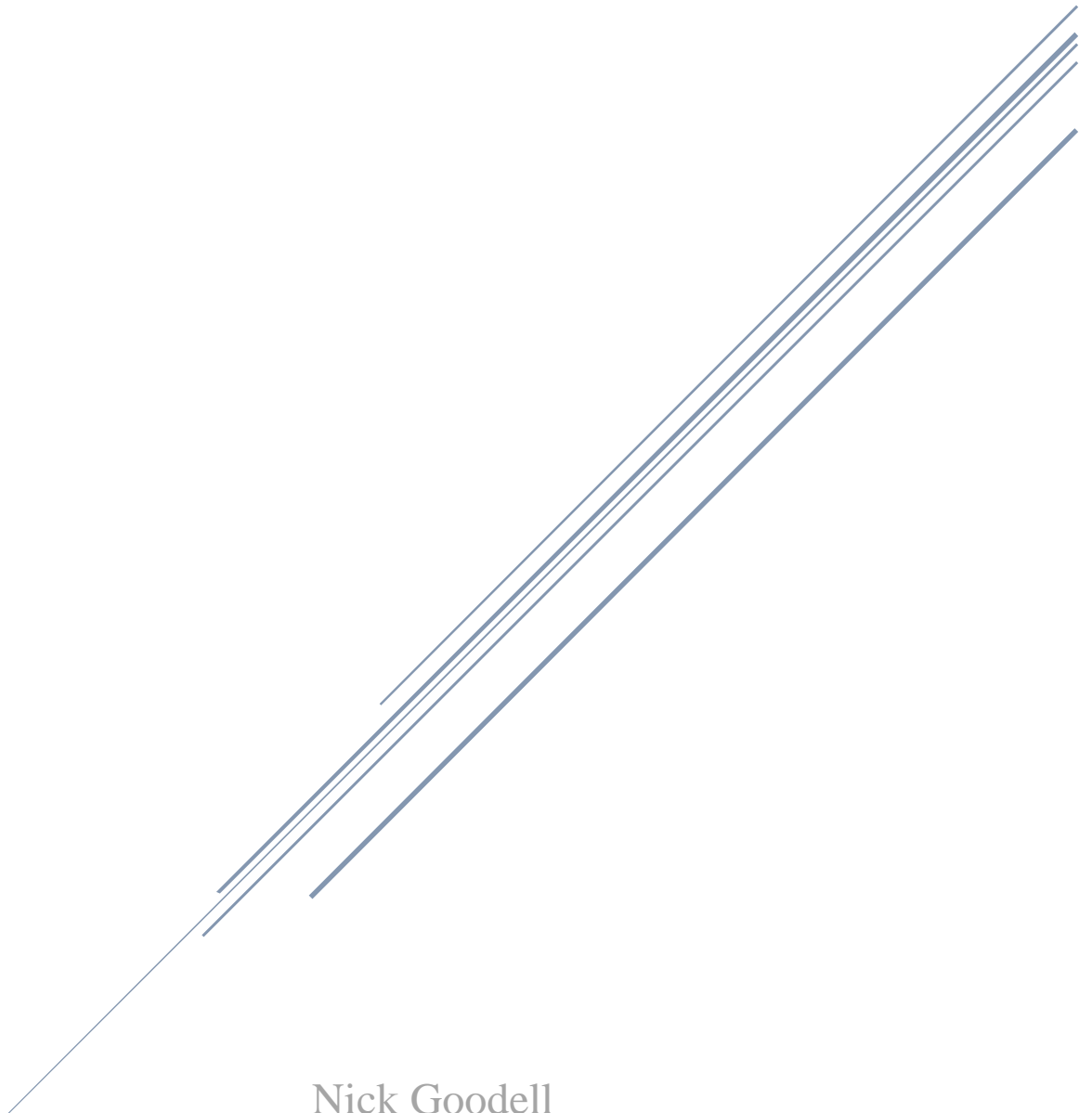


THE HOUR THEY BECAME HUMAN

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WORKING CLASS IN THE
GERMAN REVOLUTION OF NOVEMBER 1918



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Introduction

1. Prelude: A Chat with an Old Comrade at the Cemetery

It was a cold, windy, January day in Berlin. My father and I departed the U-Bahn station and walked, a long, lonely walk alongside the train tracks, past subsidized gardening plots owned by Berlin residents, not sure if we were headed in the correct direction. Then, we saw a sign—"Gedenkstätte der Sozialisten 700m"—and felt a little relieved. Perhaps the journey through the harsh wind in this less than stellar looking area of Berlin will have been worth it, we thought.

We eventually made our way to the gate to the cemetery and around the bends in the path to our destination, the Memorial of Socialists. The place was deserted. A bleak, large stone with the words "DIE TOTEN MAHNEN UNS" ("The Dead Remind Us") stood amidst some greenery, with graves wrapping around it in a circle. There lay the graves of the Germany's most famous socialists and communists: Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Ernst Thälmann, Wilhelm Pieck, Walter Ulbricht, Franz Mehring, and others. On most of these graves were many red roses, especially Rosa's, which was covered with them. In a broader, concentric circle, further out from this one—Die Ringmauer—lay more graves along a brick wall, forerunners and other famous radicals: Wilhelm Liebknecht, Hugo Hasse, Paul Singer, Luise Zeits, Carl Legien, and more. Symbols of peace, the triumph of reason, and brotherhood adorned many of the graves and tombstones, some more complex, some simple.

I explained to father who some of these people were. It was strange to be so near the embodied presence of what for many months had been only names in books and texts online that I had been rigorously studying. There lay people to whose lives I had given, and still am giving, a considerable amount of my own life researching.

As we stood there pensively, taking in the remains of German socialism, an old man, accompanied by what was probably a college age man and woman, approached the *Ringmauer* and began to go around the graves. At each, they stopped, the old man explaining in quiet German to them who they were standing over. Eventually, I worked up the courage to go and ask him what his connection to this place was, to spark up a conversation with him. If nothing else, it would be an excellent opportunity to practice German speaking skills (skills I had since coming to Berlin discovered were not so good).

Hesitantly, I asked him if he was a historian or a professor—a question I do not recall him ever really answering—for once I started speaking, I became a little nervous and did not stop, explaining to him in broken German that I was a history student researching the German Revolution of 1918 and 1919, that I was interested in the experience of the working class, that the old man keeping his distance as his son made a scene was my father, that we were from America, from Illinois, that no, we were not from Chicago....The old man patiently listened, and then explained to me in half-English, half-German, that he was here with his grandchildren touring the cemetery.

I asked if he could tell me about the people here—we were then standing over the grave of Wilhelm Liebknecht. He proceeded to describe to me and his grandchildren the symbolism of the grave, the man and woman in Roman dress, the wreath, the glorious imagery of the progress of human kind, peace, and enlightenment. Though he knew the English word “wreath,” his thick German accent caused him to pronounce it “wreet,” causing amongst us all much confusion for some time as he tried to explain the word to me by spelling it, first spelling it wrong.

The more he talked, I grew bolder. I asked him if he was from Berlin, and he said he was, gesturing that he had been born just over there in Treptower Park. I told him how fascinated I was

by the city's history between East and West, the divide, and how it was memorialized in different ways across town. The man then asked me if we had been to the DDR Museum (the East German History Museum) which we had been to just the previous day. What did I think of it, he wanted to know. Again, hesitating, I slowly explained that, while I liked the items on display and admired the research that had gone into the museum, I thought that the presentation was a little much. I pointed out how in the sets of East German apartment buildings that the windows showed only gray, cloudy skies, that they emphasized over and over again how there was not a variety of consumer goods, how they seemed to make farce out of a way of life for millions of people.

The old man smiled, held out his hands for emphasis, and said in his weak, shaky voice: "It's propaganda!" I laughed and agreed. I then apologized for taking up his time with his grandchildren, and my father and I proceeded to leave the cemetery and walk back through the plots by the railroad to the U-Bahn station, eager to warm ourselves. When we left, the old man, whom I concluded used to be a SED party member and comrade, was still there, busily indoctrinating his grandchildren and probably regaling them with stories from his past life as a comrade.

This conversation with an old comrade at the socialist cemetery remained on my mind while I continued researching and writing this project. While we might today distance ourselves from history, leaving its memorials and peoples to rot and go unvisited, the people who lived it do not have such a luxury. Its impact on their lives, their discourse on their worlds, and what they view to be possible for themselves cannot be understated. To the old comrade at the cemetery, the failed East German state was not something to be made fun of. It was the result of decades of struggle for a better world, a struggle that most of the people at that cemetery lost their lives for. To the East Germans who built the cemetery before the old comrade walked its grounds—a

cemetery rife with symbols of peace, comradeship, fraternity, and freedom—the legacy of those buried there was, similarly, no laughing matter.

A common problem that historians face is that we tend to see the whole picture, to be omniscient narrators of events, piecing them together into coherent stories full of direct connections and causalities. To people who lived the history, however, to the old man touring the socialist cemetery with his grandchildren, this was not how the world appeared. Leaving behind so many different sources for us to use, the large stone at the cemetery telling us that “The Dead Remind Us” carried a very powerful message. The dead do indeed remind us. The problem is that we, as historians, often fail to listen to them. When we do, we tend to have trouble leaving our preconceived notions of events behind, to abandon the pretensions of that the historian as a constructor of history adds *a posteriori*. It should be the task of the historian to be a good listener to the past, to limit the invasion of our own thoughts about the past into the stories that the sources tell us.

But history is not just passive listening. At times, we must wrestle with our sources, with narratives, with our preconceived ideas of how the history should flow. History is an active, engaged listening to sources. The goal is not to verbatim copy the sources for more eyes, but to interrogate and analyze them, to spark conversation between them and other sources or ideas. If I had not been active in my conversation with the old comrade at the cemetery, if I had not engaged his ideas, for instance, of socialism with the presentation of socialist East Germany in the DDR Museum, my understanding of the situation would have been much more limited.

For to him, the experience of visiting the DDR Museum was shaped by his experience of having lived in the DDR. The museum was not just whimsical, a place for tourists or a place to take his grandchildren for some fun. This public history on display at the museum was, to the old

comrade, a mockery of his personal experience in the DDR. The museum was a false reconstruction of his and countless others' experiences with socialism for the liberal propaganda machine of the ruling Social Democratic Party of Angela Merkel. It is here at experiences and their reconstruction that we begin.

2. *The Sources*

As the title of this project suggests, I will here be examining the experience of the working class in the November Revolution in Germany that occurred in 1918. The purpose of this work is to take previously unexamined voices from the working class, and, in the first, to tell their story. In part, to be a good listener to the voices from the past involves first giving them chance to speak. Often in this text, I will simply be telling the experiences and stories of the November days of Revolution in Germany through the eyes of the many working-class individuals that experienced it. The analysis, I typically leave for *after* each story is told, to make as plain as possible the distinction between what the authors of my sources wrote and experienced and what I am adding on to or suggesting about those experiences.

As sources, this text utilizes the *Erinnerungen*—literally, memories—of members of the *Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED), the ruling party of East Germany following World War II until the 1989 revolution. In the 1950s and 1960s, the SED conducted a large cultural memory project, a sort of public history exploration, asking many party members who had been active in labor struggles earlier in the 20th century to write reports on their lives and about their experiences. These *Erlebnisberichten*—experience reports—were sometimes the product of direct questioning by the government, through the Institute for Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the SED. Sometimes, the *Partei* and *Arbeiter* “veterans,” as they were called, reported of their own accord, writing in letters in response to the SED call for these early

experiences of struggle. At other points, it appears that the veterans came in to party offices to be interviewed, with stenographers and typists recording what they said. Other times still, it appears that comrades were ordered to report on their experiences by the Central Committee, based on the presence of more forceful language in the documents. While some veterans appeared to be writing official reports—*Berichten* or *Erlebnisberichten*—others wrote in to the SED in less formalized styles, suggesting less pressure to fit to party standards. This likely depended on one's own position in the party at the time, with those occupying official party posts having more expected from them in terms of their reports than those who did not have any postings or those who occupied lesser positions in the government.

These reports have varying amounts of detail, but focus on the large events of the 20th century in Germany. For many party members and communists, their reports began with their experience in the November Revolution, moving on to other experiences of the time, such as the Spartacist Week in January 1919, the March Action of 1919, the Kapp-Putsch, the civil conflict in the Ruhr Valley, other failed party actions, and more. Many of the reports then continue, detailing experiences of organizing under Ernst Thälmann and underground organizing against the Nazis after 1933. Many of these veterans had therefore truly earned their stripes by the party, having participated in the founding congress of the *Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands* (the German Communist Party) in December 1918, organizing for the revolution for decades, surviving Hitler's death camps, and coming back to participate in the new socialist government in the postwar period. My project will utilize the first parts of many of these accounts, the sections that focus on the November Revolution.

Some of the documents in the *Erinnerungen* collection were not the result of SED questioning, but were the products of earlier questionings about events. Karl Artelt, for example,

who was a working-class sailor in Kiel during the mutiny there that “sparked” the revolution in November 1918, was asked some of the following questions in 1927 about the Kiel mutiny by a parliamentary investigatory committee:

- 1.) Who was chairman or the leading member of the USPD in Kiel at the beginning of November 1918?
- 2.) Was there any misunderstanding among the crews of the navy because of the strict judgements of the Field War tribunals of 1917?
- 3.) Were there any organizations of the crews in 1918 in similar ways to how they had been organized in 1917?
- 4.) In your opinion, was there any connection between 1917 and the outbreak of the revolution in 1918?
-
- 7.) How did the revolution break out? How did you actively participate in it? What position did you hold?¹

The committee was then investigating the role of the USPD in the war, and requesting comment from thousands of participants in the revolution to determine whether the politicians really had “stabbed in the back” the German armed forces in the fall of 1918 by fomenting revolution and calling for peace. Fueled by right-wing monarchists in the parliament in the 1920s eager to incriminate the socialists responsible for the collapse of the empire, the committee searched desperately for links between the Kiel mutiny and the naval mutiny of the summer of 1917, which had been supported by the USPD. We here see a politically motivated investigation of the history of the revolution, working to undermine the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic and to do away with the socialists who were then still in power.

In other collections of party members, there are original letters, newspaper articles, and other documents that were written in the 1920s and 1930s detailing experience in the November Revolution. Searching through these collections, I acquired a broad enough source base for

¹ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/022 Artelt, Karl, p. 21.

research. To this author's knowledge, these documents have not before been used to write about the November Revolution, or the German Revolution of 1918-1923 at large.

Alongside the SED sanctioned reports, it should be noted that the 1950s and 1960s saw a larger cultural program of historical insight, in part to help legitimize the SED government. The goal was to connect it back to the legacy of the first communists and socialists in Germany, especially including those who fought against the Kaiser to establish the Weimar Republic. Though "betrayed" by the *Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands* (the German Social Democratic Party), this first revolution against monarchy and the rule of the capitalist elites was to be connected by cultural memory projects directly to the SED government, the policies of which were still "carrying on the legacy" of those struggles. The SED therefore painted itself as the inheritor of the memory of Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and many of the socialists and communists who were buried at the *Gedenkstätte der Sozialisten*—a memorial also constructed during this time and christened by Erich Honecker himself. The SED was carrying on the fight that Liebknecht and Luxemburg started, and that the SPD, then ruling over capitalist West Germany, had betrayed by playing a part in the murders in January 1919 and continuing to suppress the many communist uprisings from then until 1923. Just as the old comrade at the cemetery and his fellows of the DDR had had their experiences and memories repurposed and reconstructed for liberal propaganda in the new, united Germany of the 2000s, the DDR itself in the 1950s and 1960s repurposed the memories and experiences of those who fought for its creation in the early 20th century.

With this cultural project, there was a wave of movies, books, songs, and a flurry of newspaper articles by old party and worker veterans detailing their stories. The film *Das Lied der Matrosen*, for instance, was played in East Germany in 1958. It heroically depicted the Kiel sailor's

mutiny of November 1918, and was accompanied by a television play series a several years later, *1917 Marinemeuterei*. Cläre Casper-Derfert, a revolutionary arms smuggler and, later, the secretary of the *Vollzugsrat*, the head of the council movement in Berlin in the fall of 1918, wrote herself several articles in party newspapers about other comrades and their lives. Whenever an old party or worker “veteran” of the movement died, a large obituary would be written detailing their participation in various labor and party circles throughout their life. It was clear not only that the SED wanted to connect itself to these people’s lives, but that it wanted its citizens to memorialize them and view the revolutionary as the ideal citizen. Derfert’s own biography and *Erlebnisberichte* was published in the official SED commemorative work on the November Revolution, *Vorwärts und Nicht Vergessen* (Forward and Not Forgotten). This book compiled various *Berichten* from “active participants” in the November Revolution and directly tied these events and experiences to the then socialist government, it being their inheritor and its task being to carry on this legacy. Just as in the 1920s, this fascination by the party with the November Revolution and its desire to publish the experiences of veterans in it was a political project, though this time working to strengthen the right of the government to rule.

3. Methodology

With these sources, I will investigate the on-the-ground experience of the working class in the November Revolution. Contained in this sentence are two terms—“class” and “experience”—whose definitions and heuristics have varied broadly in historical writing. What is the “working class,” and what constitutes “experience”? How have historians used previously used these terms as categories of analysis? Some notes are here required on the nature of these two terms before we can proceed with a discussion of the historiography. A very large body of literature exists on these

terms, especially class. I will here only briefly enter into a discussion of these terms that many historians have spent entire careers researching.

Karl Marx argued that class was to be defined as the relationship for a group of people to the means of production. The working class was defined as such because it worked on and in the means of production, supplying their labor power—their work—to keep things running. In Marx's own words, it was "the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live."² Conversely, the class of capitalists were defined as such because they were related to the means of production in that they owned them. They owned the capital, and therefore were termed capitalists.

To Marx, class was a determinant of one's experience: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."³ The consciousness of people was, in part, to be driven by their class. This was how the working class was to have a different consciousness than the capitalist class, a different experience. To be in the working class meant you were a member of a consistently revolutionary class, a class that would recognize its oppression and would organize to change it. This was inevitable, given that all history was the history of class struggle.

The historian E.P. Thompson, meanwhile, famously built on the working-class experiential conception to tell the history of the English working class "from below." From the writings of the period, Thompson found real world evidence to suggest that the English working class recognized in part its own development and the raising of its consciousness in accordance with later Marxist theory. Tracing the lives of English laborers affected by the rapid industrialization of the 18th and

² Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>, 1848.

³ --*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface-abs.htm>, 1859.

early 19th centuries, he showed that class was not just a pre-set experiential determinant, but that it was something that happened to people over time—a real, lived process.⁴

The American historian Joan Scott, among others, has challenged part of this Marxist conception of working-class experience. To Scott, the trouble with the notion of class being determinant in experience is two-fold. First, the notion of class presupposes a clear subject. Group-identities came under frequent scrutiny in the 1980s and 1990s, with large group-identities of race, gender, and class being deconstructed as part of the linguistic turn, especially as historical categories. In a broad sense, Scott argued against the practice of grouping people of the past into our modern identity categories without first having established whether these categories could be accurately fitted to these historical-material conditions. Gareth Steadman Jones expressed the problem another way: “The implicit assumption is of a civil society as a field of conflicting social groups or classes whose opposing interests will find rational expression in the political arena.”⁵ We must first show that the use of the word “working class,” understood in any given sense of the term, accurately describes the situation we are writing about. Otherwise, we are presupposing a clear subject in conflict with another, clear subject, and then detailing the experiences of that initially presupposed subject. The problem with Thompson, Scott argued, was that he presupposed exactly this kind of subject, or that he presupposed the type of transformation into this kind of subject that English laborers would have.⁶

On the individual, rather than group level, this problem was worse. Part of the deconstruction of language revolved around the recognition that individual experiences were

⁴ Thompson, E.P., and Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, editors *The Houses of History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) p. 44-58.

⁵ Jones, Gareth Steadman and Patrick Joyce, Editor, “Class, Experience, and Politics,” *Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 150-154.

⁶ Scott, Joan Wallach, and Judith Butler, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), ch. 2.

always different, that this person *x* could never truly share or understand person *y*'s experiences. This was the second part, in general, of Scott's problem with the Marxist class-experience relation. How could we ever purport to have evidence about the experience of a certain class in any given historical-material conditions with the knowledge that the individual experiences of those constituting that class could never be truly compared?⁷

All this says nothing of the problems Scott also took issue with regarding the predetermined goals and experienced contained in the Marxist, working-class experience. What if evidence shows that the working class did not, in a given scenario, act in its own interest? The notion of false consciousness, or someone who does not understand what is in their best interests based on their class position, is supposed to explain away this problem. Despite these misgivings, Scott herself, as Martin Jay has pointed out, did agree that class was still a useful tool for understanding history and experience.⁸

The German language, as enumerated by Oakeshott, Steinberg, Scott, Jay, and others, has supplied us with terms that account more easily than their English equivalents do for the different kinds of experience. *Erfahrung* is experience that is driven by reflection and organization of more direct experience. This "direct experience" is the *Erlebnis*, those lived events of everyday life. Someone who describes a dramatic scene to you in person only moments after it happens—this is *Erlebnis*.⁹ The scene (typically) fresh and relatively unanalyzed, might sound very chaotic. But, as time passes, the mind will naturally organize things, as it does to dreams. The memory will become more constructed, with different elements of it emphasized besides the immediate and sensual. This is *Erfahrung*, the "terrain of the historian who tells a narratively well-integrated, expertly

⁷ Scott, Joan Wallach, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4, 1991.

⁸ Martin Jay, *The Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) Introduction.

⁹ Ibid.

structured, and directional story of the historical process.”¹⁰ *Erlebnis*, however, is still structured. Numerous entities, social-cultural and material/physical, affect the ways in which experience happens. Class, gender, space, the culture of the military or the navy in wartime Germany, the rationing of food on the Western front of the war—these structures shape the *Erlebnis*. It is in part by becoming conscious of these structures and recognizing their impact on experience that that experience becomes *Erfahrung*.

Gareth Stedman Jones has further explained the difference for historians between “consciousness” and “experience.” The two terms, though related, are not the same. Consciousness “assumes an objective and necessary process in which what is latent will be made manifest, and it provides criteria by which the adequacy of the manifestation may be judged.”¹¹ Experience, however, is more empirical, as it does not suggest a criterion for judgement or presume that something will be manifested. *Erfahrung*, then, being an experience that can be largely structured by the historian, can be related, though not necessarily so, to the construction of consciousness.

In assessing the *Erinnerungen* of party and worker veterans of the November Revolution, I will be relying more on the *Erlebnis*, the lived experiences of party workers. It is my task as a historian to construct as accurately as possible the *Erfahrung*, to determine the causes of these experiences in the revolution and to attempt to combine them into a coherent narrative. In doing so, I will be cautious not to stray from the path, to not be a poor listener to the voices of history and add too much *a posteriori* or synthetically to these experiences. Rather, I will make suggestions, with theoretical input and with input from other scholars of German history, as to how we might best interpret the *experiences* of the working class in the revolution as one, collective

¹⁰ Mark D. Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 3.

¹¹ Patrick Joyce, editor, Gareth Stedman Jones, “Class, Experience, and Politics,” *Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 150-154.

experience. By assessing what the common occurrences of the revolution were through these documents, what shared identities there were and how they played a role in how people lived and thought about their own time in the revolution, what commonalities there were in the embodied, physical, uninterpreted experiences, I hope to help craft for the reader what the experience of the working class was in November of 1918.

Doing this will entail also the use of “thick description” of the source materials. I will borrow this method from Clifford Geertz and others interested in cultural-anthropology, which analyzes texts as products of their cultures and in relation to the events that they describe, rather than treating them as isolated islands of thought.¹² In this way, a text can become relevant to other texts of the time, other experiences. We recognize here too the seemingly contradictory nature of experience: while it is individualized and driven by choice and agency, those choices, agencies, and individual possibilities are shaped by broader societal systems and societal experiences.

4. *Historiography of the Revolution and a General Narrative of Events*

To reinforce the methodology of this project, I here will give a short introduction to the historiography of the revolution. To familiarize readers with the general events of the revolution, however, I here first provide a simplified narrative of its events.

This revolution began in late October 1918 with sailors who refused to carry out what they understood to be a suicide mission to attack allied fleets. The admirals, hoping to die in glory, commanded the fleet out to sea to do battle with the British fleet, though peace talks were already under way. As a result, stokers on ships refused to fire the engines. After arrests of the mutineers saw larger protests develop to demand their freedom in Kiel on November 2nd and 3rd, soldiers under command of the admirals fired on the demonstrators. Kiel sailors formed a Workers’ and

¹² For a good example of “thick” description, see: Pratt, Mary Louise, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing And Transculturation* (London : Routledge, 1992).

Soldiers' Council, and released a list of fourteen demands, emphasizing their desire to end the war. Spread primarily by train messengers from Kiel, revolutionaries followed suit in other towns throughout Germany, organizing councils, general strikes, and refusing to show up for duty. By November 9th, the revolution had spread to Berlin.

As well as the direct pains of war, living conditions had deteriorated rapidly during it due to the rationing system and increasing strains on the German economy. Alongside the diminishing material conditions had come enhanced political repression and censorship of the press, including the arrests of labor leaders and opposition leaders. The numerous arrests of Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Richard Müller and other prominent socialists were notable examples of this political repression. These factors brought to the streets factory workers and other civilians in solidarity with the soldiers and sailors.

With pressure from the Allied governments and Wilson's fourteen points for his abdication as part of the terms of peace negotiations, as well as the developing situation in Wilhelmshaven that was spreading to neighboring towns, Wilhelm II fled into exile on November 9th. Chancellor Max von Baden prematurely announced his abdication (the official one did not come until November 28th), and assumed control of the government. Within hours, he passed off the reigns to Friedrich Ebert, a leader of the Majority SPD (the war saw the SPD split into the Independents, the USPD, and the Majority, the MSPD, in opposition to and in favor of the war respectably). Philip Scheidemann proclaimed a new, constitutional republic with a temporary SPD government on November 9th in Berlin to crowds outside the Reichstag, while only a few blocks away Liebknecht proclaimed a socialist workers state to other crowds.

Worker's and soldier's councils developed across the country during the chaos of the transition to the SPD government. A system of dual power ensued, pitting the worker's and

soldier's councils more and more against the Ebert-Scheidemann government as the Majority Social Democrats failed to deliver on promises of socialization or to deal with issues of mass unemployment and inflation. Politically, the government was split between the more conservative, MSPD and the more radical USPD. Meanwhile, Liebknecht and Luxemburg's KPD refused to participate in government with these parties, which they perceived to be the enemies of the working class.

The government used increasingly violent methods to repress unemployed soldier's and worker's movements in the cities, with "the bloodhound," Defense Minister Gustav Noske, enlisting the help of the *Freikorps*—proto-fascistic, middle-class paramilitaries—to combat the growing militancy of the workers and soldiers who were beginning to form Red Guards and Red Armies. The situation of dual power culminated in violent clashes throughout the year 1919 as Red movements were suppressed by Freikorps soldiers. This began with the crushing of a weeklong, armed uprising of the KPD in Berlin that resulted in the deaths of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. The Bavarian Socialist Republic of Kurt Eisner and the Coffee Shop Anarchists, the developing communes in the Ruhr, the struggles of Laufenberg and the Independent SPD in Hamburg, and all other areas of unrest were gradually but violently quelled as the government secured its political legitimacy with a constitutional congress that met in the spring to form the Weimar Republic. Unrest would continue in various forms until 1923, however, leading some to interpret the German Revolution as taking years to develop.

The historiography of the revolution was in the twentieth century largely politically motivated. We saw how initial interests in the revolution in the 1920s revolved around a wish to incriminate members of the USPD associated with it, in relation to the "stabbed in the back" myth. Under the Nazis, many people found to have connections to the socialist elements of the revolution

would also be imprisoned or executed at concentration camps. In the later twentieth century, the Cold War would shape the historiography, with clear demarcations between the communist East and the capitalist West.

While the SED ruled in East Germany, East German and Marxist historians initially focused much of their efforts on the “failed revolution,” the Spartacist Week of January 1919 and the other suppressed communist uprisings in the Ruhr Valley, in Bremen, in Bavaria, and in Hamburg. Sebastian Haffner’s influential work, *Failure of a Revolution* as well as Chris Harman’s *The Lost Revolution* both played to this narrative.¹³ The point of study in these kinds of texts was, as their titles suggest, to understand how the revolution “failed,” and what future Marxists could learn from this failure. With such a narrative endpoint in mind, however, these authors channeled all elements of the revolution as related to the end of the Spartacist week. All was treated in relation to telos of the revolution, its failure as epitomized by this one week in January. When East German historians were not writing about the failure of the revolution or the “lost” revolution, they were instead writing about it as the heroic progression of history, as a perfectly contiguous chain of events. This ignored largely the disruptions of continuity that the revolution brought to everyday German lives.

Some West German historians, meanwhile, treated as late as the 1960s the revolting sailors as mutineers and traitors to Germany. In the West in general, the revolution has tended to be lost as its own event, fitting instead into the rise of the Nazis narrative, the end of World War I narrative, the Treaty of Versailles narrative, or the broader context of international labor unrest after the war. Richard M. Watt’s *The Kings Depart* is an example of this, putting the German

¹³ Haffner, Sebastian, *Failure of a Revolution* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986).

Harman, Chris, *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918 to 1923* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2003).

Revolution alongside other postwar events as the Hungarian Soviet Socialist Republic, the civil war that established Poland, and the Russian Revolution—all with Western European diplomats scrambling to control the situation. The revolution was repeatedly given a retrospective telos.¹⁴

In both East and West, there was a trend also of sociological analysis of the revolution. This took in the East a hard social science approach, with an emphasis on effects of different levels of the council systems and the different elements of German society. To this, Peter von Oertzen and Eberhard Kolb are credited with introducing a consideration of the effects of the council movement on the revolution. A turn to the more objective scientific elements—statistical analysis and empirical studies of the hard facts of the revolution—can here be read a turn away from the heavily politicized accounts of the revolution that appeared earlier in the context of the Cold War.¹⁵

In the West, this was seen in works that emphasized the cultural impact of the SPD and the prewar labor movement in Germany on the revolution. Vernon Lidtke's *The Alternative Culture* is a prominent example of this.¹⁶ Also in this vein were Wolfgang Mommsen's studies of the revolution, which emphasized the protest culture that developed as a product of previous wartime

¹⁴ Watt, Richard M. *The Kings Depart, The Tragedy of Germany: Versailles and the German Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.).

¹⁵ Oertzen, Peter von, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution. Eine politikwissenschaftliche Untersuchung über Ideengehalt und Struktur der betrieblichen und wirtschaftlichen Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Revolution 1918/19* (Düsseldorf, 1963).

Feldman, Gerald D., Eberhard Kolb, and Reinhard Rürup, "Die Massenbewegungen Der Arbeiterschaft in Deutschland Am Ende Des Ersten Weltkrieges (1917 - 1920)," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 13, no. 1 (1972): 84-105.
<http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/stable/24195767>.

Kolb, Eberhard, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik. 1918-1919*, Thesis at the University of Goettingen 1959 (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Vienna: Ullstein Verlag, 1978).

See also for a discussion of the historiography:

Rürup, Reinhard, "Problems of the German Revolution 1918-19," *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 4 (1968): 109-35. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/stable/259854>.

and the introduction to:

Weinhauer, Klaus, Anthony McElligott, Kristen Heinsohn, editors, *Germany 1916-1923: A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015).

¹⁶ Lidtke, Vernon L, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

protests.¹⁷ Western historians also utilized a more liberal conception of society, adopting functionalist approaches, with works like Eric Waldman's on the Spartacist Week, *A Study of the Relation of Political Theory and Party Practice*, which conceptualized the discontinuities between the communist party theories and practices in their interactions with the public.¹⁸ Other Western historians tended to emphasize studies of politicians and political parties.

Since reunification and the end of the cold war, as McElligott and Weinbauer have pointed out, there has still not been much of a break into the field of the German Revolution as its own study. This is particularly the case with cultural-social studies of the revolution, which are still basically non-existent. Only very recently have historians like those whose essays are in McElligott and Weinbauer's compilation begun to break into this field to offer studies that are not top-down and empirical, lacking theoretical input.¹⁹

My study, then, aims to continue to break ground in the path of cultural-social analysis for the German Revolution. I will not be approaching the revolution through the surrogated institutions of members of the working class such as the councils, party politics, top-down studies of leaders, nor will I be folding the revolution into larger narratives of German and European history. Rather, I will be exploring the *Erinnerungen* to treat the German Revolution as its own event and to get at the experiences of workers in the revolution "from below" and "from within." I will be examining, with a focus on the revolutionary days of November 1918, some of the lived experiences of the

¹⁷ Mommsen, Wolfgang J., "Die Deutsche Revolution 1918-1920. Politische Revolution Und Soziale Protestbewegung," *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft* 4, no. 3 (1978): 362-91.

¹⁸ Waldman, Eric. *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919 and the Crisis of the German Socialist Movement: A Study of the Relation of Political Theory and Party Practice* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1958).

Like this work was in style and scope was:

Wheeler, Robert F., *USPD und Internatioale: Sozialistischer Internationalismus in der Zeit der Revolution* (Frankfurt:: Ullstein GMBH, 1975).

¹⁹ Weinbauer, Klaus, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn, *Germany: 1916-1923, A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015).

millions of average members of the working class who helped to make the revolution possible in the first, those who helped to build the revolution into a mass movement.

In the first chapter, I will study weapons in the November Revolution. How were they used (and obtained for use) in the revolution? What did it mean for different groups of people when they either picked up or threw down their weapons in the name of the revolution? What was the working-class experience with weapons in the days of November?

The second and third chapters will analyze the experiences of soldiers and sailors in the revolution. What was the moment of revolutionary action to them—what did the revolution mean? What were they fighting for, and in what spaces and types of organizations did they do so? How did their identities as soldiers and sailors become reflected in their actions in the revolution?

The final chapter will assess the experience of women in the revolution. Did they organize in the same ways as men did, or were they involved in the same kinds of actions? What spheres were women more or less likely to be active in in the revolution? How did gender conceptions and the identities of women as such shape their experiences in the revolution?

In the conclusion, I will then tie together these different experiences. How did identity determine revolutionary outcomes for different groups? What did the revolution mean to these groups, and how did they organize to achieve their goals? What, broadly speaking, was the experience of the working class in the November Revolution of 1918?

Chapter One: Weapons in the November Revolution

1. Introduction

This chapter will explore networks of arms smuggling in the revolution, as well as the experiences of former sailors and soldiers with weapons. The first section will offer some background to the lives of those who consciously and directly smuggled weapons for what they perceived to be the armed struggle of the coming revolution. The process of worker radicalization—from ballot box to the gun—is traced and explained. The second section will explore these experiences of weapons smuggling and the use of weapons in the early days of the revolution in Berlin in detail, relying on accounts mostly from KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands—the German Communist Party) activists. The third section will examine the usage and rejection of weapons as defining the revolution. I conclude with some remarks on the silence on weapons and their use in the revolution's historiography.

2. The Failure of German Democratic Politics and the Background to the Armed Struggle

In order to understand why so many workers felt that armed struggle would be necessary to topple the rule of the Kaiser, we must first understand the earlier efforts to change Wilhelmine society just before and during the first world war. This section traces the radicalization of workers during this time. By radicalization, I mean the process by which workers came to favor ideas of militant organizing and the violent smashing of the state.

There is a rich literature on the efforts of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or the SPD (The Social Democratic Party of Germany) to pave the path to socialism through reform and victory at the polls. Historians and sociologists have traced and researched rigorously the clubs, choirs, beer halls, party offices, women's organizations, and youth movements that

comprised the strong SPD culture (or counter-culture) amongst the working class before WWI.²⁰ Discussion was especially framed by the ideas of German sociologist Guenther Roth around understandings of the SPD as either challenging to or reinforcing of the Wilhelmine order.²¹

Though it might remain to be settled what the effects of the SPD was for the overall working class movement, it is, however, no mystery that workers faced daily immense repression and societal control from the institutions of the Kaiserreich. In taking even a cursory glance at this literature, one quickly begins see why ideas of armed struggle as the path the revolution must take had spread to much of the working class by November of 1918. Again and again the working class elected the SPD to the Reichstag, the German parliament, until by 1912 they were finally the largest party in it. However, the Reichstag had no real political power, and, like the *Duma*, granted to Russians as a concession of the Tsar in the 1906 October Manifesto, the Reichstag could essentially only make policy suggestions or pass non-binding resolutions. The Kaiser had the full power to appoint his own ministers and officials, who were the real authority and power behind the government. Not only was taking to the polls ineffective even if it resulted in actual parliamentary victory as it did in 1912, but only certain portions of the people could go to the polls. Suffrage was limited by province, with Prussia, for instance, instituting a three-tiered electorate system that resulted in the rich elites having many times the amount of voting power that they should have. Elsewhere, certain property restrictions or class restrictions were in effect, limiting the electorate to the every wealthy or increasing their voting power many-fold over that of the working class. Importantly, women also did not have the right to vote anywhere in Germany, with

²⁰ As one example, see: Lidtke, Vernon L, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

For a summation of some of this literature, see the introduction to: Evans, Richard J., Editor, *The German Working-Class, 1888-1933: The Politics of Everyday Life*, (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1982).

²¹ Roth, Guenter, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany: A Study in Working-Class Isolation and National Integration* (Totowa, New Jersey: The Bedminster Press, 1963).

their suffrage being one of the few concrete gains brought by the initial gaining of power of the SPD after the November Revolution.

If German constitutional democracy was in reality a farce, the repression and control of life wrought by the government and the powerful economic elites of the country was no laughing matter. Conscription was mandatory for all able-bodied men, pressing into service and making life long enemies of the *verhasst Preußischen Militarismus* (hated Prussian militarism) out of many workers who could be found stripping the epaulets and weapons of soldiers in the streets in the scenes described by Kessler above. As Karl Baier, one such worker-revolutionary, remembered of his time in the *Kriegsmarine* as an artillery worker: “This military service with its drill and *Kadavergehorsam*²² pushed me to the side of the antimilitarists and opponents of the war.”²³

Outside of military service, the life of a member of the working class was one faced with rigid social control and hard work. One of the foremost researchers of German, working-class autobiographies from the time period, Alfred Kelly, wrote that: “To the unskilled in particular, work still meant what it always had—exhausting drudgery.”²⁴ Based on the 1907 census, infants had a mortality rate of 41.4%, and only about 5-10% of the working class was above fifty years of age.²⁵ To be one of the millions of industrial wage laborers in Germany was to live a life full of daily struggles for survival, and to face the daily measures of oppression and control from the police, the factory managers, propaganda, and the conservative morals pushed down onto the working class from above.

²² This word does not translate well directly into English, but is meant to convey the sense of mindlessness and numbness that taking repeated orders and the military life entailed. The literal translation is “cadaver obedience.”

²³ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0027, Baier, Karl, p. 2.

²⁴ Kelly, Alfred, editor. *The German Worker: Working-Class Autobiographies from the Age of Industrialization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) p. 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18 and 21.

It was not enough to have difficult lives, however. For social movements to develop, these issues needed to be cognized as grievances—social problems with causes and possible solutions. Several channels of organizing for workers were presented, from informal modes to trade unions to the SPD and, later, the radical groups like the Shop Stewards and the Spartacists. Radicalization happened in all of these channels, shaped by their particulars.

Among trade unions, the radicalization of workers was especially prevalent in the metal working industry. Dick Geary has shown how metal workers were the most consistently radical, militant section of the working class in the revolution, alongside the youth and sailors.²⁶ The radical, militant sects of the trade unions, especially those metal workers under the leadership of Richard Müller in the *Deutsche Metalarbeiter Verband* (DMV), grew in large proportions before the November revolution. A workforce increasingly prone to strikes and direct, economic, material action had manifested by 1916 due in large part to the food rationing system of the war.²⁷ Craig D. Patton has also traced the growth of worker militancy in the chemical industries, showing how changing working conditions and the failure of welfare capitalism led to the radicalization of workers there.²⁸ As Eric D. Weitz put it: “The learning experience for many workers during the war was that in times of trouble they had to rely on their own collective activism to force improvements in their conditions—a lesson that drew on more sporadic actions before World War I and on the socialist idealization of labor.” In short, the trade union movement before and during the war, with 2,548,763 members in 1913, was one common path towards radicalization for workers.²⁹

²⁶ Geary, Dick, and Richard J. Evans, editor, “Radicalism and the Worker: Metalworkers and Revolution 1914-23,” (Surrey: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978) p. 267-286.

²⁷ Hoffrogge, Ralf, and Radhika Desai, *Working class politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, The Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and the Origins of the Council Movement* (Leiden : Brill, 2014).

²⁸ Patton, Craig D., *Flammable Material: German Chemical Workers in War, Revolution, and Inflation 1914-1924* (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1998).

²⁹ Eric Waldman, *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1958), p. 6.

In the political parties, the SPD remained dominant. Until the outbreak of the war split the party, a prominent minority on the far left of the party, championed by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, battled against the ideas of reformism touted by Leonard Bernstein and the party leader, Karl Kautsky. I described earlier how the SPD failed to make change electorally for workers. However, with their large party base and influence, particularly through their newspapers like *Vorwärts*, they still introduced millions of workers to ideas of socialism, paving the path for further radicalization to the left. In 1913, the SPD had some 982,850 members, and many more at least read the party newspapers or discussed party ideas of socialism.³⁰

Workers who would be driven by hatred of Prussian militarism into the peace movement and the culture of mass protest during the war in Berlin would also experience immense repression, contributing to their radicalization. This radicalization through the cultural channels of the peace movement is demonstrated by the simple, brutal recollections offered by Anna Erfurt, one such worker-protester who became later a KPD activist during the revolution:

In 1914 – after the outbreak of the war – my husband and I joined the peace movement, along with others in the union house at Salsufer; Comrade Toost spoke. The police charged with sabers. There were wounded....In January or February 1914 we put on a great demonstration at the Schloß [the palace of Berlin]. We went down tightly and broke through the chains of protection, even though the police were attacking us with sabers. We then came close to the castle. We were beaten back at the Lustgarten, but we made a strong presence. At our starting point we met with each other; two of us were missing, having been wounded.³¹

At the Women's Day demonstrations in front of the Reichstag in 1915, organized by the SPD, Anna again saw the brutality of police actions when they sprang into the crowd in chase of one of the speakers and arrested many women in the process. The charging with sabers by the police of peaceful crowds was no uncommon sight during the war, and hundreds of demonstrators were killed or wounded by them throughout this period. When they were not faced with violent

³⁰ Waldman, p. 6.

³¹ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0198, Erfurt, Anna, p. 3-4.

repression, demonstrators or even those mulling about in the crowds could be arrested en masse or levied with fines. That such oppression would remain even as the material conditions worsened drastically by the last years of the war certainly added to the sense that the state was enacting violence upon its own people, and that violence was necessary as an act of working-class self-defense.

As Tarrow, Tilly, and other sociologists of social movements have noted, such a change in the repertoires of contention to violent or armed action can also be thought of as a change in tactics, an escalation after more democratic procedures like peaceful rallies or gatherings have failed to bring about change.³² Reading the descriptions of other peace demonstrations in Berlin during the war and how massive they were, we can see how workers would lose hope when even these kinds of demonstrations failed to successfully force the government to give in to their demands. See the description of one such peace demonstration of some 10,000 participants on November 30th, 1915, which Walter Beling, a metal worker, offered:

But this demonstration on November 30, 1915, was different. I stood at the intersection of Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden [central Berlin thoroughfares] and saw the demonstration marching in from the Lustgarten, but not four rows as before, but across the whole width of the street Unter den Linden - an outrageous sight of concentrated power. Nor were they singing [as at other demonstrations], but silent - a silence interrupted only occasionally by the cry of "Bread, Peace!" which acted like a rumbling thunder. All this was so overwhelming that I had to force myself to remember that it was a force maturing here that would soon demand more than bread and peace.³³

As Beling pointed out, it was difficult to ignore the power of such demonstrations, and even he, a devout revolutionary already by 1915, felt that these demonstrations would succeed. He had to force himself to remember that, in accordance with revolutionary doctrine, these demonstrators would soon be demanding more.

³² Tarrow, Sidney, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 2.

³³ Bundesarchiv at Berlin Lichterfelde: SgY 30/1942, Beling, Walter, p. 8.

There is much more to be said about the protest culture that emerged in the war than we here have time to dissect.³⁴ It is not hard to see how, however, with such repression against peaceful demonstrations by the police, many in the working class came to believe that only armed revolution could break such a state and pave the path for socialism and reform. We must also consider that, for those activists like Erfurt, who were constantly in party newspapers reading about how the state needed to be smashed with force, such police repression must have been a confirmation of Shop Steward and Spartacist revolutionary theory. Beling remembered reading leaflets from the Spartacists (the far-left revolutionaries under the leadership of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg), that were passed in the factories “from hand to hand” and called for a complete end to the monarchy, which, most of the workers and sailors he encountered agreed, “with its hated militarism and soldier drudgery [Soldatenschinderei] had to disappear.”³⁵

In these leaflets, workers would have read into Luxemburg’s theories of opposition to the war. The point was not to stop the war and revert back to 1914 so as to have a new opportunity to evolve into socialism, as the Bernsteinists wished for. Rather, the goal was to end the war and struggle forward for socialism: “Proletarian policy knows no retreat; it can only struggle forward....The proletariat does not lack for postulates, prognoses, slogans; it lacks deeds.”³⁶ Some workers radicalized during this period therefore began to draw distinction between the politics of the pro-war SPD and other socialist groups, based on their readings of such pamphlets.

Though men dominated radical political circles, women also had reason to radicalize before the revolution. Though party politics proved repressive due to their hierarchal structures resulting

³⁴ For a study of the protest culture that developed during the war in Berlin, see: Davis, Belinda J., *Homefires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday life in World War I Berlin*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³⁵ Beling, p. 9.

³⁶ Rosa Luxemburg, *Junius Pamphlet* (1915), accessed at www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/index.htm.

in entrenched patriarchal leadership, the Women's Days, participation in peace movement during the war, and the hardships of maintaining standards of home living for families due to the war rationing led many to question the Wilhelmine order. Women were also involved in trade unions and formed a strong minority of the industrial proletariat, providing some of them the same channels for radicalization as men. According to the 1907 census, about 18.2% of the industrial workforce were women, meaning that about 1.56 million were working alongside men in the factories.³⁷ As far left women in the SPD frequently under attack from their misogynist male party counterparts, Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin also served as a strong influences for other women to become involved and embrace radical contentious politics. Anna Erfurt proudly recalled her father's reaction when she brought home a leaflet by Clara Zetkin in 1914: "that especially pleased my father, he said: "this you can do more often."³⁸

We have arrived now at some useful explanations for why workers smuggled arms in the revolution. Before and during the war, people saw how their votes could not enact reform—even when their party won the majority of seats, as it did in 1912. Immense repression at all levels of society and the struggle for survival on meager earnings and amid economic turmoil was coupled with the merciless crushing of any demonstrations or attempts at organization by workers, especially during the war period. Workers saw the futility of the ballot and the willingness of the state to take up violence against its subjects to maintain the status quo of their own misery. With these experiences, many felt by 1918 that they should take up violence to protect themselves, and also because no other tool for the contention to the state policies had been effective. With this repression and these struggles were working-class organizations like the SPD, the Spartacists, the trade unions, and the Shop Stewards, ready to translate them into grievances and radical demands

³⁷ Kelly, p. 15 and 21.

³⁸ Erfurt, p. 2.

for socialism through the smashing of the state. Towards the end of the war, many were willing and ready to perform through weapons smuggling some of the “deeds” that Luxemburg had argued were so lacking.³⁹

3. *Weapons Smuggling in the Revolution*

Before the outbreak of the revolution in November of 1918, workers had good reason to feel that procuring weapons was a necessary part of the path to social change that they were pursuing. In this section, we will trace the experiences that working-class organizers had smuggling weapons before the revolution.

To smuggle weapons in the oppressive state of Wilhelmine Germany was no easy affair. Complicated networks were built in the factories, neighborhoods, and across the city of Berlin that each depended on people with different types of opportunities afforded by their work, their connections to others, the spaces that they had available to hide weapons, and more. If any one of these parts of the networks were to be found out, a whole ring of organizers were put at risk of arrest and beatings by the political police. Regardless of the danger, however, the organizers continued to grow in number and in determination throughout the war, spurred on especially in the year 1918, which started with a largely successful munitions strike that saw working-class organization grow significantly.⁴⁰

By that summer, networks to secure weapons for the coming final struggle against the Kaiserreich were being built all over the city. Carl Keuschner, a worker at the Daimlerwerkes, a metalworking factory, took part in secret meetings to arrange weapons smuggling with other

³⁹ Luxemburg, Rosa, *Junius Pamphlet* (1915), accessed at www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/index.htm.

⁴⁰ Recently, historians have begun to pay more attention to this strike as linked to the revolution and the broader social unrest from WWI-1923. See Broué, Pierre, *The German Revolution: 1917-1923* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), and Harman, Chris, *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918 to 1923* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2003).

members of the *Revolutionäre Obleute* (the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, a group of far-left labor union workers under the leadership of Richard Müller, here abbreviated as RO). As members of the RO, Keuschner and his comrades believed early on that weapons were necessary for the success of the revolution. For secrecy, these meetings sometimes had to take place in the *Mannschaftstoilette* (bathrooms) of the factory. In them, it was determined who specifically had space to hide weapons, how to get copies of keys, sketches of the locations, how they planned to get weapons there from across the city, and how safe that they thought these spaces were from police activity. This information was compiled into written reports and filed away. The council leadership would then read these reports to later disseminate orders about weapons smuggling.⁴¹

Despite the organization and secrecy, it was sometimes not enough for working-class weapons-smuggling rings to avoid police detection. During one such meeting in a union club⁴² that Keuschner attended, he noted that, after a discussion of general business matters:

Suddenly the door from the taproom to the club room was pushed open, and eight policemen marched into the conference room and forbade the continuation of the debate. The attendees now had to provide information about their person and their job. Then everyone had to show his ID card of the Daimlerwerkes, the number of which number was noted, and go back home.⁴³

The state's power to shut down untolerated forms of organizing was demonstrated clearly in this episode. At any moment in these underground rings, the door could be broken open by the state, with information about its subjects to be taken down and used for their control.

Having been added to the police watch lists and having their meeting disrupted in such an intimidating fashion, the workers nevertheless continued to organize at the Daimlerwerkes and with workers from neighboring factories. The chair of these meetings, one Walter Skorzewski,

⁴¹ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0464, Keuschner, Karl, p. 1.

⁴² In comparative labor history, meeting space in the factory was limited. Workers commonly met in places like bathrooms or other such unsavory locations where they could monitor the comings and goings of foremen. What Keuschner refers to here as the "club" could be a joke about this choice of the bathroom for meetings.

⁴³ Keuschner, p. 2.

eventually organized a very successful weapons smuggling network in the final months leading up to November 9th, 1918. Several of the workers at the factory had leased plots in Neukölln for gardening vegetables and other hard to come by ingredients during the war. On these plots were small storage units and summer cottages. Being often empty during the fall and winter, they became ideal spaces for hiding weapons. The work was done cautiously and with extreme care. One Stefan Kutonioz, a well-trusted lathe operator at the factory, was the first to test the plots as storage for the smuggled arms, using his own shed. In using his own plot, Kutonioz was to be exceedingly careful of the plot neighbors, who might be on the lookout for weapons smugglers. The detailed description offered by Keuschner in the following passage displays the complicated procedure of smuggling weapons across the city:

In order to carry out the transport of the weapons from their storage place in the east of Berlin to the parcel of the lathe operator Kutonioz on the fairway as inconspicuously as possible, the boxes were loaded on a single-horse farm cart, which a friendly carter owner gave for transport. Then the coachman drove the car to the yard of a cowshed owner, who often sold manure to the allotments, and was given a load of long-straw manure that completely covered the boxes. At lunchtime on a murky September day, it went to the parcel on Dammweg, where there were already a few workers of the Daimler factory waiting who worked in the evening shift. Upon the arrival of the wagon, they threw the fertilizer from the cases over the fence of the plot. At this time of day the area was almost deserted, so no one noticed that at the end some shabby-looking wooden boxes were being carried into the tool shed of the cottage.⁴⁴

Keuschner's experience organizing with the RO highlights some of the difficulties and creativity involved in weapons smuggling on the eve of the revolution. Police raids like the one Keuschner described were a common occurrence, but, in the case of his group of organizers, it appears to have made them more cognizant of security risks and to have forced them to find new tactics. The result of the police run-in was the added attention paid to covering up the cases of smuggled weapons and munitions with manure, and with first testing the plots by storing them at the cottage of the closely trusted comrade Kutonioz. As Keuschner also noted, the operation was

⁴⁴ Keuschner, p. 3.

done “as inconspicuously as possible,” and it was a victory that no one noticed the “shabby-looking wooden-boxes” being carried into the toolshed.⁴⁵

What is also notable about Keuschner’s experience is that we see just how well-systematized, working-class organizations could be. Networks involving multiple handoffs of goods, persons, keys to storage areas, as well as numerous individuals all performing complicated and intricate tasks like the one Keuschner detailed were not built easily. That such networks existed and united, as we saw, industrial factory workers as well as cart drivers, cowshed owners, and evening shift workers—people who otherwise might have no common goal or might never have met—demonstrates the power that the idea of revolution must have had over workers in Berlin. These kinds of weak ties amongst heterogenous individuals and groups are emphasized by Sidney Tarrow as being critical in the developments of successful national social movements.⁴⁶ That people were willing to risk arrest, losing favor with their employers, losing their jobs, or being blacklisted by employers from certain kinds of work also demonstrates the passion that working-class people in Berlin felt for what they were doing. The majority of workers did not participate in such networks of arms smuggling, but, the radical, militant minority that did aid us in our search to understand the working-class experience in the revolution. Stories like Keuschner’s are critical to this effect. And, though most workers did not participate in smuggling operations, many gladly accepted the weapons that had been procured for them when the revolution came, as the next story shows.

Examining the experience of Cläre Casper-Derfert, a twenty-four-year-old metal worker at the time of the revolution, reveals more about the difficulties and dangers of arms smuggling. Having participated in the munitions strike in January of 1918 and risen to the strike committee

⁴⁵ Keuschner, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Tarrow, p. 69.

leadership, she made connections with revolutionary circles. Like other workers, her experiences in the munitions strike and other demonstrations, which were all met with harsh police brutality and repression, had convinced her of the need for more direct, and, in the interest of self-defense of the working class, violent action.⁴⁷

Using her connections to the revolutionary movement made in January, Derfert spent that summer organizing shipments of weapons to be hidden in her flat in Charlottenburg. “With each successful delivery,” she wrote, “we rejoiced as the eagerly awaited revolution came a little closer.” Her arms smuggling operation was so successful that, by November 1st, 1918, there were nearly 400 pistols and 20,000 rounds of ammunition lying in boxes in her flat. By this time, her neighbors had grown suspicious of all the heavy packages that were constantly going in and out, and she was subpoenaed to appear before the political police for investigation on November 1st. Her comrades, Arthur Schöttler and Fritz Schwerdfeger, drove a wagon up to her flat and quickly helped stuff it full of the pistols and ammunition: “Now the two had so many “wares” on their cart, but they didn’t know what to do with them.” Uncertain, and with still more weapons to hide, they loaded yet another cart full of weapons and pushed them both into the nearby coach house, waiting for instructions on where to take them the next day.⁴⁸

With her apartment “clean,” Casper-Derfert reported to the leader of her illegal organization, UPSD and RO leader Emil Barth, to tell him all.⁴⁹ Then, she went in for interrogation. “It was my first police interrogation,” she wrote, “and my heart was pounding in my chest.” The police read from a document that claimed that she had many boxes of dynamite stored

⁴⁷ Wolfgang Emmerich, editor, *Proletarische Lebensläufe: Autobiographische Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zweiten Kultur in Deutschland*, Cläre Casper-Derfert, „Steh Auf, Arthur, heute ist Revoluton!“ Originally published Berlin, 1918, (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1975) p. 176.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176-177.

⁴⁹ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0148 Derfert, Cläre Casper, p. 34.

in her apartment. Casper-Derfert claimed never to have worked in a munitions factory, and so did not know how she could have ever acquired such arms. Keeping her cool, he responded to the detective further, asking “what I, a young girl, would possibly have to do with such dangerous things!” She claimed that the boxes in her apartment were full of apples, which she had ordered from abroad and was selling for profit (which would have been easy to do under the harsh food rations in place in war-time Germany). The detectives believed her, and even showed her the document that they had accused her of having a connection to.⁵⁰

The next few days, Casper-Derfert and her comrades Arthur and Fritz carefully avoided each other and the Charlottenburg flat, lest they were still being followed by the police. In the night of November 8th and 9th, Casper-Derfert and Arthur went to the Charlottenburg munitions factory and quietly distributed the arms and ammo amongst the workers. They helped plan demonstrations and organized with other comrades that night. Early on the morning of November 9th, Casper-Derfert recalled waking up Arthur with the words: “Wake up, Arthur, today is revolution!” The two were out of the house less than ten minutes later.⁵¹

They spent the day distributing pamphlets that called for workers to walk off the job at the munitions factory before meeting some comrades at a bar. There, it was discovered that they were short of ammunition, which Casper-Derfert believed to be a consequence of the hurried clearing out of her apartment on November 1st. She and Arthur drove to get more, talking and threatening their way at gun point to acquire some 6,000 more cartridges of ammunition for their smuggled pistols. Reuniting with other comrades to finish loading the pistols, they then were met by crowds of workers who had started to walk off the job. “Calm and composed,” they then helped organize the demonstration: “First the armed men, then the unarmed, then the women.” The crowd

⁵⁰ Emmerich, p. 176-177

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 177.

proceeded along Kaiserin-Augusta-Allee In West Berlin to the Reichstag, joining other crowds. They met no resistance. The same day, she noted, crowds had taken over key buildings without a shot being fired. When she reached the Reichstag with the crowds, she greeted her comrades and found Arthur again (they had been separated at the start of the demonstration). She was incredibly relieved. Months of planning had culminated in this moment: “I was at the end of my power, and I sat on the steps of the Reichstag until long after the crowds dispersed, driving myself home later that night.”⁵²



Source: Cläre Casper-Derfert, “Steh auf, Arthur, heute ist Revolution!” *Vorwärts und nicht vergessen. Erlebnisberichte aktiver Teilnehmer der Novemberrevolution 1918/19*, Commissioned by the Institute for Marxism-Leninism by the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1958) p. 292.

⁵² Ibid., p. 179.

What Derfert's story highlights more than Keuschner's is the personal stress associated with smuggling weapons, as well as the sporadic nature of its results. She had spent months smuggling, endured police interrogation, and survived invasive police searches of her apartment. On the day of the revolution, she was up early in the morning to go leaflet with her comrades, after having been up most of the night before distributing weapons in the factories. At the last moment, she had to dash across town to procure more ammunition, basically at gun point. Next, she helped organize and participated in the long march from Charlottenburg to central Berlin. We can understand, therefore, why she collapsed with emotion—"at the end of my power"—in front of the Reichstag, unable to move. That the weapons she and her comrades had gathered did not turn out to be necessary must have only added to the emotional release of the moment. Derfert's story, then, as well as giving us another insight into arms smuggling rings, also provides us with a better understanding of the basic human experiences and emotions of the revolution.

Derfert's actions were by no means extraordinary amongst women in radical revolutionary circles. While men dominated party structures, as they would the workers' and soldiers' councils, less formal organizing saw women like Derfert more often in positions of direct and dangerous revolutionary action.

Outside of party politics and underground organizing, however, the broad-patriarchal culture of German society played a decisive role in determining how women should contribute to the revolution. We see this complexity of gender in Derfert's account. Notice how she observed, for instance, that women were at the back of the demonstration on November 9th, behind even the unarmed. They were viewed, even by Derfert, to be more defenseless than their unarmed male counterparts, so much so that they were fitted into another grouping in the rear of the crowd. They were able to be participants, but they were not to hold arms or to be leading the revolution. Did

Derfert recognize how most women, unlike her, were deemed unable to hold and use arms? If she had smuggled weapons with the aim of arming the revolution, which revolutionaries had the privilege of using these weapons—which were in limited supply—was something beyond her control.

Derfert was clearly also using ideas of gender in her favor during her interrogation. Referring to the accusation that she had hundreds of cases of smuggled weapons in her apartment, she asked, cynically, “...what I, a young girl, would possibly have to do with such dangerous things!”⁵³ She was conscious of the police perception of women as non-violent and not prone to revolutionary action, and this notion she played to her advantage. She performed to her expected gender roles to escape arrest and succeed at her goals. Her consciousness of gender is further evidenced by her statement about her participation in the leadership of the munitions strike in January: “It was a particular pride of mine that I was the only woman who worked on the committee.”⁵⁴

As in Keuschner’s case, networks of organizers are visible. Those in Derfert’s network were fellow comrades and organizers she had known since the January 1918 munitions strike and earlier. Her prior involvement in the munitions plants gave her the connections required with workers to smuggle weapons from these factories to her apartment. She stated that Emil Barth, one of the leaders of the UPSD, the RO, and one of the six people elected to the Council of People’s Deputies in the wake of the revolution—a key revolutionary figure—organized weapons smuggling from his comrades in Suhl.⁵⁵ This certainly suggests that, as in Keuschner’s case, the network had some structure. Further evidence of this is given by how Derfert, before her interview,

⁵³ Emmerich, p. 177.

⁵⁴ Emmerich, p. 175.

⁵⁵ Derfert, p. 34.

reported to her leader on the situation, and how she consistently had clear, designated meetings points, objectives, and orders to be carried out.

Derfert's account stresses too the immense weight that these organizers attached to the importance in the revolution of the weapons they smuggled. Derfert was willing to lie to police interrogators, to hand out weapons to the masses of untrained factory workers, many of whom were likely strangers with whom she would have had no previous amount of trust established. She was willing to dash across town on the morning of the revolution to secure more ammo for the guns and to threaten at gunpoint the munitions source, someone who was also clearly in the network themselves. She risked so much and undertook the operation of smuggling because she deeply believed that weapons were necessary for a successful revolution.

With the story of Derfert we also see notions of extraordinary and ordinary life coming into play. Her actions were extraordinary, yes. Arms smuggling was not standard task of anyone in the revolution. Yet, she was of ordinary background. At the age of seven, she began working as a maid in the homes of those who were better off than her. At the age of sixteen, she went to the factories. She struggled to carve out a living all her life. It was only by chance that she was brought into political leadership and organization at all. At a rally in 1917 put on by working-class organizations in support of the Russian Revolutionaries, she was asked to speak by her colleagues when no one volunteered. "Cläre, do it!" they said. By her own account, she did not hesitate to speak, even though she had no experience doing so. She spoke about the conditions of workers in the factories, with rising costs of living and the food rationing system taking an ever higher toll. Closing, she proclaimed: "Let us join our Russian brothers to end the war! The sun is rising in the East!" Galvanized by the Russian struggle for freedom, she became politicized in that moment. Though her actions in smuggling arms may have been extraordinary, there was nothing out of the ordinary

about her, amongst the millions of active, working-class people in the revolution, fighting for the rising sun.⁵⁶

The experience of Lucie Heimbürger, a twenty-one year old leader of the SPD youth movement at the time of the revolution, also gives insight into the operations of weapons smugglers. At the time of the revolution, her band of comrades had been heavily armed. They had rifles, grenades, revolvers, and more, weapons smuggled to them through networks like those Derfert and Keuschner worked. She later wrote: “Comrade Karl Liesegang had from Comrade Otto Brass-Remscheid from the Rhineland decided to obtain weapons, including hand grenades and time bombs (grenades with timed fuses). He [Liesegang] had supplied some of the young comrades. In his apartment at the sick houses⁵⁷ on Rittergustrasse (now Orloppstrasse) I obtained my gun.” With these weapons the group practiced in Tegel Forest under the direction of one Erich Habersaath how to use their new arms. A piece of white paper was tied to a tree, and, whenever a train passed to cover the noise, they would practice shooting at the target.⁵⁸

Unlike the untrained masses that were armed at the factories by Derfert, Heimbürger and her band had practiced in the woods outside of the city several times. Not only were there then different ways to be involved in arms smuggling, but, these arms were used by groups for very different aims. Heimbürger’s group had tones of organization like those of an amateur militia. Her vanguardism is pushed to the fore: here is the revolutionary activist who also recognizes herself as such. Derfert’s account, on the other hand, begins with her relation to the masses and ends with her organizing with and literally in the middle of them in the Reichstagsplatz. Keuschner’s

⁵⁶ Emmerich, p. 175.

⁵⁷ The German *Konsum Häusern* literally translates as “Consumption Housing.” At this time, those with tuberculosis would have been cordoned off in special housing units like the one that Liesegang lived at. Also living there may have been victims of the Spanish flu, which was at this time ravaging across the world in its second wave.

⁵⁸ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde, SgY 30/1488, Heimbürger, Lucie, p. 8.

account, similarly to Derfert's, also deemphasizes his activism, which, by its nature, could be called extraordinary. To Keuschner and Defert, their actions were normal and necessary as part of the masses they were trying to help. These ideas of involvement with the masses are less apparent in the story of Heimbürger.

The experience of arms smuggling was therefore a complicated one. What unified our actors was that they felt the need to act for change, for revolution. They used the connections they had made to obtain their weapons or partake directly in smuggling operations—Keuschner through his factory colleagues, Derfert through her connections from the 1918 munitions strike, and Heimbürger from her comrade's unnamed sources. Once they obtained their weapons, their differing intentions with them became clear: distribution to the masses or their use in trained militias ready to fight the state head-on.

4. *The Use and Rejection of Weapons*

Across town from Cläre at the Reichstagplatz on November 9th, Anna Erfurt, a thirty-two-year-old communist organizer who had worked in factories since she was nine years old, was busy breaking out comrades from the Maikäferkaserne. The Maikäferkaserne, a barracks of loyal Kaisertruppen during the Wilhelmine era, had become a prison for undesirable *Politiker* during the wartime. In the barracks were Anna's comrades, including Tute Lehmann, whom she had organized with during the war period. Anna's story displays the violence of the revolution in full, and shows us how weapons like the ones that Cläre and Keuschner smuggled were used in the revolution in Berlin.⁵⁹

Though wanting to free prisoners, Anna and her husband also went to the barracks partially hoping to obtain weapons. At around noon that day, sometime before their arrival, demonstrating

⁵⁹ Erfurt, p. 5-6.

crowds had passed by the barracks when soldiers and prisoners from inside called for them to free them.⁶⁰ When Anna got there, the streets were “black,” filled with the masses. Hoping that the soldiers inside would surrender peacefully, they approached with the expectation that some might discard their arms, leaving them for the taking. Their hunch was correct, and on their arrival Erfurt saw soldiers tossing weapons, their shoes, and items of their uniform out of the windows of the barracks. Anna at this point armed herself with a revolver in her bag and her husband with a carbine that they had found at the barracks. Some in the prison still had yet to surrender. In the courtyard, they came across a commander of the fortress who proclaimed: “As long as I have blood coursing through my veins I will not surrender this barracks.” Erfurt recalled:

The gate was blown up, the prison director had to show us the prison books. We said who we wanted to free. It is sometimes said that we have freed all prisoners; that's not true, we did not bring out criminals. Among the liberated people was Tute Lehmann. Then there was a Captain von Beerfelde, a political prisoner; He was overjoyed when he saw us. Whoever witnessed this moment of liberation for our comrades will never forget that again.⁶¹

The *Berliner Tageblatt* reported that it was loyal officers and *Kaisertruppen* like the one that Anna encountered that were responsible for the deaths of three working-class organizers at the Maikäferkaserne, including Erich Habersaath, who had personally trained Lucie Heimbürger in the use of her revolver. Her own brother was also wounded in some of this fighting, which, according to the *Tageblatt*, constituted some of the only known fatalities of the revolution.⁶²

Here we see weapons in action in the revolution, but not any that were smuggled by the people like Derfert or Keuschner. It is ironic, of course, that Derfert, who spent so much time ensuring that everyone had weapons and ammunition aplenty, did not use them. Regardless, in both cases we see weapons as a symbol of revolutionary strength and the transfer of power from

⁶⁰ „Der Demonstrationzug nach der Maikäferkaserne,“ *Berliner Tageblatt*, November 10, 1918.

⁶¹ Erfurt, p. 6.

⁶² „Der Demonstrationzug nach der Maikäferkaserne,“ *Berliner Tageblatt*, November 10, 1918.

the old *Herrschaft* to the new order. It was soldiers, those who were conscripted formerly to fight for the maintenance of the Kaiserreich, who were dropping their weapons at the barracks, and radical revolutionaries who were taking them up. In Derfert's case, it was the *armed* men who were leading the demonstrators, the vanguard of the revolution, to the Reichstag. They did not use their guns, but they were prepared to take up arms against the state to bring it down if need be. In the case of Anna and her husband, weapons were utilized to liberate fellow revolutionaries, who then joined up in arms with their comrades, embracing, in this way, the revolution. To physically take up arms against the old state, to hold weapons, was here part of the embodied experience of the revolution.

The blood of comrades spilled was in the name of the revolution. For those still loyal to Kaiser, however, as the commander of the barracks was, his body belonged to him. He would rather die—have his body forcefully taken from him—than give it up to for it to become a puppet for the movement against the Kaiser. In contrast, the bodies of the revolutionaries, of the soldiers, of the workers, of those imprisoned at the barracks, were newly theirs. They rejected the hold of the Kaiser over their bodies, and would gladly spill their own blood in the name of this psycho-physical form of freedom.

Also of note here is the notion of criminality that Anna employed. To her, the comrades that they freed were not criminals: "It is sometimes said that we have freed all prisoners; that's not true, we did not bring out criminals. Among the liberated people was Tute Lehmann. Then there was a Captain von Beerfelde, a political prisoner..."⁶³ To be a 'political prisoner' was to the revolutionaries an absurdity—one could not be incriminated merely because of their beliefs. Their comrades were different from other common criminals, those who had actually committed some

⁶³ Erfurt, p. 60.

wrong in their eyes. They therefore did not deserve the experience of freedom on the day of revolution. We see here the limits of the new social imaginary; there was a limit to whose crimes against the Kaiser no longer counted, and to who was to be considered a criminal under both Kaiser and Republic.

Not only was the taking up of arms symbolic of revolutionary power transfers, but so could also their rejection be symbolic of the rejection of the old order. Just as revolutionaries took up weapons to fight against the Kaiserreich, soldiers throughout Berlin were ridding themselves of their rifles, grenades, and machine guns to weaken it, to deprive it of their power and be free of its control over their lives. Friedrich Kamin, a member of the SPD who worked at the Charlottenburg water plant, saw on the day of the revolution soldiers from machine gun nests throwing their arms into the Spree. Kamin and his colleagues debated for some time about what to do with soldiers in the neighborhood that occupied a machine gun nest set up by the government upon the news of unrest. Then, they approached the machine gun nest to attempt to reason with the soldiers:

Since all talking was of no use and we were fed up with the whole discussion, I decided with some colleagues from Siemens to throw the machine gun over the railing and into the Spree. This gave the rest courage and the rifles flew behind. The soldiers were told that their hand grenades were also superfluous and were no longer needed, because now for them, the soldiers, the war was over. The hand grenades and remaining ammunition landed on the bottom of the Spree and the soldiers disappeared. People were satisfied after that a solution to the problem at the bridge [where the machine gun nest was] had come without bloodshed; above all, the machine gun was in the water.⁶⁴

The soldiers and workers here collectively decided that they no longer needed weapons. We are reminded again of the hated Prussian militarism; for these soldiers, their machine guns, rifles, and grenades were better off at the bottom of the canal than being used, especially if they were to be used to fire on fellow citizens. To these workers weapons did not need to change hands

⁶⁴ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde, SgY 30/0447, Kamin, Friedrich, p. 1-3.

or be used to secure the revolution so much as the Kaiserreich needed to be disarmed. Above all, the machine gun needed to be in the water, no longer in use.

Kamin's account also emphasizes the end of the war, over all else, as the driver of the change of weapons out of the hands of soldiers. The war, the causation of famine, overwork, political repression, disease, and untold death and suffering, was finally over. Why retain any of the weapons that contributed to it?

Outside of Berlin, similar stories can be found. Johann Fladung, a twenty-year-old, socialist youth movement activist who had been conscripted for military service in Hessen, tells the story of how soldiers at the main station in Hannover threw down their arms. He was awaiting a train coming from Kiel that was supposed to go next to Frankfurt am Main. The train was carrying sailors and soldiers who were coming from or were then on leave:

It must have been 11 o'clock at night....An amazed murmur went through the crowd of waiting soldiers. What did it mean? Were they not letting us board? The train entered. The captain snapped a command: "All sailors assemble!" "Why?" asked all the sailors from the windows. They showed their holiday vouchers. The captain: "No, they were issued by the Soldiers' Council and therefore invalid!" In complete misjudgment of the situation, the captain ordered: "Take sailors off the train!" A murmur grew among the waiting soldiers, and - in two minutes, none of the "Königstreuen" had a rifle anymore. The disarmed soldiers had more sense of the situation than their captain, and asked to leave. Most of the sailors and soldiers left the train. What now?⁶⁵

Hearing the end of the war due to the misunderstanding of the situation by their captain, waiting soldiers immediately threw down their weapons and left the scene. The revolution meant the rejection of weapons, a return to the normal, peaceable life that was supposed to be. That soldiers and sailors so hated the war that, based essentially only on a hunch from their commander that revolution had broken out against it, they abandoned it, demonstrates further their commitment to peace and their low morale by the end of the war. The rejection of war was, to many, the first

⁶⁵ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde, SgY 30/1972/2, Fladung, Johann, p. 128.

experience of revolution. It was equivalent to the pushing away of Prussian militarism, which was viewed to be so much a part of the cause for the war. This was a common, first revolutionary moment. Physically, it meant throwing weapons away as soldiers, to shirk off the identity of *Kaisertreu* that these weapons had associated with them.

In Kiel, where the Fladung's captain had assumed a revolutionary train had come from, the initial revolutionary moment was in violent clashes against machine gun nests in the streets that had mowed down peaceful mutineers. Karl Artelt was a twenty-eight year old in the navy shipyards at Kiel who rose to the leadership of the councils there in the revolution. At Kiel, to Artelt and many workers, the heart of the despised Prussian militarism was made especially plain after it was revealed that, despite the war clearly coming to an end, the commanding admirals, von Hipper and von Scheer, wanted to launch a suicide attack on the British fleet for honor and glory.⁶⁶

Large mutinies broke out against this suicide mission that saw many arrested, and meetings of the mutineers were held at an exercise field outside of town on November 2st and 3rd to decide what should be done. On the afternoon of November 3rd, the mutineers decided to march on the city. As they marched, patrols of supposedly loyal soldiers sent to stop them were "effortlessly" disarmed and merged into the crowd. They made their way into the city, past the Kaiser-Café, and approached a machine gun nest. Rather than having the opportunity to engage in discussion and simply throw the machine gun and arms into the water, as Friedrich Kamin was fortunately able to do in Berlin: "we were received by machine gun fire. Our demonstration stopped. When we realized that no one had been hit, we continued. Then, the machine gunners shot directly into our

⁶⁶ For a good resource on the Kiel mutiny, see: Renate and Klaus Kuhl. "Novemberrevolution." 1997.
http://www.kurkuhl.de/en/novrev/artelt_cv.html.

train. Forty or fifty demonstrators, mostly women and children, collapsed under the fire. Eight of them were killed and twenty-nine were seriously wounded.”⁶⁷

Shouts and cries of terror rang up from the crowds and the protestors. A sailor sprang to the front of the lines of the demonstrators and hit the commander of the machine gunners, Sublieutenant Steinhäuser, in the head with the blunt end of a rifle. To the rest of the demonstrators, this “was the signal to attack. Young sailors and workers stormed the position of the machine gunners and beat them back.” With the machine gunners fleeing, the crowd brought their wounded and dead into the Kaiser-Café, the wounded being laid on the sofas and the dead on the floor. They took the time to reach out to one another and say that these sacrifices should not be in vain. “The spark had exploded the powder keg.”⁶⁸

In Kiel, the revolutionary moment, the point of no return, had also then to do with weapons. The revolutionary crowd formed in part by “effortlessly” disarming soldiers sent to arrest and fire upon them. When they were fired on by the machine gunners, they reacted violently in self-defense to disarm the gunners. In large part, they did not, however, fire back. Some shots were, undoubtedly, fired by the mutineers. However, the bulk of the crowd would have been unarmed. According to Artelt, too, the machine gunners were “beaten back,” with the signal being Steinhäuser’s head being crack with a rifle butt. The crowds at Kiel then disarmed soldiers in the first, and, by and large, used their weapons only for self-defense. When they did so, they even used them mostly in a non-traditional way, using the non-lethal butts of their rifles as clubs. In both weapon use and disarmament, the crowd attempted to distance itself from the Prussian militarism embodied by the machine gunners who had fired on them. Note too, how they did not chase after

⁶⁷ Artelt, Karl, „Mit der roten Fahne zum Vizeadmiral Souchon,“ *Vorwärts und nicht vergessen. Erlebnisberichte aktiver Teilnehmer der Novemberrevolution 1918/19*, Commissioned by the Institute for Marxism-Leninism by the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1958) p. 93.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 94.

them once they were disarmed, in pursuit of vengeance. Unlike in imperialist war, the goal was not to destroy the enemy position and take the field. The immediate concern of the crowd was humanist: to be with their wounded and their dead, and to offer condolences for hard sacrifice. The explosion of the powder keg that was Kiel, as Artelt had put it, was therefore a very complex revolutionary moment in which workers and sailors by their actions defined some of their expectations of the revolution. It was, in the first, to turn the rifle on its heels, to not pursue any unnecessary violence as the old regime had.

That, to many members of the working class, the revolution meant first and foremost the rejection of the *verhasst Preußischen Militarismus* which had come to define life in the Kaiserreich was an idea encouraged by the provisional government in November. For their own stability, they wanted the working class to get out of the streets and spurn armed, insurrectionary action. The SPD wanted there to be “no thoughtless acts, such as would cause the bloodshed which has ended at the front to reappear again at home.”⁶⁹ In a flysheet issued on November 9th by the SPD, Friedrich Ebert concluded: “Fellow citizens! I beg you all most earnestly: Leave the streets. See that peace and order are maintained.”⁷⁰ In another decree issued late on the 9th, signed by the SPD heads, each worker was urged to “realize his responsibility to the whole.” This meant to recognize that “Human life is sacred” and that property “is to be protected against illegal interference. Whoever dishonors this glorious movement by vulgar crimes is an enemy of the people and must be treated as such.” To initiate violence of any sort, especially with weapons, was anathema to the SPD government. Performing “vulgar crimes” would make one an “enemy of the people,” an enemy of the revolution. Peace and order could certainly not be maintained when masses of armed

⁶⁹ American Association for International Conciliation, “The German Revolution,” (New York: American Association for International Conciliation Sub-station 84, 1919) p. 6

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

citizens were in the streets, ready to dismantle whatever they perceived to belong to the old, militaristic order. A definite fear of mob mentality and mob rule pervades through these early pamphlets and declarations of the SPD.

We see here to the disconnect between the new ‘government’ and the revolutionary masses. While the SPD was loudly talking of peace and quiet, and how weapons should not be used and property should not be violated, workers, soldiers, and sailors were doing just the opposite. Massive demonstrations like the ones in Kiel and in Berlin continuously disrupted order, there were repeated episodes of violence like that at the *Maikäferkaserne* and the numerous beating and crowd scuffles, and factories and spaces like the squares and buildings of the former government were being occupied and used to hold elections to councils, flying in the face of private property rights.

The emphasis on the abandonment of Prussian militarism and a return to order was also evident Philip Scheidemann’s speech from the balcony of the Reichstag on November 9th:

The German people have won all along the line. What is old and corrupt has yielded. Militarism has yielded. The Hohenzollerns have abdicated. Long live the German Republic!....Now our task is not to let this glorious victory, this complete victory of the German people, be besmirched. Therefore, I beg you to see to it that there is no disturbance to the public safety. We must be able to be proud of this day forever....Quiet, order, and security, these are what we need now.⁷¹

To Scheidemann, the old and corrupt that had yielded was militarism and the Hohenzollerns, first and foremost. This, we saw many of the working class in agreement with through their actions of throwing away their weapons or taking them up to fight against the Kaiserreich and its militarism.

What some of the working class may have disagreed with Scheidemann on was his implication that, should violence occur, the people could no longer be proud of this day. Erfurt, Derfert, Keuschner, Heimbürger, and the masses of armed workers organizing in Germany seemed

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 9.

to disagree. However, some also appeared to agree with Scheidemann that a nonviolent path was necessary. When the Kiel machine gunners fled, the “corruption had yielded,” and there was no need for the sailors to pursue them, even for defensive purposes so as to prevent future attacks on demonstrators. There was no need to give chase; the task of the revolution, to some, was to restore quiet, order and security, to care for basic human need.

Even though weapons were discarded and changed hands to arm and make revolutionaries, as we have seen, their connection to the Kaiserreich did not disappear outright. In early December, Karl Grünberg, a working-class author, factory worker, and USPD member, hesitated to take up arms in defense of the provisional republic for this reason. Reporting in Berlin for duty with his factory comrades for the *Republikanische Soldatenwehr* (the Republican Guard, the militia organized by the SPD to defend the revolution) he was handed old WWI soldiers garments and a rifle made for use in the war. He wondered: “How could we again of our own free will put on the hated garments that the revolution had [only just] freed us from?” Setting his private ambitions aside, which “quite naturally lay in a completely different area,” he told himself that the rifle he was carrying was “not the same rifle” that he had carried for the Kaiser in the war. Few of his other comrades were convinced of this notion, and it is implied, turned away from service in the guard.⁷²

This suggests that there was something about weapons themselves that were tied, intrinsically, to the old capitalist order of the Kaiserreich. In the new, socialist republic, weapons would not be necessary. How could they be, when imperialist war and conquering was to be a thing of the past? Any government that was asking the people to take up arms would have therefore raised questions of its intentions and what exactly the revolution was supposed to mean. Arms had

⁷² Grünberg, Karl, and Wolfgang Emmerich, editor, “Als meiner Soldatenratszeit,” *Proletarische Lebensläufe: Autobiographische Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zweiten Kultur in Deutschland Band 2: 1914 bis 1945* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1975), p. 186.

to be either tossed into the Spree, like Kamin did to the machine gun, or taken up against the state, like Derfert's untrained workers and Heimbürger's militants did.

The debate over whether the rejection of Prussian militarism and the Kaiserreich meant taking up arms to ensure their destruction, or refusing arms to make them the old state so powerless that it might 'wither away' reminds one of the debates between radicals and Bernsteinists in the socialist circles of Europe. This debate would continue to rage in the German Revolution, as many more became disillusioned with the SPD government, convinced that it was not doing away with as many elements of the Kaiserreich and militarist culture as it claimed when it was arming right-wing, proto-fascist elements to fire upon demonstrations of workers while simultaneously empowering large capitalist conglomerates and refusing to socialize them. It would lead to more and more workers taking up arms against the SPD government—the false revolutionaries—to enact the true revolution, and lead to much more bloodshed.

5. Conclusion: The Silence on Weapons in the Revolution

If one were to read only some of the descriptions of the crowds that formed in and around Berlin on November 9th, 1918, the date of proclamations of both the bourgeois republic of Philipp Scheidemann of the Social Democrats and the Socialist Republic of Karl Liebknecht of the Spartacists, one would get the sense that they were largely peaceful, unarmed demonstrations. Mentions of violence and weapons are lacking in the descriptions of the revolution from say, bourgeois diarists such as Count Harry Kessler or the socialist artist Käthe Kollwitz. When weapons or groups of armed workers and soldiers returning from the front are described, they usually deemphasize the presence of violence in the streets, highlighting instead images of armed soldiers having their weapons and epaulettes stripped from them, both seen as symbols of the hated

Prussian militarism. See the scene described by Kessler in his diary entry from the time, often quoted by historians to show what the revolution looked like on the ground⁷³:

In front of the main entrance [to the Reichstag], and in an arc of illumination provided by the headlights of several army vehicles, stood a crowd waiting for news. People pushed up the steps and through the doors. Soldiers with slung rifles and red badges checked everyone's business...The scene inside was animated, with a continual movement up and down the stair of sailors, armed civilians, women, and soldiers...Groups of soldiers and sailors stood and lay about on the enormous red carpet and among the pillars of the lobby. Rifles had been stacked. Here and there some individual was stretched full length and asleep on a bench. It was like a film of the Russian Revolution, a scene from the Tauride Palace in Kerensky's day.⁷⁴

Such scenes were indeed common to the revolution. Focusing only on these scenes as they were described by bourgeois diarists and artists, however, turns us away from the large emphasis that radical rank and file workers, party members, Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and labor union members placed on preparing for an *armed* revolution. If the revolution that happened in Berlin on November 9th was largely peaceful, it was not expected to be so by many members of the working class. As Kessler himself noted, the scene as it appeared to his limited view reminded him of something from the romanticized images of the Russian Revolution. His romantic vision of revolution was not of armed masses in the streets, but of the rifles stacked in the corners, of the people turning away armaments in favor of peaceful change. That he appears to have idolized Kerensky also speaks to his position on the war. Perhaps Kessler, like Kerensky, saw the peaceful protests as a means to bring about basic economic improvements and political change while simultaneously continuing the war as a republic under a new provisional government.

⁷³ For a recent example, see:

Canning, Kathleen, and Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn
Editors, "Gender and the Imaginary of Revolution," in *Germany 1917-1923: A Revolution in Context*,
(Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015) p. 103-110.

⁷⁴ Kessler, Charles, editor, *Berlin in Lights: the Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*, (New York: Grove Press, 1999) p. 7.

When we use only these kinds of accounts, we run the risk of rosily romanticizing the revolution ourselves. In this chapter, we have seen how the rejection of weapons was not, as Kessler romanticized it, merely a rejection of violence as path to change. Rather, it was a rejection of the war—the act of laying down weapons was an act of refusal to serve the militarist culture any longer. The rifles were stacked in the corner, because, in the case of soldiers, they were determined to no longer use them on their fellow Europeans for *pointless* bloodshed.

Those who were not soldiers, the arms smugglers whose experiences we traced in this chapter, simultaneously took up weapons against the war. There was to be a small amount of bloodshed to stop the massive amount that was daily happening on the front of the Great War. This was not pointless bloodshed. Rather, it had a great purpose in ending the war. This embodied experience, then, in taking up arms against the war or laying them down in disgust at the idea of further serving it, was to many the revolutionary moment in November of 1918.

Chapter Two: “The hated, cursed war and the hated, cursed, post war,” Soldiers Returning
from the Western Front

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I assess the experience of soldiers on the Western Front in the November Revolution. What was it like to be on the ground on the front when the revolution hit? What motivated soldiers to rebel? What was their conception of what was occurring? By narrating and analyzing some experiences of soldiers in the revolution, and then comparing the experiences of those in the *Kriegsmarine* to the civilian or worker experience—that of the millions of members of the army who worked in support or bureaucratic roles back home—I will explore these questions and build upon the experience of the working class in the November Revolution presented so far. We will see how the desire to survive the war led the men to organize politically. The next section will offer some short observations about the German army on the Western Front at the end of the war, exploring the material and psychological conditions there that drove some to embrace the armistice and revolution. The third section will detail the lives of soldiers on the front during the revolution and armistice, and in the fourth I will offer some concluding remarks about the experiences of soldiers in the revolution.

2. The Western Front at the End of the War

While it may have been increasingly clear to those back home in the final days of October that the war was nearing a close, to the average German soldier *im Felde* (in the field) this was not so. Up until the final days of October, soldiers were fighting for the Kaiser in France and Belgium, though on a slow retreat. After the intensely bloody offenses of Ludendorff in the spring of 1918, the Allies under Foch and Haig had pushed back in the summer, steadily gaining ground while the

Central Powers frantically tried to maneuver its dwindling reserves. Though on the retreat, a solid defensive line was maintained until the armistice was called on November 11th, and it was never decisively broken. From above, this sparked the famous ‘stabbed in the back’ myths which would be featured so prominently as the rallying call for the Nazis in the coming years. It was the civilians, it would be said, that had called for the end of the war. The German troops were undefeated in the field, and they held the line until they were betrayed by the politicians of the SPD.

This myth persisted even though it was Ludendorff and the High Command itself who initially declared the war to be lost, on September 29th, 1918. According to Colonel von Thaeer, who was present, Ludendorff voiced at this and other meetings of Reichstag and military officials his view that “there was no relying on the troops any longer” and that “with the help of the high battle morale of the Americans the enemy would gain a major victory.” This victory would result in the West front’s “flood back across the Rhine in complete disorder, bringing revolution to Germany.”⁷⁵ When Ebert learned of Ludendorff’s words, he “turned deathly pale and could not utter a word.”⁷⁶

Contrary to the myth, Ludendorff and Hindenburg were first to call for the war’s end in Germany, not the politicians. Though the troops were not stay undefeated in the field, as the High Command admitted on September 29th, they did *stay* fighting in the field until the armistice. The major breakthrough that Ludendorff anticipated never really came, though the lines were pushed back with more or less force and casualties depending on the place.

If, from above, we see the High Command weary and in despair over the situation, we from below see the grim reality of remaining in the trenches: soldiers coping with low morale, mental

⁷⁵ Haffner, Sebastian, *Failure of a Revolution* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986) p. 38.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

and physical exhaustion, loneliness/alienation, and constant combat, all while attempting to survive a deadly retreat.

As Scott Stephenson has shown, it was these factors of life *im Felde* that directly impacted how soldiers would react to the November revolution.⁷⁷ Soldiers on the front also had more stringent management structures still in place, and, being far from home, were less likely to have civilian interaction that would change their opinions on the war. In comparison, soldiers on leave (*im Urlaub*) and those who worked support jobs in the military bureaucracy or in support factories back home interacted much more with the striking civilians and were exposed to more criticism of the war. Information on the front was strictly controlled to the point that even when news of the revolution came it was disseminated to soldiers by their captains and higher-ups. This management of information coupled with the psychological and physical impact of fighting on the front, Stephenson argues, resulted in soldiers being largely apolitical, initially, about the revolution. Survival of the front, and the psychological impacts that this constant stress and regimentation of everyday life produced, pushed the politics of home far from the soldier's mind.⁷⁸

3. *Armistice and the Return from the Front*

I will now detail and then analyze the first-hand accounts of two soldiers on the Western front in the revolution. Herbert Firl was a young soldier on the Western front who vividly recalled later his experiences there with the revolution. His company of about 80 men went to the front on November 2nd, and would return within two weeks after the revolution and armistice.⁷⁹

On November 7th, while revolution was spreading throughout Germany, Firl was at the front, where (in his case) this news had not yet reached the troops. On that day, his company and

⁷⁷ Stephenson, Scott, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 9-10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Introduction and Ch. 1.

⁷⁹ Bundesarchiv at Berlin Lichterfelde, SgY 30/0216 Firl, Herbert, p. 1.

a unit of machine gunners were ordered to start marching “only with rifles.” Gas masks, steel helmets, and other accessories were tossed away. The general came by car and gave a speech to the troops, attempting to encourage them to prepare for new battles. He told them that peace talks were in progress, and that the soldiers would get better quarters soon. Alongside this, other amenities and basic pleasures were promised to the troops.⁸⁰

During this speech, however, “the guns boomed.” Firl recalled that about 16 hostile airmen circled over the troops the whole while, threatening at any moment to shoot them. The troops “grumbled: how can they let us sit here in this field, where we can all be shot in one lump!” Calls begin to shout to “skin” the general.⁸¹

Soon, the general left, and they saw who Firl cynically called the “hero” no more. The men, now under a hail of bullets from the airplanes above, scoffed at the general’s words. They did not believe that better quarters were coming “as such things should always be better,” nor that peace talks were happening. Soon, they had to leave the village, as a heavy bombardment began to fall on it. Firl’s company then marched for several hours until they stopped at a barn at 11 o’clock at night to rest.⁸²

Firl remembered the talking points of a nameless private who climbed to the rafters of the barn at 2 AM and began to give a populist speech to the troops. “Private X” told them that “after four and a half years of war, it was time not for us, but for Wilhelm and August” to do the fighting: “While we perish in the mud, our officers feast and feast. Because we endure and hold our own, our wives and children must go hungry, and we must die, because those at home are holding their own.” The private proposed that the troops take advantage of the opportunities provided by the

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

new influx of Eastern front reinforcements. As these reinforcements had “lain in the East for years,” they should sit on the front and face the bombardment so that Firl’s own comrades did not have to. Then, an officer came and shouted, threatening to have the whole company arrested. “‘By whom? Shall we arrest ourselves?’ we roared back.”⁸³

As “everyone came slowly out of their straw,” the lieutenant ordered the troops into combat readiness. This, however, raised questions about why the heavy gear needed to be brought with, if the troops were only supposed to be in combat ready mode. To this, the lieutenant had no answer.⁸⁴

In the early morning of November 8th, rain kept the company inside the barn, with the “Tommies” (the British) all the while keeping up their artillery barrage on the area. The company finally marched to the trench after hours of waiting in the barn, whereupon they were met with thick fog.⁸⁵

Firl and his comrades stayed in the trenches until November 10th, and, that evening, orderlies brought word that a truce was to begin at 8 PM:

Nevertheless, the bullets whistled and the heavy guns made the ground tremble. We stood with the clock in hand in the narrow shelter and listened. Should the truce have started? The wiser among us thought that the truce might start at 9 o’clock, because the French clocks were different. But at 9 o’clock it was still the same show. Damn it all! Everyone cursed and one could see that everyone had had their hopes up that peace had finally come. Now it was said that it could also start at 8 o’clock in the morning, but in the morning, no one was looking at the clock anymore, since the roaring [of the guns] did not sound sound like it was close to going [away] as it should if there were a truce.... At exactly 12 o’clock⁸⁶ there was suddenly complete silence. Everybody jumped up. What’s happening? A terrible thunder [goes off] from the 38er placed behind us in the village. While we wait, breathless, two more tremendous explosions follow, then there is complete rest. One man jumps up onto the edge of the trench. A whistle. The infantry activity was not set yet. There comes message: immediately withdraw to the ready line. A short while later we are already in place and receive orders to hold elections at 4 o’clock for a soldiers’ council and to get paid.... Everyone was talking only of truce or peace. In front of the regimental office it was discussed. What is this soldiers’ council? Maybe a bread commission? Only one thing we all knew, namely, that now the rule of the officers

⁸³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ 11 o’clock French time, hence the 11-11-11 Armistice Day celebrations

was over. There were no more supervisors anywhere. A noncommissioned officer suggested that the sergeant be taken as the council leader, since he knew best in everything....⁸⁷

At 4 o'clock, the men took their pay, as they were told. At a table sat two people with a list of the company members, and everyone had to vote. The sergeant had received only one vote, even though he had been suggested alongside the nameless private who preached to the men in the barn. Everyone else voted for "Private X," and, at 5 o'clock, they assembled again. The lieutenant explained that, according to his reports, the government had resigned, and that a Greater Soldiers Council was being established in Metz. The private went off on the lieutenant's horse to the council in Metz to get more information, telling the soldiers before leaving to stick to the march plan for the first day. They were also not "to throw away rifles" and they were "to give utmost care to the superiors."⁸⁸

The men did not harm the sergeant and lieutenant, but stripped them of their uniform stripes and immediately organized both the writing room and the regimental kitchen to fit their needs. About an hour later, the men were already marching towards Metz and were homeward bound. Though they were "tired and hungry from the day before, we marched very proudly, even though the rations had not yet been raised." The streets were full of columns:

all yelling at each other: "Armistice, now it's come home!" Officers higher than company commanders were nowhere to be seen. Yes, even these were already partly gone. Everyone had to march in rank and file. The lieutenant marched on the side and when he asked us – there were no more commands – if we did not want to rest, for it was hot, [the men replied] no need, go on! Steel helmets and gas masks were thrown away, heaps of military equipment were already piled up on the roadsides. The gray ribbons and the caps were torn down, everywhere the color red was sought out. Anyone who had something red tied it as a ribbon. To show that we were no longer soldiers like before, we hung the rifle down. We philosophized about what was going on in the homeland....⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

In Firl's story, we see the psychological and physical factors of the wartime experience that Stephenson highlighted as impactful on revolutionary activity. Survival and well-being—limiting physical exertion, getting enough food and rest—were first on Firl's mind and the minds of other soldiers with him, as Stephenson argued was the case for those *im Felde* in the revolution. We see this emphasis repeatedly. In the barn, the Private who would be elected to head up the soldiers' council had proposed that the veterans of the West front take advantage of the newcomers from the east so that they could remove themselves from the front, heightening their own survival chances. Nor were the men pleased when they were exposed to unnecessary danger from circling aircraft while waiting in an open field during a general's speech—"where we can all be shot in one lump!" they complained.⁹⁰ When they moved out from the barn, all questioned why it was necessary to take heavy combat gear, viewed by the soldiers as extra weight that might slow them down in combat and lead to their death or make their physical demands of the day's march that much harsher.

After the armistice, the immediate emphasis was still on survival and limiting physical exertion. When it was clear that military order was breaking down, the men took over first the kitchen of the regimental house. This gave them direct control of the food supply, something they had not had since their conscription. When the soldiers' council was first being established, the men were hopeful that it might be a body to address food security and distribution. "What is this soldiers' council?" they asked, "Maybe a bread commission?"⁹¹ The goal was to secure physical well-being for the foreseeable future. This involved too not taking any unnecessary equipment on the march back home. To limit the physical demands of the march back home, "Steel helmets and gas masks were thrown away, heaps of military equipment were already piled up on the

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 4.

roadsides.”⁹² Human life, rather than the successful continuation of the German military machine, was now to come first.

Survival was more than the immediate avoidance of danger or the constant struggle to remain healthy, however. It meant the pursuit of peace or any means possible to leave the front. While bullets whizzed overhead on November 10-11th, Firl and his comrades anxiously held the clock, desperately waiting for the appointed time of armistice to arrive. They incessantly questioned when the truce might be coming, and rumors were clearly running wild amongst them. Did they mean 8 AM? Did they account for the time difference between French and German clocks? When initial truce hopes were dashed on the night of the 10th after it passed 8 PM, “Everyone cursed and one could see that everyone had had their hopes up that peace had finally come.”⁹³ Especially for those in combat, the armistice was the ultimate guarantor of survival. This is in part why the men were so preoccupied with the idea of it.

To the notion of survival, we should add to the ideas of about its causes that the private extolled in the barn with his very socialist speech. He said that it was unjust for the men to be there, risking their lives for so little food and basic supplies, especially when the officers had so much and could “feast and feast.” Though Firl did not report on the reaction of the men to the speech in the barn, we can assume it was positive, given that they refused to arrest him and jeered at the officer who threatened their arrests. To some of the men, survival meant taking back what the officers had so unjustly taken, to reclaim the kitchens and redesign the regimentation of their lives so that they could have enough to live. Hence, the old scheduling of meals and the takeover by officer supply depots at the regimental houses were the first occurrences of the armistice for the men in Firl’s company.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

Another point to be made about Firl's account of the armistice on the front is that there is no description of any kind of elated celebration by the soldiers on the battlefield. Once the first man stepped to the edge of the trenches, all happened quickly to get the men out of there. In just a few hours, they were paid, had organized soldiers' councils, took over the regimental house, established communication with the Greater Soldiers' Council at Metz, and started on their way back home. They wanted to return to their families and their people, to celebrate peace at home.

The armistice did not just mean a ceasefire to these men. Rather, it meant leaving the battlefield altogether. As they shouted at each other in the streets, the armistice had to "come home."⁹⁴ It was not something that could stay on the front. This shows too that they conceived of armistice as something that they would bring by their own actions and agency. It was only once the men elected to march home that the armistice could "arrive" there.

That they were prepared to leave the battlefield within only a few hours' time shows too their feelings towards the war. Four and a half years into a conflict that had claimed the lives of their comrades and caused them so much emotional and physical distress, the men were very ready to commence the armistice, to leave these horrors and their lives as soldiers behind.

This transition in their minds from soldier back to civilian life occurred over these few days as a part of the armistice process. The soldier returned to civilian life by taking charge of his affairs, physically removing or altering that that stood in his way in a very confrontational, headstrong, masculine fashion. As we saw, the soldiers took back control over their survival factors. They regained control first over their own bodies, over whether they were put in danger, where they were allowed to sleep, when they were able to eat and what, where they could rest and stay. Next, the abstract symbols were repurposed or stripped away. On the march home, Firl and his fellows

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

hung their rifles down, "To show that we were no longer soldiers like before."⁹⁵ They flung all their badges and equipment away and sought anything red to tie around themselves, in a symbol of unity with their fellows of the revolution. The lieutenant's own horse was taken by the private elected to head the soldiers' council so that he go could to Metz to obtain more information for the troops. Their superiors, actors and symbols of the military authority, were mostly gone, with those ranked "higher than company commanders were nowhere to be seen."⁹⁶ Those officers that remained were literally brushed to the side, as the lieutenant, marching on the side of the street, out of rank with his troops, was.

Yet, they still marched in rank and file, with the streets full of columns. They marched "very proudly" even though they were exhausted from many days in the field with little rest and poor quarters. The marched still in part because they were told by their newly elected authority, the nameless private of stirring oration from the barn, to do so. This was therefore partly a choice which the men were "very proud" to carry out.

However, pressures from the new SPD government also called for the maintenance of order in the military as much as possible. At home, numerous leaflets begging for this had gone after the continuous days of revolutionary street action from the start of the month. Soldiers were repeatedly addressed as a special, separate body of the population in these proclamations. On such proclamation started: "Inhabitants and soldiers of Greater Berlin!"⁹⁷ Another one closed: "Workers, soldiers, see to it that quiet and order are observed."⁹⁸ "Quiet and order" meant that soldiers were to come home in rank rather than flooding back as great, unorganized masses.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Burdick, Charles B., and Ralph H. Lutz, editors, *The Political Institutions of the German Revolution 1918-1919* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1966), p. 45.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

As a special category of the population separate from workers and civilians, a new office was created to manage the affairs of returning soldiers. The Demobilization Office, under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Josef Koeth, was established initially to deal with the anticipated growth of the problem of soldier unemployment. In the coming weeks, Koeth would build unemployment benefit programs for former soldiers and would see to it as best as his office was capable that their arms were handed over to the new Republican Army. He also worked to keep some regulations on the large-scale industry in place so that some employment opportunities existed for the returning soldiers. In this broader, macro-economic sense, Gerald D. Feldman has argued that the demobilization process in Germany was actually quite similar to that in other Western nations after the war, even though it was part of the revolution.⁹⁹ In this context, the order of Firl's and other companies on November 11th was not unusual, but explicitly planned and hoped for by the SPD government. The maximum organization of those troops returning home was essential if the SPD government was to stay afloat. Otherwise, the millions of returning troops could quickly turn due to unemployment and economic hardship into an armed counterrevolutionary force.

Finally, we can add to our explanation of why the men marched home that, as Stephenson pointed out, soldiers closer to the front were under tighter, more regimented control than those working in the war economy at home or those further from the front. This control took time to shake off, and so those coming from the front were less likely to break apart and more likely to return on the march as Firl's did.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Feldman, Gerald D., "Economic and Social Problems of the German Demobilization, 1918-19," *The Journal of Modern History* 47, no. 1 (1975): 1-47. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/stable/1878920>.

¹⁰⁰ Stephenson, Introduction.

The initial revolutionary experience for those at the front was therefore one of returning home, of transitioning to civilian life, and regaining agency in those areas that it was previously denied to the men. In carrying out the armistice, however, these soldiers would interact with millions of other Germans, spurring some to action. We see this in the case of two stories, Max Hoelz and Otto Henning.

Max Hoelz was a twenty-nine year old, working-class communist at the end of the war who would later organize the Red Army of the Voigtland region around Falkenstein. He had been working in some capacity since the age of seven, when he had had to go out into the fields with his family. Conscripted into the war, he was wounded and went in and out of hospitals and various behind-the-front work for the army. Towards the end of the war, he was discharged as unfit for service.¹⁰¹ With his pension of forty marks per month, he searched for a job related to his prior work as a mechanic, and eventually became a supervisor for a construction company of some two hundred workers to make concrete, fences, chicken wire, and other implements for the army. Though not himself a soldier at the end of the war, his comments about trying to travel while so many soldiers were headed back home in early November 1918 gives us more insight into the experiences of soldiers coming from the front.¹⁰²

The construction company Hoelz worked for was just outside Alsace, and therefore close to the front. Receiving word that his wife was ill, he began his return journey to her on November 7th. What he saw on his next few days of travel was “a picture that I would never have thought possible.” The trains were so crowded with troops returning home that he was only able to board

¹⁰¹ The discharge was also likely due to his constant misbehavior. Alongside a medical assistant who Hoelz slapped when they treated him “too roughly,” he also beat up a “fat sergeant” who continuously accosted him “in a defiant tone for not running fast enough” on his injured feet.

¹⁰² Hoelz, Max, “Last Months of the War in the Hospitals and as a Technician in Alsace,” *Vom Weißen Kreuz zur Roten Fahne*, (1929) <https://nemesismarxists.org/hoelz-vom-weissen-kreuz1.htm>.

by climbing into the Frankfurt train through a window, where he and two others then stayed in tightly packed quarters for the rest of the several hours' train ride. As he rode, Hoelz later wrote, he felt a sense growing in him that there were other important things amiss besides seeing to his wife's health at home in Falkenstein. About hearing of the formation of soldiers' and workers' councils through talks with others on their ways home, he wrote: "What I heard and experienced then became, in the truest sense of the word, a revelation to me. On the 9th of November I arrived at home in Falkenstein. My first question was about the [status of the] Workers' and Soldiers Council."

Hoelz, who had previously only had one socialist leave an impression on him back in 1917, was inspired by what he saw to pursue the building of the soldiers' and workers' council in Falkenstein. This council he would lead until he was ousted by its co-leader, at which point he began organizing the Red Guard in the Voigtland, his illegal, armed band of militants. That what he saw on his journey home, what he said that he "experienced" in talking with soldiers headed back from the front, influenced him so much that he began to partake in the revolutionary action himself speaks to the type of heavy influence that the actors of the armistice had on those around them. If they were able to move Hoelz—and many millions like him to action—then perhaps they were correct when they conceptualized the armistice as only arriving home once they did.

Otto Henning was a soldier sent back in July of 1918 to work in the fields and at a construction company to supply the army. In October, Henning was put into a special company of soldiers comprised largely of those that had broken military code or caused trouble on the front that was to be used against strikers and protesters in Germany. In early November, he was sent to a suburb of Hannover, to guard with the other troops of this special detachment an important railway junction. Their commander told them: "Trains arrive here [at Hannover] from

Wilhelmshaven, Kiel and Hamburg, and all of them stop here. All sailors and soldiers on the train that are not on leave are to be arrested; in case of resistance weapons are to be used.” Two machine guns were put in position to be able to fire on those arriving if needed. The commander then stressed further that “he had been informed by telephone that resistance was to be expected because the sailors were for the most part armed.” This, noted Henning humorously, was a great mistake to tell the troops, as their whole unit was comprised of those who had been undesirable elements in the army. A “lively discussion” amongst the troops led to their conclusion: “[to] Wait, see what comes and not immediately apply our weapons.”¹⁰³

Two to three hours later, a train came in. Sailors and soldiers with red ribbons on their caps and some with red armbands descended from the train. “Do not shoot, comrades!” they said. “The emperor, has fled to Holland, the war has ended, the government has fallen, in Berlin [there is] revolution and under the leadership of Friedrich Ebert a provisional government of People’s Commissars has been formed, in which the SPD and the USPD are represented.” Henning and his comrades “agreed with the sailors immediately and only our captain with his three officers did not understand what was going on.” What made them realize that they had lost power, Henning wrote, was that the sailors then helped the troops to drive back to Minden, where they then organized a soldiers’ council. There were then demonstrations on November 9th of “infantry, pioneers, and artillerymen under red flags...of 5,000 soldiers, as they had never seen [in] this city of officers.”¹⁰⁴

In Henning and Hoelz’s stories we see the masses of soldiers and sailors bringing the armistice to their comrades on their ways home. Hoelz’s “revelation” was that so many people could be so easily mobilized for the cause of peace, which was exactly what shocked Henning’s superiors at the Hannover station and Johann Fladung’s superiors when troops were disarmed at

¹⁰³ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde, SgY 30/0373 Henning, Otto p. 1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Henning, p. 2-3.

the station he was at.¹⁰⁵ Yet, what we saw of soldiers at the front was in a certain sense true to those behind the front as well: the war was so hated that, at their first good looking opportunity, the men would abandon it with all possible haste—primarily for their own survival. It took only a “lively discussion” and a comrade to explain that the Kaiser had fled and there was revolution in Berlin for Henning’s unit to join up, just as it took Hoelz only a short time amongst these same types of revolutionary soldiers to be converted wholly to their cause and believe that he had new duties alongside tending to his ill wife.

The sociologist Asef Bayat has used the term “passive network” to explain how people can come to be easily united into action with no or little previous active or formal organizing. The network forms through the “instantaneous communication among atomized individuals, which is established by a tacit recognition of their common identity, and which is mediated through space.”¹⁰⁶ Though the men in these units might not have had explicitly aired their grievances with each other, they had common experiences of the war and of the hated Prussian militarism, of being separated from their families and being told to shoot the undesirables of the government. In this way, they had developed a shared identity through their mutual hatred of the Prussian militarism and the war. This concept helps explain in part how so many soldiers and sailors were easily mobilized into armistice and revolutionary actions to secure peace. This passive network through shared identity was powerful enough that it took only a few sentences explaining the situation and red armbands or spending a short time amongst these people to become enraptured in it. So it was as well that soldiers in the trenches, marching home, training home, or threatened with disarming at train stations quickly came together into cohesive forces of revolution.

¹⁰⁵ See p. 46.

¹⁰⁶ Bayat, Asef, “From ‘Dangerous Classes’ to ‘Quiet Rebels’ Politics of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South,” *International Sociology*, 15 no. 3 (September 2000): p. 533–557.

These stories also speak to the material reality of millions of people jamming the roadways and railways in the fall of 1918. Hoelz's description of trains so full that he had to cram into the window to ride, are similar to stories told of transportation networks all over Berlin at the time. Everywhere the trains were full of soldiers and sailors on the return. Yet, the newspapers did not comment on this material reality of armistice and of mass troop transport or warn people away from the mess that had been made of public transport. They instead focused on the words of the important politicians and vague news about which towns had declared soldiers' and workers' councils.¹⁰⁷ No information was presented by the press about the trains, which were overcrowded, rerouted, delayed, and physically damaged by the revolution in unexpected ways. Much anxiety was had over the fates of loved ones, friends, returning soldiers and sailors, and more. Carl Keuschner, the working-class arms smuggler from the first chapter, remembered waiting the night of November 9th on the platform until midnight for a train to come that he thought was bringing his wife from Wismar. When it came, however, she was not on board. The train's wagons had been "without light and window glass," and had held very few passengers. Afterwards, because the street cars were not running, he had to walk "about six kilometers along the way back to my place located in Neuköllner Sonnenallee through the unlit Berlin."¹⁰⁸ His story is a small sample of the chaos engulfing transportation networks during the revolution, which would get worse as more soldiers and sailors joined the armistice.

Though the transportation was in chaos, however, for many it was a thrilling form of chaos. As we saw in Hoelz's story, one could easily become enraptured in the moment. Over the course of a train ride, he became convinced by the mood of the soldiers there that he must help form a

¹⁰⁷ For examples, see the front pages of the *Berliner Tageblatt* and the *Vossische Zeitung* from November 11th and 12th.

¹⁰⁸ Bundesarchiv at Berlin Lichterfelde, SgY 30/0464, Keuschner, Karl, p. 4.

council in his own hometown. Similar, as we saw with Johann Fladung's story in chapter one, one never quite new what to expect from arriving trains during the revolution. Though they did not bring Keuschner his wife on the night of the 9th, they did bring to some stations crowds full of revolutionary soldiers, ready to arm or disarm themselves at a moment's notice.

The arrival of soldiers back home in the fall of 1918 was a process which lasted until late December. While it offered some aid, the Demobilization Office was unable to cope with the hordes of soldiers returning to the cities during this time. Exact figures on the numbers of soldiers on the streets of Berlin are difficult to verify, but, we know that there were 75,000 unemployed there in December 1918, the greater part of which would have been soldiers.¹⁰⁹ Karl Grünberg, who a few weeks after the revolution sought to join up in the *Republikanischer Soldatenwehr* (the Republican Guard, the militias raised in defense of the revolution) in Berlin, wrote that the city was "teeming" with soldiers—unemployed and in the garrisons—so that he figured that the SPD would have no trouble finding volunteers like him to join up.¹¹⁰

The working-class communist Hans Marchwitza described the scene of soldiers coming home in *Sturm auf Essen*, his novel about the Ruhr valley armed struggles of 1919 and 1920:

It is the year 1918, and winter. Snow falls. The men who survived the war come home. The colliery houses to which they return are gray and crooked, and their plaster looks like the shabby fur of old mining pens. The "trench animals" are again to become fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, the women scream, mothers cry, sisters howl: "He is back, O my God!" O my God! The children ask the strange man who is their father: "Do you bring bread?" The word "bread" looks like the scent of flowers in a fairy tale. "Holy Bread," stammer the old people, trembling with hunger, while accepting with reluctance the piece they have received. "The dead believed in us."

A hated, cursed war was followed by a hated, cursed post-war.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Geary, Dick, and Richard J. Evans, editor, "Radicalism and the Worker: Metalworkers and Revolution 1914-23," *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978) p. 274.

¹¹⁰ Grünberg, Karl, and Wolfgang Emmerich, editor, "Als meiner Soldatenratszeit," *Proletarische Lebensläufe: Autobiographische Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zweiten Kultur in Deutschland Band 2: 1914 bis 1945* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1975), p. 187.

¹¹¹ Marchwitza, Hans, *Sturm auf Essen* (1930) <https://nemesis.marxists.org/marchwitza-sturm-auf-essen1.htm>, ch. 1.

Marchwitza's emphasis on the question of bread posed to returning soldiers is very accurate of the real situation. Soldiers returning home found their families, cities, and lives that they knew before the war turned upside down and inside out by material hardship. Unemployment, increasing inflation, and the food rationing system had combined to make life in wartime and postwar Germany very difficult. Families barely recognized their men returning to them—faces haggard and minds numb from the trenches, some missing limbs or with scarred, battered bodies—just as the men hardly recognized their own families—barefoot, dirty, malnourished children, and careworn, thin, wives and relatives.

The Spanish flu was also raging across Europe at this time, and it took as easy victims the many malnourished people of wartime and postwar Germany. The working-class writer, Karl Grünberg, wrote of the flu: "This epidemic, which had been raging since the summer, had taken dangerous forms among the undernourished. Everywhere on the street, in the trams and in the factories, people with peculiar gray faces were found. Doctors, pharmacists and the gravediggers were hardly able keep up with the work the needed to do."¹¹² Grünberg himself was stricken with the *Grippe*, which he called the *Hungertyphus* (hunger typhus). He lay with fever in bed in mid-November, just after the November 9th revolution in Berlin, with an "agonizing cough." His roommate and his two inn-keepers had also been stricken, with his room-mate being forced to go to the emergency rooms of the hospital. Of going to the pharmacy, he wrote that "every second person in line standing behind me received the same ready-made mixture, which tasted disgusting but did not help."¹¹³ With the little that medicine could then do for the *Grippe*, those unfortunate enough to catch it were in for a miserable time as Grünberg had, with a high likelihood of being hospitalized or death.

¹¹² Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfeld, SgY 30/1116, Grünberg, Karl, p. 26.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 28.

Many of the soldiers that returned would be stricken with the disease, just as many of their friends and family that they were returning to already had contracted it. The Spanish flu would claim at least 14,000 soldiers of the German army in its second wave from October to November of 1918.¹¹⁴ Some soldiers were sent away from the front therefore not due to the armistice, but to go to hospital for the *Grippe* or to die from it. As Wever and Bergenc noted as an example, such was the case for the twenty-two-year-old private August Brodschelm, who died of the *Grippe* on November 8th, 1918, as well as for twenty-four-year-old Private Franz X. Bauer, dead of the same disease on November 19th, 1918.¹¹⁵ For the thousands more like these two, young privates, slow, painful death from the flu was their experience with the revolution and armistice.

The “hated, cursed, postwar” Marchwitza discussed was a situation of very real material hardship.¹¹⁶ In January of 1919, 800 Germans a day were dying of dietary deficiencies. In the first three months of 1919, about a third of all children born would die in a few days, with Düsseldorf seeing a child mortality rate of 80%. Living in Germany in December 1918 were 300,000 unemployed, a quarter of whom were in Berlin alone. This figure would jump to about 1.1 million unemployed in Germany by February 1919.¹¹⁷ The affects of the postwar economy on the working class were coupled with the SPD government’s refusal to socialize the economy, leading to increasing radicalization in the winter and spring of 1919. This was the “hated, cursed, postwar” that awaited many of the elated soldiers of Firl’s unit as they marched home near Metz on November 11th. It would soon be more than just the children who were asking the all-important question—“Do you bring bread?”—in the fall and winter of 1918.

¹¹⁴ Wever, Peter C., and Leo van Bergenc “Death from 1918 Pandemic: Influenza During the First World War: A Perspective from Personal and Anecdotal Evidence,” *Influenza Other Respiratory Viruses*, 8 no. 5, (September 2014).

¹¹⁵ Ibid., Section “Influenza Produced no Heroes.”

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Geary, p. 274-275.

For the fathers, brothers, and friends returning as former soldiers, being unable to help provide for loved ones due to the flu, unemployment, and the rising inflation must have been demoralizing. With armistice, they had only just regained some sense of control over their own fates, and then they saw it very quickly taken away from them again with the chaos of the revolution. This would lead many to radicalization, into the waiting arms of the Spartacists/KPD, the Shop Stewards, and the new, radical unions that would form in the Ruhr Valley in the months to come.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how and why some soldiers revolted in November of 1918. What revolution initially meant to many coming back from the Western Front was simple: armistice. The end of the war meant an end to the control of the Kaiser and officers over their bodies, minds, spirits, and psyches. It meant the liberation to have control over one's own fate again, and to have great physical security from harm and well-being. As a part of this process, officers, who had so often been the source of the abuse of well-being and the hoarders of army resources, were stripped of the ranks, pushed to the sides of the columns, and had their old headquarters occupied. In their places, the men elected new leaders from their own ranks, men whom they trusted would fight for their survival.

What the men felt was revolutionary was their bringing the armistice home, the armistice which they were the reification of. Contained partially in their concept of armistice was their concept of revolution. Coming home was as much a part of the act of revolution for the men as was the stripping officers of their ranks and the election of new leaders through the council systems. This meant that the revolution did not typically take place in the trenches. Rather, it took place as they were on their ways home.

Upon arriving home, the men were met with the shock of the postwar economy and malnourished, needy families and friends. If it was thrilling for Max Hoelz to ride with the soldiers and be with them in their moments of revolutionary bliss—the bliss of possibility and freedom—coming home was shock of reality. The real economic woes and challenges that lay ahead for the soldiers returning from the front throughout the November days would become critical drivers of their radicalization and further participation in the revolution. The realization that the war that they had been fighting was contributing to such misery at home must have been one of the final blows to the identities of soldiers as such before they shirked it off. The speech of the socialist Private X from the barn described the situation well: "Because we [soldiers] endure and hold our own, our wives and children must go hungry, and we must die, because those at home are holding their own." While the war continued, men were dying and suffering in defense of those back home while those back home were dying and suffering in defense of those very same men. In the fall of 1918, it was not civilians who 'stabbed in the back' 'undefeated' German army. Rather, the longer the German Army fought, the more they drove the knife into themselves and the more defeated they became. In November, soldiers realized this, and tried to stop the knife by returning home.

Chapter Three: The Spark and the Powder Keg: Sailors in the Revolution

1. Introduction

In the fall of 1918, sailors across Germany, like their comrades in the trenches, would revolt and mutiny. In what is commonly considered to be the beginning of the November Revolution, sailors at Kiel mutinied and protested over some of their mutineers that had been imprisoned, protests which then sparked into a broader anti-war movement. Other sections of the *Kriegsmarine* (the imperial navy of the Kaiserreich) mutinied after those sailors at Kiel did, in places like Cuxhaven, Travemünde (the river fortress at modern-day Lübeck) and Wilhelmshaven. This chapter will explore experiences of mutiny through the eyes of several working-class organizers who came to play important roles in their respective local revolutionary movements. It will show how, like the soldiers, the emphasis in their experience was on survival. In the November Revolution, survival became the basis of political action for the sailors. The next section will explore the basics of the situation of the men in the German Navy towards the end of the war, leading us into the third section, in which we will trace through the eyes of participants the mutinies that shook the navy all along the coastline in late October and early November of 1918. We will then conclude and tie together some of these experiences.

2. The German Navy

Though they were larger than any other protest, and sparked the revolution, the November 1918 mutinies were not isolated events. Like the soldiers we saw in the last section, and the workers we saw in the first chapter, the war and Prussian militarism would radicalize sailors in ways previously unknown to those of the *Kriegsmarine*. Before the mutiny at Kiel in 1918, there was, for instance, a large mutiny of sailors in 1917. Led by the socialist Max Reichpietsch and a non-socialist sailor, Albin Köbis, a mutiny in the summer of 1917 saw several hundred sailors

abandon their ships to demonstrate against the war. Though Reichpietsch and Köbis would be executed, and the other demonstrators imprisoned, it was very influential on the sailors of the time.

When sailors revolted in Kiel in 1918, ideas of justice and carrying on the legacy of Reichpietsch and Köbis were heavily ingrained in the movement, thanks in part to the efforts of the Marxist press to make martyrs of them. Lenin himself discussed briefly the failed mutiny as evidence of the coming international proletarian revolution, and called on his fellow Bolsheviks to support the mutinous sailors before it was too late and the moment had passed.¹¹⁸ Walter Beling, a socialist who would participate in the sailors' mutiny in Kiel in November of 1918, recalled the Reichpietsch-Köbis mutiny as part of his account of the revolution, tying it to the increased agitation on the ground at the time against the war and the excitement of the February Revolution in Russia.¹¹⁹ This uprising has also since been mythologized in the narrative of the sailors' mutiny of 1918 by German socialist culture, with the 1958 film *Das Lied der Matrosen* and the 1969 television play *1917 Marinemeuterei* making heroes of Reichpietsch and Köbis.

As Daniel Horn has shown, the November Revolution amongst sailors was also related to the certain social contexts of the German navy. After 1898, when Alfred von Tirpitz began a program of modernization of the navy as a competitor and deterrent against the British fleet, class inequalities between officers and enlisted men in the lower ranks became far more pronounced. What used to be a small fleet of mixed classes that sailed around the world and had an appreciation for intellectualism and other cultures, quickly became a showy, opportunistic playground for the industrial elites that rarely left the North Sea at all. The expansion of the navy saw Tirpitz demanding more and more outdated battleships, which, with their many guns and smokestacks,

¹¹⁸ Lenin, Vladimir, "The Crisis Has Matured," *Rabochy*, October 27, 1917.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/20.htm>.

¹¹⁹ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde, SgY 30/1942, Beling, Walter, p. 10.

looked very imposing and impressive to citizens in other nations. However, while these battleships were impressive looking, they performed miserably in comparison to the British *Dreadnought* and other cruisers, who could easily handle them with their longer-ranged, heavier guns.¹²⁰

Indeed, the numerous battleships constructed would be largely useless through the war. While battleships mostly hugged the shoreline, seeing little action except in the Battle of the Jutland in 1916, mine-layers, towing ships, scouts, and submarines came to have an increasingly important role in keeping the British fleet at bay. Yet, the battleships were populated with hundreds of thousands of sailors. The boredom of the men on battleships was coupled with very poor working conditions. Soap rations and food rations in particular were high points of contention, especially given that officers, with their increased pay, were able to buy more of these essential goods than enlisted men. Smaller ships, meanwhile, had a smaller officer class and saw more activity, making disparities between working conditions lesser, while morale was higher due to the increased activity. With these conditions, it was primarily on the large battleships that mutinies first occurred in both the summer of 1917 and the fall of 1918.^{121, 122}

Daniel Horn and other scholars have argued that the initial mutinies were not very political in character. Looking at the demands of the councils and the actions of the men, they have concluded that the mutinies were initially almost exclusively about working conditions and problems specific to the navy, rather than about broad questions of the war, restructuring to a republic, or socialization of the economy.¹²³

¹²⁰ Horn, Daniel, *The German Naval Mutinies Of World War I* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1969), Preface, Ch. 1, Ch. 3.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Mulligan, Timothy, "Angry Sailors or Political Revolution?" Recorded lecture, The Western Front Association's East Coast (USA) Branch WW1 History Symposium, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQa3cgNQeQL>.

¹²³ Horn, Ch. 4. Mulligan, „Angry Sailors or Political Revolution?“ Dähnhardt, Dirk, *Revolution in Kiel*, Doctoral Thesis (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 1978).

Alongside these structural factors was added the “Admiral’s Revolt.” With the war coming to a close, Admirals von Scheer and von Hipper, among several others, decided to call for a final ride of the German High Seas Fleet. The troops were ordered out to do one final battle with the British that, it was hoped, would do sufficient damage to their fleet that the peace terms might be swayed more towards Germany’s favor. The lofty admirals also craved the glory and legacy that their names would hold should they succeed in going down with their ships in battle, rather than the shame of surrendering unused battle ships without a fight. These suicide orders, which became known to the men through rumor in the final days of October 1918, while it was daily being published updates on the status of the peace talks, were the final catalysts to mutiny on top of the structural factors just outlined.

It should also be noted that, although little research has been done on the mutinous tendencies of other types of workers in the navy, it is known that the stokers—those who worked in the boiler rooms and kept the engine fires going—were consistently the most mutinous. Among the many men arrested for the summer 1917 mutiny, most were stokers. Being in the belly of the ship, and having essential control over whether ships could move, they also were in a key position to make mutinies effective. Their consistency in starting revolutionary action would show in the fall of 1918.¹²⁴

Now we turn to an examination of the *Erlebnisberichte* of sailors in the November Revolution. I will with this show how the sailors were intensely political in their actions, contrary to the arguments of Horn and others for a depoliticized understanding of the mutinies.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

3. *Sailors in the Revolution*

Walter Beling was a working-class socialist agitator, active in the anti-war demonstrations in 1915 and 1916. In 1916, after having served alongside machine gunners, he was transferred to the *Kriegsmarine* with four other comrades who, like him, had been machinists. This was, according to Beling, so that they could be used as consultants on the “feverish” construction of submarines, which was accelerating due to the naval stalemate and in advance of the soon-to-be unrestricted submarine warfare campaign.¹²⁵

Beling was in Kiel in the fall of 1918 when the news of the “Admirals’ Revolt” broke out. As Beling put it: “The leadership of the German fleet thought it right, therefore, to go down in “honors,” as it was called, as the fleet was expected to be handed over at the conclusion of the cease-fire.” However, Beling noticed that “even a part of the officers did not go along with this monstrous plan.” On the 29th of October, there was what Beling termed “mass disobedience” in the High Seas Fleet against the plan in the ports at Wilhelmshaven, where the ships were supposed to ride out from. In light of this, the Third Squadron of ships was sent back to Kiel, carrying with it many sailors determined not to have their lives spent for the “honor” of the admirals.¹²⁶ Beling continued:

To prevent further military adventures, the stokers on the armored cruisers “Markgraf,” “Kurfürst,” and “König,” pulled the fires from the boilers under the slogan “fire out.” After this the stokers of these ships were detained. Obedience was then indignantly refused on all ships. Simultaneously, a mass rally was called for the release of the arrested stokers on November 1 at the parade ground in Kiel. The Supreme Naval Command tried to the utmost to maintain discipline. On November 3, it [the command] had Kiel on the highest alert, after which all sailors had to board their ships. But the opposite happened. All the sailors who were still on board went ashore in a huge crowd of demonstrators in which the shipyard workers also participated. The front of the crowd had already reached the parade grounds. Everything was happening peacefully. Suddenly a military patrol under the command of a lieutenant opened fire with machine guns on the demonstrators. For a moment the crowd was frozen. Then a storm of indescribable indignation broke through the demonstration. “Now it is enough! Stop now!” was then heard screamed again and again. In unprecedented excitement, the lieutenant was defeated, military stripes stripped, the nearby police station occupied, the arsenal stormed,

¹²⁵ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/1942, Beling, Walter p. 8-9.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 12-13.

the imprisoned stokers freed. Then we went back to the ship. The officers were disarmed, the military insignias torn off, the red flag was hoisted. At noon on November 4, all the warships were in the hands of the revolutionary soldiers....a workers' and soldiers' council was elected from the...larger ships and the most important factories, which issued the following appeal: "Comrades! Yesterday will be memorable in the history of Germany. For the first time the political power has been placed in the hands of workers and soldiers. There is no turning back. Great tasks lie ahead of us! In order to fulfill them, unity and decisiveness of the movement is essential."¹²⁷

Also at Kiel was the twenty-eight-year-old Karl Artelt, whose experience was briefly discussed in the first chapter. His experience complements Beling's, as his account offers more detail on the actions and situation on the ground. A socialist agitator, Artelt worked various industrial jobs, fitting engines, running on shipping lines, and, holding positions in the German navy. When the war broke out, Artelt was forced to re-join the navy. He then participated in numerous anti-war actions, including the 1917 munitions strike. This landed him in prison. There, he met and interacted with numerous other socialist and radical agitators, including the Social Democratic leader from Antwerp, Joseph Verlinden, who influenced him greatly. Upon his release, Artelt again got in trouble for distributing fellows in the parole work battalion to which he was assigned, which saw him spend six weeks in Bruges to be "examined" for nervous disorders.¹²⁸ He was then reassigned to the torpedo department at Kiel in 1918.

Artelt had many connections in the local labor movement at Kiel, and worked persistently to have as many agitating conversations as possible with his fellows in the torpedo department in which he worked. In response to the "Admirals' Revolt," Artelt wrote, there was a general mood that "They [the officers] could no longer intimidate us." The stokers who refused to light the boiler fires in the third squadron were joined by others who attempted to ram ships into the harbor, so as to damage them and make them unfit for service. Two hundred sailors were arrested for these

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

¹²⁸ Kuhl, Renate and Klaus. "Novemberrevolution." 1997. http://www.kurkuhl.de/en/novrev/artelt_cv.html.

actions on October 31st, which, Artelt said, only heightened the determination for “revolutionary action.”¹²⁹

Great assemblies, as Beling noted, were had outside of Kiel. These were held at the *Exerzierplatz* (the exercise fields). The order of curfew and to return to barracks was ignored. “No one followed this order,” Artelt wrote, and “many soldiers and citizens flocked to the rally.” The demonstrations that Beling saw hundreds of sailors walk off their ships to join started here on November 2nd and 3rd. Artelt himself gave a speech at the demonstration on 2nd, which saw him elevated among the participating workers.¹³⁰

After the assembly on the 2nd, Artelt, consulted with some members of the USPD to secure the attendance to the meetings of some of its representatives. He then went to talk to local leaders of the SPD. With some snobbery, he was asked, after having detailed the decisions of the day, whether or not he wanted there to be another put down of a sailors’ revolt, as there had been in the summer of 1917.

Artelt also participated in the march on November 3rd through town that Beling saw attacked by machine gunners. The shock of the violence did indeed hit hard on that afternoon, as Beling said, even more so, because the crowd had earlier “effortlessly” been disarming those soldiers that had been sent by the admiralty to stop their demonstrations. Of the violence, Artelt wrote: “we were received by machine gun fire. Our demonstration stopped. When we realized that no one had been hit, we continued. Then, the machine gunners shot directly into our train. Forty or fifty demonstrators, mostly women and children, collapsed under the fire.” According to Artelt, eight were killed and twenty-nine seriously wounded. The defeated lieutenant that Beling

¹²⁹ Artelt, Karl, „Mit der roten Fahne zum Vizeadmiral Souchon,“ from *Vorwärts und nicht vergessen. Erlebnisberichte aktiver Teilnehmer der Novemberrevolution 1918/19*, Commissioned by the Institute for Marxism-Leninism by the ZK of the SED (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1958) p. 91.

¹³⁰ Beling, p. 13-14. Artelt, p. 92-93.

mentioned was one Sublieutenant Steinhäuser, who was hit in the head by angry crowd members with the blunt end of a rifle. After the street battle, the crowds brought their wounded inside the Kaiser-Café, laying them on sofas and putting the dead on the floor. “The spark had exploded the powder keg.”¹³¹

The next morning, November 4th, all members of the armed forces in Kiel were to report to their barracks. Artelt’s commander, one Captain Bartels, addressed his unit outside their barracks, telling them that it was not the job of the soldier or sailor to be political. Artelt noted specifically how Bartels closed his speech: “Soldiers *should* obey, soldiers *must* obey, and soldiers *do* obey.”¹³² After he had left the table he gave the speech from, Artelt was drawn “as if by a magnet” to that same table to speak. He told the sailors to vote to organize Soldier councils. Those officers that had had the misfortune to challenge Artelt’s speech were “ruthlessly disarmed” by those of lower rank in the crowd. Next, they stormed the armory of their barracks and organized their local groups into councils, with Artelt at the chair of them all. A list of seven demands was developed, including calls for abdication of the Kaiser, the end of the war, the release of their imprisoned comrades, the release of those who participated in the strikes of 1917, the release of all other political prisoners, and the immediate granting of voting rights for women. These demands were later molded into the final list of the fourteen demands of the Kiel Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council:

1. The release of all inmates and political prisoners.
2. Complete freedom of speech and the press.
3. The abolition of mail censorship.
4. Appropriate treatment of crews by superiors.
5. No punishment for all comrades on returning to the ships and to the barracks.
6. The launching of the fleet is to be prevented under all circumstances.
7. Any defensive measures involving bloodshed are to be prevented.
8. The withdrawal of all troops not belonging to the garrison.

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 94.

¹³² My italics added for emphasis.

9. All measures for the protection of private property will be determined by the Soldier's Council immediately.
 10. Superiors will no longer be recognized outside of duty.
 11. Unlimited personal freedom of every man from the end of his tour of duty until the beginning of his next tour of duty.
 12. Officers who declare themselves in agreement with the measures of the newly established Soldiers' Council, are welcomed in our midst. All the others have to quit their duty without entitlement to provision.
 13. Every member of the Soldiers' Council is to be released from any duty.
 14. All measures to be introduced in the future can only be introduced with the consent of the Soldiers' Council.
- These demands are orders of the Soldiers' Council and are binding for every military person.¹³³

When the division commander, present at one of the meetings that resulted in the initial seven demands, objected that the demands were only political, and not economic or social, Artelt responded that they had been told earlier that soldiers should not be political. They were therefore simply getting the politics out of the way first.

With Artelt and Beling, we see the revolution in Kiel unfolding both on and off land. Both in the shipyards and on board the vessels in the harbor, the primary goal was to destroy the instances of Prussian militarism: the officer class, their insignias, to strip them of their weapons. The class and naval caste antagonisms were strong enough to unite both those on and offshore, to draw the sailors from their ships and then back again to hoist up red flags—to draw the shipyard workers to the middle of town, away from the factories, and then to their occupations of various buildings of government power like the armory and police office.

We see also a sense of the finality of the revolution. Unlike the 1917 sailors' mutiny, the participants here had a definite sense that this was to be the decisive end of the war and overthrow of the hated officer class. As the statement released by the Soldiers' and Workers' Council put it, in part: "For the first time the political power has been placed in the hands of workers and soldiers.

¹³³ *Schleswig-Holsteinische Volkszeitung*, November 5, 1918, accessed in „Die Kieler 14 Punkte“ by Klaus Kuhl, http://www.kurkuhl.de/docs/kieler_14punkte.pdf.

There is no turning back....”¹³⁴ As Artelt wrote, the days before the revolution saw a situation where the officers “could no longer intimidate us.”¹³⁵

In Beling’s brief account, we also should take note of how the sailors left the ships to join the demonstrations, but then chose to board them again to take them over. They left as demonstrators, and returned as revolutionary occupiers of that space. What had started as a movement in the bowels of ship by the stokers in sweaty boiler rooms had been moved to all levels of the ships, culminating in the hoisting of red flags over the imperial naval banners and the removal of the officers. They also did this to ensure that the ships could not be used by the officers—or other sailors who chose not to mutiny—to continue the war. The primary aim was to halt any further “military adventures.”¹³⁶

Horn and others have argued, as we saw in the introduction to this section, that the sailors’ mutinies were initially over issues in the military and naval systems rather than for explicitly political aims. However, Artelt’s comment in response to the division commander that they were getting politics out of the way first with their demands that appeared to focus only on military issues complicates this view. Artelt, at least, was conscious of the fact that these initial demands lacked a socio-political edge. That he was elected to lead the soldiers’ and workers’ council with this understand could therefore speak to similar sentiments amongst his men, a similar understanding that the officer caste was the first thing that needed to be changed.

We also cannot divorce from social context the fourteen demands of the Kiel sailors. Recall that the officer caste was comprised mostly of the sons of wealthy industrialists, and that the rank-and-file, especially during the war with conscription in full swing, was comprised mostly of urban

¹³⁴ Beling, p. 13.

¹³⁵ Artelt, p. 91.

¹³⁶ Beling, p. 13.

working-class and rural farming men. Point 10, which called for an end to officers' privileges outside of duty, was closely informed by this class nature of the navy. This was a call for egalitarianism in as many social environments as possible, a point further evidenced by the constant stripping of officers of their rank, authority, insignias, and weapons which Beling and Artelt both witnessed. The men wanted, as the officers had, more control over their time off duty (point 11), as well as access the privileges of uncensored mail and press action (points 2 and 3). Lastly, that Artelt claims that original seven points, which went even further than the final in their call for abdication of the Kaiser and womens' suffrage, shows at the very least that some groups of workers and sailors *were* explicitly organizing with an aim to affect broad, socio-economic and political change. The politics of survival were rationalized as actions against the Kaiserreich, the officer class, and the war.

Reinforcing the apolitical interpretation of the mutiny's first days, however, is the fact that political parties were largely absent from both the accounts of Beling and Artelt. Rather than parties, the unifying message was between rank-and-file sailors and workers against an abusive admiralty and officer class. As we saw, too, from Artelt's experience with the snobbish SPD representatives, the largest socialist party at the time of the mutiny also rejected, initially, any endorsement of it. This discussion of the rejection of the SPD of the idea of coming to the demonstrations—and the USPD's agreement to send representatives—was the only mentioning of parties in Artelt's account. This is also itself highly suggestive: the demonstrations were a movement for workers and sailors, originated by them. Political parties were invited as a type of afterthought. This was likely a reciprocal relation, as many of the sailors, Artelt included, likely did not want to have much to do with the party that had not backed their abortive uprising in the summer of 1917. It would only be once the "bloodhound" of the party, Defense Minister Gustav

Noske, would come to Kiel and successfully attempt to become the elected head of the Worker's and Soldiers' Council there in the week following the mutiny that the SPD would endorse the movement. In other words, it was only once the party leadership felt sure that it had control of the situation that they fully endorsed it.

Karl Baier was born in 1887, and was a carpenter before his participation in a strike in 1906 saw him blacklisted, forcing him into other mechanical work. From 1907-1910, he served his compulsory service in the *Kriegsmarine*, aboard the battleship *Prinz Adalbert* as an artillery worker. As Dorn highlighted, this was a period when the navy was becoming increasingly showy, while its real ability to make war and its material conditions for enlisted men rather than officers were on the decline. As quoted in chapter one, Baier was turned radically antimilitarist by his time spent in the navy due to these factors: "This military service with its drill and *Kadavergehorsam* pushed me to the side of the antimilitarists and against the war."¹³⁷ He remembered the first book that he bought, August Bebel's take on women's liberation in *Women and Socialism*, a purchase soon followed by another, that of Marx's *Das Kapital*. This theoretical insight would lead him to socialist organizing.

When the war came, he was re-enlisted back into the *Kriegsmarine*. In 1917, however, he was lucky enough to be randomly selected from his company alongside twenty-five other men to fill desk jobs. He was placed at Cuxhaven. There, he started to organize alongside other socialists, selling newspaper subscriptions. He and other well-trusted comrades (*Vertrauensmänner*) from the naval base and some workers from the local factories would meet weekly in the evenings to discuss recent happenings and the progress of the war. They especially focused their discussion at these meetings on what was occurring in Russia and what the status of the Bolsheviks was.

¹³⁷ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0027 Baier, Karl, , p. 2.

Eventually, Baier's small cadre of socialists began to organize the workers and sailors by stewards, in accordance with the different sections of the shipyard: "One [man] for the Mine Sweepers, for the Torpedo boats, for the ship artillery, for the connection with the labor force..."¹³⁸ Baier noted, however, that before the revolution, they had no contact with those in either Kiel or Wilhelmshaven, the origin points of the November 1918 revolution. The revolutionizing force at Cuxhaven was not these connections, but the so-called "Admiral's Revolt" described above and the victory of the Bolsheviks in late October.

In the final days of October, in the midst the Bolshevik Revolution and as information was emerging about the Admirals' plans for the men to die "in glory" even though peace was nearly assured, a cruiser came to the port at Cuxhaven to try and unload mines, a common practice. However, this time, they were delayed a day behind schedule in doing so. When the stokers on this next day were ordered to light the fires of the engines, however, which would have allowed the ship to leave, the sailors refused to order them to do so (sailors held a slightly higher rank than the stokers). "Now there was confusion on the staffs of the various commands. The crews, on the other hand, developed a fighting spirit that led us to inform each other [of what was going on] on a daily basis." With confusion amongst the ships of the port and the officers, the crewmen "deliberated how we could arm ourselves," as there were not sufficient stocks on board the ships for both those on land and those on board.¹³⁹

During this time of confusion, the gendarmerie were also looking for a certain man named "Beyer." Instead, however, they imprisoned Baier's comrade and friend Hermann Beyer, who worked on a ship in the harbor. "The crew demanded [his] immediate release [and] halted work

¹³⁸ Baier, p. 15.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

until his release took place on the same day [which] did not result in reprisals. This also showed how far the “morale” had already dropped.”¹⁴⁰

On November 5th, Baier had read about the events in Kiel and heard about the revolts that were beginning to spread across Germany. The comrades from his small group met to decide upon what actions they could take to further the cause of the revolution. He then went with a trusted comrade to the Schneiderstube Artillery Barracks to find his friend Bismarck, where they met with other shop stewards and decided to hold a mass meeting of workers at the *Zur Sonne* labor union house in town. Shop stewards, armed and with red arm bands, were sent out around town to deliver the news to workers and sailors alike.

Those who were not armed were to steal weapons from the armory in the mine workers’ department under cover of darkness that night. A senior mate of Baier’s in the mine-working department of the shipyards helped to get the armory doors open at 5 o’clock that evening, an action which Baier assured him would not land him in trouble. This mate convinced Baier also to bring a gun to the planned meeting, and Baier was very preoccupied with thoughts of “whether everything would work out.” Baier wrote that he was “optimistic,” as “After everything that had happened on my part, victory had to be ours today.” He talked to his comrades to ensure that workers would be there alongside the soldiers and sailors, so that they could hold elections to both workers’ and soldiers’ councils and have them organized at the same time.¹⁴¹

Baier continued:

The gathering must have sounded like wildfire, for when we came into the congregation at 8 o’clock, no apple could reach the ground, and with some difficulty I was able to get to the stage, since I was the leader and the spokesman. An indescribable mood was among the sailors and workers present, most of whom had appeared with weapons. When I came on stage and explained what was going on that day, that the war was over for us, that we were going to arrest the admiral, that we would depose the officers, and that from then on, the Workers’ and

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 18-19.

Soldiers' Council would seize power... Then I read out the Kiel demands, which we had [also adopted] with some political additions, and then [I] called for workers' and soldiers' council elections. I marked how the sentences came to my tongue, how my heart and mind widened, how I won the situation and was carried by the fanatical jubilation that animated the gathering.¹⁴²

The elections were completed, with Baier being made a chairman alongside a comrade Kraatz from his socialist group. Then, the crowd attempted to move out in front of the pub where the meeting took place to continue demonstrating, with the two groups of armed sailors and the newly elected council heads to lead the march. They succeeded only "with difficulty" in getting the crowd out of the pub, as it was very full and crowded inside. The streets were "black" with "sailors, workers, men and women," and they marched to the commandant's office to deliver their demands on behalf of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council to one Rear Admiral Engelhardt, who was in command there.¹⁴³

At the hotel where many officers lived, a crowd had gathered "to know what was going on in the meeting and what would happen next." Baier went up to address the crowd, and convinced them to join that crowd already on its way to Engelhardt: "We were all thrilled to know the success of our political work." When they arrived at the commandant's office, the on-duty officer was "amazed" that so many people wanted to go and speak to the commander of Cuxhaven. The council leaders were allowed into a room in the building, at which point they spoke by telephone with the commandant and explained to him what had happened—the end of the war, the formation of the councils, and more. The admiral was promised safe travel from his villa, located outside of town, and arrived, at which point a lengthy conversation was had regarding the demands of the council. To most of the demands, the admiral responded that control over these matters rested with his

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 20.

superiors, and that there was nothing he could do. This was also the case for those demands about food for officers in men.¹⁴⁴

Even though most of the demands were therefore written off, Baier felt that the admiral “had to realize that his powers had ended. Weapons had already been taken from the high-ranking officers present.” The admiral “realized that there was no way out for the militarists, [and] he probably had the intention to turn the tides by action. He pulled out of his breast pocket his revolver, which was witnessed by a member of the Soldiers’ Council, who stole this weapon and gave it to me.”¹⁴⁵

Then, Baier and his men were given the command that the garrison and command could be taken over by the Workers’ and Soldiers Council, with all officers being relieved of service. The officers’ mess hall was to be occupied starting from the next day as the new headquarters of the Council, the admiral was to be locked in his villa under armed revolutionary guard, and a liaison between the officers and the Council was to be left, so as to help with technical matters regarding demobilization. All the telephone lines were also cut off, to prevent any calls for aid by the officers from being made. With this, the officers were then released to their homes. “So the question of power was solved,” concluded Baier. He then went out to address the crowd, and two more meetings were had—that night and the next morning—to organize the Council members and begin to distribute duties. Even through all the anxious waiting, “there was great enthusiasm among all the people...”¹⁴⁶

With Baier’s experience, we see the revolution from the eyes of one of its working-class leaders. The eruption of revolutionary activity that Baier was involved in highlights the very quick

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 20-21.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 21-23.

escalation for people in the revolution. Baier had for years been organizing and involved in socialist politics, yet, like other organizers, he had no control over when the actual uprising broke out. As a working-class leader, we instead see him scrambling to take charge of the situation, a process aided by his previously existing organization and small cadre of socialists. Amidst the confusion, he was able to direct the members of his group to send out a message and call for a meeting to elect a workers' and soldiers' council, slowly organizing the mutiny and helping to create bodies which had invested authority and legitimacy.

He was likely already familiar with councils of workers and soldiers, having been very interested in following the events of the Russian Revolution. However, it was only after having read on November 5th about what had happened at Kiel, where workers' and soldiers' councils had been organized to direct the revolt, that Baier and his comrades decided to follow this course of action. Baier directly read out the demands from Kiel, and took them verbatim to be the demands of those at Cuxhaven as well: "Then I read out the Kiel demands, which we had [also adopted] with some political additions."¹⁴⁷ Though there was, to Baier, no connection with Kiel or Wilhelmshaven before the revolution, when the mutiny at Kiel started, the connection was immediately made. Again, Bayat's concept of passive networks is useful; sailors and shipyard workers, though many miles away and not in direct contact, almost instantly organized alongside each other the moment the possibility presented itself. Included in the shared identity of sailors (and shipyard workers, many of whom were also technically in the *Kriegsmarine*) were shared grievances. Their harsh conditions on the ships or in the factories, experiences with an increasingly posh and classist caste of officers, the boredom of the war, and, finally, their absolute refusal to go out on the final suicide mission at the whim of the admirals united these people. And, where the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 18.

passive network failed, there were active organizers like Baier and his comrades to step in, mobilizing the many sailors and shipyard workers who had previously been (or still were) in the SPD or trade unions in their civilian lives. Even though the telephone wires in Cuxhaven had to be cut to prevent the officers and admirals from calling for counterrevolutionary aid, other, immaterial wires had already been passively laid; the current of revolution, once started at Kiel, lit them up.

The organization of the meeting at *Zur Sonne* also deserves some analysis. That Baier and his comrades decided that the messengers should wear red arm bands and be armed is key to their understanding of the situation, and to the understanding of what the sailors and workers considered to be the authorities of the mutiny. We must here recall that many of these sailors and workers were already involved in the SPD, or had had experiences in the labor movement before the war. Even without direct involvement, red was the universal color of the working-class movement at this time, and its sight on the arm bands of the messengers would have been reassuring to any workers that were reached out to and asked to attend this strange, new meeting. Red was also the color of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and was therefore an important signatory of international solidarity with Russian comrades. That the messengers were armed shows too the forcefulness of the situation. It would take armed force to break the admirals and their militarism; the sailors and shipyard workers were not going to let this revolution fail as the 1917 summer mutiny did. If the message that an organizing meeting for a workers' and soldiers' council was being held at *Zur Sonne* was not direct enough, the message that the appearance of an armed sailor with red armbands would have been. Their appearance essentially said: "the revolution is here, it is armed, and it is waiting for you to help organize it."

With Baier, we also see the more explicitly politicized side of the revolution. With sailors, as was briefly explained in the introduction to this section, the primary concerns had been the deteriorating working conditions, food and basic goods rations (and pay to buy these), and the admirals' intent to sacrifice the men for their own glory. What Baier and like-minded socialists did was to turn these initial, material grievances of survival into politicized aims. We see with Baier in Cuxhaven the point where grievances are processed into societal ills with real causes—the officer class and the Kaiserreich—and with real solutions—organization into councils and the destruction of the Wilhelmine Empire. As many revolutionary theorists including Jack Goldstone have noted, this point where grievances are processed into problems with ideologically related solutions is crucial to revolutionary movement formation.¹⁴⁸

Importantly, Baier's experience also confirms some of the ideas about the sailor's uprisings in the fall of 1918 that Horn posited. We saw the immense resentment that the men had for the officers as a class, an item that Horn highlighted as a driving factor of the revolution. This was a relationship of class and naval caste antagonisms that cut both ways, as evidenced by the admiral's attempt to draw his revolver on Baier during negotiations. Recall too that the lieutenant guarding the Commandant's Office was "amazed" that so many people should have the audacity to march in and demand to see the admiral on such short notice, nonetheless to present to him a list of demands.¹⁴⁹ Included in the demands, and among the first actions taken, was to strip all officers of their ranks and weapons, and to imprison some. On their way to deliver the demands to the Read Admiral, Baier and his crowd ran into a *different* crowd that had formed in anger outside the hotel where many officers lived. The crowds then quickly combined in unity for their hatred of the officer class to go and deliver their demands. In Cuxhaven, the immediate moment of the revolution—the

¹⁴⁸ Goldstone, Jack, *Revolutions, A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) Ch. 1.

¹⁴⁹ Baier, p. 20.

primary concern—was to mobilize against the officers as a class. From the moment that the stokers refused to light any more fires, it was the officers who were to blame. Baier and his comrades recognized this, and, merged it with their rhetoric into a more comprehensive political program against capitalism and the Kaiser.

Karl Bock was a sailor on active duty on a battleship in the days leading up to the revolution. The two letters he wrote to his sister during this time in 1918 detail for us the life on board a revolutionary ship.

He found himself in Wilhelmshaven on October 28th, 1918, after coming from Berlin. and his comrades in the navy exchanged their rumors, Bock telling of Liebknecht's speech in Berlin days before, and they of the rumored "Admirals Revolt." "To me they said that our officers took an oath in secret sitting ashore, that they agreed to make an advance with the fleet, and to, so to speak, to a hero's death before making peace."¹⁵⁰

At 11:30 PM, on November 2nd, Bock was lying in bed on his ship, trying to go to sleep. Suddenly, everyone began to move to the upper deck:

there's something going on! I, of course, went up. All our crew gathered to demonstrate. Everyone moved aft, to the officers' deck amidst shouts and noises (the men were not permitted to go there). Suddenly, our first officer arrives and begins: "Dear comrades! You know that we have a people's government, that we are facing peace, and that it is in all of our interests to get peace. But the enemy is still in the West, we cannot yet rest our weapons, we owe this to our people, to our government. Previously [for] Emperor and Empress. That's why we shouldn't stop five minutes too early. So I ask the good elements of the crew, I appeal to them that they act on the bad elements, that they do not seek military insubordination. I ask you, go to sleep. Do it for me!" The whole speech was accompanied by interjections like "Listen! Listen!" "The time for this is over!" "The food handlers receive carrots!"....Regardless, the whole speech was in vain, it was all worthless. Various officers tried, and [attempted to] disperse [the crowd], but it was useless. Shouts like, "They have no business here, throw them overboard! Down with them!" At length, a deck officer tried. He began: "What do you really want?" The crowd called back: "We will not go out!" "We do not want to let ourselves be blown up!" He said: "Come on! One at a time." Most people were reluctant to accept this request because they would face harsh penalties. (He gave his word of honor, assured guarantees.) Finally, when the danger was assured to be gone, one stepped forward....It was again said, how we could have a

¹⁵⁰ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0081, Bock, Karl, (1918) p. 1

government run by us, and yet that the fleet must remain intact until the very end?...he [the deck officer] must have drunk courage, [as] he said: "Colleagues, I would go today to the West Front today, if need be, even though I am married." To which we replied "We would not!" Finally, the heckling became too colorful for him to [be able to] pull himself away [from the crowd].¹⁵¹

Similar movements were happening on board all ships. Bock observed that "every boat that passed was greeted with shouts, such as "Up with the Bolsheviks! Down with the war! Up with the Soldiers' Council! Three hurrahs for the Bolsheviks!" There was, thankfully, no violence to "sour the air." Eventually, the officers again tried to appease the men with "pretty words," which managed to quiet the men at around 2 AM. They had been at it for almost twenty-four hours, and awoke again at 5 AM to cries of "The Bolsheviks rise, rise!" There was disruption again until 8 AM, and it was agreed to not follow orders that would take the men out to do battle with the British. Then, they sailed to Kiel.

On the way, the first officer was forced to allow free movement aboard the ship, "to prevent riots." The men then voted on whether they wished to hoist the red flag for their approach at Kiel, for they had heard of the organization there of the councils. They were faced with the choice, to "remain with the government or to join the movement." Put differently, the question was: "Who wants to go to Kiel with the red flag, and who wants to stay under the old flag?" For Bock, the question was easy: "I voted for the first [red flag]. Why? We fought four years of war. For whom? For the ruling classes. Now is the hour when we become human. The thing came out of our ship in the first place....Now is the time, the signal is given. Violence surrenders before the law....if we exclude ourselves [do not hoist the red flag], we can not enter Kiel, otherwise we will be shot at."¹⁵² Soon after, the men elected a commission to send delegates to Berlin, to find out exactly

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 2-3.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 3-4.

what was going on. It was decided to enter Kiel with a neutral flag, even though, according to Bock, the majority of the men on board were for the red flag.

Bock's remarkable detail of the mutinous men shows again the abruptness of the revolution. At one point, there was only rumors. Then, in the middle of the night, he was woken up by a mass of activity, a large crowd shouting down officers and refusing to follow orders that they thought would lead them to their death. Confusion and uncertainty reigned in all but the fact that the men were absolutely determined not to go out to do battle with the British.

The failure of all the entreaties of the officers to calm the men showed again their hatred of the officer class as well. Recall the discourse used on the first night by the officers attempting to turn the men back to obeying the order to attack the British. The officers considered there to be no interruption of service to country, regardless of who was in power. So long as "the enemy is still in the West, we cannot yet rest our weapons, we owe this to our people, to our government. Previously [for] Emperor and Empress," they said.¹⁵³ This was in direct contrast with the men, who saw no point in going out when peace was on the way.

The differences in the mentality of the enlisted men as opposed to the officers who were still wholly prepared to die for the Kaiser was most apparent when the deck officer attempted to chorale the men by telling them: "Colleagues, I would go today to the West Front today, if need be, even though I am married."¹⁵⁴ It was to the officers a matter of duty, of honor to their countrymen to win the war. To the men, it was a matter of survival and the totally illogical order to attack. The blind loyalty of the officers to the war, and their blatant disconnect from the feelings of their men, was well put by Theodore Plivier in his adaption of the sailors' mutinies to novel

¹⁵³ Bock, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ Bock, p. 3.

form. In his account, at a meeting on the flagship following unrest like that that Bock describes the admirals debated over the reports:

A great string of offences of the most serious order: riotous assemblies of the crews; conspiracy to prevent the fleet putting to sea; sailors refusing to weigh anchor; stokers keeping the fires so low that the ships are unable to move, or even putting out the fires altogether; threats and acts of violence against superior officers; sections of the crews arming themselves with rifles, others taking possession of the guns.

But it is agreed, there seems to have been no single leadership of the movement. The various crews had simply set themselves against their ships putting to sea, and having succeeded in preventing the attack, had returned to their duties.

The Admiral decides on a series of general arrests.¹⁵⁵

Though, with such actions, it was clear that the men had little intention of going out to sea, and that there was serious activity afoot on most ships, the officers insisted on normalcy. They saw no responsibility for the behavior of the crews as theirs.

Bock's experience also should make us question the "apolitical" nature of the revolution. Sailors praising the Bolsheviks, calling for the end of the Kaiser's rule, and hoisting the flag of international, working-class solidarity must have had some political inclinations, even if their later demands were more focused on the immediate concerns of military life. It is here ambiguous as to what the men meant by the word "Bolshevik," as they ordered fellow Bolsheviks to rise early in the morning of the demonstrations. Whether they considered themselves Bolsheviks or simply supported the revolutionaries in Russia, either possibility reveals the explicitly political nature of their activism on the ships. Bock also stated that the majority of the men on his ship were for hoisting the red flag, again suggesting leftist political sympathies. Though men of his mind did not form the majority, Bock was certainly not the only one who felt that the four years of war had been fought for the "ruling classes" alone. The working-class solidarity of enlisted men organizing

¹⁵⁵ Plivier, Theodore, translated by A. W. Wheen, *The Kaiser Goes: The Generals Remain*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1933) p. 50.

against the wealthy officers for better conditions, hoisting red flags, and praising the Bolsheviks is here unmistakable.¹⁵⁶

From Bock, we might also observe the embodied experience of the revolution. To have been active from 11:30 at night through most of the day, and to have then risen at 2 and 5 AM for still more revolutionary activity would have been physically exhausting. The activity itself would have also been demanding, although thrilling. To be constantly shouting at passing ships, heckling the lame appeals of officers, and be wildly at all times contemplating the latest rumors—all with a constant uncertainty about the future—made the revolution unforgettable to its participants. Though not on the ships, Artelt perhaps best summarized this point. “Although it has been over forty years since the clashes of the November Revolution” he wrote in 1958, “the memories of that day are still vivid.”¹⁵⁷ To the sailors and shipyard workers involved, the days of late October and early November were clashes more memorable than anything that they had seen through the entirety of the war.

4. *Conclusion*

Sailors in the November Revolution, it is true, mutinied and revolted against structural issues in the navy. Rations of basic goods were too low, the officers had more privileges than the enlisted men did, the large battleships saw little combat, and previous mutinies and uprisings had been harshly put down (as the 1917 summer mutiny was). Lastly, as structural factor and the final catalyst to the “powder keg,” there was the suicide mission—the “Admiral’s Revolt against the civilians”—which called for what the sailors viewed to be a pointless offensive at the cost of their own lives that would only glorify further the admirals and officer class.

¹⁵⁶ Bock, p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ Artelt, p. 89.

Looking at the experiences presented in this chapter, however, we do not see structural issues explicitly referenced in demands or as the grievances of the revolutionaries. The Kiel demands, for instance, “binding for every military person” though they were, did not mention the poor rations of the enlisted men, or their boredom on the battleships.¹⁵⁸ Neither did Baier addressing demonstrators in Cuxhaven, Bock on board his battleship, or Artelt and Beling at Kiel explicitly mention these structural causes in their experiences of the revolution. Rather, they emphasized revolutionary, direct action—often in response to the suppression of the admiralty and officers against earlier demonstrations.

Though these structural issues in the navy may have been on the minds of the men, their focus was on stopping any further military action. The immediate revolutionary experience was one of arresting officers, mass street demonstrations, showing solidarity with one another by tying anything red onto oneself or hoisting red flags on ships, establishing council or other alternative forms of rule, and freeing their imprisoned comrades.

The embodied experience of the revolution for the sailors was one full of thrilling moments of liberation and hope for the future. It was to the future that the men looked, rather than dwelling on past grievances and pains. Though these pains informed visions of the emerging republic amongst the sailors, the new social imaginary made anything seem possible. As Karl Bock wrote in the letter to his sister describing the events aboard his ship: “Now is the hour when we become human. The thing came out of our ship in the first place....Now is the time, the signal is given.”¹⁵⁹ The signal was given to become human again, to act out against all that was inhuman—the war.

¹⁵⁸ *Schleswig-Holsteinische Volkszeitung*, November 5, 1918, accessed in „Die Kieler 14 Punkte“ by Klaus Kuhl, http://www.kurkuhl.de/docs/kieler_14punkte.pdf.

¹⁵⁹ Bock, p. 4.

Like in the examples of soldiers in the previous chapter, we saw here survival at the core of the experience. The stokers refused to light the fires at the thought of a suicide attack that would surely see them all killed, just as the rest of the crewmen protested and jeered at the officers. The war by this point was no longer a “gentlemen’s game.” Recall the jeers at the officer who tried to calm the men on Bock’s ship: “Colleagues, I would go today to the West Front today, if need be, even though I am married [the officer said].” To which we replied “We would not!” Finally, the heckling became too colorful for him to [be able to] pull himself away [from the crowd].”¹⁶⁰ When the machine gunners fired on demonstrators at Kiel, they charged and wildly beat them back with their rifle butts, doing the minimum amount of violence they could, but still using force to ensure their survival, to become human and remain human.

Similarly to the soldiers in the previous chapter, we saw sailors going after their officers—stripping them of their ranks and weapons, imprisoning them, and taking control of their resources—all in the name of survival. The forced change of the naval structures, the naval hierarchies, was the immediate sight of change in the revolution for the sailors. However, this was an explicitly political process, as the actions of the men, their demands in the councils, and their discourse on the events showed. The emphasis was on survival—against violence in the war and survival through better material conditions—but survival was here practiced through direct political action.

With their backs to the wall, the men broke through the threat of violence against them on all sides, and this was to become human again against an officer and admirals class that pulled all stops possible to prevent precisely this type of outbreak (remember, for instance, the admiral Baier was negotiating with trying to quell the revolution by shooting him personally). What was so

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

abhorrent to the officers—such as the amazement had by an officer that Baier and so many people wished to speak to the admiral—was perfectly rational and natural to the men. Despite their best efforts, the officers had been deemed totally irrational. As Artelt wrote, “They [the officers] could no longer intimidate us.”¹⁶¹ The spark was not the suicide mission of von Scheer and von Hipper, but the men’s need to fight for their very survival. The explosion of the powder keg was a flurry of revolutionary direct action.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Artelt, p. 94.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 91.

Chapter Four: Women in the Revolution

1. Introduction

This chapter will explore the experiences of women and experiences with gender during the revolution. In doing so, it will draw too on the some of the experiences of women discussed in earlier chapters, especially those of Cläre Casper-Derfter, Anna Erfurt, and Lucie Heimbürger from chapter one. I do not place gender analysis in its own chapter alongside the study of women to suggest that these two subjects should always go hand in hand. Rather, as Natalie Zemon Davis explained (as quoted by Scott):

It seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus entirely on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past. Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or to promote its change.¹⁶³

Gender should be used throughout any historical study as a category of analysis, alongside class and race. It does not merely inform questions of sex and family, or affect only the experiences of women.¹⁶⁴ However, for organizational purposes, and due to the constraints of this project, I have here used it more directly in this way in this chapter.

In the historiography of the German Revolution, gender has not yet seen much use as an analytic category. Neither have the experiences of women been adequately explored. This chapter therefore also seeks to remedy these shortcomings, and is another reason for its organization as such, as opposed to the employment of gender and description of women's experience throughout the project.

¹⁶³ Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women's History in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Winter 1975-76): p. 90. As quoted by Joan Scott in "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis."

¹⁶⁴ Scott, Joan W., "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-075, doi:10.2307/1864376.

Some headway, however, has already been made. As Claudie Weill and Kathleen Canning have shown, women benefitted from the revolution and the new social imaginary it brought, which opened new possibilities for them, particularly through suffrage. It also brought new conceptions of women's place in society through art and literature, as Canning wrote in her analysis of the works of Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Toller, and Robert Reinert: "A highly porous figure, the new woman became an emblem of female economic independence in the form of wage-earning and consumption that was both self-directed and fashion-driven; this figure also represented the sexually self-aware single woman who disavowed marriage and motherhood."¹⁶⁵

While new opportunities and imaginaries for women expanded, they were still largely excluded from the new republican government and the revolutionary workers' councils that made this possible. Weill attributes this partially to the hierarchical structure of the German political parties, which made it difficult to dislodge the entrenched patriarchal leadership. Indeed, the SPD especially had a bad track record with women's involvement. They had been banned from direct participation in political parties before the war, and, the SPD leadership, not wanting to endanger the movement, therefore discouraged their participation, as they feared that it would give the police an excuse to break up meetings or make arrests. As Mary Jo Maynes has illustrated, women were essentially forced to develop their own versions of the party newspaper, like *Die Gleichheit*, in order to draw attention to the participation of *Genossinnen* (female comrades) in the socialist movement.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Canning, Kathleen, and Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn editors, "Gender and the Imaginary of Revolution," In *Germany 1917-1923: A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015) p. 116-117.

¹⁶⁶ Mary Jo Maynes, "Genossen und Genossinnen," Depictions of Gender, Militancy, and Organizing in the German Socialist Press, 1890-1914."

Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg, two of the most prominent women in the SPD later both leaders of the German communist movement, themselves faced discrimination numerous times because of their gender before and during the war.¹⁶⁷ Zetkin and Louise Ziets had to fight to maintain the *Frauentag* (International Women's Day), the yearly day of womens' marches and demonstrations. Indeed, as Evans has noted, these demonstrations were particularly valued early on for the opportunities they gave to women to act collectively *outside* of the male-dominated party spheres.¹⁶⁸

Looking at figures for the involvement of women in the workers' councils, we see the continuity of this tradition of patriarchal party politics during the revolutionary period. For example, there were only 37 women total among the 800 workers' councils in the greater Berlin area, and only 19 women were elected among the 370 representatives of the Workers' Council of Greater Stuttgart. At the General Congress of Workers and Soldiers' Councils, which met in Berlin in early December, there were but two women among the 496 elected delegates.¹⁶⁹ As Weill also notes, soldiers were the instigators and contributors to revolutionary events in many places, which gave a strong impression to women that events were dominated by men, thereby reducing the participation of women. Weill argues that, instead of being directly involved in governance and organization, many women played support roles in November 1918, dealing with lodging the incoming unemployed soldiers from the front, organizing food, or with administrative and clerical tasks. Though Derfert's actions were therefore not commonplace amongst women, she was by no means the only one. Many other women played an important part in direct revolutionary action,

¹⁶⁷ For an excellent study of prominent women as revolutionaries, see:

Mullaney, Marie Marmo, *Revolutionary Women: Gender and the Socialist Revolutionary Role* (Praeger: 1983).

¹⁶⁸ Evans, Richard J, "German Social Democracy and Women's Suffrage 1891-1918," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Jul., 1980), p. 533-557.

¹⁶⁹ Canning, p. 120.

making up the majority of demonstrators in places like Stuttgart, helping construct barricades, and smuggling arms underneath their skirts and in baby carriages.¹⁷⁰

With this context for women in mind, I now turn to an analysis of some of their personal experiences in the revolution.

2. *Women in the Revolution*

Emilie Bölke was a factory worker in Mülheim-Ruhr and member of the *Freien Jugend* (the socialist youth movement for the end of the war). At the same time, she was involved in the *Arbeiterjugend* movement, the socialist, trade-unionist youth movement. She would later become a member of the KPD, and would be active in its youth movement in the 1920's as well. Her story gives us some details as to what would have radicalized young women in the period before and during revolution.

In school, she became disgusted with the state propaganda about the war. The girls had to knit hand warmers and scarves for the soldiers and sailors. The boys played war games, and “it was of course the Germans who always won.” The teacher told the students all about the war, and gave the students the day off whenever there was a victory for their country in the field. All the children were also expected to pay contributions for the war loan—something her radical socialist father, a supporter of Karl Liebknecht and a factory worker who despised the SPD due to its war votes—refused to do. This was the cause for many beatings, bad grades, and misery for Emilie and her siblings in school. At one point, their mother gave up five pennies for them to take to the teacher for the war loan contribution, which made her usually very quiet father scream at her, causing the children to wince. “The next day he went not to the factory, but to the school to see the

¹⁷⁰ Weill, Claudie, and Christine Faure, editor, “Women in the German Revolution, Rosa Luxemburg and the Workers’ Councils,” in *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women* (New York: Taylor & Francis Books, 2003) p. 267-274.

principal and the teacher of my sister and he demanded the five pennies back. Mother had without his permission given them for the war loan [he said].” As he did not contribute to the war loans at the factory, he wanted his children to do the same. Emilie did not know whether her father got the money back, but, from then on, the teacher treated her and her siblings as invisible in the classroom—no beatings, no teasing, no detentions, and they were not called on either.¹⁷¹

Before this, the children had to one occasion write an essay on Goethe’s poem, *Das Göttliche* (On the Divine). Being the subject of how the only thing that distinguishes man from other beings is his kindness and helpfulness, Emilie’s socialist father likely would have dismissed it as bourgeois. It was therefore ironic, when, in class, the principal suddenly “hit me with his cane on the fingers and then said: “Your grade [on the essay] was the best in the class. The parents are behind it!” - Yes, the parents!”¹⁷²

Joining the *Arbeiterjugend* in 1916, she became active in the many peace demonstrations. She also began procuring various materials for the radical socialist movement which she stole from her factory work. For her, one of the “greatest experiences” of this time was in the summer of 1916, when socialist organizers marched all over the Ruhr for peace:

We drove over Essen to Remscheid and then went over the beautiful Müngstener bridge to the station and formed ourselves there for a demonstration train [*Zug*] to Solingen. From all sides came the boys and girls, but also many adult workers. The city of Solingen received us well. The people stood on the street and shouted greetings to us. We sang workers’ and hiking songs and the police let us pass everywhere. On the return trip via Dusseldorf some young people were arrested on the way, including Rosi Wolfstein, who was well known to us because she had reported on the youth conference in Jena. Since we were sitting in another car, we were able to continue undisturbed. In Dusseldorf, where we had to change trains, we let out cries of long live Karl Liebknecht [*ließen wir Karl Liebknecht hochleben*] and again behaved quite harmlessly, when officials and police appeared to find out who had called them.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0083, Bölke, Emilie, p. 6-7.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 10.

However, it was at this time that the bureaucratic leaders of the trade unions, as well as the SPD leadership turned against demonstrations like the one that Bölke participated in. The trade union leadership, at that time tightly under control of the government, as well as the pro-war SPD, did not want so many rebellious youths running around and making connections between their movements, as Bölke's had been doing.¹⁷⁴ The threat that such movements posed to their order was obvious, and it certainly did not fit in with the organized counter-culture of respectability that the SPD had worked so hard in the pre-war years to build up.¹⁷⁵ To young peace activists like Bölke, the pro-war stance of these leaders and their fervent opposition to street demonstrations only further radicalized her. Seeing such strong turnouts amongst her fellow workers for anti-war demonstrations like the one she participated in above, we also can understand how women like her might have been convinced that there were many in the working class on their side.

Given this, as well as her experiences in school—being beaten for the anti-war views of her father, and then outcast because of his actions regarding the war loan payment—she also likely felt already a strong disconnect from pro-war society. Lastly, we can assume that her father, who so boldly acted against the war and insisted that she and her siblings join the *Arbeiterjugend*, was a strong influence on her path to radicalization.

As a garrison town, there were many soldiers in Mülheim-Ruhr milling about or on duty. Bölke and some of the older girls of the youth movement would frequent the barracks or the villas where the younger recruits were housed, and became acquainted with them over time. At night, they would “fiddle” with them at the fences to the buildings. The women would deposit anti-war

¹⁷⁴ Hoffrogge, Ralf, and Radhika Desai, *Working class politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, The Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and the Origins of the Council Movement*, (Leiden : Brill, 2014) ch. 1 and 2.

¹⁷⁵ For more on the SPD counterculture, see:
Lidtke, Vernon L. *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

materials—pamphlets, socialist newspapers, or other readings that they had made—in the park or in the gardens of these villas for the soldiers to read. Some of the soldiers in the villas were also in the youth movement or had previously been in it themselves, so that they became direct receivers of the materials. Over time, the officers noticed what was going on: “They tried to shut down the gardens and [to] drive us away when we talked to the soldiers.” Yet, as Bölke put it, it got to be a fact of the matter that “Where barracks are, there are girls too.” Besides anti-war briefs, the fences and gardens of the barracks became meeting spaces for lovers and friends. “Gifts of love, cigarettes, cakes, tobacco pouches, which we had ourselves made and filled with self-pulled tobacco,” all were given to the soldiers there by the women. This was in 1916.¹⁷⁶

In 1917 and 1918, Bölke was in Duisberg working in a machine room at a factory. There, she proceeded to smuggle more goods out for the movement and began to make more acquaintances with Spartacists and other radical comrades in the unions—groups outside the domain of the SPD. In the fall of 1918, Bölke wrote, many more of their friends in the army began to become casualties of the war, including the former leader of her youth movement. His death, and the deaths of many others, further galvanized those in the youth movement for their participation in the revolution in November.¹⁷⁷

After the outbreak of the November revolution, Bölke and her comrades in the youth movement assisted and participated however they could. “We young people were loyal to the party in all their work. We did not know any tiredness at all and crowded to all the work: as couriers, as collectors, as leaflet distributors. No little task was too small for us. We were happy that the comrades of the party needed us. We were her¹⁷⁸ faithful helpers.” Emilie’s father, Hermann

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 12-13.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁷⁸ This last line can be translated either as shown, or as “We were its faithful helpers.” The noun for party—*die Partei*—is feminine in German, giving it the resulting feminine pronoun here shown.

Bölke, was elected to be a member of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council in Oberhausen, where he "stood guard with the rifle in his hand at the station and at the post office." There he guarded over the food supply and ensured its equal distribution, worked for the safe passage home of former prisoners of war, and enforced the security of weapons from counterrevolutionaries.¹⁷⁹

Emilie Bölke's account shows therefore not just life as a working-class woman in the revolution and its lead up, but also the experiences of the youth in this time. Though her comments on the revolution are brief, its combination with her detailed account of her life and some of her agitational work before the revolution leads to a better understanding of the experience of it for young women.

For young, socialist women like Bölke, the difficulty of becoming directly involved in party work was two-fold, due to this double identity. As a youth, she would not have been as well respected as the older participants in the revolution or in party work. She explained that, in the revolution itself, they were reduced to passing out fliers, being messengers, collectors of important materials, and being the doers of other miscellaneous tasks. She appeared to have a view of herself as not a full member of the party: "We were happy that the comrades of the party needed us," she wrote, othering herself from it. This could speak to the broader experience of youth in the revolution, as not as involved in direct but rather more involved in support roles for the party and union men, similar roles to those that Weill suggested many women occupied.¹⁸⁰

As a woman, she also would have had trouble breaking into direct party work. It was noted in the introductory section to this chapter how, as Evans showed, the socialist parties before and during the war in Germany consistently had issues of entrenched, patriarchal leadership. Evans argued that this made women much more likely to utilize extra-party methods of organizing, such

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸⁰ Weill, "Women in the German Revolution, Rosa Luxemburg and the Workers' Councils."

as the Women's Day marches.¹⁸¹ This argument is confirmed in the case of Bölke by an analysis of her descriptions of her agitational work. Recall how she wrote that one of her most memorable experiences in her agitational work was marching in 1916 and seeing all the people emerge, getting to travel from town to town and doing work that was outside of the party or youth movement offices. Compare this to the terse descriptions of her work in the revolution in 1918—a few sentences vaguely discussing the tasks that she and her comrades did, with none of the emotional attachment to the memory.

Her description of the November revolution is also revealing in its focus on her father's work. Being so driving a force in her life—in school, in pushing her into socialist activism, and in being an influential activist himself—the text suggests that she had a mixed relationship with him. On the one hand, she clearly respected and admired greatly his own work for the socialist cause, as evidenced by her romantic telling of his work in the November revolution: "My father...stood with rifle in hand at the train station and at the post office."¹⁸² The powerful imagery of the father with weapon, a man who was also on the council, appears to have been a more memorable for her than her own work in the revolution, given her seemingly uninterested telling of her work in it.

On the other hand, it is possible that her father was a source of patriarchal oppression in her family and activist life. Read in another light, her romantic description of him in the November revolution could have been driven out of envy for his ability to easily hold the important positions that were so difficult for her, as a young woman, to obtain. His dominance in her family life, too—harshly telling her mother to not spend the family income on the war loans, pressuring her and her

¹⁸¹ Evans, Richard J, "German Social Democracy and Women's Suffrage 1891-1918," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Jul., 1980), p. 533-557.

¹⁸² Bölke, p. 15.

siblings to join socialist movements, determining where they lived and which schools they attended—could have been a source of resentment.

The agitational work with soldiers is also of note, as Bölke made this out to be a task explicitly for the women. Again we see women at work outside of formal party functions, interacting with the soldiers at night, “fiddling” and distributing anti-war material along with their gifts to friends and lovers.¹⁸³ In Bölke, we see women acting partially as “othered” socialists, less comfortable in formalized environments. Moreover, we see the contradictions of the gendered identity of the socialist woman at play here. While performing a very socialist, masculine action in handing out anti-war propaganda and trying to foment agitation amongst the soldiers, the women were also fulfilling very traditional feminine gender roles in flirting with them and exchanging homemade gifts. It is ambiguous as to whether they were aware of this, and were using their gender roles to their advantage. Did the officers see the women more as nuisances and flirts rather than as socialist agitators? While this is unclear, it is clear that, as a result of their actions, the barracks became a place for women: “Where barracks are, there are girls too.”¹⁸⁴

The same contradictory gender roles are at play with the stories of Cläre Casper-Derfert, Anna Erfurt, and Lucie Heimburger, which were explored in the first chapter. We see women involved in more dangerous revolutionary tasks, though still largely informalized tasks in comparison to bureaucratic work or organizational work. Derfert’s weapon smuggling and her connections to the movement since the 1918 munitions strike had her acting in informalized capacity for many months. The reader might recall how she was conscious of this fact herself in her police interrogation, asking her questioners “what I, a young girl, would possibly have to do

¹⁸³ Bölke, p. 13.

¹⁸⁴ Bölke, p. 13.

with such dangerous things!”¹⁸⁵ She was clearly aware of the police perception of women as acting outside revolutionary circles, or in “less serious” roles. Perhaps the police had perceptions of women as typically involved more in the types of agitational work that Bölke was doing, flirting with soldiers and distributing leaflets. In breaking with this gender norm, Derfert was at the same time playing up the image of herself as an innocent, feminine figure, one who would have no reason in German society to be tinkering with arms and explosives in the eyes of the police.

Derfert was also conscious of her position as a woman in the demonstration on November 9th to the Reichstag. She wrote about how the crowd was organized: “First the armed men, then the unarmed, then the women.”¹⁸⁶ As a woman and leading organizer of this crowd, having armed many of the men at the factories herself that morning, she could have felt somewhat isolated in her circles, where she was one of few such women. Seeing the place of her fellow women as less directly involved, at the end of the demonstrators behind even the unarmed men, she was perhaps also motivated to further revolutionary action, for the liberation of her *Genossinnen*. Recall here her statement on her being a part of the 1918 munitions strike leadership: “It was a particular pride of mine that I was the only woman who worked on the committee.”¹⁸⁷ She was pleased at her position inside the formal and informal organizations of the revolution, with the formal later being re-realized by her participation in the *Vollzugsrat* in November alongside other revolutionary leaders in opposition to the Ebert-Scheidemann government through the six-man Council of People’s Deputies. As woman, Derfert is interesting as being active in both these informal and formal

¹⁸⁵ Wolfgang Emmerich, editor, *Proletarische Lebensläufe: Autobiographische Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zweiten Kultur in Deutschland*, Cläre Casper-Derfert, „Steh Auf, Arthur, heute ist Revoluton!“ Originally published Berlin, 1918 (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1975) p. 177.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁸⁷ Emmerich, p. 175.

circles, in both cases performing tasks usually associated with men—weapons smuggling and party organizational work.

Reading accounts of Anna Erfurt and Lucie Heimbürger, however, makes this picture of Derfert as something of an anomaly in her participation in informal and formal revolutionary environments less convincing. Both women were also very active in informalized revolutionary circles, smuggling arms, organizing their distribution, participating in agitational work and protests during the war. Erfurt participated in a particularly harrowing combat situation at the *Maikäferkaserne* on November 9th which saw the death of Eric Habersaath.

From her account, it is unclear where Heimbürger was on November 9th or what role she proceeded to play in the revolution. However, she described the formation of a workers' and soldiers' council, and observed that many of her colleagues took part in it. She also took part in a demonstration either on or just after the revolution in support of Erich Habersaath, the revolutionary killed at the *Maikäferkaserne* who had taught her and a few other comrades how to handle weapons. Of this demonstration, she wrote that she remembered especially how her armed comrades led it because "it was called out that everyone who had a weapon was to be at the front."¹⁸⁸ It is unclear if she was allowed to be at the front of this procession or not, with her lack of presence at the front possibly suggestive of her place in the movement. Though she was armed during the revolution, she may not have been deemed able to be at the front of the demonstration due to the potential danger of the situation, with women, again, being discouraged from such actions due to chivalrous pretensions.

In Heimbürger's and Erfurt's accounts, they did not leave any comments that showed that they were critical of their place within the movement as women as Derfert did. As socialists, and

¹⁸⁸ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde, SgY 30/1488, Heimbürger, Lucie, p. 9.

people so critical of Wilhelmine society that they were willing to take up arms against it, however, we should not doubt that they would have been critical of their position as women in this same society. August Bebel's *Women and Socialism* was virtually a canonical text for members of the German socialist movement at the time (recall how Karl Baier said it was one of the first books he ever purchased), and if they had not read it, they had likely at least become familiar with its ideas for women's liberation, as most in the movement were. Furthermore, with such strong socialist women as Luxemburg, Zetkin, Zeitz, and, in the Russian Bolshevik government, Alexandra Kollontai, persistently coming under attack and scrutiny due to misogynous party members, as well as the strong cultural misogyny in the socialist movement against women, we can presume that they were no strangers to oppression and patriarchy.¹⁸⁹

In their own experience, too, they were frequently the only women present or among few women involved in their organizational circles. Indeed, in all three texts, there is hardly any mention of other women active in these same circles, and most of the names given in descriptions of events are those of men. In short, though they lack direct comments on their status in the movement as women like those found in Derfert's account, Heimberger's and Erfurt's texts should be read according to the context of when the events they describe took place. From all three women, as well as Bölke, we therefore should draw in this context to understand that oppression—and the facing of it—was a part of women's experience in the November Revolution.

Though taking place a few weeks after the January Uprising—the Spartacist Week which saw Liebknecht and Luxemburg murdered in an abortive uprising led by the KPD—I also here will consider the experience of the working-class communist Gertrud Alexander, who detailed the strain of a house search by the police. She had previously worked as an art teacher and in the press,

¹⁸⁹ Marie Marmo Mullaney, *Revolutionary Women: Gender and the Socialist Revolutionary Role* (Praeger: 1983).

marrying a lawyer and founding with him and others the Spartacist League and the KPD alongside Liebknecht and Luxemburg. She became their close friends, a friendship that her son, Karl, would share in. Working alongside other communists, she became involved in illegal work against the war, distributing fliers and writing articles that were prohibited by the government.¹⁹⁰

After the revolution, she found herself tied up with some communist organizers who were accused of murdering police officers. Her friend called her on the telephone to inform her of his arrest, and told her to collect her packages (though not explicitly stated, these were briefcases likely contained weapons and evidence of previous illegal activity) and flee town. Immediately after this phone call, another call came in, with an unknown voice telling her: “Have you heard, you must get your packages!” She pretended to not know what the speaker was talking about, but it was obvious to her that her telephone line was being monitored. She then had to warn her comrades that they were under surveillance and collect her own packages. Especially, she wished to communicate with Theodore Liebknecht, the brother of Karl Liebknecht, who after his assassination in January 1919, had become more politically involved.¹⁹¹

Obtaining her briefcase from another friend, she placed it in a spare attic room, underneath a pile of washing. She had had “fear, upon entering my house, that I was followed by spies.” She was “Relieved by the good idea and happy coincidence” of her spare attic room as a hiding place, which she usually reserved for washing, but at the apartment she also found her son:

There lay—I had not been able to think of that all day, the seven-year-old Karl in his bed weeping: he had scarlet fever, and his father had not come home for several days ... where is papa? he asked as I stepped to his bed. [Her husband had been arrested a few days before, and was then being held in captivity.] The assassination of Karl Liebknecht and “Aunt Rosa” had left him very upset. He was completely devastated. In those days of the catastrophe - in the middle of January - his class teacher had called me in and asked: what's wrong with your Karl? He behaves very strangely, you see, he's scared of something, he does not want to go out of

¹⁹⁰ Walter, Rector, and Martin Fährders, *Literatur im Klassenkampf. Zur proletarisch-revolutionären Literaturtheorie 1919.1923* (Fischer: Frankfurt am Main, 1974) p. 224.

¹⁹¹ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0007/1, Alexander, Gertrud, p. 147.

the classroom in the breaks, and if, as happened in those days, shots are heard from the street, he hides under the bench. I told the still young and reasonably intelligent man of the situation that we were in, that the murder of his closest friends had severely shaken the boy, that he was afraid for the fate of his parents. I begged him not to scold or even punish the child if he seemed to be "abnormal" but to say goodbye to him - which he promised to do. Karl was one of his favorite pupils-but now he was no longer smart with him: the boy was completely engulfed in politics....He [the teacher] had found all sorts of drawings in a notebook: the title of the *Rote Fahne*¹⁹², accurately traced in large Gothic letters - including political slogans; poster-like drawings, demonstrations, meetings, trains, roads, electric trains - but nothing at all from school life. Strangely, that occurred to him, the teacher. Now the boy was ill and today probably new serious excitements were waiting for him. At that moment, for the first time, I had concern and doubts as to whether we parents were right, and how we could answer for exposing our children to such excitement-what would happen today? Luckily, the little Susanne [her other child] who was not yet two years old, was not in the apartment at the moment because of the scarlet fever danger, but with the grandmother, who lived not far from us.¹⁹³

At the point, Alexander had not yet had time to clean her cupboards or desk of incriminating documents. There came the ring of the doorbell, and a "heavy knocking at the back door, as if with a rifle butt." Karl yelled, asking who was beating down the kitchen door, and Alexander comforted him, telling him not to be afraid, that it was a house search, and that they would not find anything. Then, the housemaid called from down the hall, saying that "three gunmen" were at the door, and asking Alexander what such men could want with them. When Alexander then opened the door, "three heavily armed men" came in, "they even had hand grenades hanging on their sides. One stayed at the door, one was also posted at the back door. So I cannot run away – and [I] do not even think about it – how could I leave the child alone!" The armed men "rushed" "as if on command" to check the inside of the stove. Digging through the ashes, they found nothing ("How good was the advice of my old friend not to hide anything in the oven!").¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² The newspaper of the Spartacists and the KPD, which Alexander worked on.

¹⁹³ Alexander, p. 147-148.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

Next, the soldiers investigated the ornately decorated secretary in the room—the “Spanish cupboard,” Alexander called it. She took her time to open the lock on it, keeping the men distracted by the elaborateness of the piece of furniture and the lock itself. Inside were twelve drawers and a letter box that contained notes passed to her from prison by the communist organizer Leo Jogishes, as well as a large picture of him. She proceeded to keep her arms on top of this box as she took it out first, covering most of its contents as she held it, and opened quickly the other drawers, revealing many more papers. As the men looked through these, and other harmless papers, including the stationary and letters from her brother written on air force stationary from his time as a pilot in the war, she put the box she was holding gingerly back in place, half open. This gave the men the illusion that they had already looked through it.¹⁹⁵

They went into the next room, where Alexander’s desk lay. In the drawer, there were lying many leaflets that she had herself written for the Spartakusbund. Luckily, on top of the leaflets was a picture of her friend that she had been gifted, “really a beautiful woman.” When she opened the drawer and held it up for the soldiers, they became distracted by the picture. One of them asked to keep it, claiming to collect such photos. As Alexander wrote: “I was sorry for the photo, but a stone fell from my heart - The leaflets lay untouched in the box.”¹⁹⁶

In her husband’s room, nothing of consequence was found. In their bedroom, however, the men thought that they had something when they discovered an iron lockbox in a drawer: “But in the top cabinet they made - thank God - a find.” They asked for the key, but, as she told them, it was with her husband, who had been arrested: “I told them calmly - they would get the key from

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 150-151.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

him. I knew there were only long-dated securities, but they were content to have captured something.”¹⁹⁷

Then, the men went on to search the nurse’s room. “That was the hardest thing for me. I wanted to spare the feverish child the excitement. I asked: the boy has scarlet fever, so spare him from a search - what would I be for a mother if I had hidden something forbidden with the sick child.” She told them to call the doctor, that he would confirm that the child was sick, and told them the doctor’s telephone number. To this, the men responded that “We don’t need a doctor,” speculating that the mother was feigning the illness of the child to hide something in his room. “And they took the crying boy out of bed to look under the mattress, cleared out the bookcase with the children’s books and also the toy cabinet, and the boy cried: “What do you want with my books - these are my toys!” I quieted the boy and reassured him that none of his things would be taken.”¹⁹⁸

Returning to the corridor, they did not search the maid’s room. In the kitchen sat the landlord with the key to the grounds. At the last minute, Alexander panicked and reshuffled the items in the attic room where she had hidden her packages, placing empty suitcases in the middle of piles of clothing, keeping the briefcase with the incriminating elements still out of sight underneath a pile of laundry. “They rummaged through several suitcases and had to leave without the packages they were looking for, which were lying close by under the children’s underwear.” They then “clamored” down the backstairs. After they had left, she “went down to my son - he was not yet asleep, but anxiously waited for me and I assured him that he could now sleep soundly, they would not come back soon, and dad would soon be set free again.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 153.

Alexander's story is remarkable for the very fine detail of her ordeal that she recorded. Though this took place months after the November revolution, this detail informs us of the stress and strain of the types of illegal organizing that many women went through. Being usually responsible for the home life as well as for their organizational tasks in the field, experiences like Alexander's with anxiety ridden house searches would have been common to revolutionary women in the time before, during, and after the November revolution. Women who played supporting roles too, or those who were not as active in the fields but had husbands or brothers in the revolution, would have also been subjugated to the kinds of experiences with house searches that Alexander was.

Alexander's experience is also especially telling for those of revolutionaries who were mothers. Her constant questioning about what she was subjecting her children too, the "excitements," the deaths of friends and colleagues, the arrests of family members, and the engrossment in very mature subjects as socialist thought would have been greatly impactful on the lives of any children. Karl Alexander's pleas "where is Papa," his questionings of where his friends, recently murdered, had gone off to, his nervousness around gunfire to the point that the teacher reported him hiding under the school bench when it occurred—these were the traumatic experiences of the revolution for many children. House searches were especially impactful on them, attacking what was supposed to be a safe environment. When heavily armed, mean-looking men snappily ordered his mother around, snatched him from bed, overturned all of his belongings, and it was revealed to him that his father was in prison, it was understandable why Karl had trouble getting to sleep even after the men had left. Here we see the disruption of life at all levels that revolution brings. Family life and home life were not excluded, particularly not if one was from revolutionary organizing circles as Alexander was. With men off at the councils, at organizational

and party meetings, imprisoned or in trouble, or off participating in revolutionary street action—actions that, as the introduction discussed, men were typically more likely to do—women were typically forced to face these disruptions and to come up with solutions to them.

An important detail not mentioned earlier is that, when the oven was searched, Alexander noted that it was unlit due to the “coal death,”—the coal shortage. During the revolution, as we saw in our discussion of soldiers coming home, basic goods, foodstuffs, medicine, and other necessities as coal were constantly in short supply. This was to the point that both men coming from the front with their injuries and family members thinned from malnutrition hardly recognized each other. Pressured into doing the domestic work, however, it was women who more often than men had to cope with these kinds of issues of the home, improvising means to procure food or basic goods through theft, as had long been cultural necessity, on top of doing all the basic house work such as cooking, laundry, sewing, and miscellaneous tasks to bring in extra income. Alongside this, many women themselves held factory jobs, as all of the women in this chapter, (except for Alexander, who was a full-time organizer) did.²⁰⁰

We understand too, the worries of many revolutionary mothers, from those presented in Alexander’s account. It was not easy to raise children as a revolutionary, or in times of revolution. There were consistently elements that, though she wished to shelter her children from, she was unable to, such as the search (“That was the hardest thing for me. I wanted to spare the feverish

²⁰⁰ Grüttner, Michael, and Richard J. Evans, editor, “Working-Class Crime and the Labour Movement: Pilfering in the Hamburg Docks, 1888-1923,” *The German Working-Class 1888-1933: The Politics of Everyday Life*, (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1982) p. 54-80.

For a study of German family life, see:

Evans, Richard J., and W.R. Lee, editors, *The German Family: Essays on the Social History of the Family in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981).

See also:

Quataert, Jean H. "A Source Analysis in German Women's History: Factory Inspectors' Reports and the Shaping of Working-Class Lives, 1878-1914." *Central European History* 16, no. 2 (1983): 99-121. Quataert discusses factory reports, which investigated German home life and the economic situations of women.

child the excitement.”) or the trauma of personal loss, which resulted in Karl’s “abnormal” behavior at school.²⁰¹ That she detailed in full her conversation with the teacher shows further her great preoccupation with his welfare in an environment she had little control over. In addition, her confession of having forgotten Karl’s presence at the house and his illness in the midst of her ordeal on the day of the house search speaks to the breakup of home identity caused by consistent revolutionary action: “I had not been able to think of that all day,” she wrote, referring to Karl.²⁰² She was active so often outside of the house to the point that she thought of it more as a place where she might store items that could endanger or incriminate her and her comrades rather than as an environment—a home—for her children.

She seemed to be conscious of these shortcomings in her motherhood. “Luckily, the little Susanne who was not yet two years old, was not in the apartment” at the time of the search, she wrote. Clearly, she had been imaging how the situation could have been worse, should both of her children have been present during the search. Note too, how, upon the armed men forcefully removing her ill son from his bed and wrecking his room, she tried to comfort him back to sleep. It is likely that she felt guilty as a mother for failing to protect her family from such drama: “I had concern and doubts as to whether we parents were right,” she wrote of the day of the search, “and how we could answer for exposing our children to such excitement?”²⁰³

Later, she used this identity as a mother to her advantage, questioning to the men searching her home what kind of mother she might be should she hide something with her very sick child. She also played with their masculinity in general, using their enchantment with the photo of her friend, for instance, to keep their minds off of the rest of the contents of the box. Another example

²⁰¹ Alexander, p. 148 and p. 152.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 147.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 148.

of this was how she buried the briefcase in a pile of laundry, perhaps knowing that the men would not enjoy digging through such items as children's underwear. This play on gender and masculinity we saw before with Derfert. With this, as well as Bölke's account of using her femininity to be able to approach soldiers under the guise of flirting with them, but really to distribute propaganda to them, we can gather that women commonly used tropes of their gender to their advantage in the revolutionary period.²⁰⁴

3. Conclusion

As we have seen with our accounts of women, and from the information in the introduction, they were active in many different capacities during the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary periods. Working as arms smugglers, in support roles, as mothers, as home makers, as couriers, as messengers, distributing leaflets, and more, I have here presented just a few of their experiences of the revolution.

In the heavily gendered Wilhelmine and Weimar societies, women struggled to obtain important revolutionary roles alongside their male counterparts due to many conservative and chivalrous perceptions of their capabilities and places within the movement. Yet, as the women presented in this chapter did, many of them broke through and fought hard against these perceptions, claiming for themselves critical parts in revolutionary events.

In breaking through, however, many socialist women found themselves in contradictory gender roles. As we saw with Bölke and with Derfert, the socialist woman was in the constant struggle of doing agitational work while simultaneously being unable to escape the perceived roles for their genders. In these cases, the women were able to use these roles to their advantage in

²⁰⁴ Here, I add that I do not include Alexander's story, with its focus on motherhood, the home, and family life, to fulfill tropes of womanhood in the revolution. Alexander was also incredibly active in the communist movement, taking over editorship of the *Rote Fahne* after Jogisches death, constantly writing articles, letters, pamphlets, and organizing for most of her life from the start of the war on for the cause of socialism.

organizing, playing up their feminine innocence to be able to get close to soldiers' barracks to "flirt" or to get through a police interrogation while in reality performing serious agitational work and arms smuggling. It was by both playing to and rejecting their gender roles that women like Bölke and Derfert were able to organize and participate directly in informal and formal parts in the November Revolution.

With Alexander and Bölke, we were also taken off the streets and into the home and family life during the revolution. In both accounts, the fathers were absent, busily participating in revolutionary organizing in formalized roles through the councils or political parties. While Bölke was admiring of her father's participation, we should question too how she viewed his actions in relationship to herself. Did she think that it was possible for her, as a young woman, to participate in the revolution in the same, formalized, and heavily masculinized, gun-toting roles as her father? Furthermore, with the revolution so dominated by men through the soldiers' councils, it must have been hardly encouraging of an environment to women.

In Alexander, we saw the father figure absent from the household due to his arrest, leaving Alexander to take care of their children. It has been argued before that women in the revolution played largely support roles, but these accounts should make us question their choice in this matter. With father figures absent from the home, off in the revolution, who was to take care of the home or the children at all? Combining these experiences, we see the twofold nature of women in support roles. First, women were necessarily made to fill the support roles or fulfill duties to home because so many men were absent from home and family life, off participating in demonstrations, councils, or other revolutionary action. Second, even in situations where they were not couched with home duties or forced into more part-time, support roles, the dominance of revolutionary bodies by men did not welcome their involvement.

Though the classic, Bebel line, as expounded in his *Women and Socialism*, tried to subvert women's liberation to merely economic issues, claiming that by relieving women of work in the home through public nurseries and public laundries, they could be liberated, the truth was that a massive culture of oppression still existed in Wilhelmine and Weimar society that would take years and years of chipping away at to improve the way women were treated and thought of in Germany. The women who here participated in creating what Canning described as the new "social imaginary," the new realm of possibilities for all peoples and German society that revolution seemed to harken forth, were implemental in this gradual change in the condition of women in Germany. Furthermore, without their aid in all positions and in all aspects of the revolution, it simply would not have succeeded in toppling the Kaiser.

Chapter Five: Conclusion: “Now is the hour when we become human”

The working-class experience in the revolution was complicated and diverse. What the revolution meant and how it was lived (and remembered) was a product in part of shared group identities. In the first chapter, we saw how different groups of people related to the revolution with weapons depending on their identities. To soldiers and sailors, the revolution meant in part disarming themselves and others in the military to end the war and stop repression against their civilian comrades on the streets. To radicals in the factories and in working-class organizations like the Spartacists or the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, it meant taking up arms against the state to end the war—to prevent further violence by the state against the working class.

The second and third chapters traced the experience of the revolution specific to soldiers returning from the Western Front and sailors in the ports and on the ships of the navy. For both groups, the revolution meant stripping officers of their ranks, organizing control of strategic or survival resources such as food or the engine rooms of ships, the organization of councils, and the return to port or from the front. Returning to the cities, many soldiers and sailors became radicalized on their journeys, crowded into train cars with others fresh from revolutionary experiences at the front or at the ports, they went on to organize their own councils and demonstrations at home.

To women, as the fourth chapter showed, the revolution saw their identities challenged. Participation in the revolution was both a masculine and feminine act, with women using their perceived femininity to their advantage to evade capture while simultaneously taking on very masculine revolutionary roles through arms smuggling or organizational work. At other times, they embraced more traditional feminine roles or organized as a result of them in informal ways, largely outside of parties or organizations dominated by men.

The embodied experiences of the working class in the years before the revolution saw consciousness rise. We saw in the experiences of those dealing with weapons, sailors, soldiers, and women the rise of class solidarity and class consciousness. The experience leading up to the revolution was a constant threat of survival, be it through worsening conditions in the army and navy, the combat of the war, the willingness of the officers to risk lives for pointless demonstrations of honor or regimentation (for example, how Firl and his company were forced to listen to a speech of the general beneath a hail of bullets from circling planes, or how the general situation of the “Admiral’s Revolt” in the navy developed). Outside of the military, the war threatened survival through worsening public food rations due to the blockade, the suppression of demonstrations against the war, or the threat of death or injury of loved ones and comrades. The unifying experience, which was seen in every account covered in this paper, was the need to survive the war.

These embodied experiences led to rational decision making and the growth of grievances—conscious notions of wrongdoing on the behalf the Kaiserreich. Members of the working class were, for their own survival, compelled to consider the causes of their threats, to lash out in self-defense against the Kaiser and the war after having been for so many years been literally cut down when trying to speak out (recall Erfurt’s descriptions of the demonstrators being attacked by police armed with sabers).

The discourse in and material situations of different group environments impacted how they enacted the revolution. To each group, survival threats were manifested in different ways, and different modes of thought developed around how to address these threats. A common conclusion was that the officers of the navy and army were responsible, and should be stripped of their command. Another common conclusion was that the revolution should be armed, as the old

Herrschaft had demonstrated—through war and the treatment of rebellious soldiers, sailors, and protestors—that it would never peaceably concede to working-class demands. And, of course, there was the universal conclusion in the fall of 1918 was that the war had to end. Here, social being determined consciousness—the workers, women, soldiers, and sailors of the working class developed their rational responses depending on their social and material situations.

It was a politics—a revolutionary politics of survival—that developed because of the war, the war having been itself revolutionary in the way it threatened working-class existence. The revolutionary politics meant the redefinition of as many structures of society—structures of working-class experience—as possible. These structures were both material/physical and social-cultural. Public and private space, for instance, was redefined through the occupation of factories, squares, streets, battleships, offices of government and war, and the leaving empty of battlefields and trenches. Trains were no longer for transport alone, but became high-speed transmitters of revolutionary ideas and possibility. Similarly, the streets and squares evolved from spaces of transportation or business to spaces for revolutionary marches and demonstrations. Factories were no longer for work and production, but became meeting places for workers and organizational spaces for their councils. Where societal aspects were not concretely redefined, the old conceptions were, at least, challenged. In the new, social imaginary of the revolution, almost anything seemed possible. The old structures of society were displaced, replaced, destroyed, transformed, and reconstructed. This was the revolutionary experience that cut across group identities in the working class. Revolutionary experience involved being conscious of one's experiences and having a desire to affect the structures that constructed these experiences.

Most importantly, however, this revolutionary politics of survival meant the redefinition of working-class life, which became no longer tied intrinsically to the war. The people were

“reborn.” As the revolutionary sailor Karl Bock put it in his November letter to his sister: “Now is the hour when we become human.”²⁰⁵ What had before been cogs in the war machine became flesh and blood, and it was the task of the revolution to build a new society based on the needs of the newly-humanized working class.

These *Erlebnisberichten*—raw, lived, unstructured, immediate experience reports—were written by eye-witnesses to the revolution on the ground. They reported their immediate impressions and experiences of the revolution. However, by actively listening to and engaging with them in relation to other sources from the November Revolution—by conversing with the old comrade at the cemetery instead of meekly staring at him or passively listening to his tale—we have transformed these *Erlebnisberichten* into *Erfahrungberichten*, driven, narrational, historical reports. The driver of this narrative of the revolution was the real, lived experiences of a life defined by and made miserable by war. The experience of the physical threat against the survival of the working class forced them to act as a class. Class became something that happened, a lived process, and it was this process that led to the very conscious act of revolution. Revolution itself is a mass action that results from being conscious of collective experiences and having a collective desire to positively change these structures. Without the experiences that made the working class a class, there would have been no revolution.

²⁰⁵ Bundesarchiv at Berlin, Lichterfelde: SgY 30/0081, Bock, Karl, (1918) p. 4.

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