CHAPTER XVIII

Revolution in 1918

When the members of the Armistice Commission returned from their days in the forest of Compiègne, they found a new and confusing Germany. This could not have come to them as a complete surprise. Even before October ended, German sailors struck the first blows in the creation of a new regime.

The German revolution of 1918 presents a complex picture because it is so closely identified with the military defeat. The motivations of the participants are often hard to isolate. To what extent were people moved simply by war-weariness and terrible living conditions? How great was the desire for a democratic republic? How strong was the demand for a thoroughly socialist, even soviet, state? These questions are not easy to answer. Furthermore, the dissensions within the ranks of the socialists lead to further confusion.

The real revolutionists in Germany were divided into three groups: the Independent Socialists; the Spartacists; and a new grouping, the so-called Shop Stewards, technically the left wing of the Independents but often at odds with what they considered the overly theoretical attitudes of the party leadership. The Shop Stewards, whose following was mainly among the workers in heavy industry in Berlin and whose principal leaders were Richard Müller and Emil Barth, were closer in spirit to the Spartacists than to the Independent leaders. Their program called for immediate revolution with expropriation of heavy industry and landed estates and a government in the hands of workers' and soldiers' councils (in German Räte, a translation of the Russian "soviet"). In other words, they wanted a revolution in Germany similar to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. This group was in close association with the Russian embassy in Berlin, from which it obtained both arms and printed propaganda. When Karl Liebknecht, the Spartacist leader, was released from prison in late October, he found himself close to this revolutionary faction since its aims were so similar to his own. The Independent leader-
ship, whose principal representatives were Hugo Haase and Wilhelm Dittmann, did not feel that the time was ripe for revolution and was sceptical even about the possibility of a revolution in Germany. They counseled moderation and delay, especially at a meeting of all the revolutionary groups on November 2; at that time they won a vote to postpone the outbreak of revolution until November 11, when it was hoped the war would be over.

All three of the groups just mentioned were united in their opposition to, and scorn for, the Majority Socialists, who provide an extremely interesting sociological study at this period. It is really only by courtesy that they can be called Marxists. Essentially they had won their revolution bloodlessly in October, when they were the moving force behind the constitutional reforms of the government of Prince Max. They wanted only to consolidate their gains and perhaps push them a little bit further. They had a vested interest in society and had no notion of helping to overthrow the status quo. In fact, within a few days some of their leaders became almost hysterical at the thought of Bolshevism. Though they were theoretically republicans, Ebert accepted the post of imperial chancellor and envisaged a regime with Prince Max as regent for a parliamentary monarch, the emperor's infant grandson. As the months went on, the Majority Socialists found it far more pleasant to collaborate with the renascent bourgeois parties than with their Marxist colleagues to the left, and indeed were willing to join forces with the old military leaders to put down the left-wing extremists.

In terms of the foregoing analysis, it would appear that the Majority Socialists came closer to reading the spirit of public opinion in Germany than their opponents on the left. Although much has been written about revolutionary infiltration into the armed forces, the fact seems to be that the army and navy were endlessly war-weary and disgusted with the imperial regime. There seems to be very little evidence that either they, or the population at home, were interested in copying the Russian pattern of social overthrow. Each time that matters came to a decision (e.g., on November 10, on December 19, and in the elections of January 1919) the majority voted for the moderates rather than for the extremists. It is fair to add that the extremists did not produce the leadership necessary for a revolution by a minority. No Lenin emerged in the Germany of 1918.

The first overt action in the revolution occurred among the sailors of the High Seas Fleet. Ever since the battle of Jutland in 1916 the capital vessels of the emperor's beloved navy had been kept wrapped in cotton in the ports of north Germany. All naval activity centered around submarines, and the crews of the large ships were constantly
raided for men able to sail under the surface. The sailors had very little
to do beyond the essentials of maintenance. They were bored and rest-
less and therefore became a prey to disaffection and radicalism. Above
all, they were anxious to return to their homes and to normal life.

Admiral Scheer, director of naval operations, fought hard in mid-
October to keep Prince Max from ordering a cessation of submarine
warfare. He backed Ludendorff in the conference of October 17 and
even took the matter to the emperor, who, however, ordered him to ac-
cept Max's decision. During the following days Scheer devised a plan
to help the army and to maintain the honor of the navy. This plan re-
quired a foray by the High Seas Fleet into the North Sea to harass Allied
shipping in the narrow seas between Flanders and England. He hoped
to inflict large losses on the British and to lure the British Grand Fleet
south from Scapa Flow to engage in a final major battle in which he
felt the Germans would have a good chance of victory. Some have de-
scribed this plan as simply honorable suicide; others have considered it
sound strategy. In any case, the order went out but no notice of it was
given to the government. On the evening of October 29 Admiral Hipper,
commander in chief of the fleet, briefed his officers on the proposed ac-
tion. Within a very short time the word had spread among the crews,
and the rumors grew out of proportion. On several of the large ships
the night was one of tumult, with increasing insubordination. The officers
tried to quell the trouble both by speeches and threats, but they ac-
complished little. By the morning of the thirtieth it was clear that the
operation was impossible because of the behavior of the sailors, and it
was called off. Hipper decided to send several of the mutinous ships
through the canal to Kiel, a foolish decision because Kiel was a hotbed
of revolutionary sentiment. He also arrested several hundred of the ring-
leaders and ordered immediate courts-martial.

In Kiel the situation developed rapidly. On the evening of November
2 a mass meeting was held at which inflammatory speeches were made
and cheers for socialism given. The next day there were more parades
and demonstrations, and the troops at the disposal of the local com-
mandant joined sides with the mutineers. On the fourth the industrial workers
called a general strike, and by the end of the day Kiel was in the hands
of the rebels. Within a few days almost the entire German High Seas
Fleet was flying the red flag, and the situation was out of control.

News of these events reached Berlin slowly and in fragments. Prince
Max decided to send a leading socialist to Kiel to represent the govern-
ment. He picked Gustav Noske, a Majority Socialist from the conserva-
tive wing of the party, a man who had long interested himself in military
matters. Noske listened to the demands of the mutineers, and within a
short time relative quiet was restored. However, the incident was not closed. Some of the mutinous sailors made their way to Hamburg and Hanover, where they won the support of large numbers of the garrison troops. Within a short time all of northwest Germany was in a state of revolutionary ferment. It is interesting to note, however, that most of the sailors’ demands were nonpolitical. They were mainly interested in improvement of conditions within the navy (such minor matters as the use of the word “sir”) and wanted the end of the war. This was no carefully prepared Marxist outbreak, but rather a spontaneous outburst of tired, bored, underfed, and angry men.

The revolutionary events in the north caused a great deal of embarrassment to the Majority Socialist leaders. They had accomplished their aims and did not desire a revolution; they simply wanted to get on with the task of building the new Germany. Yet the disturbances continued. In the following days, as news arrived from other parts of the Reich, it was clear that there was still no end in view. The leaders were alarmed about what the Independents might do. After all, the Social Democrats were the party of the people, and the worst possible strategy would be for the Majority to let the Independents take the lead in achieving the people’s will. Ebert knew this. Scheidemann, who always kept a particularly sharp eye on the Independents, realized it even more vividly. Accordingly, at a party caucus on November 6 Scheidemann demanded that an ultimatum be served on Prince Max threatening immediate withdrawal from the government if William II did not abdicate without delay. Ebert managed to defeat this proposal, but that evening he had a change of heart; he began to realize how formidable was the sentiment in Germany against the sovereign and how important it was for his party to assume leadership in this matter. The next day, therefore, the ultimatum was presented to Prince Max. If both the emperor and the crown prince did not abdicate by noon of November 8, the Social Democrats would resign from the cabinet. There was still a monarchical loophole. Nothing in the demand precluded a regency for the infant Prince William, son of the crown prince.

This was the solution desired by Max. He tried without success to enlist the support of General Groener, who was on a quick visit to Berlin. In spite of this failure, he addressed strong protests to the emperor. William however, believing himself secure at headquarters under the protective wing of the army and acting on the advice of both Hindenburg and Groener, would have nothing to do with the idea of relinquishing his imperial and royal prerogatives. A few more hours and more disquieting news were needed to convince first the generals and then the emperor that the reign of William II was over.
It did not take long for disquieting news to arrive. This time it came from Munich, where on November 7 a disturbance broke out which resulted in the flight of King Louis III, the deposition of the Wittelsbach dynasty, and the proclamation of a republic in Bavaria. The leader of the Bavarian revolution and of the Independents there was Kurt Eisner, a Jew, who had moved from Berlin to Munich a decade before. Eisner was an intellectual and an idealist, who had doubts about the possibility of introducing socialism immediately and who seemed to think in the old Marxist terms of a first bourgeois revolution to pave the way toward eventual socialism. He wanted to establish councils (Räte) to educate the masses in democracy. He was also willing to assume for Germany the full blame for the outbreak of the war. Here again the question arises whether the Catholic peasant population which accepted the events in Munich without demur was motivated by Marxism or by war-weariness. There is no question that the Bavarians were extremely tired of war. Furthermore, the defection of Austria-Hungary now opened the possibility of an Allied invasion of Germany from the south through Bavaria. This consideration, added to the usual Bavarian dislike of Prussia, which the southerners felt had led Germany to her doom, seems to provide sufficient cause for the events of the seventh. This conclusion is reinforced by the poor showing of the Independents in the subsequent election.

The end of the monarchy in Bavaria was the signal for similar action throughout Germany. In nearly all the capitals and large cities disturbances erupted, and by the evening of the eighth all the kings, princes, grand dukes, and dukes had either abdicated or been deposed. There was one exception. The revolution had not yet reached Berlin, and the German emperor, king of Prussia, still held fast to his privileges and responsibilities. Yet time was running short.

In Berlin there was still indecision, especially on the part of the Majority Socialists. At noon on the eighth they announced a postponement of the deadline of their ultimatum calling for abdication, supposedly because of armistice negotiations. However, during the afternoon the Social Democratic leadership heard of ominous plans from the left. The Independents, led by the Shop Steward wing of the party, had decided on a major demonstration and general strike for the next day. Plans and instructions, which had been drafted for some time, were distributed to party offices and to factories. Ebert and his colleagues realized that this was the decisive moment. It was now that the Majority Socialists could lose control of the workers for lack of leadership and permit victory by default to the Independents. The shadow of Bolshevism loomed large. At a meeting that evening the Majority leaders agreed on a deadline of
nine o'clock the following morning for their earlier ultimatum. This would still give them time, if the emperor remained stubborn, to go to the streets and assume the leadership of the demonstration the next day.

November 9 was the day of the Berlin revolution. Crowds roamed through the streets. Factories were closed. The parades headed for the center of the city, the government quarter. Troops refused to obey their officers, insulted them, and even pulled off their insignia of rank. It was a scene of general but peaceful pandemonium. Very little blood was shed. Berliners have never been adept at revolution or barricades. Perhaps an innate sense of status inhibits them even in moments of anger.

Meanwhile the Majority Socialists carried out their ultimatum by withdrawing their two members from Prince Max's cabinet. In Berlin Max realized the seriousness of the situation, while the emperor and his advisers in Spa did not. He kept in contact with Spa, continually urging a proclamation of abdication, but the emperor remained firm in spite of the reversal by Hindenburg and Groener of their original position. Relying on information received from the various unit commanders at the front, they came to the conclusion that the army was no longer loyal to the dynasty. William was toying with the feudal idea of leading his loyal soldiers back to Germany to crush the rebels. It was the melancholy duty of Groener to have to inform the ruler, with Hindenburg's approval, that he could not rely on the army. William countered this by the suggestion that he should resign as German emperor but not as king of Prussia, a most extraordinary notion in view of the structure of the German constitution.

Max decided that he could not wait for a decision from Spa. On his own authority, about midday on November 9, he announced that the emperor and the crown prince had decided to renounce the throne, that a regency would be set up, that Ebert would be appointed chancellor, and that elections for a constituent assembly would be held forthwith. A few minutes later Ebert and other Socialist leaders waited on Max and pointed out to him how the local situation had changed. Max extracted from Ebert a promise to call a constituent assembly and formally relinquished to him his position as chancellor. Ebert accepted the responsibility and issued proclamations calling for order and for administrative officials to remain in office. He then returned to the Reichstag building for lunch and a little peace.

On that morning Prince Max of Baden involved himself in a network of falsehood and illegality. He invented the abdication of the two Hohenzollerns and also the device by which a chancellor could relinquish his office to someone else. Constitutionally, only the emperor could appoint
a chancellor. Max, however, saw no other course and preferred illegality to bloodshed.

While Ebert and Scheidemann were at lunch listening to the crowd outside shouting and singing in the large open area in front of the Reichstag building, news arrived that a similar scene was being enacted less than a mile away before the imperial palace. There the Independent leaders were surrounded by a large crowd demonstrating in the Lustgarten. Rumors spread that Liebknecht was about to proclaim a soviet republic. Scheidemann was urged to address the crowd outside the Reichstag. He did so from the great staircase of the building, and as he ended his harangue, he heard himself proclaiming the German republic. Flushed with his achievement, he returned inside only to be scolded by Ebert, who informed him coldly that he had no right to do such a thing. Yet Scheidemann’s words could not be unsaid. The new regime was in existence. It was in this informal, casual manner that the German republic came into being.

The epilogue to this momentous day occurred at Spa, where Emperor William was still firm in his determination to remain king of Prussia. As the afternoon wore on, the advice tendered by the generals became more and more discouraging. They made it clear that there could be no question of leading the army home to rout the rebellious socialists. They even cast doubt on the possibility of continuing to be responsible for the emperor’s safety at Spa. Even Hindenburg recommended that William should leave Germany. It is not clear what finally made up the emperor’s mind. Late in the afternoon, without signing any document of abdication, William retired to his train where he spent the night. Before dawn the train pulled out in the direction of the Dutch border. William placed himself under the protection of Wilhelmina, queen of the Netherlands, who granted him asylum. It was not until almost three weeks later that he drew up an act of abdication. Thereafter he spent the remaining twenty-three years of his life in exile in Holland, settling in 1920 at Doorn, where he stayed until his death. He maintained a shadow court, wrote his memoirs, and exercised his dilettante mind with archeology and his body with chopping wood. During the last year of his life he was guarded once again by German soldiers, who now wore the swastika emblem. He died in June 1941, a few weeks before another German government made the same catastrophic mistake that he had made, but much more wantonly, when it invaded the Soviet Union and engaged in another two-front war.

The first major problem facing Ebert was to establish contact with the Independents. Although the Majority Socialists represented the
greater portion of the German workers, nevertheless the spearhead of the revolution was the radical group of the left, who in particular commanded the allegiance of a large portion of the Berlin proletariat, which was busily creating workers' councils. Without losing any time Ebert invited the Independents to join him in a new cabinet. The reaction of the Independents showed that they were a far-from-united group. The party leadership, represented that day by Dittmann, was willing to collaborate with Ebert; the Shop Steward wing refused to have anything to do with him and his breed. Liebknecht, for the Spartacists, demanded the transfer of all power to the councils. A compromise was offered. Dittmann swallowed the idea of the councils; the others agreed to work with Ebert, but only until the war was over. Ebert replied by insisting on the principle of a constituent assembly to settle Germany's future. The Independents countered with an insistence on an all-socialist cabinet, sovereignty to repose in the councils, and no assembly until the social program was well under way. All this was reminiscent of the events in Russia a year before. Finally the urgent needs of the moment were overriding, and both sides agreed to form a Council of People's Commissioners with three members from each party. The Socialists were represented by Ebert, Scheidemann, and Otto Landsberg; the Independents by Haase, Dittmann, and Barth.

November 10 ended with a mass meeting in the Busch Circus of the workers' and soldiers' councils of Berlin, an assembly which adopted the fiction that German sovereignty repose in it. It approved the new Council of People's Commissioners and then proceeded to the election of its own executive committee. The slate presented to the delegates was made up exclusively of Independents, including the most radical of them, Liebknecht and Luxemburg. The soldiers' councils objected to this, and thus gave notice that the rank and file of the army was not much influenced by radical Marxism. The soldiers insisted on representation on the committee in equal numbers with the workers. They won their point and even more, because when the workers' half of the committee was elected, it was composed partly of conservative Social Democrats even after a boycott by the Spartacist leaders. This was the first of several decisive moments at which it became clear that Germany was not going to follow the Russian pattern.

The similarity between events in Germany in 1918 and events in Russia in 1917 is unmistakable. There was the same drift toward dual government: People's Commissioners and councils looked like Provisional Government and soviets. There was the same radical demand to achieve "social gains" before holding elections for a constituent assembly, in addition to the same extreme left wing prepared to seize
power by force. However, the spirit in Germany and the quality of leadership were different. In the weeks to come the trend was clearly in favor of Ebert and his group. To their right the bourgeois elements, which had gone underground at the time of the revolution, emerged and prepared themselves to play their parts in the new regime.