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Berlin, 9 November 1918

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This article discusses the 9th of November 1918 in Berlin and its commemoration. The events of the day brought the Kaiser's abdication and the proclamation of a Republic in Berlin.

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Introduction

The 9 November 1918 was a seminal turning point in [German history](#). The entanglement of national and local events and the simultaneity of a [revolution](#) from above and below formed a complex and confusing process of events. These events in Berlin can be best understood as a race to power. Participants in this competition were the revolutionaries and the advocates of forming a [German parliament](#), a process which had begun with the appointment of Prince [Max von Baden \(1867-1929\)](#) as chancellor. On 9 November, three main groups of protagonists were operating within Berlin: (a) the revolutionary crowds and their leaders; (b) the protagonists of a revolution from above; and (c) police and military as the defenders of the old regime. Revolutionary unrest had begun in [Kiel](#) and had spread from there all over Germany. On 7 November the monarchy in Bavaria had fallen and a republic had been proclaimed in Munich. The German capital had remained seemingly calm. But it

was evident that the outcome of the revolutionary movement would be decided on the streets of the German capital and nobody could foretell if the movement would be marred by military force and if riots would escalate into military dictatorship or civil war.

Events

Revolutionary Crowds

In the early days of November, the Revolutionary Stewards (Revolutionäre Obleute) were at the heart of the revolutionary movement in Berlin. At first, they decided on the 4 November as the first day of their coup. The left wing „Spartacist league” urged for immediate action but as the workers were not ready to act, the Stewards postponed it until 11 November. Driven by the revolutionary movement spreading throughout [Germany](#), on 8 November the Stewards called for a general strike in Berlin on the next day. The Spartacists and unions supported this call. Fearing that their leaders would lose control of their supporters, the SPD finally joined in on the morning of 9 November. That morning, workers gathered at their workplaces and formed several demonstrations that poured into the city centre. Armed workers were marching in front of the demonstrations. During the day they were joined by an increasing number of [soldiers](#). As the demonstrations reached the city centre, buildings like barracks, police headquarters, ministries, the *Stadtschloss*, and the *Reichstag* were occupied. By the afternoon, the revolutionaries were firmly in control of Berlin and red flags were flying over the capital.

A revolution from above

On 7 November the SPD issued an ultimatum to Prince Max, demanding [Wilhelm II's \(1859-1914\)](#) abdication within 24 hours. Since the emperor held to his throne, on the morning of 9 November the SPD's ministers declared their withdrawal from the government. [Friedrich Ebert \(1871-1925\)](#), leader of the SPD, and von Baden met several times to negotiate Germany's future. Both feared [revolution](#), bolshevism and civil war. On the morning of 9 November, Ebert and von Baden continued their negotiations at the Chancellery. During the course of the morning, the chancellor pushed Wilhelm II. to abdicate. As the emperor hesitated, von Baden finally published the news of an abdication without any official authorisation. In an unconstitutional act, von Baden transferred the chancellorship to Ebert. At this moment, both men were planning a preliminary government under Ebert and von Baden was envisaged as transitional monarch. That day, on the streets of Berlin, the republic was proclaimed a hundred if not a thousand times. Only two of these speeches are not forgotten: [Philipp Scheidemann \(1865-1939\)](#) proclaimed the German republic from a window of the Reichstag at 14:00. His intention was to proclaim the republic before the Spartacists did. At 16:00, [Karl Liebknecht \(1871-1919\)](#), the leading German socialist opponent of the First World War and an influential member of the „Spartacist league”, proclaimed a „free Socialist Republic” from a balcony of the Stadtschloss. His speech had no impact on the events of the day. The outcome of the day had been determined by the triumph of the revolutionary crowds on the streets and the transfer of the chancellorship to Ebert.

The defence of the old regime

At the beginning of November, the military was reinforced in Berlin. Military checkpoints, posts and patrols were visible to everyone and a violent escalation seemed inevitable. To stop the revolutionaries moving from the coast to Berlin the military even considered air raids on the trains to Berlin. Finally, the 9 November turned out to be mostly free of violence. All in all, eight people lost their lives on this day. Most of them were killed by gunfire in the evening. These shots cannot be seen as organized resistance but were panic shootings. The inactivity of police and the military determined the peaceful outcome of the revolutionary events. There were no acts of symbolic violence by the revolutionaries: barracks, ministries, the police headquarters and even the *Stadtschloss* were occupied without damage – there were almost no acts of violence or looting. Epulettes were torn from some officer's shoulders – but there was no outrage beyond this by the victorious crowds.

Commemoration

From the beginning, the discussion of the character and significance of the revolution had been marked in Germany by rival interpretations. In [post-1918 Germany](#), the political [right](#) identified the revolution with collapse and defeat and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) with the failure of not having established a socialist state. Due to the lack in 1921 of a common revolutionary perspective, the 11 August 1919 became the republic's national holiday (Constitution Day). On this day, the Republic's first President, Friedrich Ebert, had signed the new German constitution into law. The SPD was the only party which repeatedly commemorated the 9 November in a positive manner. Under the National socialists, 9 November became a date of remembrance for the failed „Beer Hall Putsch“ of 1923. The revolution and its protagonists were stigmatized as perpetrators of the November crime (*Novemberverbrechen*) and therefore as November criminals (*Novemberverbrecher*).

When two competing German states emerged in 1949, the search for past events as a historical foundation and legitimation became imminent. Whereas in 1948 in West Germany, the thirtieth anniversary of the revolution passed without being noticed, the date in East Germany was staged as a historical landmark. The outcome of the events in 1918/ 1919 was used by the Socialist Unity Party (SED) to reinforce its own claim of historical legitimacy. Lessons drawn from the failure of the revolution were the need to overcome *Sozialdemokratismus* and to build a socialist “party of a new type”. The commemoration of Karl Liebknecht's proclamation became part of the political folklore. The balcony from which he had proclaimed the „free socialist republic“ had been saved from destruction in 1950. In 1963, it was incorporated into the building of the GDR's State Council (Staatsratsgebäude).

In the early years of the Bonner Republik, interpretations of the revolution at first were dominated by anti-communism. In the 1960s, new perspectives on German history and its continuities arose. Possible developments in 1918/ 1919 were discussed by historians – for example the role of the

Worker's Councils. Aside from small factions within the student's movement, there was no broader interest in the revolution. With the end of debates about the possibilities of a "third way" between a Soviet-styled and a parliamentary republic, the revolution finally became a "forgotten revolution" (Alexander Gallus) to most academics. Since reunification, the **commemoration** of these political events has lost much of its fervour. 100 years after the events, the revolution has mainly become an academic topic. In 2018, the revolution was recognised as the birth of German democracy – among others in a speech by the German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Today, 1918/ 1919 is considered as one of several important periods within 20th century German history.

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