

Workers' or Revolutionary Councils

By [Anthony McElligott](#)

At the end of the First World War, Workers' and Soldiers' Councils spread throughout Germany, culminating in a mutiny among sailors at the end of October in Kiel that inaugurated the revolution of November 1918. Their leaders wanted to erect a *Räterepublik* as a socialist alternative to parliamentary democracy, but failed.

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Introduction

The appearance during the First World War of workers' councils was pan-European. Based on spontaneously elected committees on the shop floors of factories, they formulated demands to improve workplace conditions, taking their inspiration from the [Russian soviets](#) (councils) that emerged in the [1905 Revolution](#), and again in St. Petersburg during the [February Revolution in 1917](#). In [Germany](#), harsh conditions imposed on workers in munitions factories after the introduction of the Patriotic Service Law (*Gesetz über den vaterländischen Hilfsdienst*) on 5 December 1916, coupled to increasingly punitive [military discipline](#), added a radicalizing impetus to the creation of workers' and soldiers' councils (*Räte*).

Aims

Initially, the councils' demands did not stray beyond workplace concerns, but became increasingly linked to demands to end the war; by the summer of 1918, they adopted overtly political tones. After [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\) Fourteen Points](#) became known, *Räte*, with the support of the USPD, and in Berlin led by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards (*Obleute*), initiated [mass strikes](#) to end the war in January and [spring 1918](#). After the failure of Germany's "Summer Offensive", the momentum to end the war among workers and soldiers increased. On 28 October 1918 sailors in [Kiel](#) and in Wilhelmshafen, led by popularly elected councils and supported by workers' councils on land, mutinied against their commanders who were preparing to scuttle the fleet. This event ignited the revolutionary councils' movement that swept away the monarchical system.

Until November 1918, the *Räte* had been almost invisible in national political discourse. From that date, they became the vehicle for "revolutionary" authority, driven by among others [Richard Müller \(1880-1943\)](#) and [Emil Barth \(1879-1941\)](#), the leaders of the Berlin *Obleute*. On 9 November the *Rat der Volksbeauftragten* (RdV) was formed, equipped with executive powers on a shared basis between MSPD and USPD. Its three Majority Socialist members, led by [Friedrich Ebert \(1871-1925\)](#), contrary to the three Independent Socialists members led by [Hugo Haase \(1863-1919\)](#), intended the RdV as a transitional and not permanent form of [government](#). The USPD left the RdV in December.

Moderates versus Radicals

The politically moderate RdV had little connection to local *Räte* initially dominated by more radical elements, as in Hamburg under Heinrich Laufenberg (1872-1932). Nevertheless, Majority Socialists soon displaced the USPD and more radical elements in the councils. They steered a moderate policy of cooperation with liberals, favouring a parliamentary democracy rather than a *Räterepublik*, espoused by the likes of Müller, the chairman of the *Greater Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council*. The RdV and its executive organ, the *Vollzugsrat* were in semi-permanent conflict with one another. Against a background of deepening conflict between moderates and radicals, the first national Congress of Councils met between 16-21 December, where the majority of 514 delegates voted overwhelmingly for elections to a National Assembly, while rejecting a proposal by Ernst Däumig (1868-1922) for the *Räte* as a state form. This decision put Germany on the path to parliamentary democracy. An attempt to democratize the army was passed but later quietly abandoned.

The creation of independent council republics in a number of cities in early 1919, following the suppression of the Spartacists and murder of Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) and Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) in Berlin and the assassination of Kurt Eisner (1867-1919) in Munich, proved to be chaotic and inevitably short-lived. The longest lasting of these was the Bavarian Soviet Republic (*Räterepublik Baiern*) during the spring of 1919. Until its violent suppression in May, its Central Council headed by Eugen Leviné (1883-1919) in fact exerted control only in Munich.

Until mid-1919, the *Räte* captured the public imagination during the transition from monarchy to republic, with professional, occupational, and artistic and writers' groups forming their own councils.^[1] The *Räterepublik* and the emergence of self-defence organisations of workers in Baden-Württemberg, the Ruhr, Saxony and Thuringia, led some historians to speak of a "second" revolution.^[2] But by the time of the second and last Congress of Councils in early April 1919, the councils were in decline as a meaningful revolutionary force, having suffered from internal division, inept organisation, and poor leadership.

Conclusion: Räte or Parliament or "Third Way"?

Could the councils have succeeded as political institutions of the revolution? Could they have offered Germany in 1918/19 a revolutionary alternative to the more conventional and some might say, bourgeois, institution of parliament? As popularly driven institutions, could they have offered a "third way" between social democracy and bolshevism had they not been "stopped in their tracks"?^[3]; might Germany thus have averted the catastrophe of 1933?

Examined in context, even if Germany had been organized from the "bottom-up", it is unlikely that it could have survived the external and internal pressures facing the country in 1918/19.^[4] The councils emerged in an uncoordinated fashion, very much determined by local conditions. In the end, their weakness as a putative revolutionary state-form was exposed by the ability of the MSPD to isolate the radicals and to steer Germany towards parliamentary democracy. The idea that some form of *Räterepublik* might have offered a "third way" elides the realities of Germany in 1918/19. The so-called Bavaria Soviet Republic led by Leviné in Munich had more in common with the Paris Commune of 1871 in terms of its increasing "one party" regime and use of terror against its "class enemies" than with a blueprint for good government.^[5] It was never a viable alternative to democratic government as espoused by the ill-fated Kurt Eisner's People's State of Bavaria. Nor could the executive body (*Vollzugsrat*) of the Greater Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council muster the wherewithal to act beyond its resolutions to lead a first revolution, let alone a "second" in 1918/19, as the minutes of its meetings show only too clearly. To see a "second revolution" in the councils' movement in 1919 ultimately remains a utopian and counterfactual proposition. After their demise as a political instrument in the spring and summer of 1919, the councils returned to the workplaces where they had originated, guaranteed by Article 165 of the Weimar Constitution.

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Notes

1. ↑ Weipart, Axel: Die Zweite Revolution. Rätebewegung in Berlin 1919/1920, Berlin-Brandenburg 2015; Weinhauer, Klaus / McElligott, Anthony / Heinsohn, Kirsten (eds.): Germany 1916-23. A Revolution in Context, Bielefeld 2015.
2. ↑ Weipart, Die Zweite Revolution 2015; Zilkenat, Reiner (ed.): ... alle Macht den Räten! Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19 und ihre Räte. Konferenzband zum Öffentlichen Symposium Die Novemberrevolution und ihre Räte 1918/19 am 9. Mai 2018 in Berlin-Marzahn, Neuruppin 2018.
3. ↑ Kolb, Eberhard: 1918/19. Die steckengebliebene Revolution, in: Stern, Carola / Winkler, Heinrich A. (eds): Wendepunkte deutscher Geschichte 1848-1990, Frankfurt/Main 1994, pp. 99-125.
4. ↑ McElligott, Anthony: Rethinking the Weimar Republic. Authority and Authoritarianism, 1916-1936, London 2014.
5. ↑ Victor Klemperer's (1881-1960) diary is informative on this point. Klemperer, Victor: Man möchte immer weinen und lachen in einem Revolutionstagebuch 1919, Berlin 2016.

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