

Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919

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Author: Mark Jones

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Reviewer: Ángel Alcalde

There are two approaches to writing a significant history book. One is ‘going big’ and covering the broadest range of historical phenomena within a large geographical space during a wide time span. This approach makes use of vast and variegated historical bibliographies and well-selected primary sources. The result is an all-encompassing interpretation that helps to make sense of the chaotic matter of history. The other approach to writing a major contribution to historiography implies delving into the details instead: applying a microscope onto a few important historical events that took place in circumscribed time-spaces; gathering and closely analysing a great amount of empirical material that allows the researcher to provide a nuanced description of such events. This method has the ability to transform our understanding of history just as it can uncover previously unperceived factors that contributed to pushing historical events towards a specific direction. Mark Jones’ book is a clear example of this second model of history writing, and there are reasons to believe that it will be regarded as a turning point in the way in which historians explain post-First World War revolutionary processes and political violence in the European continent.

The German revolution of 1918–19 was one of the defining episodes of the 20th century. It was not only the outcome of a country’s defeat in the greatest war that humanity had ever witnessed, but also the result of the efforts of important social and political forces that had long strived for democracy, liberty, and social equality. Within a few weeks after the German military leaders (who felt unable to win the war) had started to negotiate an armistice with the allies, a set of revolutionary protests and movements composed mainly of workers and soldiers brought the German Empire to an abrupt end. This movement contributed to establishing a democratic regime under the rule of a Social Democrat government. The political history of this process is very well known and has been written about on numerous occasions. However, in contrast to the history of other political revolutions such as the French and the Russian cases, a crucial aspect has been substantially disregarded by historians of the Weimar Republic’s origins. This neglected topic is the role of violence.

Jones’ book, which stems from his doctoral dissertation, is a meticulous analysis of political violence and street politics in Germany between the end of the First World War in November 1918 and the destruction of the Munich Council’s Republic in April and May 1919. *Founding Weimar* is not, therefore, a conventional

narrative of the revolutionary process, although it may fulfil the role of introductory text to the topic for some readers. An informative introduction with a general overview of the chronological period under scrutiny precedes the study of the main episodes of potential and factual political violence during the revolution. From the first revolutionary actions by the sailors of the naval base at Kiel, to the political and symbolic struggles mainly developing in Berlin until the assassination of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, and to the bloody repression of subsequent revolutionary unrest in the German capital and in Munich, all the crucial moments of the revolutionary process are carefully explained. There is, therefore, no need to be an expert on the German post-war period to understand the significance of the events examined. The eight analytical chapters stand out for their excellent historical and historiographical contextualization. This monograph, in short, provides not only a clear thesis that is presented, argued and substantiated, but also a highly readable account of the German Revolution of 1918–19.

The key contribution of *Founding Weimar* is to reveal the crucial role of fears, rumours, misrepresentations of reality, and anxiety in the processes of political violence that marred the birth of the Weimar Republic. The breeding ground of such psychological reactions was street politics: the struggle for the appropriation and occupation of symbolic spaces of German cities by revolutionary crowds. However, the author also makes an important point that challenges and completes the dominant historiographical narratives: violence became a consubstantial factor in the creation of the new democratic regime. Exerted with the connivance of the Social Democrat government and with the approval of large swaths of the population, violence had a *foundational* and performative character. After a set of violent and tense episodes in the streets of Berlin during the last weeks of 1918, the government was ready to impose its authority ruthlessly over the Spartacist and Bolshevik challenge. The government did not spare means – including military weapons and tactics – to destroy its rivals. The picture that emerges from this analysis is somewhat paradoxical, for while Social Democrats such as Gustav Noske clearly favoured the use of excessive violence to reinforce the government's legitimacy, the profound origins of political violence – as Mark Jones explains – lie in a set of psychological and cultural processes that were difficult to keep under control. Political violence was at once targeted and uncontrollable, organized and subjected to irrationality. However, historians to date have not highlighted the sheer importance of violence in the origins of the Weimar Republic, because doing so has been seen as a concession to the arguments of those political groups (both from left and right) that prevented and destroyed German democracy. As Mark Jones reminds us, violence allowed Weimar to consolidate its rule, but violence also sowed the seeds of the demise of democracy.

Several examples from the book help readers understand the complex dynamics of violence during the German revolution. The first revolutionary events of October and November 1918 actually involved very little violence. However, a subtle cultural process led to an increasing presence of violence in the politics of the street. Jones, establishing a parallel with the French revolution, writes about *la grande peur* (the great fear) of November 1918. Once the revolution was unleashed, the fear that anti-revolutionary forces led by plotting officers would arrive to the cities to bring the revolution to an end moved revolutionary crowds to exert a pattern of symbolic violence against officers. On several occasions, rumours spread that hiding officers had fired upon revolutionaries in the streets of Berlin and other cities. While other historians of the revolution have taken these rumours as fact, Jones employs the concept of 'autosuggestion' to explain the causality of revolutionary violence in its origins. For Jones, historical actors became increasingly ready to resort to violence as anxiety and fears accumulated.

Many readers will anxiously read the first chapters to arrive at those pages where the infamous killings of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg are analysed. Nonetheless, this political crime cannot be understood without taking into account the spiral of verbal violence, paranoia, and barely containable tensions that marked the weeks prior to the 'Spartacist' January Uprising, after which both German communist leaders were assassinated. Jones shows that, after his release from prison in October 1918, Liebknecht became a political myth himself. While he was 'peripheral to so much of what had taken place, he remained entirely central to contemporary perceptions of what was going on' (p. 103). Undeservedly, he was regarded as a serious and dangerous revolutionary threat by the authorities and by large swaths of the population; his own speeches and theatrical public gestures often reinforced this distorted perception. Along Liebknecht, Rosa

Luxemburg was widely regarded as another pernicious threat. Although she only encouraged the use of revolutionary violence in her last journalistic articles, counterrevolutionary forces had an exaggerated idea of her ability to lead a successful and violent Bolshevik revolution. As Jones points out, it is significant that the government troops that assaulted the *Vorwärts* building occupied by the rebels on 11 January 1919 believed that Rosa Luxemburg had been firing a machine gun against them in person, only to discover that the female rebel they captured and mistreated turned out to be not her (pp. 216–19). Liebknecht and Luxemburg, however, came to personify the revolution that had to be crushed. Jones carefully explains how their assassination took place and shows that the killings ‘did not come out of the blue’ (p. 233). There were different plots to kill them, and uncontrolled groups of government soldiers and individuals awaiting any opportunity to lynch them to death. Furthermore, the Social Democrat Gustav Noske, whose direct responsibility in the killings cannot be demonstrated, always supported the violent conduct of soldiers under his command. Noske’s subsequent order of 9 March 1919 to immediately shoot any person found fighting with weapons against the government troops was the backdrop for further atrocities committed by the government troops and the Freikorps in Berlin and, especially, in Munich during April and May 1919.

The research methodology of this book deserves some attention. Most empirical evidence stems from two types of primary sources: the press, and private diaries. First, daily newspapers have been carefully examined by the author in order to reconstruct developments at the grassroots level and to trace the variety of rumours, unfounded beliefs, and fairy tales about the political situation circulating at the time. The quantity of false stories and distorted accounts that historical actors may or may not have trusted, but that undoubtedly influenced historical processes, is astonishing. Mark Jones has unearthed this hitherto neglected reality by only attentively reviewing the printed press. Today, when false news in digital media and manipulative post-truths in the public sphere provoke political transformations, Jones’ book reveals that these phenomena have precedents in the past.

The second type of sources employed by the author are ego-documents such as personal diaries and memoirs, which allow readers to gauge the impact of hearsay and anxiety in historical actors. While conveying the uncertainty and trepidation felt by individuals, these sources also provide the narrative with a sense of immediacy and a perspective from below. Mark Jones, for instance, has employed the published diaries of Thomas Mann, the renowned author and Nobel Prize laureate, who witnessed events from his bourgeois mansion near the English Garden in Munich. In this kind of firsthand, raw account of everyday life during the revolution, we can understand the emotional effects of – for example – hearing the echoes of gunfire over the city but not being able to know what was actually going on. The fear that Bolsheviks must have already seized power, or were about to do so imminently, contributed much to legitimize the violent counterrevolutionary reaction.

The book stands out for its innovative use of newspapers, a rather traditional source for historians. Some 60 German newspapers of the period 1918–19 are quoted within the book’s pages. As can be seen in the abundant footnotes, the author has exhaustively researched collections of clippings from public archives. Microfilmed and digitalized (online) newspapers have also been extensively used. However, with his focus on the *daily* press, the author has disregarded some other sources that also contributed to shaping public discourses. The author has not examined many weekly and monthly contemporary publications that would likely yield a more nuanced picture of historical actors’ perceptions. Of course, it was daily newspapers that conveyed many last minute, unconfirmed news and rumours about revolutionary events – the main interest of the author in this book. According to Mark Jones, during the revolution, ‘contemporaries did not have the luxury of abstract analysis’ (p. 65). Yet when the dust settled, historical actors did have time for stock-taking; they were able to reflect on and to analyse more carefully what had happened. These more serene assessments of the situation by historical actors were usually expressed in magazines and other printed materials that probably contributed to shaping historical processes, too. The focus on daily news should not mislead the reader. Actors were not the prey of uncontrollable fears and rumours; they also had time to ponder the situation, and define strategies and political agendas.

In addition, analysis of further archival material might have given a different perspective. For instance, Mark

Jones mentions the existence of petitions that citizens and organizations sent to the government (p. 149, fn. 62). We learn that in these messages, more drastic action against revolutionaries was demanded. However, the author does not analyse this interesting source, which could have transmitted the experiences and perceptions of citizens at the street level. In his research, the author visited ten different archives (most in Germany), but the characteristics of his analytical approach privilege published primary sources over other kinds of records such as police reports and documents from the army authorities, which – to be sure – are occasionally used. For example, Jones uses them when he reviews the authorities' investigations of atrocities committed by government soldiers.

The focus on German sources is another limitation of the book. It is true that the *New York Times* is cited at some point, but there is no transnational analysis of information flows. *Founding Weimar* remains a book about German history, but it is likely that the circulation of myths, rumours and fears that it describes did not stop at the borders of the German state. After all, the origins of many distorted representations of the Bolshevik menace during the German revolution lay in Russian events. How the so-called 'Russian conditions' (a trope repeatedly mentioned throughout the book) were conveyed, perceived, and understood by Germans since October 1917 remains an enigma. In turn, how revolutionary events in Germany were transmitted across borders and what the perceptions of foreign actors were are neglected topics. These are not irrelevant questions. For instance, the perceptions of the counterrevolutionary role of German soldiers and officers in early 1919 did have an impact on how Benito Mussolini and other Italian nationalists envisioned the construction of an anti-Bolshevik reaction in Italy.⁽¹⁾ Thus, in a sense, the precedent of the German anti-revolutionary violence contributes to explaining the origins of Italian fascism. Future works of the author might address these aspects.

Original and well written, *Founding Weimar* is an innovative, intriguing, and persuasive analysis of violence during the German revolution of 1918–19. Mark Jones must be congratulated on his new and provocative contribution to the topic. It is somewhat paradoxical, however, that Jones' introduction Jones situates his work around the old debate on 'brutalization' (pp. 21–2). George L. Mosse's thesis of the 'brutalization' of politics after the First World War ⁽²⁾ has provoked heated debates among historians over the last 25 years. Mosse argued that the experience of war in the trenches was the cause of the high levels of political violence in Germany and other European regions during the interwar period. According to Mosse, ex-soldiers accustomed to the daily confrontation with death at the front became indifferent to the loss of life of the internal political enemy after the war, thus paving the way to Nazism and genocide. However, some historians, after close empirical and comparative analysis, rejected the validity of the simplistic 'brutalization' thesis. Others have lately proposed new readings of Mosse's interpretation. After many years, no consensus has been reached. The value of the notion of 'brutalization' as a research tool is uncertain. Rather, 'brutalization' works as a descriptive notion to synthesise realities with more complex causes and origins.⁽³⁾ Jones hypothesises that the experiences of 'late 1918 and early 1919 were more important for the continued "brutalization" of German politics than the experiences of trench warfare' (p. 22). However, this idea is not really demonstrated in the book. In fact, Mark Jones does not refer to the notion of 'brutalization' in order to carry out his empirical analysis in any of his chapters. His conclusions do not mention or address the issue of 'brutalization' at all. Claiming that the book addresses the debate on 'brutalization' is inaccurate, since *Founding Weimar* goes far beyond. The book offers much more convincing and substantiated arguments to explain the persistence of violence in Germany after November 1918.

The methodology put forward in this book may allow for further scrutiny of processes of political violence in post-war Europe. The book demonstrates that myths, fears, and rumours were important cultural devices at play during that time. It also highlights the relevance of space, street politics, the press, and collective actors such as revolutionary crowds, in the bigger picture of the German revolution. The text is accompanied by impressive photographs retrieved from the archives and useful maps of Berlin, Munich, and Kiel. *Founding Weimar* combines sophisticated cultural and sociological analysis with a compelling narrative of political events. For all these reasons, the book is highly satisfying for any reader interested in the German revolution of 1918–19, one of the most important historical events of the 20th century.

Notes

1. Ángel Alcalde, 'War veterans and the transnational origins of Italian Fascism (1917–1919)', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 21, 4 (2016), 565–83. While he does not establish transnational connections with Germany, Mark Jones has also studied the Italian case, see his article 'From Caporetto to Garibaldiland: interventionist war culture as a culture of defeat', *European Review of History. Revue européenne d'histoire*, 15, 6, 659–74. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York, NY, 1990). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. On the international debate on 'brutalization' see Ángel Alcalde, 'La tesis de la brutalización (George L. Mosse) y sus críticos: un debate historiográfico', *Pasado y Memoria. Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, (2016), 17–42. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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