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Weimar – The First German Democracy

A Portal for Sources from the Federal Archives

Facing the upcoming centennial of the November Revolution of 1918 and subsequent centennial anniversaries commemorating the Weimar Republic, and in view of the considerable public attention that these events would receive, the Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives) started a long-term project in 2015. Since then, a great amount of records, films, photographs, posters, maps and audio recordings have been digitised and made available online on a newly-designed website – the Weimar Republic portal.¹ This work is still ongoing. Over the next two years the portal will continuously be complemented and help the visitor to find special sources from the time of the Weimar Republic (fig. 1, p. 139).

As a “custodian” of significant and unique historical sources documenting that period, the Bundesarchiv aims to direct public attention toward the “treasures” that are kept by the archives. At the same time, we are hoping that the project will enhance the overall public perception of the Bundesarchiv as one of the most important institutions for preserving history and cultural memory in the Federal Republic. We also hope that making digitized sources available online will stimulate collaboration with universities and research projects, and that the new Weimar Republic portal will attract new users while strengthening the bonds with existing users. Finally, and not least, the Bundesarchiv is eager to protect its original sources through the use of digital copies.

¹ Available at: www.weimar.bundesarchiv.de [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

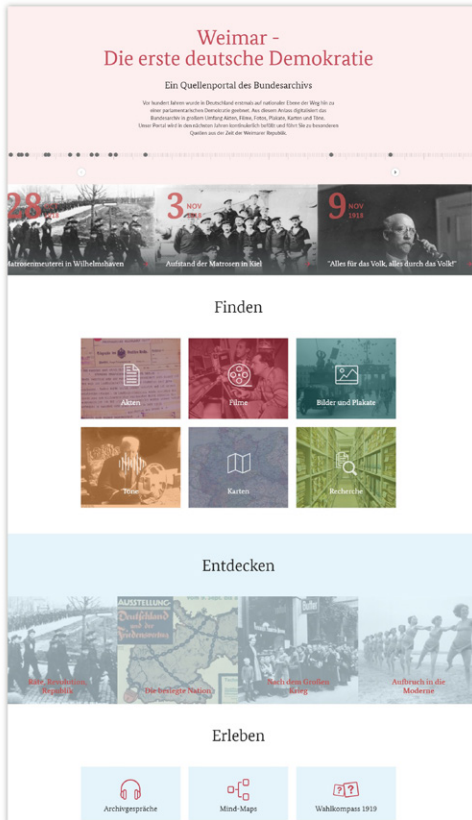


Fig. 1: Detail of the front page. ©Bundesarchiv, 2018

Current state of digitisation

Hitherto, approximately 8000 files, 70 documentaries and 30 audio recordings have been digitized for the Weimar Republic portal. Furthermore, there are digitized photos and posters on a large scale: for just the years between 1919 and 1924, more than 4000 digitized photos and nearly 1500 posters are available.

Even if this seems to be a lot of digitized material at first sight, just slightly more than 1% of all textual materials at the Bundesarchiv have been digitized so far; the share of digitized images is only marginally higher.

Different user groups and different ways of access

Digital sources are increasingly interesting for scholarly research, especially if a significant volume of digital copies is made available online, thereby making a visit to the physical archives, if not unnecessary, then at least shorter and easier. The Weimar Republic portal not only aims at scholars and journalists, who – as experts in the areas of research and interpretation – frequently find their way into the archives anyway. We also hope to attract new user groups, such as high school, college and university students, as well as people interested in history who haven't had any previous contact with archival collections. In order to address these different user groups the Weimar Republic portal offers different ways of access:

The *event-orientated access* is a timeline highlighting important political events over the years from 1918 to 1929. An exemplar – normally a document or a photo with a short explanation – illustrates the event and leads to further sources or whole collections.

The *structured access* refers to the different categories of archival material and is a guide to the different databases of the Federal Archives, such as the *Filmothek* or the search application *invenio*.

The *thematic access* includes four subject areas focusing on political upheaval, domestic and foreign policy, and cultural aspects. Virtual galleries accentuate and contextualize exemplar sources.

A kind of *playful access* – particularly suitable for pupils and teachers – invites the visitor to experience history and historical research. There are special offers for listening, watching and simply trying out: expert interviews concerning the background, objectives and perspectives of the source portal; mind maps of sources; and two interactive elements, *Wahlkompass 1919* (Election Compass) and *Spiel der Lebenswege* (Life Courses: A Game).

With these interactive elements the Bundesarchiv explores new methods of historical education and attracts new users. The idea for the *Wahlkompass* (fig. 2, p. 141) and the *Spiel der Lebenswege* was born in close cooperation with the “Verein Weimarer Republik” and with the consultants of “Museumlis”, an enterprise specializing in developing museum exhibitions.



Fig. 2: Detail of the Election Compass 1919. ©Bundesarchiv, 2018

Conclusion

The Weimar Republic portal aims to attract new users and focus on the user's interest. The Bundesarchiv also is interested in developing relationships with its users: the new portal is meant as an invitation to users to provide feedback.

With a great amount of digitized material the portal is the first step on the road to establishing a digital platform for research and science. It is considered a prototype for the development of future ways of presentation and accessibility.