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Problems of the German Revolution 1918–19

Reinhard Rürup

For some ten years now, the German revolution of 1918–19 has been the subject of intensive research and discussion. It was one of the two central topics of debate at the 1964 Congress of German Historians, a debate which yielded important conclusions and has not yet come to an end. Even so, this fiftieth anniversary of the revolution may be a suitable moment for the attempt to strike a provisional balance and to sketch the outlines of the revolution in the light of recent research.¹

A great deal of material on the revolutionary events of 1918–19 was published during the fourteen years of the Weimar Republic, but these publications were either memoirs or accounts written by actual participants. Many were of a high standard, but they are no substitute for a large-scale detailed history and analysis.² No such work was undertaken, largely because of the prevailing political climate. Never perhaps in history did the contemporaries of any outwardly successful revolution repress its memory so

¹ Apart from recent literature, the material used for this essay is taken from extensive sources which the author and Dr Eberhard Kolb (Göttingen) have studied for several years in connection with their work for the series *Quellen zur Geschichte der Rätebewegung in Deutschland 1918/19*, published jointly by the Kommission für Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien in Bonn, and the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. The first volume appeared (Leiden, 1968) under the title: *Der Zentralrat der deutschen sozialistischen Republik, 19.12.1918–3.4.1919* (cited below as *Zentralrat*). The second will contain documents on regional and local Council organizations.

² Cf. the accounts by E. Barth (1919), H. Ströbel (1920), G. Noske (1920), E. Bernstein (1921), R. Müller (1925), A. Niemann (1927), H. Müller (1930), and the Illustrated History of the German Revolution published by the KPD in 1929; the first attempts at a scholarly analysis are to be found in E. O. Volkmann (1930) and, for events leading up to the revolution, in A. Rosenberg (1928); a sketch by F. Meinecke appeared in the *Handbuch des deutschen Staatsrechts* (1930).

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quickly as the contemporaries of the German revolution of 1918–19. This revolution established no living traditions, and the Republic which succeeded it derived its meaning not from the revolution but from its defeat. The volume *Zehn Jahre deutsche Geschichte 1918–1928*, which the German Government under the social-democrat Hermann Müller published in 1928, and which represented a kind of official self-appraisal of Weimar democracy, described the beginnings of the Republic as a time of Germany's 'deepest misery' and as 'days of complete collapse', but kept silent on the revolutionary overthrow, in November 1918, of the Imperial state. It contained only one contribution dealing with the period of the revolution as a whole; this was written by Gustav Noske and given the title 'Defence against Bolshevism'. A mere decade of domestic struggles had produced such radical distortions of perspective that the only formula acceptable to both social-democrats and bourgeois democrats was the thesis that the revolution had been nothing but a clash with bolshevism and its eventual defeat. Not the revolution, but the continuity of German history preserved in the teeth of the revolution, was the basis on which the Weimar Republic rested. In fact, the seemingly successful revolution of 1918 affected contemporary and subsequent political thinking and action far less than the unsuccessful bourgeois-liberal revolution of 1848–49 had done.

After Hitler's advent to power the new rulers reinterpreted the revolution together with the Weimar Republic in their own light. They elevated the legend of the 'stab in the back' to the essence of the revolution, and they described its leaders as 'bolsheviks' and 'the November criminals'.³ The widespread acceptance of this interpretation is in part, perhaps, to be explained by the fact that it was not a specifically fascist one. It merely combined and exaggerated anti-democratic views of history which Germany's nationalist middle classes had largely accepted before 1933 and which, even after 1945, were only slowly and gradually abandoned.

The eradication of these concepts constituted one of the principal tasks which German historians set themselves after

³ Despite certain relevant publications, research into the history of the revolution remained practically stagnant until 1945. One publication remains important mainly because the sources used in it have since been lost: *Darstellungen aus den Nachkriegskämpfen deutscher Truppen und Freikorps, bearbeitet und herausgegeben von der Forschungsanstalt für Kriegs- und Heeresgeschichte*, 9 vols. (1936–43).

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1945. They began – at least in West Germany – to reinterpret the revolution in liberal-democratic terms and attempted to do justice also to the positive achievements of the social-democrats in the winter of 1918-19. Most of them developed a new appreciation of the need for compromise and for the kind of middle-of-the-road policy which Friedrich Ebert in particular pursued during the revolution. Like the historians of the Weimar Republic they, too, tended to interpret the revolution as a struggle against bolshevism – a tendency which, under the impact of the cold war, became if anything even more pronounced. But, unlike the Weimar historians, and given the failure of the Republic, they introduced the category of ‘tragedy’ into the history of the revolution which, by its very struggle against bolshevism, had revived the power of authoritarian, anti-democratic forces. Such, details of emphasis apart, was the consensus of opinion which dominated the textbooks and general histories of the 1950s.⁴ There was no critical discussion, in part no doubt because the obvious political bias of communist research into the subject seemed to preclude all serious debate.⁵

These reinterpretations failed, however, to throw light on the actual course of events. A telling example is the influential study which Theodor Eschenburg published in 1951 under the title *Die improvisierte Demokratie*. The months of the revolution are practically omitted from this study, which proceeds almost directly from the October Constitution to the Weimar Assembly. Research into the history of the revolution began only in the mid-1950s, when historians began to exploit the wealth of source material in state and private archives and to undertake critical investigations of the most important aspects of the revolution. They quickly passed beyond the stage of offering mere opinions and of opposing to the different partisan views a vague, middle-of-the-road attitude. The mass of new material enabled them to test

⁴ Cf. F. Stampfer (1936), F. Friedensburg (1946), E. Eyck (1954), article in *Handbuch* by H. Herzfeld (1951), W. Conze (1953), A. Schwarz (1958), K.D. Erdmann (1959); and the memoirs of Otto Braun (1949), K. Severing (1950), E. Schiffer (1951), W. Groener (1957).

⁵ Communist histories of the revolution were, until a few years ago, not much better. They published a great deal but, with the exception of some document collections, little of value; their rigid dogmatism was hardly designed to stimulate an exchange of views. Here, too, things are changing, as can be gathered from recent publications and the reviews in the *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*.

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their conclusions. ~~In formulating the problems of their research, they rediscovered the crucial importance of Arthur Rosenberg's work which confronted the liberal interpretation of the revolution with a provocative alternative.⁶ The first manifestation of this new trend was the study published by Tormin in 1954.⁷ This had been written before the new source materials became available, but with the new problems in mind. Subsequently, there appeared studies by Sauer, Schieck and Elben who made extensive use of the new sources and, above all, the pioneering work by Kolb on the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. Von Oertzen did research on the economic council movement and Mitchell on the revolution in Bavaria. Other important aspects of the revolution were covered in more comprehensive studies by Schulz, Morsey, and Runge.⁸ At the same time, other historians began to prepare comprehensive editions of the original documents so as to provide historical research with a new foundation⁹ and there was plenty of discussion on the various new findings.¹⁰~~

⁶ A. Rosenberg, *Die Entstehung der deutschen Republik, 1871-1918* (Berlin, 1928); *Geschichte der deutschen Republik* (Karlsbad, 1935).

⁷ W. Tormin, *Zwischen Räterediktatur und sozialer Demokratie. Die Geschichte der Rätebewegung in der deutschen Revolution 1918/19*.

⁸ W. Sauer, *Das Bündnis Ebert-Groener*. Dissertation, Free University, Berlin, 1957 (typescript); H. Schieck, *Der Kampf um die deutsche Wirtschaftspolitik nach dem Novemberumsturz 1918*. Dissertation, Heidelberg, 1958 (typescript); W. Elben, *Das Problem der Kontinuität in der deutschen Revolution* (1965); E. Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918-19* (1962); P. von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution* (1963); A. Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria 1918-19* (Princeton, 1965). Of the numerous investigations into regional and local developments, see K.-H. Luther, 'Die nachrevolutionären Machtkämpfe in Berlin', in *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands*, 8, 1959; W. Schumann, *Oberschlesien 1918/19* (Berlin (East), 1961); R.A. Comfort, *Revolutionary Hamburg* (Stanford, 1966); H. Metzmacher, 'Der Novemberumsturz 1918 in der Rheinprovinz', in *Annalen des Historischen Vereins für den Niederrhein*, 1967; G. Schulz, *Zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur*, I (1963); W. Runge, *Politik und Beamtenum im Parteienstaat* (1965); R. Morsey, *Die deutsche Zentrumspartei 1917-23* (1966); K.D. Bracher, *Deutschland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur* (1964).

⁹ The minutes of the sessions of the Council of People's Delegates are to be published shortly under the auspices of the Kommission für Geschichte des Parlamentarismus.

¹⁰ Cf. E. Matthias, 'Zur Geschichte der Weimarer Republik', in *Die Neue Gesellschaft*, 1956; U. Bermbach, 'Das Scheitern des Räteresystems und der Demokratisierung der Bürokratie 1918/19', in *Politische Vierteljahrsschrift*, 1967; R. Rürup, 'Rätebewegung und Revolution in Deutschland 1918/19', in *Neue Politische Literatur*, 1967. Among communist publications, cf. H. Wohlgenuth, 'Neue Westdeutsche Publikationen zur Novemberrevolution 1918 in Deutschland', in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 1966.

What all these new studies have in common, irrespective of their individual value, is a tendency to 'rediscover the revolution'. Despite a certain – in some cases striking – reluctance to define the term 'revolution' too closely, the revolution of 1918-19 is taken seriously. Historians have stopped writing about a 'collapse' or an 'interim government' and now write about 'the revolutionary movement', and the aims and tasks of 'the revolution'. For the first time they have seriously begun to consider the possibility of democracy becoming more securely anchored in Germany by means of a revolutionary transformation. As against the assumption of tragical inevitability, they now tend to think that the period of the revolution, though it did not open up unlimited possibilities, nevertheless created an 'open situation' in which resolute political leaders could have achieved a much more thorough democratization of the authoritarian state than was actually accomplished. As a corollary they dismiss the view that the only possible choice in 1918-19 was between 'bol-shevism' and 'the Weimar system'. This simple alternative is seen as an artificial construction, obscuring the real problems arising at the time, which fails to do justice to its actual development. Having ceased to rely on the irrational concept of 'tragedy', they now analyse the situations in which decisions were made and attribute responsibility. The chances of democracy in post-1918 Germany, and especially the missed chances, are the overall theme of recent research.

The revolution followed in the wake of military defeat; it manifested itself in a breakdown of military and political authority. Towards the end of September 1918 the Supreme Command under Ludendorff, admitting defeat, requested the Government to make an immediate truce and peace offer, and proposed the formation of a new Government on a broad parliamentary basis which would be able to carry out overdue electoral and constitutional reforms. Considering the strongly anti-parliamentary and anti-democratic views of the military leadership, these demands seemed to constitute a surprising about-turn, but their objectives were in fact transparent.¹¹ They were made at a moment when the

¹¹ Cf. Ludendorff's remark *Sie sollen die Suppe jetzt essen, die sie uns eingebrockt haben* (freely rendered: 'They've cooked our goose; let them choke on it'), quoted by S.A. Kaehler, *Vier quellenkritische Untersuchungen zum Kriegsende 1918* (1960); cf. also G.D. Feldmann, *Army, Industry and Labour in Germany 1914-18* (Princeton, 1966), p. 516.

majority parties in the Reichstag under the leadership of the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) also pressed for full parliamentary control.¹² The result of this dual pressure was the formation of the Government of Prince Max von Baden which launched Germany, overnight so to speak, 'on the road from an authoritarian to a democratic state'.¹³ But it was already too late for the experiment of a constitutional monarchy. Inside Germany as well as abroad, the truce offer and the constitutional changes had the effect of a capitulation. From the beginning of October onwards revolution was in the air. On 28 October, when the Emperor signed the new constitutional laws, groups of sailors in Wilhelmshaven rebelled against the order to launch on the next day a naval attack in the North Sea. This was followed, on 3 November, by a sailors' rebellion in Kiel. Within the next few days all home-based armed forces joined the insurrection. Political power was taken over by spontaneously formed Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. The rebellion had turned into revolution. On 7 November, the movement triumphed in Munich, and two days later in Berlin.

This revolution was no 'stab in the back' of an army which could still have won the war.¹⁴ The acknowledgment of defeat was one of the main causes of the revolution; it was this which gave mass discontent the momentum of an avalanche and at the same time demoralized the officials and representatives of the regime, producing that paralysis of will which is an essential feature of the breakdown of state authority. The revolution had not been planned although some were later to boast of having prepared it.¹⁵ It had no conspiratorial centre, nor were its actions

¹² Of decisive importance are the collections of documents edited by E. Matthias and R. Morsey under the title *Der Interfraktionelle Ausschuss 1917/18*, 2 vols. (1959); *Die Regierung des Prinzen Max von Baden* (1962). These documents considerably modify the thesis of an 'improvised democracy'.

¹³ Appeal issued by the SPD Executive, 17 October 1918, quoted from *Ursachen und Folgen*, ed. H. Michaelis and E. Schraepfer, II, p. 359.

¹⁴ Recent discussions of this topic include: Freiherr Hiller von Gaertringen, "Dolchstoß"-Diskussion und "Dolchstoßlegende", in *Geschichte und Gegenwartsbewusstsein (Rothfels-Festschrift)*, 1963, and J. Petzold, *Die Dolchstoßlegende* (Berlin (East), 1963).

¹⁵ E. Barth, *Aus der Werkstatt der deutschen Revolution* (1919). This applies especially to the circle of *Revolutionäre Obleute* (Revolutionary Shop Stewards) in Berlin, who did indeed make preparations for a revolution, but in the event were surprised by its outbreak and its character.

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guided by bolsheviks. The rebellion was spontaneous and, to begin with, anonymous. Well-known political personalities became associated with the revolution only after it had all but triumphed. The capital was not the place of origin but the terminal point of the revolutionary current. Indeed, if revolutions are 'made' by reactionaries and not by revolutionaries, as Bebel is supposed to have said, the German revolution is a classical case.

A more complex question is the relationship between this 'November revolution' and the 'October reform'. Evidence on this point is not yet sufficient for a definite assessment. Many contemporaries of the revolution interpreted it as a mere misunderstanding and thus as a misfortune that could have been avoided. The majority parties in the Reichstag had formulated their demands in a constitutional action programme. These were largely met when Prince Max von Baden formed his Government on the basis of a reformed Constitution coupled with an undertaking to grant equal suffrage in Prussia. The social-democrats were convinced that this new Constitution would enable them to carry out their own more far-reaching reforms. It was this which led Rosenberg to describe the November revolution as 'the strangest of all revolutions', since the masses rebelled against their own leaders and thus in a sense against themselves. The October reform, he wrote, constituted 'the full victory of the bourgeois revolution'; it was only because the leaders failed to explain its full significance that it was followed by a revolution made to establish – not a socialist society – but a parliamentary democracy.¹⁶ This interpretation may sound plausible and may seem to be supported by the subsequent course of events. Even so, it cannot withstand close examination.

It was assumed until recently that the sailors at Wilhelmshaven had misunderstood the intentions of the Naval Command when they refused to obey orders. The archives, however, furnish indisputable evidence that in fact the intention was to save the 'honour' of the Imperial Navy by launching a major naval battle though there were no illusions about its outcome.¹⁷ The mutiny was

¹⁶ A. Rosenberg, *Die Entstehung der Weimarer Republik*, pp. 224, 219.

¹⁷ W. Deist, 'Die Politik der Seekriegsleitung und die Rebellion der Flotte Ende Oktober 1918', in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 1966.

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not the result of a misunderstanding, but a protest against the sacrifice of thousands of men to an anachronistic notion of honour. During October – and this, too, is now beyond doubt – the Naval Command deliberately evaded Government control. It pursued its own plans, with all their political implications, without the knowledge and against the declared intentions of the Government. This violation of parliamentary rule leads one to ask how far parliamentary government had in fact been established. If democratization was not to remain a mere slogan or a temporary emergency measure, it was not enough to achieve a new division of power between the Emperor, the Chancellor, the Reichstag and the military. It was just as essential to change the relationship between Parliament and the civil service, between society and the political parties, between workers and employers. Democracy could become real only if the new political principles were not merely proclaimed from above but were effectively applied to the whole network of social relations. At the beginning of November the prospect of achieving this seemed remote. Nor were there many among ‘the pillars of the state’ who even intended to bring such conditions about or would have been prepared to tolerate them.

At the beginning of November, the democratization of Germany was at best a programme. The naval mutiny was directed not against the long hoped-for ‘people’s state’ but against the political and military ambitions of the old ruling classes who refused to submit to parliamentary government, and the subsequent course of events raises the question whether democratization by evolutionary means had any chance of success. It seems very doubtful that evolutionary methods alone could have enabled the democratic forces to conquer and hold the strong positions of the anti-democratic elements, reinforced as these were by tradition, experience, and economic power. Ernst Troeltsch – who supported the October reform but regarded the revolution as a national misfortune – wrote towards the end of December 1918: ‘One is tempted to ask whether this socialist revolution could, or could not, have been avoided; whether the reforms begun by the Government of Prince Max, including the doubtlessly great and fundamental social reforms, could have been successfully carried through against the resistance of the old ruling classes, or whether in fact nothing could have been achieved without a complete

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break-up of the old structure'.¹⁸ Yet even today this question has not been satisfactorily answered. What answers there are owe more to partisan views than to dispassionate analysis.

There is a considerable literature on the question whether or to what extent the choice between an evolutionary and a revolutionary process of democratization depended on the SPD attitude, but the question has been discussed almost exclusively in terms of ideology and party politics.¹⁹ The development of German social-democracy, from the debates on revisionism and the emergence of a new revolutionary wing up to the party split in 1916-17, has rightly been regarded as an essential part of the pre-history of the revolution, and at least two of its consequences belong to the history of the revolution proper. The first is the transformation of the (majority) social-democrats into an evolutionary-democratic party which, notwithstanding its Marxist terminology, sought to achieve its objectives within the framework of the Reich. The second is the split into the majority social-democrats (SPD) and the independent social-democrats (USP), followed by a further split when the Spartakus League, at the turn of the year 1918-19, left the USP to found the Communist Party. Up to a point, this development is to be explained by internal party factors, but a final evaluation must depend on the social realities outside the party. If there was a realistic chance of a gradual democratic transformation, a violent revolution was bound to appear unnecessary and, in the conditions of a highly industrialized mass society, also irresponsible. If such a transformation was not to be expected, the party's failure to promote the revolution has to be seen as opportunism, in striking contrast to its continuing use of a revolutionary phraseology.

The turn of events in November relieved the social-democrats of the need to decide. The revolution broke out, and triumphed, without any intervention of the party leaders. Until the last moment the SPD leaders had tried to avoid a revolution. The abdication of the Emperor had already been announced when Ebert, at noon on 9 November, succeeded Prince Max to form a new Government on the basis of the October Constitution. Ad-

¹⁸ E. Troeltsch, *Spektator-Briefe. Aufsätze über die deutsche Revolution und die Weltpolitik 1918/22* (1924), p. 302.

¹⁹ Cf. C. E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905-17* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955); A. J. Ryder, *The German Revolution of 1918* (Cambridge, 1967).

mittedly, this take-over was a political act, not sanctioned by constitutional legitimacy, but it was designed to preserve as much continuity as possible and to leave all basic decisions to a future National Assembly, to be elected as early as possible. The authors of this policy, it soon emerged, had grossly underestimated the strength and growing self-confidence of the revolutionary movement. Circumstances compelled the SPD leaders to negotiate with the USP about the formation of a coalition government. Even before these negotiations were completed, the SPD leaders were driven to issue this proclamation: 'Political power is in the hands of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. They are to meet as soon as possible in plenary session with representatives from all parts of the Reich. Only after the consolidation of the conditions created by the revolution will the question of a Constituent Assembly become topical; it is therefore to be left in abeyance pending further discussions'.²⁰ In these words, the SPD leaders recognized the revolution and openly broke with the existing Constitution. It was not what they had wanted to do; they were compelled to this step if they were not to be wholly engulfed by the rising revolutionary tide. Only by putting themselves at the head of a revolutionary government could they hope to remain in charge of affairs. The executive committees of the SPD and USP agreed that the new coalition government – to be known as the 'Council of People's Delegates' (Rat der Volksbeauftragten) – was to be composed of three representatives from each of the two parties – Ebert, Scheidmann, and Landsberg from the SPD, and Haase, Dittmann, and Barth from the USP. In the afternoon of 10 November, the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Councils formally approved the new Council; its formation constituted the first act of the revolution.

With this successful and largely peaceful overthrow of the old order the revolution had, on the face of it, reached its climax.²¹

²⁰ Koalitionsbedingungen der USP vom 10.11.1918, in Schulthess, *Europäischer Geschichtskalender*, 1918, I, p. 462. It is essential to remember that the formation of the Government depended on the approval of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, and that the Government received its mandate from the revolution and not, as was attempted as late as 9 November, from the officials of the Empire.

²¹ Concerning the important distinction between different phases of the revolution, cf. my article in *Neue Politische Literatur*, 1967, which also argues against the uncritical use of the term 'November revolution', since this focuses

Yet the decisive contest about the real nature and future course of the revolution, between the social-democrat-bourgeois 'coalition of order' on one side, and, on the other, the revolutionary mass movement represented by the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, and to a lesser extent by the USP, was still to be fought. The first and most important stage of this struggle lasted from the overthrow of the old order in November to the suppression of the January upheavals in Berlin and the election of the National Assembly on 19 January. The second stage, in the spring of 1919, which was largely determined by the course and outcome of the first, was an essentially unorganized attempt to stage an anti-parliamentary, proletarian revolution. Only with the defeat of this second attempt did the revolution as a whole reach its end. The acceptance of the Treaty of Versailles and the promulgation of the new Constitution in the summer of 1919 sealed off the revolutionary transition period and outlined the ground plan of the Weimar Republic.

The outwardly distinctive feature of the first phase were the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. As the elected representatives of the revolutionary movement they were nominally in possession of all military and political power, though in practice they proved unable to determine the course of the revolution. The structure of these Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, their activities and objectives, have only recently become the subject of detailed investigation, whose findings have had a decisive influence on all subsequent research into the history of the revolution.²² Generally led by soldiers, the Councils were set up spontaneously as the provisional instruments of the revolutionary struggle for power.²³ They were not 'hordes of bolsheviks'; with a few exceptions, they were not even radical left-wingers. Although initially the undisputed new masters, they used their powers only hesitantly and certainly not excessively. As the former rulers put up practi-

attention exclusively on the overthrow of the Imperial state, while the real revolutionary process tends to be neglected or misinterpreted.

²² An understanding of the activities and functions of the Councils provides an important key to the appreciation of the problems and the potentialities of the revolution, though not the only key, as some recent discussions may seem to suggest.

²³ The initiative for the revolution came everywhere from the armed forces; it was mainly due to the existence of the Soldiers' Councils that the Council organizations did not immediately transform themselves into committees of the local SPD or USP organizations.

cally no resistance, the revolutionaries abstained from terror.²⁴ Immediately after their seizure of power, the Councils took charge of the maintenance of public order, the provision of food supplies and the demobilization of the armed forces. Some few attempts were made at the start to imbue this movement with a more radical spirit but they were by and large unsuccessful. The Councils did not interfere with the established authorities although they assumed political control over them. Even in the army, they abstained as a rule from a formal dismissal of the officers and contented themselves with the right of control.

Despite their spontaneous emergence, the Councils were largely at one in their purpose and political objectives. Over-shadowing all else were their demands for an immediate end to the war and their revolt against militarism. The motive power of the movement had been exhaustion and embitterment; its political impetus was provided by the more or less conscious belief that the evils against which they were rebelling were inherent in the political system itself. It was this belief which transformed the military rebellion into a general revolution against the monarchy and its representatives. The terms used for the transformation of the rebellion into a revolution aiming at the establishment of a new order were borrowed from the political vocabulary of the socialist labour movement. They were the only ones available to describe more or less adequately what was happening and what was hoped would eventually happen. In actual fact, the use of socialist terminology frequently disguised the absence of a practical socialist programme. Until well into January 1919, the majority of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were not socialists but radical democrats. Their slogan was not 'socialism' but 'democratization' – the democratization of the civil service, of the army, and eventually also of the economy. What they aimed at was not the classless society, but a parliamentary democracy shorn of all the attributes of the authoritarian state.²⁵

²⁴ Paradoxically, one of the dilemmas of the revolution stemmed from the fact that practically nobody attempted to defend the old order by force. Armed clashes and bloodshed might have enforced the recognition of the revolution as the basis of further political activity.

²⁵ It is important not to be misled by the socialist terminology used or by the demands made by the minority of Spartakists and sections of the revolutionary Shop Stewards, who did indeed hope for an immediate socialist revolution but were untypical of the Council organizations as a whole. The Reich Congress of

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~~During the first few weeks hardly anyone thought in terms of a 'Council System' (in the sense, roughly, of a Soviet as opposed to a parliamentary system), or even suggested that the Councils be politically institutionalized. Noske, a People's Delegate, expressed no more than the general opinion of the Councils when he declared in January 1919: 'Once the democratic order has been established in all parts of the Reich, the states, and the municipalities, the Workers' Councils as political organizations will have to disappear'.²⁶~~

During this first phase of the revolution, the Councils were not instruments of the class struggle but the organs of a democratic people's movement with certain socialist overtones. They supported the revolutionary governments formed by the SPD and USP and would have willingly fought for them in any struggle with the former rulers. On 25 November 1918, the Council of People's Delegates concluded an agreement with the Executive Council of the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, which gives a precise definition of the general duties of these bodies: 'It is their task to defend and enhance the achievements of the revolution and to suppress counter-revolution'.²⁷ The Councils accepted the need for a transition period with its inevitable compromises, but they saw clearly that failure to secure the victory of the revolution would entail the danger of reaction and restoration. They did not think that it was up to them to construct the new order; the great majority, as their Congress in December 1918 demonstrated, were content to leave this task to the future National Assembly. Their own special task, as they saw it, was the revolutionary destruction of the power of the old ruling classes. They wanted to make sure that the overthrow of the authoritarian Prusso-German military and civilian regime, which seemed to have been accomplished in the first storm of the revolution, would become irreversible. There remained the question whether - or to what extent - the new governments were prepared to use the Councils for this purpose.

Councils in Berlin, 16-20 December 1918, decided by a large majority that the elections for a National Assembly should be held at the earliest possible date. Before the revolution, parliamentary democracy had been the only really concrete aim of the labour movement; most of the Councils therefore regarded it as a matter of course that it had to be achieved.

²⁶ *Zentralrat*, p. 495.

²⁷ Schulthess, 1918, I, p. 508; cf. *Zentralrat*, p. xx.

Both the Reich Government and the state governments which emerged from the November upheaval regarded themselves as provisional institutions established in order to cope with the immediate tasks posed by Germany's defeat and the ensuing revolution. They underlined the provisional character of their power and set deliberate limits to the period of transition by calling at once for elections for constituent assemblies. Each of these revolutionary governments, irrespective of its own specific programme, was faced with a dual political task of appalling complexity. On the one hand, it had to cope with the consequences of the military and political breakdown; on the other, it was to achieve the aims of the revolution which had brought it to power. To use the language of the time, it had both to save Germany from 'chaos' and to safeguard and enlarge 'the achievements' of the revolution. These two tasks were indeed inseparable if the revolutionary governments were to fulfil their historic mandate to create the conditions for viable democratic development. In the given circumstances, both inside Germany and internationally, a radical revolution on, for instance, bolshevik lines was out of the question. 'If we are to safeguard our revolutionary achievements', Ebert rightly asserted at the Reich congress, 'we must do everything to master these difficulties and avoid a collapse'.²⁸ But it was equally essential to be as energetic in safeguarding 'the achievements' if the maintenance of law and order was not to prepare the ground for counter-revolutionary developments. Only a sustained balancing act between these two, not mutually exclusive but mutually endangering objectives, could have saved the revolution.

In theory both the SPD and the USP accepted this dual task, but from the outset gave it a different emphasis. The USP explained that it had decided to join the Council of People's Delegates 'in order to strengthen the revolutionary socialist achievements'; the SPD, by contrast, did so mainly 'in order to prevent the worst'.²⁹ On 9 November the social democratic members of the Government issued a proclamation which unambiguously

²⁸ *Zentralrat*, p. 10.

²⁹ This the USP had expressly laid down in the conditions for a coalition of 10 November 1918: Schulthess, 1918, I, p. 462. On the political concepts of the USP leadership, see the work by H. Ströbel, *Die deutsche Revolution* (2nd ed. 1922), p. 56. On the SPD interpretation of the revolution, see the work by P. Hirsch, *Der Weg der Sozialdemokratie zur Macht in Preussen*, p. 227.

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~~defined its tasks, pending the election of a National Assembly; 'to conclude an armistice and conduct peace negotiations, to ensure the food supply, and to secure for the members of the armed forces the quickest possible orderly return to their families and to gainful occupations'.³⁰ Not a word about the tasks of the revolution, which the USP was striving to perform in broad agreement with the aims of the revolutionary mass movement. The SPD was pursuing concrete political aims – parliamentary democracy, social reforms, equal suffrage, reform of the civil service and local government, and even a cautious programme of nationalization in the case of enterprises judged to be 'ripe' for nationalization. But all this could wait until the new Constitution had been adopted. The SPD thus embodied, not the victorious revolution, but the 'transition' from one system to another which it elevated to a programme. Its leaders occupied the seats of power, but they regarded themselves as mere vice-regents and acted accordingly. The Council of People's Delegates, as also its counterpart in Prussia, thus failed to develop an agreed government programme, in spite of the urgent need for joint action. More and more, the SPD and the USP went their different ways.~~

~~The pressing problems of the winter of 1918-19 could be solved only through a compromise with the representatives of the order that had just been overthrown. Demobilization, the change over from a wartime to a peacetime economy, the provision of essential supplies and transport – none of this could be carried out without the experience and the expertise of the civil service and the military authorities. That much was agreed both between the SPD and the USP and between the Government and the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. There was no agreement, however, on the form and purpose of the compromise. While the SPD tended to think in terms of a static compromise, which meant in fact a compromise on principles, the USP had a dynamic approach to the arrangements which had to be made, regarding them as steps in the direction of further democratization; that is, it aimed at a purely functional compromise. The fate of the revolution and indeed the fate of democracy, would depend on who~~

³⁰ Schulthess, 1918, I, p. 453; the immediately following sentences complement this programme: 'For this purpose the democratic administration must immediately begin to work smoothly. Only if it functions perfectly can the worst kind of disaster be avoided'.

remained in control and whose interests prevailed in cases of conflict.

The first and most important compromise was achieved spontaneously. Immediately after the revolution the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and the new governments all over Germany requested civil servants to continue with their official duties.³¹ From the highest to the lowest, practically all civil servants responded. They accepted 'the facts of the situation' although they refrained from approving of the revolution and its objectives. Their reserve was not at first considered intolerable, especially as it was taken for granted that all branches of the civil service would be subjected to effective political control. The position of the military staff was less clear-cut, the revolution, after all, had begun as a mutiny. Still, even the Soldiers' Councils soon accepted the fact that it was not possible to eliminate the officers altogether, not at least until all the troops had been brought home from the front and demobilization had been completed. In view of the uncertainties prevailing on 9-10 November and the obvious danger of a civil war, the Reich Government, in turn, could only welcome the readiness of the military command to remain in charge until the completion of demobilization. In this case, too, it was reasonable to believe that political power was in the hands of the revolutionary soldiers, and that for the time being a counter-revolution was impossible.

All these compromises rested on the false assumption that during the transition period officers and civil servants would continue to serve as 'non-political experts', while all basically political decisions were reserved for the representatives of the revolution. The same assumption led to an effective compromise also with the bourgeois parties. Coalition governments including representatives of non-socialist parties were formed in several South German states. Leading liberal politicians were appointed to run important government departments. 'Except for Poles and Conservatives', People's Delegate Haase remarked at the beginning of December, 'all parties are represented in the Government'.³² Economic policy, too, was based on compromise.

³¹ See, for instance, the appeal of the Berlin Executive Council of 11 November 1918: 'All local, state, Reich, and military authorities continue with their activities. All orders from these authorities are given in the name of the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council.' *Zentralrat*, p. xvii.

³² Quoted from Elben, p. 41.

~~Characteristically enough, the Government entrusted responsibility for economic policy to the Reich Office for Economic Demobilization which, by its very nature, was unable to tackle structural problems.³³ Its first priority was the quickest possible reorganization of industry for peace-time production; economic experiments would have to wait until after the current crisis had been overcome. A parallel compromise between employers and trade unions led to the establishment of a joint standing committee, to promote industrial peace on the basis of 'achievements' gained in the realm of social reform.³⁴~~

After only a few weeks in office, the new governments, especially the Council of People's Delegates, had scored a number of undoubted successes. Civil war was averted and so, apart from the unavoidable occupation of the Rhineland, was an Allied invasion which might have come in the wake of civil war. The armistice negotiations went on, the armies were brought home and demobilized without serious incident. The unity of the Reich was preserved, and elections for the National Assembly were fixed for the technically earliest possible date. All in all, for a government of 'transition' this was a record of outstanding successes. By means of the various compromises which it had concluded, the SPD largely succeeded in carrying out 'its own' part of the transition programme. As to the 'other' part of the Government's mandate, i.e. the task of simultaneously 'paving the way' for democracy, the balance sheet was anything but spectacular.

With the sole exception of Bavaria, all the coalition governments were led by the SPD whose supporters were both more numerous and better disciplined than those of the USP, and whose leadership was clearly more experienced. The USP was virtually paralysed by strife between its right and its left wing, with their profoundly different ideas about revolutionary strategy and tactics. It was thus incapable of imposing its view and developed into an opposition party within the Government. For all

³³ The economic policy of the transition period has been excellently analysed in Schieck's dissertation on the activities of the Office for Economic Demobilization; cf. also Elben, p. 70.

³⁴ On the joint standing committee, established on 15 November 1918, cf. Feldmann, p. 521; W. Richter, *Gewerkschaften, Monopolkapital und Staat im ersten Weltkrieg und in der Novemberrevolution* (1959), p. 215; H.J. Varain, *Freie Gewerkschaften, Sozialdemokratie und Staat* (1956), p. 124.

practical purposes, the 'transition' programme of the SPD soon became the sole basis of Government policy. What was to prove fatal in this development was the belief of the SPD that its leadership was threatened only by the left and that the danger of a counter-revolutionary development need not be taken seriously. As People's Delegate Landsberg put it in mid-December 1918: 'This revolution differs essentially from all earlier revolutions in having broken up and eliminated every instrument of power of the overthrown class'.³⁵ The naive trust in the representatives of the 'overthrown class' was more than compensated by a profound distrust of the representatives of the revolution. The Government became increasingly hostile, not only to the Spartakus League, but also to the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and their demands for democratic safeguards.³⁶ Yet the instruments of power of the old system were still serviceable. Only briefly stunned by the revolution, officers, civil servants, and industrialists quickly recovered, and began cautiously to recapture and consolidate their former positions. That was *their* way of interpreting the compromise they had concluded with the revolution. They accepted the new masters – the SPD though not the USP – for the sake of maintaining order, while doing everything in their power to prevent a revolutionary transformation of society. So long as the men of the old regime refrained from exploiting the transition period for a *putsch*, the SPD was satisfied; for the future of German democracy this was, however, not enough.

The civil service was not 'democratized' although this had been one of the principal demands of the revolutionary movement. True, to begin with, the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils had established control over the civil service, including local government bodies, but the manner in which they exercised their control worked in the long run in favour of the established administrative apparatus. In only too many cases the controllers lacked experience and expertise. More important even, in cases of conflict they received no effective political support. All too soon, the new governments, especially that of Prussia, identified themselves

³⁵ Meeting with the Central Council on 28 December 1918: *Zentralrat*, p. 84.

³⁶ The SPD leaders' fear of bolshevism and its influence on their policies can hardly be exaggerated. See P. Lösche, *Der Bolschewismus im Urteil der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1903–20* (1967), especially p. 164 ff.

again with 'the state' which has the duty to protect 'its' civil servants against 'unwarrantable' accusations.³⁷ Instead of using the powers of the Councils to establish political control over the civil service and to restrict it as far as possible to the execution of practical administrative tasks, the governments put their main emphasis on the continuity of the bureaucracy and on the rights of the individual civil servants. Eventually, when the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were deprived of their controlling powers, the entire old civil service re-emerged unscathed and imbued with a new sense of power and self-confidence, even before the National Assembly had the opportunity to begin reorganizing the administration along democratic lines. The new republic was no longer strong enough to enforce a democratic transformation of the civil service; it guaranteed civil servants freedom of political opinion and speech – a freedom which could only harm democracy so long as the civil service remained an authoritarian body in the democratic Republic.³⁸ Hugo Preuss, author of the Weimar Constitution, stated in 1925 that the discrepancy between the democratic Constitution and the traditionally undemocratic, authoritarian civil service constituted 'the most important, direct cause of most of the weaknesses of the new state'.³⁹

Another act of omission was the failure to eradicate that 'militarism' against which the soldiers had originally rebelled and which even bourgeois democrats wanted to see destroyed. The Council of People's Delegates made use of the old military apparatus during the transition period without wishing to re-establish its power. It upheld the fiction of a non-political military administration, but the Supreme Command, under General Groener, thought otherwise; it regarded itself as the political partner of the Government.⁴⁰ The patent distrust with which the SPD leaders approached every single demand and action of the

³⁷ Many examples are to be found in the State Council files of the Prussian Ministry of the Interior in Berlin. With the continuity of the administrative institutions and personnel, the Civil Service, in cases of conflict with the revolutionary organizations, was able to take decisions in its own cause.

³⁸ Cf. Eschenburg, p. 55 ff; Troeltsch wrote towards the end of January 1919: 'There has been practically no change within the world of the civil service. The civil servants, including the most conservative, put up with the new state of affairs and remain at their posts, but they govern, talk, and behave in the old style' (p. 37).

³⁹ Quoted from Elben, p. 43.

⁴⁰ Cf. W. Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen* (1957), p. 466.

Workers' and Soldiers' Councils was, astonishingly enough, not matched by any comparable distrust of the military authorities. Groener's declaration, 'We have no intention whatever of making a counter-revolution', was accepted as a sufficient basis for co-operation.⁴¹ Groener himself – in contrast to the Council of People's Delegates – understood from the outset what really mattered, and he exploited the compromise to good purpose. Within a few weeks he had so strengthened the position of the Supreme Command that it was able to influence all domestic policy decisions. The decisive turning point came shortly before Christmas 1918. The Reich Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils had just adopted a resolution on the 'Destruction of Militarism and the Abolition of *Kadavergehorsam* (blind obedience)', a resolution which also called for the removal of all badges of rank, the election of officers, etc.⁴² The Congress also elected a 'Central Council of the German Socialist Republic' which immediately afterwards held a meeting with the Council of People's Delegates. It was at this meeting that Groener succeeded in getting the resolutions just adopted by the Congress cancelled, and this at a time when the progress of demobilization had deprived him of most of his forces. He even felt strong enough to advise the highest representatives of the revolution after having listed the most pressing military and political tasks: 'The less you interfere and the more you allow things to take their own course and let us do the work, the more quickly will order be re-established'.⁴³ Although the remnants of the old army could no longer be used as an instrument of internal power politics, the nucleus of the officer corps, which was later to form the Reichswehr, had been successfully immunized against the revolution, while the rights of the revolutionary Soldiers' Councils had been decisively whittled down.⁴⁴ Democratically-minded officers resigned because they failed to gain Government support. Both their resignations and the elimination of the Soldiers' Councils were given

⁴¹ Meeting between the Central Council and the Council of People's Delegates on 20 December 1918: *Zentralrat*, p. 37.

⁴² *Zentralrat*, p. 2.

⁴³ *Zentralrat*, p. 39.

⁴⁴ On 19 January 1919 the Ministry of War issued a decree which greatly restricted the rights of the Soldiers' Councils; its provisions reinforced the powers of the officer corps during the transition period and weakened the revolutionary forces.

formal shape on 6 March 1919 in the law on the Provisional Reichswehr.⁴⁵ The new army, led as it was by the old Prussian officer corps, developed into a power factor outside the democratic order and unwilling to be integrated.

The armed forces and the civil service had been the main pillars of the Wilhelmine Empire, but they were not the only institutions in need of radical reform. If democracy was to have solid foundations, it was essential to reorganize the Reich as well, to carry out economic reforms and to democratize the judiciary. The governments emerging from the revolution did not take even the first steps towards these reforms. When the National Assembly met, in February 1919, it was clear that the component states were hardly less wedded to particularism than the overthrown dynasties which preceded them. The judiciary, too, survived the revolution wholly unscathed, and not many years passed before it became all too obvious how much the chances of democracy had been jeopardized by the failure of the revolutionary governments to reform it.⁴⁶ When the National Assembly came into being it was already too late to remedy this omission. On economic matters, the new governments were probably most justified in confining themselves to mere 'transitional' tasks, since hasty economic experiments would have had little chance of success. Yet, the 1920 Works Council Law and similar legislation failed to democratize the economy.⁴⁷

Thus it came about that 'the entire material power structure of the Empire, and the mentality that sustained it, was preserved – the civil service, the judiciary, the established university, the Church, the economy, the military command'.⁴⁸ In the interval between the November revolution and the opening of the National Assembly, the compromise of the transition period had increasingly weighted the balance in favour of the forces of restoration. The mere fact of non-intervention on the part of the new revolutionary powers was enough to revive the anti-democratic elements

⁴⁵ There were a number of suggestions, during the months of the revolution, for the construction of a new army with the aid of genuinely democratic officers (cf. *Zentralrat*, pp. 394, 527), but the SPD leaders preferred to rely on the 'expertise' of the old military command. See F.L. Carsten, *Reichswehr und Politik 1918-33* (1964), p. 31.

⁴⁶ Cf. H. Hannover and E. Hannover-Drück, *Politische Justiz 1918-33* (1966).

⁴⁷ Cf. the informative study by K. Briggl-Matthias, *Das Betriebsräteproblem* (1926).

⁴⁸ G. Mann, *Deutsche Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (1958), p. 670.

and to jeopardize the Assembly's chances of creating a new democratic order. None of this was inevitable. The SPD leaders were so preoccupied with day-to-day tasks that they were hardly aware of the continuous shift in power. The USP leaders saw the problem, but lacked the determination as well as the power to enforce change. The Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were first pushed aside and finally eliminated altogether as a political force; their democratic potential was allowed to run to waste.

From the middle of December 1918 onwards, the revolutionary movement became increasingly alert to the danger of creeping restoration, and its apprehension became in turn one of the most important factors in subsequent developments. The united socialist front, which until then had been maintained despite tensions and disputes between SPD and USP, was rapidly disintegrating. In the cities, especially in Berlin, revolutionary unrest was on the increase. At the Reich Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, the USP left wing, which opposed further co-operation with the SPD, succeeded for the first time in imposing its views on the party. As a result, the USP refused to participate in the Central Council which the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils had just established as the supreme revolutionary authority, empowered to control as well as dismiss and appoint both the Reich Government and the government of Prussia.⁴⁹ This refusal constituted the first move in its general retreat from power. Shortly afterwards, on 29 December, the USP members resigned from the Council of People's Delegates, and early in January the USP members withdrew from the government of Prussia and several other state governments. The Cabinet crisis at the end of December provided the last opportunity for making a genuine choice. Discontent with the course of the revolution had by then become widespread among the SPD membership as well. In that situation, a differently composed Central Council would have produced a realistic chance of changing direction and stopping the trend towards restoration.⁵⁰ But that was not to be. The USP

⁴⁹ Congress of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Germany, 16–21 December 1918, in the House of Deputies, Berlin. *Stenographic report* (1919). Cf. *Zentralrat*, pp. xxxi and 22. H. Müller was later to describe this decision as 'the most important result of the Congress'. *Die Novemberrevolution* (2nd ed. 1931), p. 223.

⁵⁰ Cf. the article by Haase, Chairman of the USP, in *Freiheit* on 1 January 1919, reproduced in *Zentralrat*, p. 793.

chose the role of opposition; the SPD henceforth governed alone, relying even more than before on its alliance with the bourgeois forces. Only from that moment onwards, and not before, was there a certain degree of truth in the charge that it was the left-wing opposition which 'pushed' the SPD to the right – though even that was the result of the policies pursued by the SPD itself.

On 6 February, the National Assembly met at Weimar, and four days later the 'Provisional Basic State Law' endowed the Government with constitutional legality. The transition period had come to an end. The final decisions on the manner of its conclusion had been taken during the preceding month with the suppression of the January upheavals in Berlin and the elections on 19 January.⁵¹ It emerged in the course of the troubles in Berlin that the left-wing opposition, despite its massive local support, was unable to prevail against the coalition of order between the social-democrats and the bourgeoisie. The left lacked both resolute leaders and a realistic programme of action. Berlin, in those January days, became the scene of a protest movement without a real will to power – not of a 'Spartakus rebellion', but of unplanned mass demonstrations which took on a likeness to civil war and in which the Spartakus leaders took part only hesitatingly.⁵² The SPD gained a military victory though even that it achieved only with the aid of officer and student volunteers, i.e. by further strengthening its ties with the political right. True, it emerged as the strongest party from the elections for the National Assembly and from most of the parallel elections for the constituent assemblies in the states, but it did not gain an absolute majority. The shaping of the Republic therefore depended on coalition governments formed by the SPD and bourgeois-democratic parties, and with governments of that kind the Assembly was not in a position to promote that radical transformation of society which even the government of the revolution had not

⁵¹ Although the transition period ended only with the opening of the National Assembly, the real turning point was marked by the elections. It was immediately after the elections that the control of the Government by the Central Council came to an effective end, and that joint consultations between the People's Delegates and the bourgeois Secretaries of State, avoided until then, were begun.

⁵² For the January uprisings and the numerous conciliation attempts see *Zentralrat*, p. 218. E. Hannover-Drück and H. Hannover, *Der Mord an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht* (1967); *Zentralrat*, pp. 430, 651, 663.

dared to undertake. The so-called Weimar Coalition, composed of SPD, Centre Party and Democratic Party, reverted instead to the stage of development which had been prepared by the wartime Inter-Parliamentary Committee and had seemed to reach its goal in the Government of Prince Max. In this manner the revolution returned to its starting point. In fact, it seemed to have been largely pointless. Apart from the abdication of the dynasties, the revolution accomplished no more than what appeared to have been achieved in October 1918 before it had started.

This disappointing outcome produced in the spring of 1919 one more revolutionary mass movement. Although its leaders and followers were largely the same as those of the first revolutionary wave, they represented different forces from those which had brought about the November overthrow. The failure of the revolution led to an upsurge of radicalism. An originally democratic movement, tolerant of compromise, now turned into a radical movement of class struggle with distinctly anti-parliamentary features. Only at that moment did they begin to experiment with a 'Council system' (in the sense of a 'Soviet system') and to produce incidents of revolutionary terror in certain cities.⁵³ With intransigent new slogans they now demanded 'the abolition of the old capitalist-militarist robber state' and the construction of a 'socialist state'.⁵⁴ The various revolutionary centres had, however, no unified leadership and only sporadic organizational contacts. At no time had this movement a serious chance of success. There was considerable unrest, aggravated here and there by general strikes, in Berlin, Central Germany, the Ruhr district, Northern Germany and Bavaria. But the Reich Government succeeded in repressing all of them, once again with the aid of troops which willingly fought against a socialist revolution although they were not prepared to fight for parliamentary democracy. By the beginning of May, most of this unrest had been successfully suppressed and the second phase of the revolution, too, had come to an end.

It left no mark on the structure of power, but merely reinforced the inclination of the Government of the new Republic to take up a frontal position against the left and to treat the nationalist right

⁵³ For the 'Council Republics' in general cf. Kolb, p. 325 ff.

⁵⁴ Thus R. Müller at the second Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils in April 1919, quoted from *Zentralrat*, p. 798.

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with tolerance. The main innovation of the second revolutionary movement was its programmatic emphasis on a 'Council system' based on altogether new social-political concepts. But it was only the name which this new Council movement had in common with the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of the early months of the revolution; it developed only after the original Councils had lost all effective power and when the revolutionary transition period was approaching its end. Only then did scepticism about the value and effectiveness of the National Assembly, of the political parties and the trade unions, become at all widespread. Only the failure of the revolution led many of its original supporters to distrust the very principles of their traditional political institutions and ideologies and to seek alternative solutions in a 'Council System'. An Economic Council movement developed at the same time in the industrial areas of Central Germany with the aim of giving the demand for nationalization a new content. Even SPD circles discussed Council concepts at that period, especially in connection with their debates on the development of a new economic structure. None of these debates had tangible results. Nor were they theoretically productive, for the ideas advanced were markedly utopian and immature. Nevertheless, they did raise problems which deserve to be carefully examined. For in the final analysis this Council movement was essentially a determined attempt, proceeding from socialist premises, to transform the constitutional models of the nineteenth century into a democratic political system capable of doing justice to the technological mass society of our own age.

To this day, the literature about the 1918-19 revolution reflects certain characteristic doubts as to whether it was a 'real' or a sham revolution - a collapse incorrectly described as revolution. The contemporaries of the revolution had, at least to begin with, no doubts on that score. On 11 November 1918, Theodor Wolff described the overthrow of the Empire in the *Berliner Tageblatt* as 'the greatest of all revolutions . . . We are justified in calling it the greatest of all revolutions because never before in history was so firmly constructed a Bastille, surrounded by such solid walls, overthrown in a single assault'.⁵⁵ Shortly afterwards,

⁵⁵ Quoted from R. Müller, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik*. II (1925), p. 17.

Ernst Troeltsch wrote: 'Like England, France, and America before, Germany has now a victorious revolution', albeit, he added, 'at the most grievous moment of a general military, economic and nervous collapse'.⁵⁶ Yet opinions began to change even before the revolution had run its full course, and people tended increasingly to assess the revolution in terms of its accomplishments. In the spring of 1919, Friedrich Meinecke thought that it was now the main task 'to transform the revolution from a negative into a positive event', especially in view of the fact – the fortunate fact, as he believed – that 'there has not been a complete revolution of the state and social order'.⁵⁷ In the autumn of 1919, Walther Rathenau even maintained that it was mistaken to believe that 'there had been a revolution. There was none. There was a military strike and the beginning of a slow, basic revolution which, for the time being, has been frozen'.⁵⁸ With the passage of time, such reinterpretations became even more pronounced, and the revolution was increasingly seen and described as no more than a collapse or a 'transition period' between two systems through which the country had to pass.

In actual fact, there was a revolution in Germany in 1918–19. Recent research confirms this beyond a shadow of doubt. True, it was a movement born of misery and exhaustion, and the overthrow of the monarchy was in itself not a creative act. But that was not all that happened. The revolutionary mass movement which developed early in November pursued aims which went beyond a revolt against the symptoms of mismanagement. The revolution had a programme; even though the spontaneous character of the movement prevented its precise formulation, its outlines were nevertheless quite plain. The revolutionary movement strove for the abolition of the authoritarian state and for a truly democratic transformation of political, social and economic conditions. It sought to liberate the people from political and social dependency and to lay the foundations for a constitution of freedom. This programme was not carried out. The history of the revolution is the history of its step-by-step regression. The revolution failed even though the new governments which it brought to power managed for a time to remain in office. The

⁵⁶ Troeltsch, p. 19.

⁵⁷ F. Meinecke, *Nach der Revolution* (1919), pp. 43, 45.

⁵⁸ W. Rathenau, *Politische Briefe* (1929), p. 269.

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revolution ended in its own negation – not as the result of a successful counter-revolution – but through the establishment of a political order which might well have been achieved without a revolution, but which, in any case, made no use of any of the political options presented by the revolution.

No doubt, in comparison with the *Wilhelmine Empire*, the *Weimar Republic* was an advance on the road towards a democratic transformation. There was nothing inevitable in its inglorious end, a mere fourteen years after its foundation; it was weakened from the start by the conflicts and tensions between its democratic Constitution and a social reality formed in the image of non-democratic forces. In contrast to the demands and potentialities of the revolution, the *Weimar democracy* – as *Troeltsch* concluded in 1920 – embodied ‘a principle that was basically anti-revolutionary, concerned with the establishment of order and opposed to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only the shortsighted could feel a sense of triumph and believe that the objectives of 1848 had now been achieved. No, everything that in 1848 had been a bold enterprise of progress turned now into an instrument of conservative slowdown employed to overpower the revolution and to provide its opponents with the opportunity for legal activity and growing influence.’⁵⁹ Germany had a victorious revolution. It had the chance of democratizing itself thoroughly. It failed to make use of this chance.

⁵⁹ *Troeltsch*, p. 16.