ABSTRACT. The German Revolution of November 1918 dramatically altered the Academy’s view of its relationship with government. In particular, the Academy’s Prussian tradition had to be rethought. From initial wariness to grudging acceptance, the Academy came to accept the Weimar regime. This paper studies the politics of the Academy, uncovers factions and fault lines amongst its members, and offers a fresh interpretation on the Academy’s relationship with Albert Einstein.

INTRODUCTION

On 14 November 1918, a few days after the revolution in Berlin, a plenary meeting of the Academy took place at 80 Dorotheenstraße. The revolution shocked the Academy, which was in very real terms privileged by the Prussian monarchy. Like many university professors, Members of the Academy experienced the events of November as a fundamental revolution in values. The Academy building had been involved in the clashes on 9 November. Of the sixty-five Orden
tliche Mitglieder (Full Members – OM), forty-three were present at the meeting on the 14th. Apart from routine business, two decisions were taken: first, meetings and projects were to continue, for as long as possible; second, on 17 November, the Academy would meet with the University, at the invitation of Eduard Meyer – vice-chancellor of the Friedrich–Wilhelm–Universität (FWU) Berlin and himself a Member1 – to discuss the current situation. At the next plenary meeting, on 28 November, Max Planck reported upon his visit to the Prussian Ministry of Culture, where the new Government assured him and the Academy of its continuing support.2 Out of

1 Eduard Meyer (1855–1930) was, from 1902, Professor of Ancient History at the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität (FWU) Berlin. Previously he had been at Leipzig (1884), Breslau (1885), and Halle (1889). He was elected a Member of the Academy in 1903.

2 Max Planck (1858–1947), the distinguished physicist, was from 1892 a full professor at FWU Berlin. He became an OM in 1894, and from 1912 to 1938 was Secretary of the Physics and Mathematics Section of the Academy. From 1931 to 1937, he was President of the Kaiser–Wilhelm–Gesellschaft (KWG) and, in 1918, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics.
regard for the political situation, Meyer proposed to cancel the
forthcoming Friedrich Session – the Friedrichstag – that came at the
end of January. This annual event commemorated the birthday of
Frederick the Great, and was one of two occasions when the Acad-
emy was on show; the other being the Leibniztag at the end of June.
However, Meyer’s motion was defeated, and it was decided to hold
the festive session in the traditional manner.\(^3\) Thus the Academy set
out to deal with the new political order: ‘Business as usual’ was the
theme, but with greater vigilance, and with more contact with the
new masters, as well as – wherever possible – a shoulder-to-shoulder
stance with the university.

The political, cultural and social changes of the next twelve years
appear in a rather uncertain and threatening light.\(^4\) Yet, until 1933,

\(^3\) Minutes of Plenary Meetings 1918, Archiv Akademie der Wissenschaften
(hereafter AAW) Berlin, Bestand Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (here-
after PAW), II–V, 94, Bl. 61–63; idem., Bl. 61–68; idem., II–VI, 21, Bl. 193. For a

\(^4\) A perhaps typical reaction of an academic can be found in a letter of 10

November 1918 from Eduard Spranger to his friend and comrade-in-arms, Georg

Kerschensteiner. At that time, Spranger was still a comparatively young scholar
(elected to the Academy in 1925), and he later accepted and supported the principles
of the Weimar Republic. In this letter, he wrote: ‘It [the revolution] does not have a
workable programme, only the endeavour to dissolve’; ‘I am certain that within a
short while universities will lose the freedom to teach what they want’. A month
later, Spranger complained about ‘the people’s lack of dignity’, their ‘utter political
and moral collapse’; but at the same time, he was already developing ideas for a new
‘education of the people’, with a view to presenting them to the Government. See

Ludwig Englert (ed.), Georg Kerschensteiner and Eduard Spranger. Briefwechsel,
also Friedrich Schmidt-Ott, Erlebtes und Erstrebtes, 1860–1950 (Wiesbaden: Steiner,
1952), 162ff. For Schmidt-Ott, there was ‘no doubt that only the most rigorous sense
of duty by the civil service could save the state from dissolution and return the
undisciplined masses to order’. Ibid, 164, 10 November 1918; 16 December 1918,
142f.