

# Arnold Brecht on his First Weeks in the Chancellery (Retrospective Account, 1966)

## Abstract

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During an exchange of notes between Germany and the United States, it became evident that the Allies regarded the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II as a prerequisite for the suspension of hostilities. In order to save the monarchy, Reich Chancellor Max von Baden urged the Kaiser to step down. In late October 1918, the Kaiser defiantly withdrew to the army's main headquarters in Spa, Belgium, refusing to accept the realities of the situation until the bitter end. Faced with a mass revolutionary movement and an ultimatum by Friedrich Ebert, Max von Baden announced the Kaiser's resignation on his own authority on November 9, 1918, and then ceded the chancellorship to Friedrich Ebert. Ebert intended to have a constituent assembly settle the question of the future form of the government – a monarchy or a republic – and for this reason he viewed Philipp Scheidemann's proclamation of the republic on November 9, 1918, as an impermissible abuse of authority. Scheidemann, for his part, took this step to preempt the proclamation of a "socialist republic" by Karl Liebknecht.

Arnold Brecht (1884-1977) was a high-ranking civil servant and one of the few members of the social elite to defend the young German democracy. A few days after Hitler came to power, he was dismissed from the civil service and in November 1933 he emigrated to the United States, where he taught at the New School for Social Research in New York. This excerpt from the first volume of his memoirs describes the events that gave rise to Germany's first democracy.

## Source

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In his notes to the United States, Prince Max, on the suggestion of the High Command, had pointed out that Germany accepted President Wilson's points as a basis of peace only on the understanding that Great Britain and France did the same. Lansing's note of November 5 stated that Great Britain and France had in fact taken on the same obligations, with two important exceptions: concerning war reparations and the freedom of the seas. I have always considered the fact that this documented basis for the peace negotiations was gained the greatest service rendered Germany during Prince Max's short period in the Chancellery.

On looking back to these first weeks in the Chancellery, I find that two points stand out. The first is the fact, which has remained incomprehensible to me, that Prince Max failed to go to the Kaiser personally to persuade him to abdicate in the interest of the country and the preservation of the monarchy. He sent other people. If I am right he spoke to the Kaiser only twice even on the telephone, the first time when the Kaiser suddenly left for general headquarters, the other time on November 9. Such a decision should have been wrung from the Kaiser by the responsible Chancellor himself. It is true that influenza made the trip during several days impossible. But the physical possibility existed both before and after. The Chancellor's absence for one day and two nights would have been less damaging than the delay of the decision.

The other circumstance which had a strong influence on my political development was the historical fact, of which I was so close a witness, that the majority group of the Social Democrats was prepared to accept a democratic constitution with a monarch as a nominal head of state, as in England, the Scandinavian countries, and Holland, provided that a period of transition was guaranteed by the abdication of the Kaiser and the Crown Prince. When on November 9 Scheidemann closed his speech

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from the window of the Reichstag with the words: “Long live the Republic,” this was only after the Kaiser’s voluntary abdication had been delayed too long and the monarchy was in fact already lost. Even then his action was not in accordance with Ebert’s wishes (Chapter 17). Prince Max’s memoirs are the best testimony of the fact that the Social Democrats in the end had no alternative. Germany would have fallen into the hands of the Independents and Spartacists had the Socialist majority left it to them alone to be the spokesmen for public opinion on the question of the abdication. The patriotism of the Socialist majority shone never more brightly than during these weeks. This made an indelible impression on me. I admit that from the point of view of the Communists, what I here stress in praise of the Socialist majority must constitute ground for harsh reproaches. Here judgments of values differ. The facts are clear.

Source: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884–1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 94–95.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Aus nächster Nähe, Lebenserinnerungen 1884–1927*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966, pp. 169–70.

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