CHAPTER XIX

Birth Pangs of a Republic (1918-19)

The future of Germany for at least the next fifteen years was settled in the weeks between the revolution and mid-January of 1919. It is a confused period in which the historian cannot find dramatic and clearly defined events on which to base his analysis; more than usual, he must search beneath the appearance of things to find the leading motives. In this melancholy era it is impossible to lose sight of the disaster which had befallen Germany. The effects were multiple, both material and psychic, and a good case can be made to indicate that the psychic aspect was even more important than the material.

Up to a few weeks before the armistice, the German people—though they were sunk deep in hunger, privation, and even epidemic—were living in expectation of a victory which would raise Germany to new heights of splendor, both political and economic. War maps told them how far German soldiers had advanced on foreign soil; communiqués lulled them with tales of the constantly improving military position. Almost from one day to the next this dreamworld collapsed and the Germans had to make the difficult adjustment to defeat, a defeat shattering in its implications. Not clear at first, these implications gradually became evident. The flight of the emperor and the proclamation of a republic under socialist auspices were regarded as shameful and humiliating by all the conservative and nationalist elements in the state. All facets of German life were disrupted by the return home and rapid demobilization of a vast army. The soldiers, widely regarded as heroes and often so esteeming themselves, were cast loose upon an economy which had been over-expanded to meet wartime needs but which was now contracting rapidly as a result both of the termination of those needs and the stringency of raw materials. Many of the soldiers had been sent into the army directly from school. They knew no trade; they knew only the protective quality of military life and the comradeship of the trenches. Now they were cast adrift, alone and resentful, into an alien society. These young,
neurotic front-fighters provided admirable material for activist organizations both of the left and, more particularly, of the right. In the shadow of these imponderables and of the unknown demands which might be made by the Allies in the peace treaty, the new regime had to take shape. Much of the credit or blame for the immediate results belongs to Friedrich Ebert.

Ebert was a practical man, not a doctrinaire. Ever since he had assumed the leadership of the Social Democratic party, he had devoted his efforts by skillful tactical maneuvering toward the revisionist position of socialism. This scandalized orthodox Marxists, many of whom were now among the dissident Independents and therefore no longer had voices in the party councils. Ebert and his colleagues were strenuously opposed to anything that smacked of Bolshevism; they were determined to fight the idea of government by councils of workers and soldiers; they fought for a constituent assembly to be elected promptly by universal suffrage (including women for the first time). As the weeks continued, Ebert found that he could work more fruitfully and sympathetically with the bourgeois parties to the immediate right of socialism than with his nominal colleagues on the left. Indeed most of the story of November and December 1918 is the struggle within the ranks of the Marxists. Yet it is not the whole story, for during these same weeks the army and the old bourgeois parties revived and re-established much of their former prestige and power; by the time of the elections in January the pattern was set for a new bourgeois republic with social overtones, an outcome which did not please anyone but served as a least common denominator.

Ebert demonstrated his practical qualities at the outset. Immediately upon accepting the office of chancellor from Prince Max, he issued an appeal to the imperial and state administrators to remain at their posts. It has often been said that the peculiar quality of Prussianism, dating back to the early important Hohenzollerns, was the result of the combination of the Prussian army and the Prussian bureaucracy. Efficiency, competence, humorlessness, devotion to detail: by the use of these qualities the Prussian bureaucrats designed the Prussian state. During the empire the civil servants were drawn largely from right-wing, conservative, Protestant elements; the Catholics complained that they were not represented in proportion to their population, and there were almost no socialist civil servants. Thus Ebert’s appeal was directed toward just those people who would be most out of sympathy with the spirit of his own party, which was theoretically in command of the revolution. Yet it is difficult to blame him, because a breakdown in the whole vital administrative system would have been an invitation to the radicals of the left.
to fill the gaps. In the higher echelons socialist officials were appointed
to sit side by side with the old bureaucrats, but they were at a serious
disadvantage from lack of training. In general an amazing continuity was
achieved, but it boded little good for democratic institutions.

No revolution can succeed or consolidate its gains without control of
the instruments of force. German strength resided in the huge army
scattered on the various fronts, to an extent infiltrated by socialism but
on the whole intact and still subject to the orders of its officers. The purity
of the officer corps had been somewhat diluted by the promotion of non-
aristocratic reservists, but on the whole it was still a reservoir of con-
servative monarchist opinion. It was important for both the army and
the new government to define their mutual relations. Ebert knew this,
and realized further that the army was potentially his greatest weapon
against radical insurrection which might erupt at any moment. He de-
cided to probe the attitude of the High Command immediately and on
November 10 telephoned Spa and talked to General Groener, who on
this occasion, as well as generally throughout his career, displayed a
sense of political reality that was not typical of a Prussian officer. Ebert
discovered that he had an ally in Groener, who realized that the moder-
ate socialists were the best weapon against the radicals and the sup-
porters of the conciliar idea. It was not hard for Groener to convince
Hindenburg of his point of view; thus an agreement was achieved by
which Hindenburg consented to remain commander in chief and to
recognize the new government, while Ebert on his part tacitly accepted
the authority of the officer corps over the army and won the support of
the army against the radicals. The importance of this deal has been
stressed by historians. The old German army, with the blessing of the
Social Democrats, remained intact as a future rallying point for ene-
mies of the republic. Here is the best demonstration of the difference be-
tween the German revolution of 1918 and the great revolutions in
France and Russia. In the latter cases the old aristocratic officers either
emigrated, disappeared, or became overt traitors to their earlier prin-
ципes. New “people’s” armies were founded by Carnot and Trotsky re-
spectively. Nothing of this sort occurred in Germany. The old spirit
prevailed, even though some of the façade changed.

The events of November 10 were concluded with a statement of
general policy by the new government. This document contained a num-
ber of social provisions (such as the future establishment of the eight-
hour day and the restoration of social insurance), but essentially it was
a liberal, democratic, non-Marxist statement of principles. It guaranteed
civil and political rights (including the right of property) and promised
universal suffrage with proportional representation. It was greeted with
scorn and anger by the radical socialists but with pleasure by large elements of the population, including even some of the Independents who realized that the overwhelming tasks of the rehabilitation of defeated Germany precluded an immediate social change.

Among the former possessory classes most alarmed by the trend of events, the great industrial leaders held a prominent position. For some months the more astute ones had realized that there was trouble ahead and had looked about to see how they could best hedge and cut their prospective losses. They recognized that the trade unions constituted the most stable and conservative elements within the proletarian parties. Hence it was to them that many employers turned for insurance against the future. Conversations were begun in October, when the employers agreed to disband company unions and to grant parity in representation to employers and employees. After the outbreak of the revolution the unions increased their demands and included among them the principle of the eight-hour day. An agreement, known as the Arbeitsgemeinschaft ("community of work"), was signed on November 15 between leading representatives of capital and the three main groups of unions. The agreement granted a number of concessions for which the unions had long clamored. The unions were recognized; freedom of association was granted; the principle of collective bargaining was accepted; factory councils of employees were to be established, together with mediation boards and mixed committees to rule on problems of employment and conditions of labor. It was a sweeping victory for the union principle, and most notably it was an agreement arrived at not by force but by discussion and compromise.

The Arbeitsgemeinschaft was greeted variously. The Christian Unions were enthusiastic about it, for they had long espoused the principle of co-operation between capital and labor. The employers were grouchy at the concessions they had made but for the time being were resigned to their necessity. The Marxists, and this was increasingly true the further left one progressed along the Marxist spectrum, were extremely suspicious of the agreement. The extreme leftists saw it as a betrayal of the principle of the class struggle, an example of revisionism beyond the pale of permitted activity. It was built on the frail foundation of the exigencies of the moment and may be viewed as a weathervane of the political climate of the first republican months. The Marxists were the first to disavow it, and as the threat of extreme radicalism abated, the employers gradually drifted away from it and formed their own associations. By mid-1920 the principle of industrial solidarity was moribund.

It was not only in the economic sphere that the bourgeois groups came back into view. Driven underground by defeat in the war and by
the threat of Bolshevism, the old parties to the right of the Social Demo-
crats began to reappear. During November and December they emerged
with new names and new programs, but no essential changes. The new
programs included as many democratic principles as each group could
bear to adopt. In the new names there was a tendency to include the
word “people.” Thus the old Conservative party became the German
National People’s party; the National Liberals became the People’s
party (Volkspartei); the Progressives became the Democratic party.
Even the Center talked of a change of name to Christian People’s party,
but this move was not successful and the name Center persisted. The
motive of this effort was to suggest that the party was not strictly Catholic
and would welcome more Protestant membership (a position finally
achieved in the reorganized party of Konrad Adenauer after World War
II). The Center was particularly important in these months, as it had
been during the last two years of the war and for the same reason—as a
link between bourgeois and socialist. Adam Stegerwald, leader of the
Christian unions, was very influential as a liaison between the Majority
Socialist and the Center parties. This relationship laid the groundwork
for the creation of the so-called Weimar coalition the following year.

A final significant development on the right side of the political ledger
occurred in late November, when with the blessing of Ebert the High
Command called for volunteer enlistments to fill the rapidly shrinking
ranks of the army. Volunteer units grew apace. They were made up
largely of men who were failing in civilian life, who were resentful of
the loss of the war, who were violently nationalist, and who were lost in
the new society. These people were given work policing and keeping
order, especially in the east and in the Baltic area where they fought off
the advancing Bolshevik tide from Russia. They were strongly anti-
Marxist, and in the months to come were to present the republic with
an almost mortal peril when they became the standard bearers of the
counterrevolution under the name of the Free Corps.

The events which have just been described are very significant to the
historian writing forty years later. The subsequent history of the re-
public and the advent of Hitler have thrown into sharp relief the forces
of conservative continuity from the empire. At the time, however, with
chaos almost discernible, the vital need seemed to be the resolution of
the conflict among the various wings of Marxism concerning the im-
mediate structure of the state. This conflict revolved around one or two
major issues closely connected. The basic concern was whether the
new German regime should take the form of a conciliary government
similar to the Russian practice of control by the “working classes” (in-
dustrial workers, soldiers, and peasants), or whether the future of
Germany should be determined by an assembly to be elected on democratic principles by a vote of all classes of the nation. The corollary to this was the conflict over when the promised elections should take place. The Social Democrats wanted an election as soon as possible, both to establish clear sovereignty and to fend off extremist insurrection. For the opposite reasons, the Independents and particularly the Spartacist group desired to postpone the voting as long as possible, until such time as basic social "gains" should be the accomplished fact.

The fiction persisted that sovereignty resided in the Workers' and Soldiers' Council, which on November 10 had empowered the People's Commissioners to act as the executive and had also elected an Executive Committee to oversee the Commissioners. The meeting, however, had represented only the workers and soldiers in Berlin at the time, and could by no stretch of the imagination be called a nationally representative body. Accordingly, on November 23 the Executive Committee called a great congress representing workers and soldiers from all of Germany to meet in Berlin on December 16. Ebert and Scheideckmann realized at once the potential danger of this congress. If it turned out to be controlled by extremists, it could demand immediate socialization of industry and agriculture and the establishment of an effective government by councils. They retaliated a few days later by an intelligent, tactical move which served as bait to attract moderate and even bourgeois democratic sympathy: they set the date for the elections to the Constituent Assembly for February 16, 1919.

The first two weeks of December were tense indeed in Berlin. The pretense of co-operation between the two socialist parties on the Council of People's Commissioners were very thin, although two of the Independents on the council, Haase and Dittmann, were far from sympathetic with the extreme wing of their party. They sought a middle path, but accomplished little. First blood was shed on December 6 in connection with a march of unarmed Spartacists, alarmed at rumors of counter-revolution. Otto Wels, a Social Democrat and commander of Berlin, called out troops; they fired on the Spartacists, killing some and wounding more. It is difficult to be sure who benefited from this encounter. It gave force to the extremist contention that the Social Democrats had no love for the worker. On the other hand, moderates, even in socialist circles, were undoubtedly alarmed by this rehearsal for insurrection and confirmed in their belief that it was essential to fight anything that suggested Bolshevism.

The congress met in Berlin from December 16–19, in the chamber of the lower house of the old Prussian parliament. It was a turbulent affair, constantly interrupted by incursions of various brands of demon-
strators from the streets. From the start, however, it was clear that the sentiment of the majority of the delegates was with the Ebert government. In spite of this, the four days were tumultuous. On the first day, after Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had been refused seats at the meeting, a delegation of Spartacists rushed in calling for world revolution. The second day was spent hearing attacks on Ebert's policy from leaders of the Shop Stewards and the Independents, until the center of the stage was seized by a group of mutinous soldiers who burst in demanding that the army be "democratized" by the abolition of the officers and the substitution of soldiers' committees. The third day was one of harassment for Ebert because a motion was passed, but never implemented, to remove the supreme direction of the army from the High Command. There was already real fear of a military revival. December 19 was the decisive day of the congress and an important date in German history. On that day the congress defeated by a large majority a motion to make the conciliatory principle the foundation of the new German government. It then went further and advanced by a month to January 19 the date for the elections. The party of Ebert and Scheidemann was victorious on all counts. For all practical purposes the German revolution was over. Germany was not going to become a soviet republic; she was going to take a middle path as a bourgeois republic, perhaps with some socialist overtones. The ensuing violence was anticlimactic; the actions of the Constituent Assembly were simply implementation of the decision of December 19.

While they may have been anticlimactic, the events of the Spartacist revolt of December and January were serious and left a wound in the body of socialism which was never healed. The Social Democrats became Cossacks in the eyes of the extremists. To moderates and conservatives the bloodshed in Berlin was an object lesson of what might be expected of Bolshevism. The extreme nationalists felt that not enough blood was shed, that this type of lawlessness must be radically wiped out.

Not long after the congress adjourned, fighting erupted. The immediate issue concerned several thousand sailors of the People's Naval Division who had installed themselves in the former imperial palace in Berlin. Already irritated by the defeat on December 19 and convinced that the Ebert government was sabotaging the revolution, these men refused to obey an order to vacate the palace and on December 23 decided on direct action. They surrounded the chancellery, thinking that Ebert was isolated there, and seized Otto Wels, who was particularly detested because of the events of December 6. Ebert, however, had a secret telephone line, which he used to call for the help of regular army units. On Christmas eve the army, under command of the old-line Gen-
eral von Lequis, besieged and bombarded the sailors at the palace for several hours. The sailors could not hold out and eventually agreed to a compromise. The details of the skirmish are not important. The essence of the matter lies in the fact that the Social Democratic government had relied on army units to fire on German revolutionaries in uniform. Feeling ran intensely high, and the three Independent members of the Council of People’s Commissioners felt that they could no longer operate in harmony with Ebert and Scheidemann. They took their complaint to the Executive Committee of the recent congress, but that body, composed exclusively of Majority Socialists, of course supported their own colleagues and offered no redress to the Independents. Accordingly Haase, Dittmann, and Barth resigned from the government and were replaced by three Social Democrats, including as minister of war Gustav Noske, the most militaristic of the socialists. Now both the Council of People’s Commissioners and the Executive Committee of the congress were one hundred per cent Social Democrat. That party was temporarily in complete control of events. The Independents had abdicated.

The Spartacists were not ready to accept defeat. They held a mass meeting on December 30 at which they broke all connection with the Independent party, which, they insisted, had been lukewarm in the revolutionary struggle. They now took the new name of German Communist party. They listened to harangues from Liebknecht and Luxemburg, and finally, against the wishes of the latter, voted to boycott the coming elections.

The next stage of the crisis started with a conflict over Emil Eichhorn, the left-wing Independent chief of police in Berlin, whom the Social Democrats resolved to force out of office. His maintenance in office became a rallying point for the Independents. The government persuaded the Prussian authorities to dismiss him on January 4, 1919, which resulted in manifestos, demonstrations, and general turbulence lasting for several days. The Communists, again against the advice of Rosa Luxemburg, resolved on a Putsch and called for a general strike. The Social Democrats issued a similar call in retaliation. For several days an armed truce existed in Berlin. Efforts at conciliation were made by several of the groups concerned, but Ebert became more and more adamant. He was determined to put an end to the “Bolshevik” menace once for all. On January 11, under the command of Noske, the fighting began. Both regular troops and free corps volunteers attacked the strongholds of the Communists. For four days Berlin was a shambles in which hundreds were killed. Finally by the fifteenth quiet had returned, and the army was in control of the city. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were prisoners in local army headquarters. Late that night they were driven separately into
the Tiergarten, where they were murdered by officers. Their bodies were concealed, and it was several months before Rosa Luxemburg's corpse was found floating in one of the canals which wind through the German capital. The government and army won its victory, but it was an expensive one and left bitter memories. Immediately the two Communist leaders who were murdered in cold blood became martyrs of the red religion.

Four days later the elections were held and resulted in a victory for the moderate socialists and the bourgeois parties. They were held among scenes of fighting in other German cities, repercussions of the carnage in Berlin.

There remained to be enacted one bizarre series of events, which, although it occurred later than the Spartacist revolt, nevertheless breathed the same spirit. This was the abortive and bloodstrewn effort to establish a Communist republic in Bavaria.

After the abdication of the king of Bavaria, the state was controlled by the evolutionary Independent, Kurt Eisner. However, he was defeated by the Majority Socialists in the elections in Bavaria held in January 1919. He refused at first to resign, but on February 21 he decided to announce his resignation. As he was walking into the Bavarian parliament to carry out this plan, he was shot and killed by an aristocratic counterrevolutionary named Count Arco-Valley. This crime set off a wave of political tumult in Munich, including more shootings in the parliament itself. Eventually a coalition of Social Democrats and Independents, under the moderate Johannes Hoffmann, formed a new government. However, this was only a temporary lull. A small group of artistic and radical revolutionaries, led by the author Ernst Toller and the anarchist Gustav Landauer and backed by some tougher and more realistic Communists, decided that the moment had arrived for the creation by force of a proletarian state. On April 6 they proclaimed a soviet republic in Bavaria. The legitimate government fled to Bamberg and civil war began. The Communists at first interested themselves mainly in revolutionizing art and education, but soon serious bloodshed between the two parties erupted in Munich. The national government, with Noske in charge of the operation, activated units of the army and the free corps who converged on Munich and on May 1 entered the city. There were grievous atrocities committed by both sides. Bavaria lay under martial law for some weeks, and the revolt was quelled by courts-martial and military executions. A reign of terror prevailed until finally in August the Social Democratic government was restored. This violent interlude had serious repercussions affecting the psychology of Bavarian political thought and eventually that of all Germany. The excesses of
the Communist dictatorship created a revulsion in the conservative and moderate groups of the population, such that Munich became the center of conservative and reactionary extremism. It was no accident that in Munich only a few months after the Communist Putsch the party was founded which was shortly to develop into the Nazi party of the new reactionary messias, Adolf Hitler.