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H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.
<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

H-Diplo Book Review of Harry Harmer, Friedrich Ebert: Germany (Makers of the Modern World Series), London: Haus Publishing 2010, ISBN 978-1-905791-63-7, US\$ 19.95.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-Germany.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **V.R. Berghahn**, Columbia University

The Haus Publishing series on 'Makers of the Modern World' is to be welcomed because it is designed to provide concise biographies, around 200 pages long, of major politicians and intellectuals from all over the world. All of them are also put into the larger context of the age and the often momentous decisions that they were involved in.

The volume to be reviewed here is on Friedrich Ebert's career and his role during the German revolution of 1918/19 and the negotiations and imposition, on the young parliamentary republic of Weimar, of the Versailles peace treaty. Rising from humble working-class background, he became the leader of the Social Democrats in World War I at a time when that war was not going well for the country, leading to an increasing radicalization and polarization of society. The extreme left castigated Ebert, a very decent and honest man who long before 1914 had been persecuted for his political convictions by the autocratic Hohenzollern monarchy, as a traitor to the working class. Meanwhile the extreme right and an increasingly more desperate Imperial government saw him as an unpatriotic ring-leader who was stirring up the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions. He was accused of undermining the war effort and of sedition during the massive strikes of January 1918 when in fact he had inserted himself into this conflict in order to de-escalate the crisis.

When after the failure of the German spring offensive of March 1918 the generals told the emperor that the war had been lost and initiated what has been called a 'revolution from

above' that established a constitutional monarchy similar to the British one in which the crown was no longer the power center but the elected parliamentary assembly, Ebert loyally supported this solution that was supposed to stave off a 'revolution from below'. There exists a memorandum, of a famous encounter between Ebert and general Wilhelm Groener, the emissary from the Imperial headquarters at Spa in Belgium, in which the "unpatriotic" Social Democrat leader pleaded with the general to stop a further radicalization of the situation. His solution was for Emperor Wilhelm II to step down and for a regent to be appointed until the crisis had subsided and the country could return to a constitutional monarchy. Although there were already mass protests in Kiel and other cities, the military flatly refused. A few days later the generals forced Wilhelm II to abdicate, put him into a motor car and sent him across to Holland where he remained in exile until his death in 1941.

Clearly, these were world-historical events that did not prevent the 'revolution from below' from breaking out. Once more Ebert found himself in the midst of this drama and when, on November 9, the revolutionary "workers' and soldiers' councils" (soviets) that had constituted themselves spontaneously offered him and Hugo Haase, the leader of the Independent Socialists, the leadership of the provisional government to fill the power vacuum. Ebert accepted out of a sense of duty. It was an attempt to bring under control a volatile situation that many, including Ebert, feared might follow the path of the Russian revolution a year earlier and end in a Bolshevik seizure of power.

These fears form the backdrop to another momentous decision by Ebert: his provisional government had hardly been installed when he received a call from general Groener who offered him military help if he agreed to quell the radical left. Ebert agreed and the Army now raised volunteer units, known as Free Corps, that, equipped with heavy weapons from the arsenals, prepared for a suppression of the radical left. The Ebert-Groener pact was complemented by an agreement between the employers and the leader of the Social Democrat powerful trade union movement in which the former promised the introduction of the eight-hour workday in return for the labor movement desisting from its plans for a socialization of industry.

When, partly enraged by these agreements, the extreme left staged the Spartacist Uprising in January 1919, the Free Corps quickly moved against the barricades, their victory was soon secured. With law and order more or less restored, Ebert and his comrades were once again accused of having betrayed the German working class and the revolution. Meanwhile not only the constitution of the parliamentary republic was drawn up in the town of Weimar, away from the turmoil in Berlin, but also the peace treaty by the Allies at Paris. In June the Germans were called to the Versailles Palace to sign it or face a renewal of military action. Although Ebert, meanwhile occupying the position of interim president of the parliamentary Weimar Republic left the signing to the new government, it was now the anti-Versailles extreme right that charged him with being a traitor to the nation and a "fulfillment politicians" who did not resist the implementation of the harsh clauses of the Versailles Treaty by the Western Allies.

All this is ably recounted by Harmer, but I have spent some time summarizing his study of Ebert as a “maker of the modern world” to bring out the huge dilemmas that Ebert faced and how he became the target of both right-wing and left-wing hatred. He was no doubt the great tragic figure of a crucial period of German history the end of which no-one could possibly know. He who had suffered distressing humiliation and discrimination under the monarchy; who had patriotically worked for the defense of the Fatherland in World War I and for a reform of a political system that was no longer capable of coping with the democratic pressures ‘from below’; who had lost two of his sons at the front and who wanted to build an economically and politically stable and modern republic, was never able to resolve the enormous social tensions left by a war that the emperor had started and by a civil war that exacerbated wartime hardships and traumatization.

In fact, in the end it was these unresolved tensions that led to his early death in January 1925. But the deterioration of Ebert’s health accelerated a few weeks earlier after a newspaper editor had accused him – as Harmer puts it (p. 145) – “of treason for his part in the January 1918 munitions workers’ strike. He challenged Ebert to disprove the charge in court.” Shortly after, “Ebert, having accepted the challenge, said in a statement read to the court he had been against the January action and had joined the strike committee solely to bring it to an early end.” Despite supporting letters, the court rendered a verdict on December 23 that “came as a blow to Ebert. The judge agreed the editor was guilty of technical libel but said that Ebert committed treason in supporting the strike, whatever his reasons.”

While Ebert thus remained a controversial figure in his time, historians have also disagreed over his role in 1918/19. Among Western historians, Sebastian Haffner was probably his harshest critic, accusing him of having betrayed a revolution that was much less radical than Ebert had perceived. Harmer does not engage with this debate in an introduction that would have enabled him to position himself in the field. His distancing from his subject comes more indirectly in that he discusses the “unraveling” of the Versailles system and the Weimar Republic all the way up to the defeat of the Hitler regime in 1945. In his final sentences in which he discusses the “fate” of Ebert’s surviving son, he provides what he calls a “counterpoint” to the father’s career. Having lived through World War II as a soldier Friedrich Jr. became “prominent in the new [East German communist] party, serving as mayor of East Berlin from 1948 to 1967 and as chairman of the party faction in the People’s Chamber from 1971. In 1973 he was East German acting head of state for a few months, attaining the pinnacle – if only briefly – his father had reached half a century before.” (p.161)

Did the author want to allude with these remarks to a twist of “fate” that, like history more generally, an individual life also comes round twice, the first time as a tragedy and the second time as a farce? Rather than having no introduction and an opaque ending, the books in this series should invariably start with a few pages that set out, in analytical terms, the questions to be investigated and conclude with answers that have been found from the evidence presented in the intermediate chapters. I am sure that students to whom this text will be recommended will be grateful for this.

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