

**ANTI-WAR MOVEMENTS IN IMPERIAL GERMANY DURING THE FIRST
WORLD WAR:
FROM PROTEST TO REVOLUTION**

William A. Pelz

Institute of Working Class History, Chicago¹

All wars give rise to myths and the First World War is certainly no exception. In most Anglophone countries, people “know” that the war was caused by an aggressive and expansionist Germany. Yet, much of the evidence suggests a much more nuanced picture.² Likewise, it is commonplace wisdom that the conflict was almost universally welcomed by the common people everywhere with this support only weakening, if at all, at the very end of the fighting. Even a century later, many find evidence contrary to these ingrained beliefs hard to accept.³ One radical argues that even right from the start, “the popularity of the war was not as widespread or deeply ingrained in the mass of ordinary people [as one might think.]”⁴ In the week before the shooting started, hundreds of thousands demonstrated for peace in Germany.⁵ Many of Europe’s leaders, like Kaiser Wilhelm II, thought that going to war would fan the flames of socialism.⁶ At the other end of the social pyramid, Berlin metalworker Richard Müller saw no nationalist euphoria among workers and his view seems vindicated by recent research.⁷

Despite the protests, there were also significant pro-war feelings at various times and among diverse populations; one would do well to remember that much of this was orchestrated by ruling pro-war institutions. Of course, some people caught war fever, but

¹ iwch@juno.com

² Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, New York: HarperCollins, 2013.

³ Note the slightly mocking tone of: Rob Hughes, “Tale of 1914 Christmas Day Truce Is Inspiring, Though Hard to Believe,” *New York Times*, 23 December 2014.

⁴ Dave Sherry, *Empire and Revolution: A socialist history of the First World War*, London: Bookmarks, 2014: 54.

⁵ Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 55.

⁶ Clark: 183,

⁷ Ralf Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement*, Leiden: Brill, 2015: 25.

as an eminent British historian observed the “myth that European men leapt at the opportunity to defeat a hated enemy has been comprehensively dispelled. In most places and for most people, the news of mobilization came as a profound shock, a ‘pearl of thunder out of a cloudless sky.’”⁸ Mass disbelief was followed by fear, confusion and fatigue certainly, but also by resentment and even fury.

Before discussing the war itself, a brief analysis of why it broke is in order. First, certain possibilities can be eliminated. It was not merely about an assassination as Europe had sadly seen a number of important people murdered without a war ensuing. The war wasn’t about race as it was fought mainly by Europeans and colonial people dragged into the fight by their European overlords. It was not about religion as French Catholic killed German Catholic, German Protestant slaughtered English Protestant, Arab Muslim attacked Turkish Muslim and Jews fought for their nation regardless of its predominant creed. Many other circumstances worked in tandem to spark the war. One enabling factor was that the European rulers had to a large extent forgotten how destructive war could be. With the notable exceptions of the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), the European powers had either been at peace or only fought ill-equipped “natives” in colonial wars since the Napoleonic War ended at Waterloo in 1815.

What had changed in the century since Napoleon’s defeat was the industrialization of much of Europe with resulting economic competition. Even the American President, Woodrow Wilson commented, “...is there any man or any woman—let me say any child, who does not know that the seed of war in the modern world is industrial and commercial rivalry?”⁹ Nor did this competition take place solely within national boundaries. By the early twentieth century, there were numerous industrial or financial organizations that destabilized the international political arena. For these companies, there was no limit to their accumulation of capital since, “the ‘natural frontiers’ of Standard Oil, the Deutsche Bank or DeBeers Diamond Corporation were at the ends of the universe, or rather at the limits of their capacity to expand.”¹⁰

⁸ Clark: 553.

⁹ Wilson was fond of this statement and used it in many speeches. See, for example: *The Nation*, 111, 1920: 371.

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*, New York: Vintage Books, 1987: 318.

Economic warfare had led to Imperialism and the search for colonies across the planet. Approximately a quarter of the earth's land fell to the onslaught of a handful of dominant nations while the formerly independent inhabitants were reduced to the status of colonial subjects with few rights. With the world divided up, the only way to gain more territory was through war. Great Britain planned on a transition from coal to oil-fired ships and looked greedily at the rich oil fields belonging to Germany's ally, the Ottoman Empire.¹¹ The ever-growing importance of oil led Britain's foreign secretary to contend after the war, the "Allies floated to victory on a wave of oil."¹² It may be more than coincidence that World War I was between one side that represented the vast majority of colonial empire owners versus Germany and her allies who were devoid of overseas holdings.¹³ None other than Lloyd George, Great Britain's war leader, admitted that it was an imperialist war.¹⁴

Once the shooting had begun, both sides initially thought that the war would be over if not by Christmas, certainly by the spring. Naturally, most on both sides assumed their own side would win. Reality soon intervened. The war was neither to be short in duration nor heroic fun like so many military recruiters promised. Because the opposing armies bogged down into trench warfare after the initial German offensive was stopped outside of Paris, the fighting took on an almost otherworldly quality. Living for long periods in trenches, shared with lice, filth, mud and often their dead comrades, soldiers found the misery of everyday life almost as painful as actually fighting. During these lulls, the fighting continued to a certain extent with shooting at the enemy trenches. Given the closeness of the trenches and the lack of real hatred among many soldiers, it appears that direct "communication of friendly sentiments was not uncommon."¹⁵ This often led to what have been called "Live and let Live" agreements where the uniformed warriors simply refused to provoke firefights. One scholar observed that, "on many occasions tacit agreements existed between the opposing troops to restrict offensive activity."¹⁶

¹¹ Clark: 337.

¹² Sherry: 23.

¹³ W.E. Burghardt DuBois, "The African Roots of War," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 115 (5), May, 1915: 707-714.

¹⁴ Richard Rathbone, "World War I and Africa," *The Journal of African History*, 19(1), 1978: 4.

¹⁵ A. E. Ashworth, "The Sociology of Trench Warfare 1914-18," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 19(4), December, 1968: 408.

¹⁶ Ashworth: 421.

During the first Christmas of the war, a strange, one is tempted to say surreal, series of events took place at places all along the trenches. After months of attempting to murder and maim each other, soldiers decided that there should be a Christmas truce. Not only was the fighting suspended for a time but enemies wandered tentatively into “no man’s land” to exchange greetings, gifts and even play sports together. Hushed up at the time and downplayed since, the truce actually took place. Although once called a “latrine rumour,” “eyewash” and far less polite things, it is now accepted that it not only took place but was far more extensive than once believed.¹⁷ In 2005, a \$22,000,000 budget European movie was made called *Joyeux Noel* that dramatized the truce. By 2014, a United States military collectors company issued a catalog offering “World War I Christmas Truce Figures” for sale.¹⁸ At the time, the warlords appear not to have taken such a kindly view towards their subordinates’ expressions of human solidarity. On 29 December 1914, the German high command forbid all fraternization and made approaches to the enemy punishable as high treason. All the same, there was still some, limited fraternization during Christmastime of 1915.¹⁹

Nor was fraternization limited to the Western front. Often overshadowed by the later, greater drama of the 1917 Revolutions are earlier incidents of Russians communicating with German or Austro-Hungarian soldiers. “We send them sausage, white bread and cognac,” one 1915 letter to home reads, “the Germans give us cigarettes.”²⁰ It is, of course, tempting to see all such incidents as isolated and insignificant kinks in the otherwise well-functioning military machines possessed by all sides. Still for the pro-war rulers, these were dangerous seeds that might take root and lead to mutiny as, in fact, happened in Russia, Austro-Hungary, France, Germany and even Great Britain.²¹ There were indications that many combatants were far less bloodthirsty than their rulers at home.

¹⁷ Malcolm Brown & Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce: the Western Front December 1914*, London: Pan Books, 1994: xxi.

¹⁸ *Military Issue*, Holiday 2014, Minneapolis: 1-2.

¹⁹ Brown & Seaton: 196-206.

²⁰ Marc Ferro, et. al., *Meetings in No Man’s Land, Christmas 1914 and Fraternization in the Great War*, London: Constable & Robinson, 2007: 212.

²¹ Gloden Dalas and Douglas Gill, *The Unknown Army: Mutinies in the British Army in World War I*, London: Verso. 1985.

After the war, groups of former officers and some ultra-nationalist veterans attempted to make a great deal of noise about the nobility of sacrifice and comradeship of the trenches. One historian warns that it “would be hopelessly misleading to regard the testimony of literate, educated, upper-and middle-class combatants as descriptive of the war experience as a whole.”²² Some soldiers, particularly socialists, saw the war as merely a harsher version of pre-war bourgeois society. Many argued that the war was the logical extension of proletarianization in civilian life; humans in both cases being reduced to handmaidens of machines.

Authors often quibble about the exact quantity of suffering on the battlefields of Europe, yet all the differing figures still point to an almost inconceivable number of dead, maimed, and missing. Just look at these numbers:

	Mobilized	Dead	Wounded
Germany	11,000,000	1,773,700	4,216,058
Russia	12,000,000	1,700,000	4,950,000
France	8,410,000	1,375,800	4,266,000
Austria-Hungary	7,800,000	1,200,000	3,620,000
United Kingdom	8,904,467	908,371	2,090,212
Italy	5,615,000	650,000	947,000
Rumania	750,000	335,706	120,000
Ottoman Empire	2,850,000	325,000	400,000 ²³

What these numbers fail to show, however, is that suffering extended beyond just those soldiers killed and wounded. That is, the qualitative horrors of trench warfare. The terrible emotional and psychological impact of industrialized warfare resulted in scars less obvious, but no less real, than those caused by bayonets. Simply put, some soldiers lost a leg or an

²² Eric J. Leed, “Class and Disillusionment in World War I,” *Journal of Modern History*, 50(4), December, 1978: 682.

²³ Susan Everett, *World War I*, Riverside, NJ: Simon & Schuster, 1985: 248.

arm while others forfeited their joy of life, their nerves or even their minds completely. Angst, anxiety, worry became a long term or even permanent condition for millions.²⁴

Even early in the conflict, there were a large number of officers who appear to have been killed by their own men. The military high command didn't broadcast this fact nor, for rather obvious reasons, did the soldiers who shot them. This seems to have mainly occurred to particularly cruel officers who treated their men with hostility and disdain. But, it also happened to sadistic leaders who mistreated the "enemy." German soldier Julius Koettgen reported instances early in the war in which officers ordered that defeated French be killed rather than made prisoners. Koettgen, wrote, "not all the soldiers approved of that senseless, that criminal murdering. Some of the 'gentlemen' who had ordered us to massacre our French comrades were killed 'by mistake' in the darkness of the night, by their own people, of course. Such 'mistakes' repeat themselves almost daily . . ."²⁵ In his memoirs, William Hermanns who was a German veteran of the Western Front, reported on the hatred felt towards many officers. While marching to Verdun, ". . . [He] first heard the whispered slogan 'A bullet from the rear is just as good as a bullet from the front.'"²⁶ It worth noting that German soldiers were killing officers long before defeat loomed.

The war took an almost unbelievable emotional and psychological toll on the people at the front. Little wonder that one author concluded one, "should not rule out the possibility that almost half of the survivors sustained more or less serious psychological disturbance."²⁷ This is famously on display in the war art of German veteran Otto Dix.²⁸ Jay Winter argues that "Dix represents every possible manifestation of dehumanization: madness, mutilation, horrific wounds, putrescent corpses, rapes, civilian casualties, sexual depravity, wretchedness."²⁹

²⁴ E. J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. For more on the psychological damage on the men who fought it, see: Michèle Barrett, *Casualty Figures: How Five Men survived the First World War*, London: Verso, 2007.

²⁵ Julius Koettgen, *A German Deserter's War Experience: Fighting for the Kaiser in the First World War*, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2013: 69.

²⁶ William Hermanns, *The Holocaust: From a Survivor of Verdun*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972: 61.

²⁷ Annette Becker, *1914-1918: Understanding the Great War*, London: Profile Books: 25-26.

²⁸ Paul Fox, "Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix," *Oxford Art Journal*, 29(2), 2006: 247-267.

²⁹ Fox: 250.

Nor was the pain limited solely to those in uniform. Besides the obvious suffering caused by artillery shelling and the like, the stationing of German, British and other, soldiers outside their home country inevitably led to various crimes, both petty and major, against the occupied civilian population.³⁰ Even those civilians left unmolested saw their lives turned upside down, as witnessed by women who were thrown into dangerous factory war work.³¹ Many female armaments workers were poisoned by TNT or other materials they had to handle.³² For Germany and her allies, the war meant civilians would be starved, frequently to death, by the British naval blockade of formerly food importing nations.³³ If German industrial growth had threatened England's claim to economic supremacy, it handed the Royal Navy a potential hostage, "in the form of a German urban working class."³⁴ The resulting illness and death may have even been decisive in the outcome of the war.³⁵

Most scholars agree that given such international carnage support for the war was tenuous; this went from bad to worse the longer the war dragged on. An Englishwoman married to a German Prince, spent the war in Berlin and recorded her impressions in a diary. While such sources are always highly personalized and thus somewhat suspect, they can be useful for understanding the range of emotional responses to World War I and the general outlook of the populations. As early as autumn 1914, Princess Eveyln Blücher records many events that unset her privileged social circle. She reports of German soldiers, after being hit by sniper fire, being ordered to shoot into crowds of fleeing Belgian civilians so "many innocent perished with the guilty." The much-respected Imperial German army also comes in for criticism as the Princess learns from a wounded German officer how "his

³⁰ Craig Gibson, *Behind the Front, British Soldiers and French civilians, 1914-1918*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

³¹ Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War I*, London, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998.

³² Thom:122-143.

³³ Note the significance of food shortages in the Austro-Hungarian Empire: Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. For Germany, see: C. Paul Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger: Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915-1919*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985.

³⁴ Avner Offer, "The Working Classes, British Naval Plans and the Coming of the Great War," *Past & Present*, 107, May, 1985: 226.

³⁵ Marion C. Siney, "British Official Histories of the Blockade of the Central Powers during the First World War," *The American Historical Review*, 68(2), January 1963: 400-401.

regiment had been practically annihilated by their own side, through a mistake of his Colonel's."³⁶ By late 1915, the Princess expresses the fear of many of the elite that, "Germany will be a very difficult country to live in after the war, as, whether she wins or loses, the Socialists are going to revolt- I feel quite sure of that."³⁷

What led to such dire reactions on the part of presumably patriotic citizens in uniform? One vital factor was that the class conflict of industrial life was reproduced in the officer/enlisted men split in the trenches. The actions of officers reinforced, over and over again, the difference between the privileged and the proletarians. "What about the way the officers live, when not in action? Pheasant served on slices of pineapple, with champagne, is a mere item in a long menu," wrote Princess Eveyln Blücher in 1915, "whilst others are starving. The bread they get is so hard that they cannot bite it, and often there is not even that. The injustice of all this is bound to make them cry out for equality and fairness, not that they should be sent out to fight other men, called enemies, who are just in the same plight as themselves."³⁸ It was no different in the French army, where officers commonly thought the men would work better if you gave them hardly "anything to eat." At the same time, their officers drank, filled their bellies and were warm. In protest, French enlisted men attempted to report themselves sick only to be refused by the medical officer. As they bitterly retreated from the officers, they began to sing the "Internationale," the socialist hymn.³⁹

In the months to come many ordinary Europeans would certainly defy the age-old stereotype of being docile and unthinking. Little wonder when one considers the suffering that almost all sectors beyond the rulers had endured since the outbreak of war. Russia may stand out as the example where mutiny led to victorious revolutions but it was only the weakest link in the European chain. Central Europeans were hardly much better off. Added to the losses on the battlefield, the home front was, by 1916, "defined by food shortage." As early as March, a letter from Hamburg tells how queues of 600, 700 or 800 people formed outside shops whenever butter was delivered.⁴⁰ While all urban areas in

³⁶ Princess Eveyln Blücher, *An English Wife in Berlin*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1920: 39.

³⁷ Blücher: 93.

³⁸ Blücher: 95.

³⁹ Barthas: 134-135.

⁴⁰ Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, New York: Basic Books, 2014: 330.

central Europe suffered, Vienna probably was hardest hit. By 1917, a quarter of million people stood daily in one of 800 food lines spread throughout the city.⁴¹ In Berlin, even the privileged could complain that everyone was, “all growing thinner every day, and the rounded contours of the German nation have become a legend of the past. We are all gaunt and bony now, and have dark shadows round our eyes, and our thoughts are chiefly taken up with wondering what our next meal will be . . .”⁴² By the end, 760,000 German civilians died because of the food shortages caused by the British blockade.⁴³

Friedrich Adler, a radical anti-war socialist, publicly shot a high Austro-Hungarian official in October 1916. At his trial Adler damningly indicted the rulers for waging war without the people’s consent. Although sentenced to death, Adler’s sentence was commuted to eighteen years because of the wide support the assassin enjoyed among the working class and even beyond.⁴⁴ While this act was exceptional, the feelings that motivated it were not. It can be argued that the First World War, even allowing for the new industrial technology, was no more brutal or murderous than any number of previous wars. What may have been more unique was the level of collective anti-war opposition to it.⁴⁵

Be that as it may by 1916, perhaps 1917 at the latest, Europeans in war locked nations were tired of the conflict. The populace was tired and more than a little angry at those they believed had begun the conflict as well as those who were seen as profiting from it. Certainly, there were some who still bought into the romantic myths of the extreme right, for example Adolf Hitler, who at this point was an insignificant corporal in the war. Yet, one wonders if these supporters were as common as was later claimed. What is not in dispute is that the war gave birth to anti-war agitation throughout the continent of Europe. In turn, these peace movements evolved towards revolution as millions came to believe that their rulers wouldn’t end the war. In the face of such belief, the response was that they must dispose of the rulers themselves.

If the war to end all wars was a disaster for the commoners of the West, it was, if possible, even worse for the people of the Russian Empire. Backward economically and

⁴¹ Watson: 332.

⁴² Blücher: 158.

⁴³ Vincent: 170.

⁴⁴ Watson: 373-374.

⁴⁵ John Mueller, “Changing Attitudes towards War: The Impact of the First World War,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 21(1), January, 1991:11.

deeply superstitious, as much as religious, Russia was a historical curiosity. French financial capital had invested heavily in attempts to modernize this land as had the British and even Americans. Between 1890 and 1904, the total railroad mileage of Russia doubled. In addition, the national production of coal, iron, and steel doubled during the last five years of the nineteenth century. So, the Russian bourgeoisie with all its ties to Paris and London was European in mind set. Likewise, the radical leaders were far better schooled in revolutionary theory than one might expect. This might in small way because Czarist censors allowed Marx's *Capital* to circulate freely since they thought "few will read it and even fewer will understand it."⁴⁶

On 8 March 1917⁴⁷ a demonstration was held in Petrograd for International Women's Day. Some striking men joined the demonstration whose size amazed both organizers and bystanders. When on Monday, troops were told to shoot down civilians, they began to shoot their officers instead. Officers fled for their lives while many, maybe half, soldiers joined the protesters. To try to control the unrest Nicholas II, Czar by Grace of God, headed from the front back towards rebellious Petrograd. On Wednesday, the Czar's train was halted by mutinous troops and he was forced to flee to a military base southwest of the capital only to find that there was no army present to support him. After a period of confused bewilderment, Nicholas II abdicated. When his brother refused the throne, the Romanov dynasty came to an end. A Provisional Government was set up by members of the previously tame parliament, the Duma. It immediately faced a competitor in a popular assembly known as the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies that consisted of 2,500 delegates elected from work places and army units.⁴⁸ Worse was the fact that the new Provisional Government, faced with almost unbearable pressure and more than a few threats from their Western allies, felt compelled to stay in the war.

Early enthusiasm for the new government soon vanished as the continued butchery of the front combined with ever worse shortages on the home front to alienate the bulk of the population. Not only was everyone hungry, at the front food shortages combined with a

⁴⁶ Albert Resis, "Das Kapital Comes to Russia," *Slavic Review*, 29(2), June, 1970: 221.

⁴⁷ This is the date in the Western calendar. In Russia, it was still February since the Czar's regime still used a different calendar from other European nations.

⁴⁸ For a detailed treatment of this as well as other events of the 1917 revolutions by a radical participant, see: Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2007.

scandalous lack of armaments for soldiers. One historian later commented, “Short of food, and short of clothes, the Russian soldier with any guts left to fight in 1917 often found himself without weapons to fight with. One-third of the number of rifles required at the front were lacking in 1917. In order to obtain rifles, those who had no weapons waited for their fellows to die, desert, or get wounded.”⁴⁹ Things were hardly better on the economic front. The want of manufactured goods was severe with basics, “like kerosene, soap, textiles, paper, leather and metal products” in short supply. “By October the cumulative effect of these shortages was taking its toll of human patience.”⁵⁰

Bolsheviks who had flirted with support for the Provisional Government were knocked back into line by leader V.I. Lenin who returned from exile in April. Despite endless rumors to the contrary, there is “no evidence of any secret agreement between Lenin and the Germans.”⁵¹ For all the various anarchists groups, “the great hopes stirred up by the February Revolution soon turned into bitter disappointment.” In fact, they were soon to join the Bolsheviks in promoting a second revolution.⁵²

When one reads of the situation in Russia in those days, it is not surprising that the Provisional Government was overthrown. In a sense, it is a sign of the patience of the Russian people that no one did so sooner. Leaving aside other mistakes that were made, it seems as if the lack of supplies would have brought down even a strong government.⁵³ The formation led by liberal lawyer Alexander Kerensky was many things but it could not be accused of being strong. It failed to deal with the two basic problems undermining Russian society, the war and economy chaos. This resulted in further radicalizing workers and within a period of a few months “compelled the workers . . . to give their support to a new leadership—that of the Bolsheviks.”⁵⁴ Throughout 1917, this party’s influence grew as more moderate revolutionary groups lost influence, particularly among the workers of Petrograd.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Pethybridge: 389.

⁵⁰ Pethybridge: 384.

⁵¹ Alfred Erich Senn, “The Myth of German Money during the First World War,” *Soviet Studies*, 28(1), January, 1976: 90.

⁵² Paul Avrich, “The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution,” *Russian Review*, 26(4), October, 1967: 343.

⁵³ Pethybridge: 399.

⁵⁴ Ziva Galiliy Garcia, “Workers, Industrialists, and Mensheviks: Labor Relations and the Question of Power in the Early Stages of the Russian Revolution,” *Russian Review*, 44(3) July, 1985: 268.

⁵⁵ Alexander Rabinovich, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*, Chicago:

Revolutions also serve to embolden those, like many German workers, already predisposed to rebellion.⁵⁶ Not that other Europeans involved in the bloodbath of the trenches or the sufferings at home needed external examples to tell them things were bad. In Austria-Hungary, the slashing by half of the flour ration led to strikes around Vienna on 14 January 1918. Spreading throughout the Hapsburg Empire, around 700,000 workers of various ethnic backgrounds took part as the strike lasted ten days. Early the next month, there was a naval mutiny that lasted for three days where sailors had flown the red flag, demanded a peace without annexations and killed an officer.⁵⁷ On 28 January 1918, Berlin, the German capital to the north, saw the region's entire armament industry come to a halt as hundreds of thousands of workers organized by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards demanding peace without annexations as well as more radical demands like the democratization of the entire state structure.⁵⁸ Nor could this strike be dismissed as merely a knee jerk reaction to food shortages as earlier work stoppages were.⁵⁹

Within the Imperial German Navy, disaffection with conditions and treatment had led to riots in August 1917, discipline being restored only very brutally with sailors receiving heavy sentences and over a dozen actually executed.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the suppression was to prove a grave mistake for the Admiralty, and a valuable lesson for German sailors. By October 1918, with peace seemingly at hand, the latter were in no mood to listen to their officers, be they right or wrong. On the 28th of that month, the High Seas Fleet began to assemble outside Wilhelmshaven Naval Station in the North Sea. What the German Admiralty had in mind was an assault against the British fleet whereas what the sailors were thinking was not considered. A sailor recalled later: "Rumors circulated to the effect that it had been decided to engage the enemy in a final encounter, in which the German fleet would triumph or die for the glory of the 'Kaiser and the Fatherland.' The sailors of the Fleet had their own view on the 'Glory of the Fatherland'; when they met they

Haymarket Books, 2009.

⁵⁶ John L. Snell, "The Russian Revolution and the German Social Democratic Party in 1917," *American Slavic and East European Review*, 15(3), October, 1956: 339-350.

⁵⁷ Watson: 495-496.

⁵⁸ Hoffrogge: 49.

⁵⁹ Hoffrogge: 49-50.

⁶⁰ Daniel Horn, *The German Naval Mutinies of World War I*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969: 138-168.

saluted one another with a 'Long Live Liebknecht.'"⁶¹

Even if this perception was not universal, it is certainly indicative of the mood of large sections of the fleet's rank and file sailor. Thus, when ordered to sea, the crews on the Thüringen and Helgoland mutinied. In a vain effort to prevent the spread of mutinous sentiment, it was decided to separate the squadrons of his battle fleet and the third squadron was dispatched to Kiel. As soon as these ships docked, radical activity began anew. Petitions were circulated demanding the release of imprisoned comrades as the thin veneer of discipline began to crack with officers' orders being ignored with greater and greater frequency. Demands that had been voiced were put into action when, on 3 November, a crowd estimated at 20,000 moved on the detention barracks. Street fighting broke out when the crowd encountered a line of armed sailors with orders to disperse the demonstration. Within minutes, eight people were killed while twenty one were wounded.

When news of the events at Kiel reached Berlin, the shaken government headed by Prince Max resolved to send a reliable but well-known Social Democrat to the port city to calm the revolutionary waters. Before this could happen, a crowd mainly composed of sailors seized numerous buildings and set up a Sailors' and Workers' Council.⁶² The authorities had estimated that as many as a third of sailors were radicals.⁶³ It has even been claimed that there was a secret revolutionary organization among the members of the North Seas fleet, "[under]seamen's yarns in the lower deck, in the lockers, the munitions rooms, crew's nests of the fighting masts, even in the laboratories, an underground organization was built up which did its share towards stopping the imperialist war, and sweeping away the semi feudal monarchy."⁶⁴

All along the coastal area, the working class took the events at Kiel as the signal to rise up. On 6 November, a Workers' and Soldiers' Council seized control of Hamburg with the *Hamburger Echo* - reappearing as *Die Rote Fahne* (Red Flag).⁶⁵ A hundred naval mutineers, under guard to a prison camp, passed through Bremen where they were freed by

⁶¹ Icarus (Ernst Scheider), *The Wilhelmshaven Revolt: A Chapter of the Revolutionary Movement in the German Navy 1918 – 1919*, Honley Nr. Huddensfield, York: Simian Press, 1975: 17.

⁶² David Woodward, *The Collapse of Power: Mutiny in the High Sea Fleet*, London: Arthur Barker, 1973.

⁶³ Horn: 309.

⁶⁴ Icarus (Ernst Scheider): 14.

⁶⁵ Richard A. Comfort, "The Political Role of the Free Unions and the Failure of Council Government in Hamburg, November 1918 to March 1919," *International Review of Social History*, 9(1), 1964: 47-64.

proletarian crowds. A Workers' and Soldiers' Council was established and soon in command, with guards being posted to ward off any government assault. By the end of the first week of November, not just Bremen and Hamburg, but Lubeck, Cuxhaven, Rensburg, Restock and other smaller towns were in the hands of the working class. As the Empire that Otto von Bismarck had so carefully built was tottering under the blow struck from the north, the *coup de grace* was delivered by a revolutionary uprising in the kingdom of Bavaria.⁶⁶ Over one hundred thousand people assembled in Munich on 7 November to hear speeches demanding the Kaiser's abdication. After the rally broke up, revolutionary soldiers joined with the city garrison, and all strategic points - railroads, telephone, telegraph offices, army headquarters and government agencies -- were occupied.

By 8 November, the major urban areas of Saxony, Baden, Hesse-Darmstadt, Wurttemberg and the Thuringen states were all in open rebellion. One by one, old ruling dynasties were pushed off the stage of history by the rising tide of revolution. All these regional revolutions awaited word from Berlin that would mean the end of the Kaiser's political death agony and the proclamation of the long awaited republic. Following the lead of Friedrich Ebert, the SPD bureaucracy gained increasing influence in the liberal monarchical government of Prince Max of Baden. Right-wing Social Democratic leader, Ebert and his close associates not only refused to consider any radical alternatives, but concentrated on derailing the speeding train of revolution.⁶⁷

When Ebert later learned of countless reports of meetings and protests which suggested that the revolution was about to hit Berlin, he was forced to demand the Kaiser's immediate removal. On the morning of 9 November 1918, thirty-nine unit commanders were ordered to report to Army Headquarters at Spa as to whether or not their men would fight for the Kaiser against the revolution. The verdict was clear: most officers reported their troops unwilling to risk their lives for Kaiser Wilhelm II and doubtful if they would fight "Bolshevism." By the morning of the 9th, the streets of the Reich's capital were filling with large crowds. Increasingly, shouts of "Long live the Socialist Republic!" echoed through the air.

As the day went on the size of the crowds grew. One non-socialist Reichstag deputy

⁶⁶ Allen Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria 1918-1919: The Eisner Regime and the Soviet Republic*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965.

⁶⁷ D.K. Buse, "Ebert and the German Crisis 1917-1920," *Central European History*, (5)3, 1972: 234-255.

witnessed the images of that time and recorded his perceptions in his memoirs. Returning to the Reichstag from a restaurant on Potsdamer Plaza, he saw throngs of people on the streets in larger and larger numbers while, "red flags, revolutionary songs, and shouts for the Social Republic were seen and heard everywhere." Reaching the doors of the German parliament, he was surprised to observe "a score of fully equipped riflemen and above them a huge red flag. Sailors with cartridge belts across their shoulders and rifles in their hands stepped forward, ready for battle."⁶⁸ The Kaiser fled into exile and a German republic was born. The Kaiser went but ominously the Generals remained. Two in particular had been the de facto rulers of Germany since 1916: Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. Both were very briefly placed on a list of suspected war criminals. Both were quickly removed from this list by people more interested in order than justice. Ludendorff became an early supporter of the Nazi party and Hindenburg who, later in 1933 as President, appointed Adolf Hitler as German Chancellor.⁶⁹ A story for another time.

Now, the current author would argue that pre-war anti-militarist education predisposed people to be receptive to an anti-war message. The activity of the left helped define perceptions of the war, as shown by the popularity of Liebknecht for his anti-war stand. The experience of fraternization with the enemy, such as during the 1914 Xmas truce, caused a conflict within the minds of German soldiers who once again saw the other side, not as alien enemies but as fellow humans like themselves. Women workers experienced the war at home, both as workers and as those bearing the brunt of the British starvation blockade and contributed to pro-peace consciousness. The impact of the 1917 Russian Revolutions helped further radicalize German workers and soldiers. The failure of the Imperial German government to even consider, let alone push for, a peace without annexations or indemnities helped lead anti-war activists to change into revolutionaries.

⁶⁸ Hans Peter Hanssen, *Dairy of a Dying Empire*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1955: 342-344.

⁶⁹ Watson: 559.