

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 210

### “1919 – Germany I”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*The leadership has failed. Even so, the leadership can and must be recreated from the masses and out of the masses. The masses are the decisive element, they are the rock on which the final victory of the revolution will be built. The masses were on the heights; they have developed this “defeat” into one of the historical defeats which are the pride and strength of international socialism. And that is why the future victory will bloom from this “defeat.”*

*“Order reigns in Berlin!” You stupid henchmen! Your “order” is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will already “raise itself with a rattle” and announce with fanfare, to your terror: I was, I am, I will be!*

Rosa Luxemburg.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 210. 1919: Germany, part one.

Let us consider the situation in Germany as of the Armistice in November 1918, and let us begin by refreshing our memories around the final months of the war. From the German perspective.

To begin with, Germany won the war in the east. Of that there can be no dispute. Russia surrendered. Russia signed a peace treaty with Germany that was like a German wish list. Russia agreed to give up territories that were home to a third of its population, half its industry, and almost all of its coal production.

Now, you could argue that most of these people were not ethnic Russians, and that Germany was not so much penalizing Russia as liberating its minorities. It’s the German version of self-determination of peoples. Liberals in Germany embraced that interpretation. You’ll recall that the three largest political parties in the Reichstag had passed a resolution calling for peace

without annexations or indemnities, which was language not that much different from Woodrow Wilson's.

The German right had a different idea. They meant for the new ethnic states that arose from the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to become German satellites, with German ruling classes, particularly in Poland and the Baltic States.

In the end, Germany was not able to impose either of these visions on Eastern Europe, but that was only because of the war in the West.

Germany tried to leverage its victory in the East to win a victory in the West in 1918, but although German gains in the spring and summer were impressive, in the end they did not fundamentally alter the situation on the Western Front. By August of 1918, the Allied powers had regained numerical superiority and were on the advance. For four years, the commanders on both sides of the Western Front had experimented with new tactics and new technologies, hoping to break the stalemate. Now the Allied side had hit on the winning combination. It involved tanks, airplanes, and precision targeting of artillery, all carefully coordinated with infantry operations. This approach to warfare is known in our time as *combined arms*.

August 8, 1918 was the day that Ludendorff called the "Black Day" of the German Army. By September, the German line was collapsing, and Hindenburg and Ludendorff were telling the Kaiser and the civilian leadership that it was time to ask for an armistice. Remember that Hindenburg had argued that even if the armistice didn't lead to peace, it would buy the German Army valuable time to rest and regroup and resupply. Let's call that "Plan B."

But Woodrow Wilson would not negotiate with Hindenburg, nor with Kaiser Wilhelm. Only with democratic representatives of the German people, he said. So a civilian government, a liberal government, was formed in October, one that had the support of the major parties in the Reichstag and thus met Woodrow Wilson's criteria for an acceptable negotiating partner.

But here's an important point to consider: This new government, with Prince Max as Chancellor, did not enter into the armistice talks in October thinking their duty was to negotiate a German surrender. Their goal was to extricate Germany from the war in the West as painlessly as possible.

Germany had already won the war! In the East. If it were possible to negotiate a peace deal with the Western Allies that would roughly restore the pre-war status quo in the West, that would leave Germany with one win and one draw on the scoreboard, so to speak. And that win in the East had been a substantial one. Even if Germany had to settle for a draw in the West, it would add up to a win overall. Even if Germany had to make some concessions in the West, if they could be kept small enough, they would be more than offset by Germany's gains in the East.

The Great War had been a war that by many measures was unprecedented: in its length, in its scope, in its economic cost, in the demands it made on the civilian populations, and not least, in its body count. It was total war. And total war generally ends in total victory or total defeat. The Napoleonic Wars didn't end until the Russian Army was in Paris and Napoleon deposed. The American Civil War didn't end until the US Army was in Richmond and Atlanta was in ashes. The task facing Germany's new, more democratic leadership was to talk its way out of total war without subjecting Germany to total defeat.

It sounds impossible, at first. But there's a wild card in the deck, and his name is Woodrow Wilson. Wilson's Fourteen Points sounded a lot like the Reichstag's "no annexations or indemnities" translated into American. Hadn't Woodrow Wilson been the man who spent years calling for "peace without victory"?

The British and the French would be impossible to negotiate with. They would make demands on Germany, heavy, burdensome demands. But Wilson was different. And the Allied strength on the Western front was largely attributable to the US Army. If Wilson stopped the war, the French and British would have no choice but to go along with his decision, which was indeed how it happened.

For Wilson, it must have seemed the capstone of his already highly successful political career. He personally was going to end the worst war in history, and he was going to end it on his own terms, terms he had first articulated years ago, when America was still a neutral country. The British and the French were less enthusiastic about Wilson's peace plan, though they clearly saw the virtue in ending the war now in 1918, rather than fighting on to the bitter end, which would require sacrificing a further measure of their nations' wealth and youth. And how on Earth would the democratically elected governments sitting in London and Paris explain to their own voters why they wanted to keep fighting after Mr. Wilson had declared the war over?

In fact, the strongest opposition to Wilson's peace proposals on the Allied side came from the Republican Party in the United States. Remember the Republicans had attempted to scuttle the peace negotiations by urging the British and French governments to ignore the US President and fight on. More radical Republicans spoke of impeaching Wilson for the crime of opening peace talks with an enemy government in wartime.

These political fractures on the Allied side, between those like Wilson who were prepared to talk peace today, and the more hawkish elements in all three Allied governments, who basically felt that Germany had not yet suffered enough, this split was mirrored in German politics. As liberal, civilian, pro-peace politicians like Matthias Erzberger and the Social Democrats were coming to the fore and taking the lead in peace negotiations, the political right in Germany, particularly in the military, were becoming increasingly unhappy. Then came Woodrow Wilson's diplomatic note of October 23, 1918, the one in which he instructed the Germans that the Allies would not

negotiate with the military or the Kaiser, but only with democratically elected representatives of the German people.

As we saw in episode 170, Ludendorff resigned, to the cheers of the German public. Kaiser Wilhelm and Field Marshal Hindenburg reluctantly agreed they had no better option than to accept Wilson's terms. But the Imperial German Admiralty, without consulting the Army or the government or the Kaiser, decided on its own to ignore talk of an armistice and gamble everything on a last-ditch suicide attack on the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet. And when I call it a "suicide attack," of course I don't mean the admirals ordering the attack would be personally committing suicide for the sake of the Kaiser and German honor. I mean the admirals would be ordering their subordinates, the rank and file sailors of the High Seas Fleet, to commit suicide for the sake of the Kaiser and German honor.

The rank and file sailors of the High Seas Fleet received to this call to die for the sake of someone else's notions of honor about as well as you'd expect, and when the dust had settled, Germany was declared a republic, the Social Democratic Party, the SPD, was running the government, and the Kaiser was on his way into exile in the Netherlands. Germany went from being an autocratic monarchy to a constitutional monarchy to a democratic republic in the course of about a week.

Then came the Armistice. Woodrow Wilson wisely chose not to set the terms of the Armistice himself, but handed off that decision to the Allied military commanders, principally Marshal Foch, who saddled the Germans with tough demands. It was not enough to stop the fighting; the German Navy would have to surrender its ships and U-boats, the Army would have to surrender large numbers of arms, as well as the locomotives and railroad cars that had given it its remarkable mobility, and withdraw from foreign soil. Allied troops would occupy Germany west of the Rhine River, as well as assume control over the major river crossings.

In other words, Foch and the Allied generals were going to make sure the German military never got a chance to implement Hindenburg's Plan B. It was silly of Hindenburg ever to have suggested such a thing; the Allied commanders would have had to have been spectacularly naïve to fall for that ploy.

So when the Armistice came, it came without any realistic hope of Germany restarting the war. It was a surrender in all but name, and that was why the military command refused to sign it. It was a matter of honor, you see. The civilian leadership didn't care. They just wanted peace. Recall how Vice Chancellor Friedrich von Payer told Erich Ludendorff, "I know nothing of soldier's honor. I am an ordinary, plain civilian. I see only hungry people."

And so it was a delegation of civilian leaders, led by Matthias Erzberger, signed the armistice agreement with Foch in that famous railroad car, civilian leaders representing a civilian government that was only a few days old. The military leadership, soldiers like the renowned war hero Paul von Hindenburg, who was a household name in Germany, stood aloof.

That brings us up to the Armistice on November 11, and the crucial fact that the Armistice was agreed to by the new civilian leadership of Germany, not by the now-deposed Kaiser or the military. Crucial because this will later allow the military to blame the Armistice and the subsequent peace terms on the civilian government. Never mind that Hindenburg and the military were themselves urging the government to open armistice talks six weeks ago.

But put a pin in that topic for now. We'll come back to it next week, but for the remainder of today's episode, I want to focus on the domestic political situation in Germany after the Armistice of November 11.

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 1*]

The war was over. The troops were coming home for Christmas. The Allies were organizing a peace conference, but as you know, they also declared their intention to meet among themselves first to hammer out a common negotiating position before opening talks with Germany. That meant that, internationally, there was nothing for the German government to do. So political attention focused on domestic questions.

Recall that the Social Democratic Party, or SPD, was the largest single political party in the German Reichstag. The SPD, the Centre Party and Progressive People's Party were the three parties that had together approved the Reichstag Peace Resolution back in 1917 that had so outraged the military at the time. Now that the war was lost and peace was the only option, this coalition of parties was the only political force that has the democratic credibility domestically and internationally to represent Germany in peace talks.

Remember too, that the leader of the SPD, Friedrich Ebert, didn't want to see a revolution. He wanted a more democratic Germany, but a constitutional monarchy would have suited him just fine. As leader of the Reichstag's largest political party, he also believed he was the logical choice for Chancellor of a new government that would include the SPD's peace coalition partners.

But the SPD was under pressure on its left flank. There was a splinter group that had left the SPD because they opposed the party's ongoing support for the war. They're usually called the Independent SPD. And there was a more recent split of an even more radical faction that called itself the *Spartakusbund*, or Spartacus League, after the famous leader of a slave rebellion during the Roman Republic. The Spartacus League drew its inspiration from the Russian Revolution and aimed to engineer a similar socialist revolution in Germany. Its two most prominent leaders were Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, both of whom we've encountered before in our narrative.

Ironically, when the German Navy admirals basically mutinied against the impending armistice and tried to launch their Fleet in a suicide run at the Royal Navy, their own sailors mutinied against them in return. The sailors then appealed to the local SPD in Kiel, and the mutiny

evolved into a more general uprising of workers and leftists across Germany, in just the same way that rebellious soldiers and sailors in Petrograd helped trigger revolution in Russia.

I say it's ironic, because these right-wing aristocrats in the Admiralty gave a huge boost to the Spartacus League, the leftmost political party in Germany. Workers' councils were quickly formed in major German cities, the equivalent of the Russian soviets. The German word for one of these councils, by the way, is *Rat*, R-A-T; the plural is *Räte*, R-A-with-an-umlaut-T-E, because that's how German works.

The main socialist party, the SPD, under Ebert, was still looking for a democratic, constitutional solution to the crisis in German government. The Spartacus League and the Independent SPD were looking for a new October Revolution. Deputy SPD leader Philipp Scheidemann publicly declared Germany a republic on November 9, not because that was what Ebert or the party wanted or the German constitution allowed, but because they'd heard that the Spartacus League was going to declare Germany a socialist republic later that same day. The SPD declaration was meant to pre-empt the leftists and rob them of their political momentum. The Spartacus League went ahead with their declaration anyway, so after the Armistice took effect, approved by Ebert's SPD government, Germany effectively had two parallel governments, both claiming authority to run the country, but neither having a solid legal basis for its claim.

The SPD-led government called itself the "Council of People's Deputies." They took control of the existing administrative apparatus of the old Imperial government and put it to work implementing reforms. Martial law and censorship were lifted, political prisoners freed, and universal suffrage declared for all men and women twenty years of age and older. The party organized committees to prepare for the nationalization of large industries, like coal and steel.

The independent SPD and the Spartacus League, on the other hand, the radical socialists, took over leadership the *Räte*, the soviets, the workers' councils. These groups took control of local affairs in cities and towns across Germany, including Hamburg, Bremen, Düsseldorf, and Leipzig. In some of these localities, the *Räte* and the civil service working for the Berlin government coordinated their administrations; in others, the *Räte* had the civil servants arrested.

If you remember our many episodes on the Russian Revolution, a lot of this will sound familiar to you, with Friedrich Ebert and the Council of People's Deputies taking on the role of Alexander Kerensky and the Provisional Government, and the various local and regional *Räte* taking on the role of the soviets. Germany had a bifurcated government. On the one hand, there was the central government run by self-appointed parliamentary leaders that leaned socialist but had taken over the Imperial state apparatus, although it was at least nominally committed to setting up a parliamentary democracy. On the other hand, a bunch of regional workers' councils popping up all over the country with no legal authority and no administrative experience but with more political credibility and full of socialist zeal and more interested in implementing the

socialist state than in preserving bourgeois democracy and suspicious of the motives of the central government.

Also in parallel to the Russian experience, the German Council of People's Deputies proposed to resolve the problem of its own lack of either formal legal authority or a popular mandate by organizing elections for a National Assembly that would function as an interim parliament and draft a new constitution for the new German republic. You may remember, back in the days of the Russian Revolution, that I kept dingling the Provisional Government for dragging its feet in organizing elections for the Russian Constituent Assembly. By the time those elections took place, the October Revolution had already happened and the Constituent Assembly was reduced to a nullity.

The Council of People's Deputies, on the other hand, must have been listening to me, because they scheduled the election for the German National Assembly for January 19, 1919, just ten weeks after taking power. Maybe they learned something from the Russian experience; maybe this is just that legendary German efficiency in operation.

But the dissident left, the Independent SPD and the Spartacus League, maybe they had learned their own lessons from the Russian example. They opposed this rush to electoral democracy. In their view, the socialist revolution in Germany had already begun. It had begun with the sailors at Kiel and spread across the country. Bourgeois elected officials and Reichstags and National Assemblies were no longer the point. Job one was protecting and advancing the ongoing socialist revolution against the backlash of the ruling elites. First we make sure the new socialist state is fully entrenched, then we can argue over the organizational details of how it would be governed.

To the Council of People's Deputies, this was entirely backward. Only an elected assembly had the right and the authority to make that decision. Elections first, then we'll figure out what kind of economic system the new Germany will live under.

This split between the more moderate elements of the central government and the leftists in the councils developed gradually through the months of November and December 1918. In the early days of the revolution, the local councils and the Spartacus League mostly saw themselves as defenders of the central government against what was left of the military and the monarchy. The Independent SDP even held some seats in the new governing council. A special revolutionary military unit was created to protect the revolution and the new government. It was called the *Volksmarinedivision*, the People's Navy Division, because its core members were mutinous sailors from Kiel, who had been imprisoned under the old regime. Now they were released and their numbers augmented by other left-leaning soldiers and sailors. They were summoned to Berlin and quartered in the palace that had until recently been the Berlin residence of the Kaiser.

But as the split between the moderate government and the leftists became wider, the government began to wonder if keeping a thousand armed leftist radicals down the block from the Chancellery was such a good idea after all. How long would it be before someone like Karl

Liebknecht decided to cast himself in the role of the German Lenin and march the *Volksmarinedivision* down the street to re-enact the October Revolution?

But here is where the parallels between the Russian Revolution and the German Revolution begin to break down. The Russian Provisional Government stayed in the war and the Russian Army stayed at the front throughout 1917. The new German government had signed an Armistice. The war was over. The Army was coming home.

Not the soldiers on the Eastern front, mind you. As you'll recall from the early episodes of our 1919 World Tour—if you can remember that far back—the Allies had requested the German government keep its forces on the Eastern front in place until the peace talks had a chance to sort out the situation in the East. But on the Western front, that was a different story. The Allies wanted German soldiers out of France, out of Belgium, out of Luxembourg, PDQ. Also out of the Rhineland, which the Allies intended to occupy themselves.

So the soldiers of the Western Front, nearly a million of them, came home. Chancellor Ebert marched them through Berlin on December 10 in a festive occasion that someone who didn't know better might have mistaken for a victorious army returning in triumph. Ebert famously declared to them. "No enemy has overcome you. You return undefeated from the field of battle."

To anyone who did know better, this was transparent nonsense. The German Army had been thoroughly, fully, comprehensively defeated. But Ebert knew exactly what he was doing. If the radical left of the *Räte* and the *Volksmarinedivision* and the Spartacus League are going to challenge the authority of Ebert's government, then Ebert will need a few rifles on his side. Buttering up the returning war veterans must have seemed like a small price to pay to avoid a Communist coup and ending up in front of a firing squad.

But this moment, like the moment when the military command refused to sign the Armistice, will reverberate through German politics in a way no one yet foresees.

We'll come back to that. Oh yes, we will come back to that. But in the short run, Ebert may have saved his government, which at the time was doubtless all he was thinking about. February Revolution, yes. October Revolution, that's a big no.

Through December, Ebert and the SPD leadership were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the close proximity of the *Volksmarinedivision*, which was clearly aligned with the Independent SPD and the Spartacus League. Ebert told his minister of military affairs, fellow SPD member Otto Wels, to get rid of them. Wels ordered the sailors to relocate outside Berlin. When they proved resistant to leaving, Wels withheld their salaries. This led to a confused confrontation just before Christmas, when the sailors seized control of the Chancellery, the seat of the government, also seizing Wels personally. Ebert called in the regular Army, the guys he'd been buttering up for just such an occasion. About 800 heavily armed soldiers attacked the 1000



more lightly armed sailors on Christmas Eve. The sailors got the better of the skirmish, driving the soldiers away; there were 34 killed on both sides and 58 wounded.

But the *Volksmarinedivision* was not exactly the radical militant Bolshevik force Ebert feared it might be. After the dust had settled, they agreed to abandon the Chancellery, release Wels, and withdraw from Berlin as ordered, in exchange for the government coughing up that back pay they were owed.

Though the armed confrontation fizzled out, it was definitely a blow to Ebert and the SPD. The Independent SPD withdrew from the government in protest against the the government's decision to use the army against the pro-revolutionary sailors and Karl Liebknecht of the Spartacus League condemned what he called *Eberts Blutweihnacht*, that is, Ebert's Bloody Christmas.

It was also a blow to the regular German Army, which had seriously embarrassed itself by losing a street battle to a band of sailors and revolutionary rabble. German military command supported the creation of the Freikorps, which we met before when we talked about events in the East. These were returning war veterans who organized into volunteer paramilitaries and were regarded by the High Command as much more loyal, disciplined, and reliable than other veterans, the ones displaying these alarming leftist sympathies.

The Freikorps were hardly apolitical, though. They skewed hard to the right. They were pro-Kaiser and anti-revolution and more than a little reminiscent of the Italian veterans who made up the backbone of Mussolini's *fasci* in Italy.

They say politics makes strange bedfellows. With the leftists walking out on the Ebert government and the regular Army proving inadequate, the Social Democratic Party of Germany was short on political allies. The one useful alliance left to make was with the Freikorps.

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 1*]

On the last day of the year, December 31, 1918, the leadership of the Spartacus League announced that they were reorganizing into the Communist Party of Germany, often referred to by its German initials, KPD. The founding principles of the KPD included the position that since everyone in Germany now agreed on the need to democratize, democratization was no longer an issue. The issue was whether German capitalists would be permitted to continue to control the economy or whether Germany would become socialist. The KPD was, of course, entirely committed to the latter. The founders of the KPD hoped the new party would win over the Independent SPD, now that it had been driven out of the government by Ebert's Bloody Christmas, but the Independent SPD did not take up the offer.

The new KPD also chose not to contest the upcoming election for the National Assembly, but instead to focus immediately on revolutionary socialism. This decision was not unanimous, with

Rosa Luxemburg in particular dissenting. The majority of the KPD leadership placed its faith instead in the *Räte*, the local and regional workers' councils, as the means to power.

I'm not sure what kind of timeline the KPD leadership had in mind for its version of the October Revolution, but I feel reasonably confident in saying that it was longer than three days, but it was just three days after the end of the party conference in which the KPD was created—January 4, 1919—that the revolution was triggered.

Maybe.

On that day, Saturday January 4, the Ebert government dismissed the Chief of Police in Berlin, a man named Emil Eichhorn. Eichhorn was an activist in the Independent SPD who had taken over control of the capital police back on November 9, as the Kaiser was being overthrown. Now that the Independent SPD was out of the government, and in reaction to Eichhorn's refusing to involve the police in the so-called "Bloody Christmas" fighting, Ebert's government was replacing him with an SPD loyalist. The Independent SPD and the KPD called for a demonstration in Berlin the following day, Sunday the 5<sup>th</sup>, to protest the firing. The outpouring of support exceeded their wildest expectation. Crowds numbering close to half a million thronged the streets of the capital, including many supporters of the mainstream SPD. Leaders of the protest formed what was called the "Provisional Revolutionary Committee," with 53 members, an organization that operated just as efficiently as you would expect a 53-member committee to operate. They couldn't agree over whether now was the time to launch the revolution; in the end, they settled for calling a general strike, to be held two days later.

That day, Tuesday the 7<sup>th</sup>, the strike was held and again, hundreds of thousands of Germans filled the streets of Berlin, many of them armed. They seized control of government offices and train stations. KPD members tried to persuade soldiers to join the strike but were unsuccessful, even with the supposedly left-leaning *Volksmarine* division. It sure looked like the Revolution was at hand though, and this event will go down in history as the "Spartacist Uprising," never mind that the Spartacus League is now called the KPD, or that the uprising was not solely organized or controlled by the KPD; it was full of Independent SPD supporters and even some regular SPD supporters as well.

But again, there was a split of opinion between the hardliners in the KPD, who were ready to declare the Revolution, and the more moderate leadership that wanted to negotiate a compromise with Ebert and his government. The Independent SPD leadership undertook that role as the negotiators between the government and the KPD. Ebert, for his part, agreed to participate in talks, but he also secretly sent orders to the military command to send more soldiers to Berlin.

The following day, as negotiations continued, the KPD leadership found out that troops were on their way to the capital. They broke off talks with the government and warned their supporters in the streets to prepare for combat.

The next few days saw savage fighting in the streets of Berlin as soldiers supporting the government, mostly Freikorps members, armed with heavy weapons left over from the war, methodically ground down the opposition and recaptured the city. The Freikorps took no prisoners. Revolutionaries who couldn't escape were shot dead at the scene. Over 150 people were killed in all. This included Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, both of whom went into hiding but were discovered by the Freikorps on January 15. They were both savagely beaten, then killed with shots to the head.

So it was under these grim circumstances that elections to the new National Assembly were held on January 19. This was the first German election in which everyone, man and woman, age 20 or over was eligible to vote. Under the formula in use, the 423 seats in the National Assembly would be allocated among the political parties in proportion to their share of the popular vote.

When the votes were counted, the same three-party coalition that had passed the Reichstag Peace Resolution and led the government after the fall of the Kaiser took the top three slots in the new National Assembly. The SPD, the Social Democratic Party, took 38% of the total vote, a substantial increase over what it had won in the 1912 Reichstag election, the election that had made it the number one party then. In second place, the Centre Party took 20% and the German Democratic Party, the successor party to the Progressive People's Party, took 19%. This gave the coalition more than 75% of the seats in the Assembly. Behind them were the German National People's Party, a conservative-monarchist party that captured 11% of the vote, the Independent SPD that won only a disappointing 8%, and the German People's Party, a small liberal party that won 5% of the vote. Four minor parties split the remaining 1% and change.

Because of the disorder and unrest in Berlin, the National Assembly convened in Weimar, a quiet town in central Germany, home to about 30,000 souls at that time. Apart from the question of whether the Assembly would be safe in the capital, the move to Weimar was meant as a signal to the Allies that Imperial Germany was dead, the Communists were defeated, and the new Germany would be the peaceful, civilized Germany of Schiller and Goethe, not the warlike Imperial Germany dominated by Prussian aristocrats.

The Assembly formed a government, and given the dominant position of the SPD, its two leaders naturally were elected to the two top positions, Friedrich Ebert as President and Philipp Scheidemann as prime minister, a position that would soon be renamed Chancellor. It was the National Assembly meeting in Weimar that would govern the country for the next year and a half. This Assembly will eventually ratify the Treaty of Versailles and draft a new constitution for the new German republic. This constitution will come to be known as the Weimar constitution, the three-party ruling coalition will come to be known as the Weimar Coalition, and the German state from this point forward will be known as the Weimar Republic.

I hasten to point out that "Weimar Republic" is like "Byzantine Empire." It's a label that was attached to the German state during this period retroactively by historians. No German in 1919

referred to their nation or their government as the Weimar Republic. The Germans of this era called their nation the *Deutsches Reich*, the German Realm, a name that kind of-sort of implies a monarchy, although it was in fact a republic.

Although the leftist uprising in Berlin was crushed, other regional *Räte* continued to claim control over their territories, most notably the one history usually calls the Bavarian Soviet Republic in Munich, although the word soviet is Russian. The Germans called it *Räterepublik Baiern*, which translates into English as the Council Republic of Bavaria. These various eruptions of left-wing council rule in the model of the Russian soviets were put down one by one by Freikorps fighters supporting the Weimar Coalition.

What are we to make of the birth of the new *Deutsches Reich*? An optimist would say that in the aftermath of the collapse of the Empire, the elements most committed to a democratic republic gained the upper hand and Germany transitioned to a democracy, albeit with some violence. A pessimist would say that the new republic bears the Mark of Cain, that it betrayed and murdered its fellow revolutionaries after making a devil's pact with the unrepentant German right. The German left will remember the new republic and the SPD in exactly this way, and will never forget and will never forgive.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank David for his donation, and thank you to John for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like David and John help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to everyone who has been able to help out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we press on into the next chapter of German history. Now that the Germans have settled on how their new Republic is to be governed, more or less, and who is going to govern it, more or less, the lucky winners now have to deal with the demands of the Allied powers meeting in France. The end of the dreamland, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. We should not overlook the doings of the military duo of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, because—spoiler alert—neither one of them is finished with German politics.

Hindenburg remained a top commander of the German Army and oversaw its rapid withdrawal from the Western Front, as mandated by the Allies. He opposed use of the regular Army by the new government to put down civil opposition. In June of 1919, he returned to his retirement in Hanover, which, you'll recall, was where he was already living in retirement when the Great War began. The city gifted him with a splendid new house, despite the fact that, in his own words, he had lost the greatest war in history. There he would live with Mrs. Hindenburg, whom he described as "my best friend and comrade" until her death in 1921. He wrote his memoir, under the title *Mein Leben*, My Life. The book was a best seller, but as it studiously avoids saying anything controversial, it is regarded by historians as not very interesting.

Ludendorff, you'll recall, fled the country for Sweden. In February 1919, with the political situation in Germany calmer, the Swedish government forced him out and he returned to Berlin, where he would spend the next seven months writing his memoirs, which will prove...more interesting.

[music: Closing Theme]