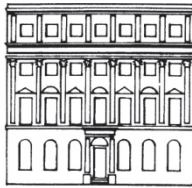


# German Historical Institute London



## BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Alex Burkhardt:

*Forgotten, not Forgiven? New German-Language Works on the 1918/19 German Revolution*

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 40, No. 1  
(May 2018), pp99-108

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### **FORGOTTEN, NOT FORGIVEN? NEW GERMAN-LANGUAGE WORKS ON THE 1918/19 GERMAN REVOLUTION**

ALEX BURKHARDT

JOACHIM KÄPPNER, *1918: Aufstand für die Freiheit. Die Revolution der Besonnenen* (Munich: Piper, 2017), 528 pp. ISBN 978 3 492 05733 2. €28.00

WOLFGANG NIESS, *Die Revolution von 1918/19: Der wahre Beginn unserer Demokratie* (Munich: Europa Verlag, 2017), 464 pp. ISBN 978 3 95890 074 5. €24.90

The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War in 2014 provided the occasion for a veritable glut of new books to commemorate and reassess what George Kennan called the ‘great seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century’.<sup>1</sup> The year 2018 offers a similar opportunity for scholars to pen their thoughts on the German Revolution, which brought an end to the war as well as the Hohenzollern monarchy. In contrast to 1914, however, the revolution has tended to slip under the radar of the popular historical imagination. Ian Kershaw is quoted on the back cover of one of the books reviewed here to the effect that ‘today’ the revolution is ‘often forgotten or underestimated’, while a compendium of essays released in 2010 was entitled *Die vergessene Revolution* (‘The Forgotten Revolution’).<sup>2</sup> There is, indeed, little doubt that the revolution does not enjoy the sort of prominence in Germany’s popular historical tradition that the French or Russian revolutions have acquired in their respective nations; nor has it generated the same kind of public interest as, say, the rise of the Nazis or the Holocaust.

<sup>1</sup> George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order: Franco-Russian Relations 1875–1890* (Princeton, 1979), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Gallus (ed.), *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19* (Göttingen, 2010).

Despite this, the German Revolution was at one time one of the most intensively researched fields in modern German history – and one of the most controversial. The conservative historiography of the 1950s held that the Majority Social Democrats (MSPD) had no option but to forge a deal with imperial elites in order to crush a burgeoning ‘Bolshevik’ revolution centred around the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils.<sup>3</sup> But in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars such as Eberhard Kolb, Susanne Miller, and Ulrich Kluge dedicated their fledgling careers to challenging this view by arguing that the Council movement carried a ‘democratic potential’ which the Social Democrats failed to exploit because of their excessive fear of Bolshevism and misplaced faith in the military. They thus left untouched ‘anti-democratic’ figures and institutions which would later play a crucial role in delivering the republic over to Hitler.<sup>4</sup> To some extent, then, the German Revolution of 1918/19 may have been ‘forgotten’, but the Social Democrats’ perceived failure to seize the day and fully democratize Germany in late 1918 was never really ‘forgiven’, at least not by certain sections of the German historical profession. This rather negative evaluation of the SPD’s role in the revolution was taken to an extreme in the German Democratic Republic, where historians depicted the Social Democrats not so much as excessively timid or misguided, but as conscious ‘traitors’ to the tradition of Marxist class politics who showed their true colours during the revolution when they sided with the old regime to become ‘murderers of workers’ (*‘Arbeitermörder’*).<sup>5</sup>

The legacies of these judgements are very perceptible in two German-language books released in 2017 to mark the revolution’s centenary: *1918: Aufstand für die Freiheit* (‘1918: Uprising for Freedom’), by Joachim Käppner, and *Die Revolution von 1918/19: Der wahre Beginn unserer Demokratie* (‘The Revolution of 1918/19: The Real Beginning of our Democracy’) by Wolfgang Niess. Both books bill themselves as

<sup>3</sup> See Karl Dietrich Erdmann, ‘Die Geschichte der Weimarer Republik als Problem der Wissenschaft’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 3 (1955), 1–19.

<sup>4</sup> See Eberhard Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der Deutschen Innenpolitik, 1918–1919* (Frankfurt/M., 1978); Suzanne Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht: Die Deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1918–1920* (Düsseldorf, 1978); Ulrich Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution: Studien zur Militärpolitik in Deutschland 1918/19* (Göttingen, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> A similar argument was also advanced by Sebastian Haffner in his famous polemic, *Die deutsche Revolution: 1918/19* (Berne, 1969).

correctives to the revolution's lack of popular recognition by providing new narrative accounts aimed at mass audiences, and each is written by a trained historian turned journalist (Niess wrote a doctoral thesis on the historiography of the revolution and now works as an editor for *SWR Fernsehen*, while Käppner, a journalist at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, also holds a Ph.D. in twentieth-century German history).<sup>6</sup>

In their accounts, both authors focus mainly on those traditionally considered the revolution's most prominent actors—Social Democrats, the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, the masses who gathered in Berlin and other big cities to demonstrate for peace—while 'old elites' in the military, industry, and bureaucracy serve (as per usual) as the villains. Meanwhile, despite becoming more central to the historiography of the revolution since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the *Bürgertum*, both Protestant and Catholic, is handled quite cursorily by both authors.<sup>7</sup> Above all, however, both of these books draw heavily on the radical West German scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s in assessing the revolution's achievements, failures, and historical significance.

Niess sets the scene with the protests in Berlin that flared up in November 1918 against the Kaiser and the continuation of the war, whereas Käppner opens with a description of the uprising in Kiel. But the second chapters of both books then go back in time to analyse the marginalized condition of the Social Democrats during the Kaiserreich and their conflicted conduct during the war, before providing fluidly written litanies of those events and actors generally considered central to the course of the revolution. These are, briefly, the High Command's realization during the autumn of 1918 that the war was lost, the resulting 'revolution from above' of democratic reforms introduced in October 1918, the spread of the 'revolution from below' in the form of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, and the burgeoning conflict between the moderate and radical faces of the

<sup>6</sup> Niess's thesis was published in 2013 as *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der Deutschen Geschichtsschreibung: Deutungen von der Weimarer Republik bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Hans-Joachim Bieber, *Bürgertum in der Revolution: Burgerräte und Bürgerstreiks in Deutschland 1918–1920* (Hamburg, 1992); Michael Epkenhans, *Das Bürgertum und die Revolution 1918/19* (Heidelberg, 1994); Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

revolution over the new year of 1918/19, which ultimately led to the breakup of the Majority Social Democratic/Independent Social Democratic (USPD) provisional government and the MSPD's deal with the old elites. The closing chapters of both books depict the growing violence and radicalism of the revolution during the first months of 1919, though Niess' book also deals with the Kapp Putsch, its aftermath, and the deeply divisive elections of June 1920, while Käppner includes a chapter on the ambivalent impact of the revolution on women (who gained the vote and provided some of the revolution's leading figures, but who were also generally excluded from the Councils and frequently lost their wartime jobs to returning soldiers.)

The arguments these books present about the revolution would be familiar to anyone conversant with the West German historiography of the 1960s and 1970s. Niess promises to 'deal with' several 'legends' in his introduction, but these turn out to be the same assumptions that guided much of the conservative historiography of the 1950s, as well as the East German position that the Social Democrats consciously betrayed the revolution. Broadly speaking, in these books, Niess and Käppner provide the same answers to the same set of historical questions addressed half a century ago by historians such as Kolb and Miller; that is, whether or not the Council movement carried a genuine 'Bolshevik' threat (it did not), whether or not the Social Democrats were sufficiently aggressive in their attempted democratization of Germany in 1918/19 (they were not), and whether or not this failure to be more reformist paved the way for the Nazis (it did).

All of this, of course, adds up to a version of German history highly redolent of the *Sonderweg* thesis, according to which the failure of the liberal revolutions of 1848 left Germany with a modern economy and a backward political structure dominated by the old elites, until 1918/19 arrived as a historic chance to thoroughly democratize German society and thereby place the nation on the more agreeably congruent historical trajectory then being traversed by Britain and France.<sup>8</sup> Both Niess and Käppner roll out precisely such a narrative in their chapters on the Social Democrats during the Kaiserreich, but there is little mention in either book that, since the late 1980s, this ver-

<sup>8</sup> For a useful summation of this literature, see Jürgen Kocka, 'German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23/1 (1988), 3–16.

sion of German history has been heavily and convincingly called into question, that it now seems clear that both the Kaiserreich and the German *Bürgertum* were more democratic and 'advanced' than the proponents of the *Sonderweg* theory assumed, and certainly with respect to the supposed bastions of liberal parliamentarism in Britain and France.<sup>9</sup> To be fair, Käppner does fleetingly allude to this position, but he rather breezily dismisses it on the grounds that it constitutes a 'misjudgement of the power of the old elites' (p. 49).

With the perceivedly 'special' nineteenth century background of the German Revolution in place, both Käppner and Niess then proceed to argue that the SPD failed to enact the necessary democratic reforms in November and December 1918 because of an irrational and exaggerated fear of left-wing, Bolshevik-inspired radicalism and a misguided faith in the trustworthiness of the military. However, the extent to which this fear really was exaggerated remains open to question. The successful radicalization of the revolution under the Bolsheviks in Russia and its horrifying consequences were very much in everyone's minds in late 1918. That a similar potential for a violent 'second revolution' did exist in Germany became abundantly apparent during the course of 1919 and 1920, when some elements of the council movement, disappointed by the SPD's perceived failure to enact a 'proper' revolution, embarked upon a seemingly interminable series of uprisings which punctuated the first five years of the Republic. Some of them involved thousands of armed workers. That these uprisings also came within the context of the Red Army's highly unsettling progress in Eastern Europe is also significant, and recent research has shown that the Social Democrats, the liberal and conservative media, and much of the German middle classes all feared the apocalyptic possibility of a co-ordinated Bolshevik-style revolution from within and possible Soviet invasion from without.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On the limits of 'liberalism' in putative 'western' nations and the democratic advances of the German *Bürgertum*, see e.g. Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (London, 2010); David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> The importance of the Bolshevik Revolution in framing the MSPD and media's perceptions of what was happening in Germany is related in Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge, 2016). The author of this Review Article has also written about *bür-*

On top of this, Ebert and Scheidemann could have been forgiven for thinking that the war might imminently resume and that the spread of a rather threatening looking Council movement would massively complicate the task of concluding a favourable peace with the Allies.<sup>11</sup> Only with the benefit of hindsight can we blithely suggest that these fears and concerns were illusory or exaggerated.

In any case, that the principal motivation behind the SPD's compromise with the old regime was indeed a fear of the revolutionary Left is in itself questionable. During the winter of 1918/19, the Social Democratic government was faced with ostensibly more banal, but potentially more catastrophic, problems even than the threat of a Bolshevik-style uprising, such as the mammoth demobilization which the Allies had demanded be enforced in record time, securing the food supply despite the continuing Allied blockade, reckoning with an imminent housing crisis, and guarding Germany's eastern borders in the face of possible uprisings and secessions.<sup>12</sup> Could the government have mastered this incredibly fraught, pressured and uncertain situation, while at the same time 'thoroughly democratizing' – that is, purging – the military and bureaucracy of those 'anti-democratic elements' who had administered both for decades, while reckoning with a revolutionary movement that could conceivably have turned violent? This is highly debatable; at the very least, it would have represented an enormous risk that could have gone badly wrong at immense human cost. As Niess himself points out, Germany was

*gerliche* fears of a simultaneous Spartacist uprising and Red Army invasion; see Alex Burkhardt, 'A Republican Potential: The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Party in Hof-an-der-Saale, 1918–1920', *Central European History*, 50/4 (2017), 1–22.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael Geyer, 'Zwischen Krieg und Nachkrieg: Die Deutsche Revolution 1918/19 im Zeichen blockierter Transnationalität', in Gallus (ed.), *Die Vergessene Revolution*, 187–223.

<sup>12</sup> The litany of problems faced by the provisional government is examined in Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford, 1993). The SPD's misjudgement of Polish separatism and the severity of the challenge they faced on Germany's eastern border is the subject of Jens Boysen, 'Simultaneity of the Un-Simultaneous: German Social Revolution and Polish National Revolution in the Prussian East, 1918/19', in Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn (eds.), *Germany 1916–23: A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld, 2015), 229–51.

spared a catastrophic famine during these months, but he does not mention that this was at least partly due to the Social Democratic deal with old elites in the military, bureaucracy, and industry (pp. 188 and 436–7). Käppner, too, fully recognizes the difficulty of the government's position as dictated by external factors, but he nonetheless describes Ebert's pact with Groener as the beginning of a 'nightmare' for the Republic (p. 220).

Also questionable is the link implied in these books between the SPD's perceived 'failure' to 'democratically reform' German society in 1918/19 and Hitler's so-called 'seizure of power' in January 1933. Both books, and the historiographical heritage they tap into, imply a crucial, causal relationship here. As Käppner most forthrightly puts it, the 'failure' of the revolution constituted a missed opportunity to remove the 'old elites' who 'delivered the republic over to Hitler', and thus to 'prevent Hitler's tyranny, the war, the road to Auschwitz, and millions of deaths' (p. 453). Is this a sustainable argument? In the first place, it is rather unfair to depict the 'elites' with whom the SPD aligned themselves (especially in the civil service and heavy industry) as homogeneously composed of arch-reactionaries bent on the destruction of the republic, as suggested by, for example, the close co-operation between industrialists and trade unionists during the revolution (which Niess acknowledges, but Käppner views with scepticism) or the civil service's key role in confounding the 1920 Kapp Putsch (which Niess plays down in favour of an unsurprising emphasis on the working-class General Strike.)<sup>13</sup>

However, even if the elites had indeed all been monocle-wearing, moustache-twiddling anti-republicans plotting the enslavement of the working classes and imperialistic wars in dark, smoke-filled rooms, the argument that they were *primarily* responsible for 'delivering the republic over to Hitler' is far-fetched. Such an argument actually conceals a basic, rather Whiggish optimism, that *truly* democratic societies naturally obviate the potential for a dictatorship such as Hitler's, and that such dictatorships are, in the final analysis, reactionary constructs battling against democratic forces and the tide of progress. However, anyone who has observed with growing disqui-

<sup>13</sup> The burgeoning co-operation between labour and industry, which began during the war itself, as well as the role of the civil service, are the subjects of Conan Fischer, 'A Very German Revolution?', *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, 28/2 (2006), 6–32.



et political developments in the western world over the last five years surely has good reason to question this rather rosy conception of democracy as something inherently liberal, or the straightforward positing of a battle between (progressive) democratic and (reactionary) undemocratic forces. Indeed, in his introduction, Niess makes mention of the national conservative regimes in Poland and Hungary and implicitly locates them in the camp of 'anti-democratic' forces, despite the fact that both currently enjoy resounding popular support and were, in fact, democratically elected.

This (admittedly disturbing) decoupling of the concepts of democracy and liberalism also carries implications for our understanding of Nazism which, though it was, of course, vehemently opposed to a parliamentary system, was also, in the end, the product of a democratic mass society, concerned not with preserving the power of the old elites, but with eliminating, sidelining, or integrating them in the construction of a new type of totalitarian polity based on the putative 'will of the people'.<sup>14</sup> The unpleasant fact is that the old elites only found themselves in the (from their point of view, rather uncomfortable) position of having to install Hitler as Chancellor because, in free and democratic elections, the NSDAP had become the biggest party in the Reichstag. The Nazis were certainly committed to the destruction of parliamentary democracy, but they also represented what Michael Mann has called the 'dark side of democracy', rather than some kind of reactionary force designed to preserve feudal power structures (whose representatives would have much preferred a prolongation of von Papen's cabinet of barons over Hitler's disconcertingly rebellious movement.)<sup>15</sup>

This is highly pertinent to the history of the November Revolution because, as Sebastian Haffner pointed out, though Nazism was an avowed enemy of the revolution, it was *also* the revolution's off-

<sup>14</sup> See Riccardo Bavaj, 'Pluralizing Democracy in Weimar Germany: Historiographical Perspectives and Transatlantic Vistas', in Paul Nolte (ed.), *Transatlantic Democracy in the Twentieth Century Transfer and Transformation* (Berlin, 2016), 53–73, at 70–3.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York, 2005). For the extremely troubled relationship between the old elites and the Nazis during the seizure of power, see Hermann Beck, 'The Nazis and their Conservative Alliance Partner in 1933: The Seizure of Power in a New Light', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6/2 (2005), 213–41.

spring—a product of the age of democracy and ‘mass society’.<sup>16</sup> The surest proof of this is that, in January 1933, Hitler did not, in fact, recall the Kaiser from his Dutch exile, which rather gives the lie to Niess’s repeated insistence in his conclusion that Hitler’s *raison d’être* was to ‘roll back’ everything that changed in November 1918. There was a much more complex relationship between the German Revolution and National Socialism than either Niess or Käppner allow for.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, then, these two books provide strikingly similar accounts of the German Revolution based on a tradition of writing which is underpinned by some debatable normative assumptions about the nature of both German history and democracy. To be sure, there are clear differences between the two books: Niess is more optimistic about the achievements of the revolution, emphasizing its positive legacy (the removal of the monarchy, the enfranchisement of women, a genuine parliamentary system) for the later Bundesrepublik, whereas Käppner is more negative, explicitly referring to the revolution as a ‘failure’ and ‘German democracy’ as its ‘big loser’ (p. 19). His version is a more tragic celebration of the courage and sacrifices of those who took to the streets or joined Councils in November and December 1918, but always with a view to the catastrophe that followed after 1933, whereas Niess’s gaze is fixed on the period after 1945.

Nonetheless, whatever their differences, these fluently written and engaging books ultimately convey the same impression as the radical historians of the 1960s and 1970s—that whatever they achieved, and though they were not conscious traitors, the architects of Germany’s forgotten revolution are still in need of forgiveness for their failures and limitations. As Käppner puts it, the Social Democrats ‘gave their best, but their best was not good enough for this revolution, not by a long way’ (p. 461). In fact, however, given everything we have learned about the German Revolution over the last half a century, it would be more reasonable to argue that the revolution actually ‘reflected pretty accurately the reformist potential already present in Wilhelmine society and, beyond that, the more radical ambitions of the democratizing forces in that society’.<sup>18</sup> From the point of view of November 1918, there is nothing to forgive.

<sup>16</sup> Sebastian Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler* (London, 1997), 11.

<sup>17</sup> This is the central argument of Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*.

<sup>18</sup> See Fischer, ‘A Very German Revolution?’, 31.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

ALEX BURKHARDT was awarded his Ph.D. in June 2017 by the University of St Andrews. The resulting thesis, 'Democrats into Nazis: The Radicalisation of the *Bürgertum* in Hof-an-der-Saale, 1918-1924', examines the changing political culture of the middle classes in a single German town during the first half-decade of the Weimar Republic. He is currently preparing the manuscript for publication.