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# When Germany's Social Democrats Made a Revolution by Half

BY

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The November Revolution of 1918 replaced Germany's monarchist regime with a parliamentary system. But its Social Democratic leaders made a pact with the old ruling class to repress the left-wing radicals who wanted to go further, crippling the new Weimar Republic from the start.

Review of Robert Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2020)

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The history of the socialist movement in Germany has always been a major reference point for the global left. It was in Germany that Marxism first found a foothold in mass organization, and during the period of the Second International, it was here that the major debates of the twentieth-century socialist movement found their sharpest expression. The culmination of this movement in war and revolution has been an important object of activist and scholarly examination ever since.

The German November Revolution of 1918 played a major role in bringing an end to the First World War, laying the groundwork for Germany's first democracy, the Weimar Republic, and shaping its political trajectory. In crucial respects, it was the fractures in German social and economic life during this revolutionary period that set the stage for Adolf Hitler's seizure of power fourteen years later. As the first major application of socialist politics on a mass scale in an industrialized society, this historical period is rich with lessons for socialists today.

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## New Perspectives

For English-language readers, the tumultuous history and riveting strategic debates of Germany's fractured socialist movement have long been accessible through masterful works such as Carl Schorske's *German Social Democracy 1905–1917* and Pierre Broué's *The German Revolution 1917–1923*. Other general histories of the German Revolution from the left in English include Chris Harman's *The Lost Revolution* and Bill Pelz's excellent *People's History of the German Revolution*, as well as several documentary histories.

The recent centenary of the revolution predictably generated a wealth of new studies. Although the majority are in German, the English-speaking world was enriched by several new works, including *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–19* by Mark Jones, the aforementioned social history by Bill Pelz, and Robert Gerwarth's *November 1918: The German Revolution*.

Gerwarth's book is distinctive in its claim to present a narrative history of the German revolutionary events with a particular eye to the transnational context. It provides a useful update on previous attempts to cover this ground, such as Richard Watt's *The Kings Depart*. However, Gerwarth's history of the revolution faces a peculiar dilemma. Contemporary liberal historiography has trouble finding real heroes for its ideology in this period of shocking inhumanity, surging revolutionary tides, and structures that leapt to life.

The revolutionary developments in Germany itself appear to defy neat representation, leading many historians of the liberal stripe to smuggle this history into the long prelude of Hitler's rise to power, or latch their narratives upon the triumphant Allied commanders and the fallout of the war. Gerwarth's book provides an illustrative example of this dilemma, and an interesting answer to the liberal search for heroes.

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**The Crucible of War**

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Gerwarth’s narrative begins in January 1917, when the Zimmerman Telegram set off the events that would ultimately bring the United States into the Great War. Those familiar with the basic historical turning points of World War I will recognize the familiar characters and plot points of the book’s first chapter.

We meet Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff at the helm of Germany’s military forces and observe their country’s fatal gamble in dramatically escalating submarine warfare. Woodrow Wilson enters the stage with his moral quandaries and domestic political triangulation, before issuing a famous proclamation of fourteen points setting out his vision for a new world order.



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Paul Hindenburg. Wikimedia Commons

Lenin and his band of zealots ride a secret train to foment revolution in Russia, which ultimately brings the Bolsheviks to power and takes Russia out of the war by way of the draconian Brest-Litovsk peace treaty. On the home front, German politics witnesses the “great schism” in the ranks of the Social Democrats (SPD), which yielded two parties of the left, one reformist and pro-war, the other (the Independent Social Democratic Party or USPD) more radical and pacifist.

As Germany feels the pain of the expanding Allied blockade and diminishing industrial labor resources, increasing hunger and dissatisfaction lead to protests and strikes. Unrest behind the lines coincides with rapidly collapsing morale and increasingly desperate military measures, especially in the spring of 1918, when the German high command attempts to secure a swift victory. The reality of impending defeat for the Central Powers begins to dawn on German contemporaries when Bulgaria falls to the Allies, followed shortly by the rout of the Habsburg and Ottoman armies.

As the Kaiser and the high command realize the position they are in, Germany’s rulers institute a number of “democratization” reforms in an attempt to diffuse revolutionary rumblings while foisting the consequences of defeat onto the reform-minded parties and the Social Democrats in the Reichstag. These forces begin a process of coming to terms with Woodrow Wilson in a series of exchanges (extensively belabored by Gerwarth), all of which proves insufficient to stop the outbreak of revolution in Germany by November.

In the course of this account, Gerwarth introduces us to the men who will go on to play central roles in the events of the coming years: SPD leaders Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann, and USPD leader Hugo Haase. According to the author, these are the true unsung heroes of the Weimar Republic’s early years.



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Friedrich Ebert. German Federal Archive / Wikimedia Commons

## The Revolution Ignites

Three chapters detail the spread of revolution across Germany from the port city of Kiel through the southern region of Bavaria and on to the capital, Berlin. The German Navy plans to redeem the honor of the Kaiser's fleet by means of an almost certainly suicidal assault on the British, but this merely provokes a revolt among the sailors in Kiel. The revolt soon expands both geographically and ideologically, as soldiers and workers form political councils, insist on peace, and infect sailors and workers in other coastal cities with their revolutionary ideas.

When the fervor of revolution reaches Bavaria, tired and demoralized troops defect to form a provisional constituent assembly of their councils and elect the USPD's Kurt Eisner as leader of the newly proclaimed Bavarian republic. Gerwarth's account intersperses high-level political developments with eyewitness accounts from a familiar cast: Gustav Noske, Alfred Döblin, and the omnipresent Victor Klemperer, alongside some lesser-known figures like Käthe Kollwitz.



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Rosa Luxemburg. German Federal Archive / Wikimedia Commons

The book's narrative conveys the dramatic arrival of revolution in the German capital with appropriate suspense, intrigue, and grandeur, primarily by way of ample quotations. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg lead the small but influential Spartacus group to join the workplace activity of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, clashing with attempts by Ebert and other SPD leaders to contain the upsurge. The SPD leadership only jumps ship from the Kaiser-approved "democratic government" when great masses of armed workers march from the factories into the center of Berlin, finally opting to join the workers and soldiers that comprise their base.

While his empire is overthrown city by city, the German Kaiser remains aloof, inaccessible, and unconcerned. The chancellor Max von Baden announces the monarch's abdication despite repeated stalling and deflection by the Kaiser himself. "It gripped my throat, this way the House of Hohenzollern ended," one witness cited by Gerwarth comments, "so pitiful, so incidental, not even the center of events."

No sooner have Ebert and his colleagues taken the reins of government than they enter into stark political confrontation with more radical left-wing parties and councils, who continue their revolutionary agitation for a socialist republic based on the grassroots democracy of workers' and soldiers' councils. To prevent a descent into what he calls "Russian conditions" and contain the rapidly rising influence of Bolshevism, Scheidemann preemptively declares a German republic. Soon afterwards a provisional government, the Council of People's Deputies, is established with participation from SPD and USPD leaders alike.

## Containment

Before delving into the immense problems of the newfound republic, Gerwarth focuses on the war's final moments and the armistice. In a laboriously reconstructed chronology, we follow Matthias Erzberger as his train leaves Berlin. Erzberger passes through Belgium to meet with the German High Command, waits at various crossings, has dinner with the supreme commander of the First French army, and finally arrives at a special saloon car in a destroyed city — aboard which, we learn, "cognac was served" — before being transported to a secret meeting in the forest for negotiations.

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**“The SPD leaders jumped ship from approved “demo government” when masses of armed workers marched from the factories into Berlin.”**



Matthias Erzberger. German Federal Archive / Wikimedia Commons

Meanwhile in Germany, the new provisional government under Ebert has to cope with the threat of mass starvation, an industrial economy on the rocks, and the need to demobilize and reintegrate millions of veterans into an already overtaxed political and economic system. In Gerwarth's telling, Ebert seeks heroically to surmount these obstacles and stave off political chaos by forming an alliance with General Wilhelm Groener. In exchange for the loyalty of the remaining army, Ebert will take swift action against potential left-wing uprisings.

Gerwarth denies that this agreement was a "Faustian pact with the old imperial army," but doesn't provide any further argument or supporting evidence. He presents Ebert's decisions in this period as having been necessary, if difficult, but makes no mention of the ready shipments of Russian grain waiting to feed the starving German population, rejected by Ebert in favor of Wilson's promises.

Curiously, Gerwarth devotes only a single paragraph to the rapid conclusion of a systematic institutional arrangement between the Free Trade Unions under Carl Legien and the most important business leaders represented by Hugo Stinnes, even though the trade unions and the arrangements they reached with German capital were the "strongest factor of stabilization" in the transitional economy, according to the well-supported assessment of historian Susan Miller.

As if the vindictive peace negotiations aren't enough of a problem for the leaders of the young republic, millions of workers and soldiers initiate what the SPD leaders consider a most unwelcome radicalization on both left and right. Gerwarth presents revolutionary figures such as Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Karl Radek as dangerous threats to the newborn democracy, referencing the precedent of Russia, where "all that was needed for the takeover of power was a small group of determined professional revolutionaries." The order of the SPD leaders for the German military to shoot on revolutionary sailors at Christmas then begins a cycle of violence that plays a major role in the rest of Gerwarth's book.

The SPD's military expert Gustav Noske brings in the proto-fascist *Freikorps* battalions to quell discontent and beat back the revolutionary left during the spring of 1919. Gerwarth's concise account of the background and motivations of *Freikorps* soldiers is particularly valuable, emphasizing the centrality of anti-feminism to their ideology. The SPD-led government's unleashing of these counterrevolutionary forces ultimately claims the lives of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, along with countless other radicals, dispatched in brutal fashion.

Here and at later points in the book, Gerwarth draws on the innovative recent work of Mark Jones, author of *Founding Weimar*, to highlight the flourishing

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culture of political violence that developed after the war. Too often, however, Gerwarth's history privileges the category of "violence" over more fruitful analytic terms.

He cites the murders of Liebknecht and Luxemburg as a prominent illustration of "the brutalization of political life as a result of the war and its legacies," and holds up various other political assassinations around the continent as evidence that "murder as a means of political conflict" had become "an integral feature of post-war European culture." Aside from the meager evidence that Gerwarth puts forward for such an assessment, the "culture of violence" thesis adumbrated here tends to obscure the actual social dynamics of which it is a symptom.

**Liebknecht, and dangerous threat to newborn democracy referencing the Russian Revolution.**

## Liberalism Triumphant

With the rebels taken care of, the National Assembly elections of January 1919 officially inaugurate what one chapter title describes as "the triumph of liberalism." The new republic witnesses a tremendous surge of women's political participation, along with the under-analyzed revival of German nationalist ideas for an *Anschluss* with Austria. It is here that Gerwarth delivers most effectively on his promise to "reconstruct the perspectives of contemporaries," situating the political vision of key statesmen within the long shadow of Germany's failed liberal-democratic revolution in 1848.

The constitution, political forms, and even symbolism of the young republic clearly reflect the self-understanding of its leading statesmen: "The moderate revolutionaries of 1918 were correcting the erroneous political developments since 1848. Liberal democracy, which had failed to come into existence then, had finally emerged triumphant."

Gerwarth takes pains to defend the "revolutionaries" of this "moderate revolution," lauding the "pragmatic" Ebert and his colleagues as the long-overlooked republicans at the helm of the new system.

When the omnipresent specter of violence re-emerges in the tumultuous Bavarian soviet experience later that spring, a right-wing backlash turns Munich into the site of a bloodbath. Throughout these events, Gerwarth's narrative grants Bavaria's SPD leaders a prominent role as the rational figures in this rapidly developing situation, despite their distance from and irrelevance to it. Even so, his account of the Bavarian soviet republic is well-textured and multifaceted.



Eugene Levine. German Federal Archive / Wikimedia Commons

The initial leaders of this short-lived political experiment were notorious for their hopeless diletantism — indeed, the Bavarian soviet has sometimes been referred to as the *Schriftstellerrepublik* or "writers' republic" because of the prominence of anarchist poets. Before long, the

communist Eugen Leviné swoops in to establish discipline and defend the city against the coming *Freikorps* assaults. Gerwarth's account presents the German revolutionary left as either hopelessly naïve or brutally violent, while ignoring their often brilliant feats of self-organization and farsighted contemporary political analysis. The effect is to reinforce the sense that there was no alternative to the path followed by the SPD leaders in Berlin.

The book's final chapter, also its longest, provides an extensive analysis of the peace conferences at Paris and Versailles. The author argues that, by focusing on the Versailles Treaty, previous historiography has obscured the "single biggest issue at stake at the time: the transformation of an entire continent previously dominated by land empires into one composed of 'nation-states.'"

This chapter also addresses the politically significant effect that the peace treaty had on the ethnic makeup of Germany's population and that of other states. Gerwarth examines the question of self-determination rights throughout Europe, and very astutely discusses Jewish migration and social concerns, including the evolving role of anti-Semitism during these pivotal years. While all of this material provides some interesting insights, Gerwarth's account does not fully explain the impact of these far-reaching developments on the course of the German Revolution or the squalling Weimar democracy.

A very short epilogue covers the period from 1919 to 1923, racing through the failed right-wing Kapp Putsch, revolutionary unrest in the Ruhr mining region, a number of high-profile political assassinations, catastrophic hyperinflation, and the germination of Nazism in Bavaria. Even in the course of such a brief overview, Gerwarth misleadingly portrays Ebert as the initiator and hero of the general strike that defeated the Kapp Putsch. In reality, the Free Trade Unions under Carl Legien and the radical factory council movement orchestrated this stoppage while the SPD's parliamentary leaders fled. After returning to power on the back of the union initiative, Ebert and his allies failed to prosecute any of the coup leaders.

The SPD leaders, along with other pro-republican statesmen, would go on to face a series of existential threats and political crises throughout the lifespan of Germany's first democracy. Gerwarth concludes his account with a tribute to the resilience of the republic through the turmoil of these early years and the enduring legacy and achievements of these German democrats.

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## The Motor of History

At the outset, the author declares his intention to supply a new historical narrative, one that "takes more seriously the ways in which contemporaries perceived, experienced, and narrated both the world around them and their future." This is, of course, a noble aim for a subject that historians frequently roll into books about the First World War or the origins of Nazi Germany instead of addressing it on its own terms.

However, as should be clear by now, Gerwarth's account focuses almost exclusively on the actions of powerful men (and the very occasional woman) at the top of German politics and society. Although Gerwarth does fill his book with illuminating quotations from writers and politicians of the time, the lives of ordinary German people — their motivations, actions, constraints, and organizations — remain very much in the background. There is nothing inherently wrong with writing a "history from above," but *November 1918* puts too much stress on the role of great individuals as the driving force of historical development.

Any account of the German revolution, especially one that aspires to comprehensive status, must engage with the central role of mass actions and organizations in restructuring social relations. Gerwarth presents sailors and soldiers as if they are simply reacting to events beyond their control or following direction from their more sophisticated leaders, while depicting German generals as psychologically complex and even sartorially admirable world spirits, who move and shake the foundations of Western society through the power of their charisma.

The author supplies us with ample analysis of what motivated figures like Kaiser Wilhelm, Friedrich Ebert, Woodrow Wilson, and other Great Men. To be fair, he does give left-wing leaders like Lenin, Trotsky, or Luxemburg similar treatment, but draws too much on the writings of historians like Robert Service and Richard Pipes with their Cold War ideological framework, ultimately reducing these figures to Machiavellian caricatures. *November 1918* relies heavily upon individual biography as the decisive factor, offering little contextualization of the relevant economic and social trends or institutions. Where, for example, is the analysis of German capital in this period of ascendant German industrial power?

Gerwarth tries to show that Weimar was far from being a "republic without republicans." He wants to demonstrate that Ebert and his collaborators were Great Men too, acting within very difficult circumstances, whose positive achievements should challenge the prevailing historiographic consensus about the manifold weaknesses of the Weimar Republic. He stresses that the centerpiece of these supposed accomplishments, the "pragmatic" November revolution, was "remarkably bloodless."

The same descriptor could easily be applied to the heroes of this book. In the version of the revolution presented here, inchoate violence abounds while grand causes collect their most famous martyrs, but the Great Men who occupy the center of the stage lack conviction, passion, and vision. These men may have been adept state managers, but their version of socialism was utterly anemic.

In many ways, reading *November 1918* is akin to looking at this extraordinary period of history through a distorting filter in which the colors are drab and flattened. Instead of the surprise and wonder of life during the revolution, or the shared experiences of those who went through it, Gerwarth merely offers the reader adulation for the genius of those in power.

In reality, it was ordinary people — housewives, peasants, exhausted soldiers, factory militants — whose fight for basic dignity was the motor of the German Revolution. We still need to chronicle their experiences, dreams, and achievements, not simply because of the inherent value of social history, but in order to develop an accurate

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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GERMAN REVOLUTION / GERMAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY