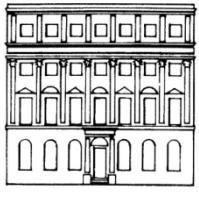
German Historical Institute
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Marius S. Ostrowski:
Living the German Revolution: Expectations, Experiences, Responses
Conference Report
German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 41, No. 1
(May 2019), pp155-163

Living the German Revolution: Expectations, Experiences, Responses. Conference held at the German Historical Institute London, 18–20 October 2018. Conveners: Christopher Dillon (London), Christina von Hodenberg (London), Steven Schouten (Amsterdam), and Kim Wünschmann (Munich).

After four years of First World War centenaries, modern European historians might be forgiven for succumbing to a measure of centennial torpor. Yet in the new historical research and interpretations which these commemorations brought to the fore, one of the seminal events of the war remained somewhat in the shadows. This was the German Revolution of 1918–19, a major historical turning point in which German soldiers and civilians rose up to overthrow the German Empire's political and military leadership. Since the 1960s and 1970s, comprehensive and systematic studies of the Revolution have been comparatively rare, with many analyses situating the events of 1918–19 within the wider history of the ill-fated Weimar Republic. Yet in recent years, as the Revolution's centenary approached, new research has emerged to challenge the dominant narratives about its events, to examine the role of neglected groups and blurred identities, and to bring to life the vitality of revolution itself, looking beyond theorists and professional politicians to the roles of activists, supporters and opponents, partisans, and bystanders.

The aim of this conference, sponsored by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, was to re-evaluate the German Revolution's contested history and memory, focusing on the socio-cultural realm of expectations, experiences, and responses. It sought to explore the subjective dimension of the revolutionary events by examining the practices and agency of ordinary protagonists, and to gauge the Revolution's popular mobilization and societal penetration. With its far-reaching destruction of inherited patterns of authority, the Revolution became for Weimar contemporaries a prism to understand the creation of democratic citizenship and institutions, and a potential model for spreading democracy across Europe. Given the apparent global return of authoritarianism, the conference provided a timely occasion to explore the Revolution's contested legacy for the Weimar republican project.

The full conference programme can be found under 'Events and Conferences' on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

The first panel, 'Living at Revolutionary Flashpoints', cast the conference *in medias res*, offering three complementary perspectives on how the Revolution was experienced 'on the ground' in its primary contexts: naval, urban, and rural. Wiebke Wiede (Trier) focused on the naval port of Wilhelmshaven, one of the cradles of the Revolution, as a microcosm of how various social groups at the end of the Kaiserreich reacted to the Revolution and the foundation of the Republic. She traced the way in which socialist revolutionaries returning from penal battalions at the front worked closely with naval crews and workers to subvert the existing social order in November 1918, as well as the legacy of the sailors' revolt for reactionary officers who later went on to join the anti-Republic terrorist group *Organisation Consul*. Christina Lipke (Hamburg) shifted the focus to Hamburg, and illustrated how the institutions of the Revolution's local government sought to maintain at least a superficial resemblance to the cultural manifestations of the outgoing order. She observed that the Revolution was not always marked by overt violence, and illustrated how ordinary Germans soon came to accept the disruptions and restrictions it imposed on them as part of their everyday routines. Last, Christopher Dillon (London) turned to Bavaria as an example of the competing narratives at work in the Revolution's reception, stressing the need to move away from a narrow focus on Munich in accounts of the sheer diversity of the Bavarian experience. He sought to resist traditional narratives that attributed the Bavarian revolution to dilettante intellectuals, focusing on the 'provincial tremors' in Ingolstadt, Erlangen, and Hof at the height of the Spring Offensive that triggered the collapse of regional aristocratic power, and in effect split Bavaria into a mosaic of mini-republics. The discussion centred on the ways in which various German regions tried to absorb demobilized troops returning from the Front, and considered how transgressive appropriations of public space and personal (real or imaginary) narratives of revolutionary experience were used as means to cope with the experience of defeat.

In the second panel, 'Perspectives on Revolutionary Violence', the conference considered how the Revolution's periodic moments of violence were received, both by their participants and in retrospect. Anita Klingler (Edinburgh) traced the continuities in the way left-wing violence was treated and described across Europe, with a comparison between the crushing of the Bavarian Räterepublik in April–

May 1919 and the Battle of George Square in Glasgow in January 1919. In both cases, political authorities deployed modern weaponry in the interests of preserving 'Ruhe und Ordnung' ('peace and order'), but cast themselves in the role of 'liberators', consistently using dehumanizing, antisemitic language to denigrate and delegitimize 'alien' Bolshevik and Sinn Fein tendencies, perceived as 'viehisch' (brutish), among the revolutionary workers. Thomas Blanck (Cologne) drew comparisons between revolutionary Munich and Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Impresa di Fiume* ('Fiume Endeavour') of September 1919, considering whether interwar revolutionary violence became, to a degree, a self-fulfilling prophecy. In contrast to 'bourgeois' representations of these moments as 'carnivalesque', he stressed the uncertainty brought to them by situational factors, such as urban overcrowding, noise, darkness, material needs, the omnipresence of arms, and the frequent deaths of innocent bystanders. Finally, Mark Jones (Dublin) offered an analysis of the Revolution's violent episodes over time, observing that they led to a clear transformation in political culture of what counted as acceptable political violence in transitional periods. He noted the ways in which police behaviour in late 1918 rapidly became more ruthless and brutalized, with the normalization of the use of military tactics against civilians laying the groundwork for the methods by which the Nazis rose to power. The conference moved on to a discussion of the changing partisan claims to ownership over state violence against civilians, including its effects on national and regional identities (such as the erosion of traditional *Reservatrechte*, or reserved rights, by the Reich government), and the counter-revolutionary co-opting of the legacies of violence associated with revolutionary moments.

The conference's keynote address was given by Benjamin Ziemann (Sheffield), who offered several local accounts of the Revolution's events to illustrate the tensions between its multifarious historical 'plot' and its 'emplotment' in both revolutionary memory and historical reception. He stressed the role of the media, especially 'shock cinema', in the Revolution's emplotment, especially regarding the long 'tail' of revolutionary activities that persisted past the Revolution's formal end in 1919, such as the 1920–21 Vogtland uprising under Max Hoelz. The German Revolution, for Ziemann, never followed the tripartite comedy–romance–tragedy emplotment of other revolutions, largely because the brutal end of the Spartacist

uprising precluded all attempts at forming a strong countervailing narrative. Similarly, he observed that the radical promise of the council movement that emerged during the Revolution suffered from its failure to incorporate vital groups within German society, and soon became co-opted by the administrative structures of the late Wilhelmine state in the context of urgent yet pedestrian needs to manage the production, distribution, and consumption of food, coal, and other resources. Ziemann also argued that the Revolution was characterized for the most part by competing male subjectivities, which prompted a lively debate about the erasure of female and other intersectional class and religious subjectivities in historical discussions of the spaces in which the Revolution took place.

On the second day of the conference, the panels focused explicitly on several groups in early twentieth-century German society whose participation in the Revolution had only been indirectly alluded to so far. The third panel, 'Women and the German Revolution', sharpened historical focus on the female protagonists of the Revolution, challenging the pervasive male gendering of its seminal events. Ingrid Sharp (Leeds) recentred the role of women away from being mere passive beneficiaries of male revolutionary activity, arguing that historical narratives of the Revolution must redefine political activity in a way that decouples violence from gendered identities, not to 'overclaim' women's role but to avoid 'editing out' women in a distortionary way. Despite the significant patriarchal barriers standing in the way of women's participation in, for example, the elected councils, over 250 women can be identified who had recognized roles in the Revolution, including socialists such as Toni Sender, Gertrud Völcker, and Hilde Kramer, and pacifists like Anita Augspurg and Lida Gustava Heymann. Corinne Painter (Leeds) built on Sharp's argument to explore women's experience of the events of 1918–19, using examples of how neglected female protagonists learned to deal with the arbitrariness of state power and terror. Writers such as Lola Landau and Cläre Jung, for example, sought actively to cultivate a sense of self as agents who could influence the world and events around them, using themes of love and suffering to craft imagery of women's roles in reaching across borders to form a new world and a new humanity. Matthew Stibbe (Sheffield Hallam) observed that, in many revolutionary narratives, women are 'permitted' to be symbols, sites, or servants of revolution, but never its bona fide agents

unless, like Rosa Luxemburg, they conform to 'the linear stories told by men'. While it was typically only communist literature that stressed female agency in an effort to demarcate itself from liberal bourgeois elements in the Revolution, tensions still remained in the attempts by some communists to relegate women to adjunct roles, and in their reluctance to take seriously emotional responses to revolutionary experiences as legitimate foundations for socialist views. The ensuing conference discussion noted that the partisan affiliation of many of these 'rediscovered' women was either communist (KPD) or independent social-democratic (USPD), which contrasted not only with the patriarchal exclusionism of mainstream social democrats (SPD), but also with German women's wider rejection of both the council movement and their tendency to support reactionary parties (such as the DNVP) in later Weimar-era elections.

In the fourth panel, 'German Jews and the Revolution', the conference turned to Jewish experiences of the Revolution, both through activists' direct links to party-political developments in the early Weimar Republic, and through the perceptions of other Jewish contemporaries experiencing the historical events against the backdrop of the minority's complex 'insider–outsider' identity. Kim Wünschmann (Munich) outlined the way in which the Revolution brought out many different conceptions of Jewishness among German Jews, particularly in relation to their membership of the emergent democratic German state. Often, they were caught between contradictory accusations of being war profiteers and at the same time Bolshevik sympathizers, which led many to internalize the imposed *Judenfrage* as a heuristic through which to re-evaluate their instinctive loyalty to the German nation. Daniel Siemens (Newcastle) stressed that the Revolution was often the object of deep uncertainty and frustrated aspirations among Central European Jews, who had hoped that it would not only bring about democratic transformation but also lead to the recognition and achievement of (political) emancipation. The hopes and fears of Jews in the Revolution were inextricably bound up in the First World War and the *Fronterlebnis*, as well as the divisive 1916 census of Jews that remained unpublished but contributed heavily to the spread of antisemitic stereotypes of cowardice and lack of patriotism. The discussion centred around the efficacy of visual imagery in propounding claims and counter-claims about Jewish identity, mobilized more effectively by antisemitic than anti-antise-

mitic tendencies, as well as around the relative absence of a true 'home' for German Jews in Weimar party politics (with the liberal DDP and DVP typically capturing most Jews' support).

The fifth panel, 'Emotions and the Chronicling of Revolutionary History', explored how the events of the Revolution were experienced by young Germans who were still growing into their political roles within society. Nadine Rossol (Essex) chronicled the experiences of a class of students training to become schoolteachers in the Ruhr area, whose essays about their encounters with the Revolution saw them writing themselves into the local script of revolutionary events as critical commentators, keen observers, or reporters. She noted the particular benefits of using school essays as ego-documents to track the construction of pupils' selfhood and identity, as well as the great variety of hopes and fears already evident at their early age regarding the risks of revolutionary *Pöbelherrschaft* ('mob rule') continuing or being ended by the formation of the Weimar Republic. The discussion focused on the role of teachers with clear political leanings in influencing pupils' political self-formation, and noted the significance of imaginary representations of the Revolution in shaping its legacy for the citizens of the new Republic.

The conference returned to the intersection of politics and religion for its sixth panel, 'The Churches and the Revolution', examining the complex role played by the various Christian denominations and institutions in the transition from Kaiserreich to Republic. Benedikt Brunner (Mainz) examined the way in which Protestant churches sought to leverage the concept of *Volkskirche* ('people's church') to remain socially relevant and build a new identity in the Weimar Republic. Waging a desperate struggle against the feared 'mutilation of the church', Protestant theologians sought to rethink religious organization in a way that aimed to reach all members of German society, bridging confessional boundaries, in order to allow them to cast themselves as revolutionary agents without committing to endorsing the new German state. Ulrike Ehret (Munich), assessed the Catholic response to the Revolution, arguing that the traditions of political Catholicism were instrumental in protecting reactionary elements throughout the Weimar period. She focused especially on 'brown priests', such as Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, in promoting Catholic support for *völkisch* and Nazi ideologies, and in perpetuating xenophobic and antisemitic tropes about 'foreign writers' and

'Revolutionsjuden', who were accused of turning Germany from a 'Volksstaat' into a 'Judenstaat'. The conference then raised the question of dissident 'free churches' on the fringes of German Christian denominations, noting that the organized *Amtskirchen* ('institutional churches') were often the most effective organizers of counter-revolution in Germany—a fact typically obscured by the more overt actions of reactionary *Freikorps*.

The last day of the conference turned from social to cultural analyses of the Revolution's legacy. In the seventh panel, 'Publishing Houses, Culture, and Education', the focus was on the response of intellectuals and educators to the Revolution's events. Margarete Tiessen (Cambridge) traced the response to the Revolution of a group of highly influential intellectuals associated with the publishing house Samuel Fischer, casting them as a neglected 'other left' whose seminal contributions to post-Revolution Germany are often overlooked in favour of more revolutionary strands. Figures such as Walther Rathenau, Thomas Mann, and Gerhard Hauptmann argued that the Revolution needed an inner German *Geist* to achieve real emancipation, a democratic freedom that transcended the mere desperate 'negative unity' of radical action—a *Geist* that they saw themselves as best placed to articulate. Steven Schouten (Amsterdam) found a similar strain of thought among intellectuals who were influenced by theosophical and anthroposophical traditions of early twentieth-century mysticism, culminating in a commitment to the idea of achieving Germany's social rebirth through a concerted spiritual revolution. In particular, Rudolf Steiner urgently defended the need to save Germany's cultural *Geist* from subordination to political or economic logics, and to cultivate its enlightened formation through new regimens of schooling, medicine, and nutrition. The discussion focused on the ways in which German intellectuals sought to reinvent socialism and denude it of its Marxist associations during the war and interwar period, as well as on how they formulated cross-ideological accounts of democracy—sometimes *Führerdemokratie*—with pedagogical elites as the optimal model for the new Republic.

The eighth panel, 'Revolutionary Ideas and Practices', expanded the conference's intellectual-historical focus to reconnect the Revolution with more contemporary social research. Darrow Schecter (Sussex) argued that the Revolution provides a treasure-trove of hitherto unexplored resources and ideas to inform and renew the con-

temporary Left, especially on questions of democratizing the economy and other areas of society beyond the state. Following the work of Hermann Heller and Hugo Sinzheimer, he argued that modern thought on the Left must recover the concept of the 'social constitution', and especially of the *Wirtschaftsverfassung* ('economic constitution'), in order to move left-wing strategy beyond mere *Machtergreifung* ('seizing power') and achieve a true democratic transition away from the institutions of the *Obrigkeitsstaat* ('authoritarian state'). Andrew Donson (Amherst) provided a critique of the discourse around *Arbeitsunlust* ('reluctance to work'), which circulated among opponents of the new society and culture the Revolution had inaugurated, arguing that the availability of 'free time' was essential to enabling a revolution to take place at all. He focused on the economic reforms instituted in the early Republic, including unrestricted freedom of association, a gradual shift to an eight-hour day, and comparatively generous unemployment support, observing that they were more consequence than cause of a post-war shift in German culture to prioritize private enjoyment over the needs of the country. The conference then discussed the similarities and differences between the reforms spearheaded by the early Republic and analogous models endorsed by radical syndicalism, fascist corporatism, and ordoliberal *Sozialmarktwirtschaft* ('social market economy'), and considered how far the 'laboratory' (Schouten) of the Revolution could be used to inform contemporary democratic responses to economic financialization.

The conference closed with a final roundtable discussion between Anthony McElligott (Limerick), Andrew Donson, Nadine Rossol, and Steven Schouten, which gathered together the essential themes that the conference had considered. Central to these was the timeline of the Revolution, with enduring questions over both its date of origin—from the various 'watershed moments' during the First World War to the formal transfer of power on 9 November 1918—and its later horizon of effects, including, of course, the entire Weimar period, but also the subsequent periods of right-wing and left-wing totalitarianism. While not all the agents of the Revolution were sure of their role in its events, a shared sense of historical momentousness emerges very strongly from ego-documents and other sources of the time, as well as a view of the Revolution as an opportunity for constitutional and intellectual transformation and renewal that had to be

seized. But perhaps the strongest message of the conference was one of plurality—that there was not just one German Revolution, but many concurrent German Revolutions. Of course, this is partly a question of decentring the Revolution, away from Berlin and Munich, away even from the ports and the *Kleinstadt*, to the point at which the Revolution became a free-floating signifier in people's fantasies, far removed from the real experiences of revolutionary action. But, above all, it is a question of recognizing the many identities that were at stake in the Revolution's events and aftermath, the many socialisms and forms of left-wing politics, the many rival masculinities, femininities, and religious identities, which combine to give 1918–19 its complex, contested legacy.

Marius S. Ostrowski (Oxford)