Hi-story lessons.

3

09.11.1918

9 November: Philipp Scheidemann (the Social Democratic Party of Germany) proclaims the German Republic

Despite some initial success, the German Spring Offensive Operation Michael on the western front ultimately fails, and in its aftermath, any remaining fighting morale among the weakened German troops sinks visibly. 8 August 1918, is a truly schwarzer Tag (black day) militarily for the German Empire, as the Allies break through at Amiens and the German soldiers are forced to retreat on a broad front. In addition, the Germans are confronted by around one million American GIs by the autumn of 1918. By this time, the German Oberste Heeresleitung or OHL (Supreme Army Command) has no remaining scope for any further initiatives in the West. On 29 September 1918, the Deputy Commander of the OHL and General of Infantry, General Erich Ludendorff, requested the imperial government in Berlin to begin armistice negotiations, as long as a complete collapse of the German positions could be avoided. On 3 October, the earlier opposition within the Reichstag government, including Social Democrats who had been reviled and vilified for decades as vaterlandslose Gesellen (journeymen without a fatherland), is integrated into a new imperial government under the leadership of Prince Maximilian of Baden as Chancellor, also known as Max von Baden, in order to conduct these ceasefire negotiations. On 4 October, Max von Baden submits a petition for a ceasefire to the American President Woodrow Wilson, which is, however, rejected with the comment that the German Emperor, Wilhelm II, would first need to abdicate. Max von Baden instigates the end of the submarine warfare, and arranges for the removal of Ludendorff from the Supreme Army Command. On 28 October, changes to the Imperial constitution come into force, whereby the parliament is to be granted extensive rights henceforth. At this point in time, the German Empire which had only been democratic to a very small extent, is actually on a pathway towards becoming a parliamentary monarchy.

Although the Supreme Army Command (OHL) has already been pressured to negotiate an armistice, the German Naval Command autonomously resolves on 24 October to contest a final ehrenvolle (honourable) naval battle with its ships that had not seen action since the Battle of Jutland in June 1916. Sailors on ships anchored at Wilhelmshaven trigger a mutiny in response to this absurd and senseless order. 1000 sailors are arrested in an attempt to stop the mutiny in its tracks. However, when seven demonstrating sailors are shot on 3 November by a military patrol in Kiel, the situation escalates. On 4 November, insurgent sailors take over power in Kiel and, thus, launch the German November Revolution. Based on the model of the Soviets (Councils) in the Russian October Revolution,

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the first German Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat (Workers' and Soldiers' Council) is created in Kiel. In numerous cities over the following days, Workers' and Soldiers' Councils are formed and take over power. Across the entire empire, people go on strike, demanding peace and the abdication of the Emperor, in huge demonstrations. There is also increasing public pressure for the introduction of a socialist German soviet republic, like in Russia, and for the numerous German princes to renounce their titles. In the end, when revolutionaries bring down the monarchy in Bavaria on 7 November and proclaim the republic, the position of the Emperor can no longer be maintained. At this point in time, Emperor Wilhelm II has already fled from Berlin to the Belgian town of Spa, where the headquarters of the Supreme Army Command (OHL) is located. On 9 November, Max von Baden announces Emperor Wilhelm II's abdication. The Imperial Chancellor also resigns and hands over official duties to Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). On the same day, Philipp Scheidemann, also a member of the SPD, proclaims the republic form the western balcony of the Reichstag building at 2.00 PM, under threatening pressure from the workers and soldiers. Schiedemann declares: 'Das Alte und Morsche, die Monarchie ist zusammengebrochen! Es lebe das Neue; es lebe die deutsche Republik!' ('The old and rotten, the monarchy has collapsed! The new may live; long live the German Republic!'). By proclaiming a moderate republic, Scheidemann is acting under the impression that it was necessary to forestall the radical powers from the far-left. In reality, Karl Liebknecht, a former Social Democrat and now member of the socialist splinter party Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) also announces the end of the monarchy two hours later, and declares the Freie Sozialistische Republik Deutschland (Free Socialist Republic of Germany) from a balcony of the Berlin City Palace. However, Scheidemann's proclamation is the decisive statement, and it marks the end of the Empire and the beginning of a democratic Germany.

In the following months, the young republic struggles with challenges from both the left and right wings of politics. Right-wing Freikorps (paramilitary units formed of First World War veterans) and fighters from the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) that was established in January 1919, both wage war on the new state. For months, the country becomes bogged down in uprisings and political murders. In an attempt to evade what is tantamount to a state of civil war, the German constituent national assembly meets in the small town of Weimar in Thuringia, which had primarily been known previously for the literary works from Weimar Classicism and, in particular, the poets Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller. On 11 August 1919, the constitution is finally signed, and implemented on 14 August. For the first time ever, Germany is a liberal democracy.

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