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History 133B – Germany, 1900-1945

Source Exploration

Diaries of the Revolution: Those Who Lived Through It

1918 is a year that changed Germany's destiny forever. In the months after the ceasefire in November, Germany transformed from a monarchy to a republic while gripping with political violence and infighting on the streets of their own cities. Left-wing social democrats and communists launched their revolution against the disintegrating monarchy to proclaim a republic on November 9, two days before the armistice, and became the new political force in a post-war Germany. The German Revolution is a significant event in German history but is often overlooked and forgotten in the present-day education and knowledge of most Germans. This is the result of the revolution being a failure in contrast to other cotemporary revolutions that succeeded. The official canon of the German Revolution portrayed this event as a workers' and socialist uprising against the collapsing German monarchy. It is dominated by the political infighting where the political left and right fought both in political discourse and the streets with weapons. Paramilitary groups would arise to serve each side of the political spectrum while the country witnessed numerous high-profile assassinations of political figures. Most historical records often neglected the political developments that were taking place in Germany in the backdrop of Versailles - the period of infighting between revolutionaries that set the stage for future political violence in the Weimar Republic. As the revolution unfolded, there are numerous personal accounts of the event written by individuals from politicians to ordinary citizens. These people came from an educated background and would typically be wealthy to a degree, hence the diary keeping. While they lived through the revolution, these individuals provided a different perspective on the revolution set on reshaping the social structure of German society from an aristocratic imperial system to a representative democracy. As the event unfolded in real time in front of these witnesses, a sense of confusion and uncertainty can be seen in their diary entry as their country headed towards an uncertain future.

The most comprehensive documentation of the German Revolution is *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918-19* by Sebastian Haffner. This is a widely cited source on the German Revolution as it documented the series of events from a scholarly perspective. While it is not a

primary source, it is a great resource of scholarly knowledge that documented a largely forgotten piece of German history. Haffner was able to provide a clear picture into the political turmoil of 1918 and 1919. This source provides an unbiased account of the revolution with diaries and official records. While staying true to its title, that the revolution is a failed one, it took perspectives from all sides of the revolution. The source covers the months between September 1918 and February 1919, with the suppression of the revolution by the new government led by Friedrich Ebert. Haffner notes that the revolution is one of importance and not of a sin, and that Germany still lives in the effects of the revolution. Another documentation of the revolution is *The German Revolution 1917-1923* by Pierre Broué. In the foreword written by Eric D. Weitz, this piece was written during the leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Weitz noted that this was before the time that archives of German history were made widely available to the public and was an in-depth retelling of the German Revolution from the sources Broué could acquire at the time. This serves as useful source in looking at a comprehensive timeline of what happened during the chaos of the German Revolution. Broué is a French left-wing activist who sought to document the German Revolution as an extension of the worldwide leftist movement in the 1960s. The preface states the revolution from 1918 to 1923 “shaped our past, and undoubtedly weighs in our present.”

Several Germans have kept diaries that recount their personal experiences during the revolution. Victor Klemperer, a scholar, kept a diary on the events in Munich, while Harry Kessler documented the revolution in Berlin. Both diaries give an insight to the authors’ personal take on the event. While they were not direct witnesses of certain events, their diaries document their feelings of uncertainty and confusion as the revolution unfolded in their respective cities. Klemperer detailed his experience on the day of the assassination of Kurt Eisner, the leader of Bavaria. He describes it as a normal day in the university when they were told to evacuate upon hearing news of the assassination. Henry Kessler kept a diary detailing his personal experiences of the revolution in Berlin. This diary spans a period of 19 years, with entries for each year making up a chapter, but he kept entries between the years of 1918 and 1919 that detailed events unfolding in Berlin. Kessler describes the revolution as a handful of councils that jockey for political influence in the new political order. Around that time, Kessler was on a visit to Warsaw and therefore he was not present in witnessing some of the revolutionary events. When he returned to Berlin, he described the city as a place stationed full of soldiers. Kessler described the

deaths of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg as a “dreadful and fantastic end,” showcasing his stance against the Spartacist uprising. The diary entries of Victor Klemperer and Harry Kessler evoke a sense of uncertainty. Both were members of the educated class and were living through the rapidly unfolding changes of the German Revolution. Klemperer’s diaries recorded the confusion he felt as assassinations and violence took place in Munich. Harry Kessler’s entries emphasize his uncertainty of the future of his country. Despite being in Warsaw for a significant part of the revolution, Kessler remained concerned about the political developments in Germany. The only source of relief he described was when he wrote about the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, which changed his view on the direction of the revolution. These sources provide a first-person account of the German Revolution, where it is now usually portrayed as a left-wing working-class movement. The diaries show individual perspectives of the revolution, and the effects can be felt at all levels of society. The canon of the German Revolution is therefore challenged as the violence and political discourse created an atmosphere of disorientation and confusion, where ordinary people wouldn’t know about the developments of revolutionary movements until news of it were announced. By providing a first-person account of the event, the diaries of Klemperer and Kessler serve as living history in a period that is often overlooked in the study of post-World War I Germany.

In addition to the diaries, memoirs were also written by some Germans to recount in retrospect their experiences during the German Revolution. Arnold Brecht and Felix Gilbert wrote memoirs of their careers and lives. They would mention the important events that they lived through and recall how those events affected their lives at the time. Brecht was a career politician in the Weimar government who witnessed the German Revolution. He was in Berlin and retells his experience serving as a politician during the violent political event. Gilbert was in his youth when the revolution unfolded. While being a witness to the revolution, he retells his experiences through his memories in the 1960s, where the accuracy of his memoirs can be disputed. The diaries of Klemperer and Kessler would overtake these memoirs as a source to the eyewitnesses of the German revolution.

Through the confusion and political violence, these sources piece together a comprehensive documentation of the German Revolution through the eyes of those who lived through the era. The feelings of uncertainty as Germany reeled from the aftermath of its defeat in World War I dawned upon the people as they faced left-wing uprisings and right-wing political

violence. The diary entries are important pieces of evidence in a period of German history that was mostly forgotten. Scholars who wrote secondary sources on the German Revolution contributed to the increasing studies into that period in German history. First-hand account of the German Revolution preserved the memory of the event while also providing insight into how the German people felt as their country moved towards a new democratic government. The diaries serve as a personal record that sheds light onto how ordinary citizens lived their lives in the backdrop of social upheaval. They serve to help future scholars better understand the scope of the revolution as well as the long-lasting impact it has had on German history leading up to the rise of the Nazi regime.

Annotated Bibliography

Brecht, Arnold, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht: An Autobiography, 1884-1970*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1970.

Arnold Brecht (1884-1977) was a German jurist and a leading government official in the Weimar Republic. He served in the Weimar government between 1918 and 1933 before being dismissed by Hitler after he became chancellor. Afterwards, he emigrated to the United States and was sought after as a foreign policy advisor for US government. After the end of World War II, he contributed to helping draft the constitution of post-war West Germany, which would become the constitution of modern-day Germany.¹ This comprehensive autobiography of Brecht details events from his childhood to his life after leaving Germany and post-war activities. As an autobiography, this source was created with the purpose of education. Brecht intended to help direct the future generations of politicians to make sound decisions and not repeat the mistakes of the Weimar Republic. The introduction of the source is a foreword by Brecht himself. He noted that the English version was a shortened version of the original German publication of around 500 pages.

¹ Wikimedia Foundation. (2023, August 29). *Arnold Brecht*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Brecht

Kessler, Harry. *In the Twenties: The Diaries of Harry Kessler*. [1st ed.]. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

- Harry Kessler (1868-1937) was a German count who lived through Great War and the German Revolution. He grew up in France, Germany, and England and served in the German Army in World War I.² His diary entries detailed his personal life up to 1937, the year of his death. He came from an aristocratic background and his views on certain events are from a perspective against movements that are socialist or communist. His diaries are written records of a German count whose life spanned the years between the end of World War I and the rise of the Nazi regime. He created the diaries to detail his personal life and how he views that changes to his native Germany in the revolutionary chaos as well as the new Weimar government after the end of World War I.

Haffner, Sebastian. *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918-19*. Translated by Georg Rapp. London: Deutsch, 1973.

- Sebastian Haffner (1907-1999) was the pseudonym of Raimund Pretzel, a German journalist and historian who wrote extensively throughout his career on interpretations of German history. He was an emigré in Britain during World War II and a journalist in post-war West Germany. Haffner's writings broke with both the political right and left and his intervention in the Spiegel Affair in 1962 raised his public profile. Once he left the journalism field, Haffner began writing about the history of the German Reich between 1871 and 1945. *Failure of a Revolution* was one of the many books Haffner wrote on the history of the German Reich and it was a detailed documentation of the German Revolution. Haffner's source was a more unbiased documentation of the revolution, which was tainted by political beliefs of the right and left. This retelling of events shows a comprehensive and nonbiased attempt at documenting a polarizing period of German history. This source was written for education, as Haffner's belief that there was nothing Germany could do to

² Wikimedia Foundation. (2024b, February 18). *Harry Graf Kessler*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Graf_Kessler

avoid the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles and the rise of the Nazi regime.

Gilbert, Felix. *A European Past: Memoirs, 1905-1945*. New York: Norton, 1988.

- Felix Gilbert (1905-1991) was a German historian whose expertise was the history of the Italian Renaissance. He came from a Jewish family and was forced to emigrate due to the Nazi rise in power. Gilbert moved to the United States where he continued his studies and lectured at numerous universities across the country.³ This source is a memoir of Gilbert's life between his childhood and 1945, around the time of Germany's surrender. It includes snippets of his memories at important German historical events and serve as a retelling of his own experiences during that time. The section about the German Revolution was mostly from his childhood, where the memories of it could have been inaccurate.

Broué, Pierre, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*. Translated by Ian Birchall and edited by Brian Pearce with a foreword by Eric D. Weitz. Leiden; Brill, 2005.

- Pierre Broué (1926-2005) was a French historian and Trotskyist revolutionary. He wrote numerous books detailing the history of the Bolshevik Party in Russia, revolutions in Spain and Germany, and biographies of Leon Trotsky. Broué would fight against German occupation as part of the French Resistance during World War II.⁴ His work on the German Revolution originates from the wave of leftist politics in the 1960s and 1970s. It was a product of that era and the source leaned heavily towards a leftist interpretation of the events. Broué source was written as a documentation of a leftist movement in the past.

³ Wikimedia Foundation. (2023a, January 1). *Felix Gilbert*. Wikipedia. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Gilbert

⁴ Wikimedia Foundation. (2022, September 26). *Pierre Broué*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Brou%C3%A9

Klemperer, Victor. *Munich 1919: Diary of a Revolution*. Translated by Jessica Spengler. English edition. Cambridge, UK; Polity Press, 2017.

- Victor Klemperer is a German scholar and diarist. His family was Jewish and despite his conversion to Protestantism and having strong connection to German culture, Klemperer found his life becoming more restricted after the rise of the Nazis due to the anti-Jewish laws. He kept a diary throughout the Nazi era, detailing his day-to-day experiences. Klemperer also published *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, a study on how Nazi propaganda influenced the German language. After the war Klemperer became a noted figure within East Germany, where he lectured at universities until his death in 1960.⁵ Klemperer's diaries of the German Revolution provide a different perspective on the event from a different city. As most revolutionary events were documented in Berlin, it is worth noting that the revolution affected a lot of other cities within the borders of Germany. Klemperer was residing in Munich when the revolution broke out and he felt the immediate effects of the assassination of Kurt Eisner in 1919. Klemperer's diaries were written within the year of 1919, which narrows down the scope of events that he covers with his other diaries.

⁵ Wikimedia Foundation. (2024, January 18). *Victor Klemperer*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Klemperer