant democratic methods.” Throughout the work, Bessner clearly explains how serious engagement between Speier and other activist intellectuals, especially University of Chicago social scientist Harold D. Lasswell, was, so illuminating because of these scholars’ shared influence in the field of propaganda during World War II.[7]

After World War II, Speier’s embrace of the United

States' exceptionalist claims to democracy blinded him to American failings that ranged from Guatemala in 1954 to McCarthyism through the 1950s, and throughout the escalating US intervention in Vietnam. In Speier's view, social research demanded commitment to values but, as Bessner demonstrates, Speier had difficulty finding a balance between full participatory democracy and restraining it when confronted with the crisis of communism after the Second World War. The wisest critics, Bessner tacitly suggests as the book's bigger lesson, authentically champion values by sincerely questioning policy and the ways and means used to implement policy, and especially its strategic ends. Dissent, in fact, may be one of the most patriotic qualities found in democracy, and, reasonably, critical debate and dissenting opinions often enable more effective policy. The irony in Bessner's account, of course, was that Speier's advocacy for limiting democracy to protect it from manipulation played a part in the rise of authoritarianism from which Speier fled in 1933.

Speier, understandably, conflated fascism with communism and the fear that ideologues could manipulate the public never left him. The reader can see that Bessner navigates between a sense of frustration and sympathy with Speier throughout the book. As a result, Bessner's narrative becomes almost vibrant in his analysis of intellectual disagreements that existed between Speier, who advocated an action-oriented use of knowledge, and the critical and non-action-oriented theories of Frankfurt school theorists, such as Herbert Marcuse and especially Max Horkheimer. Along with Theodor Adorno, Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and others, the Frankfurt school, based primarily around Columbia University, "sought to reinvigorate Marxism through the incorporation of psychoanalysis and a critique of culture" (p. 60). Speier, in contrast, sought to establish the intellectual in the service of the United States, as a means to protect democracy.

Structurally, early chapters in the book are devoted to Speier's intellectual formation, and they provide helpful context for the post-Second World War effort Speier devoted to establishment of what Bessner regards "the defense intellectual." Speier's wartime experience, working for the US government in the field of psychological warfare, euphemistically referred to currently as "military information support operations," reflected Speier's profound awareness of propaganda's power by Nazi Germany. Due to his expertise in propaganda, Speier found postwar employment with the RAND Corporation two years after its creation in 1946. In this role, Speier became a founding member of the Social Science Division at RAND. Moreover, his influence at RAND expanded

with his subsequent efforts to integrate social science into the Research Program in International Communication at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for International Studies and also at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University.

The RAND Corporation, initially funded by the US Air Force to study effective means for deploying its forces during the early Cold War, became an intellectual battleground in important respects. Speier joined RAND in 1948, and, as a leader among the social scientists there, he not surprisingly championed qualitative assessments of political decision-making. This perspective was especially embodied in political-military simulations for training purposes that "endorsed the idea that political life was, by definition, unquantifiable" (p. 224). Helpfully, Bessner provides a well-written account that helps the reader navigate complex intellectual debates. As an example, readers are presented with sophisticated analysis of the debate between qualitative-quantitative divergences at RAND's offices in Santa Monica and Washington, DC. Moreover, Bessner describes how debates over heuristic simulations such as game theory, which rationalized human behavior through various models of analysis, did not go uncontested by Speier and other social scientists. Speier, not surprisingly, pushed back against claims that quantifiable analysis, in general, could fully explain human action. Speier, Bessner explains, recognized that "effective policy analysis required accepting—indeed embracing—the limits of knowledge" (p. 223).

Historians studying twentieth-century Europe and the United States deserve this book, and they probably need it too. The content of terms that historians use to describe social forces and processes, such as national security and their sought-after employment as "defense intellectuals" are all too often insufficiently scrutinized and subject to wide-ranging interpretation. Mary L. Dudziak has demonstrated how the phenomena of when wars begin and end, represented in the idea of "wartime," has serious implications. War, Dudziak shows, can be manipulated into an exceptional event, especially since Congress no longer declares "war" as it should according to the Constitution, to justify extreme actions that are not as acceptable in times of peace.[8] Bessner's *Democracy in Exile*, therefore, stacks up with the best in contemporary history that is powerfully relevant to current debates concerning foreign policy. The book shows how and why it is important to think carefully about democracy and the role scholars and intellectuals contribute to its survival. Speier's life and work are reminders that the value

of an open and free society, which citizens of this republic all too often take for granted, are never guaranteed.

Notes

[1]. Daniel Bessner, "The Ghosts of Weimar: The Weimar Analogy in American Thought," *Social Research* 84, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 834.

[2]. For more on the Enabling Act of 1933, see Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018), 206.

[3]. Bessner, "Ghosts of Weimar."

[4]. See Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, "Applied History Manifesto," Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Applied History Project, October 2016, https://www.belfercenter.org/project/applied-history-project#!manifesto.

[5]. Other recent examples of intellectual biography include Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); David Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008); and David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2015).

[6]. Mannheim was a Hungarian-born sociologist known as a founder of the sociology of knowledge and other ideas that were influential in the first half of the twentieth century. See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (Eastford, CT: Martino Books, 2015).

[7]. See Harold D. Lasswell, "The Garrison State," *The American Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 4 (January 1941): 455, 459.

[8]. Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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Citation: Nathaniel Moir. Review of Bessner, Daniel, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2019.

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