

*Revisoren erlesen
Dr. R. Steiner*

Die Kernpunkte
der
Sozialen Frage
in den
Lebensnotwendigkeiten
der Gegenwart und Zukunft
von
DR RUDOLF STEINER



1919
Verlag des „Goetheanum“ Dornach
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hat also jetzt zu heißen:

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*Rudolf Steiner: Die Kernpunkte der sozialen Frage
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News of the war ending reached Rudolf Steiner in the Swiss town of Dornach, in a country that was still neutral and had remained undamaged.

Political and social order in Germany collapsed rapidly and in ways unforeseen by many. In no time at all, the former leaders lost the trust and respect of the people who had, for years, followed them and their words and actions almost indiscriminately. The Kiel Mutiny of early November 1919, when sailors refused to set sail again for a last and pointless decisive battle with England, marked the beginning of a revolutionary process that—due to the poor living conditions and low morale—spread like fire, reaching Germany’s major cities within days and growing into a country-wide movement. “The masses acted spontaneously and unanimously; there was hardly any resistance and little bloodshed.” “Everywhere, political prisoners were set free; town halls, stations and general headquarters were occupied, and workers’ and soldiers’ councils were elected” (Schmelzer).⁴ Only five days after the Kiel insurgence the uprising reached Berlin, where the German Kaiser was forced to abdicate and an unhappy Max von Baden was replaced by the social democrat Friedrich Ebert.

Not only the monarchy crumbled, but also other structures and pillars in the German state. The outrage of the masses was directed against the aristocracy and its bond with the economic interests of German large-scale capitalism, but also against the entire capitalist system. Within weeks, an intensive search for a new society emerged, for new economic forms and antiauthoritarian structures. Long held

back and repressed endeavors came bursting to the surface in a burning call for self-determination, self-realization, and self-administration; for leaving behind traditional power structures; for public property and participation.⁵ It was not long, however, before a new security system took root, brought in mainly by the ruling social democrats, who united effectively with the custodians of the old order—the military and the Wilhelmine bureaucracy—to promote stability and prevent the revolutionary impulses and the ideas of self-administration from spreading too widely. “The revolution of November 9, 1918 was no revolution; for all that has changed is the veneer,” Rudolf Steiner remarked in June 1919,⁶ when he described the developments of the previous six months.

As early as the spring of 1919 a second mass movement rose up against this immobilization and instrumentalization of the revolution, its social protests driven by deep disappointment, calling unambiguously for “socialization.” As the right and left organized themselves, violent conflicts broke out that elicited a growing radicalization and poisoned the political mood.⁷ The historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler has written of the effects of the war and the postwar period, “The threshold for violence and aggression had been lowered tremendously. People had become accustomed to the killing that was euphemized as a war-promoting achievement and rewarded with medals and promotions. Millions of men returned from war, habituated to the inhumanity of warfare, experienced in the use of arms, and bitter about the defeat. In their hundreds and thousands they joined the new paramilitary combat groups, from Stahlhelm (steel helmet) through Roter Frontkämpferbund (red front fighters) to the National–Socialist Storm Troopers. The war between nations continued as a civil war between the right and left camps.”⁸ “In the war human life had become despicable and valueless, something that was sacrificed ruthlessly as a means to an end,” as the left-wing social democrat Curt Geyer wrote as early as 1923; he warned against the dangers arising from the radicalization of the German workers’ movement, realizing how rapidly leftist radicalism could turn right wing.⁹



This state of affairs was not restricted to Germany; it unfolded within the tension between East and West, between capitalism and the Bolshevik Revolution. In fact, the end of World War I marked the collapse of four autocratic powers of the old continent: Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire. According to the new Czech president Thomas Masaryk Europe had become a “laboratory atop a vast graveyard.”¹⁰ Now, out of the turmoil of the revolution, the long-awaited era of parliamentary democracies, of which there had been only three in prewar Europe, finally arrived. They were quickly established, expressly promoted by Woodrow Wilson’s propaganda and the Paris Peace Treaty.

As early as 1921 the British scholar James Bryce wrote of the “universal acceptance of democracy as the normal and natural form of government.”¹¹ According to the politicians in charge, the parliamentarization and constitutionalization of regimes expedited since 1918—the “great flood wave of democratic nationalism and republican radicalism in Europe”¹²—was not only expected to tap the potential of liberal joint determination and participation, but also to prevent, in particular, the kind of “socialist” developments that were concealed behind the European revolutions of late 1918 and that Lenin and Trotsky had long hoped for. “*Either Wilson or Lenin*,” wrote Hugo Preuss, who drafted the Weimar Constitution, which he saw as a “bulwark” against the Bolshevization of Europe.¹³ In the early twenty-first century, the British historian Mark Mazower wrote, “Thus the new constitutions tried to reconcile ‘old-fashioned’ parliamentarism with the contemporary pressures of a modern mass society emerging from the devastation of war. A mixture of forward-looking optimism and a new anxiety, they mirrored the ambiguous postwar situation of democracy’s defenders—the European bourgeoisie.”¹⁴

Germany was one of these postwar republics. Its constitutional assembly was not convened in bustling Berlin, however, but in Weimar—the remote city of Goethe and Schiller. The Weimar National

Theater, where the participating politicians gathered, was guarded by six thousand soldiers. As a precaution, all public buildings were occupied and an area of ten kilometers was cordoned off around the Palace and along the Ilm River. The whole setup was something of a political farce. The republic decreed by Ludendorff and safeguarded by military authority was founded in, and named after, a city that had no democratic tradition or aspirations and a population that largely rejected the changes. The legacy of German Idealism was conjured up in Friedrich Ebert's address at the National Theater, when he spoke of the "spirit of Weimar," "the spirit of the great philosophers and poets" that would "imbue" Germany's life again now that the decision had been made to move "from imperialism to idealism, from world domination to spiritual greatness." The social democratic politician emphasized that the great social problems of the times needed to be dealt with in the spirit of Faust II and Wilhelm Meister's *Journeyman Years*.¹⁵ Yet hardly any of the prerequisites were in place for such a change. The bourgeois and merely rhetorical recourse to the "great philosophers and poets" did not herald a new beginning but mocked the true "Weimar spirit" and the scientific, cultural, and social impulses it had introduced at the turn of the nineteenth century.



In the following years the democracies instituted in a hurry all over Europe as bulwarks against the Bolshevization turned out to be instable and hardly viable. Their success was short-lived and it was not long before an upsurge of right-wing, nationalist, and, ultimately, fascist and totalitarian forces—coming from Italy, Spain, and Portugal—overtook them, introducing and effectively representing new authoritarian systems. Indubitably promoted by the idea of a central state with national self-determination that Wilson had propagated for years, and driven by the persistence of unresolved questions regarding social responsibility and participation, a fateful right-wing radicalization ensued that would tragically determine and shape the fate

of Central Europe for the next decades. “The confident bourgeois claim that liberal constitutions would both acknowledge and nurture the Nation was belied almost everywhere by ethnic and class cleavages. As a result, those whose highest priority was national unity were increasingly tempted by more integral and authoritarian forms of government” (Mazower).¹⁶ “Point 4 of the 1920 Nazi Party’s program ran ‘None but members of the nation may be citizens of the state.’”¹⁷ As early as 1862, when Rudolf Steiner was not yet two years old, the English historian Lord Acton wrote, “By making the State and the nation commensurate with each other in theory, [nationality] reduces practically to a subject condition all other nationalities that may be within the boundary . . . according, therefore, to the degree of humanity and civilization in the dominant body that claims all the rights of the community, the inferior races are exterminated, or reduced to servitude, or outlawed, or put in a condition of dependence.”¹⁸ Wilson’s policy of “national self-determination,” in actual fact, not only gave 60 million people their own state, it also turned 25 million people into minorities in those states. These minorities benefited from state protection for a while but soon their lives were in danger as the parliamentary order crumbled under the influence of right-wing nationalist developments.

The actual *instability* of the European postwar democracies that had begun with the euphoria of constitutionalization but had soon broken apart again—because their foundations were brittle and not consolidated by a new thinking or a new order—was noticeable, not only in the historical retrospective. Even contemporaries who looked closely enough could see that the brutal experiences of violence during the four war years had left scars in people’s souls. Wehler later described them as constituting the perfect breeding ground for fascism and militant communism, as well as for the intended establishment of totalitarian systems of government as a continuation of war with different means—buttressed by economic suffering, growing poverty, insufficient processing of the past, and unresolved social issues. As early as February 1919, Rudolf Steiner said in a lecture:

This European house of cards will soon be blown down by the only powerful and politically influential forces of our time: the social forces. Everything else is mere mask today. But that is the reality. And Europeans are much deceived if they think they can judge and object on the basis of ancient mummified thinking.¹⁹

Eight months earlier, in May 1918—while Ludendorff went ahead with his final offensive at the western front (“Michael”)—Rudolf Steiner said to the members of the Anthroposophical Society in Berlin with regard to the German situation: “Our dear populace, free of authority as it believes, and rejecting and attacking all imposed authority, will nevertheless allow ahrimanic impulses to shape society and its structures one-sidedly.”²⁰

