

C The revolution from below: did the 1918–19 German Revolution provide a strong basis for democracy?

The First World War left a dangerous legacy for the new democratic regime. It left a heavy financial burden and continuing inflation. Germany's unexpected defeat was blamed on the new regime and when it was forced to accept the harsh peace terms at Versailles the prospects for success weakened further. We now examine the limited nature of the German Revolution of 1918–19 that left so much of the traditional elite intact. How would this affect the prospects for a strong democratic government?

FOCUS ROUTE

Study pages 17–24. Then copy and complete the two tables below. Give each cause and change a mark out of 5 to show how far it applied (0 = not at all, 5 = greatly).

The causes of the German Revolution

In a political revolution, one group of people wanting change take power from the group defending the existing political system. For this to happen there must be some or all of the causes listed in the table below. Note that 1–3 are weaknesses in the status quo; 4–6 are forces likely to bring about change.

| Causes | Degree present 0–5 | Evidence for choice |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Severe weaknesses in the existing governing system | | |
| 2 Collapse of law and order | | |
| 3 A major setback for the government | | |
| 4 Mass discontent | | |
| 5 Organised revolutionary groups | | |
| 6 Determined revolutionary leaders with a clear vision of change | | |

The effects of the German Revolution

If the revolutionaries succeed in taking power, you might expect the changes shown in the table below.

| Changes to | Degree occurred 0–5 | Evidence for choice |
|---|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Government structure | | |
| 2 Administrative and judicial machinery | | |
| 3 Organisation of the army | | |
| 4 Ownership and organisation of industry and land | | |
| 5 The lives of the mass of the people | | |

From monarchy to democratic republic in six weeks!

In October 1918 a new government based on the Reichstag was formed. This was 'a revolution from above', as this great change was initiated by the ruling class itself. The new government under Prince Max of Baden passed some reforms, but in these turbulent days they were not sufficient. Economic discontent and war weariness caused growing popular unrest. The German people had been promised, and expected, a great victory. When it was clear that the war was lost, Germany erupted in a wave of unrest, often described as the 'German Revolution' of 1918-19, the 'revolution from below'.

Serious trouble began in late October at the naval bases of Kiel and Wilhelmshaven when sailors refused to obey an order to sail out to salvage German honour in a final battle. They stopped the fleet sailing by putting out the fires in the ships' boilers, raised the red flag and took over Kiel. News of the mutiny encouraged the creation of a series of sailors', soldiers' and workers' COUNCILS throughout Germany. These challenged the authority of *Länder* (state) governments. Desperate to prevent a full-scale revolution, Prince Max announced the Kaiser's abdication and handed over the chancellorship to the moderate socialist leader Friedrich Ebert.

Moderate and radical Socialists were competing for leadership of the revolution. To outmanoeuvre the radicals, Philipp Scheidemann, a moderate SPD leader, declared a republic to cheering crowds in Berlin. Karl Liebknecht, the leader of the communist SPARTACIST movement, declared a soviet republic from another balcony. Ebert was furious that a republic had been declared illegally but had to accept that the monarchy had collapsed. Two days later, on 11 November, the government signed an armistice.

TALKING POINT

The proximity of the beginning of the Republic and the ending of the war was unfortunate for the new Republic. Why do you think it was unfortunate?

■ ID Key stages in the German Revolution 1918-19

1 REVOLUTION FROM ABOVE. THE CREATION OF A PARLIAMENTARY MONARCHY

- 29 Sept Generals recommend a new civilian government and an armistice.
- 3 Oct A new civilian government led by Prince Max of Baden, based on Reichstag support and including Liberals and Socialists, is formed.

2 REVOLUTION FROM BELOW. THE CREATION OF A PARLIAMENTARY REPUBLIC

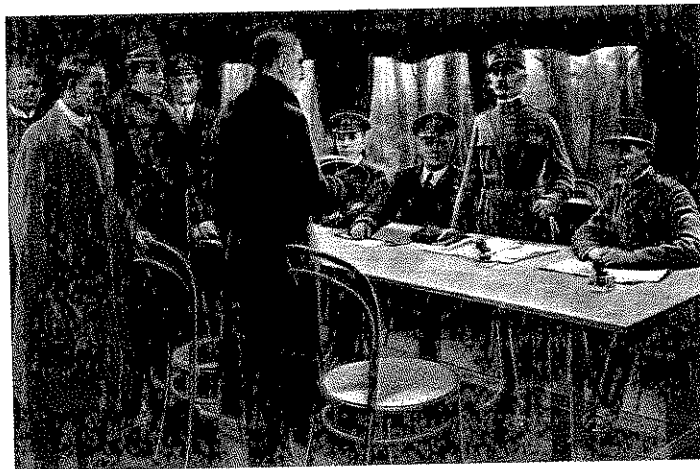
- 31 Oct Kiel sailors mutiny. Unrest spreads.
- 9 Nov Prince Max hands over the chancellorship to Socialist leader Ebert. A republic is declared. The Kaiser abdicates and flees to Holland.

3 LIMITED REVOLUTION: THE DEAL WITH THE ARMY

- 10 Nov The new socialist government makes an agreement with General Groener to gain the support of the army.



General Groener



The German delegation arrive to sign the Armistice, 1918, in a railway carriage in the Forêt de Compiègne



Spartacist supporters defending their position from behind a barricade of newspaper

4 ARMISTICE

- 11 Nov The new government signs the Armistice.

5 REVOLUTION SUPPRESSED

- 1919 Jan A communist rising by the Spartacists is suppressed by the socialist government. (Later, in spring 1919 and spring 1920, further waves of strikes and risings are suppressed.)

6 FORMAL ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NEW REGIME

- 1919 Feb A new elected National Assembly meets at Weimar to draw up a new constitution. This is completed by August 1919.

■ IE Germany's left-wing parties

1. KPD/Spartacists

Aims: to seize power and enact a soviet revolution, developing a series of local and national councils to create a communist state

- Named after the Roman rebel slave Spartacus
- Formed in 1916 from radical SPD members opposed to the war
- In early 1919 had about 5,000 members
- Led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg

2. USPD (radical Socialists)

Aims: remove enemies of democracy and create conditions for a secure socialist society

- Formed in 1917 from SPD members hostile to the war
- In 1919 had about 300,000 members
- Led by Hugo Haase and Karl Kautsky

3. SPD (moderate Socialists)

Aims: establish democratic socialist system by democratic means

- Formed in 1875
- After 1890, the largest party in the Reichstag
- In 1919 had about 1 million members
- Led by Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann
- In Nov-Dec 1918, the SPD formed a coalition government with the USPD

■ Learning trouble spot

Political terms and Weimar political parties

Here we provide a very simplified summary of the main political groups in 1918-19. As you deepen your knowledge of Weimar Germany, you will modify this simplified picture, but at the moment it will clarify some issues.

Left and right These terms derive from the French Revolution of 1789. In the new French parliament, representatives wanting greater change with more power for ordinary people sat on seats on the left of the assembly, and those wanting little or no change, preferring greater power for the existing elite and the monarchy, sat on the right. This seating arrangement has led to conservative groups, i.e. those favouring the status quo, being called right wing and those wanting social and political change being called left wing.

Socialism and communism Normally Communists are more radical Socialists. In Weimar Germany there were two parties that called themselves Socialists (the moderate SPD and the more radical USPD), and the more extreme Communists (KPD). All three groups based their ideas on Karl Marx.

Radical This term can also cause confusion. It is usually used to describe people on the extreme left, i.e. those who want great changes. But technically it just means extreme, so you will encounter radical right-wing parties as well, such as the Nazis. (Calling the Nazis a right-wing party is, however, another problem. We tackle that one on page 117.)

Conservative This name comes from to conserve, to keep things as they are. It usually means the same as right wing. Conservatives generally favour more authoritarian government, i.e. one where much power lies with one leader or a few leaders, rather than a more liberal-democratic government where more power is given to ordinary people. The actual position a conservative holds depends on the period and overall context. For example, the British Conservative Party supports democracy as this is well-established in Britain. In 1918, German conservatives hoped to maintain the Second Reich, with a strong monarchy. Conservative groups in Weimar Germany remained at best suspicious of and usually hostile to democracy.

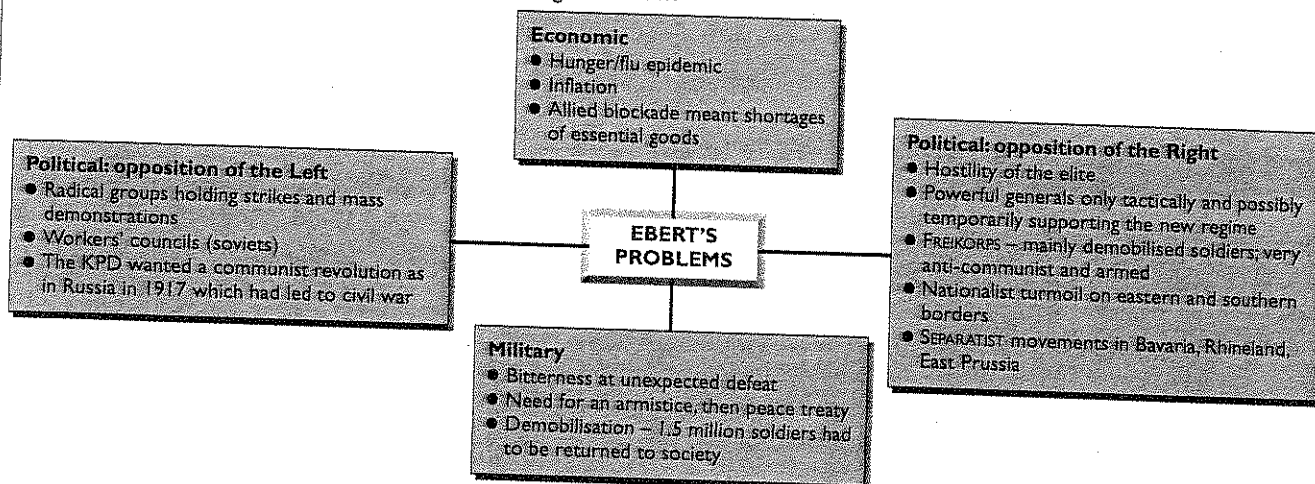
Political Parties

| | Left ← | | | → Right | |
|------------------------------------|---|------|-----|--------------------|-------------|
| Parties in the Weimar Republic | Communist/socialist | | | Liberal/democratic | |
| | KPD | USPD | SPD | DDP | |
| | | | | Centre Party (Z) | |
| | The Centre Party was a party that had been created to protect the interests of the Catholic Church. The political views of its supporters covered a broad range, but most were supporters of the new democratic regime. | | | | |
| Where their main support came from | Working class | | | Middle class | Upper class |

ACTIVITY

On 9 November 1918 Friedrich Ebert, the former saddler and leader of the SPD, found himself at the head of the newly proclaimed republican government. The future of Germany would be determined by the decisions he and his colleagues took. You are going to carry out a decision-making exercise to decide **what you would have done in Germany in 1918–19**. As a class, divide into three groups, then:

- 1 Each group should choose one of the socialist parties (KPD, USPD or SPD). Ensure you understand its political position (see Chart 1E opposite).
- 2 Look through Ebert's problems shown on the diagram below.



- 3 Look through Ebert's options on the five topics below. Decide which option your party should support. In each topic, one option is moderate, one more radical and one even more extreme.
- 4 You should then explain your party's policies to the class.
- 5 As a class, decide which party's policies you feel are most likely to succeed in securing effective democracy, given the conditions in Germany.
- 6 Read pages 20–3. How did your decisions compare with what Ebert did?

Ebert's options**1 POLITICAL****Elections**

- a) Call an election for a new parliament as soon as possible
- b) Take revolutionary measures (without calling elections) immediately as the people have given you power
- c) Delay elections for a new parliament until major measures weakening the position of the elites are taken

Councils

- a) Give workers' councils extensive powers to negotiate improved working and living conditions
- b) Create a new government structure based on workers' councils
- c) Allow existing workers' councils to continue only until a newly elected assembly takes over

2 INDUSTRY

- a) Pass decrees nationalising major industries, and enabling workers' participation in management
- b) Take over all industry and hand it over to workers' control
- c) Persuade industrialists to come to agreements with responsible trade union representatives to give workers more say in their working conditions

3 THE CIVIL SERVICE AND JUDICIARY

- a) Keep the existing experienced personnel in their jobs
- b) Purge the administration of conservative officials
- c) Create a new system of elected officials and judges

4 THE ARMY

- a) Create a new workers' army, modelled on Russia's Red Army
- b) Try to win the support of the existing army by maintaining its basic structure
- c) Create workers' militia alongside the existing army, and remove REACTIONARY elements from the military High Command

5 WORKING-CLASS UNREST

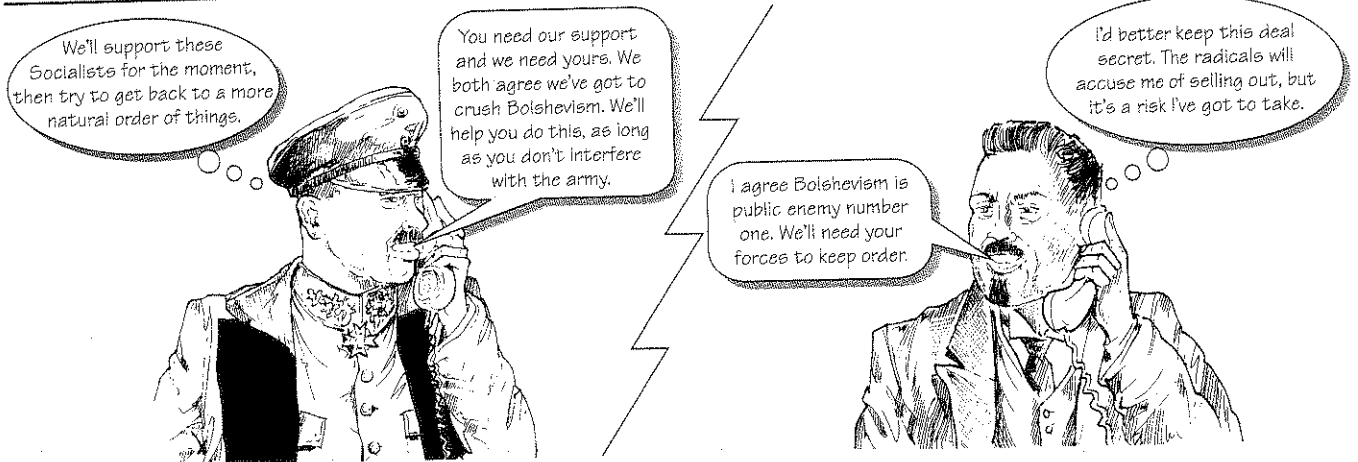
- a) Organise protests demanding a soviet-style revolution giving power to workers' councils
- b) Use army and volunteers to suppress revolutionary communist elements
- c) Pass radical reforms benefiting the working class to reduce potential support for a communist rising

Ebert's decisions and deals

Ebert chose the moderate course. He believed the majority of the German people wanted an end to the war and were for moderate change. Even the majority of members of the councils did not have genuine revolutionary feeling and supported the SPD line. He was determined to defend the new democratic system from what he saw as the horrors of BOLSHEVISM (communism). The new government was concerned to maintain order and organise elections for a constituent assembly which would draw up a democratic constitution. Ebert believed the new regime needed the support of the traditional elite and was prepared to co-operate with them.

He was helped in this policy by the support of many of the elite. They too were terrified of a real socialist revolution and were prepared, for the moment, to help the new government. On 10 November General Groener telephoned Ebert and made a secret deal. In return for the government promising to maintain the authority of the existing officers, the army would defend the new government. Ebert also asked the existing civil servants to stay in their positions.

■ IF General Groener and Chancellor Ebert make a deal, 10 November 1918



Wilhelm Groener,
1876–1959



- Groener was a career soldier who co-operated with the SPD during the First World War to increase production.
- He succeeded General Ludendorff as senior Quartermaster General in October 1918, and actually advised the Kaiser to abdicate.
- Groener tried to reconcile the differences between army tradition and the new democratic constitution. He held a series of government posts, and from 1928 to 1932 was Minister of Defence.
- He initially made Kurt von Schleicher (see page 153) his protégé, but later broke with him.
- Groener became committed to the Weimar regime, and was critical of the Nazis, even banning the SA in 1932.
- His resignation in May 1932 was a particular blow to the Weimar regime. He took no further part in politics.

Friedrich Ebert,
1871–1925



- Friedrich Ebert was a saddler who rose to become one of the leaders of the SPD.
- In November 1918 he became Chancellor, and in February 1919 he was elected by the new assembly to be President of the republic.
- Ebert steered the Weimar Republic to safety, seeking the support of both workers and the elite. However, this conciliatory approach aroused the hostility of extremists of both the Left and Right.
- His humble origins and socialist beliefs meant that despite his position as President he never won the respect of large numbers of Germans.
- He died of a heart attack in 1925.

Rosa Luxemburg, 1870-1919



- Rosa Luxemburg was a German-Polish Socialist who had been imprisoned for her opposition to the First World War.
- She welcomed the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, but criticised Lenin's repressive policies. She argued that a true communist revolution must have popular support.
- With Karl Liebknecht she founded the Spartacist League which became the German Communist Party.
- She thought Germany was not yet ready for communism in 1919, but when a workers' revolt broke out in January she felt she had to side with the workers.
- She was captured by the Freikorps, assaulted, then shot. Her body was dumped in a Berlin canal. This ended the brief career of a revolutionary who has won respect for her humane vision of communism, but one who was unable to channel the chaotic socialist movement of 1918-19 into an effective revolution.

FREIKORPS

The Freikorps (Free Corps) was a general name for about 200 PARAMILITARY groups, largely recruited from demobilised soldiers and officers. They were dominated by right-wing nationalists. They saw themselves as the protectors of Germany from Bolshevism and as the kernel of a new German army.

The Freikorps helped the new government forcibly to suppress left-wing revolts even though many of them were hostile to the Weimar regime.

They were similar to the Fascist squads in Italy; many members of the Freikorps later joined Hitler's SA.

Not all decisions were so conservative. Major industrialists thought it wise to make concessions to trade union representatives to ward off workers' unrest. On 15 November industrialists, led by Hugo Stinnes, and trade unionists, led by Karl Legien, agreed to create a *Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft* (ZAG), or 'central working association'. This established the principle of workers' committees, trade union negotiating rights with binding ARBITRATION on disputes, and an eight-hour day. This was one of the greatest achievements of the German Revolution.

A new compromise caretaker government, the Council of People's COMMISSARS, was set up with three members from both the SPD and USPD. Some of the protesters expected the new government to set up a socialist republic, but it was more moderate than its title suggested. The temporary government gained the support of representatives from the numerous councils throughout Germany. In December 1918 the National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils voted 344 to 98 to reject a government based on the councils, supporting instead Ebert's preference for electing a constituent assembly. They did, however, favour some more radical changes, for example in the nature of the army and the SOCIALISATION of some industries, than Ebert's government was prepared to endorse.

Ebert's moderate line aroused left-wing opposition. In December 1918 the USPD left the government. In January 1919 mass protests at the dismissal of a radical official turned into a largely spontaneous rising which communist members of the Spartacist League tried to take over in the hope that it would turn into a communist revolution, as in Russia. The SPD government, led by Defence Minister Gustav Noske, ordered the army to suppress the Spartacist rising. The army was supported by the Freikorps, and the Spartacist leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were shot. Over a hundred workers were killed. Thus the German Revolution of 1918 ended in the suppression of radical revolutionaries.

The crucial decisions had been taken. The agreements with the army and the industrialists were vital in establishing the Republic, but these short-term measures were destined to have long-term effects on Weimar democracy, as Chart 1G shows.

■ 1G The effects of Ebert's short-term measures

| Short-term measure | Immediate effect | Long-term effect |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Deal with Groener and army | Army support for government against Left | Military elite in strong position to undermine democracy later |
| Deal with industrialists | Workers rally to reforming new government, and do not challenge private ownership of industry | Industrialists came to resent power given to workers, and rejected the Weimar regime |

Was Ebert's policy of co-operating with the elite and crushing the Communists justified?

For a long time, the period 1918–19 was not the subject of major historical debate. Most historians in the West accepted that Ebert's actions in suppressing the communist threat and making deals with the old order were vital for the creation of democracy. The Cold War atmosphere of the 1950s, with its exaggerated fear of communism, encouraged acceptance of the view of the German Communists of 1919 as dangerous and of the consequent need for repression. The possibility of other routes to democracy, besides that of Ebert's, was underplayed.

In East Germany, on the other hand, communist historians portrayed Ebert as the servant of the BOURGEOISIE, saving CAPITALISM from the revolutionary threat of the communist-inspired masses. This view was dismissed in the West as mere communist propaganda.

It was only in the 1970s, with a more fluid political and academic atmosphere after the relaxation of the Cold War, that more thorough reassessments of the various options in 1918–19 were made. The creation of councils from November 1918 has been studied more closely and seen as having greater potential. There is now a strong argument that:

- the chances of a Soviet-style communist regime were far lower than Ebert and his worried supporters believed; Ebert overestimated the threat to democracy from the Communists and underestimated the threat from the Right.
- there was, however, a broader movement, within and outside the councils, that desired more radical transformation of the Second Reich, and which might have led to a more secure democratic regime. This third way (broadly represented by the USPD), between Ebert's relative conservatism and radical Soviet-style communism, was a possible alternative route to democracy, which might have strengthened the chances for the Weimar Republic to survive.



SOURCE 1.10 'Germany, you have a pig of a problem.'
A communist view of Ebert in *The Red Truncheon* magazine

SOURCE 1.11 Arnold Brecht, an SPD member and civil servant during the Weimar Republic

Ebert and Scheidemann ... were convinced opponents of [a communist system], in the interest of both the working classes and their own ideals of freedom, self-determination, justice and culture. By far the larger section of the working classes were behind them in this and certainly have no reason to maintain that they were betrayed by them. A moderate revolution is far more difficult to carry through than one which is radical, extremist, and determined to apply any means.

SOURCE 1.12 The historian Sir Lewis Namier assesses the Groener–Ebert telephone deal in 'The Nemesis of Power', *The Listener*, 19 November 1963, pp. 853–4

In a few sentences a pact was concluded between a defeated army and a tottering semi-revolutionary regime; and the Weimar Republic was doomed at birth ... When the troops, like victors, [returned] ... they were greeted with the words: 'I salute you, who return unvanquished from the field of battle.' So saying, [Ebert] unwittingly absolved the General Staff and INDICTED the revolution. The legend of the 'stab-in-the-back' was born.

Thus Ebert's unintentional exaggeration of the danger of a Soviet-style revolution and his overreliance on the old elite unwittingly contributed to the eventual failure of the Weimar Republic. Furthermore, the suppression of Communists by a socialist government, helped by conservatives, led to great bitterness on the extreme left. The Communist Party never forgave the SPD. The USPD itself split: some joined the Communists; some rejoined the SPD. The forces of the Left were to remain bitterly divided until they met up in Hitler's concentration camps after 1933!

ACTIVITY

- 1 What do you think is the message of the cartoon in Source 1.10?
- 2 How justified do you consider this view of Ebert?
- 3 In Source 1.11, why do you think Brecht considers a moderate revolution more difficult to carry through than a radical one?
- 4 Why does Namier in Source 1.12 consider Ebert's greeting to the soldiers unwise?

SOURCE 1.13 M. Hughes, *Nationalism and Society*, 1988, p. 184

There is still dispute among historians as to whether there was a genuine revolution in November 1918. In view of the fact that there was so little real change – the removal of the Kaiser and the other German monarchs was of symbolic rather than real significance – it is more accurate to talk of a potential revolution which ran away into the sand rather than the genuine article. The republic that eventually emerged contained at once too much and too little of the old Germany: powerful institutional centres of the old ruling class remained intact and were not subject to democratic control while many Germans saw the republic as originating in a revolution and therefore illegitimate.

SOURCE 1.14 W. Carr, *A History of Germany 1815–1985*, 1987, p. 249

The achievements of the revolution were undoubtedly limited . . . The reign of parliamentary democracy began, but all this had been achieved before the November Revolution which merely confirmed a new political order brought into being by the German High Command . . . The Republic was accepted by many Germans not as a superior form of government but a convenient means of filling a void left by the collapse of monarchy. It was widely – but quite erroneously – believed that the alternative to a conservative parliamentary regime was a RED dictatorship which only a tiny minority wanted. The structure of German society was hardly affected by the revolution. The spirit of Imperial Germany lived on in the unreformed civil service, the judiciary and the officer corps. Nor did the powerful industrial barons have much to fear from the revolution. If one believes, as many socialists did in 1918, that democracy is fatally weakened unless the citadels of power and privilege are stormed and subjected to the general will, then the German revolution was certainly a failure for which the three Socialist parties bear much of the responsibility.

FOCUS ROUTE

Look at your completed tables from the Focus Route on page 16. Using the knowledge you have gained and Sources 1.13 and 1.14, answer the following questions.

- 1 What were the major changes resulting from the German Revolution of 1918–19?
- 2 Which areas of German society were not changed?
- 3 How might the events of the German Revolution
 - a) help
 - b) hinder
 the development of a successful democracy?

TALKING POINT

Do you think that the events in Germany in 1918–19 should be called a revolution?

ACTIVITY

- 1 How does Ebert justify his actions in Source 1.15?
- 2 a) Comment on Groener's use of the words 'alliance' and 'secret' in Source 1.16.
b) What did Ebert and Groener have in common? What might divide them?
c) What is ominous for the survival of the Weimar regime in Source 1.16?
- 3 Briefly explain what each of the soundbites in Chart 1H shows about the nature of the 1918 Revolution.
- 4 'To describe the events of November 1918 as a revolution is very misleading.' What do these sources suggest about the validity of this comment?

The German Revolution 1918–19: sources and soundbites

SOURCE 1.15 Chancellor Ebert addressing the leaders of the German states on 25 November 1918

The entire political leadership has been placed in the hands of the Council of People's Commissars. This ... consists entirely of representatives of the socialist parties ... But we had to make sure, once we had taken over political power, that the Reich machine did not break down ... to maintain our food supplies and the economy. We worked with all our strength day and night to prevent collapse and downfall within a few days. The six of us could not do that alone; we needed the experienced co-operation of experts. Had we removed the experienced heads of the Reich Offices, had we replaced them with people who did not possess the necessary knowledge and experience, then we should have faced failure within a few days.

SOURCE 1.16 General Groener recalls his actions of 10 November 1918

In the evening I telephoned the Reich Chancellery and told Ebert that the army put itself at the disposal of the government, that in return for this the Field Marshal and the officer corps expected the support of the government in the maintenance of order and discipline in the army. The officer corps expected the government to fight against Bolshevism and was ready for the struggle. Ebert accepted my offer of an alliance. From then on we discussed the measures which were necessary every evening on a secret telephone line between the Reich Chancellery and the High Command. The alliance proved successful.

We [the High Command] hoped through our actions to gain a share of power in the new state for the army and the officer corps. If we succeeded, then we would have rescued into the new Germany the best and strongest elements of old Prussia, despite the revolution.

At first, of course, we had to make concessions, for developments in the army and in the homeland had taken such a turn as to make the vigorous issuing of commands by the High Command impossible for the time being. The task was to contain and render harmless the revolutionary movement.

■ 1H Soundbites on the 1918 Revolution

That the German working class movement, disorientated during the war, should have taken over the old state apparatus practically unchanged was its grave historical error.

SPD member in exile
1934



What they want, it sounds laughable I know, is revolution without revolution ... the revolutionary vocabulary of Marxism is maintained with religious fervour, but its meaning has evaporated.

Clara Zetkin to SPD assembly
about its leadership

Comrades! Maintain revolutionary discipline. Do not walk on the grass!

A shout during a Berlin demonstration, 1918



We have done all we can to keep the masses on the halter.

SPD leader Philipp Scheidemann

They would not even storm a railway station unless they'd first bought platform tickets.

Lenin on the German revolutionaries



When the house is burning, you may have to put out the fire with water from a cesspool, even if it stinks a bit afterwards.

Industrialist Bosch 1918

