

2 The German Revolution

- ▶ How and why did the October reform fail to prevent the November revolution?
- ▶ Why were the consequences of the divisions in the left-wing movement so significant?

On 29 October a mutiny began to spread among some sailors who refused to obey orders at Wilhelmshaven, near Kiel. Prince Max's government quickly lost control of the political situation and, by 2 November, sailors had taken charge of other major ports, such as Kiel and Hamburg. These takeovers had been prompted by a real fear among the sailors that their officers were planning a suicide attack on the British fleet, in order to restore the honour of the German navy. The news of the Kiel mutiny fanned the flames of discontent to other ports, Bremen and Lübeck, and soon throughout Germany. By 6 November numerous workers' and soldiers' councils, similar to the **soviets** that had been set up by the **Bolshevik Revolution** in Russia, were established in the major cities of Berlin, Cologne and Stuttgart. In **Bavaria**, the last member of the House of Wittelsbach, King Louis III, was deposed and the socialist Kurt Eisner proclaimed Bavaria an independent democratic **socialist republic**.

By the end of the first week of November it was clear that the October reforms had failed to impress the German people. The popular discontent was turning into a more fundamental revolutionary movement whose demands were for an immediate peace and the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The disturbances were prompted by:

- The realisation by troops and sailors that the war was lost and nothing was to be gained by carrying on.
- The sense of national shock when the news came of Germany's military defeat – propaganda and censorship had delayed the reality for too long.
- The increasing anger and bitterness over socio-economic conditions.

Prince Max would certainly have liked to preserve the monarchy, and possibly even Wilhelm II himself, but the Emperor's delusions that he could carry on without making any more political changes placed the chancellor in a difficult position. In the end, Prince Max became so worried by the revolutionary situation in Berlin that on 9 November he announced that the Kaiser would renounce the throne and that a left-wing provisional **coalition government** would be formed by Friedrich Ebert:

- 'provisional' as it was short term until a national election was held to vote for a National Assembly (parliament)
- 'coalition' as it was a combination of parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) (see page 6).

KEY TERMS

Soviet A Russian word meaning an elected council. In Germany many of these councils were set up in 1918 and had the support of the more radical and revolutionary left-wing working class.

Bolshevik Revolution 'Bolshevik' means majority, which was used by Lenin as the leader of the majority Russian Socialist Party from 1903. In October 1917 Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power to create a communist government.

Bavaria One of the oldest states in Europe and part of Imperial Germany, which maintained its kingdom until November 1918.

Socialist republic A system of government without a monarchy that aims to introduce social changes for collective benefit.

Coalition government Usually formed when a party does not have an overall majority in parliament; it then combines with more parties and shares government positions.

KEY FIGURES

Philipp Scheidemann (1865–1939)

Leading Social Democrat who declared Germany a republic on 9 November 1918. First chancellor of the Weimar Republic after the elections, but resigned in protest over the Versailles Treaty terms.

Rosa Luxemburg (‘Red Rosa’) (1871–1919)

Born in Poland of Jewish origins and badly disabled. Founder of the Spartacus League and was imprisoned for the duration of the war. Helped to create the German Communist Party on 1 January 1919, but was soon murdered in police custody in Berlin after the Spartacist uprising. She presented a humane and optimistic view of communism, in contrast with the brutality of the Bolsheviks in Russia.

KEY TERMS

Soviet republic A system of government that aims to introduce a communist state organised by workers’ councils and opposed to private ownership.

Proletariat The industrial working class who, in Marxist theory, would ultimately take power in the state.

It was in this chaotic situation that **Philipp Scheidemann**, one of the provisional government’s leaders, appeared on the balcony of the *Reichstag* building and proclaimed Germany a republic. (Actually, an hour later Germany was also declared a ‘**soviet republic**’ by Karl Liebknecht – a statement crucial for the shaping of the next few months of the German Revolution.) It was only at this point in the evening of 9 November that the Kaiser, who was in Belgium, accepted the advice of leading generals to abdicate. However, in effect, the Kaiser did not formally abdicate, he simply walked away and went into exile voluntarily in the Netherlands.

The left-wing movement

A genuinely revolutionary situation existed in Germany in early November 1918. However, the revolutionary wave that swept Germany was not a united force. In fact, the left-wing movement behind it consisted of three main strands.

The SPD (German Social Democratic Party)

The SPD represented moderate socialist aims and was led by Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann. It dated from 1875. In the election of 1912 it had become the largest party in the *Reichstag* with a membership of over a million. Its fundamental aim was to create a socialist republic, but being wholly committed to parliamentary democracy, it totally rejected anything that might have been likened to Soviet-style communism.

The Spartacists

On the extreme left stood the Spartacus League (otherwise known as the Spartacists), led by Karl Liebknecht and the Polish-born **Rosa Luxemburg**.

The Spartacists had been formed in 1905 as a minor faction of the SPD and by 1918 they had a national membership of about 5000. From 1914 the Spartacists had opposed the war and they were deeply influenced by Lenin and Bolshevism. They had come to believe that Germany should follow the same path as Communist Russia. The fundamental aim of the Spartacists was to create a soviet republic based on the rule of the **proletariat** through workers’ and soldiers’ councils.

The USPD (Independent German Social Democratic Party)

The USPD had been formed in 1917 as a breakaway group from the SPD. It was led by Hugo Haase and Karl Kautsky. Although the USPD was in a minority in the assembly in the *Reichstag*, it had a substantial following of 300,000 members.

The USPD demanded radical social and economic change as well as political reforms. However, as a political movement, it was far from united and internal divisions and squabbles seriously curtailed its influence. The main disagreement

Friedrich Ebert

- 1871 Born in Heidelberg of humble background and trained as a saddler
- 1889 Became a trade union organiser and SPD member
- 1912 Elected as a member of the *Reichstag*
- 1916 Chosen as leader of the SPD
- 1918 In November he was made chancellor of the provisional government when Imperial Germany collapsed. In November concluded the Ebert–Groener agreement
- 1919 Chosen as the country's first president, a position he held until his death
- 1925 Died at the age of 54 of a ruptured appendix

As a young apprentice Ebert became quickly involved in trade union work and his written and spoken skills were soon recognised by the SPD leadership. He quickly advanced through the party, covering a range of full-time political jobs, and in 1912 he entered the *Reichstag*. Although the First World War divided the SPD fundamentally, Ebert worked really hard to reconcile the different views in the party and in 1916 he was chosen as leader. However, it proved impossible to overcome

the differences, which led a year later to the party splitting and the creation of the USPD.



When Germany collapsed in autumn 1918, Ebert wanted a democratic parliamentary government with a constitutional monarchy, but when events got out of hand the monarchy stood down and he accepted the chancellorship. It was a major success to manage to hold the first truly democratic German elections, which led to the National Assembly and the creation of the Weimar constitution. However, Ebert himself was attacked for endorsing the use of the army and the *Freikorps* to brutally suppress the more radical elements of the left.

From a humble background, Ebert was chosen to be the country's first president in February 1919, a position he held until his death. He oversaw the years of crisis and applied the emergency decrees of Article 48 with success (see pages 52–3). Yet, he became the focus of scurrilous criticism from the extreme right. He was a man of great integrity and decency, who was a patriot and served his office with distinction and correctness. His character and achievements shaped the development of Weimar.

was between those who sympathised with the creation of a parliamentary democracy and those who advocated a much more revolutionary democracy based on the workers' councils.

Ebert's coalition government

The different aims and methods of the socialist movement meant that there was a lack of unity in Ebert's coalition government. Moreover, it should also be remembered that German society was in a chaotic state of near collapse, so the leading political figures at the time had little room to manoeuvre when they had to make hasty and difficult decisions.

Ebert was a moderate and was frightened that the political situation in Germany could easily run out of control. In Table 1.1, overleaf, the nature of Ebert's major problems can be seen.

Table 1.1 Ebert's main problems

Socio-economic	Left-wing opposition	Right-wing opposition	Military
1. Inflation. Wages were falling behind prices, which was increasing social discontent	1. Strikes. From the autumn of 1918 the number of strikes increased markedly	1. <i>Freikorps</i> . A growing number of right-wing, nationalist soldiers were forming paramilitary units	1. Demobilisation. About 1.5 million soldiers had to be returned home to Germany
2. Shortages. From the winter of 1916–17 fuel and food shortages were causing real hardship in the cities	2. German communists. Inspired by the events of 1917–18 in Russia, communists aimed to bring about a revolution in Germany	2. The German Army. The army was generally conservative, but deeply embittered by the military defeat	2. Allied blockade. The Allies maintained the naval blockade even after the Armistice. Shortages, causing social distress, were not relieved until June 1919
3. Flu epidemic. The 'Spanish flu' killed thousands. It was the most serious flu epidemic of the twentieth century	3. Workers' and soldiers' councils. Hundreds of councils were created and many wanted changes to the army and industry	3. Nationalists. Nationalist-conservatives were deeply against the abdication of the Kaiser and did not support the creation of the new republic	3. Peace terms. The Armistice was when they agreed to stop fighting, but there was great public concern about the terms and actual effects of the peace treaty

Ebert's main worry was that the extreme left would gain the upper hand. He recognised the growing number of workers' councils and feared that they might threaten his policy of gradual change. He was determined to maintain law and order to prevent the country collapsing into civil war. He also feared that the return of millions of troops after the Armistice agreement, which was eventually signed on 11 November, would create enormous social and political problems. These were the main concerns in the minds of Ebert and the SPD leadership in the months that followed and were the main reasons why they made agreements with the army and industrialists.

Ebert–Groener agreement

On 10 November, the day after the declaration of the republic, General **Wilhelm Groener**, Ludendorff's successor, telephoned Chancellor Ebert, as later revealed in the former's memoirs:

SOURCE A

From the memoirs of General Groener written in the 1930s, quoted in J.C.G. Röhl, *From Bismarck to Hitler*, Longman, 1970, pp. 87–8.

In the evening [10 November 1918] I telephoned the Reich Chancellery and told Ebert that the Army put itself at the disposal of the government, that in return for this the Field Marshal and the officer corps expected the support of the government in the maintenance of order and discipline in the Army. The officer corps expected the government to fight against Bolshevism and was ready for the struggle. Ebert accepted my offer of an alliance ...

At first, of course, we had to make concessions, for developments in the Army and in the homeland had taken such a turn as to make the vigorous issuing of commands by the High Command impossible for the time being. The task was to contain and render harmless the revolutionary movement.

The Ebert–Groener telephone conversation was very significant. The Supreme Army Command agreed to support the new government and to use troops to maintain the stability and security of the new republic. In return, Ebert promised to oppose the spread of revolutionary socialism and to preserve the authority of the army officers. The deal agreed has become known simply as the Ebert–Groener agreement.

Stinnes–Legien agreement

A few days later, on 15 November, Karl Legien, leader of the trade unions, and Hugo Stinnes, leader of the industrial employers, held another significant discussion. The Stinnes–Legien agreement was, in effect, a deal where the trade unions made a commitment not to interfere with private ownership and the free market, in return for workers' committees, an eight-hour working day and full legal recognition. Ebert's provisional government endorsed this because the German trade unions were a powerful movement and traditionally closely tied with the SPD.

These two agreements with the army and industry have been severely criticised over the years, particularly by the left wing. Critics have accused Ebert of having supported compromises with the forces of conservatism. The army was not reformed at all and it was not really committed to democracy. Employers resented the concessions and were unsympathetic to the Weimar system. Nevertheless, there is a counter-argument that Ebert and the SPD leadership were motivated by the simple desire to guarantee stability and a peaceful transition.

KEY FIGURE

Wilhelm Groener (1867–1939)

Politician and soldier, who succeeded Ludendorff. Worked hard with Ebert to prevent revolutionary disturbances in Germany 1918–19. Committed to the Weimar Republic and served as defence minister 1928–32.

According to Groener in Source A, what did the two men agree on and why did the deal have important implications for the new republic?

