Germany’s greatest revolution

One hundred years ago, the monarchy was toppled and democracy installed, writes the historian Robert Gerwarth

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November 10, 1918, the triumphant end of a war. But it was also the beginning of a new era, the atonement for a war that had killed millions and brought nothing but destruction. The revolution that toppled the monarchy within hours was, as the Western Times reported the previous day: “The German people have come to the decision, that their monarchy is no longer tolerable to them.”

This was, indeed, an extraordinary moment. Within a mere 24 hours, the kingdom of Prussia had become the Republic of Weimar. A republic that would be remembered as one of the most stable in the 20th century. The new republic would exist for 33 years until its decline in the 1930s.

Yet, against which the Federal Republic was formed as a very selective memory of the historical events. And the most common, the most popular, the most widely known narrative is that of the “betrayal” of 1918-19. The “betrayal” of the workers’ movement, the “betrayal” of the revolution, the “betrayal” of the workers. No one exploited this soon-to-be-widely shared narrative more than the Nazis. Just as late as 2008, the historian Thilo Wolff wrote: “No man is an island. As late as 2008, the historian Thilo Wolff wrote: “No man is an island.”

The “betrayal” of 1918-19 is the most well-known interpretation of the events of November 1918. The main culprit was considered to be the Social Democratic leader Friedrich Ebert, who became president of the new republic. While some historians have argued that Ebert was a moderate and that the revolution was a “betrayal” of the workers, others have pointed to the fact that Ebert was not the only one to blame. The revolution was a complex event, involving many different actors.

The revolution of 1918 was not a single event, but a series of events that took place in the autumn of 1918. These events included the collapse of the imperial army, the strike wave, and the rise of the Freikorps. The Freikorps were a group of right-wing paramilitary forces that were formed in response to the revolution. They were largely composed of ex-soldiers and were led by extreme right-wing leaders.

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