

# 1

## THE GERMAN REVOLUTION, 1918–19

### BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

Germany was taken into the First World War in August 1914 by a civilian government under Bethmann Hollweg, the fifth Chancellor of the Second Reich. By July 1917 his regime had been converted into a military dictatorship under Field Marshals Ludendorff and Hindenburg. This, however, made little difference to Germany's prospects in the war. Despite defeating Russia in the East, the Reich faced imminent collapse in the West by October 1918. The decisive factors were the entry of the United States into the war and a crippling blockade imposed by the Royal Navy. Ludendorff therefore advised Kaiser Wilhelm II to appoint a civilian government to negotiate an armistice with the Allies. Prince Max of Baden was entrusted with this unenviable task on 26 October. He was supported by the Social Democrats (SPD), who since 1912 had been the largest party in the Reichstag, but opposed by the more radical Independent Socialists (USPD) and Spartacists, who had broken away from the SPD during the course of the war.

The situation then deteriorated rapidly as the armed forces began to disintegrate. The result was a series of mutinies. On 7 November Bavaria also erupted when the Wittelsbach dynasty was overthrown, to be replaced by an Independent Socialist regime under Eisner. The Kaiser was persuaded to abdicate on 9 November. On the same day, Prince Max of Baden handed over the reins of government to Friedrich Ebert, who succeeded him as Chancellor, while the latter's SPD colleague, Philipp Scheidemann, proclaimed Germany a Republic from a window in the Reichstag building.

At this stage the SPD were obliged to share power with the radicals—the USPD and Spartacists—in a Council of People's Representatives. It was no secret, however, that the groups had vastly different aims. The

SPD hoped to establish a western parliamentary system, while the Spartacist leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, clearly intended to emulate the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. In January 1919, the Spartacists came out in open revolt in the streets of Berlin. They were, however, crushed by the Freikorps, or remnants of the Imperial army, with the full knowledge and sanction of Ebert, who had already done a deal with the commanding officer, General Groener. During the fighting both Liebknecht and Luxemburg were shot in cold blood. The next target was Bavaria, which had proclaimed a Soviet Republic in January. This regime was brought down by the Freikorps in April 1919.

Meanwhile, elections had been held for the convening of the first full assembly of the Republic. This met in Weimar but, once the violence in Berlin had ended, the legislature was transferred back to Berlin, which once again became the permanent capital.

### **ANALYSIS: WAS THERE A GERMAN REVOLUTION?**

‘Revolution’ involves the transfer of power in circumstances outside of the normal constitutional process. It results in radical changes to the political—and quite possibly social and economic—infrastructure. The process is usually accelerated by the experience of war, and especially of military defeat. This is what happened in Russia during the course of 1917.

There has always been a strong argument that Germany had a similar experience a year later. The usual interpretation is that, like Russia, Germany underwent either two revolutions, or a single revolution which developed in two stages. A ‘revolution from above’ liberalised the constitution of the Second Reich in October 1918. It was followed by a ‘revolution from below’, which further subdivided into two. One successfully laid the foundations of the Republic in November and then beat off attempts to establish a more radical Bolshevik-style regime in January 1919. Collectively these developments comprised the ‘German Revolution’, which transformed an authoritarian structure into an advanced democracy. This scenario can—and should—be challenged. It will be argued here that Germany certainly did experience a revolutionary situation in 1918 but that it is far from clear that this situation actually produced a revolution.

‘Revolution from above’, it has been argued, was initiated at the end of September 1918 by Ludendorff and the Army High Command or OHL

(*Oberste Heeresleitung*). Recognising that Germany's defeat was imminent, they advised the Kaiser to hand over power to Prince Max of Baden in an attempt to secure a constitutional government which would be acceptable to the Allies in general and to President Wilson in particular. The 'revolution' was activated by the reforms of 28 October which for the first time made the Chancellor responsible to the Reichstag and enabled members within the Reichstag to become ministers. The constitutional base of the Second Reich was therefore completely transformed.

The underlying situation was certainly dramatic. Germany faced military disaster and two of her allies, Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary, had already collapsed. The First World War was therefore the agent for political change, just as the Franco-Prussian War had been in 1871. Then, the Second Reich had been born out of military victory, based on the absorption of Germany into Prussia under the personal hegemony of the Hohenzollerns. Now, that same regime was being transformed by the spectre of military defeat. Ironically, the last country to have made an equivalent transition as a direct result of war was Germany's victim of 1870: France had changed from the Second Empire into the Third Republic. There is, it seems, much to be said for Trotsky's maxim that 'war is the locomotive of history'.

But did a revolutionary situation actually produce a *revolution*? The political and constitutional developments of October 1918 were all predictable. There had been persistent pressure for such changes throughout the history of the Second Reich by the Progressives, Social Democrats, National Liberals and even the Centre Party. The concessions were therefore very much within the mainstream reform programme of all the progressive elements of the regime. What occurred in September 1918 was not a sudden and radical departure but rather the fulfilment of a long awaited objective. 'Revolution from above' is a less appropriate description of this process than, say, evolution accelerated by necessity.

There is a stronger case for saying that November's 'revolution from below' was a real one. All the constituents seemed to be present. First, the military crisis destabilised the new administration of Prince Max, who was compelled to give up after only six weeks. Second, ever increasing pressure was exerted from outside Germany as President Wilson demanded unconditional surrender. Third, this precipitated action from below. As an awareness of the desperate nature of the situation spread through Germany there was a strong pressure for the abdication of the Kaiser and other German rulers. The wave of unrest

was sparked off by the naval mutinies at Wilhelmshaven, Kiel, Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck and by army disaffection in Frankfurt, Cologne, Stuttgart and Leipzig. There was undeniably a popular momentum which proved irresistible and which swept away the constitutional compromise implicit in the government of Prince Max. Fourth, the arrangement which followed seemed to be far more radical than the earlier October reforms. Scheidemann's proclamation of the Republic on 9 November was followed, a day later, by the formation of the Council of People's Representatives (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*) comprising Ebert, Scheidemann and Landsberg from the SPD and Haase, Dittman and Barth from the USPD. Similar institutions were set up in all the German states following the abdication of their rulers. Could these not be seen as revolutionary institutions?

Not necessarily. Despite the chaos of November 1917 and the undeniable potential for revolution, there is again strong evidence that the transfer of power was evolutionary. When Prince Max handed over to Ebert on 9 November 1918 he said, 'I commend the German Reich to your care.' (1) It was never Ebert's intention to bring any fundamental political changes. He hoped instead to reconstruct an administration on the basis of the October reforms and to form a caretaker government which would include the SPD, the USPD, the Centre and the Progressives, until a national assembly could be called to decide upon a future constitution. To an extent his hand was forced. Ebert found Scheidemann's proclamation of the Republic on 9 November profoundly irritating; he said on the occasion: 'You have no right to proclaim the Republic. What becomes of Germany—whether she becomes a republic or something else—must be decided by a constituent assembly.' (2) The possibility of power going to the soldiers' and workers' councils meant that Ebert felt obliged to go along with the apparently revolutionary device of the Council of People's Representatives instead of his own preferred option. Nevertheless, he did whatever he could to prevent this from pursuing a radical path and to pull the whole process back on to the course he had originally envisaged.

The whole attitude of Ebert fits into the pattern of recent developments within the SPD which had actually made them a force for stability and continuity. Even before 1900 the party had been engaged in active debate between the 'revolutionary' minority and the 'evolutionary' mainstream led by Bernstein. The radicals had broken away during the First World War to form the USPD and Spartacus League, the latter espousing Marxist-Leninist principles. The majority

Social Democrats now showed no enthusiasm for anything other than a reformed version of the constitution of the Second Reich. Some historians have argued that they dismissed the alternatives too lightly; according to Wehler, for example, workers' and soldiers' councils 'could have been used to restructure society, if the political leadership of the time had encouraged such a course with more determination than it showed'. (3) Bookbinder agrees: the Social Democrats were so preoccupied with preventing political revolution that they lost the chance to seek social change. This, in turn, 'convinced the conservatives that they could limit any concessions that they might make.' (4) It would therefore be difficult to argue even that the Social Democrats were 'reluctant revolutionaries'; on the contrary, twenty years of internal debate had made them convinced evolutionaries, prepared to take any measure necessary to prevent revolution. This became more and more apparent at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919. The situation again seemed highly volatile as the Social Democrats, in alliance with the military, took action to prevent a Bolshevik-style *coup* by the Spartacists. Some historians, like Erdmann, maintain that this was necessary to maintain the liberal-democratic course, which had been started in November 1918, from the threat of totalitarian dictatorship from the left. Marxist-Leninist historians, by contrast, claim that a genuine mass movement, led by Luxemburg and Liebknecht, was betrayed by the Social Democrats in collusion with the forces of reaction. Different though they are in other respects, these two interpretations agree on the revolutionary nature of the Spartacist initiative.

On the surface, there is much to support such an approach. It reflects the two very different perceptions of progress which had grown out of the SPD. One was trying to defend the liberal-democratic achievement against the Communist threat, while the other was seeking to accelerate the movement towards socialism. The Spartacists wanted close association between Germany and Soviet Russia, together with a transfer of all political power to the workers' and soldiers' councils, the establishment of a workers' militia, collectivisation of larger agricultural units and the nationalisation of many industries. This explains why the SPD were so quick to abandon the workers' and soldiers' councils as a representative device, seeing in them a direct influence of the Russian system of soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies. Instead, the SPD leadership were prepared to take a pragmatic course by making a deal with Groener and the Freikorps.

No one could reasonably argue that the Social Democrats were not genuinely acting to prevent revolution in December 1918 and January 1919. But it is possible that they greatly exaggerated the danger and therefore swung too readily into a counter-revolutionary position to prevent a revolution which was not really happening; this, in turn, helped determine the essentially conservative nature of the Weimar Republic.

Recent research by German historians such as Kolb, Feldman and Kluge has shown that the Spartacists did not have the previously assumed control over the workers' and soldiers' councils. Nor, indeed, were these councils incompatible with the concept of constitutional democracy: indeed, Kolb maintains that 'the great majority of the former were dominated by Majority Socialists and moderate independents, while in the soldiers' councils not only Social Democrats but also bourgeois elements exercised considerable influence.' (5) According to Berghahn, 'the objectives of the overwhelming majority of the Councils were also moderate, comprising no more than the traditional catalogue of demands of mainstream Social democracy.' (6) The Spartacists were, by contrast, in control of relatively few councils. The councils cannot therefore be seen as the nucleus of a revolutionary alternative to moderate constitutionalism.

Nor were the Spartacists ready for revolution. Recent historians have pointed to the movement's almost complete lack of organisation: Kolb, for example, maintains that it was 'without a clear strategic plan, was hopelessly mismanaged and to some extent half-hearted'. (7) There was no equivalent to the precision of the Bolshevik takeover in Petrograd and Moscow a year earlier. Luxemburg and Liebknecht did not even believe that the time was right for an insurrection but were drawn into a situation which was uncontrolled and chaotic. They paid with their lives.

In the circumstances the reaction of the SPD was tougher than it need have been. It would be inappropriate to take the Marxist view that Ebert's government simply crushed by counter-revolution any achievements that had been made in November 1918. But it is arguable that Ebert stopped well short of the sort of reforms which the government might have accomplished if it had been prepared to take as tough a line with the establishment as with the radical left. In the event, the Republic as constituted—and defended—by Ebert's government contained many residual influences and structures from the Second Reich. Hiden goes so far as to say: That great violence was also used against the German communists was a sad and bitter comment on the nature of the relationship developing between Ebert and the German

establishment. In that sense, at least, the Weimar Republic may be called the last act of Empire.’ (8)

There are four main examples of this continuity between Republic and Reich. First, the constitution, which was eventually adopted in July 1919, was essentially a compromise: the base was the previous constitution, modified by the October reforms and given a republican superstructure. Article 1 even affirms: ‘The German Reich is a Republic.’ (9) Second, the adaptation was relatively straightforward for the moderate political parties who comprised most of the earlier coalition governments. The SPD and Centre (Z) made the transition virtually unchanged, while the Progressives and National Liberals were little modified as the Democrats (DDP) and People’s Party (DVP) respectively. It was a case of the constitutional opposition to the Kaiser’s administration now inheriting the right to become that administration, but this implies constitutional evolution rather than political revolution. Third, there was no attempt to make structural changes to the judiciary or the civil service. As will be seen in the next chapter, these became powerful forces for conservatism and weighted the operation of the law heavily in favour of the right and against the left. Above all, the Republican government was careful not to interfere in the attempts of the army to revive itself after the catastrophe of defeat. The military rump, limited by the Treaty of Versailles (1919) to 100,000 volunteers, became a highly professional core based very much on the ethos of the Second Reich. The decision not to republicanise the military really stemmed from Ebert’s telephone conversation with Groener on 9 November. Hence, as Heiber maintains, ‘The entire old apparatus and its incumbents were allowed to go on operating without let or hindrance, at first provisionally, but later with the republican constitution ultimately removing all their worries.’ (10)

We are therefore left with a paradox. Germany in 1918 had all the ingredients necessary for revolution: defeat in war, a disintegrating army and a radicalised left. And yet there was a surprising degree of continuity within Germany’s transition from Empire to Republic. Apparently desperate situations were relieved by pragmatic decisions which prevented radical changes. Hiden argues that the Revolution was ‘the link between the former German Empire and the Weimar Republic’. (11) It would perhaps make more sense to reverse the metaphor and see the link between the Empire and Republic preventing revolution. The year 1918, in short, saw in Germany a revolutionary situation but without a revolution. Or, put another way, if there was a revolution, it did not revolutionise.

### Questions

1. Which argument do you find more convincing: there was or there was not a revolution in Germany in 1918–19?
2. Why did the Social Democrats, and not the Spartacists, shape the new Republic in 1918 and 1919?
3. Why is the question as to whether there was a revolution significant for the future development of the Weimar Republic? (You may wish to return to this after having completed the rest of the topics.)

### SOURCES

#### 1. CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF THE REVOLUTION

**Source A:**  
**from an article by Friedrich Meinecke in *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 November 1918.**

Our constitutional reform was possible in the fashion in which it transpired due to the pressure of the international situation, for which the old system was no longer fit. But that elements very capable of development, forward pointing, and ready for reform already existed in our now-bygone ancien regime is demonstrated by the fact that the constitutional transformation—the substance of which represents an enormous revolution—despite its abruptness, was completed with astounding calm, carried by the judgement and unanimity of all legislative elements. It therefore fell into the laps of the people like an overripe fruit.

**Source B:**  
**from Kurt Tucholsky's *Wir Negativen*, 13 March 1919.**

If revolution means merely collapse, then it was one; but no one should expect the ruins to look any different from the old building. We have suffered failure and hunger, and those responsible just walked away. And the people remain: they had their old flags torn down, but had no



new ones... We confront a Germany full of unrivalled corruption, full of profiteers and sneaks, full of three hundred thousand devils among whom each assumes the right to secure his black self from the effects of revolution... We have the opportunity of choice: do we fight...with love or do we fight...with hate? We want to fight with hate out of love. With hate against that fellow who has dared to drink the blood of his countrymen...with hate against the clique to which the disproportionate snatching up of property and the misery of cottage workers appears to be the will of God... We fight in any case with hate. But we fight out of love for the oppressed.

**Source C:  
from the reminiscences of Bernhard Prince von  
Bülow, published in 1931.**

In Berlin on November 9, I witnessed the beginnings of revolution, Alas, she did not come...in the shape of a radiant goddess, her hair flowing in the wind, and shod with sandals of iron. She was like an old hag, toothless and bald, her great feet slipshod and down at the heel. The German revolution was drearily philistine, lacking in all fire or inspiration... Our new masters were...unfit to govern. Most characteristic of their mentality was the speech from the Reichstag steps, delivered by Scheidemann...who, in proclaiming the Republic, began his oration with the following: The German people have won all along the line' A stupid lie! And a very cruel piece of self-deception! No, alas, the German people had not 'won'—it had been conquered, overpowered by a host of enemies, wretchedly misled politically, reduced by famine, and stabbed in the back!

To any unbiased spectator of these events, to whoever watched it all in the one hope that the German nation might not perish, these first days of our republic were days of the return to chaos. Children could scarcely have done worse.

### Questions

1. What was the Reichstag (**Source C**)? [1] Who was Scheidemann (**Source C**)? [1]
- \*2. How do Sources **A**, **B** and **C** differ in their interpretation of the 1918 Revolution? How would you explain these differences? [6]

3. Compare the reliability of Sources A, B and C to the historian studying the origins of the Weimar Republic. [6]
4. How effectively do the authors of Sources A, B, and C make use of language to emphasise their message? [4]
5. Using the three sources and your own knowledge, comment on the view that there was no revolution in November 1918. [7]

### Worked answer

\*2. [Both parts of the question need to be addressed fully. In an examination paper they might even be asked separately. There should be an introductory sentence, followed by two paragraphs. The first could focus on the contrasts between the sources themselves, using selected examples. The second needs reference to the context of the sources and the speakers. This requires some inferences and a little background knowledge.]

The Sources provide very different analyses, representing the centre, far left and right of the political spectrum.

Meinecke (Source A) emphasised the positive nature of effortless change in the form of continuity with the past; this was because the ‘bygone ancien regime’ contained all the necessary potential for reform which had now been ‘completed with astounding calm’. To Tucholsky (Source B), on the other hand, any change from the former system was entirely negative: any revolution there might have been had collapsed, since ‘those responsible just walked away’. The result was exploitation, ‘unrivalled corruption’ and widespread selfishness. Von Bülow (Source C) shared the disillusionment of Tucholsky, referring to a ‘return to chaos’, but he used a different perspective. The Revolution was caused by conquest ‘by a host of enemies’, and by the army being ‘stabbed in the back’.

The differences between these attitudes can be explained by the political standpoints of their authors. Meinecke was a historian: he was therefore likely to see links with the past. As a liberal and a supporter of the new Republic, his main fear was that the arrival of democracy had been so easy that it might now be undervalued. Tucholsky, by contrast, was of the radical left. He therefore rejected the achievement of liberal democracy, welcomed by Meinecke, and anticipated further conflict on behalf of ‘the oppressed’. Von Bülow’s views were typical of those of

the conservative right and, because of the time lapse before publication in 1931, had been influenced by the ‘stab in the back’ myth. Like the rest of the right, he considered the Republic to have been tainted by its origins.

## SOURCES

### 2.

## THE BIRTH OF THE REPUBLIC—AND ITS ENEMIES

### Source D:

from Philip Scheidemann’s *The Making of the New Germany: Memoirs* (1929).

On the morning of 9th November, 1918, the Reichstag was like an armed camp. Working men and soldiers were going in and out.

...Then a crowd of workers and soldiers rushed into the hall and made straight for our table.

Fifty of them yelled out at the same time, ‘Scheidemann, come along with us at once Philipp, you must come out and speak’

I refused: how many times had I not already spoken!

‘You must, you must, if trouble is to be avoided. There are thousands upon thousands outside shouting for you to speak. Come along quick, Scheidemann! Liebknecht is already speaking from the balcony of the Schloss’... ‘Liebknecht intends to proclaim the Soviet Republic!’

...There was no doubt at all. The man who could bring along the ‘Bolshies’ from the Schloss to the Reichstag or the Social Democrats from the Reichstag to the Schloss had won the day.

I saw the Russian folly staring me in the face—the Bolshevik tyranny, the substitute for the tyranny of the Czars! No, no, Germany should not have that on the top of all her other miseries.

...I was already standing at the window... The shouts of the crowds sounded like a mighty chorus. Then there was silence. I only said a few words, which were received with tremendous cheering.

‘Workers and soldiers, frightful were those four years of war, ghastly the sacrifices of the people made in blood and treasure. The cursed War is at an end... The Emperor has abdicated. He and his friends have decamped. The people have triumphed over them all along the line. Prince Max of Baden has handed over his office as Chancellor to Ebert.

Our friend will form a Labour Government to which all Socialist Parties will belong...

‘...Workmen and soldiers, realize the historic importance of today. Miracles have happened. Long and incessant toil is before us. Everything for the people; everything by the people! Nothing must be done that brings dishonour to the Labour movement. Stand united and loyal, and be conscious of your duty. The old and rotten—the monarchy—has broken down. Long live the new! Long live the German Republic!’

**Source E:  
from the Spartacus Manifesto, 26 November 1918.**

**PROLETARIANS! MEN AND WOMEN OF LABOUR! COMRADES!**

The revolution has made its entry into Germany. The masses of soldiers, who for four years were driven to the slaughterhouse for the sake of capitalist profits, and the masses of workers, who for four years were exploited, crushed and starved, have revolted... That fearful tool of oppression—Prussian militarism, that scourge of humanity—lies broken on the ground. Its most noticeable representatives, and therewith the most noticeable of those guilty of this war, the Kaiser and the Crown Prince, have fled from the country. Workers’ and soldiers’ councils have been formed everywhere.

Proletarians of all countries, we do not say that in Germany all the power has really been lodged in the hands of the working people, that the complete triumph of the proletarian revolution has already been attained. There still sit in the government all those socialists who in August 1914 abandoned our most precious possession, the International, who for four years betrayed the German working class and at the same time the International.

But, proletarians of all countries, now the German proletarians are speaking to you. We believe we have the right to appeal before your forum in their name. From the first day of this war we endeavoured to do our international duty by fighting that criminal government with all our power...

...Proletarians of all countries, when we now summon you to a common struggle, it is not done for the sake of the German capitalists who, under the label of ‘German nation’, are trying to escape the consequences of their own crime; it is being done for our sake as well as yours. Remember that your victorious capitalists stand ready to suppress in blood our revolution, which they fear as their own. You yourselves

have not become any freer through the ‘victory’, you have only become more enslaved...

...Therefore the proletariat of Germany is looking toward you in this hour. Germany is pregnant with the social revolution, but socialism can be realized only by the proletariat of the world.

**Source F:**

**Rosa Luxemburg: *The Founding Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 31 December 1918.**

The question today is not democracy or dictatorship. The question that history has put on the agenda reads: bourgeois democracy or socialist democracy. For dictatorship of the proletariat is democracy in the socialist sense of the word. Dictatorship of the proletariat does not mean bombs, putsches, riots and anarchy, as the agents of capitalist profits deliberately and falsely claim. Rather it means using all instruments of political power to achieve socialism, to expropriate the capitalist class, through and in accordance with the will of the revolutionary majority of the proletariat.

**Source G:**

**from an article in *Vorwärts*, a newspaper of the SPD, 24 December 1918.**

It was hunger that forced the Russian people under the yoke of militarism ... Bolshevik militarism is the violent despotism of a clique, the dictatorship of the idlers and those unwilling to work. Russia's army, made up of masses of unemployed workers, is today already waging another bloody war. Let the Russian example be a warning. Do we also want another war? Do we want terror, the bloody reign of a caste?

**NO!**

We want no more bloodshed and no militarism. We want to achieve peace through work. We want peace, in order not to degenerate into a militarism dictated by the unemployed, as in Russia. Bolshevik bums call the armed masses into the streets, and armed masses, bent on violence, are militarism personified. But we do not want militarism of the right or of the left.

Bolshevism, the lazy man's militarism, knows no freedom or equality. It is vandalism and terror by a small group that arrogates power. So do not follow Spartacus, the German Bolsheviks, unless you want to ruin our economy and trade.

The collapse of German industry and trade means the downfall of the German people.

So, no to terror, not to militaristic rule by loafers and deserters.  
Not militarism, but freedom!

### Questions

1. Explain the references to Liebknecht (Source D) and Spartacus (Source E). [2]
- \*2. What considerations should a historian have in mind when assessing the value of Source D as evidence for the origins of the Republic? [6]
3. Does Source D prove that the formation of the Weimar Republic was a ‘revolution’? [4]
4. To what extent do Sources E and F complement each other? [5]
5. Using Sources D to F, and your own knowledge, how great a threat did Communism pose to the newly formed republic? [8]

### Worked example

\*2. [At first sight it seems possible to provide only a short answer to this question. This is deceptive. The analysis needs to be balanced, containing references to both its strengths and weaknesses and to include references to the text and to additional knowledge. It would also be relevant to include a reference to the need for supplementary sources.]

The historian should bear in mind that this source will have both strengths and deficiencies, and that the latter will need to be offset by the use of additional sources.

The strengths are considerable. Scheidemann’s description points to the state of confusion which existed, with the Reichstag like ‘an armed camp’ and ‘working men and soldiers’ going ‘in and out’. It shows that Scheidemann was not intending to speak, but was responding to persuasion: ‘Philipp, you must come out...’ It confirms the fear of ‘the Russian folly’ and ‘Bolshevist tyranny’ and Scheidemann’s view that instant action was necessary to prevent Liebknecht from taking power. And, of course, it contains the text of the speech given by Scheidemann

from the Reichstag window. Overall, it carries considerable authority: after all, its author became the Republic's second Chancellor.

On the other hand, there are several possible shortcomings. As a personal account, it is likely to be highly subjective, and the lapse of 10 years before its publication in the form of memoirs could have led Scheidemann to over-dramatise the events. How serious was the threat from the Schloss on that same day? Did Scheidemann exaggerate the impact of Liebknecht—or was he simply panicked into making a speech and using the threat of the left as subsequent justification? To answer these questions the historian would need to cross-check with other types of source such as the reports of German and foreign journalists and any photographs or film taken inside and outside the Reichstag building.