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1918/19: A German Revolution

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Although the socio-economic upheavals in Germany at the end of World War I are customarily referred to as the Revolution of 1918, in discussing the events most scholars implicitly or explicitly surround the word revolution with inverted commas, in order to indicate their uneasiness about applying the term “revolution” to what happened in Germany in 1918/19.* In comparison with the changes wrought by “real” revolutions — those in France, Russia or China — the German “revolution” seemed to effect few alterations in the fabric of German society. The Reich became a parliamentary republic instead of a semi-authoritarian monarchy, but underneath the new label little of substance seemed to have changed. The Republic kept most of the Imperial executives, the army remained a state within a state under the command of its old officers, the judiciary was still notorious for its monarchical and reactionary prejudices, and the economy retained its capitalist character. And if more proof of the futility of the Revolution in Germany was needed, surely the *Machtergreifung* of Adolf Hitler fifteen years after the fall of the Empire demonstrated that Republic and Revolution were only brief interruptions in the customary continuity flow of German history.

The views sketched above incorporate a number of assumptions both about German history and about the general phenomenon of revolution. To begin with, it employs an *a*

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the October, 1981 meeting of the Western Association for German Studies in Seattle, Washington.

posteriori definition of the term revolution which seriously distorts the multifaceted historiography of “revolution” as an ascriptive and descriptive term.¹ In effect, under this interpretation the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 (and perhaps the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949) becomes not the ideal-typical model, but an actual historical standard which determines whether other upheavals “failed” or “succeeded.” Most, of course, “fail” under this standard; the Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, the Chinese Revolution of 1912 no less than the German Revolution of 1918.² In fact, under this definition there were no real revolutions in Europe between the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the establishment of the system of “People’s Republics” at the end of World War II. For, as Gerald Feldman has reminded us,³ except for the Russian Revolution all of the post-World War I upheavals in Europe failed as ignominiously as the German Revolution. A second distortion involves the specific course of German history. If the Revolution of 1918 represented no major break in the course of German history, there remains an essentially unbroken continuity line from the Wilhelminian Reich to the Nazi state. But that in turn comes close to implementing the fallacy of “finalism” against which Albert Matthiez rightfully warred.

Instead of applying rigid and quasi-finalist models in interpreting the German revolution of 1918, the significance and character of that upheaval, like other historical phenomena must be analyzed within the specific historical context of the society and time in which the upheavals occurred. That is to say, revolutionary change is a function of the degree to which the upheavals in a specific society called into question or rejected pre-revolutionary values, institutions and societal relationships of the same society.

1. See, Karl Griewank, *Der neuzeitliche Revolutionsbegriff*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt a.M., 1969), pp. 208-209, and Peter von Oertzen’s bibliographic article, “Die Revolution bleibt ein Schlagwort,” *Die Zeit* (no. 28, 3 July 1981).

2. In the 20th century the elevation of the Bolshevik Revolution from ideal to real model has had far more than historiographic significance. In the years prior to their complete control by Stalin, the Communist parties of the Western and Central Europe vigorously rejected the imposition of the Russian model as the basis for their tactical decisions. Cf. Paul Levi, *Zwischen Spartakus und Sozialdemokratie*, ed. by Charlotte Beradt (Frankfurt a.M., 1969), pp. 96 ff, and the debates at the Third Congress of the Communist International. See, *Protokoll des III. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Moskau, 22. Juni bis 12. Juli 1921 ([Moscow], 1921) [reprint Milan, 1967]. See also, Paul Levi to Clara Zetkin, 23 Sept. 1921, in: Levi papers/63/6 (Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn-Bad Godesberg).

3. Gerald D. Feldman, “Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitische Probleme der deutschen Demobilmachung,” *Industrielles System und politische Entwicklung in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. y Hans Mommsen, et al., Düsseldorf, 1974, pp. 618-619.

This means, inevitably, that the transitional phases make for some strange bedfellows. Revolutionaries are partially self-selected, i.e. they declare themselves to be revolutionaries. But the historian must also include in the categorization those who, in the eyes of the leaders of the pre-revolutionary regime, constitute a danger to the status quo. The two groups will clearly not be identical; the second group will in all likelihood prefer the categorization “reformers” to that of “revolutionaries.” Hugo Preuss angrily rejected the label “revolutionary,”⁴ but Colonel Bauer, General Ludendorff’s political advisor, regarded the ideas of Preuss and Karl Liebknecht (the leader of Spartakus and later the KPD) as equally serious threats to the pre-1914 Prusso-German social and political system.⁵

In order to assess the impact of the changes brought about by the Revolution of 1918 it may be useful to sketch briefly the salient characteristics of German society prior to the outbreak of World War I. Wilhelminian Germany was in the midst of a differentiated process of change and transition. The process was swift and irreversible in the area of economics and technology, slow and unpredictable as far as political changes were concerned.⁶ Germany was certainly not comparable to Japan or China prior to their opening to the West, but neither was the Reich a modern, Western society in the sense of England or France. In fact, the politically dominant forces in Wilhelminian Germany pointed proudly to Germany’s historical development as the “Third Way:” a superior alternative to the immovability of Russian autocracy to the East and the evils of materialist democracy to the West.⁷ In practice, the Bismarckian and Wilhelminian Third Way meant a considerable catalogue of civil liberties, economic freedoms, political parties and elected parliaments, but also the infamous three-class system of voting in Prussia, a complete absence of ministerial responsibility in three fifths of the country, an

4. Hugo Preuss, “Die Sozialdemokratie und der Parlamentarismus” and “Volksstaat oder verkehrter Obrigkeitsstaat”, *Staat, Recht und Freiheit*, ed. by Else Preuss (Tübingen, 1926) [reprint 1964], pp. 144-172 and 365-368.

5. Bauer equated “Jewish liberalism and Social Democracy.” See, “Die Stellung des Reichskanzlers,” 1917, *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914-1918*, ed. by Wilhelm Deist (Düsseldorf, 1970), doc. no. 258, p. 673 and doc. no. 286, p. 717.

6. On the contradictions of Wilhelminian society see, for example, Hans Jaeger, *Unternehmer in der deutschen Politik* (Bonn, 1967), pp. 290-291, 300-301; Dirk Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks* (Cologne, 1970), pp. 116-127; and Lothar Albertin, *Liberalismus und Demokratie am Anfang der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf, 1971), pp. 120-121.

7. Thomas Mann’s wartime book, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* [vol. 8 of his *Collected Works*] (Berlin, 1925) is a biting and polemical attack on the western concept of democracy and a celebration of Germany’s alternative “Third Way.”

executive superstructure chosen from a narrow, socially and politically homogeneous group, an ingrown educational system whose motto was certainly not "*Freie Bahn dem Tüchtigen*,"⁸ and an official *Kulturleben* that moved within the narrow boundaries dictated by the often philistine tastes of the imperial court⁹ and the *Bildungsbürgertum*.

At the same time it cannot be denied that there was movement in virtually every sphere of German pre-war society. In politics the process of parliamentarization was proceeding relentlessly, especially at the Reich level.¹⁰ In Prussia the defenders of the three-class system of voting were becoming increasingly isolated, though the Conservatives continued to cling to their control of Germany's largest state ferociously and tenaciously. Even Germany's *Kulturleben* in the decade before the First World War meant not only the barbaric tastes of the Prussian lieutenant, but the novels of Heinrich and Thomas Mann, the plays of Gerhart Hauptmann and the paintings of the Berliner *Sezession*.¹¹ Wilhelminian Germany was changing: in spite, not because of its ruling classes and at a pace far slower than the advocates of either reform or revolution wanted. How fast and to what end result the process would have proceeded without the factor of the War is difficult to determine. That the process would have continued is not open to question.

Both war and revolution acted as catalysts in the process of societal change, but it is important to draw a distinction between the effect of the two events on the societal development of Germany. The war accelerated the pace of change,¹² but it did not really alter either the direction of the changes or the institutional means to affect them. Throughout the years of conflict, literally until the eve of the naval mutinies in Kiel in early November 1918, the pressure for domestic reforms mounted, but the old ruling classes never lost control. The Conservative leadership of Wilhelminian Germany was divided, however, on the best tactical

8. Werner E. Mosse, "Die Krise der europäischen Bourgeoisie und das deutsche Judentum," *Deutsches Judentum in Krieg und Revolution 1916-1923*, ed. by Werner E. Mosse (Tübingen, 1971), pp. 1-8; Heinrich August Winkler, *Mittelstand, Demokratie und Nationalismus* (Cologne, 1972), pp. 158-159. See also, Fritz Ringer's recent contribution, *Education and Society in Modern Europe* (Bloomington, Ind., 1979).

9. See, Marie-Louise Plessen and Daniel Spoerri, *Le Musée sentimental de Prusse* (Berlin, 1981).

10. See especially the excellent work by Manfred Rauh, *Die Parlamentarisierung des Deutschen Reiches* (Düsseldorf, 1977).

11. Peter Paret, *Die Berliner Sezession* (Berlin, 1981).

12. Friedrich Payer, *Von Bethmann-Hollweg bis Ebert* (Frankfurt a.M., 1923), pp. 22; and Hermann Müller, *Die November-Revolution* (Berlin, 1928), p. 13.

answer to the wartime demands for change and reforms. One group, led until his forced resignation in August 1917 by the Reich chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, and later by Prince Max von Baden, sought to preserve what it saw as the essence of the German way of life in return for granting genuine, but limited concessions to the reformers.¹³ This meant, for example, recognition of the Social Democrats as an acceptable part of the German political spectrum,¹⁴ abolition of the three-class system of voting in Prussia,¹⁵ and improved channels of consultation between executive and legislature at the federal level. However, the “liberal Conservatives” rejected a parliamentary system of government with provisions for ministerial responsibility,¹⁶ and they intended to maintain Prussia’s hegemonial position in the Reich. On the other side, but still within the dominant circles of pre-1918 Germany, stood the die-hard Prussian Conservatives and the military led by Ludendorff, whose aim, as we now know, was to use the war as a means of inflicting a decisive defeat on all domestic reform efforts. The political tactics of the “die-hards” during the war were designed to hide their ultimate goals.¹⁷ Feigned concessions to the labor unions (e.g., the *Hilfsdienstgesetz* of 1916)¹⁸ and parliamentary leaders were intended to maintain domestic morale until the military could win the conflict on the battlefield and impose a *Siegfrieden* on Germany’s enemies. Thereafter the concessions would be withdrawn and the Reich subjected to a virtual military dictatorship.

In the end neither the “liberal Conservatives” nor the military extremists realized their aims. The political success of the latter was predicated upon a favorable decision on the battlefield that was never within the generals’ and admirals’ grasp.¹⁹ The efforts of von Bethmann-Hollweg, von Baden and their supporters failed partly because their aims were systematically sabotaged by the military’s

13. For a different view of Bethmann-Hollweg’s motives see, Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 3rd ed. (Düsseldorf, 1964).

14. Dieter Grosser, *Vom monarchischen Konstitutionalismus zur parlamentarischen Demokratie* (The Hague, 1970), p. 137.

15. Reinhard Patemann, *Der Kampf um die preußische Wahlreform im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Düsseldorf, 1964).

16. See, Baden’s letter to Hohenlohe, 12 Jan. 1918, quoted in, Philipp Scheidemann, *Der Zusammenbruch* (Berlin, 1921), pp. 178-179.

17. Cf. the extensive documentation in Deist, ed. *Militär op. cit.*

18. Details in Gerald Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor in Germany 1914-1918* (Princeton, 1966).

19. On the political aims of the navy see, L.E. Hill’s contribution, “*Signal for Counterrevolution? The German Navy’s Intended Last Foray on 30 Oct. 1918*” (WAGS Conference, Oct. 1981).

increasing opposition to the “politics of the diagonal,” but even more important was the emperor’s unwillingness to spearhead the drive of the Conservative reformers. The “liberal Conservatives’ ” last and most dramatic effort to retain the initiative in German politics, the constitutional reforms of October 1918, were effectively nullified by the military’s lack of cooperation and the emperor’s flight from Berlin. The military’s own *va banque* policy in turn ended with the final defeat and the armistice a month later.

With the naval mutinies and the overthrow of the German territorial monarchs the transformation of German society burst the evolutionary, gradual mold, and became sudden, irregular and unpredictable. As is true of all revolutionary changes, the power changes in Germany in November 1918 created a political *tabula rasa* in which the initiative passed from the old elite to as yet undetermined new forces. Who they were and what societal changes they would effect would depend on their own ideas and the circumstances that governed their exercise of power.

Historians are not in agreement as to when the revolutionary era came to an end in Germany, but certainly no one would argue that the revolutionary leaders of 1918 retained any significant influence after the Reichstag elections of June 1920. And by that time the balance sheet of revolutionary changes was clearly disappointing. All of the radical slogans and promises of November 1918 — socialization, land reform (*Siedlungspolitik*), “all power to the councils,” the expectation of “world revolution”²⁰ — had remained empty words. Seemingly, the only concrete accomplishment of the Revolution had been the establishment of a democratic and parliamentary system of government.

Interestingly, in looking back to the events of 1918 ten years later, some of the participants themselves took a much less pessimistic view of their accomplishments. Hermann Müller, the national chairman of the Social Democratic Party, emphasized what he saw as the fundamental differences between pre-1918 German society and the Weimar Republic.²¹ Similarly, a commemorative brochure issued by the SPD’s local organization in Kassel on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Revolution

20. The SPD’s educational expert, Heinrich Schulz used phrases like “we are in the midst of a world revolution” and “the [First] World War represented the violent liquidation of capitalism.” See, his concluding remarks to the SPD’s 1919 national congress, *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagés . . . 10. bis 15. Juni 1919* (Berlin, 1919), pp. 455-457.

21. H. Müller, *November-Revolution*, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-286; Friedrich Ebert, *Schriften, Aufzeichnungen*, ed. by F. Ebert, Jr. (Dresden, 1926), II, pp. 263-264.

spoke of a “revaluation of all values” (“*Umwertung aller Werte*”) which the Revolution had brought.²² Were these reminiscences merely self-delusions? Perhaps not. The key to appreciating *das Revolutionäre* in the German Revolution of 1918 is to understand that the positive values of most of the German revolutionaries were not those of Lenin and the Bolsheviks of 1917, but the ideals of Carl Schurz and the revolutionaries of 1848. Concretely, the socio-political goals of the revolutionaries of 1918 were democracy, social justice, and federalism, not Bolshevism and the dictatorship of the proletariat.²³

If the revolutionary standards of 1848 in Central Europe rather than those of 1917 in Russia are applied to the events in Germany at the end of World War I, the revolutionary record of 1918/19 is considerably more impressive. And, more important, the linkage of 1848 and 1918 does not distort the historical record. The events of 1848/49 as comparison and model loomed large in the minds of both moderate and radical leaders seventy years later. In 1923 Friedrich Ebert spoke of the new social Germany joining hands with the democratic-national Germany of 1848.²⁴ Karl Kautsky proclaimed the completion of the revolution of 1848 was one of the tasks of the revolution of 1918.²⁵ The Austrian socialist leader Bauer regarded the union of the rump Austria of 1918 with the new German Republic as the logical corrective to the failure of the *großdeutsche* solution in 1848.²⁶ The leader of the Württemberg SPD, Wilhelm Bloß, went so far as to claim that the ideals of the Communists of 1848 were similar to those professed by the moderate socialists of 1918.²⁷ Even left-wing socialist leaders like Kurt Eisner supported values reminiscent of those current in 1848.²⁸ The linkage was even

22. *Zehn Jahre Revolution*, ed. by SPD Ortsverband Kassel (Kassel, 1928), p. 11.

23. The picture was complicated by the decidedly schizophrenic image that the German revolutionary leaders presented to the public: de facto moderates, their programs and utterances reflected their traditional if outmoded commitment to revolutionary Marxism. See, Susanne Miller, *Das Problem der Freiheit im Sozialismus*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt a.M., 1964), pp. 271-272; Fritz Bieleck, et al., *Die Organisation im Klassenkampf* (Berlin [1932]), pp. 35-36.

24. Ebert, *Schriften*, op. cit., I, p. 12.

25. See, his remarks written for delivery at the *Zweiter Kongress der Arbeiter-, Bauern- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands . . . 8. bis 14. April 1919* (Berlin, 1919), p. 224.

26. See, Lajos Kerckes, “Zur Außenpolitik Otto Bauers 1918/19,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, XXII (no. 1, Jan., 1974), pp. 22-23.

27. Wilhelm Bloß, *Von der Monarchie zum Volksstaat* (Stuttgart, 1922-1923), I, p. 18.

28. F.L. Carsten, *Revolution in Central Europe* (Berkeley, CA, 1972), p. 184. The ultraleft, for its part, sharply criticised the moderates for their support of the bourgeois values of 1848. See, Richard Müller, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik* (Berlin, 1924), II, pp. 80 and 141.

stronger among the moderate middle class parties, particularly the “essential” Weimar party, the German Democratic Party.²⁹

In what ways did most of the German revolutionary leaders of 1918 see their efforts as linked to those of 1848? In the widest sense both aimed at hastening the socio-political modernization of Germany. In essence, the spokesmen of 1918 hoped to correct the lopsided path to modernization that had prevailed in Germany since the victory of the counterrevolution in 1850/51. More specifically the values common to 1848 and 1918 were a belief in the power of rationality and scientific progress (especially in the areas of education and economics), support for a federal, democratic and parliamentary *Volksstaat*, and a belief in the national destiny of the German people.

The heritage of the Enlightenment with its belief in reason, rationality, and linear progress is clearly apparent in the actions and motivations as it had been seventy years before. The revolutionaries of 1918 hoped to give concrete form to the ideas of the Enlightenment in the socio-political framework they were creating.³⁰ The Enlightenment values were supplemented but not replaced by beliefs more typical of the nineteenth than the eighteenth centuries: the notion that experts — be they scientists, economists or bureaucrats — performed their duties without political prejudices, what Wolfgang Elben has called “*Fachmannsideologie*.”³¹ At the same time, the revolutionaries distrusted emotion in public affairs.³²

The revolutionaries’ faith in reason and linear progress found

29. Werner Becker, *Demokratie des sozialen Rechts* (Göttingen, 1971), pp. 56 and 260-261; Conrad Haussmann, *Schlaglichter* (Frankfurt a.M., 1924), p. 153; Theodor Wolff, *Der Marsch durch zwei Jahrzehnte* (Amsterdam, 1936), p. 171; and the remarks by a DDP delegate to the *Erster Kongress der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands* (Berlin, 1919), p. 130.

30. Friedrich Kreppel, “Der Lehrer in den zwanziger Jahren,” *Zeitgeist der Weimarer Republik*, ed. by H.J. Schoeps (Stuttgart, 1968), p. 142. See also, Erich Kuttner, “Der Untergang der deutschen Sozialdemokratie,” p. 19, in: Kuttner papers/139b (IISG Amsterdam).

31. Wolfgang Elben, *Das Problem der Kontinuität in der deutschen Revolution* (Düsseldorf, 1965), p. 83. See also, Gustav Radbruch, *Der innere Weg* (Stuttgart, 1951), p. 177. It must be noted, of course, that the *Fachmannsideologie* constituted a naiveté that led to some disastrous results. The failure of the revolutionaries to reform the Imperial officer corps derived largely from the belief — widespread among the Socialist leaders — that as military experts the old officers were both indispensable and apolitical.

32. Typical was a comment by the left-wing Socialist Rudolf Hilferding on the Russian Bolsheviks just after Lenin had seized power, “your heart wants to join them, but your reason won’t let you.” Hilferding to Kautsky, 3 Dec. 1917, Kautsky papers/D-XII/631 (IISG, Amsterdam).

its most profound expression in their attempts to transform the Prusso-German *Obrigkeitsstaat* into a democratic and parliamentary *Volksstaat*. Democracy in its progressive and liberal, not Marxist-revolutionary sense³³ was accorded the highest priority rating among the revolutionary goals. Democracy was also closely linked to the notion of progress: the revolutionaries of 1918 were convinced democracy was a higher form of societal organization in the evolution of political man than authoritarianism.³⁴ It is also important to note that democracy was a substantive rather than formal goal; as in 1848/49 the later revolutionary leaders were perfectly content to attain their constitutional goals in the form of a monarchy rather than insisting upon the form of a republic.³⁵ The latter was forced upon them only at the last minute by circumstances beyond their control.

Central to the concept of the modern *Volksstaat* was the cooperation of the liberal, particularly left-liberal³⁶ parties and the moderate or majority Socialists. The Socialists saw themselves as the heirs to the democratic tradition of 1848,³⁷ a claim that liberal leaders in 1918 readily accepted. Carl Peterson, national chairman of the DDP and long-time lord mayor of Hamburg, described the “ethical equality of all political groupings and the creation of a democracy that is able to support the German state” as “the greatest consequences of the War.”³⁸ Liberal and Social Democrats believed that their ideologies constituted a compatible continuum³⁹ that was clearly distinguished from and opposed to “aristocratization” on the right and Bolshevism on the left.⁴⁰

33. A leader of the Prussian SPD noted that socialism was a means to increased welfare, but “democracy we favor as an end in itself.” See, *Sitzungsberichte der verfassungsgebenden preussischen Landesversammlung* (Berlin, 1921), IX, col. 11010 (26.4.1920). For criticism of this attitude see, Bieligk, *Organisation*, op. cit., p. 58, and Ernst Haase, ed., *Hugo Haase* (Berlin, 1929), pp. 235-236.

34. Becker, *Demokratie* op. cit., p. 69; and Abraham J. Berlau, *The German Social Democratic Party* (New York, 1949), p. 216.

35. Wilhelm Keil, *Erlebnisse eines Sozialdemokraten* (Stuttgart, 1947-1948), II, pp. 470 ff.

36. Grosser, *Konstitutionalismus*, op. cit., p. 20.

37. Miller, *Problem*, op. cit., pp. 270-271.

38. Petersen to Captain Matthaei, 22 Oct. 1917, in Petersen paper/L53 (Staatsarchiv Hamburg). Cf. also, the SPD's and DDP's 1919 programs in *Deutsche Parteiprogramme*, ed. by Wilhelm Mommsen, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1968), pp. 508-514; and Payer, *Bethmann-Hollweg*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

39. George L. Mosse, “German Socialists and the Jewish Question in the Weimar Republic,” *Year Book of the Leo Baeck Institute* (London, 1971), pp. 125 and 133; Keil, *Erinnerungen*, op. cit., II, pp. 48 ff; and Wilhelm Külz, “Deutschlands innerpolitische Gestaltung,” Hermann Müller, ed., *Zehn Jahre deutsche Geschichte*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1928), p. 58.

40. Friedrich Naumann, “Wie es kam,” *Hilfe* (no. 47, 21 Nov. 1918), pp. 556-557;

For the revolutionaries of 1918 a major ingredient of the elements that made possible the compatibility of liberalism (as well as, though that was less apparent in 1918/19, left-wing political Catholicism) and moderate socialism was the positive (as opposed to what Grosser has called “negative”) integration of the working classes into the national societal framework. This enabled the cooperation of non-socialist and socialist democrats, and it was also the fault line along which left and right Social Democrats split. The evolution was not inevitable; before 1914 the Wilhelminian bourgeoisie had by a variety of ways reinforced the barriers against social and political equality of the working classes.⁴¹ Here again the war acted as indispensable catalyst: Friedrich Naumann noted that in August 1914 the SPD had become a truly national reformist party.⁴²

Among the Social Democrats “positive” integration was welcomed with varying degrees of enthusiasm,⁴³ but there is little doubt that seen in its entirety, the German labor movement — which supplied most of the leaders in the Revolution of 1918 — did not aim at a mythical *Arbeiterkultur*, but sought to democratize the narrowly bourgeois national culture.⁴⁴ The alternative available in 1918/19, the dictatorship of the proletariat institutionalized in a power monopoly for the workers’ and soldiers’ councils,⁴⁵ never had the support of more than a minority among the organized working classes — despite some eloquent pleas by leaders on the extreme left.⁴⁶ It is historically incorrect to postulate a conflict between the timid national leaders on the one hand and the radical *Bilderstürmer* in the local workers’ and soldiers’ councils on the other. The German conciliar movement, with few exceptions, never saw itself as an alternative to the bourgeois democratic order,

Becker, *Demokratie*, *op. cit.*, p. 63; and Ernst Müller-Meiningen, *Aus Bayerns schwersten Tagen* (Berlin, 1923), p. 262.

41. Guenther Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany* (Totowa, N.J., 1963), p. 315.

42. “Europäische Revolution,” *Die Hilfe* (no. 6/7, 14 Feb. 1918), p. 66.

43. Konrad Haenisch, *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie in und nach dem Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 1916), pp. 33-34 and 107; Ebert, *Schriften*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

44. Payer, *Bethmann-Hollweg*, *op. cit.*, p. 170; Jürgen Kocka, “The First World War and the Mittelstand,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, VIII (no. 1, Jan. 1973), p. 117; and Oertzen, *op. cit.*; Berlau, *Social Democracy*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

45. Grosser, *Konstitutionalismus*, *op. cit.*, pp. 31 and 72 ff.

46. See, R. Müller’s address to the *Erster Allgemeiner Kongress der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands vom 16. bis 21. Dezember 1918 . . .*, ed. by Adolf Kunze (Berlin, 1919) [reprint, 1971], pp. 1-2; but also Hugo Haase’s criticism of this attitude in *Haase*, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

but as a temporary support system for the society until a new order had been formalized.⁴⁷

An important parallelism between 1918 and 1848 was the continuing attachment to the federal structure of the German nation. To the surprise of many contemporary observers, the attempt to create a unitary state in 1918/19 — in spite of the SPD's long-standing programmatic support of the idea — proved completely unsuccessful. *De facto* governments and provisional democratic state constitutions for the *Länder* with their old boundaries intact emerged much earlier than the Reich constitution, so that when Hugo Preuss attempted to embody a territorial *Reichsreform* in his draft of the national constitution, his ideas were foiled by a solid phalanx of popularly supported state governments. The new Reich would continue to be composed of "self-contained" individual states within the context of a well-ordered, clear (*übersichtlich*) [Reich] entity.⁴⁸ In addition, the conciliatory movement for the most part also thought in federal terms. Indeed, many of the councils held fast to the *Kleinstaaterie* more tenaciously than their Conservative predecessors.⁴⁹

Still, as heirs of the traditions and problems of 1848, the revolutionaries of 1918 could not be blind to the traditional difficulties of German federalism. The revolutionary leaders specifically sought a solution to the long-standing "Prussian problem." After Germany was unified under Bismarck's auspices in 1871 the state of Prussia made up more than half of the territory and population of the new Reich. The state also provided the internal administrative machinery for most of the nation, dominated the federal executive, and, through its preponderance of votes, all but controlled the Reichsrat. German federalism, in other words, was a group of loose units grouped around and dominated by a giant. Especially the so-called middle states in Southern and Western Germany (Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden) had long chafed under Prussia's preponderant influence, but before the crisis of

47. See, the documentation in *Der Zentralrat der Deutschen Sozialistischen Republik*, ed. by Eberhard Kolb and Reinhard Rürup (Leiden, 1968); and the unpublished material in the "Archiv des Zentralrates" (IISG, Amsterdam). Cf. also, Oertzen, *op. cit.*; Eberhard Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918-1919* (Düsseldorf, 1926), p. 139; and Carsten, *Revolution, op. cit.*, p. 324.

48. Friedrich Meinecke, "Verfassung und Verwaltung der deutschen Republik," *Neue Rundschau*, XXX (1919, part 1), p. 3.

49. Ulrich Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution* (Göttingen, 1975), p. 124; and Erich Kuttner, "Der Untergang der deutschen Sozialdemokratie," p. 29 (ms. in Kuttner papers/139b [IISG, Amsterdam]); and Kolb and Rürup, eds., *Zentralrat, op. cit.*, pp. XXXIII-XXXIV [sic.].

First World War the chances for meaningful territorial and political reform of the Reich were negligible. In one sense the sudden collapse of the Wilhelminian Reich in the fall of 1918, which necessitated a thorough rewriting of both the national and state constitutions, seemed like an opportune time to eliminate glaring anomalies among the *Länder* boundaries as well, but in practise this proved far less feasible. The obstacles were partly practical: Germany needed the services of the highly centralized and efficient Prussian territorial administration to carry the country through the difficult months between the conclusions of the armistice and the ratification of the Weimar constitution. In addition, as the new Socialist rulers of Prussia quickly pointed out, breaking up Prussia into new, smaller, *Länder* might well endanger Germany's national unity as well. At least some of the most vigorous supporters of the "Los von Preussen" movement in 1918/19 — particularly in the Rhineland — also seemed to welcome a new edition of the Napoleonic Confederation of the Rhine.⁵⁰ For these reasons the framers of the Weimar constitution stopped short of breaking up Prussia. The constitutional convention curtailed Prussia's political hegemony in the Reich, but left the state intact, so as to enable it to continue performing its function as the rivet of national unity. (As it turned out, reducing Prussia's hegemonial powers was a major error by the revolutionary leaders. Throughout the Weimar years Prussia was the most reliable bulwark of the democratic order in the Reich.)

It has become customary to attribute the failure of the new order of 1918 in large part to the revolutionaries' uncritical identification of German nationalism with Wilhelminian chauvinism, and it is certainly true that especially in the heat of the war effort, some liberals and socialists succumbed to the lure of irrational, integral nationalistic emotions.⁵¹ After the war had ended, such feelings continued to surface particularly in the

50. For a balanced account of this controversial topic see, Henning Köhler, *Autonomiebewegung oder Separatismus?* (Berlin, 1974).

51. Cf. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Sozialdemokratie und Nationalstaat*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen, 1971), pp. 113 and 116; Hermann Heidegger, *Die Sozialdemokratie und der nationale Staat* (Göttingen, 1956), p. 179; and Haussmann's note, in *Die Hilfe* (no. 3, 17 Jan. 1918), p. 17.

52. V. Gayl, "Meine Erinnerungen als deutscher Reichs- und Staatskommissar . . .", Max Worgitzki, ed. *Geschichte der Abstimmung in Ostpreußen* (Leipzig, 1921), p. 158 describes a group of left-wing (USPD) Socialists in East Prussia demonstrating against the transfer of their region to Poland with a black-white-and-red flag and a placard "We are German to the marrow of our bones." Cf. also, Carl Severing, *Mein Lebensweg* (Cologne, 1950), I, 300.

disputed border areas.⁵² Nevertheless, the nationalism of 1918 was not identical with that of 1871 or 1890. Instead, it deliberately sought to forge a link with 1848 and 1849. Unlike the imperialist aims of the Wilhelminian era, the goal of the leaders of 1918 was defensive: to preserve the elusive national unity of the Reich.⁵³ More significantly, the revolutionaries of 1918 identified nationalism and democracy,⁵⁴ and deliberately juxtaposed this linkage to the synonymy of Bismarckian and Wilhelminian nationalism with Prusso-German authoritarianism.⁵⁵

The revolutionary leaders have been most frequently and vociferously criticized for their failure to enact a specific reform program that would have fundamentally altered the structure of German society, especially in the fields of economics, administration and education. Once again, at first glance the criticisms seem justified: the Socialists certainly did not bring a "socialist" economy to Germany. But it must also be recalled that the German Social Democrats were heirs to the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century belief in science, not followers of Lenin. In fact, they regarded the economic-political changes introduced by the Bolsheviks during the first year of their rule in Russia as a "barbaric-Asiatic distortion of scientific socialism."⁵⁶ In contrast, the German leaders intended to lay the groundwork for substantive reforms in what they considered was a scientific and rational manner. Typical were the preparations for the much-discussed socialization of the economy. The provisional Reich government appointed a "socialization commission," headed by Karl Kautsky with a number of "not extreme"⁵⁷ socialist leaders, liberal academics and labor union leaders among its members. The commission concluded that some segments of Germany's economy should be "socialized," but only after they were ripe for such a step. And "ripeness" was a function not merely of time and economic circumstances, but of political and macro-societal goals as well. In

53. Blos, *Monarchie*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 36; and Heidegger, *Sozialdemokratie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

54. Hugo Preuss, "Nationale Demokratie," and "Republik oder Monarchie," *Staat*, *op. cit.*, pp. 431 and 459 ff.

55. Cf. Adolf Braun's address to the SPD Parteitag 1919, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

56. Phillip Scheidemann, *Memoiren eines Sozialdemokraten* (Dresden, 1928), II, pp. 292-293.

57. Heinrich Ströbel, *Die deutsche Revolution* (Berlin, 1920), p. 181. Cf. Kolb and Rürup, eds., *Zentralrat*, *op. cit.*, p. 67 n. 8. Hans Schieck, "Die Behandlung der Sozialisierungsfrage in den Monaten nach dem Staatsumsturz," *Vom Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik*, ed. by Eberhard Kolb (Cologne, 1972), pp. 138-164, provides a detailed analysis of the socialisation controversy.

short, socialization was a means to improving the society in general, not an end in itself.⁵⁸

For the leaders of 1918 the realization of any substantive economic or administrative reforms had to be subsumed to the larger goals of preserving the newly achieved *Volksgemeinschaft*, the cooperation of all segments of the society to preserve national unity,⁵⁹ and the need for rational and pragmatic rather than power-oriented solutions to society's problems. While the first consideration was essentially a modern version of the 1848 ideal of *Ständegleichheit*,⁶⁰ the second was an outgrowth of the typically nineteenth century belief in *Fachmannsideologie*. The revolutionaries of 1918 held that economic matters, like all other aspects of public affairs requiring learned expertise, was best left to those most directly concerned with *die Wirtschaft*.⁶¹ Consequently, the high point of economic reconstruction was not a law on socialization, but the *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft*, an extra-parliamentary agreement (later given the status of law by the *Nationalversammlung*) which left major economic decisions to those presumably best qualified to make them, i.e. the association of employers and the labor unions.⁶²

The prevalence of the values of 1848 in the Revolution of 1918 also explains the seeming lack of radical changes in the realm of *Kulturpolitik*. Here, too, the revolutionary leaders wanted integration and equality, not wholesale destruction of the Humboldtian ideals. To be sure, as in the case of the conciliar movement, radical ideas surfaced briefly,⁶³ but the short career of Adolph Hoffmann as Prussian co-minister of education demonstrated how little real support such plans had. Hoffmann, head of the Berlin Association of Atheists and one of the leaders of the left-wing socialists, sought to realize a radical program of the separation of church and state, complete "democratization" of

58. Miller, *Problem*, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

59. Grosser, *Konstitutionalismus*, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

60. Albertin, *Liberalismus*, *op. cit.*, p. 418; and Bruno Lewin, *Die Aufgaben der Jugend im neuen Deutschland* (Berlin, [1919]), pp. [5-6].

61. See, Henry Ashby Turner, "The Ruhrlade" and Gerald D. Feldman, "Big Business and the Kapp Putsch," *Central European History*, III (no. 3, 1970) and IV (no. 2, 1971), pp. 195-228 and 99-130.

62. On the origins and negotiations leading to the ZAG see, Gerald Feldman, "German Business Between War and Revolution: The Origins of the Stinnes-Legien Agreement," *Entstehung und Wandel der modernen Gesellschaft - Festschrift für Hans Rosenberg*, ed. by Gerhard A. Ritter (Berlin, 1970), pp. 312-341.

63. Wolfgang Freiherr v. Löhneysen, "Zur deutschen Kunst um 1920," Schoeps, ed., *Zeitgeist*, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

public schools (e.g., daily faculty-student assemblies with decisions taken by majority vote) and wholesale dismissals of incumbent civil servants in the ministry and the universities. He was vigorously opposed not only by bourgeois intellectuals, but by most social democrats, including his right-wing socialist co-minister, Konrad Haenisch.

All this is not to say that the revolutionaries did not have a vision of major reform in German cultural and educational life. The lines along which the revolutionaries intended to lead Germany's *Kulturpolitik* can be illustrated by the school reform program of Carl Heinrich Becker. Becker, a distinguished orientalist whom Haenisch promoted to state secretary in the Prussian ministry of education and who was minister in his own right from 1925 to 1930, left among his papers a hand-written "first draft" for a Reich Education Law. It is dated February 24, 1919. The main points of the draft combine the characteristics of the eighteenth century Enlightenment and the nineteenth century *Bildungs-* and *Ausbildungsdrang*: the level of education should be linked solely to the child's ability (the German original is typical of the language of this revolution: *unbeschränktes Recht jedes Kindes auf Bildung und Erziehung nach Maßgabe seiner Fähigkeiten, ohne Rücksicht auf Vermögen, Stand und Glauben der Eltern*), a twelve grade mandatory school system with the possibility of what is now called the *zweiter Bildungsweg* to permit wider access to institutions of higher learning, *Simultanschulen*, i.e. children of different religious backgrounds should attend the same schools, abolition of the Prussian *Lehrerseminare* and substitution of university-level training for elementary school teachers.⁶⁴ Becker (and many others) failed; a *Reichsschulgesetz* was never passed.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the aim of the revolutionary *Kulturpolitik* was clear: to remove the obstacles that until then had made education part of the Conservative system of hegemonial control over German society. Moreover, the revolutionaries did not limit their proposed reforms to the school system. The entire flowering of Weimar culture was possible only because the revolutionaries removed the Wilhelminian barriers to experimentation and innovation.

The revolution of 1918 failed for a number of reasons, but prominent among these was certainly the leaders' excessive faith in

64. See, Becker papers/Sachakten, no. 1181 (Preußisches Geheimes Staatsarchiv, Berlin).

65. The most detailed account of the long struggle is Günther Grünthal, *Reichsschulgesetz und Zentrumspartei in der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf, 1968).

the rationality of the German body politic. The leaders of 1918 lacked full appreciation of the historical truism that once revolutionary upheavals have created a political *tabula rasa*, many forces other than the initiators of the original changes will attempt to put their imprint on it. The leaders were unable or unwilling to recognize that the same developments that had removed the conservative barriers to democratic and social democratic movements and ideas also pushed aside the traditional inhibitions against unfettered flowering of considerably less positive forces. Most important among these was the deadly combination of political anti-Semitism and chauvinism. For all their faults, the old Conservatives had never entirely trusted this dual monster before the First World War. The Wilhelminian era's anti-Semitic parties had lost most of their influence by 1900,⁶⁶ Stöcker's anti-Semitism was always limited by the institutional and theological parameters of the Protestant churches, and even the pan-Germans never enjoyed the full extent of official sanction they longed for.

All that changed during and after the war. In the course of the conflict itself the military had already unleashed these slumbering forces and given them respectability. Ludendorff and his advisors not only encouraged the participation by officers in the mass political organization of the new right,⁶⁷ but quite deliberately sought to identify anti-Semitism and anti-democratism in the public mind as two attitudes simultaneously aiding the preservation of the German system of government and the foundation of her greatness.⁶⁸ After the war, freed from the vestigial ties that bound them to the traditional Conservatives, the forces of "revolutionary conservatism" began an uncontrolled life of their own. Here lay the cradle of the specifically German forms of fascism: the image of the nation as super person, the cult of the warrior as amoral superman, and the racial Manichaenism of the

66. See, Richard S. Levy, *The Downfall of the Anti-Semitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany* (New Haven, Conn., 1975).

67. See, the guidelines issued by the commander of the Baltic Sea naval forces, ". . . über den Beitritt von Marineoffizieren zur Deutschen Vaterlandspartei, 16. Sept. 1917," Deist, ed., *Militär, op. cit.*, pp. 1048-1050.

68. See, Bauer's notes, *ibid.*, II. pp. 674-675 and 716-717; Werner T. Angress, "Das deutsche Militär und die Juden im Ersten Weltkrieg," *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen*, XIX (no. 1, 1976), pp. 77-146; Werner Becker, "Die Rolle der liberalen Presse," Saul Friedländer, "Die politischen Veränderungen der Kriegszeit und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Judenfrage," and Eva G. Reichmann, "Der Bewußtseinswandel der deutschen Juden," Mosse, ed., *Judentum, op. cit.*, pp. 130-131, 27-65 and 511-612. For a contemporary analysis see, Julius Simon, "Die Juden und die Gebildeten unserer Tage," *Mitteilungen aus dem Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus*, XVI (22 March 1916), n.p.

Nazis.⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt⁷⁰ was quite right: Nazism and other forms of integral politics was made possible by the demise of traditional conservatism. And that, too, was part of the specific “Germanness” of the German Revolution. It would be wrong, however, to see a direct causal connection between the power phase of Nazism after 1933 and the German Revolution of 1918/19. The link does not extend beyond the movement phase. The first chain of causation between Revolution and rightist extremism ends with the *Hitler Putsch* of 1923, not the *Machtergreifung* of 1933. The latter event is more accurately traced to the rebirth of Nazism after the onset of the depression.

What, then, was the significance of the German Revolution of 1918? Undoubtedly the most important consequence was the removal of the Conservative norms and strictures that had limited and channelled Germany’s societal development since the failure of the Revolution of 1848. New forces were now free to pursue their ideals — whether they be the liberal-social democratic *Volksstaat*, the Communist dictatorship of the proletariat, or the Nazi’s *völkischer Machtstaat*. There is no doubt that most Germans in 1918/19 favored the first of these alternatives. That it and they eventually failed was due in more or less equal parts to the naiveté and omissions of the new leaders,⁷¹ the errors of Germany’s war-time enemies, the fanaticism of those opposing the models of 1848/1918, and the political immaturity of a people that suddenly found itself subject rather than object of political decisions.⁷²

69. The best synthesis of the rise of German revolutionary conservatism is, Gerhard Schulz, *Aufstieg des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt a.M., 1975).

70. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951) and subsequent editions.

71. Lothar Albertin has demonstrated that many Germans turned against the republic in 1919 and 1920 not because they opposed democracy, but because the new order did not bring enough democratic changes. See, Albertin, *Liberalismus*, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27. Cf. also, Albert Grzesinski, “Kampf um die deutsche Republik,” p. 68, Ms. in, Grzesinski papers/2457 (IISG, Amsterdam).

72. Hugo Preuss, “Deutsche Demokratisierung,” *Staat*, *op. cit.*, p. 337.