

the government did and did not do, and why. His account of the Kornilov affair, certainly pivotal in any assessment of Kerensky, strikes me as fair and objective. I suspect that he overdoes the Masonic connection. The book sometimes reflects an uncritical use of the stereotypes which run through Kerensky's works (and those of his rivals), especially of social groups and broad developments of the Revolution. Missing is the finer texture of understanding the Revolution which has emerged from the many studies published in the first half of the 1980s, which would have helped him where he needs to portray the attitudes of the workers and soldier masses and how these interacted with Kerensky and the government. The omission of these works is a bit puzzling, but perhaps the manuscript was finished earlier than the publication date suggests.

This is a good and an important work. We are indebted to Richard Abraham for producing, if not a perfect biography or the final word on Kerensky, a solid and highly valuable account of the man who was not only the "first love" of the revolution, but also its perennial scapegoat.

*Rex A. Wade*

WETTE, WOLFRAM. *Gustav Noske. Eine politische Biographie.* Droste Verlag, Düsseldorf 1987. iv, 876 pp. Ill. DM 98.00.

It is no exaggeration to say that Gustav Noske, a prominent figure during the revolutionary upheavals in Germany in 1918-19 and the Weimar republic's first defence minister, is the most controversial politician in the history of German social democracy. Assessments of Noske give rise to a peculiar reversal of positions: Noske eventually became a heavy burden on his party, and today most Social Democrats were very critical of his policies; but the political right held, and still holds, him in high regard.

Given that Noske is a Social Democratic politician, who enjoys particular esteem with all German conservatives, it does not come as a surprise that Wolfram Wette's critical biography caused a stir even before its publication. The scientific advisory board attached to the Research Institute for Military History (Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt), Wette's employers, tried to obstruct the publication of the study, a fact which quickly became public knowledge within the profession. The board (appointed by the federal minister of defence) accused the author of bias and of lack of balance in his judgements, and recommended that the institute withhold its imprint and refuse to subsidize the printing costs. Further expert opinion was then sought, and on the basis of this the institute did finally decide to publish. But, unusually, the director of the institute made a number of critical observations in his introduction to the book, articulating the advisory board's reservations about Wette's appraisal of Noske the man and the policies he espoused.

On perusal of this lengthy study it becomes clear – abundantly clear – that the accusations by the advisory board are entirely without justification. Wette offers a fair representation of the development and political career of Gustav

Noske. But a biographical appreciation should not shy away from a critical assessment, and Wette certainly does not. Although of course there can be no universally valid criteria arriving at historical judgements, any fair-minded judge would endorse Wette's yardstick in this case: a leading representative of the Social Democratic Party, who played a key role in German politics during the two turbulent years following the end of the first world war, should be judged by how much he contributed to the consolidation of the young democratic republic. (No doubt the criteria for assessing the motives and actions of conservative and monarchist politicians would be different.)

Gustav Noske was born in Brandenburg an der Havel in 1868, and died in 1946, aged 78. The son of a weaver, he trained as a basketmaker, turned to journalistic work for the SPD, and rose through the ranks of the party to become a member of the Reichstag in 1906 and the "military expert" of the parliamentary party.

Wette deals with this early period in some detail. But a biography of Noske may, indeed should, concentrate on the eighteen-month period between September 1918 and March 1920, when he helped determine in a most decisive way the fate of the early Weimar republic, first as the military governor who brought the sailor's mutiny in Kiel under control, then as the member of the council of representatives (the precursor of the Weimar parliament) responsible for army and navy affairs, and finally as minister of defence and the strong man in the cabinets of Philip Scheidemann and Gustav Bauer.

In March 1920, the Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, an attempted coup by rightwingers, brought Noske's political career to an abrupt end. He held high administrative office until 1933 as the prime minister of Hannover province, but he never again gained a position of major political influence. As a result, Wette's short report on Noske's tenure in Hanover seems more like an epilogue.

Wette quite rightly devotes around two thirds of the book's 800 pages of text to Noske's political activities between September 1918 and March 1920. In what he did, and also in what he did not do, Noske made history in these months. The decisions taken during the "Noske era" were almost impossible to reverse subsequently. The comments below refer to this core section of the biography.

For Wette, and indeed for anyone concerned with this period, the crucial question to be answered is whether Noske chose the right course and employed the appropriate means to achieve the legitimate aims of maintaining order and consolidating the authority of government. In other words, did there exist a realistic alternative, consistent with social democratic principles, to Noske's policy of violent pacification, which allowed the imperial officer corps to become a powerful force in the country and which alienated broad sections of the working class from the Weimar state?

The findings of this study and the arguments based on them are unequivocal. In Wette's view, Noske bore much personal responsibility for the fact that in the early phase of the Weimar republic the Majority SPD endorsed – in conjunction with what he calls an "abdication of political leadership" – the deployment of military might to suppress the uprisings, which in turn precipitated an escalation of violence.

Wette is not content to make a general claim that the Majority SPD leadership could have chosen an alternative course and that Noske in particular had at least a limited room for manoeuvre. Through detailed analysis he demonstrates that conditions did exist for an alternative policy. Wette concedes without qualification that the government, and specifically the minister responsible for internal order and military policy, was obliged to defend itself against attempts by far-left groups to overthrow it. But he questions the appropriateness of the means adopted, and arrives at the well considered judgement that the massive deployment of military force (in the form of volunteers' units led by monarchist officers) can in no way be considered necessary or appropriate.

Even before the army was called in to suppress the Spartacus revolt in January 1919, the key elements of Noske's policy had become clear: creating and maintaining order would be a matter for the military, not the police; conflicts would be resolved by use of force, not through compromise; the army would be commanded by the imperial officer corps, not by democratically minded officers; SPD-sponsored reforms, such as the People's Defence Law (*Volkswehrgesetz*) approved in December 1918, would be reversed; and the formation of self-defence units of Social Democrats would be discouraged. All this, and above all the blind faith in the loyalty of the imperial officers, were the hallmarks of Noske's policy. It would be unfair, however, Wette stresses, to make Noske the scapegoat for this military policy. During the crucial months it was backed by both the Majority SPD leadership and large sections of the party membership. It was not until the second half of 1919 that criticism of the policy began to grow within the ranks of the party.

Wette analyses in some detail the events between acceptance of the Versailles peace treaty in June 1919 and the Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch in March the following year, a period which has not been intensively studied thus far. He shows how Noske significantly reduced his remaining scope for action by obstinately holding on to the military option, and how his support in the party gradually waned.

By bringing together a wealth of information on this period Wette is able to present an accurate picture of, and throw some new light on, the developments which led to the Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch. In all, however, it is not so much the new insights which make this biography of Gustav Noske such an extremely important book. Wette relies largely on the results of recent studies of the period, exhausts the source material contained in them, and combines the individual findings into a consistent overall argument. The earlier studies had already cast doubt on the widely held view that objective constraints left the Majority SPD of 1918-19 no choice but to adopt Noske's policy of the iron fist. Wette's impressive and prolific analysis explodes this myth once and for all. That is the principal merit of this biography.

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