

## FOUNDATION VIOLENCE: ATROCITIES AND THE BIRTH OF GERMAN DEMOCRACY

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The German Revolution of 1918-19 was one of twentieth-century Europe's formative events.<sup>1</sup> It was both the end of the First World War and of the German Empire; as well as the birth of the Weimar Republic, Germany's first fully democratic state. The revolution was part of a wider period of political change that saw the collapse of the continent's multi-ethnic land empires and their replacement with nation-states — a series of upheavals that were collectively of a scale unlike anything seen in Europe since the French Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Within Germany the historical processes captured by the revolution included the breakdown of the authority of the Imperial state and its replacement with a Republic in November 1918, the formation of new political institutions that included new political parties, as well as the newer phenomena of workers and soldiers councils, the extension of voting rights to all women and the election of a National Constitutional Assembly in January 1919, the writing of a new constitution over the spring and summer of 1919, the build up to the signing of the Versailles Treaty in June 1919 and a series of challenges to the new order that occurred during the first six months of 1919 that included Council's Republics in Bremen and Munich, armed insurrections, strikes, protests, and border wars.

Despite the range of events and actions that require historical explanation and debate, historians' interest in the German Revolution of 1918-19 has not remained constant. Its heyday was surely the two decades that followed the publication of a series of seminal studies on the councils' movement in the late 1960s — a decade which also saw the publication of the most popular West-German account of the revolution, Sebastian Haffner's *The Revolution Betrayed*, which is still in print, albeit under a less polemical title.<sup>3</sup> The late 1960s and 1970s also saw the re-emergence of historical interest in Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht as well as yet more work on the revolution's political institutions. By the early 1980s, the field was unrecognizable compared to what had existed twenty years earlier. The older myth-histories of the revolution that had grown out of conservatives' rejection of the Weimar Republic had been overthrown. Similarly, the new historiography had also challenged the East-German

1 For an overview of its place in twentieth-century revolutions see: Martin Conway and Robert Gerwarth, "Revolution and Counter-revolution," in Robert Gerwarth and Donald Bloxham, eds., *Political Violence in Twentieth Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2011), 140-75. See further Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., *Revolution in History* (Cambridge, 1986).

2 Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War failed to end* (London/New York, 2016).

3 For a recent overview of the revolution's historiography see: Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung. Deutungen von der Weimarer Republik bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2013). Seminal publications include: Eberhard Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918-19* (Düsseldorf, 1962); Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution* (Düsseldorf, 1963); Reinhard Rürup, "Problems of the German Revolution," *JCH* 3:4; Ulrich Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution: Studien zur Militärpolitik in Deutschland 1918/19* (Göttingen, 1975); Sebastian Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19* (Cologne, 2008).

scholarly attempts to co-opt its history to provide legitimacy to the East German state. With Heinrich August Winkler's *From Revolution to Stabilization*, first published in 1984, this new historiography appeared to have found its crowning analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Looking back, the publication of Winkler's book also appears to mark the high tide of the period of research that began in the 1960s. From the mid-1980s onwards, the pace of research began to decline before it appeared to come to a complete standstill — best captured by the title of an edited volume published in 2010 under the title *The Forgotten Revolution*.<sup>5</sup> While that title aptly captures the lack of interest in the revolution's history during the 1990s and 2000s, it would be unthinkable to use the same formula to describe the history of the Weimar Republic more generally. For while research on the revolution declined, research and interest in the Weimar Republic surged ahead. This is something of a conundrum for historians of the Weimar Republic: at precisely the point in time when historians turned their backs on the history of the revolution that brought the Republic into existence, they have transformed our understanding of the Weimar Republic as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

This untenable disjuncture has recently begun to unravel. Partly inspired by new academic studies, and partly inspired by the Revolution's centenary, a series of new publications have attempted to restore the revolution to its rightful place at the center of historical analysis and debate. Without the revolution, this work implies, the history of Weimar will always be incomplete.<sup>7</sup>

In this article I want to focus on one aspect of this new revolutionary historiography: the revolution's violence. As a consequence of the forgetting of the revolution that has occurred since the mid-1980s, when historians think of the violence of the Weimar Republic, they tend to think of the violence that occurred at the Republic's end. The period of street fighting between Nazis and Communists. For the revolution that marked the Republic's beginnings, with the exception of the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the founders of the German Communist Party and cultural icons for the remainder of the twentieth century, until recently the role of violence has received far less attention.

By focusing on the intimate history of violence during the revolutionary months of November to March 1918-19, I want to show how violence occurred and examine what factors led to its radicalization

4 Heinrich August Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918 bis 1924* (Bonn, 1984).

5 Alexander Gallus, ed., *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19* (Göttingen, 2010)

6 Peter Fritzsche, "Did Weimar Fail?" *The Journal of Modern History*, 68:3 (1996): 629-656; Benjamin Ziemann, "Weimar was Weimar: Politics, Culture and the Emplotment of the German Republic," *German History*, 28:4 (2010): 542-571.

7 Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott and Kirsten Heinsohn, eds., *Germany 1916-1923. A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld, 2015); Julian Aulke, *Räume der Revolution. Kulturelle Verräumlichung in Politisierungsprozessen während der Revolution 1918-20* (Stuttgart, 2015); Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar. Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-19* (Cambridge, 2016); Robert Gerwarth, *Die Grösste aller Revolutionen. November 1918 und der Aufbruch in eine neue Zeit* (Munich, 2018).

over the course of the winter of 1918-19 as a whole. My purpose is to suggest that there was more to the violence than simply the murder of Rosa Luxemburg — the event that received the most media attention in and beyond Germany during the revolution's centenary. By understanding the radicalization of mentalities that occurred in parallel to the escalation of violence and the ensuing atrocities, I argue, we can better understand the nature of the Republic's politics at its very beginnings. The analysis of the escalation of violence during the winter of 1918-19 does not intend to suggest that the Republic was "doomed from the start." Rather, its broader historical significance lies in what it tells us about the potential for social and political radicalization in Germany during the 1920s. By understanding that potential, I argue, we gain a better understanding of how and why contemporaries reacted to the violence of the Republic's end. After all, for contemporaries, the violence of the Republic's beginnings was of a greater and more intense nature than that which accompanied its end.

### **I. November's violence: Panic gunfire**

Let me begin with a civilian victim of revolutionary violence. Charlotte Nagel. She was killed alongside a sixty-year-old man at Berlin's Alexanderplatz on 11 November 1918. The gunfire was caused by panic. It occurred when pro-revolutionary soldiers started firing after they thought that they had come under fire from counter-revolutionaries. The outburst was one example of the waves of panic gunfire that occurred in Germany between 3 and 11 November 1918. The pattern started in Kiel, the starting point for the November Revolution, where pro-revolutionary sailors took control of the naval garrison following their refusal to sail out to attack the British Royal Navy at the end of September. But even if Kiel has a special place in the Revolution's history, the pattern was similar elsewhere. There were simply too many people who believed that revolution would be met by a violent reply from monarchists. Rumors and fake news (*Falschmeldungen*) spread wildly. One of the most important suggested that officers loyal to the king were hiding in buildings and on rooftops sniping at revolutionaries in the streets below.

The expectation triggered waves of panic gunfire. As one observer explained a few weeks later: "Everyone knows how quickly a shot can go off when a gun's safety is switched off. When this happens, all of the armed men immediately think that someone in the crowd has fired

upon them and a horrifying volley of gunfire [*entsetzliche Knallerei*] begins, without there being any real reason for the shooting.”

An important example of this kind of panic firing occurred in Kiel at lunchtime on 5 November 1918. Given that this example demonstrates the potential for de-escalation it is important to analyze its course in detail. Employees of the Kiel Sparkasse (savings bank) explained what had happened. While the city was shaken by the previous day’s events, that morning, life in the bank had proceeded as normal. At around 2 p.m., Oberstadttassistent von Pein, the most senior bank official present, opened a window in the customer waiting area. He thought that the air in the room was stuffy. Looking out of the window, he noted a horse-drawn cart pass by with a sailor at the reins. Von Pein watched as the sailor stopped the horses before returning to work. About ten minutes later, Fräulein Stender, one of the bank’s two assistants, was close to the window. She was looking for a book on a colleague’s desk when she heard gunfire outside. Curiously, she approached the window to try to see if she could discover what was happening. Outside the bank, she caught a glimpse of a group of soldiers who were pointing at the bank. Worse than this, “one of them pointed his gun in the direction of the bank.” She jumped back from the window, warning everyone present that they should flee to the cellar. But without sufficient authority her opinion was ignored. Some of the staff even wanted to look out the window to judge the situation for themselves. Then the first bullets smashed through the building’s windows and no-one doubted Fräulein Stender’s suggestion. They raced to the cellar. Von Pein was the last to make it. He first took shelter behind a door, from where he listened to the sounds of a whistle before another round of shots rang out.

The terrified bank employees waited in the cellar until they thought that the shooting had stopped. Once they had been reassured by a few moment’s silence, they ventured out from their hiding place, only to rush back in when another round of gunfire shattered their illusion that the ordeal was over. But this time the apprentice Völkert did not join them. Perhaps fearful of theft, or keen to impress the bank’s many female employees, he went back to “put things away in the cheque and giro department.” For some time, while they stayed in the cellar, none of his colleagues knew what had happened to him. While they waited, a patrol of soldiers entered the cellar and told them to stay there until the entire building had been thoroughly searched. The bank staff only came out when soldiers told them that it was safe to do so.

By the time they did so, Völkert had already been carried away on a stretcher. A soldier later explained that he had been accidentally shot after he had been mistaken for a sailor who was about to shoot at them. Then the bank employees were told that they were all under arrest. The women were given five minutes to change their clothing, while von Pein, the only man amongst the revolutionaries' captives was searched for weapons. The soldiers and sailors then took them to the recently established revolutionary headquarters at the trade union building. In that moment, they were suspected counter-revolutionaries, accused of either being responsible for firing upon revolutionary sailors and soldiers from the Sparkasse building, or aiding the gunman who had done so.

The worst treatment was reserved for the building's live-in caretaker, Oldenburg. When the firing started, he had been with his family in their kitchen. As soon as the first bullets smashed through the windows of the upper floor rooms, he told his family to take cover in a corner and then went to investigate. In the landing he found a group of people trying to escape that included civilians and soldiers. Then, amid the commotion, a group of soldiers suddenly started shouting at him, accusing him of being responsible for the firing. No one listened to his quiet pleas of innocence. Instead, "they threatened him with weapons and declared him under arrest. They shouted at him and ordered him to come down the steps with his hands up. He was told he had to open the upstairs apartments." He refused to do so. Instead, the soldiers and sailors took him into the cash office, which had borne the brunt of the firing and was badly damaged. While he was there, he watched as the injured Völkert was carried out on a stretcher. In this moment, an "unknown civilian was playing with a revolver." Oldenburg pleaded with him that the gun was not necessary. After initially ignoring his requests, the man finally put the weapon away. By this time, Oldenburg's family had already been led away by angry revolutionaries. While Oldenburg continued to protest his innocence, his assailants told him that his wife and children would pay the price if the culprit was not found. Then Oldenburg was brought to the trade union building, where he stood trial in a makeshift revolutionary court.

This was the point when Oldenburg's luck changed. Inside the trade union building, when the soldiers and sailors produced a rifle and claimed that it had been used to fire upon them, cooler heads inspected the weapon and discovered that years had passed since the

gun had last fired a shot. Then a man intervened on behalf of him and his family, offering bail for them. But most importantly, while some of the soldiers and sailors were possessed with rage, others calmed them down and recognized Oldenburg for what he was: a man who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The idea that Oldenburg was a gunman, or that he had used his position as caretaker to allow the sniper to enter or exit the building was dismissed for what it was, a fantasy on the part of nervous sailors and soldiers. Soon after, just as had been the case with the bank employees who had been arrested earlier, Oldenburg and his family were released. Völkert made a full recovery. He later stated that it was the civilian with the revolver who had shot him.<sup>8</sup>

A week later, when the revolution reached Berlin, leading to the announcement of the Kaiser's abdication at mid-day on 9 November 1918 and the proclamation of a German Republic on the same day, there were similar outbursts of panic gunfire in the German capital. As crowds formed in the government area around Unter den Linden, and at the Royal Palace and Stables at its eastern end, the first outbursts of panic gunfire occurred during the late afternoon. Rumors suggested that counter-revolutionary officers were hiding in Berlin's Royal Opera, the Neue Wache and in front of the Royal Palace. It was even alleged that officers were firing with machine guns and that there was an anti-revolutionary sniper in the dome of Berlin cathedral. But no culprits were ever found and once the revolutionaries received "strict instructions" to stop firing, all of the gunfire ceased.<sup>9</sup>

The waves of panic gunfire described here are a reminder that the first ten days of November 1918 were not as peaceful as some of the most recent accounts of the revolution would like us to believe. November 1918 was not November 1989. It was not a "peaceful revolution."<sup>10</sup> At least sixty people lost their lives — fifteen alone in Berlin.<sup>11</sup>

The gunfire terrified contemporaries. It was the most important sound during the revolutionary upheaval. Even those in favor of the revolution were concerned by the breakdown of control over public spaces. The number of those killed might pale in comparison to the millions of dead during the First World War, but it still amounted to an important historical turning point: it was not since 1848 that the political elite experienced such a sudden and seemingly total loss of control. For many, it felt like much worse violence would soon follow. As a result of the fears of future violence that were in part the result of the sound of gunfire, many contemporaries believed that they

8 The events at the Sparkasse are retold in: Stadtarchiv Kiel Nr.32665. Akten des Magistrats zu Kiel (November 1918). I am grateful to Dr. Johannes Rosenplänter (Landeshauptstadt Kiel, Stadtarchiv) for his assistance in locating this set of files. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

9 Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 55-63.

10 Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19. Der wahre Beginn unserer Demokratie*, (München, 2017).

11 Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 91.

were already participants in a moment of violent radicalization that could destroy Germany. Perhaps tragically, contemporaries failed to recognize that, as the revolutionary's failure to execute their prisoner Oldenburg and his family shows, in November 1918 the capacity for de-escalation was greater than the capacity for escalation. This was to change over the course of the winter of 1918-19.

## II. The 6 December and the first use of the machine gun

The starting point for that change was 6 December 1918. The first time that machine gun fire resulted in civilian casualties during the revolution. The firing took place shortly before 6 p.m. at the intersection of the Chauseestraße and Invalidenstraße on 6 December 1918 — one of the main junctions in north central Berlin just a short distance from the Spree River. It only lasted for at most one and half to two minutes. But its impact was devastating. Bullets rained down on a crowded street at a busy urban interchange as people made their way home from work. A number 32 tram was caught in the line of fire. It suddenly crashed to a halt. Many of its passengers collapsed as blood splattered across the tram. Beside the tram bullets pulverized a horse that was pulling a cart. On the sidewalk screaming civilians fled for their lives, knocking each other to the ground. Some escaped by throwing themselves through the glass windows of a large department store — the cuts of the glass were more merciful than the bullets of machine and rifle gunfire. On board the tram, terrified passengers tried to escape. In an instant, one man, an engineer from Reinickendorf, watched as the soldier standing in front of him collapsed dead, struck down by the bullets. Behind him a woman was also hit. She was left seriously injured. He was physically unscathed, but his clothes were wet. It was the blood of the victims, who had been standing beside him. Later he sent a letter to the compromise revolutionary government created in the immediate aftermath to the events of 9 November, known as the Council of People's Representatives. In it he pleaded that "careful, cold-blooded behavior on the part of the soldiers would have considerably reduced the numbers of dead and injured."<sup>12</sup>

After the soldiers stopped firing, for a while almost complete silence reigned over the scene. Then the first people ventured onto the street and looked at the battlefield.<sup>13</sup> They saw bodies lying on the ground. There were large pools of blood on the street. Injured people, including at least five women, lay there groaning, moaning and crying out

12 BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/25 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.86-87: Friedrich Neddermeyer. An den Polizeipräsidenten von Berlin. 7 Dez. 1918.

13 "Ein Spartakus-Putsch in Berlin," *DZ* Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; "Die Vorgänge in Berlin [Priv. Tel. Berlin 7 Dez.]," *FZ* 7 Dec. 1918 AA; "Sturmzeichen in Berlin, Eine Spartakus-Versammlung. Maschinengewehrfeuer in der Chauseestraße," *Post* Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

for help.<sup>14</sup> There were not enough ambulances available to bring all of the injured to hospital — later it was also claimed that there were so many bodies that no one was sure about what was to be done with them. In total at least sixteen people lost their lives. The 17 year-old apprentice Martha Komorowski was the youngest victim. She was on board the number 32 tram when it arrived at the junction. A further eighty people were hurt in some way, of whom at least twelve suffered serious injuries.<sup>15</sup> The dead included a group of people who had been standing waiting at a tram stop.<sup>16</sup>

A taboo had been broken. The machine gun fire in central Berlin was a clear example of what could happen if the violence went out of control. After weeks of anxiety that Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were about to use violence to seize power along the lines of Lenin's Bolsheviks, this explosive event brought home just how dangerous the situation could become if mass violence broke out. Across Germany people learnt how the violence of one of the First World War's most emblematic weapons suddenly transformed an everyday urban setting into a space defined by unexpected violent death.<sup>17</sup> The *Vossische Zeitung* told how "many bullets hit the tram, others struck the windows of the banks and the shops on the left hand side of the Chausseestraße," as well as warning chillingly that "several people collapsed" instantly.<sup>18</sup> The *Berliner Morgenpost* thought that the firing created "indescribable panic" while the correspondent of the *Neue Hamburger Zeitung* added that even if they were not struck by bullets, many women fainted because of the sound of gunfire.<sup>19</sup> One ultranationalist newspaper claimed that "soldiers used to gunfire" pulled "terrified civilians" to the ground.<sup>20</sup>

While historians will never be able to say with certainty whether the firing was orchestrated or not, the shockwaves that followed were quickly and deliberately politicized. The firing of 6 December occurred at the same time as an attempted counter-revolutionary putsch. The putsch's organizers had tried to imprison the Berlin-based

14 "Spartakus gegen Maikäfer," VZ Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; "Ein bewegter Tag in Berlin," BM Nr. 339, 7 Dec. 1918.

15 "Ein Spartakus-Putsch in Berlin," DZ Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

16 Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution* gives the figure of sixteen killed and twelve seriously injured. On 7 December 1918, the *Rote Fahne* gave the figure of fourteen dead, while on the same day the *Vossische Zeitung* estimated that twenty-four people were killed and that a further sixty were injured: RF Nr. 22, 7 Dec. 1918; VZ Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA. In its edition of 7 December, the *Berliner Morgenpost* suggested that the latest available figures that came in late the previous evening put the death toll at sixteen and the injured at fifteen: "Ein bewegter Tag in Berlin," BM Nr. 339, 7 Dec. 1918. Another historian, Karl Heinz Luther, has suggested that fourteen people died and that twelve were injured: Karl-Heinz Luther, "Die nachrevolutionären Machtkämpfe in

Berlin, November 1918 bis März 1919," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* (1959): 187-222, here 199.

17 "Ein Spartakus-Putsch in Berlin," DZ Nr. 622, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; "Die Vorgänge in Berlin [Priv.

Tel. Berlin 7 Dez.], FZ 7 Dec. 1918 AA; "Sturmzeichen in Berlin, 'Eine Spartakus-Versammlung. Maschinengewehrfeuer in der Chausseestraße," *Post* Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

18 "Der Straßenkampf in der Chausseestraße," VZ Nr. 625, 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

19 "Ein Putsch in Berlin [Berlin 6 Dec. Eigene Meldung]," NHZ Nr. 621, 7 Dec. 1918 MA; "Ein bewegter Tag in Berlin," BM Nr. 339, 7 Dec. 1918.

20 "Blutige Straßenkämpfe in Berlin," *Reichsbote* 7 Dec. 1918 MA.

Executive Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, which was known as the *Vollzugsrat* and which some revolutionaries believed was empowered to monitor and control the revolutionary government. At the Reich Chancellery the putschists had tried to proclaim Ebert as a new German dictator. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg argued that the conspirators behind the putsch had pre-planned the bloodbath, deliberately organizing a massacre to accompany their attempt to seize power. Almost every other political group blamed the Spartacists for the loss of life. They argued that the gunfire only started after the Spartacists had declared that they were going to hang Ebert from the next lantern and that the first shots were fired by Spartacists at the soldiers.

In response, on 7 December, Liebknecht and his supporters demonstrated with machine guns along the Siegesallee. Many people were terrified. Fearful that the Spartacists were about to seize power, members of the political elite made plans to flee Berlin at a moment's notice. Some rumors even suggested that Liebknecht controlled a secret army of up to 100,000 men. The fear that Germany was about to follow Russia down the path of Bolshevism and civil war was about to reach its zenith. But none of these fears of a new revolutionary Armageddon were ever realized. Instead, at the same time as the fear of the streets continued to grow, Ebert's agenda received a powerful boost from the first national congress of workers' and soldiers' councils which began meeting in Berlin on 16 December 1918. This congress, which acted like a revolutionary parliament with delegates being elected by soldiers and workers, strongly endorsed Ebert's plans for the democratization of Germany. Of the 512 delegates, recently selected in meetings of workers' and soldiers' councils across Germany, only twelve were Spartacists. The Social Democrats had more than 300. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were unable to secure a mandate.<sup>21</sup>

Once again, however, before the Social Democrats' successes in the congress could manifest themselves in the political life of the revolution, violence intervened. Whereas the 6 December 1918 was the first occasion when a machine gun was fired upon a civilian crowd, on 24 December 1918 the escalation of violence reached a new key when front soldiers used the assault tactic in central Berlin at dawn on 24 December 1918. The battle pitted front soldiers from the Guard Cavalry Division (GSKD) under the command of the General Commando Lequis against a group of pro-revolutionary sailors known as the *Volksmarinedivision*.

<sup>21</sup> A record of proceedings was published in 1919, see *Allgemeiner Kongreß der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands. Stenographische Berichte* (Berlin, 1919). Important historical analysis includes: Kolb, *Arbeiterräte*, 197-216; Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution*, esp. 197-204; Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 121-129; Winkler, *Von der Revolution*, 100-109.

The soldiers had been rushed to central Berlin during the night of 23-24 December 1918. They were sent there following a series of confrontational events in the government district on 23 December. While the exact chronology of those confrontations may never be entirely possible to re-establish, at their end we can be certain that they included armed sailors taking the Social Democratic town major Otto Wels hostage, armed sailors temporarily blocking access to the Chancellery Building (in effect briefly making Friedrich Ebert a prisoner of his own guards) and crucially, a gun battle on Unter den Linden that left two sailors dead and brought their comrades to boiling point. Later accounts often portray the sailors as having been angry at plans to disband their division and remove it from the castle and stables without pay. Accounts that represent the sailors in this way forget that at least some of them were motivated by the deaths of two of their comrades in a shootout with unidentified snipers that the sailors later claimed were counter-revolutionaries.

The sum of these events changed Friedrich Ebert's attitude to violence. Up to this point, the most important majority Social Democratic politician was opposed to using force against his opponents on the revolutionary left. But the chaos and confusion of 23 December led him to abandon his previous constraint. He now gave General Groener, who was de-facto the head of the Supreme Military Command (OHL), permission to use military force to create order. For the first time in the revolution, the OHL could move militarily against the sailors. The assault, led by the prestigious Guard Division, began at 8 a.m on 24 December. It turned the eastern end of Unter den Linden into a warzone. The sailors defended their positions in the Schloss and Marstall, which they had occupied since mid-November, while the soldiers attacked them from the Zeughaus, the Lustgarten, and the Neue Wache. Assault soldiers [*Sturmsoldaten*] raced across the space in front of Berlin cathedral and along Unter den Linden. The statue of Friedrich the Great was even struck by bullets and the Schlossplatz destroyed by the fighting.

By lunchtime the assault was over. Only days after Friedrich Ebert had told the front soldiers that they were "undefeated in the field," the Guard Division surrendered to a group of rebel sailors. That afternoon, the soldiers and officers marched out of the city humiliated. Major Pabst, who would go on to orchestrate the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht three weeks later, described it as the worst moment of his military career. Seeking a scapegoat

for his failure, the officer in charge of the assault, General Lequis, blamed women and children for interfering with the military operation, creating a dangerous myth that suggested that reluctance to fire on civilians led to military failure and humiliation. Days later, Lequis was dismissed.

Many people thought that this was the nadir of the revolution. Typical of the mass panic that follows sudden violence in civilian areas — think of the recent responses to terrorist attacks in western Europe — it was believed that hundreds of people had been killed. The real figure was closer to ten. But facts mattered little. New rumors even suggested that Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht's rule of violence had begun. In reality the Spartacists did not have sufficient followers to undertake a putsch. Indeed, the sailors who had been victorious on December 24, 1918 were unwilling to accept the authority of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. When Liebknecht visited them, they refused to come under his leadership. Instead, both sides called their supporters out on to the streets: on December 29, central Berlin became the stage for a massive plebiscite on Germany's future. Supporters of the government gathered at the Reichstag end of Unter den Linden. Its opponents formed crowds at the opposite end of Berlin's most important boulevard. The opponents' demonstration surrounded the coffins of the sailors killed on 24 December. Their demonstration was a political funeral. The sailors were later buried in the burial grounds of the fallen of 1848. For the government's supporters, the demonstrations of support for the Social Democrats were a massive victory. They believed that the size of the crowds that came out to support them was a clear indicator that the will of the majority was firmly behind them.

The Council of People's Representatives could not survive this pressure. The Independent Socialist members Hugo Haase, Wilhelm Dittmann, and Emil Barth, who were accused of collaborating with the majority Social Democrats against the ideals of their own party, quit the council. They were replaced by two Social Democratic hardliners, Gustav Noske and Rudolf Wissel. From this point on the council renamed itself the *Reichsregierung* — the government of the Reich.

Large anti-Spartacist demonstrations on 29 December encouraged the SPD hardliners. Their supporters demanded that the government use force to restore order. Bernhard Dernburg, one of the founders of the liberal German Democratic Party was cheered by thousands at the Moltke memorial when he called out: "We can tolerate it no longer,

that 2000 Spartacists terrorize all of Berlin, and we must demand that the government immediately use the forces available to them and cease from, as they have done up to now, leaving them hanging on the wall. If they cannot do that, then we will all once again pull on the old grey field coat, to restore order and quiet.”<sup>22</sup>

### III. Performing state power: Crushing the January Uprising

Ebert’s government got an opportunity to prove that it could do so on 5 January 1919, the first day of the January Uprising — often described as the “Spartacist Uprising.” The uprising began when unexpectedly large demonstrations took place in support of the Independent Socialist chief of police Emil Eichhorn. Eichhorn had become police chief during the revolution of 9 November. But since mid-December 1918 he had been increasingly identified as a threat to the democratic order being created. He was rumored to have lived from the profits of organized crime and he was accused of harboring secret stashes of weapons to arm the government’s opponents when the next revolutionary situation occurred. But what Eichhorn’s opponents did not realize was that there was considerable support for the idea that the chief of police had to remain in the hands of the working class. Hence, the news that Eichhorn had been dismissed brought about unexpectedly large anti-government demonstrations. For radical revolutionary socialists determined to emulate the Russian Bolsheviks and seize power, it looked like it was now or never. They believed that the demonstrations in support of Eichhorn were a chance to seize power. Late in the evening of 5 January, armed workers occupied several buildings in Berlin’s press district. That night a coalition of radical groups in Berlin, including Karl Liebknecht (but not Rosa Luxemburg, who was not present) proclaimed the 6 January 1919 as the first day of a worker’s uprising. It lasted less than a full week.

Sebastian Haffner’s *Die Verratene Revolution* is remarkably misleading about what happened next. He describes January 6 as a real chance for the proletariat to seize power and blames the failure of the radical leadership for the absence of a successful second revolution. What his account deliberately forgets is that the radicals were not the only people in the streets on 6 January 1919: thousands of government supporters blocked off the Wilhelmstrasse and demanded to be given weapons to protect the government.<sup>23</sup> While the government successfully mobilized its supporters, the radicals lost theirs. Rosa Luxemburg’s daily articles in the *Rote Fahne* desperately pleading for

22 For a fuller account of the events related in this section and detailed source references, see Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 136–172.

23 Sebastian Haffner, *Die deutsche Revolution: 1918/19* (Reinbek, 2004), 158.

workers to join in the struggle went unheard. As the state prosecutor put it a few weeks later “‘the worker’ disappeared at the moment when the demonstration turned into a putsch and armed rebellion.”<sup>24</sup>

While Luxemburg used words to call for violence, in central Berlin between 6 and 11 January 1919, the fighting took the form of street battles, outbursts of panic gunfire, and skirmishes between rebels and supporters of the government. More innocent civilians were killed. By 8 January, thirty people were dead — the final death toll was around 200. While many of the dead were rebels, the uninvolved civilian population also suffered: every day in Berlin between 6 and 11 January at least one female civilian lost her life in the crossfire. Dead women and girls included Hermine Seidel (16), Sonne Waldow von Wahl (20), Marie Freystadt (20) and Ella Wiesener (26). Unlike Luxemburg or Noske, there is no place for them in contemporary memories of the Revolution of 1918-19.

There were attempts to negotiate an end to the violence. But the Majority Social Democrats chose to end the rebellion with a performative display of the state’s power. Like the founders of so many new states, they were determined to use violence to send a message: we will stop short of nothing to defeat anyone who challenges our right to rule (a right that was indisputably confirmed by the results of the elections to the National Assembly on 19 January 1919). They summed up their intention in an announcement on 8 January 1919. It ended with the promise that “the hour of revenge draws near [*Die Stunde der Abrechnung naht*].”<sup>25</sup>

That hour came at the rebels’ stronghold, the *Vorwärts* newspaper building on Lindenstrasse on 11 January 1919. The newspaper was the Social Democrats’ most important political organ. During the First World War its editors had been dismissed when they began to be critical of the party leadership’s support for the war. Hence, many opponents of the Social Democratic leadership believe that the *Vorwärts* had been stolen from them.

Rather than seal the building off and wait for the rebels to surrender, the government forces undertook a spectacular assault that began with artillery fire and was followed by assault soldiers racing across the Belle-Alliance-Platz (today Mehringplatz). Like the operation on 24 December, the tactics behind the assault treated a building in a civilian area as if it was an enemy trench on the western front. During the first assault, five government soldiers were killed. The assault

24 GStA PK. Rep.84a. No. 11759. Bl.61-62.

25 As quoted in “Die Stunde der Abrechnung naht!” *Reichsbote*, 9 Jan. 1919 MA

soldiers blamed their losses on a machine gun which they claimed was operated by Rosa Luxemburg — the origins of this false belief lay in a rumor that had circulated during the previous days. When they got their hands on their first prisoners — including a group of men attempting to negotiate the rebels' surrender — they brought them to the Dragoon Barracks (today the tax office of the Kreuzberg district). Soon after they became the first prisoners murdered during the revolution of 1918-19. One of the dead men, a 30-year-old father of two, Wolfgang Fernbach, was a German Jew. No one was ever convicted for the crime.

Testimonies vary as to how the seven men were actually killed. The officer who led the assault, Franz von Stephani, claimed that they were all shot in a single volley of fire. One witness, Willi Köhn, a soldier in the republican *Sicherheitswehr*, contradicted his account. Köhn claimed that the soldiers had killed the prisoners without any order to fire. He suggested that as many as 100 or 200 men participated in what he described as a “general outburst of gunfire that was nearly as dangerous for those who were watching.”<sup>26</sup> Another witness, Hans Stettin, a medical orderly of the Guard Dragoons, described the beaten men before their deaths as “bleeding from various parts of their bodies including their faces.”<sup>27</sup> Although none of the dead were Russian,<sup>28</sup> as they killed their first prisoner, the men screamed “Russian pig” amongst other insults at him. “Without further ado,” Stettin added, “he was put with his face against the wall and killed by a shot to the back of his head.”<sup>29</sup> After they had done so, Stettin claimed that they made the other prisoners file past this body, insulting them, and telling them that the same fate awaited them.<sup>30</sup> In his words: “The first man was shot while standing up; two or three men were shot while they were lying down, and even hit by several bullets, so that half of their faces were completely destroyed. A body lay to the right on the powder case; there was only a small part of its face left. It had been indiscriminately set upon.”<sup>31</sup>

Another witness, the soldier Wilhelm Helms, thought that ten minutes passed between the killing of the first and second groups of prisoners. He described how at first two men were shot against a wall, before a second group was killed by gunshots as they stood between two carriages. Before the first two men were shot, Helms claimed that the soldiers had beaten their prisoners so badly that they were “incapable of action, they were completely covered with blood and no longer looked like humans; they were now only spineless pieces

26 *Prussian Parliament B*, “Gericht der 1. Garde-Division, Amtstelle Potsdam, - als Verfahren wider Unbekannt wegen Erschießung des Schriftstellers Fernbach.” Summary of Köhn’s testimony to a military court. Presented to the Prussian Parliament on 12 September 1919, 284.

27 *Prussian Parliament B*, Stettin testimony 3 July 1919, 129.

28 Gumbel, *Vier Jahre Mord*, 9; Memorial Finanzamt Kreuzberg.

29 *Prussian Parliament B*, Stettin testimony 3 July 1919, 129. The report of the *DZ* also referred to one of the prisoners as a Russian: “Der Kampf um den “Vorwärts”,” *DZ* Nr. 11, 12 Jan. 1919 MA.

30 *Prussian Parliament B*, Stettin testimony 3 July 1919, 129.

31 *Ibid*.

of meat.”<sup>32</sup> Helms thought that twenty to thirty men participated in this vicious act of violence. He said that the men had been killed “like at the front.” In his words:

The prisoners were lined up in groups, and then they were shot. The command “fire” was given. The first two were shot around eight times. The effects were so terrible, that their brains were left on the ground, as if one was buying brains [*Brägen*] in a butcher’s shop. Afterwards someone happily shot again at the bodies, as one of them was allegedly still moving; this was almost an hour later. However there was no command given for this. The group of five were treated in a more precise manner. They were lined up against a wall. They could hardly walk and some of them were partially led there. They stood against the wall, some of them already collapsing. Twenty men lined up and shot them. A Sergeant took command and organized the soldiers, who in fact did the shooting when he ordered “fire.”<sup>33</sup>

The wife of Werner Möller, one of the dead men, lamented that death at the hands of a firing squad would have been far milder than what her young husband endured during the final moments of his life. She later claimed that his body had only one gunshot wound, in its upper left side. The left side of his chest however had a striking knife wound, which she thought had been caused by stabbing by bayonet. There was also a major wound on the left side of his neck and the lower left side of his face had collapsed to the point that his ear had almost fallen off. She added that after her husband was killed, his body was robbed. She said that by the time she had found his body, he was missing his shoes, wallet, watch and hat.<sup>34</sup>

Franz von Stephani was accused of ordering the captives’ execution. He denied this. He was, however, willing to admit that once the men lay dead he might have said something like “they have forfeited their lives.”<sup>35</sup> Although it was never established who carried out the beating, it is most likely that the captives’ assailants included soldiers who had participated in the assault on the *Vorwärts* building as well as younger junior officers who were present in the Garde-Dragoon barracks and joined in the violence. One witness specifically identified the younger soldiers as using whips to strike the captives.<sup>36</sup> No one was ever sentenced for the killings.<sup>37</sup>

32 *Prussian Parliament B*, Helms testimony 5 May 1919, 86.

33 *Ibid.*, 87.

34 Bundesarchiv-Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter BArch Berlin) SAPMO NY 4131/27 (Personal Papers of Emil Eichhorn) Bl.122-137: “Die Ermordung der Vorwärts-Parlamentäre“ by Eugene Fernbach (father of Wolfgang Fernbach), here Bl.123. and Bl.132.

35 *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani 3 July 1919, 131.

36 BArch Berlin-SAPMO NY 4131/27 (Eichhorn Papers) Bl.122-37: “Die Ermordung der Vorwärts-Parlamentäre“ by Eugene Fernbach, here Bl.134-5. See also the discussions in *Prussian Parliament B*, 21 May 1919, 4 June 1919; 3 July 1919, 112-45.

37 Emil Julius Gumbel, *Vier Jahre politischer Mord* (Berlin, 1922), 9-10.

In the immediate aftermath to the assault, most commentators didn't care about the atrocity.<sup>38</sup> Newspapers praised the assault soldiers. Their headlines announced that their success was the "victory over terror" (*Berliner Morgenpost*), "the end of Spartacist rule" (*Vorwärts*), the "victory of order" (*Frankfurter Zeitung*), "Liebknecht's defeat" (*Frankfurter Zeitung*) and the "liberation" of Berlin (*Reichsbote*).<sup>39</sup> The Berlin correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* wrote that "the liberation of the capital from the terror of the Spartacist league and its friends, the Independents," felt like when "one wakes up after a terrible dream."<sup>40</sup> By the time readers of southern Germany's most important pre-war liberal newspaper read his words, the nightmare for the families of the men killed in the Garde-Drögoner barracks had only just begun.

Just hours after the men had been killed, in short succession, two soldiers turned up unexpectedly at the home of Alice Fernbach on Grunewaldstrasse. They had most likely been sent there to tell her the news that her husband, Wolfgang Fernbach was one of the seven men brutally killed in the Garde-Drögoner barracks that morning. Fernbach was from an assimilated German-Jewish family.<sup>41</sup> They had met and married in 1912 and had previously lived in London, where he worked as a newspaper correspondent for *The Financier and Bullionist*.<sup>42</sup> Since then they had become the parents of two young children — one of whom was not yet five years old.

Wolfgang Fernbach was of weak stature and poor health — he had initially been rejected by the German military in 1914 before he was called up in November 1915 only to be discharged on the grounds of poor health nine months later. While a serving soldier, he joined in the underground activities of the Spartacist league.<sup>43</sup> A committed activist, in November 1918, it is quite likely that he was among the men who accompanied Ernst Meyer to occupy the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* and produce the first two issues of the *Rote Fahne* newspaper.

38 During the immediate aftermath to the assault, it was relatively easy for the government's supporters to ignore the Garde-Drögoner barracks atrocity. In the aftermath to the assault on 11 January, contemporaries' reactions to events in the barracks were subsumed within a much broader wave of atrocity accusations and counter-accusations, some of which circulated as rumors and many of which later turned out to be untrue.

39 "Der Sieg über den Terror," *BM* Nrs. 6–13, 13 Jan. 1919; "Das Ende der Spartacus-Herrschaft," *Vorwärts* Nr. 22, 13 Jan. 1919; "Der Sieg der Ordnung in Berlin. Die entscheidenden Ereignisse [Berlin 12 Jan. Priv. Tel.]," *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 MA; "Liebknechts Niederlage," *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 AA; "Der Zusammenbruch der Spartakiden," *Reichsbote*, 11 Jan. 1919 AA; "Berlin von dem Joche der Spartakiden befreit," *Reichsbote*, 13 Jan. 1919 MA; "Das Ende der Spartakus-Herrschaft in Berlin," *DZ* 13 Jan. 1919 MA.

40 "Berlin. 13 Jan. [Priv. Tel.]," *FZ* 13 Jan. 1919 AA.

41 His father Eugen had quit Judaism shortly after Wolfgang was born but Wolfgang had briefly flirted with Zionism and his sister had even married a Russian Zionist — much to their father's dismay.

42 Fernbach, "Memories of Spartacus." Fernbach's appearance may have been a factor; in 1910 he was subjected to anti-Semitic insults. However, I have come across no indication that Fernbach's Jewish background was referred to at the point of his killing.

43 He was involved in the printing of Rosa Luxemburg's Junius Pamphlet, the Spartacist letters, and former German ambassador to London, Prince Lichnowsky's controversial memoir, *Meine Londoner Mission*, in which he blamed the German government for the origins of the war.

By January 1919, the occupation of the *Vorwärts* building presented this young idealist with a new chance. Wolfgang Fernbach went there determined to help produce a new Communist newspaper: “*Der Rote Vorwärts*.” He also went there fully aware that the decision might cost him his life. He carried a short letter on his person that instructed its finder to inform his wife Alice if they should find it while searching his body.

The morning after she learnt that her husband had been killed Alice Fernbach went with Wolfgang’s parents, as well as her own father Wilhelm Sabor, to the Garde-Drögoner barracks. They were hoping to find out what happened to Wolfgang during the final hours of his life, and probably praying to discover that the soldiers’ messages the previous day were untrue. In the barracks, at the request of Wolfgang’s father Eugen, he and Alice’s father were brought to the stables where the bodies of the dead men were lying outstretched on the ground. According to Eugen’s account, all of the dead men had been robbed of their valuables and they were missing their shoes. None of the officers present were willing to tell them what had really happened the previous day.

On 16 January, Eugen and Alice Fernbach returned to the barracks once again. This time an officer told them to write to Major von Stephani — having avoided them during their first visit, von Stephani was now back in Potsdam. On 17 January Eugen Fernbach wrote to Stephani but he signed the letter in the name of Alice Fernbach. He pleaded with von Stephani to inform the family of what really happened to his son. When Stephani failed to reply he sent another letter in his own name on 13 February. Unlike his first letter, the second was sent as a registered letter (*Einschreiben*). It included the additional goading comment that no “man of honor” could refuse to inform a family faced with such a desperate situation.

Von Stephani answered in two letters, dated 9 and 13 February 1919. The first, addressed to Wolfgang’s wife Alice expressed his regret at her and her children’s loss. But both letters were adamant that Wolfgang and the other six men had been caught with weapons and been in the possession of the hated “dum-dum-bullets” — soft-nosed bullets used for target practice which were despised by soldiers in all armies during the First World War because of their horrific impact upon the human body (soft-nosed bullets have a more destructive impact upon the body than regular ammunition). Von Stephani later

repeated the same claim before the Prussian Parliament and at the start of March 1919, he and Count Westarp — the main suspects behind the atrocity — even went as far as completing an official complaint with the police against the seven dead men for murder and attempted murder.<sup>44</sup>

His letters to the Fernbach family expressed regret at their loss. But he was in no way repentant about who was responsible for Wolfgang's death. On 16 January 1919 — the same day that Alice and Eugen Fernbach paid their second visit to the Garde-Drögoner barracks — Stephani was one of the chief mourners at the funerals of the government soldiers killed during the assault. The families of the dead men were present, as were representatives of the Mosse, Buxenstein and *Vorwärts* publishers as well as members of the Social Democratic Party and significant numbers of local people in Potsdam.<sup>45</sup> The men who were laid to rest that day were foremost in his mind when he wrote to the Fernbach family. In his second letter he told them that the soldiers killed during the assault on the *Vorwärts* building also had families who were now desperately grieving. In both letters he stated that the sole blame for all of the deaths lay with the leaders of the Spartacist league. In May 1919, in front of the Prussian Parliament, von Stephani made references clearly blaming Rosa Luxemburg for the loss of life — although he did not mention her by name.

After burying *their* victims together, it was unlikely that the *Vorwärts* newspaper and its SPD party colleagues in the government would listen to Fernbach and the many others who spoke out against the treatment of the first seven prisoners killed by Freikorps soldiers in 1919. Moreover, there could be no justice for the Fernbach family because the atrocity was part of a powerful political battle about the meaning of the uprising and the legitimacy of Friedrich Ebert's government's decision to use military force, including artillery fire, to bring it to an end. This political debate has continued to influence how the January Uprising has been understood right up until today.<sup>46</sup> It pits supporters of the Social Democrats against their critics who view the level of force used against the rebels as having been unnecessary. In 1919 these two camps were divided along similar lines. The government's supporters saw the rebellion as an atrocious act that was deserving of punishment, while their critics understood the Garde-Drögoner barracks atrocity as the outcome of a terrible government policy that betrayed the tradition and history of the German working class.<sup>47</sup>

44 *Prussian Parliament B*, von Stephani testimony 21. May 1919, 122–7. See also GStA PK Rep.84a (Justizministerium) Nr. 11759 Bl.51–51RS: Reinhard letter to state prosecutor Weissmann 3 March 1919; GStA PK Rep.84a (Justizministerium) Nr. 11759 Bl.52–52RS: Anzeige gegen die bei der Erstürmung der "Vorwärts" gefangen genommenen Personen gegen Mordes und Mordversuchs (vom 16.I.1919).

45 "Beisetzung der "Vorwärts" Opfer," *Vorwärts* Nr.25–28, 16 Jan. 1919.

46 Rüdiger Hachtmann, "Blick zurück und in die Zukunft. Die Sicht auf die „Novemberrevolution“ 1919 bis 2018 und mögliche Perspektiven einer kritischen Revolutionshistoriographie," *Sozialgeschichte Online* 23(2018): 107–165. See also Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung. Deutungen von der Weimarer Republik bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2013).

47 On the idea of atrocity as a "culturally constructed and historically determined category," see Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, 430.

A taboo had been broken. It was the first time that prisoners were killed during the Revolution of 1918-19. Instead of condemning the atrocity and punishing the perpetrators, the government, led by Friedrich Ebert, Philip Scheidemann and Gustav Noske, and its supporters continued to defend the conduct of soldiers and blame the Spartacists for *all* of the violence. For them, the assault on the *Vorwärts* had served its purpose: it had sent a message that the government was determined to maintain its right to rule and prevent “Russian conditions” in Germany. For large parts of the audience to this violence, it was reassuring to know that the government had “more machine guns than Liebknecht.” Three weeks later Max Weber famously defined the state as the holder of the monopoly of physical force.<sup>48</sup>

The role of *Vorwärts* editor Friedrich Stampfer (after whom the street in front of the Social Democrat’s Party headquarters is named today) was especially controversial. In December 1918 Stampfer’s editorials had made him particularly disliked among parts of the radical revolutionary left. On 11 January, he accompanied the assault soldiers during their operation at the *Vorwärts* building. Later he described seeing dead bodies — one of whom he described as looking Russian — in the rubble. In the Dragoon barracks he was shocked to witness a group of soldiers preparing to execute a female prisoner. He intervened and demanded that no further prisoners be killed. But publicly he refused to admit that the atrocity had taken place.<sup>49</sup>

#### IV. The violence continues: The suppression of Berlin’s March Uprising.

There was no cooling of passions. On 3 March 1919 Berlin’s workers went on strike. The decision to strike was made by delegates elected to represent workers at a general assembly of Berlin’s workers’ councils on 3 March 1919.<sup>50</sup> It was at first supported by an uneasy coalition of Berlin based Independent Socialists, Communists, and some Social Democrats, who in turn placed the strike’s leadership in the hands of Berlin councils’ *Vollzugsrat*.<sup>51</sup> Even though it was termed a “general strike,” it did not bring a stop to the city’s electricity, gas, and water supplies, and Berlin’s emergency and security services also continued working.<sup>52</sup> Gustav Noske’s response was immediately clear. He declared a state of emergency in the capital and ordered its military occupation. For Noske, a hard response to the strike was an opportunity to demonstrate the state’s power.

48 Max Weber, “Politik als Beruf,” in id., *Geistige Arbeit als Beruf. Vier Vorträge vor dem Freistudentischen Bund*. Zweiter Vortrag. (München, 1919), [http://www.deutschetextarchiv.de/weber\\_politik\\_1919](http://www.deutschetextarchiv.de/weber_politik_1919), accessed September 5, 2019. See further Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber. A Biography*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, 2011), 514-518.

49 Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 218-226.

50 Gerhard Engel, Bärbel Holz and Ingo Materna, eds., *Groß-Berliner Arbeiter und Soldatenräte in der Revolution 1918-19* (3 Vols.), (Berlin, 1993-2002).

51 Müller, *Geschichte*, 662-663.

52 ‘Frankfurt, 4 März’, *FZ* Nr.170, 4 March 1919 AA.

The strike quickly escalated into an armed uprising. The first shots were fired in the vicinity of the Alexanderplatz where there was rioting and shops were plundered. During the night of 5-6 March the first skirmishes transformed into an out-and-out battle. Later accounts produced conflicting explanations for the origins of this fighting. Supporters of the government explained it as the first act in a pre-planned uprising. The strike leaders, including the revolutionary shop steward Richard Müller, blamed it on the work of *agents provocateurs*.<sup>53</sup>

Regardless of whether the rising was planned or not, once the fighting started, what happened in Berlin was a rebellion. Armed workers tried to break into police precincts to seize weapons. After they were defeated at the Alexanderplatz, the rebels retreated into the city's east, where there was intense fighting in the area between the Spree river and the Große Frankfurter Straße, and around Warschauer Brücke and Schlesischer Bahnhof (today Ostbahnhof). Rebels also built barricades along Landsberger Allee. The soldiers who followed them fired artillery (first 12 cm, and later 7.5 cm shells). On the ground their soldiers used machine-guns, flamethrowers and mortars. In the air, they dropped bombs and strafed housing blocks with gunfire, causing the first civilian casualties as a result of aerial bombardment in the German capital in the twentieth century.

The propaganda war was equally intense. On 9 March it reached a new key when the *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag* (the *Bild Zeitung* of 1919) reported that enemy rebels had brutally murdered as many as 150 police in Lichtenberg.<sup>54</sup> The news came straight from the communications office of the Guard Division.<sup>55</sup> It was untrue. But just like the crisis of facts that has empowered the rise of populism in today's world, in March 1919 the truth mattered little. The first reports led to a wave of demands for unrestricted violence against Spartacism, and Noske was widely supported when on 9 March 1919 he declared: "the gruesomeness and bestiality of the Spartacists fighting against us forces me to issue the following order: every person who is encountered fighting against government troops with a weapon in hand is to be immediately shot." Within three to four days, at least 177 and possibly more than 200 people were executed.<sup>56</sup>

The order legitimized a series of atrocities. Two Russian prisoners of war were beaten to a pulp in the courtyard of Moabit prison just hours after the soldiers learnt of Noske's proclamation. Another twenty-nine men were executed after they were lured to the courtyard of a building in the Französische Straße. At night on the Schillingbrücke

53 See the Independent Socialist publication: *Die Wahrheit über die Berliner Straßenkämpfe*, 6; and in Richard Müller, *Eine Geschichte der November Revolution*. 3 Vols: Vol. 1: *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik*; Vol. 2: *Die November Revolution*; Vol. 3 *Der Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1924 & 25, 2012 reprint), 663, 680-81.

54 As reported in: "Sofortige standrechtliche Erschießung [Berlin. 9 März]," *Deutsche Zeitung* Nr. 105, 10 March 1919 MA. See also Wolfram Wette, *Gustav Noske*, 421.

55 "Die Wahrheit über Lichtenberg. Die totgegläubten Beamten wieder im Dienst," *Berliner Morgenpost* Nr. 72, 13 März 1919; "Frankfurt, 15 März," *Frankfurter Zeitung* Nr. 201, 15 März 1919 Evening edition.

56 Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 257-58.

soldiers carried out executions and dumped the bodies into the Spree River. Elsewhere in the eastern part of Berlin, a small number of children were shot in their homes after government soldiers accused them of participating in the rebellion.<sup>57</sup>

The Social Democratic *Vorwärts* newspaper was certain of its moral superiority. It described the dead as the “downright characters that one finds only too often in the lines of the *Spartakusbund* which is built on impoverishment. Even when they are dead, anger, hatred and despair is written on their faces.”<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

For many historians, the violence of the revolution of 1918-19 was the product of a wartime process of brutalization that gripped Germany during the course of the First World War. This interpretation, first famously advanced by George Mosse, however misses some crucial points. For a start, most veterans of the conflict rejected violence.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, as we have seen in the case of the shooting at the Sparskasse in Kiel, in November 1918 there was considerable potential for de-escalation. The closer we examine the course of violence during the winter of 1918-19, the more questionable a linear idea of brutalization from the trenches to Berlin becomes. Instead, the violence of the revolution was a product of a mix of factors. For some actors, particularly former officers or adolescent males denied their wartime experience of violence, the revolution did create circumstances for them to carry on the violence of wartime — albeit with a victorious outcome. But for many more, the process behind the radicalization of violence was a result of the conditions of the revolution itself.

Moreover, a further criticism of the brutalization thesis is that it forgets that in 1919 the deaths of civilians at the hands of pro-government soldiers was contested. German society in 1919 was not so indifferent to the deaths of German women, children and civilian males that society could easily accept the deaths of civilians. Instead, during the winter of 1918-19 political elites and the media developed a new set of ideas about why this violence was necessary. The core of these ideas suggested that the people being killed were no longer really human, that they were “beasts in human form.”

The dehumanizing processes that made this possible were driven by panic, fears of invasion, and fears of a repetition of the Russian civil war on German soil — summed up shorthand as “Russian conditions,” as

57 Jones, *Am Anfang war Gewalt. Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19 und der Beginn der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin, 2017), 265-275.

58 “Totenschau,” *Vorwärts*, Nr.126, 10 March 1919 MA.

59 On the brutalization thesis see Mark Edele and Robert Gerwarth, eds., “The Limits of Demobilization: Global Perspectives on the Aftermath of the Great War,” *JCH* 50:1 (2015): 3-14. Classic works in favor of brutalization include: George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, 1990); Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: the Holocaust, industrial killing, and representation* (New York, 1996). Its critics include Dirk Schumann, “Europa, der Erste Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit: eine Kontinuität der Gewalt?” *JMEH* 1 (2003): 24-43; and Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923* (Oxford, 2007).

well as older fears of an out-of-control *Lumpenproletariat* rising up to take control of large cities.<sup>60</sup> Alongside these imaginaries of terrible futures that might be about to happen, the radicalization was also driven by the very real dangers of rebellion and the radical language used by the Communist leaders. No political group comes out of this era looking particularly good.

The desire of officers and soldiers to take revenge upon revolutionaries also mattered. But it should not be overemphasized — as is the case in Volker Weidemann's book *Träumer*.<sup>61</sup> Personal acts of vengeance were only possible because of political and military structures that demanded a display of force from the state. Noske's execution order, first introduced because of fake news in eastern Berlin, was reintroduced for operations against Munich. It was accompanied by dozens of other military commands instructing officers and soldiers to use maximum force and show no mercy to their enemies. That key actors, including representatives of Social Democracy and liberalism, supported these measures was one of the great tragedies of the German Revolution of 1918-19.

60 On fears of "Russian conditions" in Germany see Mark Jones, "Scripting the Revolution: 'Russian Conditions' and the German political imagination in 1918 and 1919," in John Steinberg, Steve Sabol, Alexander Marshall, eds., *Arc of Revolution*, Vol. 4 of the series *Russia's Great War and Revolution, 1914 — 1922: The Centennial Reappraisal* (Bloomington, in print).

61 Volker Weidemann, *Träumer. Als die Dichter die Macht übernahmen* (Cologne, 2017).

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