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GERMAN REVOLUTIONS:

A DIFFERENT VIEW OF GERMAN HISTORY

Within the last century and a half, Germany has experienced at least three revolutionary disruptions. Of the three, Adolf Hitler's coming to power in 1933 has become most widely known outside academic circles. Partly, this was due to the viewpoint that since the Germans were a submissive people they could hardly be expected to have a history of revolutions. Such simple views of national character are rarely given credence today. However, the German revolutions that occurred before 1933 are little known mainly because they appear to have achieved so little in the way of social alteration and because the world has been preoccupied in seeing Germany's history only in terms of National Socialism.

The German Revolutions of 1848 and 1918 pinpoint other events and issues which have preoccupied German society. These revolutions have at their core the problems of the democratization and industrialization of society. Re-examination of these revolutions might be the basis for a reconsideration of the general view of German history.

The German Revolution of 1848 emerged out of a clash of classes: a dominant aristocracy versus an aspirant middle class.¹ The aristocracy, firmly entrenched in all the significant political and military positions, was unwilling to widen its privileged circle by the inclusion of the newly enriched merchant or industrialist, who was beginning to modernize Germany by steam transport and factory in the early nineteenth century. The aristocracy believed in a society of status and people born to privileges with no taxation and with arbitrary legal controls over agricultural workers. The aristocracy was not opposed to employing the lowest classes—the peasantry and the craftsman—in trying to keep the middle class subjugated. In 1846 a noble wrote:

I shall not give up the fight. Our princes have not yet exhausted the resources with which they may survive the struggle against triumphant mediocrity. Let them but have the courage to turn to the masses. There, most important of all, are beings more disposed to a return to piety than that public of newspapers, citizens' assemblies, and chambers of deputies which has been demoralized by the evil education of the times and has lost its loyalty and faith.

As this passage reveals, the aristocracy feared the modern world of industry and educated common men. They wished to maintain privileges solely for themselves and were even prepared to accept the division of Germany into over thirty small states under the leadership of a reactionary Austria.

In opposition to the aristocracy stood a middle class which was reaping the benefits of early industrialization and which wished social and political prestige commensurate with its new economic preeminence. A provincial governor reported to the Prussian Minister of the Interior in 1844:

The disgruntlement and dissatisfaction which are becoming evident in this province do not emanate from the lower classes, but from the so-called educated groups which desire to put their idea about freedom of the press and popular representation into practice at any cost. To this class belong mostly the lawyers, doctors and merchants, who hope by the means which they advocate to achieve a greater importance, for no one believes that they have only the welfare of the country in mind, as they maintain.

These professional people advocated that the "qualification for admission to the ruling elite" be changed from birth to wealth. They wanted an end to the type of political system in which the nobility had ten times as many elected and appointed representatives as the rest of the people while constituting only two per cent of the population. However, if the middle class favoured more elected representation and some form of constitution to limit the powers of the monarchy and aristocracy, it was in no way composed of democrats wishing full representation and participation by all members of society. Indeed, most of it was opposed to universal suffrage. A businessman wrote in 1830:

by majority we are never to understand one determined by counting heads, but rather the true strength of the nation which, while it is also to have no interest other than that of the numerical majority yet differs essentially from it, since by its better education, great insight, and its property it has a larger stake in the maintenance of a stable, vigorous and good government.

According to the middle-class view, only talented, educated and propertied individuals working in conjunction with the old aristocracy of birth should

rule and regulate affairs. These liberals wanted German unification for the economic rationalization it would bring: removal of restrictions to travel and trade, unification of tariffs and monetary systems. In sum, the middle class wanted more to extend privileges to itself than to overthrow or end the privileges of the aristocracy. For that reason they did not act until the economic conditions of the 1840s forced revolutionary leadership upon them—a rule in which they appeared to directly challenge the aristocracy and a role for which they were unprepared.

The economic distress of the 1840s was caused by the last great European famine which occurred at a time of depression and extensive unemployment. Conditions became so chaotic that the conservative peasants and craftsmen were pushed to the point of desperation. Some sought release in emigration; some turned to prostitution; instances are recorded of children being sold into slavery. Some questioned the nature of a society which could produce such disruption of normal life; others turned to small-scale rioting. The lowest level of society was being radicalized. With food prices doubling in three years over the period 1845-1846-1847, these people were ready to look to the middle classes for leadership. Yet, since economic discontent was the basis of their distress, an improvement of their conditions might mean a restoration of their faith in the existing system of government and society. But for a moment they would support any move to improve their situation.

With such widespread economic dislocation and class conflict, word that France and Austria had experienced revolution was enough to touch off barricade building in most of Germany. And the German revolution was not only set off by European developments, it also followed the European pattern: a quick triumph over the old order, indecision about what to do with the newly-acquired power, division among the triumphant groups allowing the old order to reassert itself. Even the timing was nearly the same everywhere: a few days of revolt, a few months of revolution and years of counter-revolution. During the days of revolt in Berlin the monarch acceded to the demands from the streets by ordering his troops out of the city, installing liberal ministers and even wearing the colours of the revolutionaries. During the months of revolution the middle class attempted to institute representative institutions including a National Assembly for all of Germany. However, it left the old institutions to exist beside the new. The Prussian military and aristocracy soon discovered that they had been momentarily displaced, *not replaced*, and employed the strong argument of armed might to regain their capital city. The liberally-minded in the National Assembly argued out a bill of rights

and a constitution, and discussed whether or not certain parts of Europe could be full members of a unified German state. They did not, however, consolidate their position or take care that their allies from the initial days of the revolution—the discontented peasants and handworkers—be given consideration in formulating a new social system. One of the most acute contemporaries noted:

On August 4, 1789, three weeks after the attack on the Bastille, the French people in one day disposed of the feudal burdens. On July 11, 1848, four months after the March barricades, the feudal burdens are disposing of the German people. . . . The French bourgeoisie of 1789 did not for one moment desert its allies, the peasants. It knew that the basis of its power was the destruction of feudalism in the countryside, the creation of a free, landowning peasant class.

By early 1849 the Prussian monarch could not only refuse the crown offered him by the National Assembly, he could also decree his own constitution and replace the liberal ministers with aristocratic Junkers. The return of economic prosperity in mid-1848 restored the faith of the peasant and handworker in what existed; they saw little benefit in a unified nation and saw only dangers in the liberals' demands for *laissez-faire*. One historian has concluded that "the revival of the European economy deprived the revolution of the urgency and militancy necessary for its success".

Even if the revolution did not bring an alteration of who ruled, since the aristocracy had easily and quickly reasserted itself, the revolution had achieved some alterations. A constitution—the aristocracy *giving* it rather than being forced to *accept* it—was found necessary so as to channel political activity, to limit the absolute authority of the monarch and to allow representation from some of the wealthy and educated parts of the community. The revolution's focus upon national unification increased the consciousness of a unity of fate and interest among German-speaking peoples. That consciousness soon expressed itself in demands for the larger German states to resolve the question of unification. Further, the revolution increased the distance between the upper classes and the slowly increasing number of industrially employed whose leaders were either exiled or martyred for their attempts to push the revolution into a democratic phase. Finally, the revolution provided an ideal of political and social rights. The hope to institute the ideals of 1848 motivated many of the liberals and socialists who seventy years later participated in the next revolutionary upheaval in Germany.

During the seventy years between the revolution of 1848 and the revolution of 1918 Germany was politically and highly industrialized.² Economically

it became one of the most productive societies on the continent, and by the time of the first world war challenged and competed with Britain, France and the United States for markets and spheres of influence. But behind the prosperity and demand for an equally sunny place in the world, critical problems existed internally. To be sure, many of the middle class had been willing to accept the authoritarian government which accompanied Bismarck's unification. But, increasingly the fastest growing group—the industrial workers—was excluded from this society. The best evidence is not their isolation, shown by the refusal of the middle class to permit these 'unpatriotic scoundrels' to join their singing or gymnastic or bicycling clubs. Rather, the best evidence is in the growth of the Social Democratic Party which had less than 200,000 members in 1890 but achieved one million before 1914. By 1912 that party had received the largest number of votes and had become the largest party in the national parliament. Such statistics are only a measure of the socialists' support, not of their actual political power or participation. Both of the latter were denied them, for under the constitution the government was not responsible to the parliament but only to the monarch. For instance, in 1913 the government could thumb its nose at parliament when the majority of representatives expressed their lack of confidence in the government over repressive military policies. Despite such nonchalance, the German government also recognized the need to come to terms with the basic class and social divisions among Germans. This factor played a large part in the calculated entry into world war. The government thought that by presenting the appearance of a defensive war, especially against Russia, the working class would react patriotically. The reasoning was accurate enough as the socialists approved war credits with the statement they dared not leave "the Fatherland in the lurch". Indeed, Germany enjoyed what a contemporary described as an ecstasy of national unity in spirit and action as World War I began.

The breakdown of that national unity explains the coming of the revolution in 1918, for the ending of national unity meant the re-emergence of class conflict.³ The reasons for the breakdown included the extreme war aims of the conservatives and the military who intended to establish German hegemony over all of central and western Europe, the workers' discovery that profits and prices were not in fact controlled like wages, and the government's refusal to allow political changes so that the man who was expected to offer his life in the trenches would also have a meaningful vote. By mid-1917 Germany's institutions were malfunctioning under the pressures of total war and of the renewed internal struggles. One man jotted down in his diary: "On the one

hand, politically-interfering military; on the other, parliament—in between the Chancellor swings back and forth”. Even the bourgeois parties cooperated with Social Democracy to demand peace negotiations and responsible government.

Despite the recurrence of internal dissension, Germany remained deceptively quiescent until September 1918. A good harvest in 1917 and improved wages tempered some unrest, but primarily the moderate opposition of the Social Democrats prevented disruption of the war effort. The party opposed strikes, helped quell a very large munitions-factory walkout and on occasion even warned the government of threatening activities planned by the more radical socialists who had split from the party. Though the leaders of Social Democracy found the government’s policies “dishonest and contradictory”, their dissent was not made public.

By August 1918 the German generals admitted military failure. However, these conservative-military men refused to accept responsibility for their own shortcomings. They adroitly shifted the blame to the political parties such as the Social Democrats who were by September vociferously demanding responsible government. The generals’ conception of affairs was summed up by one who said, “They have cooked our goose, let them eat it”. This stab-in-the-back legend seemed plausible to the military as the Social Democrats demanded that “not only a new man come and the machine continue to run as before, but a whole new system must be established”. Under the cloud of defeat, changes were introduced that included placing the monarch and the generals under constitutional control. But, events were beyond tinkering with the constitution. Revolution preceded armistice and thereby identified the newly proclaimed republic with defeat.

The Social Democrats had played a dual role in the coming of the revolution. On the one hand they had supported the government. On the other, since July 1917, they had acted increasingly as the leaders of popular discontent. Yet, by skillful maneuvering they came to hold political power during the revolutionary period. For example, they enlisted the aid of the old Imperial bureaucracy. They invited the more radical socialists, known as the Independents, to join this provisional government. They gained approval for this coalition from the workers’ and soldiers’ councils. These councils, partly modelled upon the soviets of the Russian Revolution, had sprung up simultaneously throughout Germany. Assured of the councils’ support one Social Democrat leader confidently stated on the day after the overthrow of the monarchy, “Germany has had her revolution”.

But there were many, including members of the councils, who dis-

agreed and wished to drive the revolution forward immediately. These more radical individuals sought larger social changes such as abolition of the officers' corps and socialization of industry. That placed the Social Democrats in a dilemma. Although they, too, wanted alterations, they gave priority to administering a defeated nation and, coupled with this, they wanted to be certain that all Germans had a say in the reorganization of their state and society.

The Social Democrats decided upon a course of compromise to resolve the situation. To fulfill the armistice terms they thought it necessary to work with the old generals who had the technical skills requisite to moving the German army east of the Rhine and demobilizing the troops. Under the impression that food supplies would last for only a few weeks and with the industries requiring conversion from war production, the government shunned all economic experimentation. An agreement which the trade unions made with the organizations representing the industrialists had in effect tied their hands. Not wishing to antagonize the Western powers, the government did not renew diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. To gain recognition as the legal German government, to prevent France from chiselling off parts of western Germany, as well as to gain widespread internal support, the Social Democrats decided to proceed with a constituent assembly as soon as possible.

The constituent assembly was the crux of Social Democratic policy. It offered a solution consistent with their beliefs and methods. Only thereby, they thought, could a real 'people's government' be established. It fitted their beliefs because, in addition to German unity, they placed great value on an integrated state in which no dictatorship existed of one class over another. They opposed the workers' and soldiers' councils, not just because they wanted no institutions competing with party and parliament, but also because they feared that the councils might be used by the very radicals—whom they misjudged as to size of following and intentions—to follow Lenin's example. The radicals accurately questioned whether the Social Democrats' ideas and methods could achieve more than a reformed capitalism, whether they could even begin to achieve democracy and socialism.

By the end of December 1918 the radicals' and some councils' distrust of this government had reached such a level that civil war became unavoidable. However, the radicals misjudged their own strength and their uprising against the Social Democrats was quashed by voluntary troops organized by the old military. During the next months the government employed the same troops throughout the country to quell in bloody fashion any attempts to

institute purely socialist governments in the provinces. The Social Democrats indicated that they placed a higher value on parliamentary government and in holding the reins of power than on socialism, especially when they joined forces with the middle-class parties who had gained a high percentage of the vote in elections to the constituent assembly. By all these actions the Social Democrats allowed the continued existence of the old institutions and interest groupings: officers' corps, leagues of industrialists, churches, parties. Social Democracy simply refused to destroy or allow the destruction of existing institutions without a parliamentary mandate. A shrewd observer noted that the Social Democrats had shifted social revolution "to nice, dignified discussions among different social classes, followed by a roll-call vote". The observer's understanding of social relationships and timing of decisive changes surpassed that of the Social Democrats, for though the government succeeded in gaining peace, creating a constitution and maintaining itself in office, it could not begin socialization and the parliamentary democracy remained unstable because it was undercut by those with whom the Social Democrats had momentarily allied themselves. The new republic had more opponents than supporters, for many who refused to give up their aristocratic and authoritarian ideas of the nineteenth century sought to regain the positions which they had lost during the war and revolution. Many others had expected more social changes—nationalization of industry, a militia form of military, participatory democracy—and they gained adherents among a working class disenchanted with the compromises of Social Democracy.

Even if those elevated to power in 1918 had a better conception of how to retain their new position, just like the middle class in 1848, they could not or would not smash the old institutions. In both instances the disruption and disagreement about fundamentals within society existed before and continued after the revolutions. This was primarily because the revolutions resolved few of the economic inequities and class conflicts upon which the social discontent engendering each revolution rested. The apparent lack of resolution and the inability of the new holders of power to alter the social structure, has focused nearly all attention on the 'failure' of these revolutions. Doing so is to overlook that these revolutions were the first attempts to deal directly with the complicated questions of democratic rule and industrial society. During the seventy years between these revolutions and again after 1918 German leaders avoided these questions. Bismarck, Wilhelm II and Hitler escaped these 'modern' problems by expansionism, paternalism and terror.⁴

The question needs to be posed as to whether the themes of racism,

expansionism and fascism dominate in German history because of the unresolved problems of industrialization and democratization. Indeed, the question might be posed whether such themes as racism and expansionism have come to dominate a whole century of German history because they were a means of avoiding the problems these unsuccessful revolutions had at their core.

NOTES

1. Since this material was first presented as part of Laurentian University's radio broadcast series and is not an attempt to provide the results of original research adding novel information but is to provide a general understanding with novel insight and interpretation, exact source references will be omitted. Further reading and the basis from which the author has worked will be suggested in the notes.

- On the 1848 Revolution the reader should consult especially the works of T. S. Hamerow, *Restoration, Revolution, Reaction* (Princeton, 1958) and "1848" Ch. 8 in L. Krieger and F. Stern, eds., *The Responsibility of Power* (New York, 1969), from both of which works some of the following quotations are drawn. In addition see P. H. Noyes, *Organization and Revolution* (Princeton, 1966), G. Eyck, *Frankfurt Parliament* (London, 1965), K. Marx and F. Engels, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany* (New York, 1964).
2. The following provide informative materials: O. Pflanze, *Bismarck* (Princeton, 1963), R. Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York, 1965), A. Rosenberg, *Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, 1963), G. Stolper, et al, *The German Economy since 1870* (London, 1966), J. Kuczynski, *Rise of the Working Class* (London, 1967).
 3. The background and context of the 1918 Revolution is presented in G. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor in Germany 1914-1918* (Princeton, 1966), A. J. Ryder, *The German Revolution of 1918* (Cambridge, 1967), R. Rürup, "Problems of the German Revolution of 1918", *Journal of Contemporary History* III (1968). Some of the material is based on my forthcoming article "Ebert and the German Crisis, 1917-1920", *Central European History* V (1972).
 4. Some recent studies have illustrated this viewpoint, in particular the German-language analyses of Imperial Germany, of which H.-U. Wehler, "Bismarck's Imperialism" *Past and Present* (1970) is a translated excerpt of one of the most exemplary studies. See also the study of J. C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck* (Berkeley, 1967) and A. J. Mayer, "Domestic Causes of the First World War", Ch. 15 in Krieger and Stern, *Responsibility of Power*.