

Bernhard von Bülow, “Revolution in Berlin” (Published Posthumously, 1931)

Abstract

In this account, former Reich Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow contrasts daily life during the revolution in Berlin, which seems quite ordinary at first glance, with a fanciful, aesthetically exaggerated portrayal of revolutionaries and statesmen, taken mainly from French history. He even appears to sympathize with Louis Charles Delescluze, one of the central figures of the Paris Commune of 1871 (the telling reason for Bülow’s affinity: Delescluze “got himself killed at the barricades”). Bülow systematically denounces the political leaders who presided over the upheaval in Germany, calling Max von Baden a “neurasthenic prince” and referring to Friedrich Ebert merely as “Fritz” Ebert to express his condescension. Bülow’s political and moral standards are reflected in his callously nonchalant account of the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. By contrast, the sight of revolutionary soldiers tearing off officers’ epaulettes inspires him to remark that he had “never . . . seen anything more brutally vulgar.”

Source

In Berlin on November 9, I witnessed the beginnings of revolution. Alas, she did not come, as Ferdinand Lassalle had envisaged her in his moments of giddiest ambition, 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. It revealed no such figures as the Danton whose statue in bronze stands on the Paris boulevard: erect, with clenched fist, to the left of his plinth a *sans-culotte* with fixed bayonet, to his right a tambour, beating up the *levée en masse*. Our revolution brought us no Gambetta to proclaim war to the knife and prolong our resistance by five months, not even a Delescluze, to get himself killed at the barricades. I have never in my life seen anything more brutally vulgar than those straggling lines of tanks and lorries manned by drunken sailors and deserters from reserve formations which trailed through the Berlin streets on November 9. That afternoon, from the window of my suite at the Adlon, I had a view both of the Linden [street] and the Pariserplatz. I have seldom witnessed anything so nauseating, so maddeningly revolting and base, as the spectacle of half-grown louts, tricked out with the red armllets of social democracy, who, in bands of several at a time, came creeping up behind any officer wearing the Iron Cross or the order *Pour le mérite*, to pin down his elbows at his side and tear off his epaulettes.

When young Captain Bonaparte stood watching the attack on the Tuileries of August 10, 1792, the sight inspired his well-known exclamation: “*Avec un bataillon on balayerait toute cette canaille*,” and there can be no possible doubt that on November 9, 1918, the Berlin streets could easily have been cleared with a few battalions of storm troops. Such battalions would have been easy enough to form from the troops and officers of Berlin, who were positively itching for such an order. With a few machine guns set in position simultaneously at the Brandenburger Tor, in the Schlossplatz, and the Alexanderplatz; a few tanks, each with a crew of sharpshooters, sent through the streets of the town, the Berlin *canaille* would soon have scuttled back to their holes. But for this, not an authorization but the formal order to fire with ball ammunition would have been necessary. Prince Max had not the courage to give this order, especially since he feared it might disqualify him from succeeding to the Baden throne.

While the populace gained possession of Berlin’s streets, endless telephone conversations were in progress between Berlin and Spa, Spa and Berlin. At the Berlin mouthpiece sat Privy Councillor Wahnschaffe, at Spa, von Grünau, the Councillor of Legation; Wahnschaffe, as a rule a sound official, had

managed to lose his head completely under the enervating influence of Prince Max. As for Grünau, he had no head to lose. He was a young and very callow diplomat with neither knowledge nor practical experience, utterly ignorant of the questions of civil law to be decided. The fruit of amorganatic marriage between a Prince von Löwenstein and a governess, he was on fairly intimate terms with the Court at Karlsruhe, and therefore in the confidence of Prince Max, who had attached him to the emperor's person at Spa. In this hour of deadly peril to his dynasty, a tragic fate had given the King of Prussia, as his sole adviser, a young man, possibly endowed with every talent, but not, in any case as yet, a prudent and vigilant guardian of the glorious and menaced Prussian throne.

The result of all this ringing of telephone bells was that Prince Max began to placard every kiosk and street corner in Berlin with the official announcement to Berliners that their emperor and king had abdicated. The truth, as it later was established, was that William II had only wished to divest himself of his imperial dignities, while at the same time remaining King of Prussia. The announcement was either hysterical or a blunder—but, in either case, entirely characteristic of this last chancellor whom the emperor had seen fit to appoint. Prince Max, without consulting any of his colleagues or those military chiefs who for the last twenty-four hours had been longing for their orders to intervene, wrote off to the Socialist leader, Fritz Ebert, into whose hands he gave the affairs of the empire, relinquishing to the Socialist party the business of forming another government.

Ebert assumed the title of People's Commissar, which he further bestowed on several of his revolutionary friends, the Socialist leaders of Berlin, and began to govern. The energy which they all, especially Gustav Noske, displayed in the next few days in keeping down the Spartacists, grown too insolent, might have served as an example to Prince Max. But, careless of what happened in Berlin, the prince was on his way to Baden, whose dynastic interests seemed to him far more important than all the destinies of the empire. Whomever Kaiser Wilhelm II had cared to select, in that fatal October 1918—general, diplomat, civil servant, or deputy—none could have served him worse at the critical moment than this neurasthenic prince whose egotism and family interests entirely outweighed his sense of duty. Prince Max, however, had miscalculated in supposing that he could save himself or his house. He lives today as a private citizen on Lake Constance.

But our new masters were equally unfit to govern. Most characteristic of their mentality was the speech from the Reichstag steps, delivered by Scheidemann, an ex-imperial state secretary, 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. The new regime was so constituted that the Council of People's Commissaries (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*) gave an equal number of seats to the Majority and Independent Socialists—the SPD and USPD. Two mandates, therefore two executives! Such a system had never been seen, since the two quæstors, two consuls, of ancient Rome, which certainly did not resemble modern Germany! And above the Council of People's Commissaries reigned the Executive Committee of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, in whose hands lay the real power. In modern art, as it is called, there was for a time a certain vogue for dadaism, whose aim was a complete return to the lispings and gurglings of sucklings. The beginnings of the German Republic were a kind of political dadaism. Such phenomena as [Hermann] Müller made their appearance. Müller had been nicknamed "corpse-Müller" for declaring that there should be no more Reichstag elections, unless they were held over his dead body. Herr Müller is today in the best of health, yet since he spoke his memorable words there has been more than one election to the Reichstag.

The socialist left was all for suppressing the Reichstag out of hand and replacing it by workers' and soldiers' councils, though even this suggestion was not original but a miserable, servile copy of Bolshevik Russia. [Theobald von] Bethmann[-Holweg] from the very start had given an antisarist turn to our war propaganda, and every fool had applauded him. Now our own people, like apes, could only try to imitate forms of government set up in Russia by the Bolsheviks, and unworkable even there on such a passive herd as the Russians.

In Prussia there were two ministers for each department: the one majority (SPD) and the other (USPD) Independent Socialist. Konrad Hänisch and Adolf Hoffmann were the simultaneous ministers of education. The first had risen from the ranks by becoming *cavaliere servente* to Rosa Luxemburg, then he had sloughed off his communist skin and by degrees emerged a moderate socialist. He was moderate when I made his acquaintance. He seemed not a bad sort of fellow, jovial and very good-natured, the usual dyed-in-the-wool Bohemian, certainly without wide and delicate culture, and still less with any profundity of thought—the ordinary half-educated mind. His political Siamese twin, the Berlin publican Adolf Hoffmann, was at least what Countess Terzky in Schiller's *Wallenstein* desires her stepbrother to become, that is, a truly self-integrated personality, since he never cared to bother about such trifles as bad grammar in a Reichstag speech. On the premature termination of his ministerial activities, Hoffman became the spokesman of revolution on the Municipal Council of Berlin, and for years he set the tone of that assembly. The Berlin city leaders hurled invectives; at moments they even came to blows, while from every tribune there were catcalls, stink bombs, and similar intellectual weapons of the young republic. [...]

The republic that emerged from our revolution was, as I have said, flatly amenable. It was petit-bourgeois and philistine; its leaders the perfection of mediocrity. But at least there were no serious disorders. [...]

The elements which, in Berlin in these first months, gave revolution its own peculiar character, were mostly callow, half-grown youths. At that time we were still at the Hotel Adlon. A self-styled republican commissar forced his way into our suite. I had been asked to a bachelor dinner and was out. The 'commissar' enquired of my wife whether we had any officers in hiding. Had I brought my uniform to the Adlon? Did I keep a revolver about me? My wife insisted politely that she knew nothing at all of any such antirepublican plots and secret armings, and the embarrassed 'commissar' made his excuses and departed. Another day, as we walked down the long corridor, a youth of not more than seventeen emerged from the lift and pursued us, in either hand a revolver. My wife asked why he wanted to shoot us, and he answered in a piping treble: "You must excuse me, Madame, but we are all so terribly nervy and strung-up. We have the republic to defend and the least you can carry is a revolver. But we don't mean you any harm. If you like even come out with you for walks and we will protect you." With a smile of thanks I declined this republican guard of honor. [...]

It seemed likely that there would be fighting in the Pariserplatz and the proprietor of the Adlon asked me to vacate our suite. He feared for the precious glass of his windows and wanted to keep the shutters closed. I decided to change my hotel. [...]

A few days after our arrival there I noticed some uniforms in the corridor and learned that the general staff of the cavalry division of the guard had been transferred to our hotel. Next morning we were told that during the night Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had been summoned before the court-martial of this division. Liebknecht had tried to escape into the Tiergarten on their way to the hotel, and had been shot. Rosa Luxemburg had begun to scream sedition at the top of her voice and a soldier had cracked her skull with a rifle butt. But we had noticed nothing of all this.

Source: Bernhard Fürst von Bülow, “Revolution in Berlin” (1931), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. © 1994 Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press, pp. 56–59. Reprinted with permission of the University of California Press.

Source of original German text: Bernhard Fürst von Bulöw, *Denkwürdigkeiten*. Volume 3, Weltkrieg und Zusammenbruch. Berlin: Ullstein, 1931, pp. 305–12.

Recommended Citation: Bernhard von Bülow, “Revolution in Berlin” (Published Posthumously, 1931), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-3822>> [March 16, 2026].