

One hundred years since the November Revolution in Germany

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One hundred years ago—on November 9, 1918—the revolutionary uprising of the German working class against war and monarchy reached its peak and shook the capitalist system to its foundations.

Since the beginning of 1918, despite repression, draconian censorship, the imprisonment of revolutionary leaders and the support of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and trade unions for the Great War, the imperial government was no longer able to control the resistance of the working class to the war. The devastating effects of three-and-a-half years of bloody slaughter and the military defeats on the Western front led to a revolutionary crisis.

In many areas, the food supply had collapsed almost completely. Although war production had increased dramatically since the summer of 1914, total industrial production at the end of 1917 was 47 percent below its pre-war level. Agricultural production had fallen by 60 percent. The famine was unimaginable.

The fronts hardly moved in the last months of the war, but the great human slaughter continued unabated. Soldiers were senselessly sent to the slaughter, starved to death in the trenches or condemned to die in agony from epidemics. By that point, the First World War had been raging for four years. General Ludendorff and the Supreme Army Command delayed the armistice negotiations, and when the war finally ended in November 1918, 10 million people had lost their lives worldwide, with 20 million wounded soldiers. In addition, there were 7 million civilian victims.

In Russia, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, the working class had conquered power and ended Russian involvement in the war in October 1917. Their victory inspired the workers in Germany. Amid the butchery of the world war, the Russian revolution proved that a world beyond capitalism was possible without exploitation and war.

In January 1918, the workers at the armament factories in Hennigsdorf downed their tools. Their demonstration in neighbouring Berlin was joined by 400,000 people. “The January Strike is the beginning of the end of the Wilhelmine order, a volcanic eruption of all the contradictions that have been swirling in the Reich and which have not only been concealed by the truce, but have even been aggravated by it,” Joachim Kämpner writes in his book “1918.”

After that, the resistance in the factories grew and spread to the fleet and the front. In the autumn of 1918, the situation was worsening from day to day. To control the revolutionary wave and shift responsibility for the war defeat onto others, the government made a series of retreats. “The reform from above was supposed to forestall the revolution from below—that was the basic idea of the now completed about-face,” Volker Ullrich remarks in “The Revolution of 1918/19.”

On October 3, Prince Max von Baden was appointed Reich chancellor to form a government coalition with the Social Democrats, who for the first time in history assumed government responsibility. Three weeks later, General Ludendorff, the most powerful man in the Supreme Army Command, was dismissed.

But the measures came too late. The revolutionary uprising could no

longer be stopped. Here is an outline of the events that rapidly followed:

On October 30, the sailors of the deep-sea fleet rebel and refuse to go out in a “final battle,” which would mean their certain demise.

In Kiel, sailors fraternise with the workers and organise a general strike. On November 4, they occupy the ships and the Kiel City Hall. Workers’ and soldiers’ councils are formed.

On November 5, the revolution prevails in Lübeck, on November 6 in Hamburg, then in Bremen, Hanover and Stuttgart. On November 7, 80,000 workers demonstrate in Munich and form a workers’ and soldiers’ council. One day later, Kurt Eisner proclaims the Free State of Bavaria.

Events begin to accelerate. Richard Müller, who, as chairman of the Executive Council of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils, played a leading role in the Berlin uprising of November 9, describes it this way:

“After the breakfast break, things became lively. The factories emptied at an incredibly fast pace. The streets were filled with huge crowds of people. On the outskirts, where the largest factories are located, large protest marches formed, which flowed into the centre of the city.”

Müller describes how soldiers who had been ordered to Berlin to protect the monarchy and maintain order joined the workers’ demonstrations without being asked to do so. “Men, women, soldiers, a people in arms flooded the streets up to the nearest barracks,” he writes.

In Moabit prison and Tegel prison camp, the inmates are freed. “The large newspapers, the Wolff telegraph office, the telegraph department, the Reichstag building were already occupied in the first hours of the afternoon.”

“The characteristic feature of this uprising lies in the elemental force of its outbreak, in the all-encompassing extent of its expansion and the unified, almost methodical action in all parts of the vast area of greater Berlin,” Müller writes in summarizing the events.

The rule of the monarchy, shattered by the war, collapses like a house of cards under this tremendous onslaught of the working class. Reich Chancellor Max von Baden announces the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II in the morning. At noon, he hands over his office to the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert. In the early afternoon, SPD member Philipp Scheidemann proclaims the democratic republic from the balcony of the Berlin City Palace in front of a huge crowd of people. Karl Liebknecht, the leader of the Spartacus League, shortly afterwards proclaims the Socialist Republic in the neighbouring Lustgarten.

The following day, SPD Chairman Ebert forms a new government, called the “Council of People’s Representatives,” which includes three majority Social Democrats (Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann and Otto Landsberg) and three members of the Independent Social Democrats (Hugo Haase, Wilhelm Dittmann and Emil Barth). The Independent Social Democrats (USPD) had been founded in April 1917 by SPD members who, under the pressure of the masses, refused to grant further war credits and were therefore expelled from the SPD. Barth is also a member of the revolutionary representatives who exert great influence in the Berlin metal industry.

The Council of People's Commissioners takes on the task of containing, suffocating and bloodily crushing the huge revolutionary wave that has in a few days spread like wildfire across the country, threatening not only the monarchy, but also the property of the capitalists and land owners and the power of the military caste.

In the summer of 1914, the SPD leaders voted to grant war credits to the German government and thus sent millions of workers into the slaughterhouse of the imperialist war. Four years later, they proved to be the most important defenders of capitalist rule. Ebert concludes a secret pact with the Supreme Army Command under General Gröner. The attacks against the revolutionary workers are prepared and organized in daily, direct cooperation with the general staff of the counterrevolution.

In his memoirs, General Gröner wrote of this alliance with Ebert: "The officer corps could only cooperate with a government that took up the fight against radicalism and Bolshevism. Ebert was ready for that." He had told Ebert on November 10 that the army had made itself available to his government but demanded that Bolshevism be combated. "Ebert responded to my proposal for an alliance. From then on, we discussed the necessary measures each evening on a secret line between the Reich Chancellery and the Army Command. The alliance has proven itself."

Based on this alliance, the SPD leadership organizes one blow after another against the revolutionary workers. The people's commissar for the Army and Navy, Gustav Noske, is instructed to recruit against the uprising from the scattered reactionary soldiers of the Freikorps. He takes on the task with the words: "Somebody has to play the bloodhound." In the SPD party newspaper *Vorwärts*, calls for cooperation with the Freikorps, the precursor of the Nazi stormtroopers, appear under the headline "Protect yourselves from Spartakus!"

The conflict between the working class on the one hand, and the Freikorps, counterrevolutionary troops and the Ebert government on the other, develops into an open civil war. But it was not until December 29, when armed fighting was raging on the streets of Berlin, that the ministers of the USPD left the Ebert government. They had acted as a left-wing fig leaf, without having even the slightest influence upon events.

Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, who had fought since the beginning of the war against the betrayal of the SPD and formed the "Gruppe Internationale" and later the "Spartakusbund," founded the Communist Party of Germany amid the fire of great revolutionary struggles at the turn of the year 1918/1919.

Luxemburg, who had been released only a few weeks earlier from long imprisonment in a fortress, delivers the main address at the founding congress. Karl Radek delivers greetings from the Bolshevik Party. Two weeks later, on January 15, Luxembourg and Liebknecht are captured and murdered by Noske's Freikorps.

Counterrevolution triumphs! With terrible cruelty, it rages against the revolutionary workers in Berlin and other industrial areas. Tens of thousands are murdered. The troops of the Social Democratic Army minister down the revolution in blood.

Today, official historiography presents the November Revolution as a democratic awakening and beginning of democracy in Germany. It was nothing of the sort. The 1918 German Revolution, as Leon Trotsky aptly put it in 1930, was "not a democratic completion of the bourgeois revolution," but "a proletarian revolution beheaded by social democracy: more correctly, it is bourgeois counterrevolution forced to preserve pseudo-democratic forms after the victory over the proletariat."

The German bourgeoisie had already bid farewell to democratic aspirations 70 years earlier. In 1848, it had stabbed in the back the democratic revolution that had swept across Germany and large parts of Europe, and had allied itself with feudal reaction. Germany's rise as an imperialist great power then took place under the rule of the Hohenzollern regime. Prussian militarism, the authoritarian Prussian state apparatus and its backbone, the large landed property owners, served the aspiring

German bourgeoisie to oppress the working class and pursue its imperialist goals. This culminated in the catastrophe of the First World War, for the outbreak of which the German bourgeoisie was largely to blame.

The workers and soldiers, who rose *en masse* after four years of barbaric slaughter and unspeakable war crimes, did not confront the task of completing the bourgeois-democratic revolution. The bourgeoisie had long since become the ruling class under the protection of the imperial regime and had proved its historical bankruptcy with the war. The working class was faced with the task of depriving the bourgeoisie and the military caste of their material basis, expropriating the industrial barons, war profiteers and landowners, and establishing a socialist workers state.

The German November Revolution was an inseparable part of the developing proletarian world revolution. One year earlier, the working class had conquered power in Russia under the leadership of the Bolsheviks. The leaders of the October Revolution, Lenin and Trotsky, had based their entire strategy on an international perspective. They understood the Russian Revolution as the prelude to the socialist world revolution. They were convinced that the contradictions of the imperialist world system expressed in the barbarity of the First World War would also drive the working class of other countries into revolution and quickly free the Russian workers state from its initial isolation. Events in Germany confirmed this perspective.

While the victory of the October Revolution inspired the German workers, it provoked fear and terror among the ruling elites. "Defence against Bolshevism" became not only the battle cry of the utmost reaction, but also of the SPD and sections of the USPD. "When Karl Liebknecht... tried on 9 November to commit the Reichstag faction of the independents to the Russian slogan 'All power to the Soviets,' Eduard Bernstein, present at the time, reacted as if struck like lightning to his head: 'It brings us counterrevolution,'" wrote Heinrich Winkler in *Der lange Weg nach Westen (Germany: The long road West)*.

The German Revolution failed due to the lack of a revolutionary leadership. Under August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, the SPD had built the largest Marxist mass party in the world. But its leading layers allowed themselves to be dragged along by the economic upswing. They betrayed their own program in 1914 and supported the First World War.

The working class did not recover from this blow in time. The USPD was founded a full three years after the beginning of the war. It emerged not on its own initiative, but because the SPD, through party expulsions, left it no other choice. Its policies always remained centrist, adapting to every bourgeois pressure, such as its participation in Ebert's government. Even the most revolutionary and courageous representatives of the German working class in the Spartacus League found it difficult to break with the SPD and USPD in time.

The defeat of the November Revolution had devastating consequences. It isolated the Soviet Union, contributing substantially to the growth of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Joseph Stalin's increasing influence on the policies of the Communist International, in turn, became an important factor in further defeats of the international working class. Thus, in 1923, the KPD (German Communist Party) missed an extraordinary revolutionary situation due to its false policies. And in 1933, the catastrophic policies of the KPD, dictated by Stalin and strictly opposed to a united front against the Nazis, resulted in Hitler taking power without a shot being fired.

Above all, however, the November Revolution left intact the power and property of all those forces that would help Hitler to power 15 years later: the industrial barons such as Stinnes, Krupp and Thyssen; the Prussian Junkers, upon whom Paul von Hindenburg and other generals relied; and the Freikorps, from which Hitler's Stormtroopers were recruited. Not even the high nobility was expropriated or abolished, a task the French Revolution had thoroughly completed 120 years earlier.

A hundred years later, the working class in Germany and internationally

is again faced with the same challenges as in 1918. With the intensification of the global crisis of capitalism—extreme social inequality, trade war and war—all the unresolved problems of the twentieth century are returning. Right-wing extremist parties are on the rise everywhere, including in Germany, as is militarism and authoritarianism. The class struggle is coming to a head. Without a socialist revolution in the foreseeable future, mankind threatens to sink again into war and barbarism.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and the International Committee of the Fourth International are the only political tendency that draws on the lessons of the strategic experiences of the class struggle and fights for an international socialist perspective. The urgent need to build a politically independent, revolutionary socialist movement of the working class is the essential lesson of the German revolution, and remains the central task today.



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