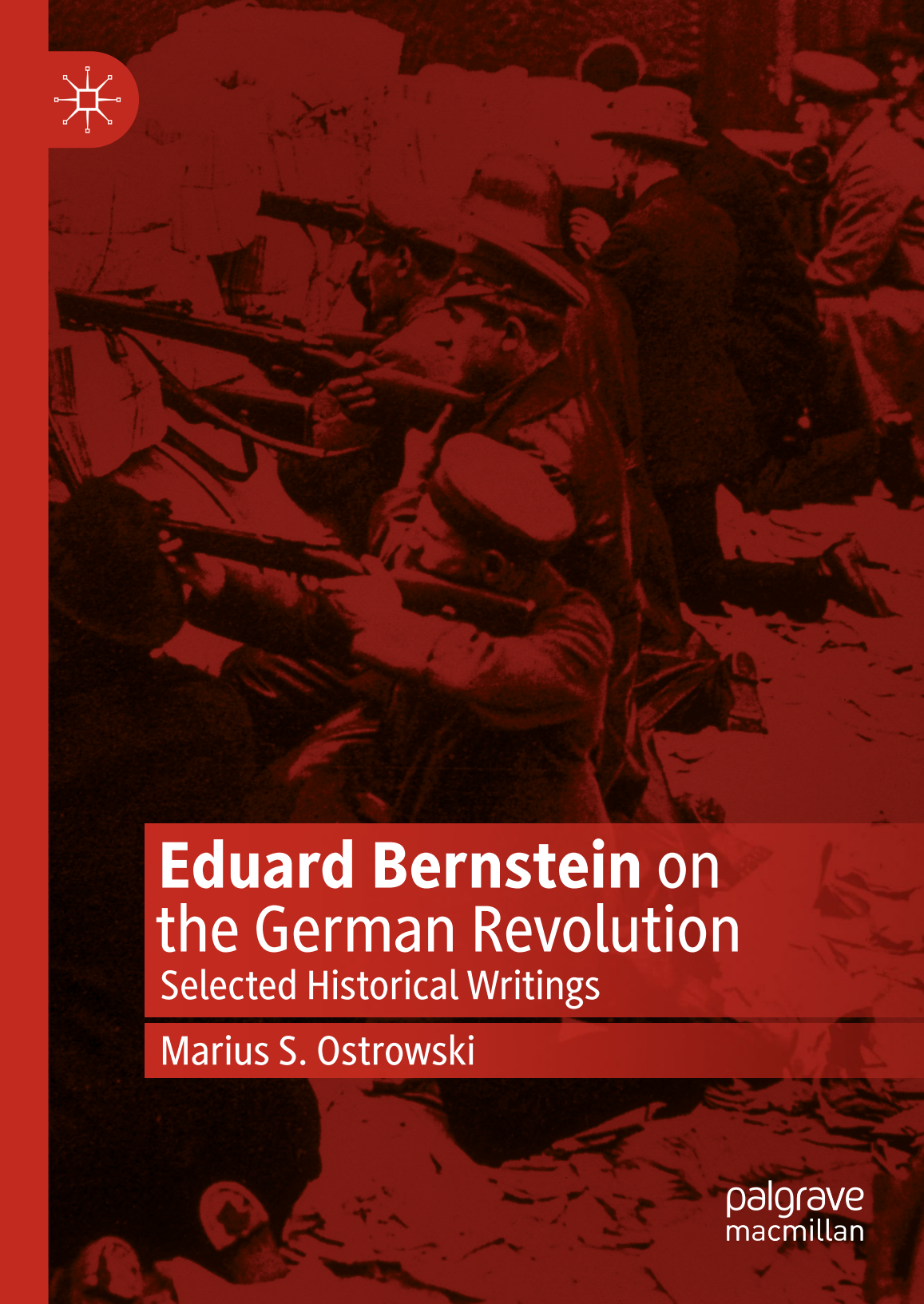

Eduard Bernstein on the German Revolution

Selected Historical Writings

Marius S. Ostrowski

palgrave
macmillan

Eduard Bernstein on the German Revolution

Marius S. Ostrowski

Eduard Bernstein on the German Revolution

Selected Historical Writings

palgrave
macmillan

Marius S. Ostrowski
All Souls College
University of Oxford
Oxford, UK

ISBN 978-3-030-27718-5 ISBN 978-3-030-27719-2 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27719-2

Cover illustration: Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Marius S. Ostrowski

The 1918–19 German Revolution, which saw the militaristic *Kaiserreich* of Wilhelm II overthrown and replaced by the nascent democracy of the Weimar Republic, has a justifiable claim to be one of the neglected transformative moments of European history. Its effects for Germany were abrupt and radical. What began as a series of strikes and mutinies among the sailors stationed at Kiel and Wilhelmshaven in late October 1918, in response to orders to prepare for a final, suicidal confrontation with Allied naval forces in the North Sea, rapidly metastatised into all-out insurrections in most of the major cities across Germany. By 9 November, as revolutionary workers' and soldiers' councils sprang into existence all over the country, the growing unrest had forced the Kaiser to abdicate, and his Chancellor Max von Baden to transfer power to a transitional government, the *Rat der Volksbeauftragten* (Council of People's Deputies). This initially took the form of a coalition between the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and its smaller rival, the Independent Social-Democratic Party of Germany (USPD), but by the end of 1918 was led solely by the SPD. The shock of this transition unleashed nearly a year of violent upheaval, with aftershocks lasting as late as 1923 in the guise of periodic military revolts and prolonged civil unrest, which saw the political institutions of one of the most advanced societies in Europe quickly and comprehensively transformed. The German Revolution's effects for Europe as a whole were no less profound. Most immediately, it catalysed the end of World War 1 by confirming the military defeat of the German Reich and

M. S. Ostrowski, *Eduard Bernstein on the German Revolution*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27719-2_1

the Central Powers—which had become increasingly inevitable since the failure of the German March 1918 Spring Offensive (the *Kaiserschlacht*), and the subsequent collapse of the German front under the Allies' counterattack during the August 1918 Hundred Days Offensive. More deeply, it precipitated the creation of the conditions for democracy as a form of government to flourish on the European continent for the first time—moving from the minority pursuit of Europe's Atlantic and Nordic fringe to the system under which the majority of its population now lived.

But the clear significance of the Revolution's events at the time has become obscured by the way its legacy has been portrayed in the European political imaginary. Its reception has been overwhelmingly shaped by particular features of its geographical and temporal setting, and by the later trajectory of European political transformation. First, the German Revolution took place against the backdrop of a larger wave of socialist, anti-absolutist, and anti-colonial revolutionary activity that gripped Europe and the wider world between 1916 and 1923: Ireland 1916 and 1919–21, Finland 1918, Hungary 1918–20, Italy 1919–20, Egypt 1919, and Argentina 1919–22, to give only a few examples. Within this wave, the events of 1918–19 in Germany have been largely eclipsed by the successful revolutions against tsarist rule in Russia in 1917 as the perceived paradigm case of interwar political transformation—and it is particularly the October 1917 Bolshevik revolution that is typically centred as the defining political *caesura* of the time. Second, the Revolution represented the culmination of a long period of ideological debate and partisan pressure by various democratic and socialist currents who aspired to a significant break with Germany's absolutist, imperial, militarist past. Of these, it is predominantly adherents of revolutionary strands who have claimed the Revolution's events as part of their 'origin story' or 'founding myth'—albeit marked with tragedy, frustration, and resentment at Germany's failure to successfully implement radical-left social transformations. Lastly, the ultimate collapse of the nascent Republic into Nazi dictatorship, and the brutal end of two decades of uneasy peace with the outbreak of World War 2, has driven assessments of what the Revolution *did* achieve into one of two fairly simplistic directions. Either it is presented as a 'false dawn', an aberrant moment of superficial democratisation that failed to achieve lasting structural transformations in a recalcitrantly reactionary society; or as a 'lost opportunity', a glorious first flowering of progressivism replete with idealistic creativity whose reversal represented one of the greatest tragedies in European history.

These three intersecting factors have contributed to a retrospective context of dismissal and neglect that, for modern readers, instinctively frames any works that cover the Revolution's events from a vantage-point of immediate contemporaneity or recent direct experience. As with other interwar texts, especially from Weimar Germany, it is now impossible to read them without at least a feeling of desolation at how comprehensively their fervent aspirations and earnest visions were thwarted by totalitarian annihilation. However, simply discarding or discounting such works on that basis risks doing them a grave disservice. It holds them to an impossibly high standard of judgment for not having been able to predict what came after. At the same time, it skates over the many subtle ways in which they did detect warning-signs and actively sought to counter them. It also runs the risk of poor historicism, by exaggerating the extent to which WW1 and WW2 actually acted as categorical and irretrievable epistemic and institutional breaks between (in the German context) the *Kaiserreich*, the Weimar Republic, and the *Bundesrepublik* (and to a lesser extent the Democratic Republic).[1] In a similar way, it is not possible to treat the intellectual outputs of this period as merely a form of purgatorial hiatus between Past (pre-twentieth-century) and Present (post-1945). They form part of the European heritage of ideas—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse—and they must be assertively reinserted into the overarching continuity of the canon, insofar as 'canonical' designations are still a desirable signifier in modern scholarship. In other words, it is important for modern historians to know—despite, or rather precisely because of, the Republic's later failure—how those who lived through the German Revolution and its aftermath viewed what they had experienced, not least because their efforts represent, by definition, the first steps in the formation of a historiography of its events.

One of the earliest of such historical perspectives on the Revolution was that of the socialist thinker, journalist, campaigner, and parliamentarian Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932). Best known as the theoretical forefather of modern Social Democracy, Bernstein first achieved acclaim in the 1880s as one of the main defenders of orthodox Marxist thought. His rapid rise to prominence within the socialist movement then turned to notoriety in the late 1890s, when he published several articles, entitled 'Problems of Socialism', and a seminal book, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, in which he outlined a sustained critique of both orthodox Marxist theory and revolutionary socialist practice.[2] After successfully weathering the storm unleashed by his advocacy of revisionism and reformism, Bernstein became

a dominant figure on the right of the SPD, making significant contributions in the years prior to WW1 on the 'national question' in socialist ideology, and the role of the mass strike in social-democratic strategy.[3] In the immediate lead-up to the Revolution, Bernstein's main intellectual preoccupation was with issues of international law, trade, diplomacy, and international relations raised by the increasingly unrestrained and barbaric war conduct that characterised the latter years of WW1. Here, he busily expanded the depth and coverage of nascent social-democratic thought, both making the case for socialists to integrate insights and expertise from legal and constitutional theory into their intellectual arsenal, and taking pains to distinguish his position from the more limited, state-centric thinking of his liberal rivals.[4] When the Revolution broke out and the Republic was formed, Bernstein used his personal close, high-level involvement in the events of late 1918 and early 1919 as a basis to return to another of his intellectual *métiers*: that of the politically-committed historian. Apart from *Preconditions*, and in addition to his prolific journalistic output, Bernstein's most significant works prior to WW1 were historical. They included a study of proto-socialist and democratic tendencies during the English Civil War (1895/1908), translated into English as *Cromwell and Communism*; a three-part history of the Berlin workers' movement (1907–10); and an intellectual history of the nineteenth-century socialist Ferdinand Lassalle (1904), which earned Bernstein the status of *de facto* reviewer of all books on Lassalle for high-brow socialist periodicals such as Carl Grünberg's *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*.[5] Accordingly, between 1919 and 1922, Bernstein applied the same skills to a moment, and a period, whose effects he felt sure would reverberate around Europe for many years afterwards.

Bernstein's account was not the first, nor even the best-known attempt to compile an overview of the events of the German Revolution during the interwar period. Ernst Drahn, a military historian and amateur economist who led the SPD party archive between 1917 and 1920, issued an *Almanac of the German Revolution* in 1919 based on the copious documents from the early stages of the Revolution that he had accumulated for the archive, followed by a *Revolutionary Chronology of the Years 1914–1920*, published in 1920.[6] At much the same time, a frantic race began between the members of different factions in the Revolution to put out commentaries, critiques, and memoirs about the events of 1918–19, which persisted until the cloture imposed by the Nazi takeover. Most notable among these are perhaps the works by various men who were

members of the *Rat der Volksbeauftragten* between the date of the Kaiser's abdication and 13 February 1919, when a new government was formed on the basis of the elections for the constitutive *Nationalversammlung* (National Assembly) that had been held in January 1919. For the SPD, Gustav Noske and Philipp Scheidemann—the two members of the *Rat* whose actions during WW1 and the Revolution earned them the most opprobrium among the German left—published their accounts of the events in 1920–21.[7] On the USPD side, the first salvo was fired in 1919 by Emil Barth, a left-radical who found himself regularly outvoted even by his fellow party members in the *Rat*, followed in 1926 by the moderate Wilhelm Dittmann.[8] These were complemented by histories and memoirs by other major participants in the Revolution, including Max von Baden (1927) and the leader of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards (*Revolutionäre Obleute*) faction Richard Müller (1924–5), as well as figures who subsequently attained prominent positions in the Weimar Republic, such as twice-Reich Chancellor Hermann Müller (1928).[9]

Yet Bernstein was arguably the first to present his account *as* a history of the Revolution—well in advance of the *Illustrated History* (1929) by the Russo-German communist Jakob Reich ('*Genosse* Thomas'), and the best-known of the interwar contributions to the Revolution's historiography, the Marxist historian Arthur Rosenberg's two-volume *History of the German Republic* (1928, 1935).[10] Bernstein was acutely aware of the dearth of a self-confessed historical treatment of the Revolution:

> The German Revolution does not yet have a detailed historical presentation to speak of that covers its course so far. The literature about it up to now consists of summary descriptions of its emergence and initial development, writings about certain events, or the effect of certain people on its course, critical tracts about the policy of its parties, writings about legal cases, official and unofficial reports and proclamations of various kinds, and other government and party records. Many of these are kept remarkably objective, others are characterised by tendentious partisanship, which does not shy away from crudely falsifying facts; some reports […] offer up highly valuable material, but even this has only partly been systematically processed—in short, there is a respectable number of publications on the history of the Revolution available, but as yet no more comprehensive historical work about it.[11]

He also realised the social need for and strategic advantage to be gained from a 'definitive' account of what, by the early 1920s, had become fiercely contested events:

> It concerns the presentation of a period in which the German Republic emerges and seeks to determine its content, but in doing so is afflicted with struggles that have the most fateful effect on the form it has ultimately assumed, and for its entire domestic and foreign policy. However, in our fast-moving time, an entire wreath of legends has woven itself around these struggles, so that not only the behaviour of the parties and persons who participated in them is judged quite wrongly in various ways, but its nature and significance are gauged completely wrongly as well.[12]

In view of this, Bernstein set out to explore the social and intellectual context and significance of the German Revolution from the perspective of a sympathiser of the Weimar regime, albeit one with a fair measure of judicious criticisms of how Social Democracy as a movement had handled the transition from *Kaiserreich* to Republic.

This collection aims to restore Bernstein's account of the German Revolution to the 'castlist' of histories of Weimar Germany. It collects in one place a range of pieces in which he addressed the course of events between the collapse of the *Kaiserreich* in October–November 1918 and the establishment and consolidation of the Republic over the course of 1919 and 1920, and the questions and concerns it raised for the future of German society. It also intends to return focus onto the historical aspect of Bernstein's work as an important, and often undervalued, component of his wider intellectual outlook. One of the most noticeable aspects of the writings collected in the previous volume in this series was the tripartite structure of Bernstein's thought: the diagnosis of societal problems, the critical consideration of existing policy proposals, and the positive formulation of theoretical and practical alternatives.[13] In the works presented in this volume—just as in his studies of Lassalle or the English Civil War—Bernstein extends the focus of these three strands of thought from the immediacy of contemporary society to reflections on the shadows of the past. But this is not as hermetic a divide as it might appear at first sight: when he is talking about the present, he always has at least half an eye on the past, and vice versa. As a result, it is both unwise and impossible to try to separate Bernstein the historian from Bernstein the political (and for that matter, philosophical, legal, or economic) theorist. For Bernstein, citation of apposite historical precedent is often preferable to lengthy argumentation in delivering political insight—and, seen purely from the perspective of an inquisitive social researcher, the Revolution had brought him (and future historians) untold wealth in new material to digest and

incorporate into political thinking. The aim in what follows here is to give some context for Bernstein's account of the German Revolution, outline the main features of his historiographical approach, and offer some comments on how his analysis should be received today.

From Kaiserreich to Republic: Socialism's Move from Protest to Power

Perhaps more than with many other equally seismic transformative moments, the fate of the German Revolution was extensively determined by the wider geographical and temporal context in which it took place. Unlike the European revolutions of 1848–49, and unlike many prominent revolutions and uprisings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the events of 1918–19 took place in the shadow of a long and highly destructive war—namely as part of its aftermath, not merely as one of its protracted, indirect consequences. Europe at the close of WW1 was a broken and devastated continent. It had suffered vast annihilation of its labour, capital, and infrastructure, and even the victorious Allied countries had ended the war in dire economic straits, above all heavily indebted to the rising financial sector in the USA. European countries also entered the interwar period having undergone vast economic alterations. The pressures of supporting four years of all-out conflict had prompted massive changes in the purposes of economic enterprise, as well as increases in the size and interventionist role of state institutions, which amounted to a thorough nationalisation and militarisation of the economy. These changes were echoed in wider society. Europe during the 1917–23 revolutionary wave was awash with competing nationalist and revanchist claims and movements, with new political identities in Eastern Europe especially seeking to capitalise on the dissolution of the continent's three remaining great feudal empires. The military alliances that had confronted one another on the battlefield threatened to entrench into permanent divisions between rival political-economic blocs—French-led *Entente* versus German-led *Mitteleuropa*—especially once the territorial losses and other punitive provisions of the final peace treaties were put into effect. Domestically, the ideological and institutional volatility these factors created was exacerbated by the long crescendo of activist efforts to empower women and the working class, culminating in significant expansions of the electoral franchise in both established and nascent democratic polities.

In addition, European societies were faced with a glut of unused weaponry and other materiel, as well as the logistical and demographic challenge of demobilising vast numbers of military personnel and reabsorbing them into civilian life.

The confluence of these international factors meant that the revolutionary forces in Germany were operating in circumstances that not only were not of their own making, but also imposed serious constraints on how far and how fast they could achieve their social and political goals. While, of course, the shock of military defeat often acts as a catalyst for societal transformation—the 1905 and 1917 Russian revolutions immediately come to mind—the conditions of Germany's loss in 1918–19 were so unique that, as many of the Revolution's leaders observed, it was impossible to compare its trajectory with what might have happened in more normal, favourable times. In reality, the rupture the Revolution brought about—and the tenor of its early aims and achievements—was as much a pressure-valve response to the long years of stifling autocracy under the *Kaiserreich* as the peculiar wartime exigencies of repression, censorship, rationing, labour requisitioning, and wage restraint. Yet the attempts to offer redress in the Revolution were seriously impaired by Germany's post-war political and economic state—the result of what was done to it by the victors, and also (crucially) what was left undone. The interwar Republic that emerged was a hybrid of old and new elements, characterised by several stark internal contradictions. It was a country that had been defeated in war, albeit only 'partly'—with its total collapse on the Western Front balanced, if not outweighed, by its total victory in the East in many Germans' minds. It was forced to accept peace conditions whose draconian terms were a response to the high-handed hubris of the Kaiser's regime, but which ultimately cast a cloud of suspicion over the social democrats who had long resisted and eventually supplanted him. This regime itself had been beaten but not destroyed. The Kaiser was in exile, not dead. Junkers and bourgeois monarchists still controlled the German military and civil service, and had retained their presence in party politics, albeit in reconstituted and rebranded form. Germany had also been formally disarmed, but not truly demilitarised—and the Republic never fully outgrew the violence that marked the Revolution's flashpoints.

Despite these tensions, the Revolution turned Germany very suddenly from a European beacon of chauvinist reaction to one of socialist progress—reflecting its long-held role as the 'chief pole' of socialist and labour activism, and leapfrogging polities with a more gradualist emancipatory

tradition in the process, including Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. Yet the arduous road to finally bringing about this turn had come at a heavy cost for the German left. The years of attritional debates and disputes in German Social Democracy—over revisionism versus orthodoxy in Marxist theory, reform versus revolution in practical strategy, and nationalism versus internationalism as the true expression of socialist principles—had cemented a profound factional divide within the movement. Ultimately, it was the SPD leadership's decision to steadfastly join with bourgeois parties in voting to approve war credits to the Reich government during the war—despite its increasingly transparent imperialist and expansionist war aims, and growing domestic and international outcries about its brutal war conduct—that converted this divide into a full party split.[14] What emerged from this split over the course of 1916–17 was the USPD, which brought together a somewhat eclectic and heterogeneous grouping of social-democratic traditionalists, revisionists, 'Marxist centrists', and the revolutionaries of the *Spartakus* League. United almost exclusively by opposition to the war, the harmony between the USPD's rival tendencies did not long survive the arrival of peace and the outbreak of the Revolution. In particular, the existence of an antecedent revolution in Russia—which, despite the best efforts of its domestic counter-revolution and its opponents abroad, was in the process of establishing an apparently successful state built on a substantially different understanding of socialism—posed an acute threat to the party's integrity. While other USPD groupings were sceptical about the relevance of the Russian example for their own German context, preferring to adhere to the old social-democratic strategy of parliamentarism, the revolutionary *Spartakus* wing embraced its leftward pull, and committed itself in October 1918—during the earliest stages of the Revolution—to a programme explicitly inspired by the Bolshevik model of council (soviet) government.[15] The upshot of this was that, whereas during the *Kaiserreich* the proletarian left in Germany had been represented somewhat monolithically by the old 'Majority' SPD, the Germany of the Revolution and early Republic also featured a volatile electoral formation to the left of it, which leeched disproportionately off the older party's support in its traditional heartlands of Thuringia, Northern Saxony, Berlin-Brandenburg, and the Ruhr.

When the Republic was declared on 9 November 1918, Bernstein was one of the figures in German society who was immediately catapulted right into the heart of this unexpected (but long-awaited) *volte-face* in the country's political situation. As a lifelong pacifist, he had broken with his

erstwhile allies on the right of the SPD over the war question, and after he had spoken increasingly vocally against maintaining the *Burgfrieden* ('party truce') with the other bourgeois parties in the SPD's parliamentary party meetings, he had been one of the few revisionists expelled from the party's parliamentary grouping in March 1916. Though he readily joined the Social-Democratic Working Group (*Sozialdemokratische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*) formed in the Reichstag by the other expellees as a temporary measure, he consistently hoped to rejoin the SPD group once the war was over. When the Working Group's members were expelled from the party entirely in January 1917, Bernstein only reluctantly agreed to support the formation of the USPD at Gotha in April 1917. Once the Revolution started, it was in this capacity as a USPD member that Bernstein was appointed Assistant Secretary to the Reich Treasury by the *Rat der Volksbeauftragten*. The SPD-USPD coalition soon collapsed as a result of the *Rat*'s response to the skirmishes between revolutionary and regular government troops at Christmas 1918 (the *Weihnachtskämpfe*), with all of the USPD *Rat* members resigning *en masse*. Despite this, Bernstein was one of the few USPD members to stay in post. As a result, he was working in the Treasury at the time that the *Spartakus* uprising broke out in January 1919—generally seen as a direct result of the Christmas incident—and narrowly escaped serious injury amid intense fighting near his office building. Although he agitated intensively for democratic elections to be held as soon as could reasonably be arranged, Bernstein was not himself elected to the *Nationalversammlung*, which meant that he was notably absent from the deliberations that eventually agreed a constitution for the new Republic. When his official term expired shortly after the elections, he thus became free to devote more time to writing, at which point he resumed the frenetic literary and journalistic activity of his wartime years.

Bernstein's main preoccupation in this activity was the question of reunifying the disparate forces on the German progressive left under the aegis of Social Democracy. His basic thesis was that the original reason for the *Parteihader* ('party dispute') was specifically the war question—the approval of war credits, and the toleration for the Reich government's war conduct. With the armistice that *de facto* ended WW1, this reason was now void, which meant that—for Bernstein at least—there was no longer any obstacle in the way of reuniting the SPD, and moving on from the dispute. He recognised that, over the nearly three years since the initial break, other differences in policy and outlook had entered in to exacerbate

the divide, but he insisted that they were all ultimately derivative issues, which could be addressed within the remit of a pluralistic 'big tent' debate of the kind that the SPD had pursued on other questions before—not least the revisionism debate at the turn of the century. Bernstein emphasised the strategic urgency of reuniting the forces of the progressive left in Germany, in order to be seriously able to take on the responsibilities of government now they had fallen into the hands of Social Democracy after the end of the *Kaiserreich*. As a result, he devoted extensive time to propagandising for a basic unity programme designed around salvaging the German economy, consolidating and developing its nascent democracy, and beginning the process of socialising its industries.[16] Bernstein had a clear electoral basis for his concern. The shift from *Kaiserreich* to Republic had led, in his view, to a pronounced shift in the task required of Social Democracy—from protest and opposition to creation and construction.[17] In that context, the SPD needed to be able to speak with one united voice, in order to win as many votes as possible for its programme in the *Nationalversammlung* and subsequently in the Reichstag—and not lose constituencies to bourgeois parties due to internecine left-on-left conflict with the USPD. Bernstein put his focus on 'left unity' into practice himself in a typically idealistic way. He rejoined the SPD on 24 December 1918—a decision loudly fêted by its main party organ *Vorwärts*—without renouncing his membership of the USPD, becoming from then on a demonstrative one-man unity project, so that on a host of official documents in early 1919 he is consistently listed as "SPD and USPD".[18]

Yet in the first instance, his optimistic efforts met with little success—thwarted above all by excessive dogmatism and a widespread flirtation with Bolshevism among the German left. Bernstein became utterly frustrated at the doctrinaire, self-indulgent, and frankly amateurish way in which many USPD members approached the question of entering government alongside the SPD.[19] Again and again, the USPD tried to overplay its hand in its negotiations with the SPD in various forums—the *Rat der Volksbeauftragten* itself, as well as the Central Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils in which democratic power was formally vested in the initial stages of the Revolution. Eventually, not long before the *Spartakus* uprising in January 1919, he lost patience with the party, and stopped attending its executive meetings entirely.[20] Bernstein's SPD-reunification drive and his evident dissatisfaction with the USPD did not go unnoticed, and at the USPD conference held in Berlin in March 1919, a motion was passed that explicitly banned its members from also being members of

another party. Bernstein took this as a personal slight, and left the party ostentatiously, writing an open letter to its members that was published in both *Vorwärts* and the USPD's organ *Freiheit*.[21] From that point onwards, Bernstein established himself as an implacable enemy of Bolshevik tendencies within the German left, condemning it as nothing more than a contemporary update to the Blanquist glorification of revolutionary violence that Social Democracy had fought so hard to eradicate in the mid-nineteenth century. He shifted his electoral efforts from Breslau to Berlin in 1920 in order to fight for the SPD against the comparatively greater threat from the USPD and the Spartacists, who had by now reconstituted themselves as a separate party, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD).[22] For Bernstein as both campaigner and historian, Germany in the wake of 1918–19 had the hallmarks of Russia between the two 1917 revolutions. USPD and KPD were in danger of doing to Germany everything that the Bolsheviks had forced on Russia after October 1917, and it was incumbent on all social democrats to prevent them from doing so. At the same time, Germany at the start of the 1920s had a chance to learn from the Russian case, avoid making the same mistakes, and achieve a lasting transformation of society. Whichever way the country chose would determine whether the promise of the Revolution would be squandered or brought to fruition.

Writing the German Revolution: A Study in Social-Democratic Historiography

In the works that form this collection, Bernstein draws on his direct experience of the German Revolution, as well as his own previous research, to make a sizeable evidential contribution to the history of the socialist movement. In the first text, *Die Deutsche Revolution: Geschichte der Entstehung und Ersten Arbeitsperiode der Deutschen Republik*, here translated as *The German Revolution: A History of the Emergence and First Working Period of the German Republic*, Bernstein gives a highly detailed account of the events of the Revolution and their intellectual, economic, and political context.[23] He starts with the fragmentation of Wilhelm II's government in October 1918 under the effects of its own "blood and iron" policy and the obsession with power and military victories, which had fuelled the egregious failures by Erich Ludendorff and the German High Command, the *Oberste Heeresleitung*, as well as the Kaiser's successive chancellors (Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, Georg Michaelis, Georg von

Hertling, and Max von Baden). Bernstein tracks the landslide of revolutionary spread from the mutinies at Kiel and Wilhelmshaven to Hamburg, Köln, Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden, and the sudden proliferation of workers' and soldiers' councils. He outlines the ideological differences within German Social Democracy, emphasising the left-USPD's embrace of Bolshevism and anti-reformism, and devotes several chapters to the continuous difficulties this created for the creation and proper functioning of a new government after the Republic was proclaimed on 9 November. Bernstein highlights the three major moments that shaped the trajectory of the Revolution: the first Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils in Germany on 16–21 December; the *Weihnachtskämpfe* and the USPD's departure from the governing coalition on 29 December; and, in by far the longest chapter in the whole work, the *Spartakus* uprising of 5–12 January 1919, with a further chapter dedicated to the murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. He closes the account with an overview of Germany's overall situation in the first months of the Republic, and assesses the reasons for the worse-than-hoped-for results of the *Nationalversammlung* elections on 19 January. Throughout the text, originally written as part of a planned (but seemingly never completed) larger work, Bernstein emphasises themes that he first considered much earlier in his career, including the reformist and revolutionary tendencies within socialism, the strategic importance of ideological and organisational party unity, the dangers of militarism and political violence, relations with non-socialist and bourgeois movements, and the defence of parliamentary democracy.

Bernstein presents a historical analogy to the German Revolution in the second main text, *Wie Eine Revolution Zugrunde Ging*, here translated as *How A Revolution Perished*, an account of the 1848 French Revolution as well as an explication of the significant new theoretical and practical questions that its events raised for the German experience.[24] Bernstein takes the view that, despite important differences in terms of economic structure, class divisions, and class organisation, there are instructive parallels between the 1848 French Revolution—memorably analysed by Karl Marx in *The Class Struggles in France 1848–1850* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*—and the German Revolution, above all in terms of the problems that confronted each new republican formation (albeit at different scales). In Bernstein's view, 1848 inaugurated a new type of revolution, differing from the great political revolutions of earlier generations, which could act as a prototype for future

revolutions in advanced countries. He explicitly attributes his 'turn' towards reformist socialism to his study of the 1848 French Revolution, and revisits his arguments in the 'reform or revolution' debate. Bernstein suggests that this apparent choice is not a fight over a new principle, but rather resumes an old contradiction in the conception of 'revolution' in Social Democracy—between violent intervention in the functions of a societal body, and replacing the institutions that impede these functions with new ones that foster their strength. In general, Bernstein argues that both bourgeois-democratic and socialist parties have much to learn from the French experience, not only by learning from the mistakes that were made then but also by taking into account the massive social-economic changes that have taken place in the intervening period—including far-reaching changes in the size and composition of social classes. These changes have refined societies' complexity, making them all the more sensitive to disturbances by policies of brutal wilfulness and violence. Bernstein returns to his critique of Bolshevism, but here castigates it less for its *putschist* tendencies, and more for its misguided attempt to mechanistically apply the 'early' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels of the *Communist Manifesto* to societies that lack the necessary conditions for that form of transformation. He emphasises the need for the fledgling German Republic to maintain a peaceful foreign policy, urgently avoid any return to monarchism, and above all reunify the fragmented strands of Social Democracy, in order to keep in check the latent reactionary, anti-system tendencies of the German bourgeoisie.

Finally, in a selection of articles published in social-democratic periodicals and newspapers during and after the Revolution—chiefly *Vorwärts*, but also *Freiheit* and the main paper in his constituency, the *Breslauer Volkswacht*—Bernstein elaborates on his historical account and theoretical arguments in the two main texts. In the first articles, published between December 1918 and March 1919, Bernstein deals with the fallout from the controversy over his own party affiliation. He spells out his evolving (but consistently enthusiastic) position on social-democratic reunification, and starts to outline a possible unity programme based around rebuilding the German economy and consolidating the new constitutional democracy. After a brief hiatus, during which he worked on other literary projects, including a set of essays on socialist economic theory, Bernstein resumed his journalistic activity between late August 1919 and April 1920, with a focus on extending his critique of Bolshevik and Blanquist tendencies within the left-wing of the USPD and the KPD.[25] The most intense

period of his post-WW1 journalistic output came in the lead-up to the first full Reichstag elections on 6 June 1920, in which he was again running and campaigning heavily for the SPD. Here, his articles focus on the significance of newly democratised elections under the Republic (as compared to their near-façade status under the *Kaiserreich*), and seek to demarcate the SPD as the only true 'party of the Republic', facing both the anti-Republican hostility of the *völkisch*-conservative German National People's Party (DNVP), national-liberal German People's Party (DVP), the KPD, and what remained of the USPD after the KPD's defection, and the weak support for the regime from the Christian-democratic Centre Party (*Zentrum*) and the social-liberal German Democratic Party (DDP). Once elected in Berlin, Bernstein became preoccupied with the debates over the SPD's future ideological direction, taking a central role in drafting the noticeably revisionist 1921 Görlitz Programme, which replaced the more orthodox 1891 Erfurt Programme (to which he had also significantly contributed).[26] His journalism once again dropped off, but his comparatively few articles from 1921–22 are nonetheless of great interest as they show Bernstein's burning concern to trace the progress and (retrospectively) the outcomes of the Revolution.

Despite their wide-ranging subject-matter, what unites these texts is a very particular approach to the historiography of socialism, especially its forays into political revolution. For Bernstein, the aim of political historiography is to delve into the details of concrete past events, and either verify or falsify the claims posited by political economy about the deep-structure social forces at work in human history by uncovering evidence that either corroborates or contradicts what these claims would lead one to expect in each case. In particular, as Bernstein phrases it in his foreword to *The German Revolution*:

> The task of the political historian […] is to ascertain the deeper contradictions that underpin practical struggles, and bring them to view for the sake of evaluating them correctly.[27]

In modern terms, what Bernstein is describing probably fits best the description of historical sociology or historically-oriented social theory—especially of a kind influenced by social conflict theory. In the specific case of the German Revolution and the partisan violence associated with it, these contradictions were ideological, and underlay questions of everyday strategy:

> These struggles were about a contest between two fundamentally different conceptions of socialism and social development, which can be traced through the entire modern socialist movement, but of whose deeper historical significance only the fewest of those participating in these struggles were fully conscious. Rather, they only presented themselves to most of them in the guise of questions of tactical behaviour, or the method that was practical at the time, towards which they then adopted a purely practical stance—in which greater or lesser insight into the contexts and possibilities one can recognise is decisive.[28]

In other words, at a time when the everyday carried momentous import for the future trajectory of society, but only very few people truly grasped the nature of this import, Bernstein saw the function of political historiography as bringing to the fore the competing futures for German society that were at stake.

Crucially, the nature of the contradictions that political historiography must focus on are not simply reducible to the straightforward bourgeois-proletarian class distinction heuristic deployed by orthodox Marxian analysis. What the Revolution made obvious, for Bernstein, was that its ideological contradictions existed *within* the proletariat—to be precise, within the proletariat in its *politically-organised form*. None of Germany's socialist parties had successfully captured the unanimous support of the German working class: SPD, USPD, and KPD were competing with one another for German workers' 'hearts and minds'. In that context, it made no sense for political historians to focus exclusively on distinctions rooted in the economic base—instead, they had to examine contradictions that were forming within the superstructure as well. Bernstein thus applies in political historiography the same methodological commitment to the *quasi-autonomy of the superstructure*—especially the quasi-autonomy of *politics*—that had become an increasing feature of his theoretical work since *Preconditions*, including in his WW1-era writings.[29] He is more committed than ever to 'unfreezing' the superstructure from the economic base, and in his conclusion to *How a Revolution Perished*, he argues that there are clear historical moments—including the moment of the Revolution—in which economics is not overwhelmingly dominant and determinant for social outcomes.[30] In his double-bill history of France 1848 and Germany 1918–19, Bernstein provides a case-study for Marxists in what happens when the superstructure changes, but the base (largely) does not. He sees in both revolutions evidence that the social emancipation of the proletariat

already achieved a significant advance through the expansion of their civic rights and the general franchise, supporting his reformist conviction that progressive political struggle cannot limit its goals to economic socialisation.[31] He also dwells on the cases where newspapers that had formerly been semi-official mouthpieces of the Kaiser's government underwent transformations or reorientations in response to the dawn of the new Republic, depicting them as signal moments where ideological certainties were unmasked and overturned, and previously-hegemonic social groups were forced to confront the anomie engendered by Germany's revolutionary rupture.[32]

Given that this is the aim of historiography, the politically-committed historian requires particular skills and attributes to carry out their tasks. Bernstein describes the role of the historian as a combination of the poet and the naturalist:

> But if history is to be our teacher, then we must inform ourselves about all the facts that influenced the events we are looking at. We must seek to unite the creative power of the poet, who lets men and battles come to life anew, with the conscientious strictness of the naturalist, whose magnifying glass does not leave the tiniest detail unexamined.[33]

Accordingly, he writes his account of the Revolution with both the experimental air of a quantitative social scientist and the narrative quality of a qualitative social theorist. The Revolution acts as a testing-ground for his long-held assumptions about the growing opportunities for—and appropriateness of—reformist over revolutionary socialist strategy, except this time with immediate practical evidence rather than references to a comparatively distant transformative moment, as in *Preconditions*.[34] For Bernstein, a vital historical skill is the ability to make accurate and apposite comparative judgments about discrete events. With an allusion to the Leibnizian insight that "no two constituent parts of the organic world are completely the same as each other", which makes it harder to draw straightforward analogies between them, he observes that historians need to develop the skill of finding the *right* things to compare with one another, and making the *right* comparisons between them.[35] Of course, he argues, it is possible to draw lessons for the present from the past—but in order for those lessons to be relevant and effective, historians must make sure they are looking for them in the right place. In Bernstein's view, the most powerful manifestation of this is that, for decades, socialists have

been paying attention to the wrong French revolution in the nineteenth century. The 1871 Paris Commune, whose brief existence became a point of theoretical fixation for leftists ranging from Mikhail Bakunin to Joseph Stalin—and an inspiration to literary figures from Émile Zola to Bertolt Brecht—was in reality not a good example for anything of genuine interest to early-twentieth-century socialists. It was dominated entirely by military questions from start to finish, and none of the socialist measures it introduced had the opportunity to be really adequately tested. Instead, it is the longer-lasting democratic dawn between 1848 and 1851 that has tangible insights to offer for socialist policy and strategy, and Bernstein reemphasises that it was his historical engagement with the 1848 French Revolution that initially prompted his turn towards reformism and revisionism in the 1890s.[36]

A vital ingredient for making accurate comparisons, for Bernstein, is collecting an adequate quantity and quality of data to inform historical analysis. A noticeable aspect of his account is that he frequently reproduces in full documents that he believes are vital to understanding his interpretation of events—with particular focus on documents that his contemporary and later audiences may not have readily available, or which might have become lost from wider circulation by his time of writing. Alongside citations from memoirs, official statements, and articles from *Vorwärts*, *Freiheit*, *Rote Fahne*, and other newspapers, he thus often refers to the pamphlets and fliers that were circulated by rival factions among workers and soldiers in Berlin—not just because of the major impact they had on people's behaviour in the Revolution, but also because they are overt, propagandistic statements of the ideological contradictions he is trying to assess. Collating a copious number of such documents is, for Bernstein, not just a matter of lending one's analysis the requisite depth and erudition, but may also help reveal ideological meanings and connections that are too obscure in each piece on its own. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, he suggests, is a good example of an author whose articles must be read *en masse* and in conjunction in order for their political meaning to become clear—something that could incidentally, *mutatis mutandis*, also easily be said of Bernstein's own output.[37] In this vein, Bernstein sees the task of the historian as partly being that of a chronicler, creating a repository of material to ensure that future historians and theorists have everything they need at their disposal to make a 'true' judgment of the German Revolution's events. This is certainly in character with his lifelong side-activity as an editor and publisher of major documents in the history of

German Social Democracy: Bernstein brought out more than 20 volumes of records of the early socialist movement (1902–5) and the causes of WW1 (1914–15), several editions of correspondence with and between Marx, Engels, and Lassalle (1905, 1913, 1925), and a 12-volume collection of Lassalle's speeches and writings (1919–20).[38] In another familiar move, Bernstein uses the opportunity of reviewing the historical material he has collected on the 1848 French Revolution to quibble with and correct what he sees as deep-seated historiographical errors among his fellow socialists about it—most prominently what he sees as their unjustified focus on Louis Auguste Blanqui as the "centre of the workers' movement" in France at the time, at the expense of the more subtle and overlooked influence of Louis Blanc.[39]

This conception of the politically-committed historian's task inevitably raises questions about their subjective positionality relative to the events they discuss. Bernstein is refreshingly honest and self-effacing about his inability to be a perfectly neutral commentator about the Revolution.[40] As a prominent member of Social Democracy, and for a time a high-ranking official within the post-Revolution government, he was far too closely personally invested in the success of the Republic to be indifferent to the Revolution's outcome. At the same time, as an anti-militarist *and* a reformist, he had accumulated several years' worth of experience of being in the minority in his particular chosen corner of Social Democracy, giving him an idiosyncratic and fairly equitably critical perspective on the activities of both SPD and USPD mainstreams. In general, Bernstein sees genuine blanket impartiality of interpretation as a difficult goal for historians to strive for.[41] Instead, he differentiates between what could be described as a *diagnostic* form of partiality, defined as meddling with, exaggerating, or concealing facts, and a *critical* form of partiality, conceived as "expressing [one's] individual verdict on events, as suits the writer's political standpoint", and considering "the factor of personal responsibilities". The former variant he sees as dangerous to good history and theory, as it is fundamentally incompatible with the historian's "requirement of truth". The latter, however, he is far more receptive to, as an often necessary requirement of the historian's own "political conscience".

This distinction becomes all the more important for would-be historians who were themselves co-participants in the events they describe. Bernstein accepts that, as a politically-committed "fellow fighter [*Mitkämpfer*]" in the Revolution—specifically, as one with a clear (albeit shifting) party affiliation—he has no plausible way of denying his own

partisanship. Yet he distinguishes between being "unpartisan [*parteilos*]"—which he explicitly concedes he is in no position to be—and being "impartial [*unparteiisch*]" in the diagnostic sense—which he holds up as his defining watchword when writing his account. As he puts it bluntly: "I have made an effort to be fair, but I have laid no value on pleasing everyone". A major reason for this is the "incisive significance" of the events he describes "for the fate of [his] own people and peoples in general"—events that were still very much unfolding around him as he was writing, making it all the more difficult to establish a full sense of their trajectory. In the time between the events of the Revolution and the publication of *The German Revolution*, the Republic had already witnessed two national elections, a host of *Landtag* elections, and four changes of government—as well, most significantly, as the attempted Kapp-Lüttwitz *putsch* in March 1920, which laid bare the vulnerability of the new Republic to opposition from its own anti-system parties, and which was only defeated by a concerted general strike joined not just by all three proletarian parties but by a good number of their bourgeois rivals.[42] These events were all still fresh in Bernstein's mind:

> … still so interested in it with all my feelings and thoughts as though I had also perceived everything that was done wrong in these struggles, […] as if it happened to me as well. Everything I lived through at the time came to mind again as I was writing this book.[43]

With events both so clear to the recollection, and so raw to the emotions, it cannot be expected—and, in the interests of adding some hard truths to socialist scholarship, it is also not to be desired—that a socialist historian could write an account as if they had left him entirely cold.

Bernstein observes that one of his main tasks when writing his account of the Revolution—and, by extension, of political historians more generally—was adjudicating between mutually incompatible existing narratives about its events, or what in more modern terminology would be termed its rival *emplotments*.[44] Again, he carefully distinguishes between castigating accounts—usually of Spartacist and ultraconservative origin—that simply get their facts wrong about the causes and consequences of events, and permitting a fairly wide variety of competing interpretations of these facts. But Bernstein also leaves his readers in no doubt about the 'right' interpretation of the Revolution's events—in short, a view of the Revolution as a moment of both popular *and* class emancipation, which it was incumbent on all self-declared progressives to support. This is especially evident in his

articles, in which he repeatedly exhorts German workers to unite resolutely behind the SPD as the surest "buttress" of the Republic's institutions.[45] In doing so, Bernstein is as much trying to push a social-democratic partisan line about the origins of the Republic as he is concerned to avoid leaving space for myths to emerge about the causes and course of the Revolution. This was no small concern: the deaths of the Spartacist leaders Liebknecht and Luxemburg at the hands of the volunteer divisions hired by the *Rat der Volksbeauftragten* to defeat the January uprising, and the perceived lack of serious punishment for their killers, were already turning them into martyrs and icons for the KPD and left-USPD. At the same time, the refusal of the *Oberste Heeresleitung* to accept any responsibility for their catastrophic war conduct had prompted German nationalists to blame the German military defeat in WW1 on the Revolution and the new civilian government of the Republic (now better known as the infamous 'stab in the back' myth).[46] But on a more subtle level, Bernstein also inveighs against the tendency—already evident in the memoirs and commentaries that were starting to emerge about the Revolution—to turn every political conflict into a battle between predesignated 'heroes' and 'villains'.[47] Insofar as histories should be considering the impact of individuals on fundamentally social events at all—rather than, say, social groups, institutions, or structural forces—it is much more valuable to see them as subject to conflicted motivations, uncertainties, human fallibilities, and constraints of circumstance.

Bernstein's criterion for judging the role of individual figures is based around what he perceived as their political skills (or lack thereof). Viewed in those terms, it is difficult to say that any of the German Revolution's protagonists come off outstandingly well in Bernstein's narrative, even the purportedly more 'sensible' governing members of the SPD. Noske's proximity to the military is portrayed as a considerable asset in the early stages of the Revolution, when he took on the task of managing events at Kiel, but a flaw when it came to choosing the right way to respond to the confrontations in December 1918 and January 1919.[48] Ebert and Scheidemann are depicted as making a broadly good fist of their unenviable task of holding the Republic together, despite being buffeted by constantly-changing winds of fortune, but also as characterised by the patronising impatience of long-serving *Praktiker*, with a tendency to antagonise their more idealistic partners in SPD and USPD alike.[49] But Bernstein engages in far more extended critique—at times, *ad hominem* assaults—on individual characters who played a more dissident part in the Revolution, and it is in these moments that his partisanship comes most

strongly to the fore. Liebknecht is the main target of his ire, and Bernstein disparages him as a monomaniacal "desperado" who combined the superior arrogance of his thoroughly bourgeois lawyering background with the intransigent zeal he had copied from his Bolshevik paymasters.[50] Similar comments also appear about Barth and to a lesser extent Dittmann throughout *The German Revolution*, and in general Bernstein appears to have found the behaviour of the USPD a greater source of aggravation than that of the SPD.[51] But by comparison, his long-time sparring partner Luxemburg comes in for more sparing criticism, with Bernstein dismissing her lack of experience of Reichstag politicking as a foreigner and a woman and resenting her naïve opportunism in participating in the Spartacist uprising, but also deeply mourning her death as an irretrievable loss to the Republic.[52] Bernstein is even somewhat complimentary about the eccentric Bavarian USPD leader Kurt Eisner, and it is relatively clear that he is won over not by Eisner's substantive views, but by his unique combination of idealism and practical good sense—or to put it in classically Weberian terms, his ethic of ultimate ends and ethic of responsibility.[53]

Finally, Bernstein's approach to historiography is characterised by a consistent commitment to anti-essentialism and pluralism, especially where the role of class as a driving force of social change is concerned. In general, his account in *The German Revolution* subscribes strongly to the thesis that 'there was not just one Revolution', and he prefigures much more modern scholarship that seeks to decentre the events of 1918–19 from Prussia to other states—Bernstein focuses on Bavaria, Saxony, and Württemberg in detail—and from urban centres such as Berlin, Munich, Kiel, and Wilhelmshaven to their respective localities.[54] But as an avowedly socialist historian, his main concern is assessing the class character of the Revolution—and, by extension, that of all analogous periods of social unrest. Here, his central thesis is that socialist thinkers and activists urgently need to stop trying to look for single 'true' centres of classist movements.[55] Instead, they must become more sensitive to the great variety of different opinions that are possible within any single class—rather than arbitrarily elevating one of them as 'true' and dismissing the others as 'false'. As Bernstein observes in *How a Revolution Perished*:

> Generalisations such as "*the* bourgeoisie" and "*the* proletariat" are already of no use because in the bourgeois as well as the proletarian camp the most diverse factions existed and the most varied motives influenced people's minds.[56]

As social democrats were to become only too aware over the course of the interwar period, even a working class that had long been politically organised through party and trade union activism was quite capable of casting its ideological lot in with a plethora of rival directions—not just the varying flavours of socialism endorsed by the SPD, USPD, and KPD, but also the Christian-democratic and fascist offerings of *Zentrum*, the DNVP, and later the Nazis. Just as there was not just one Revolution, there was (and is) not just one proletariat—and, of course, not just one people.[57] But Bernstein goes even further: not only should socialist historians avoid the tendency to frame everything in neat bourgeois-proletarian class binaries, they should also stop trying to frame every social event in class terms entirely. With reference to the bloody June Days fighting in 1848, Bernstein remarks:

> [O]ne does not exhaust it if one describes it as a bloody intensification of the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat. It does not represent a pure example of class struggle. This is not because workers also fought in front of the barricades, and members of the bourgeoisie behind them. Classes will never divide so absolutely that in moments of action every class party will not feature elements from classes other than its own in its ranks. But in June 1848, men fought against the proletarian-revolutionary party whose previous life and later behaviour showed that their entire feeling and thinking was far more with the working class than with the privileged, men who would under other circumstances have stood decidedly on the side of the workers. On the other hand, for some personalities who had not accompanied the workers onto the barricades but still *incited* them onto them, a true and a not merely temporary victory of the workers would have been the greatest inconvenience in the world. It was a piece of class struggle, provoked by the collective effect of irritations that for a great part did *not* stem from class contradictions, or at least not *those* class contradictions as which the June battle presented itself, and as which it will also always count historically.[58]

In other words, not every struggle is a class struggle. Attempting to read class into every instance of social conflict risks weakening the nuance and explanatory power of classist social analysis—and hoping that quite ordinary military conflicts may metastatise into class struggles (and then turned to the advantage of the proletariat) is little more than a wasteful misdirection of socialist energies.