

The Failed German Revolution of 1918–1919

A review of Richard J. Evans' *The Rise of the Third Reich*

Michael Schmidt

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Although commended by no less a luminary than Sir Ian Kershaw on the dust-jacket, Richard J. Evans' name is not one that stands in the first ranks of historians of Nazism and the ultimately (self)destructive spiral of accelerating radicalism that led to the Holocaust. To be fair, it is tough to distinguish oneself in this field because the rise of such an implacable evil in the heart of what in many respects was the most "civilised" of Western countries poses the greatest riddle of the 20th Century – and has thus been exhaustively treated by more works than any other single historical topic.

In this volume – the first of a promised trilogy, ending with the defeat in 1945 – Evans attempts to define the conditions present in the Wilhelmine Second Reich, the empire of Kaiser Wilhelm II (1888–1918), and its unstable successor Weimar Republic (1918–1933) that allowed a complex set of vectors to collide in the perfect storm of 30 January 1933 that brought the Nazis to power. To his credit, Evans goes well beyond simplistic explanations of Prussian militarism or Junker conservatism as the key enablers of the Nazi ascension to examines all sectors of society: the stuffy rectitude of the civil service from the diplomats and judges down to the railway and postal clerks; the confessional tensions between the Lutheran majority and Catholic minority (especially the latter's experience of repression under Reich Chancellor Bismarck which led to their Centre Party's failure to stand against the Nazis); the horse-trading political parties which almost without exception in the postwar era ran private armies of thugs on the streets; the honoured status of the armed forces within both politics and broader society; the highly politicised trade unions; the universities with their ultra-conservative dueling societies; and all manner of voluntary organisations dedicated to the arts, hiking, nature, birth control, eugenics, esoterica, sports, and so forth.

Unfortunately, in his attempt to be so holistic, I fear Evans has failed to employ theoretical triage, cutting away or at least reducing in stature those institutions, organisations or tendencies that were ultimately just swept along by the tide of history, from those which were primary vectors of those waves. He does treat in welcome detail the deep sense of insecurity and fear of recurrence generated by the economic crises of the hyperinflation of 1923, and of the Great Depression of 1929–1939, but strangely does not locate the Wilhelmine Empire's deep conservatism within the Long Depression of 1873–1896, perhaps because the fiscal crisis did not cut very deep and occurred within a period of great industrialisation in Germany.

Evan's view is very continental in that he understates the effects of the Second Reich's drive to achieve domains abroad that would put it among the ranks of the Great Powers, the paltry achievement – despite possessing the greatest navy in the world after the Royal Navy – of a handful of unimportant colonies (South-West Africa, Togoland, Kamerun, German East Africa, German New Guinea and a few islands in the South Pacific), the racist experiments conducted there, especially the 1904 Herero Genocide in South-West Africa, and the injured pride at having to surrender even these small outposts after the wholly unexpected defeat in World War I. If Nazi expansionism is seen as a reprise of this colonial drive (albeit justified by racism), and in many aspects an imitation, including the use of concentration camps in conquered terrain, of British colonial practices, much of what occurred later in Eastern Europe under the swastika becomes more explicable; for the best treatment of this thesis, read Mark Mazower's book *Hitler's Empire*. Out of this experience arose the powerful and persuasive "stab in the back" theory that the Nazis made their own – that the German nation was betrayed at home by the Social Democrats who forced the Kaiser to abdicate in 1918, and again at Versailles two years later by the Social Democrats who signed the terms of Germany's punishing reparations. This meant that the party with the greatest potential to stabilize post-war Germany was forever tainted with the accusation that they were "November criminals," a stain that soon spread to the edifice of the Weimar Republic itself, with few parties, including those in the Reichstag, having much affection for the new experiment in electoral democracy at all.

Evans rightly stresses how the Weimar Republic's frequent resort to emergency rule under article 48 of the Constitution to handle internal crises weakened its pretensions to democracy, undermined the Reichstag and acclimatised the Germans to rule by fiat, and he is particularly useful in outlining how in 1923, social Democrat Party (SPD) President Friedrich Ebert had used Article 48 to depose the dissident state governments of Saxony and Thuringia, which high-handed action ironically set the precedent for the July 1932 putsch by Franz von Papen who used the excuse of restoring law and order after a particularly bloody KDP-Nazi street battle to depose the SPD state government in Prussia (at well over half the German territory and with a population larger than that of France, by far its most important state), a lesson in realpolitik not lost on Hitler, then waiting in the wings. Crucially, the powers of decree conferred on the President under Article 48 were buttressed by Article 25 which enabled the President to dissolve the Reichstag – a threat he could wield should the deputies fail to ratify any Article 48 decree. Evans makes the telling point that Ebert – who is today mistakenly hailed as a standard-bearer of democracy – had ruled by decree on an astounding 136 separate occasions before his death in February 1925.

The author overemphasizes the vicissitudes of fortunes of the Reichstag's political parties, while underplaying the polarising effect on German society of their armed formations – and those of the extra-parliamentary parties – in the beer-halls and on the streets. Although he is fascinating in examining the failures of the traditional right and centre, the liberals, conservatives, nationalists and Catholics, to come up with a coherent alternative to either a military coup or a Nazi regime (which Evans postulates were the only viable options by 1933), I feel he does not give sufficient weight to the failures of the traditional left, especially the moderate Marxist SPD which came to power in 1918. For it was the SPD which used both its own Noske Guards, and the right-wing Freikorps – demobbed soldiers, deeply embittered by the defeat at the front and alarmed at the spread of revolution at the rear – to crush the militant left, consisting of anarchists, communists and left-communists.

This revolutionary left was not insignificant: the anarcho-syndicalist Free Workers Union of Germany (FAUD), concentrated in the industrial Rhineland and Westphalia and dominated by metalworkers and miners, rose to 200,000 members by 1922, the revolutionary syndicalist General Workers' Union of Germany (AAUD) had 300,000 members by 1920, its splinter General Labour Union – Unity Organisation (AAU-E) attained 75,000 members by 1922, and the IWW's Marine Transport Workers' Industrial Union (MTWIU) had 10,000 members on the docks by 1924; meanwhile, their political organisations, the Federation of Communist Anarchists of Germany (FKAD), the bolshevik German Communist Party (KPD), and the left-communist Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD), gathered several thousand hardcore members; and their combined Rühr Red Army which fought the Freikorps was 5,000 strong in 1919.

By giving the Freikorps a new lease of life and crushing the only working class forces with the numbers and temperament to battle the ultra-right, the SPD government nurtured the key seed-bed of what was to become the Nazis' own armed formation, the Storm Division (SA) – who wore old German colonial brownshirt uniforms – and sowed such deep distrust of the Social Democrats that the left was never able to mount a combined defence of the relative freedoms of the Weimar Republic. If the SPD justification for this betrayal of their comrades on the left was that they feared a Russian-styled red dictatorship and that they needed to establish stability by befriending the hostile military, then both their fears and hopes were misplaced, for on the one hand, German attempts at establishing soviets barely extended past brief experiments in Wilhelmshaven, Munich and Saxony, while on the other, the military never rewarded their friendship, for it signally failed to resist the Nazis – until defeat on the Eastern Front finally saw the belated 20 July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life.

This book is a worthwhile read, but in the end, Evans does not provide a suitably compelling overarching thesis for how the Empire and the Republic gave way to Hitler's dictatorship.

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