

Michael Habersack:
Friedrich Dessauer (1881–1963).
Eine politische Biographie des Frankfurter Biophysikers und
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During the period of the Weimar Republic, the Frankfurt-based biophysicist Friedrich Dessauer was »one of the most fascinating figures in German Catholicism of the time« (Heinz Hürten). Rudolf Morsey counts him among the »leading politicians and parliamentarians of the Center Party,« while the neurologist Karl Stern saw him, at the beginning of the 1950s, »at the head of the German Catholics movement« (à la tête du mouvement catholique allemand). Nevertheless, the role this well-known pioneer of x-rays played as a local politician and Reichstag deputy has been considered only sporadically and marginally in the scholarship on political history. As Dieter Rebentisch rightly observed in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1981, Dessauer is a nearly forgotten social politician. That is not least the result of the one-sidedly medicinal or scientific perspective from which Dessauer's life's achievements have been honored in biographical form.

A political biography of Dessauer has thus far been missing, as has an answer to the question whether, and how, both fields in which the Frankfurt biophysicist was active were connected. The present study, therefore, is concerned not only with political biography in the narrow sense; it also examines what influence Dessauer's »pre-political life« had on his political outlook, which factors were decisive for his entry into politics, which roles he was assigned in the Center Party, in particular, and in German Catholicism, in general, as well as what possibilities to exercise influence these afforded him. It also investigates what consequences he faced in the Third Reich on account of his political involvement. Consequently, Dessauer's life's work, taken as a historical cross-section of the »age of catastrophes,« provides transcending insights into the history of Frankfurt and the Center Party in the Weimar Republic, as well as the history of the Third Reich.

The present study is the first to utilize the – mostly unknown – larger part of Dessauer's papers. Using this source base, one considerably expanded compared with older works, Dessauer's youth, his founding of a company at age 19, his role as head of a firm during the First World War, his turn to science, and his years of exile in Istanbul and Fribourg in Switzerland are, for the first time, presented so that the context and conditions of Dessauer's political intentions and motivations become recognizable. His fascination for the monumental

technological inventions and scientific discoveries of his youth, including the automobile, radio, film, the transmission of electrical power, and x-rays, is significant, as is his resulting enthusiasm for research, his founding of a company in Aschaffenburg, and the merger of his business with a Frankfurt firm. This merger established the »Veifa« company, whose managing director Dessauer was for over a decade and which the tireless researcher considered his life's work. The company's loss of independence in wartime did not remain without effect on his political outlook.

Additionally, the study reveals the influence of his close friendship with Carl Muth, publisher of the Catholic cultural journal Hochland. It reconstructs the beginnings of this friendship, which had its origins in Dessauer's marked determination to find a balance between technical progress and the Catholic faith, and which was grounded not least in both men's shared goal of overcoming that Catholic »inferiority« lamented by the later Reich Chancellor Georg von Hertling in 1896.

Dessauer's entry into politics in November 1918 was shaped by his determination to help shape events but also by his fear of any communist experiment. As a deeply committed democrat, he favored a Weimar coalition of the Center Party, the SPD, and the DDP (German Democratic Party) and brought the majority of the Center Party in Frankfurt onto this course. He managed this through his outstanding position as a brilliant speaker and superior visionary among Frankfurt's Catholics. He persuaded his party to cooperate with the SPD and DDP in electing the liberal Ludwig Landmann as governing mayor and to support Landmann's path-breaking projects, such as reopening the international Frankfurt Trade Fair and construction of housing and the airport.

Dessauer was not able to achieve comparable successes in national politics; time and again, he supported minority positions within the Center Party's Reichstag contingent, to which he belonged since 1924. Nonetheless, Dessauer's influence was considerable, as a role model for the Center Party's youth and as publisher of the Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung, which he single-handedly rehabilitated and built into one of the most successful Catholic newspapers in the German Reich. He represented the Center Party's future. As a result of his stance on the matter of the Fürstenabfindung (compensation for disempowered rulers), however, he became an object of hate for right-wing Catholic and völkisch (ethnic nationalist) circles, which in 1933 finally resulted in the purely politically motivated »kleiner Volksvereinprozeß« (a trial involving the Volksverein, a Catholic social organization). The after-effects pursued Dessauer into his subsequent exile. The study shows how difficult this situation was for the convinced patriot Dessauer, both financially and emotionally.

That the ideas of the irrepressible optimist Friedrich Dessauer, shaped by Franciscan piety and overcoming both Nazi tyranny and World War II, bore fruit in the post-war period is demonstrated by the success of his numerous books, which appeared in multiple printings, and the attendance at his speeches, which were followed by thousands of listeners, such as at the 76th Catholic Congress in Fulda in 1954. With keen interest, the scientist Dessauer beheld the beginning of Vatican II and the Aggiornamento of the Church, before finally passing away in February 1963.