

Felix Gilbert on the Legacies of the Revolution (Retrospective Account, 1988)

Abstract

The revolution of 1918/19 did not cause a fundamental restructuring of society, nor did it end the privileges of its elites, so there was a high degree of continuity in the areas of law, administration, and the military. However, in Prussia, which until 1932 was mainly governed by the Weimar Coalition of SPD, DDP and Zentrum party, the relatively stable political situation facilitated a democratically oriented policy in the arts and culture backed by corresponding political appointments. In this excerpt from his memoirs, historian Felix Gilbert describes how this policy manifested itself in Berlin's cultural scene. A supporter of Social Democracy and son of a Jewish mother, Gilbert emigrated from Germany to the U.S. during the National Socialist rule.

Source

The Social Democrats, as I have indicated, had been a decisive factor in maintaining order and stability against extremism. But if the right refused to recognize that the revolution had taken place, those who accepted and approved the revolution—and I was certainly among them—felt that the revolutionary chapter was not yet closed. In many respects life went on as it had before the revolution. Class distinctions remained very noticeable, people continued to be carefully addressed with rank and titles, defeat had not extinguished the prestige of the military class, and there was a great display of wealth nourished by war profiteering and the onsetting inflation. Certainly the change of the regime had brought improvement in the situation of the working class: trade unions were legitimized and began to exert power and the grounds were laid for the development of a welfare state. However, Germany was not an egalitarian society and was still far removed from the realization of that perfect society at which the revolution had aimed.

Discontent, and a certain revolutionary ferment, remained alive among the younger generation and found an outlet in literature, art, and the theater. We liked to read books and writers who had not yet been accepted into the official canon. I read Nietzsche at this time, and was more interested in his *Genealogy of Morals* because of its attack on bourgeois values than in his *Zarathustra*. Like many of my contemporaries, I read Freud, particularly his *Interpretation of Dreams* which seems to me worth mentioning because in England and the United States Freud's influence began to spread only much later. It was also at this time that I read Dostoevsky, in whom we thought we found something of Russia's revolutionary atmosphere; for me *The Idiot* was his most impressive work. However, reading it gave me the most terrifying dreams, and still does whenever I take it up again.

Under the empire modern art and literature had not been banned, but official disapproval was powerful enough to limit its impact to small groups of society. I remember the immense impression that the van Gogh exhibition of 1920 or 1921 made on me; it filled an entire building, the former Palace of the Crown Prince. The theater, likewise, was an exciting and revolutionary intellectual force in Berlin at the time.

The new Prussian government appointed a new head of the state theater, and thus, in one of Berlin's loveliest neoclassical buildings, the plays of Germany's classical authors were shown in startling revolutionary productions: Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, usually shown before a backdrop of snowy Swiss mountains and blue lakes, was performed on a bare staircase, so that its political message would come out clearly. There was much emphasis on works by contemporary authors who were writing

expressionist dramas with titles like *Murderer of His Father* or *Not the Murderer, the Murdered Is Guilty*. These were either political, depicting the injustice of society, the misery of the downtrodden, and the desperation of the masses, or they were psychological, effacing the boundaries between the unconscious and the real. I suppose I am one of the few people still alive who saw an early production of Bertolt Brecht's first play, *Drums in the Night*. Brecht is the only playwright still well known among those whom we found exciting at that time. The others—Hasenclever, Bronnen, Toller—are almost forgotten. The one I liked most is probably even less known than the others: Fritz von Unruh. Son of a Prussian general, educated in a cadet corps, an officer who had become an opponent of war and violence, a friend of Walther Rathenau, he expressed perhaps better than anyone else the atmosphere of the time—its revolutionary hope and its entire lack of realism. I still know by heart the words with which he concludes one of his plays, and which proclaim his confidence in a “Kraft, die aus neuer Liebe neue Menschen schafft” (“force which, out of new love, creates new men”).

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