



HISTORICAL EXHIBITION PRESENTED BY THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG

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### **The November revolution, 1918/1919**

The revolution of November 1918 was a **consequence of the military defeat** of the German Empire in the First World War and was triggered by the naval mutiny at the **beginning of November 1918**. Within only a few days this insurgency spread throughout the Empire with no appreciable resistance from the old order. It developed into a mass movement against the monarchical system as the working classes joined forces with the troops. Throughout the Empire, **Workers' and Soldiers' Councils** were formed and assumed political and military powers. The Social Democratic parties, which had been split since 1917 into the Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany (**MSPD**) and the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (**USPD**), put themselves at the head of the revolution; along with the Councils, they became the key political players in the November revolution. Most of the Councils were politically close to the MSPD.

On 9 November 1918, the Imperial Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden (1867-1929), announced the **abdication of the Emperor**. Prince Max handed over the office of Chancellor of the *Reich* to **Friedrich Ebert** (1871-1925), chairman of the MSPD. On the same day, Philipp Scheidemann (MSPD, 1865-1939) proclaimed the republic from a window of the Reichstag building. A few hours later, Karl Liebknecht (USPD, 1871-1919) proclaimed the 'Free Socialist Republic'. This **twofold proclamation of the republic** reflected the conflict that underlay the revolution. While the MSPD wanted a **constituent national assembly** to be convened without delay, the USPD advocated the rapid realisation of Socialist ideals in a system of soviet-style councils. The MSPD wanted fundamental issues of constitutional law, including the economic order, to be decided by the democratically elected National Assembly. In view of the numerous challenges arising in connection with the lost war, such as the repatriation of several million troops and the provision of food supplies, and for fear of bringing the country to the brink of civil war, the MSPD opted for **cooperation with the old power brokers of the Empire**. There was, however, no strong sense of commitment to parliamentary democracy and the republic among military officers, the police, the judiciary and the administration and civil service. This lack of republican spirit would be a heavy burden for the new Weimar Republic.

Still on 9 November 1918, a nationwide '**Council of People's Representatives**' was formed and was ratified as the provisional government by the General Assembly of the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Councils the following day. The six-member Council comprised three MSPD and three USPD representatives. It had two co-chairmen: Friedrich Ebert (MSPD) and Hugo Haase (USPD, 1863-1919). A key role in the revolution devolved on Ebert in his dual role as Chancellor of the *Reich* and co-chairman of the Council of People's Representatives. In an agreement concluded on 10 November 1918 with General Wilhelm Groener (1867-1939), head of the German High Command (the **Ebert-Groener Pact**), he secured the support of the military staff. Among the laws enacted by the Council of People's Representatives was the introduction of votes for women on 12 November 1918. On 30 November 1918, the Council of People's Representatives decided that elections to a constituent German National Assembly would be held on 19 January 1919.

On 28 December 1918, the alliance between the MSPD and the USPD in the provisional government collapsed when the USPD withdrew from the Council of People's Representatives because of differences over a military operation. The conflict over the future course of the revolution escalated

into what became known as the **Spartacist Revolt** of January 1919, when troops of the MSPD government waged bloody battles with representatives of the USPD and the Communist KPD, the government troops being assisted by the right-wing *Freikorps*. On 15 and 16 January 1919, *Freikorps* troops murdered the KPD leaders Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) and Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919).

The **elections to the National Assembly** on 19 January 1919 turned the path of the revolution decisively towards parliamentary democracy, even though the following months saw further bitter confrontations with the radical Left, including local uprisings and wildcat strikes. The MSPD emerged from the elections of 19 January 1919 as the strongest party. On 6 February, the National Assembly constituted itself in Weimar and on 11 February elected Friedrich Ebert President of the *Reich*. The first government of the *Reich* to be accountable to Parliament, the **Weimar Coalition** of Majority SPD, the Centre Party and the German Democratic Party (DDP), under the premiership of Philipp Scheidemann (MSPD), took office on 12 February 1919. Most of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils had dissolved themselves by the summer of 1919.

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