

***Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919.* By Mark Jones. Cambridge University Press. 2016. xxiv + 380pp. £65.00.**

The centenary of the First World War has led to a considerable regeneration of its historiography in recent years. With the end of the commemorative period 2014-2018, the focus of public attention and that of many historians is now moving on to consider the impact of the war on the so-called interwar period. The Weimar Republic and particularly its eventual downfall traditionally feature prominently in the histories of post-1918 Europe. The November Revolution of 1918 that led to the foundation of the German Republic holds an ambiguous place in modern German history. Despite marking the successful overthrow of the authoritarian Wilhelmine regime, it was never fully integrated into the canon of commemorations in the Federal Republic. In the rather conservative political culture of West Germany, a revolution driven in most parts by socialists and rebelling workers was at odds with the prevalent anti-communist identity. The GDR, by contrast, used the revolution as its very own foundation myth yet presenting a rather selective interpretation of the events in 1918 and 1919. Here the historical debate often focused on the 'betrayal' by the moderate Social Democrats, their alliance with the military and Freikorps to crush communist uprisings as well as the revolutionary martyrdom of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. These conflicting interpretations of the founding of the Weimar Republic have for a long time provided a fertile ground for historical scholarship in Germany and to a lesser extent in the English-speaking academia.

With *Founding Weimar*, Mark Jones adds to an already considerable body of literature on the November Revolution and the conflicts surrounding the foundation of the Weimar Republic. Jones emphasises the importance of different forms of violence as a key factor in the struggles over the character of the new republic in the formative months between November 1918 and May 1919. In the context of the power struggles between the moderate Social Democrats, the military and a small yet influential group of radical socialists, violence was not just functional but featured a considerable symbolic and communicative dimension. Violent acts were a form of political communication that transported very specific messages. For instance, machine gun posts and their open display in the streets was often more a demonstration of power and domination of public space than a military necessity. Particularly in the first weeks after the flight of Wilhelm II, control of public spaces and the mobilisation of mass support in the streets were crucial for legitimising competing claims to power. Remarkably this contest for the streets was initially rather peaceful. Jones presents a dense account of these struggles for symbolic dominance and points out how much the new (M)SPD-dominated government was at unease with this kind of mass politics. The first three chapters of the book are mostly covering the general political developments, stretching from the Sailors' Mutiny in late October to the collapse of the old order in Berlin on 8 and 9 November 1918. Jones emphasises that despite the initial absence of excessive violence there were numerous reports of imagined atrocities committed by both revolutionaries and loyal military units. Berlin and other German cities were rife with rumours and 'auto-suggestions' of violent excesses. Contemporaries used historical precedents, such as the French Revolution of 1789 and the Paris Commune of 1871, as a frameworks of reference to express their own fears of impending 'white' or 'red' terror.

Moreover, reports of massacres and atrocities committed by the Bolsheviks in Russia fuelled the anxieties of similar developments in Germany. On the radical left, there were similar fears of a conspiracy of the military and old elites to overthrow the revolution. On both sides these debates paved the way for the violence that was to come. *Founding Weimar* is primarily a meticulous analysis of the discourses about revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence at this time.

Jones follows the established scholarship on the November Revolution by identifying the so-called *Weihnachtskämpfe* in Berlin on 24 December as the starting point for the escalating violence that was to follow. The short yet intensive fights between the revolutionary People's Naval Division and government troops were soon followed by the much more extensive and excessive violence during the January Uprising of 1919. Then, in March 1919, a general strike organised by the trade unions led to the worst atrocities when government troops and Freikorps killed over 1,200 alleged insurgents in the Lichtenberg district of Berlin. These killings were legitimised by alleged murders of policemen by insurgents in Lichtenberg on 8 March 1919, which was almost immediately reported in the press as facts. It later transpired that this was a fabricated rumour yet Reichswehr Minister Gustav Noske used it as a welcome occasion to issue his so-called 'Execution Order' to the government troops on 9 March. It demanded that captured insurgents had to be killed on the spot. A day later an even more severe order was issued which ordered that all civilians found with weapons had to be executed. Noske's 'Execution Order' marks a significant stage of escalation, as Jones rightly identifies, yet it was not entirely new. Similar orders had already been issued by military commanders in the years before the First World War. The order by General Moritz von Bissing, commander of the VII Army Corps, of 30 April 1907 is a pertinent point in case. Noske's order is strikingly similar to von Bissing's, which also demanded that armed insurgents were to be executed on the spot. Jones seems not to be aware of these sources although they are widely cited in the East German historiography. This is an important point because it suggests that the violence of government troops in March 1919 and later on was much more rooted in already existing designs for counter-insurgency warfare than Jones acknowledges. Noske's order was in this context perhaps less of a rupture but merely the implementation of already existing ideas of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence.

Jones draws extensively on newspapers, which provide the majority of his source material. Despite some of the inherent limitations of this type of source, Jones makes excellent use of them to reconstruct the public discourse on the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence. He demonstrates convincingly that even excessive violence and extra-judicial killings of alleged insurgents found widespread support in the German press and very likely also from the general public. The language used to describe Spartacists and other leftist insurgents often dehumanised them as subhuman, beast-like creatures. This in turn facilitated the use of excessive violence. The link between violent discourse and violent action is not entirely new, of course. George Mosse's classical argument regarding the 'brutalisation' of political culture in Germany after the First World War, for instance, goes in a similar direction as Jones acknowledges in his introduction. Likewise, proponents of the *Culture de Guerre* hypothesis have argued along similar lines when explaining the links between propaganda and brutalisation on the battlefields of the First World War. Jones applies these conceptual frameworks to November Revolution and offers a detailed analysis of the respective source material. This

represents a very welcome contribution to our understanding of post-war political violence in Germany. The reconstruction and analysis of the discourse surrounding violence during this tumultuous period is clearly the strongest element of the book. Jones manages to clearly demonstrate the importance of the press for not only shaping the public perception of violence but in many cases also justifying and instigating it.

On the whole, *Founding Weimar* is a timely and ambitious book that offers the reader not only a detailed synthesis of the recent scholarship on the November Revolution but also a new perspective on the factors that contributed to the descent into violence after the *Weihnachtskämpfe* of 1918. The emphasis Jones places on the ‘foundation violence’ of the Weimar Republic encourages the reader to consider the wider context of post-war violence in Europe and locates the book prominently in a current scholarly debate. Moreover, it raises questions as to whether the violence of 1919 represents a moment of continuity of wartime violence or whether it represented a new form of political violence. In any case, students and researchers alike will find *Founding Weimar* an engaging and thought-provoking read.

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