The Weimar Republic
Second Edition

Eberhard Kolb
Translated by P. S. Falla and R. J. Park

Routledge
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Reviews of the first edition:

'A well-researched and concise presentation of the fourteen years' experience of this state . . . a first-class study aid.' Heinz Abosch, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

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The Weimar Republic, Germany's first attempt at a democracy, lasted from 1918 until the accession to power of Hitler. *The Weimar Republic* provides both a clear historical narrative of this critical period in German history and a detailed analysis of the scholarly research in the field.

In the first part of the book, Eberhard Kolb surveys the political, social, economic and cultural developments of the Weimar Republic, setting it within the international context of the inter-war period. Kolb then goes on to provide a detailed examination of the historiography of the period, shedding light on the problems and controversies of both domestic and foreign affairs in those years.

This new English edition, which has been translated from the sixth and most recent German edition, has been brought up to date throughout to take account of all the latest research in the subject. It also includes a completely revised and updated Bibliography.

With its detailed Chronology and extensive Bibliography, *The Weimar Republic* provides an invaluable introduction for all students of this immensely important period in Germany history.

Eberhard Kolb was Professor of History at the University of Cologne until his recent retirement. He has written widely on the inter-war period in Germany and co-edited two important volumes of hitherto unavailable source material on the German Revolution of 1918–19.

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Preface to the sixth German edition

The Weimar Republic, originally submitted in 1984, received a favourable welcome among specialists and has now clearly proved its worth as a textbook on the subject. This has led to the need for new editions at intervals over several years. For the third edition (1993) the volume was thoroughly revised, and for the current sixth edition I have again examined and extended the text and brought the bibliography up to date. In the process, attention was directed towards presenting the current state of research as precisely and comprehensively as possible, taking intensive note of more recent Weimar research.

In the section entitled 'Historical survey' the text has been checked and expanded in various places. The section 'Basic problems and trends of research' has been revised much more thoroughly; results and trends of the most recent research have been taken into account by dint of revising individual passages and making numerous additions to the text. In the bibliographical section, a number of titles have been dropped and a great many more from recent research have been added, so that the scope of this section has widened markedly (instead of the 622 titles listed in the first edition there are now 994).

At this point, it is essential that I thank all those who accompanied the book at the time of its genesis or who have supported me through the various new editions. Above all, my warmest thanks are due to Professor Dr Klaus Schönhoven; not only did he carefully read and make well-informed comment on the manuscript of the first edition, but I was also able to hold numerous stimulating conversations with him on the subject of the Weimar period. Further thanks are due to my then colleagues for their energetic help: Professor Dr Peter Alter, Professor Dr Wolfram Pyta, Dr Hans-Georg Fleck, Dr Christine Lattek, Georg Mölich and Stefan Noethen, along with Frau Renate Kolwert and Frau Gisela Reddmann, who dealt with the paperwork. 'Last not least', I should like to thank sincerely Professor Dr Lothar Gall, who as co-editor of the series has sympathetically looked after this volume and subjected the manuscript to a thorough and beneficial examination.

Eberhard Kolb,
Bad Kreuznach, November 2001

From the preface to the first edition

Although the Weimar Republic existed only for the relatively short span of about fourteen years, it has proved a difficult task to describe its history and outline the state of research concerning it, within closely prescribed limits of space. The history of these fourteen years is immensely complex and full of events; and the international consequences of the collapse of the Weimar democracy in themselves call for a particularly careful analysis of its causes, which, however, can only be suggested in outline in a brief survey such as the present.

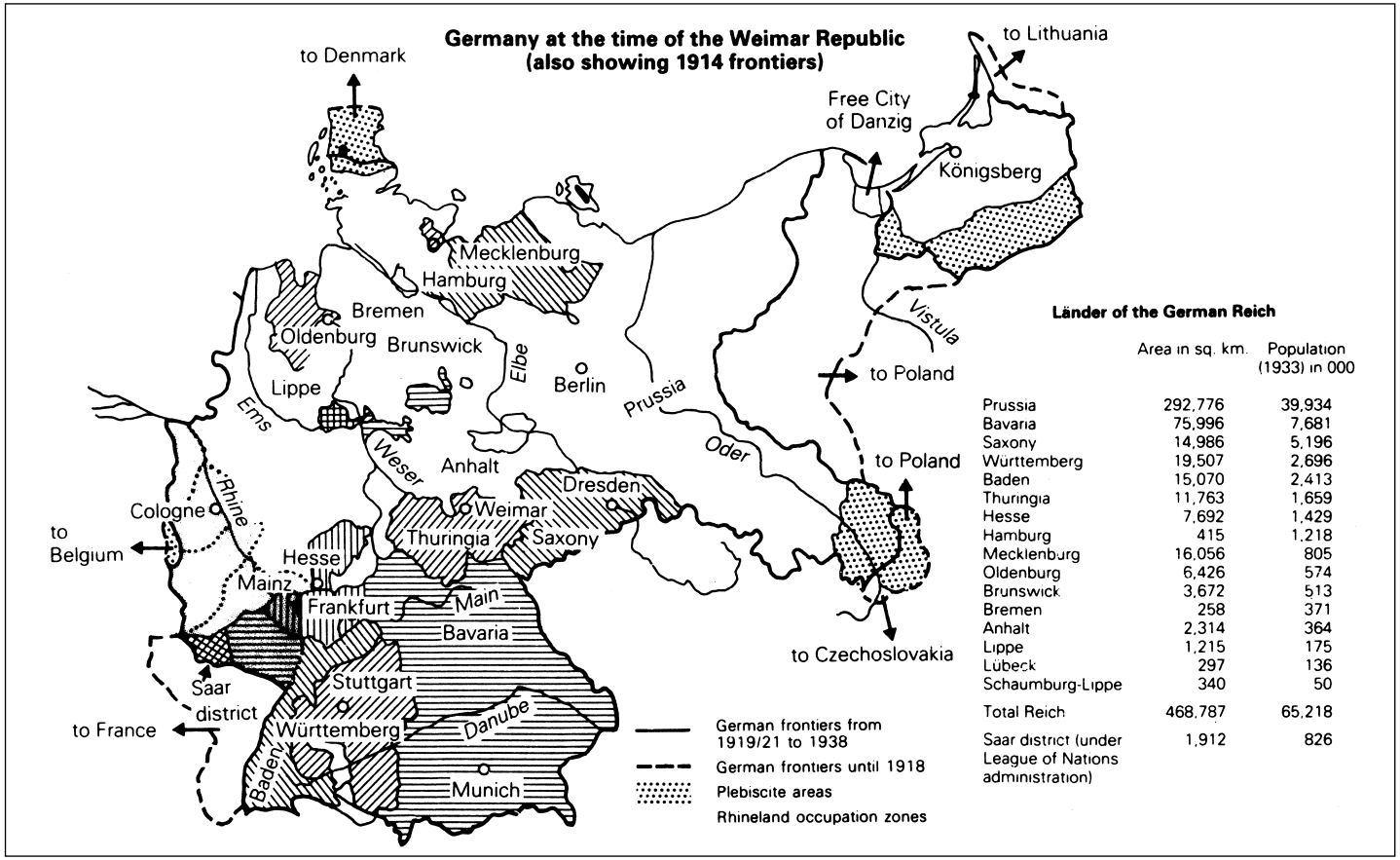
As regards the development and present state of research, it has also been necessary to confine this book to essential aspects. For decades past, German and international research has been so intensively devoted to the Weimar era that it is difficult even for a specialist to give a full account of the relevant literature. A detailed account of the progress and achievement of research on all aspects of the Weimar period would exceed the bounds prescribed for this work; the most that can be done is to indicate the most important results and to throw light on some problem areas that have at times been the subject of controversy. It should be pointed out that the narrative part of this work and the account of research activities are closely interwoven; so that a number of events that are only briefly mentioned in the first part are described and discussed in more detail in the second.

The arrangement of the material and the selection of problems for fuller discussion were governed by the fact that the book is designed for students and teachers as well as general readers who are interested in history. [. . .]

Eberhard Kolb,
Cologne, April 1983

Part II has been brought up to date for the English edition. The bibliography has been revised to take account of works published until February 1987, and several English-language titles have been added.

Eberhard Kolb,
Cologne, March 1987



Länder of the German Reich

	Area in sq. km.	Population (1933) in 000
Prussia	292,776	39,934
Bavaria	75,996	7,681
Saxony	14,986	5,196
Württemberg	19,507	2,696
Baden	15,070	2,413
Thuringia	11,763	1,659
Hesse	7,692	1,429
Hamburg	415	1,218
Mecklenburg	16,056	805
Oldenburg	6,426	574
Brunswick	3,672	513
Bremen	258	371
Anhalt	2,314	364
Lippe	1,215	175
Lübeck	297	136
Schaumburg-Lippe	340	50
Total Reich	468,787	65,218
Saar district (under League of Nations administration)	1,912	826

List of Abbreviations

(a) In the text

ADGB	Allgemeiner deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (General German Trade Union Congress)
BRD	Bundesrepublik Deutschland (German Federal Republic)
BVP	Bayerische Volkspartei (Bavarian People's Party: Catholic)
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei (German Democratic Party: liberal)
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik (GDR, German Democratic Republic)
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei (German National People's Party: nationalist)
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei (German People's Party: national liberal)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Party)
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party: National Socialists, or Nazis)
OHL	Oberste Heeresleitung (Army High Command)
RDI	Reichsverband der Deutschen Industrie (Reich Association of German Industry)
SA	Sturmabteilung (Nazi storm troopers)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party: Social Democrats, also Mehrheitssozialdemokratie, MSPD, 1917–19)
SS	Schutzstaffel (Nazi élite guard)
USPD	Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Independent Social Democratic Party: Independent Socialists)
ZK	Zentralkomitee (Central Committee, e.g. of Communist Party)

(b) Periodicals cited in Part two and the bibliography

AfS	*Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*
GG	*Geschichte und Gesellschaft*

GWU	*Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*
HZ	*Historische Zeitschrift*
IWK	*Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*
JMH	*Journal of Modern History*
MGM	*Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*
NPL	*Neue Politische Literatur*
PVS	*Politische Vierteljahresschrift*
VfZ	*Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*

Part one

Historical survey

(A) ORIGIN AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE REPUBLIC, 1918/19–1923

1 The revolution and the foundation of the Republic, 1918/19

The Weimar Republic has been called a 'makeshift democracy'. This suggestive phrase is intended to convey that the first German democracy was not the achievement of a strong republican movement with its roots in many sections of the population, which strove systematically over a long period to transform the monarchical, authoritarian state and finally succeeded in doing so by a major effort. Rather, it was improvised as an 'emergency solution' to mitigate, as far as possible, the effects on the German people of defeat in the First World War. When it failed to produce the desired result, and the victorious Allies imposed an oppressive peace despite the establishment of a democratic republic, the new constitution was thereby discredited in the eyes of a great majority of the population: the Republic, which many had not wanted anyway, had failed to perform the service expected of it. Thus the foundations of the improvised democracy were shaky from the outset.

The above interpretation of the origin and first beginnings of the Weimar Republic is partly right and partly wrong. Certainly until the last days of the war no major political group contemplated the substitution of a republic for the monarchy. There was no strong republican movement in German politics. The left-wing liberals who had had republican leanings before, during and even after the 1848 Revolution had long since come to terms with the monarchical regime. Even the Social Democrats, whose programme still included the replacement of the monarchy by a republic, did not in practice regard this objective as a primary one to be pursued with their utmost strength.

But the 'improvisation' theory does not do justice to certain important factors. First, even before the military leaders admitted that the war was lost, a majority in the Reichstag (the Majority Socialists, the Centre Party and the Progressives) had intensified their efforts to extend parliamentary government and so strengthen the democratic element in the constitution. Thus the transition from a constitutional to a parliamentary monarchy, at least, was not simply improvised, but deliberately engineered by powerful political

forces. Second, though the Republic certainly began its life in highly unpropitious circumstances, these did not necessarily determine the degree of solidity or fragility of the first German democracy; the specific form of the Republic was first determined during the months of the revolutionary period. Third, even after the initial phase was completed, the last word had not yet been spoken on the longer-term viability of the Weimar democracy. The French Third Republic had come into being in the 1870s as a result of defeat in war, and in its first phase had to fight for its life in the face of a massive attack by anti-republican forces, but in the long run it consolidated itself as a democratic republic. We should therefore guard against assuming that the fate of the Weimar democracy was sealed from the outset because it had not been achieved by a democratic republican people's movement, but was the direct consequence of a defeat and was saddled with the after-effects of a war that Germany had lost.

Whatever view we may take in general of the stability and flexibility of the German Empire and its capacity for political development, it had weathered the difficulties of the war as long as the great majority of Germans were borne up by the belief in ultimate victory. It was only when this belief faded and military defeat was in sight that the political and social tensions of the empire, which were partly latent and partly manifest, rapidly developed into an acute political crisis that ended in the collapse of the state, the coming of revolution and the founding of the Republic.

Until the summer of 1918 the parties of the Reichstag majority had pursued their policy of extending the power of Parliament with caution rather than impetuosity; but from July–August onwards, as the military situation of the Central Powers grew rapidly worse, drastic changes soon ensued in home affairs. After the Austro-Hungarian peace note of 14 September and the collapse of Bulgaria (armistice, 30 September) the Army High Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) was obliged to recognize that Germany had lost the war and that only an immediate armistice could prevent a military disaster.

The OHL made this declaration of bankruptcy at a GHQ conference at Spa in Belgium on 28–29 September, attended by leading representatives of the imperial regime. It was decided to address an appeal immediately to President Wilson for an armistice and peace, and to support this on the home front by establishing a parliamentary government, a decree to this effect being issued on 30 September. On this basis, with the OHL still pressing for the immediate dispatch of the request for an armistice, negotiations were conducted for the formation of a new government. Prince Max of Baden, who was appointed chancellor on 3 October, formed this government in full consultation with the parties of the Reichstag majority, and thus a decisive step was taken on the path from constitutional to parliamentary monarchy.

However, to present the transition to a parliamentary system in the dying days of the empire as a 'revolution from above', brought about by the Emperor William II and the OHL, would be an undue simplification of the extremely

complex process by which the constitutional structure of the country was transformed in the autumn of 1918. As recent research has shown, the majority parties in the Reichstag were far from obediently assuming power as mere instruments of Ludendorff's intentions. They had of their own accord taken the initiative in the constitutional crisis, before the decision was taken at GHQ at the end of September to make way for parliamentary government. On 28 September the inter-party committee which co-ordinated the action of the majority parties in Parliament called for an amendment of the constitution as a 'precondition for the creation of a strong government supported by the confidence of a majority of the Reichstag'. Beyond question this initiative of 28 September had ample force behind it, as the majority parties were determined to make full use of the potential power that the Reichstag had displayed by its peace resolution in July 1917. If, in September 1918, matters did not come to a showdown between the OHL and the Reichstag majority, it was because Ludendorff, seeing that the military situation was hopeless, judged it wiser to let the parties take power, and thus place on them the responsibility for terminating the war effort.

The first parliamentary government of the Reich began to function in the most unfavourable conditions that could be imagined: the first task imposed on it by the OHL was to sue for an armistice. It was not until 2 October, in the midst of negotiations for the formation of a new majority government, that the leaders of the parliamentary party groups were informed by a representative of the OHL that the hopeless military situation made an immediate armistice necessary. Prince Max of Baden fought desperately for at least a few days' delay, but in vain. Ludendorff demanded that the note to Wilson should be sent at once: 'The army cannot wait 48 hours.' The new government bowed to the OHL ultimatum. On the evening of 3 October the German government asked the US President to bring about the 'restoration of peace' on the basis he had laid down, especially his Fourteen Points. Then came the momentous sentence: 'To avoid further bloodshed the German government requests the immediate conclusion of an armistice on land, at sea and in the air.'

This frank acknowledgment of defeat came as a bombshell to the German public, which was completely unprepared for it. To the very last, the great majority had believed the overoptimistic estimates of the war situation that had been systematically put about by official propaganda. The request for an armistice suddenly and dramatically revealed that this propaganda was illusory, and from then on the German people's only desire was to see the war ended, as quickly as possible and at any price. The peace movement gathered momentum like an avalanche in the course of October; it grew increasingly radical in complexion, exposing the government and parties to strong pressure from below. The revolutionary groups had hitherto been few in number and weak in organization, and much hampered in their activities by government police measures, but they now received ever-increasing support and encouragement from the population.

Although popular opinion was not primarily anti-monarchical, wide circles of both the bourgeoisie and the working class increasingly feared that it might be impossible to put a rapid end to hostilities on the strength of the constitutional changes so far introduced. To achieve peace, people were ready to call for more radical political changes, and even the Kaiser's abdication.

This radicalization of the peace movement was triggered off by Wilson's replies to the German offer. Above all, his third note of 23 October contained alarming passages which aroused deep depression in Germany, but also an increasing determination to comply with his terms for the sake of peace. The President declared unmistakably that if the US government had to negotiate with military rulers and autocratic monarchs, 'it must demand, not peace negotiations, but surrender'. The German public construed this, whatever its real intent, as meaning that if the Kaiser abdicated Germany would be offered lenient armistice terms. The demand for abdication was voiced more and more insistently, and openly discussed in the press in spite of censorship.

While the exchange of notes with President Wilson was taking place, and was attracting the principal share of public attention, the new government was planning constitutional reform in consultation with the majority parties. The mass of the people scarcely realized at this time the potential scope of the move towards a parliamentary system that was beginning, and for this unawareness the new government and the parties that supported it were in part to blame. The Reichstag – which, given the critical internal and external situation, ought to have played a key role in articulating the demand for a parliamentary system and pushing for constitutional reform – met far too infrequently during October. Having approved of the government declaration on 5 October, it went into recess until the 22nd at the instance of the majority parties. At that time, however, public opinion was chiefly interested not in constitutional reform but in ending the war and in the Kaiser's abdication as a means of doing so.

On 28 October the two Bills 'for the amendment of the Reich constitution' came into force. Although they affected only a few articles of Bismarck's constitution of 1871, they meant the Reich was now a parliamentary monarchy in terms of constitutional law. The essential provisions were that in future the chancellor had to possess the confidence of the Reichstag, and both he and his deputy were responsible to the Bundesrat and the Reichstag for the performance of their duties; members of the Reichstag could henceforth become ministers without having to resign their seats.

While historians differ greatly in their opinion of the viability and prospects of the October reform, it is hardly in doubt that, despite the constitutional change that was then in progress, the monarchy and the army were not prepared to subordinate themselves to the civil government and take orders from it. This was clearly shown on several occasions, of which two were of particular importance. First, the naval leaders, without the government's knowledge, ordered the High Seas Fleet to sail out into the North Sea; and

second, against the government's will, the Kaiser betook himself to GHQ at Spa, where he was beyond the control of the civil power. This 'flight' to Spa took place at a moment when the internal crisis was reaching its height. The call for abdication grew louder, and on 28 October for the first time sailors of the fleet at its anchorage in the Schillig Roadstead near Wilhelmshaven refused to obey orders. The sailors feared that the object of their commanders' manoeuvre was to undermine the government's policy by launching a last desperate battle against the British, the prospects of which were at least doubtful, and which appeared to the sailors both senseless and irresponsible. The admirals, on the other hand, faithful to a traditional code of honour, were unwilling to surrender tamely without throwing the fleet into action for the last time. About a thousand naval mutineers were arrested at Wilhelmshaven; five ships of the line were sent to Kiel where more arrests took place. Soldiers and sailors, concerned for the fate of their comrades, rallied at Kiel; mass meetings demanded the release of those arrested; shots were fired, soldiers' councils formed and officers disarmed. The commanders were no longer masters of the situation and declared themselves willing to accept the mutineers' demands. By the evening of 4 November Kiel was in the hands of the mutinying sailors and soldiers.

The next few days made clear the full extent of the 'paralysis of the will to maintain order'. The military and police apparatus of the old regime surrendered everywhere, offering virtually no resistance to the rebellion that spread like a forest fire. The sailors swarmed out from Kiel, and wherever they went they were joined by the local garrison of soldiers and by factory workers. Workers' and soldiers' councils were set up; local officials of the workers' parties and trade unions took charge without waiting for instructions from their central offices. This occurred on 6 November in Hamburg, Bremen, Wilhelmshaven and Lübeck; on 7 November in Hanover; and on 8 November in Cologne, Brunswick, Düsseldorf, Leipzig and Frankfurt. It was not a question of a centrally planned campaign of subversive action by revolutionary elements, but a spontaneous outbreak by the war-weary people, who hoped in this way to force their rulers to make peace. However, the movement stirred up a determination, which had hitherto been more or less latent amid wide sections of the population, in favour of a more thoroughgoing reform of the political and social order; this trend was to become more articulate and forceful in the coming months.

The wave of revolution reached the national capital on 9 November, when several conflicting events took place in Berlin. The Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, was convinced that the monarchy had a chance of survival only if William II and the crown prince abdicated without delay; he therefore made frantic efforts from early dawn to persuade the Kaiser at Spa to authorize him to issue a proclamation to that effect. Towards noon, as armies of demonstrators marched through the streets of the capital and the soldiers in barracks joined the movement, Prince Max announced the Kaiser's abdication, although he did not yet have the authority to do so; at the same

time he transferred the office of chancellor to Friedrich Ebert, leader of the SPD. Ebert, with several of his party colleagues, had appeared at the chancellery and demanded that political power should be handed over to those who possessed the 'full confidence of the people'. He declared himself prepared to take over the chancellorship and undertook to govern according to the Reich constitution. The socialist deputation also agreed to the calling of elections for a national constituent assembly. Ebert's object at this time was to head off the revolutionary movement by reconstructing the government on the basis of the October constitution. He had in mind a coalition in which the Independent Socialists (USPD) – an anti-war group which had broken away from the SPD in 1917 – would join the existing majority parties – Social Democrats (SPD), Catholic Centre and Progressive Party – and a caretaker Cabinet with dictatorial powers, to be appointed pending the immediate convening of a national assembly which would decide on the future constitution of the state. Consequently, Ebert was exasperated to learn that his party colleague Scheidemann had already proclaimed the Republic to a crowd assembled outside the Reichstag building. Ebert moved into the chancellery with a few assistants, but his chancellorship lasted only a few hours.

The revolutionary groups in Berlin had not stood idly by on 9 November. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards (*revolutionäre Obleute*), who belonged to the left wing of the USPD and enjoyed considerable support among the Berlin workers, persuaded a soldiers' meeting to adopt a resolution that workers' and soldiers' councils would be elected next morning in the Berlin factories and garrisons, and would proceed on the same day to form an assembly and appoint a provisional government. In this way the Berlin soldiers' councils, who were the real holders of power in the capital from the afternoon of the 9th onwards, laid claim to a decisive voice in the formation of the new government.

In this situation Ebert and his colleagues decided to drop the plan for a coalition Cabinet of socialists and the bourgeois parties, and to seek a direct understanding with the USPD leaders, so as to create a *fait accompli* before the assembly of councils could meet; far-reaching though the USPD conditions were, the SPD accepted them for the sake of this overriding aim. Thus, early in the afternoon of the 10th, the two sets of leaders reached agreement on the formation of a new government on a basis of equality: the Council of People's Representatives (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*) consisted of three SPD members (Ebert, Scheidemann and Landsberg) and three from the USPD (Haase, Dinmann and Barth).

The assembly of 3,000 delegates elected by the Berlin workers and soldiers greeted the SPD–USPD agreement with wild applause. The mood of the hour was well expressed by the headline in the socialist newspaper *Vorwärts* on 10 November: 'No war between brothers!' The assembly 'confirmed' the Council of People's Representatives as a provisional government but, in addition, reflecting the intentions of the left-wing radicals, it appointed

an Executive Council, the *Vollzugsrat*. Only after heated debate were the Majority Socialists (the SPD – so-called to distinguish them from the USPD) and soldiers' representatives able to obtain equal membership of this body despite resistance from the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and their supporters. Owing to this equality, and also to the lack of organizational skill and tactical errors by the left-wing members of the Executive Council, the latter was unable to play the part of a revolutionary 'counter-government' to the Council of People's Representatives, as the radicals had intended. Even during the weeks of transition when the country was without a constitution, there was no 'dual control' at the top level as in Russia. By the end of November the Council of People's Representatives had decisively won the trial of strength with the Executive Council. Above all, the Majority Socialist representatives possessed strong support among the 'expert ministers' (heads of government departments) who were nearly all members of bourgeois parties or could be regarded as such (Solf, Preuss, Schiffer, von Krause, Koeth).

As in the Reich as a whole, the monarchical system in the federal German states was abolished in November 1918. The revolutionary governments that seized power there were in some cases composed equally of SPD and USPD members (Prussia, Saxony); Majority Socialists predominated in some (Württemberg, Hesse), Independents in others (Brunswick, Hamburg, Bremen, some small Thuringian states); in others again, some of the ministers represented the middle classes (Baden, Mecklenburg-Schwerin). In Bavaria the revolutionary government, which included SPD and USPD members, were headed by the Independent, Kurt Eisner, who seized the initiative in Munich at the crucial moment and, as early as 7 November, proclaimed the overthrow of the Wittelsbach dynasty and the establishment of a republic.

The fall of the monarchies and the appointment of revolutionary governments of the Reich and the individual states coincided with the ending of the war. An American note received in Berlin on 6 November gave the green light for armistice negotiations, and on the same day a German delegation left for the West. By agreement with the Army High Command it was headed by Matthias Erzberger of the Centre Party; it would certainly have been better for the chief delegate to be a representative of the General Staff, so as to make clear to the world who was actually responsible for the German surrender. The terms presented to the delegation by Marshal Foch were extremely severe. The Germans were to evacuate all occupied territory in the West and the whole left bank of the Rhine, as well as three bridgeheads at Cologne, Mainz and Koblenz; to surrender a large quantity of war *matériel*, the submarine fleet and the High Seas Fleet, as well as locomotives, rolling stock and motor vehicles. Allied prisoners were to be returned without any reciprocal obligation; the peace treaties of Brest Litovsk and Bucharest were to be abrogated; German troops were to be withdrawn from territories in the east, though not until the Allies should so require; the

blockade of Germany was to continue. The Army High Command, consulted on the terms, replied that the delegation should try to secure some concessions, but if this was impossible, they should 'accept them nevertheless'. The delegation were only able to obtain a slight postponement of the date for the withdrawal of German troops. The armistice agreement was signed on 11 November. A few hours later the guns fell silent on all fronts, after more than four years of bitter fighting.

Now that hostilities were over, all energies in Germany were concentrated on issues of internal politics. What were the objectives and political strategy of the groups and parties heading the revolutionary movement, as well as the chief members of the revolutionary government, and how did the middle class react to the change of regime?

None of the political groups possessed a patent recipe – a strategy carefully elaborated over a long period and adequate to the acute political and social crisis that had broken out at the end of October. The course of events took all of them completely by surprise. The total and unexpected collapse of the existing order produced a situation for which no one was prepared: neither the political right, which looked on helplessly as if paralysed, and, in the first few days, accepted the fall of the monarchy without any attempt at resistance; nor the bourgeois parties, whose chief concern was the threat of a radical overthrow of the social order; nor the Social Democrats, who had achieved their main objectives with the October reform and on 9 November crossed the Rubicon only with reluctance; nor even the radical left, who had desired and worked for a revolutionary change and who should have been most likely to possess a clear strategy to cope with it. But, until the last days of October, even the left-wing radicals had not reckoned with such a sudden collapse of the imperial regime.

We may begin with the extreme left, the Spartacus Union (which was organizationally part of the USPD until the end of December 1918). The objective of Karl Liebkneckt, Rosa Luxemburg and their supporters was clear: they wished to see a Soviet Germany in alliance with Soviet Russia. The position reached by 10 November was to them an unendurable half-way house: 'On with the revolution' was their cry. Accordingly, they called for the abolition of the Council of People's Representatives; the immediate transfer of political power to the workers' and soldiers' councils; cancellation of the decision to convene a national assembly; the disarming of the police, of all officers and 'non-proletarian soldiers'; the creation of a workers' militia; the expropriation of all large and medium-sized agricultural concerns, as well as mines, iron and steel works, and large industrial and commercial firms.

The supporters of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were certainly not lacking in revolutionary zeal, but they were a small handful: probably at most a thousand when the revolution broke out. The most fervent exponents of the watchword 'All power to the councils' had themselves hardly won a seat on any of those bodies. For that reason they took to the streets,

organizing demonstrations in a frenzy of revolutionary impatience and seeking to counterfeit a strength they did not possess. 'Revolutionary gymnastics' was the mocking comment of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in Berlin, whose programme was similar to that of the Spartacists but who rejected their tactics. The demonstrations were indeed unsuccessful in the days of November and December, but they were not without consequences. To large sections of the people they gave the impression that the plan to convene a national assembly – the common aim of all bourgeois circles, the Social Democrats and most of the workers' and soldiers' councils – was in danger; many, too, saw the demonstrations as a foretaste of Bolshevist anarchy.

The threat from the left provoked a strong defensive reaction, not only from the middle class but from supporters of social democracy and most of the workers' and soldiers' councils. But, above all, it confirmed the belief of the Social Democratic People's Representatives that it was only in co-operation with the corps of officers and the traditional bureaucracy that they could maintain order and solve day-to-day problems. In this way a vicious circle set in from October onwards. The activities of the extreme left drove the Social Democratic Representatives towards the light; but their strong reliance on the old repositories of power became increasingly unacceptable to many supporters of the Majority Socialists, who wished for the abolition of the 'authoritarian state'.

The Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) was split internally from the outset of the revolutionary period. Widely different views prevailed among its officials and members concerning key questions of revolutionary policy and the re-ordering of the state and society. Hence the party evolved no coherent strategy: from December onwards its left and right wing to a large extent cancelled each other out and impeded action, though party membership was rising rapidly: about 100,000 in October 1918, over 300,000 in January 1919. (In March 1919 the Majority Social Democrats numbered about a million members.)

The left wing of the USPD sympathized with the radical socialist programme of Liebknecht and Luxemburg; it was opposed to calling a national assembly and was in favour of a system of councils (soviets). However, it rejected the Spartacist tactics of using street demonstrations and rallies to whip up the emotions of anonymous masses whose political stability could not be taken for granted. Instead, the USPD left wing preferred to rely on disciplined action by radical workers in their factories.

For the time being, however, it was still the right wing of the USPD that determined the party's policy. Its members sat on the Council of People's Representatives and on many workers' councils. Like the Majority Social Democrats, they favoured the calling of a national assembly. They did not want an election too early, wishing to lay a foundation of social democracy in the interim; on this point they differed from the Majority Socialists. But it was the decisive weakness of the moderate Independents that they only

stood a chance of putting their wishes into effect if the Majority Socialists were prepared to take the same line; and from mid-November onwards it was increasingly clear that this was not the case.

The leaders of the Majority Socialists had attained their political objective with the October reform. They regarded the November revolution as both unnecessary and harmful, as it complicated the solution of all the difficult problems arising out of the defeat and the cessation of hostilities: the withdrawal of the armies within the short time-limit imposed by the armistice; food supplies; conversion of the economy from a war to a peacetime footing; reabsorption on to the labour market of soldiers returning from the front and disbanded from their garrisons; preservation of the unity of the Reich; execution of the armistice terms and preparation for peace negotiations. All these tasks had to be tackled at once in the feverish, revolutionary atmosphere of November 1918, and in the Majority Socialists' view they could only be mastered if the civil service was functioning properly, disturbances of public order and economic life were reduced to a minimum, and firm discipline was maintained among the returning troops and in army barracks. Hence the Majority Socialist leaders were vitally interested in obtaining loyal support from the ruling élite of the empire – the bureaucracy, expecially its upper echelons, big business and the officers' corps. As they saw the priorities, it was inopportune to introduce drastic structural reforms at once, as the USPD advocated, or even to take preliminary social and economic measures designed to provide a firmer foundation for eventual parliamentary democracy (cf. below, pages 152 ff.). Instead, from 9 November onwards the Majority Social Democrats did their best to channel the revolutionary movement into the calmer waters of an election campaign. Pending the convocation of the National Assembly they governed on a strictly caretaker basis, leaving to the assembly all important decisions concerning the new political and social order.

During the first weeks after the revolution, in November and December, the decisive political initiative lay with the left-wing parties and groups, while the middle class and its political organizations played a largely passive role. The military defeat and revolutionary events, the uncertain future and the fear of a major social upheaval initially had a paralysing effect on large sections of the middle class. The situation following the collapse of the state called imperatively for organizational reform and political reorientation; only the future could show how much of this reflected a genuine change and how much was merely a concession to the spirit of the time.

On the political right a new party came into existence, the German National People's Party (*Deutschnationale Volkspartei* – DNVP). It consisted basically of the previous conservative parties (*Deutschkonservative* and *Reichspartei*), together with members of anti-Semitic and popular organizations, sections of the old and new middle class adhering to the right, but also some of the working class with ties to the Protestant church. The DNVP was loyal to the monarchical constitution, the social basis and values of the

Kaiser's Germany; it saw itself as a party of conviction, dedicated to nationalist, anti-parliamentarian aims, but had at the same time close ties with the world of industry and the landowning classes.

The (Catholic) Centre Party attempted at an early stage, but unsuccessfully, to establish itself as a non-denominational group under the name Christian People's Party. It continued to be the main electoral force representing Catholic voters, with a wide social span from aristocratic land-owners to Christian trade unionists. While the overthrow of the Protestant dynasty of Hohenzollern might inspire various political hopes, in large sections of the party there could be no question of active allegiance to republicanism; this was especially the case in Bavaria, where the local Centre Party constituted itself as an independent group at the end of 1918 (*Bayerische Volkspartei* – BVP).

The liberals did not succeed in forming a united party. At the outset the newly founded German Democratic Party (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei* – DDP) offered a broader political spectrum than its effective predecessor, the Progressive People's Party. But a section of the National Liberals refrained from joining the DDP, and certain individuals were deliberately excluded, as being politically discredited by their annexationist policy during the war years. In December 1918 these members of the former National Liberal Party founded the German People's Party (*Deutsche Volkspartei* – DVP) under the leadership of Gustav Stresemann, the last chairman of the National Liberals in the Reichstag. Meanwhile, in the months of revolution the DDP served as a focus for the hopes of the non-Catholic bourgeoisie that the party would adapt itself to the new forms of parliamentary democracy and that, by prudently accepting social change, it would achieve political stability and enable the middle class to play a major role in the new society.

Having thus surveyed the forces in the political arena after 9 November 1918, we may cast a glance at the principal events and stages of the internal struggle during the first months after the revolution.

As early as 10 November an agreement was achieved between Ebert and General Groener, who had succeeded Ludendorff as quartermaster-general of the army on 26 October and was the dominant personality at Army Headquarters during the revolutionary months. Both men were anxious to come to terms on a basis that would not shake the foundations of the state; they were both firmly opposed to a leftward development, and wished to restore the 'rule of law' as quickly as possible by convening a national constituent assembly. Consequently Groener gave a promise of loyalty to the new government on behalf of the OHL. In return he expected the Council of People's Representatives to support the attempts of the high command to maintain discipline in the ranks and preserve the authority of the officer corps. To this Ebert consented; it was hard to do otherwise in the confused situation of 10 November. But it did not necessarily follow from this agreement (which has been wrongly presented as an 'offensive alliance' in internal affairs) that Ebert and the Council of People's Representatives were

to be permanently dependent on the OHL. The important decisions on military-political affairs were not taken until the following weeks.

From the point of view of damping down agitation on the home front, as the Majority Socialist leaders desired, an event of at least equal importance was the Central Working Association (*Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft*) agreement concluded on 15 November between the employers' associations and the trade unions. Negotiations for the agreement had been instituted by both sides before the revolution. The employers believed that in the stormy period to come they could not rely exclusively on the protection of the state apparatus, and that they should come to a direct understanding with the trade unions to ensure the continuance of a free market economy. The union negotiators put their trust in the partnership of capital and labour and hoped that long-desired reforms could now be put into effect. The agreement of 15 November seemed to justify these hopes. The employers recognized the trade unions as the 'authorized representation of the workers' and as a proper body with which to negotiate collective wage rates; they dropped their support for the more amenable 'yellow' unions (*Werkvereine*); they agreed to the eight-hour day (with full wage adjustment) and the establishment of workers' committees in all concerns with a workforce of at least fifty. By these concessions the employers managed to a large extent to keep the trade union leaders quiet and even to secure their partial support in the debate on basic economic organization. With the idea of 'social partnership' the employers offered a model of how far the demands and interests of the workers could be met without resorting to 'socialization', that is, nationalization. 'Social policy in exchange for renouncing socialization' – such was the employers' strategy during the revolutionary months. The agreement of 15 November 1918 has rightly been described as one of 'mutual benefit between the unions and heavy industry, which in quasi-syndicalist fashion asserted the primacy of the economy over workers' councils, state bureaucracy and a revolutionary government' (Heinrich A. Winkler). In this way, before the party system was constituted and the authorities of the Republic were fully organized, the business world and especially that of heavy industry was able to safeguard and even enlarge its sphere of influence. This success is all the more remarkable since the fighting strength of the unions was appreciably increased by a mass influx of members in the months after the November collapse: for instance, the membership of the 'free trade unions' associated with the workers' parties rose from about 2.8 million at the end of 1918 to 7.3 million at the end of 1919.

The primary aim of the Majority Socialist leaders from 9 November onwards was to convene a national assembly as soon as possible: it was for this body alone, in their view, to take decisions as to the future organization of state and society. Although the left-wing radicals agitated loudly against the plan for a national assembly – their watchword being 'All power to the councils' – a dictatorship of the latter bodies was not on the cards in November 1919. This was clear to anyone whose attention was not fixed

exclusively on certain meetings in Berlin. All political forces of importance were in favour of a national assembly: the middle class no less solidly than the SPD and trade unions, even the majority of the USPD, most of the workers' councils and – of especial importance in the initial weeks – practically all the soldiers' councils. On 29 November the Council of People's Representatives passed the law providing for elections to a constituent assembly. Apart from introducing a strict system of proportional representation, probably its most important provision was that, contrary to the state of affairs in imperial Germany, women were henceforth entitled to vote and to stand for election.

The date for the election to the assembly was left to be decided by the first National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, which sat in Berlin from 16 to 20 December. Out of about 500 delegates, nearly two-thirds were members of the SPD; less than a dozen were Spartacists; Liebkneckt and Rosa Luxemburg received no mandate. By an overwhelming majority the date for the election was set at 19 January 1919. A proposal to adopt the system of councils as the 'basis of the constitution of the socialist republic', and to invest the councils with supreme legislative and executive power, was rejected by a large majority.

Despite its domination by the Majority Socialists, however, the congress also took decisions which were clearly contrary to the wishes of the party's leaders, and which indicated the direction in which the social democratic workers and soldiers were impatient for the government to move. The congress called on the government to 'put in hand forthwith the socialization of all industries that are ripe for this purpose, especially the mining industry' and to 'take all necessary steps to disarm the counter-revolution'. To symbolize the 'destruction of militarism and the abolition of the doctrine of blind obedience (*Kadavergehorsam*),' all badges of rank and the wearing of uniform off duty were to be prohibited; soldiers were to elect their own officers, and a 'People's militia' (*Volkswehr*) was to be created speedily to replace the standing army.

These demands (the so-called 'Hamburg points') outlined a programme for which there was a broad consensus in the democratic mass movement of those weeks, amounting to the 'democratization' of the army (especially), the civil service and the economy.

> The nationalization of heavy industry was regarded as a matter of course, but not the most urgent priority in view of the acute problems of demobilization and supply. The basic decision in favour of a National Assembly and a parliamentary system did not mean that all decisions concerning the process of democratization were to be left to the assembly. On the contrary, the government was expected to take decisive steps at once to consolidate the power situation brought about by the revolution and to prevent the revival of reactionary forces (Reinhard Rürup).

However, from the end of December the prospects of the government carrying out such a policy of reform in a short time receded from day to day. On 28 December the Independent Socialists withdrew from the Council of People's Representatives. The immediate occasion of their doing so was a difference of opinion as to the justification and advisability of the SPD Representatives' action in using troops to put down the disturbances in Berlin at Christmas time. The underlying cause, however, was the disagreement between the SPD and the USPD on basic policy, especially towards the military and the OHL, together with increasing pressure by the left-wing Independents to persuade the USPD Representatives to withdraw from the goverment and break up the coalition with the SPD. After the resignation of Representatives Haase, Dittmann and Barth, and the accession of the Majority Socialists Noske and Wissell, the Reich government was entirely in the hands of the Majority Socialists, assisted by the imperial bureaucracy and experts from non-socialist parties who were given ministerial posts. On 3 January 1919 the USPD members of the Prussian government also resigned.

While the more moderate elements in the USPD were at this time losing ground – they included the party chairman Haase and the theoreticians Kautsky and Hilferding – the extreme left for the first time organized itself as an independent party: the *Spartakusbund* (Spartacus Union) and the 'Bremen left-wing radicals' united to form the German Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* – KPD), which held its inaugural congress in Berlin on 1 January 1919. On 5 January, the Berlin 'left Radicals' launched the so-called 'January rising' (armed occupation of newspaper offices, appointment of a revolutionary committee and proclamation of the deposition of the Ebert-Scheidemann government). The rising, conducted by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and KPD headquarters without a clear strategic plan, was hopelessly mismanaged and to some extent half-hearted. The government used troops to put it down, and for this purpose encouraged the formation of *Freikorps* (anti-Communist volunteer units), which had been developing for some time past and in the ensuing months were used similarly in other parts of the Reich.

The January rising has been called 'the revolution's Battle of the Marne'. Its bloody suppression caused a deep rift within the workers' movement and gave a stimulus to political escalation. The murder of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg on 15 January by members of the Horse Guards Division aroused indignation and horror among many who in no way shared the victims' political views. While the USPD took on a more radical hue, the SPD leaders more and more openly sought close co-operation with the officer corps and higher bureaucracy, and intensified their contacts, which had never been broken off, with the bourgeois parties.

Although from the beginning of January 1919 radicalization made rapid progress not only in Berlin but in other industrial centres, it was not reflected to a great extent in the election to the National Assembly on 19 January

(cf. table, pages 224–5). The SPD polled 37.9 per cent of the votes and 165 seats – the highest share of the vote in a national election that the SPD, let alone any other party, was to achieve in the years of the Weimar Republic, while the USPD obtained only 7.6 per cent (22 seats). However, a majority in the National Assembly was held by the bourgeois parties who, aided by unrestricted freedom of the press and the right of public assembly, had conducted an intensive electoral campaign. The strongest middle-class party proved to be the Centre (19.7 per cent; 91 seats), closely followed by the DDP (18.5 per cent; 75 seats). The DNVP obtained only 10.3 per cent of votes (44 seats) but, in addition to the traditional conservative strongholds in Germany east of the Elbe, it made some advance among the urban petty bourgeoisie of the west and south. The DVP, which had entered the election campaign relatively late, gained 4.4 per cent of votes (19 seats). Despite visible shifts and changes, the German party system showed remarkable continuity before and after the upheavals of 1918–19. In view of the election result, it was inevitable that the October coalition of Majority Socialists, the Centre and the DDP would develop into the 'Weimar coalition'. This, however, meant that the constitution had to reflect a compromise between the Social Democrats and the bourgeois democratic parties. The way had been prepared for such a compromise in November: on the 15th of that month Hugo Preuss – a respected left-wing liberal, an outspoken opponent of the old authoritarian state, but certainly not a socialist – had been appointed secretary of state in the Ministry of the Interior with the specific task of drafting a constitution.

The National Assembly convened at Weimar on 6 February. The government had chosen that venue under the impact of the January rising in Berlin, intending to protect the assembly from the revolutionary excitement of the capital and demonstrations by the anxious population. As all parties to the right of the USPD were determined to end the transition period as soon as possible, the National Assembly took a very short time to lay the constitutional foundations of the new state. On 8 February a Bill 'Concerning the Provisional Exercise of Political Power' was submitted to the assembly by the Reich government, which had prepared it in consultation with representatives of the state governments, and two days later it was passed, without the assembly having debated its principles or subjected it to a thorough examination.

The interim law, which contained only ten paragraphs, provided for the essential constitutional organs of the Republic. (1) The National Assembly was empowered to adopt, in addition to the constitution, 'other urgent national laws', that is, it was vested with the functions of a legislature, the Reichstag; (2) The individual German states were represented by a Committee of States, which had been set up at a conference of representatives of all the states on 25 January and had since then exercised a strong influence on the constitutional discussions; it was to some extent a precursor of the Reichsrat. Laws for the whole Reich were to be passed with the

concurrence of the National Assembly and the Committee of States. The states were also given the assurance that their territorial boundaries could not be altered without their consent. (3) The business of the Reich was conducted by a president, to be elected by the National Assembly; he would in turn appoint the Cabinet, whose members must possess the confidence of the National Assembly. While all these arrangements were designated 'provisional', in practice the basic structure of the constitution – with the Reichstag, President and Cabinet – was thus predetermined before the constitutional discussions began.

On 11 February the National Assembly elected Friedrich Ebert to be the first President of the Reich. On the same day Ebert called on Scheidemann, the SPD deputy, to form a government, and on 13 February he appointed the new Reich Cabinet, composed of the Weimar coalition of Majority Socialists, Democrats and the Centre Party.

Some days later the National Assembly began to debate the constitution. The draft prepared by Preuss, now Minister of the Interior, had a complicated history behind it. After full discussion in the ministry, in which the sociologist Max Weber took part, a first version had been prepared at the end of December 1918. This provided for a 'strong president' as a counterweight to the Reichstag, and also made decisive changes in the relationship between the Reich and the individual states. Germany was to be a federal state with markedly unitary features; Prussia was to be split up and other state boundaries altered so as to form sixteen 'Reich districts' (*Gebiete des Reichs*), to which Germany, Austria and Vienna might eventually be added. Preuss's draft was published on 20 February after two important alterations had been made at the direction of the Council of People's Representatives: a short list of basic rights was added, and the specific proposals for changes in territorial boundaries were replaced by a vague indication that such changes might be necessary. The unitary features of the draft aroused the alarm of the individual states, who now became active and secured further modification. The draft submitted to the assembly in February 1919 thus differed in important respects from its author's intention, and Preuss could do no more than hope that the sovereign assembly would set firm bounds to the ambitions of the individual states.

These hopes were to some extent realized. During the discussions, which chiefly took place in the Constitutional Committee of twenty-eight members and which, from the beginning of May, were overshadowed by the peace terms and the dispute over the signature of the Treaty of Versailles – the tendency was to enlarge the powers of the central government, especially as regards taxation policy and tax administration. The prerogatives of Bavaria and Württemberg in regard to military matters, post and communications were abolished. The states were re-designated as 'lands' (*Länder*). The Reichsrat, representing the *Länder*, had distinctly less power than the Bundesrat before 1918, its functions being confined essentially to advising on legislation.