

Arnold Brecht on the November Revolution (Retrospective Account, 1966)

Abstract

On October 22, 1918, the Naval Command began gathering the German battle fleet in the harbor of Wilhelmshaven. Without having secured government authorization, the command decided to dispatch the ships for a final, strategically senseless battle in the North Sea. The first sailors disobeyed orders on October 28. Their numbers grew rapidly after crews were ordered to leave the port on October 29. Approximately 1,000 mutineers were arrested in Wilhelmshaven, and five ships were transferred to Kiel, where additional arrests were made. Soldiers and sailors showed solidarity with the imprisoned crews, forming Soldiers' Councils and demanding their release at mass gatherings. The sailors' mutiny sparked a mass revolutionary movement that was fueled by pervasive war-weariness.

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 how the November Revolution unfolded.

Source

The German Revolution of November 1918 did not start in Berlin or on the Ruhr, not among industrial or rural workers, not among the leaders of the two Socialist parties, but in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel among the sailors. It began with the sailors' resistance against a revolt of the leading naval officers who were about to thwart the policy of the constitutionally legitimate, responsible government in Berlin by having the fleet put to sea secretly, in the middle of the peace negotiations, for a last great sea battle with the British fleet. The sailors' rebellion in Wilhelmshaven was suppressed. In Kiel it was victorious.

When the Kiel sailors thus suddenly held in their hands the power over the warships in the harbor and over the town, they did not know what to do next. Aimless and leaderless they walked the streets. Then, Gustav Noske, Social Democratic expert on naval affairs, whom his party sent to Kiel on November 4 at the request of the government, succeeded with great courage and skill in gaining control. The admiralty and the sailors willingly accepted him as governor of Kiel. Kiel was pacified. But the spark had in the meantime caught fire in Lübeck, Hamburg, and Bremen because groups of sailors had without difficulty won over the weak military garrisons in the Hansa cities. On November 6 all three—Lübeck, Hamburg, and Bremen—were occupied by the revolutionaries, and on the 7th Hannover as well. On the same day the revolution was victorious in Munich, independently of the sailors. Cologne, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Leipzig, Halle, Braunschweig, and Magdeburg also fell on November 7.

The sailors had not come to Berlin. The Revolution there had rather antecedents of its own. There the masses of workers, and broad sections of the upper classes as well, waited breathlessly for the Kaiser's voluntary abdication, which Prince Max of Baden was trying day by day vainly to induce. Even as late as November 6 – that is, two days after the victory of the Revolution in Kiel – General Groener, Ludendorff's successor as Chief of Staff, had found the Social Democratic leaders and the representatives of the trade unions "entirely reasonable," as he maintained in November, 1925 as a witness at the so-called stab-in-the-back trial in Munich. From no side, he said, was "a word uttered then, which might have led one to conclude that the gentlemen aspired to revolution. On the contrary, from beginning to end they spoke

only of how the monarchy could be maintained.” Finally Ebert, he reported, made the following proposal: “Abdication of the Kaiser was absolutely necessary, if the desertion of the masses into the revolutionists’ camp and thus the Revolution itself were to be avoided. He therefore proposed that the Kaiser voluntarily announce his abdication on that very day, November 6, or at the latest on the following day, November 7, and appoint one of his sons, perhaps Prince Eitel Friedrich, Regent in the place of the Crown Prince’s oldest son.”

Groener added that he had at that time rejected this proposal. “And thus I plead guilty,” he said, “of not having agreed to Ebert’s proposal on that afternoon on November 6, and not having said: ‘Herr Ebert, a man, a word. We will proceed together: I will see to it that the Kaiser abdicates and you that the Social Democrats back you and defend the monarchy.’ From my knowledge of deputy Ebert I am sure he would have agreed to this. So, gentlemen, if you wish to pronounce me guilty then you are at your liberty to say: on November 6 General Groener committed the bottomless idiocy – not intentionally, of course – of not accepting this proposal made by deputy Ebert. Perhaps it would have been possible to save the monarchy, but only perhaps, for it was already rather late.”^[1]

At the same trial Scheidemann said: “We did not prepare a revolution, we did not want a revolution, but by simply following requests [to take over the government] and finally from our own sense of responsibility too, we were faced with the question of what we ought to do in this moment of terrible misery for our nation?”

The meeting with Groener was on November 6. It became ever more difficult to restrain the masses in Berlin, impressed as they were by the events on the coast and their spread to the south and west. On November 7, therefore, the Social Democrats sent their ultimatum to the federal government—that is, to Prince Max and his Cabinet—with the (in itself legal) announcement that they would withdraw their representatives from the Cabinet and from the government departments, if the abdication was not received by midday, November 8. The reason given: the workers would otherwise desert and go over to the Independents and Spartacists.

Scheidemann was willing to remain in the government until the conclusion of the armistice, so that a government which was able to negotiate would exist. The Socialist leaders, therefore, asked the workers to be patient “for a few more hours.” However, when on the evening of November 8 the Kaiser had not abdicated, the Social Democratic members withdrew from the government. On the morning of the 9th they issued the order to strike: “Out of the factories!”

Shortly before midday, November 9, Prince Max announced the abdication, on the basis of a telephone communication from Headquarters that “the decision had been made and had only to be formulated.” Not until after publication did news from Headquarters arrive that the Kaiser had been willing to abdicate only as Kaiser and not as King of Prussia. Prince Max had taken action to prevent the agitated crowds from going over to the Independents and Spartacists and thus, if possible, to avoid violent revolution and the overthrow of the monarchy. On Simons’ advice, in a bold but pertinent interpretation of his historical role at this hour, Prince Max now transferred the duties of Chancellor to Friedrich Ebert as the leader of the largest party in the Reichstag. “I enjoin the German Reich on you,” he said. Ebert replied: “I have given two sons for this Reich.” Prince Max took his leave of the officials in the Chancellery, asked them to transfer their loyal services to Ebert, and left Berlin.

NOTES

^[1] Quoted from Carl Herz, *Geister der Vergangenheit*, Haifa, 1953, p. 190.

Source: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884–1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 108–10.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Aus nächster Nähe, Lebenserinnerungen 188–1927*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966, pp. 187–89.

Recommended Citation: Arnold Brecht on the November Revolution (Retrospective Account, 1966), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-3821>> [March 16, 2026].