

The German Revolution of 1918-19

war and breaking point

Simon Constantine examines the clashes between the Left and Right of Germany's new Republic that helped to create the environment for future extremism and hatred.



Heinrich Ehmssen, 'Kindertod' (Infant Death), 1917-18.
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In the Summer of 1917, not long after the United States entered the war, the former American ambassador to Germany, James Gerard, would write the following words:

The German nation is not one which makes revolutions. There will be scattered riots in Germany, but no simultaneous rising of the whole people. The officers of the army are all of one class, and of a class devoted to the ideals of autocracy. A revolution of the army is impossible; and at home there are only the boys and old men easily kept in subjection by the police.

There is a far greater danger of the starvation of our allies than of the starvation of the Germans. Every available inch of ground in Germany is cultivated, and cultivated by the aid of the old men, the boys and the women, and of the two million prisoners of war.¹

Gerard turned out to be wrong. A revolution occurred a little over a year later, and both the USA's decision to fight and widespread hunger in Germany would play important causal

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Food ration card for bread, Hamburg, 1918.
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roles. His assessment of military loyalty also proved incorrect; the rebellion was to begin among the mariners of the German navy, and the actions of both soldiers and sailors were crucial to its early success.

Gerard could be forgiven for this errant prediction. For much of his tenure in Berlin Germany had coped well with the demands of total war, and it is certainly true that there was a rapid decline in German fortunes *after* his memoir had been published. But things had also worsened in the few months before he left Germany in February 1917. A poor harvest meant that the daily struggle for German citizens had intensified in the autumn of 1916, with food shortages leading to undernourishment and climbing mortality rates, especially among children, the elderly and the sick. Tuberculosis patients, in particular, died in great numbers as the quantity and quality of food diminished. This 'turnip winter' was also exceptionally cold, which contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of fatal heart attacks and strokes. Statistics compiled by the municipal authorities in Leipzig show that there were over 100 days where the daytime temperature remained below zero. For much of February it fell below -10. At the same time, the cost of heating was rising. The situation did not improve in 1917. With American entry into the war in April, Germany's trade with neutral powers was greatly curtailed, and the effect of the Allied naval blockade more severe. Increasing numbers came to depend on the black market for staple foods, or on municipal soup kitchens, which, together with bread queues, became a very visible sign of social distress.²

The growing distance between actual experience and war-time propaganda also undoubtedly fuelled resentment. Ordinary Germans weighed reports of military victories against personal experience of bereavement, and the bullish patriotism of the war food office against the experience of real hunger. The

writer and revolutionary Ernst Toller would later draw attention to this widening credibility gap.

Germany was hungry. Eminent scientists proved that clay had the same food value as flour, that saccharine-sweetened jam was healthier than butter, that dried potato tops were better for the nerves than tobacco and tasted just as good. But the pronouncements of scientists were of little avail to the stomach, which reacted to their nonsense in its own way: people collapsed, fell sick, grew desperate.³

Food shortages and war-weariness led to widespread resignation, but also fed a latent propensity for protest. New, politically-radical organisations emerged, most notably the Spartacus League, under the leadership of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards of the Berlin metalworkers. The rank and file in the mining and armaments industries, frustrated at union leadership, also turned increasingly to direct action. Strikes, which had been largely absent in the first years of war, were the main response. Some 240 occurred in 1916, including the mass strike of around 50,000 Berlin workers in June, launched in protest at the arrest of Liebknecht who had called publicly for an end to the war. In 1917 561 strikes took place with a million and a half participants, the largest the 'Bread Strike' in Berlin in April 1917. Wilhelm Groener, head of the War Office at this point, and worried about the impact of the walkout on arms production, noted in committee that 'it was unfortunate that the bread rations had to be reduced just when labourers were beginning to brighten up after the hard winter'. The *Brotstreik* also had a political dimension. Pamphlets were distributed referring to the Russian Revolution, and exhorting armaments workers to stop working as a way to stop the war.⁴

The cover image of the newspaper *Das Illustrierte Blatt* of 24 November 1918 shows revolutionary sailors and soldiers with a red flag as they drive through the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, 9 November 1918.

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In late January 1918 the largest strike of the war, in which over a million workers took part, brought much of Germany to a standstill. Largely peaceful, the protest nevertheless escalated to the point of violent confrontation in some areas. In the north of Berlin, troops on horseback confronted barricades of overturned trams.⁵ This mass walkout reflected the desperate need for an improvement in material circumstances, but the workers' demands were also political: peace without annexations, a lifting of the state of emergency, the restoration of the rights of association and assembly, equal suffrage, and political amnesty for opponents of the regime who had been imprisoned.

Military intervention, and the arrest and conscription of its instigators, brought an end to the *Januarstreik*, although not to the sentiment which produced it. But this crisis at home was to be followed by one at the front that would ultimately prove decisive. Between March and July the German army launched five major offensives in the west, securing territorial gains but not the intended strategic breakthrough. Its fighting strength and its morale were greatly depleted by the effort; battlefield casualties were enormous, and the army was also hit by the influenza pandemic in the summer months. In August a counterattack by the *Entente* forced a retreat and with this the German army 'lost the belief that it could achieve victory'.⁶ In late September, the capitulation of Bulgaria, and the foreseeable impact it would have on German oil and grain imports, led Army Command to seek an armistice.

The revolution arrives

This combination of external and internal pressure forced the regime's hand. It now appointed a government that would be responsible to parliament, tasked with constitutional and electoral reform, and – in the first instance – with securing

the armistice. It heralded the end of the semi-authoritarian rule of the second Empire, and was both a strategy to ward off revolution and an attempt to improve Germany's bargaining position with the Allies, since it was felt that President Wilson would be better disposed towards a more liberal Germany. But within a matter of days this 'revolution from above' was to be engulfed by one from below. The catalyst was the decision by the navy to launch one final, honour-saving attack on the British from the port of Wilhelmshaven, a plan which would rob the military of any authority it still possessed and – critically – underscore the 'legitimacy of collective disobedience', since the idea was both futile, and directly contradicted the German government's own efforts to negotiate a ceasefire.⁷

In the night of 28–29 October crews in the 1st and 3rd squadrons mutinied, sabotaging their own ships. Naval command's subsequent decision to order the 3rd squadron back to their home port of Kiel, with the arrested ringleaders on board, spread rather than contained the rebellion. On 3 November a protest by sailors and workers in Kiel calling for an end to the war culminated in a procession to free the imprisoned mutineers. When this was fired upon with the loss of seven lives, the demonstrators fought back. The next day mariners stationed at the large garrison, including many of the lower-ranked officers, rebelled and by the evening the city was fully under their control. From Kiel flying columns of sailors brought the revolution to the other northern port cities, and, in the following days to Germany's north-west, Bavaria, Hessen, Saxony and Wurttemberg, finally reaching Berlin on 9 November. Fears that the military leadership would respond and a bloodbath ensue proved unfounded when it became apparent that even 'reliable' soldiers would not fire on their fellow-Germans. A republic was declared and a provisional government of leading Social Democrat (SPD) and Independent Socialist (USPD) parliamentarians formed, pushing the Kaiser into exile. One day later, with Matthias Erzberger instructed by Groener (chief of staff) and Friedrich Ebert (head of the new coalition government) to secure a ceasefire at any price, the armistice came into effect.

The revolution came with a spontaneity and momentum which caught the establishment utterly off guard. This included the leaders of the labour movement, who had been 'obliged to jump into the revolution' so as not 'to lose the leadership of the masses'.⁸ But this elemental, dynamic quality to the revolution did not mean that it was somehow unstructured or chaotic. In these first days the movement was channelled through a country-wide network of workers' and soldiers' councils, convened in the garrison towns at barracks, battalion and regimental level, and established in improvised fashion in working-class neighbourhoods and workplaces, often by local union or USPD and SPD party branches. District and regional councils broadly shadowing the existing bureaucratic structure were also constituted, and, later, larger, centralised councils would appear, most prominently the unified Workers and Soldiers Council of Greater Berlin and the 'Central Council' (*Zentralrat*) elected by delegates to a national congress held from 16 to 21 December.

In the weeks after the Armistice the councils comprised an armed and loyal force that could be mobilised in the event of counter-revolution. Historians have also highlighted the important role that the councils played in facilitating the process of demobilisation and in ensuring the continued distribution of food and fuel. But contemporaries on the radical left also looked beyond this immediate practical function and saw in the organic, local organisation of the councils a template for authentic democracy, one in which decision-making 'flowed upwards' from the grass roots. Such direct participation promised to be a real alternative to the representative system of

Spartacists are pictured at a barricade in front of the publishing company Mosse in Schützenstrasse in the newspaper district of Berlin, Germany, during the street fights in early January 1919.

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parliamentary democracy 'which once in a while summons the people to the ballot box and then loses all touch with them for years on end.' But it remains the case that the majority within the councils' movement were broadly in favour of the parliamentary course set by the SPD and USPD leadership, and in most cases viewed their own power as temporary or (at best) ancillary to that of the parliaments at state and national level. Delegates to the December congress voted to hold parliamentary elections for a constitutive assembly at the earliest opportunity, and against the idea that the councils should be given a fundamental role in the new constitution, a decision that provoked bitterness and despair among some on the Left.

The assumption that there was no meaningful place for the councils in the new system was in large part a product of SPD antipathy towards the council movement, which it mistakenly viewed as a competitor and destabilising force, rather than a partner which could help to democratise Germany. Such distrust followed from the SPD's abhorrence of rapid or radical social transformation; a political outlook which was to do much to shape the course of events that followed, chiefly because it brought the SPD leaders closer to elements of the old regime and guided their response to the episodes of radical protest that occurred from the winter of 1918-19 onwards.

Co-operation with the old order

To some extent the SPD leaders' willingness to work with the existing institutions reflected the severity of Germany's post-war predicament, and the desire of both new and old powers to ward off social and economic collapse. This 'anti-chaos reflex' saw the new SPD/USPD coalition and the councils work with the existing military chains of command and administration on the withdrawal and demobilisation of forces, and on the surrender of *matériel* to the Allies. The process of repurposing the economy for the aftermath of war, and of ensuring that the population were fed, clothed and housed also necessitated co-operation with the civilian administration and a reliance on the expertise of existing authorities. But, as already suggested, the relationship between the SPD and the old order, particularly the General Staff, was conditioned not only by the need to meet basic social needs, but also by a shared desire to prevent the emergence of more radical political solutions to the problems facing Germany after the

war. At the very beginning of coalition government Ebert had struck a deal with Groener, now quartermaster general of the German Army, that promised him the loyalty and co-operation of the armed forces in return for a commitment to fight any appearance of Bolshevism on German soil, to ensure that the soldiers' councils remained a temporary phenomenon, and that the sole authority of the officer corps would be restored. In the winter of 1918-19 a series of crises would strengthen this fateful relationship, and, as a result, also destroy any chance of co-operation or reconciliation between the radicals and reformists of the German labour movement.

Winter crisis

In mid-December, following alleged instances of theft by revolutionary sailors stationed in the Berlin Palace, the coalition made plans to disband the unit and suspend their pay. In response they occupied the Reich Chancellery and placed the coalition under house arrest, also taking Otto Wels, the city commandant, hostage. Ebert reacted by telephoning Groener and ordering an attack on the palace in which 56 troops, 11 sailors and several civilians died. Negotiations, not force, eventually persuaded the sailors to vacate the palace, the division intact. The episode demonstrated the vulnerability of a government which could call on no reliable or effective troops, something which was to push Ebert even closer to the General Staff. Critically, it also marked the end of the coalition, with the USPD leaving the government on 29 December in protest at Ebert's handling of the crisis and the SPD's opposition to the restructuring of the

army which the congress of councils had proposed. In this way Ebert facilitated the re-emergence of an anti-democratic military – at this point hatching plans to crush the councils and confer temporary dictatorial powers on Ebert – as a major player.

Ebert's decision on 4 January to sack Emil Eichhorn, the Independent Socialist Berlin police commissioner who had refused to deploy his security forces against the sailors, provoked a mass demonstration on 5 January. Armed demonstrators went on to occupy buildings in the city's newspaper quarter, and the USPD and newly-formed Communist Party came out in support. The political leaders and occupiers formed a revolutionary committee, and called a general strike for 7 January and for the removal of the Ebert government. Some of the revolutionaries like the KPD leader Liebknecht argued that the regime should be deposed by force. Others looked to negotiations, but efforts to resolve the standoff peacefully failed when talks with Ebert collapsed. Under Gustav Noske, who had been given command in the capital, troops and paramilitary formations reasserted control. On 10 January the Reinhard Brigade attacked Spartacist headquarters in Spandau, and in the following days the heavily armed Potsdam *Freikorps* retook the occupied buildings. Well over 100 rebels and civilians caught up in the fighting were killed.

Further excesses of violence were perpetrated against the Left during the subsequent occupation of the city by *Freikorps*, most notoriously the abduction and murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht on 15 January 1919 by members of the Garde-Kavallerie-

Burial of Karl Liebknecht and 31 other victims of the revolution in a mass grave on 25 January 1919. An empty coffin was put into the grave for Rosa Luxemburg whose body had not yet been found.

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Schützendivision. It is unclear whether Ebert knew of the plan to kill his two former SPD comrades, but there is some evidence to suggest Noske was directly implicated. Papst, the leader of this paramilitary unit, later claimed the murders could not have been carried out without his approval. The government's failure to investigate the murders properly and to punish the culprits adequately enraged the Left. Eventually brought before a military court, it was reported that the accused men looked as if they were attending a wedding rather than their own trials. Runge and Vogel, two of those responsible, were given prison sentences of two years four months and two years respectively, although the latter was to be spirited across the Dutch border by a sympathetic officer and thus escaped justice entirely.¹⁰

In parallel with events in Berlin another crisis was unfolding in the west of the country. By January a strike wave begun in the Duisburg-Hamborn mining district had escalated to the point where some 180,000 workers were involved. This protest was characterised by its mistrust of the unions and political parties. Strikers demanded 'socialisation' with a syndicalist slant emphasising workers' control over company property and profit. It was a logical response to excessively long shifts, to inflation (and to wages that did not keep pace with prices), to blacklisting, and to an authoritarian style of management that now seemed out of place.

The spring strike wave

Neither the bloody resolution of the crisis in the capital, nor the end of the January strike, brought peace to Germany. In the months that followed conflict would both intensify and spread, in some places degenerating into violence of civil-war-like proportions.

In February, against a backdrop of rising unemployment, industrial and transport workers in the central German cities of Halle and Merseburg went on strike calling for co-determination and a role for works councils (*Betriebsräte*) in the running of industry. In March KPD supporters sought to channel another general strike in Berlin into a further armed attempt to depose the *Reich* government. With the city already placed under martial law, Noske ordered that any insurrectionists be shot on sight, and troops under his command went on to crush the rebellion with huge loss of life. As many as 1,200 people were killed.

This wave of protest peaked in early April, with some 400,000 on strike in the Ruhr mining areas. Here they were demanding shorter shifts and higher wages, recognition of the councils, the disbanding of the paramilitaries and diplomatic relations with the USSR. Once again there were also calls for socialisation, not just co-determination. There followed further walkouts by industrial workers and dockers in Bremen and in Hamburg in defiance of the social and economic policies of the new majority Socialist-led coalition. As had been the case in January the decision to halt production was often a *response* to military intervention, rather than its cause, this pattern visible in the city of Brunswick where on 9 April workers struck upon the arrival of troops under Maercker. Ultimately, and measured against their demands, the strikers secured little, but there were some gains. Wages were raised, and the miners secured the seven-hour shift. In the Autumn of 1919 paid holidays and a system of collective wage-bargaining were to follow.

The uncompromising reaction by Scheidemann's coalition government, the first following the elections of 19 January, sprang from its fear of

unpredictable mass protest, and also from its determination to minimise the impact the strikes could have on the economy. This, in turn, was partly driven by the threat of Allied intervention if demands for workers' control were to become more widespread and disruptive. But, as Kluge has argued, while they demanded the reassertion of order, the Allies did not require that this be achieved through such violent means.

With Noske as Minister for the Army, the government response was wholly disproportionate, particularly given the fact that much of the protest was *not* an attempt to replace the fledgling parliamentary democracy, and that, prior to the war, the 'broad church' of German social democracy had managed to contain both reformists and radicals. It also amounted to an irrational faith in the army as a force that could bring order, since military intervention often generated further unrest in the first instance. Noske's approach went so far beyond what was required to defeat the radicals, that with Kluge one is left wondering quite 'what drove the *Reichswehr* minister to carry out his task as protector of public security in such an extreme and inhumane fashion.'¹¹ The SPD's willingness in this situation to also give right-wing, anti-democratic paramilitaries a free hand has also attracted the attention of historians. Although they were recruited as Noske's henchmen, the *Freikorps* had absolutely no commitment to the Republic. Indeed, only a year later, in the Kapp Putsch of March 1920, they would attempt to destroy it. Responsible for scores of political murders of left-wing activists, they would also go on to kill other prominent politicians of the era, notably the Centre Party's Matthias Erzberger (1921) and the DDP's Walther Rathenau (1922).

Munich

The final bloody chapter of Germany's revolution also began with a political assassination, that of USPD Bavarian Minister President Kurt Eisner, murdered on the way to submit his resignation following his party's miserable performance in the January election. That Eisner was Jewish as well as a socialist, and had also openly acknowledged German war guilt, made him an obvious target for radical nationalists. In the words of his murderer, the 22-year-old student Anton Graf Arco auf Valley, he was killed because he was 'a Bolshevik, a Jew, and no German'. Eisner's death marked the beginning of a new, more radical phase of the Revolution in Bavaria, one in which any chance of a diarchal rule



Troops loyal to the regime with a tank are pictured in Berlin, during the street fights in March 1919.
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involving both parliament and the councils would disappear as a struggle between the two systems descended into open warfare.

The councils in Bavaria had retained their political influence under Eisner, even after the Bavarian parliamentary elections on 12 January. In the power vacuum that followed his death a congress of councils called for the state's parliament to be dissolved and for the formation of a provisional 'national council', a course rejected by the parliamentary SPD, who would only accept a ruling cabinet responsible to the state parliament. In March a minority government was formed on this basis composed of SPD and USPD politicians under the SPD's Johannes Hoffmann. Hoffmann's cabinet did not command the support of the working class, whose economic circumstances were deteriorating rapidly. In this context the *Zentralrat* headed by the left-wing SPD politician Ernst Niekisch, and composed of USPD, SPD and KPD representatives, declared the parliament dissolved, and, on 7 April, rejecting further co-operation with what it described as the 'contemptible government' in Berlin, announced the establishment of an independent 'Bavarian Councils Republic'. A new government of people's commissars headed by Ernst Toller was to be very short-lived, replaced in a matter of days by a second, Communist-led 'Councils Republic' on 13 April, a further shift to the Left which had been triggered by a right-wing coup attempt. Hoffmann, whose government had retreated to Bamberg, requested assistance from Berlin. It arrived in the form of 30,000 regular troops and *Freikorps*; a wave of white terror that would break on the city with 'bestial ferocity'.¹² As many as 1,000 were killed during the fighting to retake Munich, and hundreds more were executed in the weeks that followed. Among the dead were leading figures of the rebellion such as Gustav Landauer, Max Levien and Eugen Leviné, and scores of civilians who had no direct involvement.

Legacy

The violent suppression of rebellion was to have profound consequences for the new Republic. The bloodbaths of Berlin and Munich ruined the chances of future co-operation between the radical and moderate Left, preventing any effective, united resistance by the SPD and KPD to National Socialism in Weimar's final years. The SPD's relationship with the General Staff also facilitated the re-emergence of the army in its old

unreconstructed form. It meant that the Weimar Republic did not have the support of a republican army, but one predisposed to authoritarian rule. This neglect of institutional reform and the relative failure of government to democratise the economy has led historians to describe the German Revolution as one that stopped half-way, with union leaders and government seen as obstructing the political will that existed for a socialisation of industry. But if the revolution ground to a halt in 1919, its momentum had still delivered Germany a more democratic system than it had possessed before the war. Government was now responsible to parliament and women could now vote. The weighted franchises that had corrupted state politics were gone, including Prussia's notorious three-class voting arrangement. The first national elections in January 1919, conducted in chaotic circumstances, had also produced a national assembly where a majority was held by parties who supported the republic. There were some grounds for optimism.

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