

# German president defends alliance against November 1918 Revolution between Social Democrats and right-wing reaction

Peter Schwarz  
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November 9, 1918 was a “milestone in the history of German democracy,” declared President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at a specially scheduled memorial meeting of the German Bundestag (parliament). The November Revolution, he claimed, had paved the way for parliamentary democracy and laid the foundations of the modern welfare state.

The president expressly acknowledged the role played by Friedrich Ebert, the chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the party to which Steinmeier belongs today. Ebert “wanted first of all to prevent chaos, civil war and military intervention by the victorious powers,” and was driven by the desire “to give people work and bread,” he claimed.

In fact, Ebert was driven by the desire to crush the revolution of workers and soldiers, which had spread like wildfire all over the country, and thereby save as much of the old order as possible.

Already on October 3, when the German defeat in the First World War had become apparent and discontent in the factories and the military reached the boiling point, the SPD entered the imperial government for the first time in its history. Ebert explicitly justified this move with the need to avert impending revolution.

“If we do not want an agreement with the bourgeois parties and the government, then we have to let things run their course... then we leave the fate of the party to the revolution,” he declared on September 23 to the parliamentary faction and executive of the SPD. He added that anyone who had experienced what happened in Russia, where the October Revolution succeeded a year before, could “not wish such a development for us.” The SPD had to “throw itself into the breach” and save the country. That is “our damned duty and responsibility,” Ebert insisted.

It was too late, however, to stop the revolution. At the end of the month, the sailors of the High Seas Fleet mutinied. The sailors were mainly recruited from workers who had been drafted into the Navy because of their technical skills. When part of the fleet was transferred to Kiel, the sailors

allied themselves with the tens of thousands of workers in the city’s shipyards, which played a key role in the war.

Within the space of a few days, the sailors’ uprising in Kiel spread across Germany and overthrew the existing authorities. Workers’ and soldiers’ councils sprang up everywhere like mushrooms.

When the revolution reached Berlin on November 9, the SPD sprang into action. The emperor abdicated and on the same day Ebert took over leadership of the government, misleadingly called the “Council of People’s Deputies.” The “council” consisted of three Social Democrats and three members of the Independent Social Democrats.

In the days that followed, the leaders of the SPD allied themselves with the most reactionary forces in the state apparatus and army to crush the insurrection by the workers, who were intent on eliminating the old order. (See: “One hundred years since the November Revolution in Germany.”)

Steinmeier felt obliged to distance himself somewhat from the brutal actions of Ebert and his “bloodhound,” Gustav Noske. The People’s Deputies “probably had to risk more change than they considered justified from their point of view,” he said. “Too many sworn opponents of the young republic retained their offices in the military, judiciary and administration,” he admitted. Thus, there was “no justification” for “effectively unleashing the brutality of nationalist volunteer forces.” (This was a diplomatic reference to the proto-fascist Freikorps.) The victims of those days—Steinmeier named Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in particular—should also be commemorated, he said.

Nevertheless, he fully defended the president’s suppression of the Spartakus uprising, which culminated on January 15, 1919 with the assassination of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. “It remains true, however,” he said, “that the People’s Deputies led by Friedrich Ebert had to defend themselves against the attempt by the radical left to prevent

elections to the National Assembly by force.” It remained “the great merit of the moderate labor movement that they—in a climate of violence, in the midst of hardship and hunger—sought to compromise with the moderate forces of the bourgeoisie and give priority to parliamentary democracy.”

The very same bourgeoisie with whom the SPD sought to “compromise” elevated Hitler to power 15 years later. The real mission of the SPD in 1918 was to drown in blood a revolution directed not only against the Hohenzollern regime, but also against its social base—the military caste, the industrial barons, the large landowners, the Prussian state apparatus and the arch-reactionary judiciary. The SPD saved the pillars of the old order, which otherwise would have been swept away by the revolution. They were able to retain their property, social status and power. A number of social and democratic concessions, which were later withdrawn, were a small price to pay.

The Weimar democracy was never more than a façade, which collapsed every time class antagonisms intensified. This was the case in 1923, when Ebert, now president and confronting an impending proletarian revolution, transferred executive power to General Hans von Seeckt and practically established a military dictatorship. From 1925 onwards, Paul von Hindenburg was president of the Reich and head of the republic. The field marshal, who had established a kind of military dictatorship during the last years of the war, had been one of the main targets of the November Revolution.

Under Hindenburg’s patronage, the democratic facade collapsed completely. Beginning in 1930, governments no longer relied on parliamentary majorities, but on emergency decrees signed by the president. In 1933, a conspiracy led by Hindenburg made Hitler chancellor.

When Steinmeier now confesses his pride in these traditions. When he exclaims, “Let us no longer assert that the Weimar Republic was a democracy without democrats!”, when he acknowledges an “enlightened patriotism” and deceitfully transforms the German national colours of black, red and gold into a symbol for “democracy and law and freedom,” he expresses his intention of returning to the reactionary traditions of German history.

The most notable feature of Steinmeier’s speech was the reaction of deputies in the packed Bundestag. Again and again they applauded him. At the end, all of the deputies—from the Left Party to the far-right Alternative for Germany—rose to give a standing ovation and sing the national anthem. All of the “moderate” and “left” parties could not have made more clear their fundamental kinship with the AfD, which openly evokes the most reactionary traditions of the Weimar Republic and considers the Nazi regime to be a mere “speck of bird shit” in 1,000 years of

successful German history.

Steinmeier’s speech also met with a storm of approval from the media. Heribert Prantl, who heads the opinion pages of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, published a gushing response that defies commentary. The speech was a “ray of hope,” a “miracle,” “a good, a wise, an excellent speech,” he enthused. He was particularly delighted that “all deputies—all, including the AfD!—rewarded him with a standing ovation.” Something that should trigger alarm, Prantl finds entrancing!

Steinmeier’s speech and the reaction to it exemplify what is currently taking place in society as a whole. Faced with the deep gulf between the vast majority of the population and the established parties, the latter are closing ranks and moving further to the right to implement a reactionary program of militarism, rearmament and social cuts.

The AfD already largely determines the course of the government. The ruling grand coalition—Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD)—has completely taken over its reactionary refugee policy. The lesson drawn by Steinmeier from the November 1918 Revolution is that even closer collaboration with the most reactionary forces in politics and the state apparatus is necessary in order to suppress a looming uprising.

The SPD is determined take this path to the end. Although the party is currently polling at an historic low of 13 percent, it sticks firmly to the grand coalition. As for the Greens, they held a congress last weekend whose main task was to prepare the party for participation in government alongside the CDU and CSU.

The working class must draw its own lessons from the November 1918 Revolution. To counter the united forces of reaction, it requires its own independent Marxist party. The construction of the Socialist Equality Party is the burning task.



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