

Citation style

Gallus, Alexander: review of: Robert Gerwarth, November 1918. The German Revolution, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, in: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XLIII (2021), 1, p. 143-149, <https://www.recensio.net/r/4def3e02f002468885a7a241b3089eee>

First published: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XLIII (2021), 1

GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON

Bulletin



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

ROBERT GERWARTH, *November 1918: The German Revolution, Making of the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), xxvi + 329 pp. ISBN 978 0 19 954647 3 (hardback). £20.00

Starting in the 1980s, a virtual silence reigned on the subject of the November Revolution for several decades, with the event losing its prominent position in both historical research and public memory. It seemed that the Revolution was gradually being forgotten. Yet in recent years, the trend has begun to reverse, with the major centenary commemorations in 2018–19 in particular helping to rekindle interest in the radical shifts of 1918–19. Likewise, a desire to understand the present moment and a new sense of socio-political insecurity have resulted in closer attention being paid to the revolutionary awakenings and transformations of a hundred years ago. These modern-day needs have helped breathe new life into the stagnant historiography of the November Revolution. As a result, after a long intermission, we are seeing the publication of new general surveys of the Revolution—a genre of text whose absence has long been lamented.¹

Robert Gerwarth's *November 1918* stands out as one of the most successful such surveys. Paradoxically, its German translation was published almost two years before the English-language original.² A broad comparison of the two versions reveals subtle amendments, omissions, and clarifications, but otherwise there are no major differences. The English version lacks the short chapter on the collapse of the empires at the end of the First World War, and instead includes a substantial preface that sets out the author's core assumptions from the very beginning. Here, Gerwarth explains the period he has chosen to study, which extends far beyond the 'November 1918' of the title.

Trans. by Jozef van der Voort (GHIL)

¹ For a comprehensive overview of the historiography of the Revolution, see Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung: Deutungen von der Weimarer Republik bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2013).

² Robert Gerwarth, *Die größte aller Revolutionen: November 1918 und der Aufbruch in eine neue Zeit* (Munich, 2018).

It also quickly becomes clear that he intends to paint the November Revolution in a more positive light than previous interpretations, which he sees as taking a more fundamentally pessimistic view. In so doing, he grants the Revolution a special status as 'both the first and the last revolution in a highly industrialized country worldwide prior to the peaceful revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989-90' (p. vii). In general, he makes the case for comparative perspectives, noting the importance of situating events in Germany within the broader context of the revolutionary era of 1917-23 in central and eastern Europe. He also argues that more room should be given to contemporary voices and to experiential history, which can help us to identify what options there were for the future. Finally, he convincingly suggests that the word 'revolution' itself should be detoxified, as it were, of its typical associations with totalistic fantasies of violent overthrow. Gerwarth's core focus falls quite rightly on the question of political regime change.³ In this respect, the Revolution was successful, as in its wake, Germany adopted a democratic course for the very first time. In light of this basic fact, Gerwarth argues, it makes little sense to describe the German upheavals of 1918-19 as a 'minor revolution' (p. ix).

Gerwarth's study begins in the pivotal year of 1917, when the USA entered the First World War and the Bolsheviks successfully staged their coup in Russia. In Germany, after three years of war, there was little left of the national optimism of August 1914. Hunger strikes attested to the increasing weakness of the war-weary German Reich and highlighted a shift in the public mood that would later become obvious with the eruption of mass protests in January 1918. The systemic crisis of the monarchical order had been long in the making and gained urgency as the prospect of military defeat grew

³ For more on this fundamental position, which I also share, see Alexander Gallus, 'Wiederentdeckung einer fast vergessenen Revolution: Die Umbrüche von 1918/19 als politische Transformation und subjektive Erfahrung', in Hans-Jörg Czech, Olaf Matthes, and Ortwin Pelc (eds.), *Revolution! Revolution? Hamburg 1918/19* (Hamburg, 2018), 14-31, esp. 15-16; and Alexander Gallus, 'Revolutions (Germany)', in Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, et al. (eds.), *1914-1918-Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (Berlin, 2014), at [<http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10291>].

increasingly inevitable. Among civilians and exhausted troops alike, the fervent longing for an end to the war became bound up with a desire for improved food supplies and the abolition of authoritarian command structures. Moreover, from 1917 onwards, new and sharper battle-lines were drawn, pitting democratic, Western, capitalist systems against socialist structures. Advocates of the latter in turn fought among themselves over the 'right' way to bring about a socialist state and society. While some sought to pursue a democratic, parliamentary path towards their goal, others advocated various forms of workers' councils and a sweeping revolution. The split among the Social Democrats, which became obvious in 1918–19, had a long gestation, and was further exacerbated by the new transnational ideological landscape from 1917 onwards.

Against this backdrop of war, defeat, and multifarious ideological ambitions, Gerwarth takes a positive view of the actions of Friedrich Ebert, the central figure in the German transformation of 1918–19. In Gerwarth's opinion, despite standing at the helm of an 'inexperienced government' (p. 130), Ebert achieved considerable success under distinctly unfavourable conditions ('his government succeeded in channelling revolutionary energies'; p. 19) and doggedly strove to establish a parliamentary political system with a liberal constitution. Ebert favoured the path of reform over a revolution that he feared would result in chaos, a loss of control, and conditions resembling those in Russia—a prospect that assumed the appearance of an imminent threat from 1917 onwards, though that perception proved to be exaggerated. In this context, Gerwarth interprets Ebert's oft-quoted remark that he hated the Revolution 'like sin' as a fundamental rejection not of change in general, but of a 'Bolshevik-style revolution' in particular (p. 69). Together with the Social Democrat majority, Ebert sought to bring about a socio-political transformation that avoided barricades or fighting in the streets.

Furthermore, Gerwarth rejects as misleading the idea that Ebert's use of the words 'No enemy has defeated you' in his address to returning soldiers before the Brandenburg Gate on 10 December 1918 helped promote the *Dolchstoßlegende*, or 'stab-in-the-back myth'. Instead, he argues, 'Ebert's words were born out of a desire to co-opt the army into supporting the new regime in the face of a potential

challenge by either right-wing opposition or those advocating a more radical revolution in Germany' (pp. 133–4). Ultimately, Gerwarth considers it a fallacy to interpret the agreements struck between the transitional government and senior army commanders in a phone call between Ebert and First Quartermaster General Wilhelm Groener on 10 November 1918 as a 'Faustian pact with the old imperial army' (p. 134). Instead, he describes the arrangement more soberly as a 'pragmatic agreement' (p. 134) that was entered into for understandable reasons on both sides.

Yet the reader would be mistaken to see these assessments as reflective of an uncritical approach to the government's recourse to military force from the end of 1918 onwards. Gerwarth passes particularly severe judgement on Gustav Noske (who referred to himself as a 'bloodhound') and the *Freikorps* he deployed. In his 2016 transnational comparative study *The Vanquished*, Gerwarth offers a detailed description and classification of the violence that took place in the defeated nations of the First World War.⁴ In *November 1918*, he once again argues that a glance beyond the domestic German context will show that levels of violence in the November Revolution were relatively low, making its achievements all the more commendable.

Gerwarth has little time for the counterfactual reflections on missed opportunities and hypothetical alternative outcomes that have long shaped the critical debate surrounding the November Revolution. Instead of writing history as a collection of wistful 'what-ifs', he suggests it would be better to pay closer attention to the hopes, expectations, and disappointments of those who lived through the Revolution than has previously been the case. In particular, Gerwarth extensively quotes contemporary intellectuals in order to conjure up a lively picture of the upheavals, including Harry Graf Kessler, Victor Klemperer, Alfred Döblin, Thomas Mann, and the artist Käthe Kollwitz – with the latter's sensitive, meticulous diaries proving to be a superbly valuable source. Though Kollwitz's cautious, thoughtful arguments go back and forth, in general she welcomed the changes and the end of the war, was happy with the introduction of the right

⁴ Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London, 2016).

to vote for women, and looked to the future with hope. In her view, there was no doubt that she had borne witness to a revolution.

For Gerwarth, voices like Kollwitz's are representative of the many contemporary observers who fundamentally approved of the Revolution and the end of the monarchy, but who spoke out in favour of pragmatism and muted radicalism during the events that followed. Building on this, his book offers a refreshing reminder that revolutions in modern societies should not primarily be defined in terms of armed and violent uprisings. Instead, he argues, true revolution consists in the introduction and implementation of new political principles and the expansion of civil and participatory rights. The Weimar Constitution set these things down in a single document, thereby creating 'probably the most progressive republic of the era' (p. 6). Yet to speak of a 'triumph of liberalism' (p. 160), as Gerwarth does in a dedicated chapter, seems somewhat exaggerated, since it underestimates the challenges and contradictions faced by a crisis-ridden liberalism at the onset of mass democracy in Germany.⁵

Gerwarth is correct, however, in emphasizing that the Weimar Republic was in no way a defenceless democracy, as his epilogue provides a cursory review of the 'defiant republic' (p. 212) between 1919 and 1923. Indeed, the German version of his book goes even further, with its talk of a 'militant democracy', and looking back from 1923, Gerwarth provides a summary that once again rails against the idea of a 'failed' or 'half-hearted' Revolution. On the contrary, he suggests that its achievements speak for themselves: 'Germany had a democratic government, a liberal constitution that granted its citizens wide-ranging basic political and economic rights, and a noticeably improving economy . . . Extremist minorities on the political Left and Right had been marginalized, and their attempts to violently topple the republic had failed' (p. 219–20). From a year of crisis in 1923, Gerwarth argues, the Weimar Republic emerged as a progressive democracy that was ready to face further tests. 'In fact', Gerwarth concludes, 'in late 1923, the failure of democracy would have seemed far

⁵ On the difficult battles fought by liberals, who had been forced onto the back foot and still needed to strike a fundamental balance in their relationship with democracy, see the superb study by Jens Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie: Zur politischen Theorie des Liberalismus in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Berlin, 2018).

less probable than its consolidation. At that point, the future of the Weimar Republic was wide open' (p. 221). It was only in later years that the Republic would lose its way.

Gerwarth's solid and carefully considered account focuses on political history, but does not come across as old fashioned; rather, it takes communicational dynamics, experiential ambiguities, and transnational perspectives into account. All the same, much of his exposition feels familiar to the reader. Yet this cannot be held against him, given that detailed research into the November Revolution is still in its early, faltering stages, and that new findings are only gradually emerging.⁶ Among the key strengths of Gerwarth's book are that it offers an account of the political transformation process that is polished and accurate in equal measure, and that it appropriately examines the use of violence during the Revolution from a comparative, transnational perspective. On the whole, he judges the rupture of 1918–19 positively as an important moment in the history of German democracy. Indeed, the German version of his book expresses this view in its title – 'The Greatest of all Revolutions' – which quotes the early euphoric words used by the brilliant liberal journalist Theodor Wolff in the *Berliner Tageblatt* on 10 November 1918.⁷

By contrast, Gerwarth's former student Mark Jones offers a significantly more sceptical view of the events of 1918–19 in his book *Founding Weimar*.⁸ Jones conjures up a terrifying landscape of violence backed by public and media support, which he lays primarily at the feet of the new government led by Friedrich Ebert. Given the violent birth of the Weimar Republic, Jones also draws a line of continuity from 1918 to 1933. In broad terms, Gerwarth and Jones represent different interpretive models, with each historian situating the juncture of the

⁶ For other possible perspectives, see Andreas Braune and Michael Dreyer (eds.), *Zusammenbruch, Aufbruch, Abbruch? Die Novemberrevolution als Ereignis und Erinnerungsort* (Stuttgart, 2019); Klaus Weinhauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn (eds.), *Germany 1916–23: A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld, 2015).

⁷ See n. 2 above.

⁸ Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge, 2016). See also the substantially reworked German edition, which goes far beyond a mere translation: id., *Am Anfang war Gewalt: Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19 und der Beginn der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin, 2017).

November Revolution differently within the development of modern German history. The paradigm of the emergence of democracy competes with one focused on violence and dictatorship. Yet Gerwarth's survey is successful above all because it emphasizes the opportunities for democratic development in 1918 without overlooking the early stresses on the Weimar Republic. Just as he is reluctant to fit the foundation of the Weimar Republic into a narrative of a German *Sonderweg*, or special path, towards the establishment of the Third Reich, he also refuses to put the beginning of democracy in Germany on a pedestal. In this respect, the sober title of Gerwarth's original English book does more justice to its contents than that of the German translation.

ALEXANDER GALLUS is a Professor of Political Theory and the History of Ideas at Chemnitz University of Technology. His research focuses on the history of ideas in the German Federal Republic, political thought in the twentieth century, and the relationship between intellectuals and politics. His many publications include *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19* (ed., 2010); *Heimat 'Weltbühne': Eine Intellektuellengeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert* (2012); and *Vermessungen einer Intellectual History der frühen Bundesrepublik* (ed. with Sebastian Liebold and Frank Schale, 2020).