

Division and Radicalization in the German Working Class

A Study of German Socialism from the Revolution to the Halle Congress

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Introduction

The First World War was the greatest loss of life in a European war up to that point. In the chaotic days of November, 1918, the monarchy and German militarism appeared largely discredited. The German people, hungry and exhausted, demanded peace and bread, while democratic minded German politicians sought to replace the monarchy with a republic, both to reform the government and to hopefully receive better terms from Woodrow Wilson, who felt strong antipathy toward the Kaiser.

However, this initial groundswell of support for change was greatly divided. Majority Social Democrats (SPD) like Friedrich Ebert and Phillip Scheidemann pushed for a constitution, elections, and the establishment of a democratic republic in Germany. In contrast, the radical left, comprised of some Independent Social Democrats (USPD), Spartakists, and later the Communist Party (KPD) among others, envisioned government along the lines of Soviet Russia, where the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils held power. From the beginning of the revolution, these two groups strived for dominance over the German working class and for recognition as the true heirs of the German Marxist tradition, a movement whose roots stretched back to the mid-1800s. From the outset, these groups engaged in fierce polemics against one another. Even before the violence of 1919, *Die Rote Fahne* railed against the SPD, describing as early as November 26, 1918 the SPD as "those... who for four years betrayed the German working class and at the same time the International."¹

¹ "Spartacus Manifesto." Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. The Weimar Republic Sourcebook. Berkeley: U of California, 1994. 37

The so-called betrayal of August 1914 when the SPD voted in favor of war credits was but the first in a series of events that irreparably divided the German working class. The fragmentation of the SPD culminated in the breakup of the party, which occurred in stages between 1914 and April 1917. The causes were multifaceted, and included short-term resentments, especially the recognition within the party that German war aims were annexationist rather than defensive. Hugo Haase, for instance, said in the spring of 1915 that “We declared ourselves then against a war of conquest, today we have that war.”² However, these more immediate causes belied long simmering disagreements over party philosophy.

David Morgan describes the SPD prior to the split as made up of four factions: the far left, center left, center right, and far right. The latter two comprised the Majority SPD after the split, while the former two became the USPD. Ideologically, the far left represented the most radical group, and formed the core of intellectuals that later established the Spartakist movement and the subsequent Communist Party of Germany (KPD). The left center, on the other hand, represented the core constituency of the USPD, although many of its rank and file members ultimately joined the KPD when the USPD formally divided.³

Whereas the members of the left wing opposed the war as imperialist, the right wing of the SPD supported the *Burgfrieden*, or civic truce, and hoped to derive meaningful concessions from cooperation with the *Reich* government. Morgan argues that some revisionists consciously sought “to ensure that the wartime direction of the party’s policies should become a

² David W. Morgan. *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917-1922*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975.39-41

³ Ibid 27-30

permanent commitment to gradualism.”⁴ Altogether this meant that the opposing sides generally coalesced around ideological positions as well as support for or opposition to the war, although exceptions certainly existed.

On March 24, 1916, eighteen members of the SPD Reichstag delegation voted against war credits, rather than excusing themselves from the Reichstag chamber, as was the SPD’s custom. Given that this was the second incidence of insubordination (seventeen members voted against war credits in December 1915), the SPD expelled these members, who then formed the Social Democratic Alliance (SAG). In January 1917, these members, together with others who had subsequently left the party, held a conference. The SPD executive responded by removing the membership of any SPD member in attendance of that conference. Three months later, these members formally established the Independent Social Democratic Party.⁵

Far worse than the bitter legacy of the split was the violence of 1918-1919, in which the Army and *Freikorps*, supported by the SPD, ruthlessly eliminated far left resistance of any variety. In allying with the Imperial German officer corps, the SPD not only permanently divided the German working class, but also revived the flagging fortunes of the German Army, which was discredited during the war through its heavy handed approach to civil unrest, the veritable dictatorship of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, and the collapse of the army in October-November 1918.

The *Freikorps* in particular perpetrated the worst atrocities of the revolutionary period. They murdered Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, and in the worst single act of the

⁴ Ibid 42

⁵ Ibid 44

revolution, murdered six hundred people in Munich after the defeat of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, giving the city “a thorough cleansing.”⁶ These actions alienated members of the USPD and KPD from the Majority SPD.

Historian Robert Waite describes the *Freikorps* as “men who could never demobilize psychologically.” He quotes Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz, a *Freikorps* volunteer and later a leader in the SA, who wrote that “People told us that the War was over. That made us laugh. We ourselves are the war.”⁷ Ernst von Salomon, another *Freikorps* volunteer who participated in the murder of Walter Rathenau, also described this phenomenon of soldiers who could not escape the war. “War,” he wrote, “moved them; war dominated them; they could never abandon it, never come home.”⁸

The *Freikorps* proved particularly problematic for the SPD leadership because they for the most part excluded Socialists. Waite, comparing the *Freikorps* to the Nazis, whom he considers the ideological successors of the *Freikorps* movement, notes that “the volunteers – like the majority of the National Socialists – came from lower middle-class and peasant backgrounds.”⁹ These men rejected both their bourgeois roots and the Socialist leaders of the new Republic and dedicated themselves instead to vague notions of Germanness and military

⁶ Allan Mitchell. Revolution in Bavaria: 1918-1919: The Eisner Regime and the Soviet Republic. Princeton (N.J.): Princeton UP, 1965. 329

⁷ Robert G. L. Waite. Vanguard of Nazism; the Free Corps Movement in Post-war Germany, 1918-1923. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952. 42

⁸ Ibid 44

⁹ Ibid 53

prowess.¹⁰ Waite succinctly summarizes the attitudes of both the officers and rank and file soldiers with another quote from Heinz, who wrote:

This state, born of this Revolution – whatever constitution it gives itself, and whoever is the head of it – this state will forever be our enemy. The strength of its first years was treason cowardice, lies, corruption, weakness, and selfishness... Death to the Democratic Republic.¹¹

While the *Freikorps* especially hated the Republic, even the regular officer corps expressed troubling indifference towards it. During the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, for instance, the majority of the officer corps in Berlin refused to pit “*Reichswehr* against *Reichswehr*” and defend the Republic by armed force.¹²

When the USPD divided in October 1920, 237 of the 393 delegates in attendance voted in favor of the so-called 21 Conditions of the Third International; these members later joined the United Communist Party (VKPD), a synthesis of the old KPD and the leftists among the USPD. In terms of membership, approximately 370,000 members of the USPD joined the VKPD out of the 893,923 pre-split members.¹³ For the first time the communists, which previously constituted a small minority, held significant popular support among the German working class.

Historians discuss this split in terms of two primary factors. In the mid-1950s, Carl Schorske pioneered the study of the SPD split, and argues that the division of the SPD in 1917 was the result of an unwieldy fusion of reformist and revolutionary strains of socialism established in the 1891 Erfurt Congress. In the Erfurt Program, Karl Kautsky described the growing plight of the workers, which he argued could only be alleviated by the socialization of

¹⁰ Ibid 55

¹¹ Ibid 57

¹² F. L. Carsten. The Reichswehr and Politics: 1918-1933. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1966. 79

¹³ Morgan 378-384

the means of production, by which he meant: “the transformation of capitalist private property in the means of production – land, mines, raw materials, machines, transportation – into social ownership.” But the Erfurt program also emphasized the expansion political rights over socialist revolution. Schorske argues that this synthesis, which worked “so long as the German state kept the working class in a pariah status,” failed as Germany transformed in the interwar years, and that the split of the German working class was inevitable.¹⁴ He describes the USPD Party Congress at Halle as the final iteration of this split: the permanent division of German Marxism into reformist and revolutionary wings.¹⁵

Subsequent historians have drawn on Schorske’s basic premise that although the war and revolutionary period were catalysts, the split in German socialism was inevitable. Richard Comfort, for example, describes the USPD as a mass party of both “young voters” and “workers in the mass industries.”¹⁶ Richard Hunt describes a similar trend, noting that after early SPD electoral gains in the postwar period, the party lost the support of industrial workers, who went over to the USPD, and subsequently to the KPD.¹⁷ Hunt, who is highly critical of the SPD, discusses the *verbürgerlichung*, or “bourgeoisification,” of that party, and asserts that as the party shifted from a class party to a people’s party, it moved further away from the left radicals.¹⁸ R.F. Wheeler discusses this argument in terms of age; he describes the USPD’s split at Halle as largely based on age differences, with younger voters more likely to support more

¹⁴ Carl E. Schorske. German Social Democracy: 1905 - 1917; the Development of the Great Schism. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. 5-6

¹⁵ Ibid 327-329

¹⁶ Richard A. Comfort. Revolutionary Hamburg; Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1966. 162-163

¹⁷ Richard N. Hunt. German Social Democracy, 1918-1933. New Haven: Yale UP, 1964.128-129

¹⁸ Ibid 142-148

radical solutions.¹⁹ Each of these arguments reflects a variation on the theme that the German working class was inherently divided into two subclasses: one that was more established and financially secure, often older, and more conservative, and another that was desperately poor, often younger, and highly susceptible to radical ideas. According to this understanding of the German working class the splits that occurred, between SPD and USPD and later between the USPD and KPD, were the result of fundamental divisions within the German working class. While the actions of the SPD during the revolutionary period may have influenced the schism, the divergence of these groups was inevitable.

David Morgan, in his work The Socialist Left and the German Revolution, argues that the breakup of the SPD and later the USPD was not inevitable, but rather the result of powerful forces that broke apart the socialist movement. Regarding the wartime division of the SPD, Morgan writes: "At the time, socialists, insofar as they could sense the prospect of division, felt it to be unnatural rather than unavoidable." Although the SPD divided along the factional lines which Morgan describes, he argues that this was a logical fault line for the split, but not one that necessitated the breakup of the party.²⁰ Like his understanding of the breakup of the SPD, the Morgan emphasizes that the growing disillusionment of the German working class toward the Republic was a response to the events of 1918-1919, rather than an unbridgeable divide between two types of workers. He writes:

Moreover, a further broad section of the working class, not initially committed to advanced socialist ideas, was drifting away from the political center in the spring and summer of 1919, disillusioned by the government's inability to promote

¹⁹ R. F. Wheeler. "German Labor and the Comintern: A Problem of Generations?" *Journal of Social History* 7.3 (1974): 307

²⁰ Morgan 39

economic recovery...[,] timid handling of the business and bureaucratic elites, ...failure... to satisfy democratic idealism, and by the excesses of Noske's military forces.

Morgan argues that this discontent among the workers drove workers away from the SPD and towards the USPD.²¹ At the subsequent USPD split at Halle, wide segments of these workers opted in favor of the more radical communists. Rather than understanding of the division of the German working class as a function of insurmountable ideological and social differences, in his argument Morgan asserts that this breakup primarily occurred in response to violence perpetrated by forces operating under the SPD government, and by that government's inability to make meaningful changes in the areas of socialization and the military.

While class differences and ideological disagreements did play a role in the permanent division of the German working class, the actions of the Ebert government, especially the violence committed by the *Freikorps* under Noske, were the most important factors therein. Ebert and Noske consistently relied upon the army command, which at best felt ambivalence towards the Republic and the SPD, and upon the *Freikorps*, who through their brutality irreparably damaged the relationship between the left and right wings of German socialism. Although the USPD did not act blamelessly, and despite the intransigence of the communists on the far left, the SPD responded with disproportionate force to the threat posed by the radical left. Altogether, this violence, as well as a strict adherence to the principle of immediate transition to parliamentary government, undermined opportunities for military and economic reform through SPD cooperation with the USPD, which drove these two parties apart. Further,

²¹ Morgan 241-242

the SPD thereby contributed to the radicalization of a large segment of the USPD membership, who became the mass base of the KPD following the USPD Halle Party Congress of 1920.

Chapter 1: The Struggle between *Freikorps* and the Radical Left

On November 10, 1918, Friedrich Ebert and Wilhelm Groener, aide to Field Marshal Hindenburg, established the basic terms of an alliance over telephone conversation, wherein Ebert agreed to Groener's demands that:

...the government will support the Officers' Corps, maintain discipline, and preserve the punishment regulations of the Army... The Officers' Corps expects that the government will fight against Bolshevism, and places itself at the disposal of the government for such a purpose.²²

"Through this activity," wrote Groener, "we hoped to bring some of the power of the new state to the Army and officer corps."²³ By forming this alliance, Groener succeeded in reviving much of the power and prestige of the army, which was discredited in the aftermath of the war.²⁴

Groener's demands were twofold: he insisted that the government support the army against the newly formed *Soldatenräte*, who insisted on elected officers and the abolition of insignia of rank, and were widely opposed by the officer corps as detrimental to soldiers' morale and military cohesion. In his December 8, 1918 "ultimatum" Hindenburg reiterated Groener's November 10, demand of support against the *Soldatenräte*, insisting that only "commanding authorities can issue commands," that the practice of "receiving salutes, must be restored," and that the *Soldatenräte* be abolished – Hindenburg made allowance for the

²² Waite 5

²³ Wilhelm Groener. "General Groener über sein Bündnis mit Ebert vom 10.11.1918." Ritter, Gerhard A., and Susanne Miller. *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918-1919*. Hamburg: Hoffmann Und Campe Verlag, 1975. 99

²⁴ A. J. Ryder. *The German Revolution of 1918: A Study of German Socialism in War and Revolt*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967. 162

existence of *Vertrauensräte*, which roughly equated to soldiers' unions, rather than rivals for authority with the officer corps.²⁵ With these demands Hindenburg placed himself and the officer corps squarely in opposition to the Spartakists, KPD, and the most radical members of the USPD, a majority of whom viewed the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte* as the forerunners of dictatorship of the proletariat.

However, Groener's demand of government support against Bolshevism was the most significant. As historian F.L. Carsten notes, the Imperial German Army was loath to become involved in politics, which it regarded as a "dirty affair."²⁶ When Groener insisted on government action against Bolshevism, he expressed the first serious political demands of the German Army. The Army wanted to see Bolshevism defeated – it would tolerate a Republic, but would not stand for the introduction of Bolshevism into Germany. So long as the Army and Ebert Government remained in alliance, an already unlikely rapprochement between the SPD and the KPD and Spartakists would be impossible. Worse, the alliance seriously exacerbated tensions between the SPD and USPD, and thereby contributed to increasing feelings of powerlessness and increasing radicalization among the USPD rank and file.

Noske argued that Ebert's assent to this alliance hinged on the need for an orderly withdrawal of the German Army, rather than a cynical preparation for a looming conflict between SPD and Spartakists. He wrote:

When after November 9th the six People's Representatives took over managing the of business of the German Empire, a not insignificant task was the repatriation of million man armies from the East and West to the homeland in accordance with the armistice... The danger of the army flooding back

²⁵ Carsten 13-14

²⁶ Ibid 4

haphazardly was great. On the other hand they had little they could do on their own. Only with the help of the old apparatus was the incredible work of the repatriation and demobilization of the army resolved.²⁷

According to Noske, the leaders of the SPD and USPD, both of whom were represented on the People's Commissars, did not establish an arrangement with the army command over the threat of Bolshevism, but instead over the serious difficulties associated with repatriating millions of Germans of soldiers. He also used this decision by the People's Representatives to counter USPD criticism of his policies as Minister of Defense, writing:

With one of their first official acts the People's Representatives of the Independents did what they later reproached me for; they cooperated with the monarchist officers because otherwise they had no one who could sort out military affairs.²⁸

However, Noske thereby conflated cooperation with the army officers for purposes of repatriation of the army with the alliance Ebert established with Groener. Whereas the People's Representatives recognized the urgent need to bring German troops home after the armistice, doing so did not require the long term retention of the German officer corps, or even uncritical acceptance of officer corps actions.²⁹ Indeed, the alliance Ebert established and Noske solidified ultimately exacerbated the problems of Bolshevism, whatever the stated goal.

As for Ebert, historians debate his decision to negotiate with the Army Command.

Robert Waite argues that "It was the pressure of events which forced him to turn to the Supreme Command,"³⁰ and that the agreement between Ebert and Groener did not "deliver up

²⁷ Gustav Noske. Von Kiel Bis Kapp; Zur Geschichte Der Deutschen Revolution. Berlin: Verlag Für Politik Und Wirtschaft, 1920. 112

²⁸ Ibid 113

²⁹ Gerald D. Feldman. The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914-1924. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.104

³⁰ Waite 6

the entire Revolution into the hands of the reactionary Army.”³¹ A.J. Ryder, argues that Ebert did not agree to force the USPD out of government, as Groener later contended during the October 1925 “Stab in the Back Trial.” However, he goes on to write that “Ebert’s pact with Groener was hardly compatible with his pledge to the USPD that the gains of the revolution would be consolidated before Germany returned to parliamentary government.”³² Richard Hunt, most critical of the SPD, writes that “From the outset Ebert had anticipated a violent showdown with the Spartakists and the left-wing Independents, who wanted to push the revolution further in a socialist direction.” Further, he claims that Ebert entered into alliance with Groener out of fear. He states, “Understanding that he was the Kerensky of the German Revolution, Ebert feared a parallel fate, and vastly overestimated the strength of the small and disorganized extremist groups.”³³

Though Ebert did not seek to undermine government by the People’s Representatives through his agreement with Groener, in so doing he acted as *Reichskanzler* rather than as co-chairman of the Council of People’s Deputies, and thereby undermined the authority of the latter. Further, he did so fully acknowledging the army’s intention to combat Bolshevism. Whether or not he understood Groener’s definition of Bolshevism, which Ryder states: “meant the claims of the Executive Council to be the sovereign power in Germany”; at the very least he understood that alliance with the army meant conflict with the Spartakists.³⁴ Ebert himself strongly supported the restoration of parliamentary rule at the earliest possible date. Consequently, he supported Groener’s goal of ending Council Government, even if he did not

³¹ Ibid 5

³² Ryder 161-162

³³ Richard Hunt 29-30

³⁴ Ibid 161

recognize it as Bolshevism. In this way, Ebert is to blame for the escalation of the conflict between the SPD and the Spartakists, since he knowingly aligned himself with officers dedicated to the elimination of Bolshevism.

Ultimately, because Ebert and his fellow government leaders lacked any other real armed strength, a tremendous power imbalance existed between the Army and Government.³⁵ The Army, recognizing this imbalance, introduced the so-called “Doctrine of Responsibility,” which Robert Waite describes as a “Variety of political extortion. Whenever the Supreme Command decided that it did not like a government measure, it would announce that it could not feel “responsible” for the results of its execution.”³⁶ This relationship between Ebert and the Army exacerbated tensions between the SPD and the radical left. Since the SPD felt compelled to side with the Army on questions of policy, the radical left grew more disillusioned and radical, which forced Ebert to rely on the Army to restore order. The result was a vicious cycle in which SPD reliance on the Army to control unrest only exacerbated the unrest, forcing the government to further acknowledge Army demands in order to maintain Army support. Further, this relationship drove apart the SPD and USPD members of the Council of People’s Representatives, which undermined cooperation between the two socialist parties.

The North Sea Cities: Hamburg and Kiel

In the final weeks of the First World War, German naval officers planned a final suicidal act of resistance: a battle against the British fleet, with the hope of breaking the blockade and

³⁵ Carsten 11

³⁶ Waite 7

redeeming the honor of the navy, which remained in port after the Battle of Jutland. For German sailors, this act seemed to be quite clearly suicide, given British numerical superiority at sea. The sailors began to mutiny, and the officers responded by arresting the ringleaders. On November 1, sailors in Kiel staged a mass meeting demanding the release of the detainees. The next day, soldiers prevented a second meeting. Shortly thereafter, on November 4, sailors began disarming officers and patrols. "Finally," wrote Noske, "a strong patrol fired on the mutineers... The excitement in the city was great."³⁷ Such was the situation in Kiel at the onset of the sailors' revolt.³⁸

In nearby Hamburg, the mayor began receiving reports of "trouble" in Lübeck on the evening of November 5. Although the mayor dismissed these reports, messengers continued to come in, and later that evening brought reports of the first signs of unrest in Hamburg. Unbeknownst to him, the unrest that reached Hamburg on November 5 was part of a wave of unrest that began in Kiel. The two decisive factors in the revolution, according to Richard Comfort, "were: a spontaneous manifestation of disappointment and hostility... toward the military authorities... and the total absence of other legitimate unifying entities that could restore order and provide goals for the future."³⁹

The absence of other unifying factors in this early period was not due to the absence of politicians or political consciousness in the coastal cities. Dockworkers served as a crucial SPD voting bloc, and Hamburg was described in socialist writing as a "fortress of Socialism."⁴⁰

³⁷ Noske 9-10

³⁸ Morgan 114-115

³⁹ Comfort 30-31

⁴⁰ Ibid 24

However the SPD was unprepared for the revolution of 1918.⁴¹ For example, historian David Morgan writes that the SPD in Hamburg primarily concerned itself with the fulfillment of political demands, to the exclusion of the “far-reaching, emotional aspirations of their followers.”⁴² Noske noted that “It wasn’t known that the German princely throne was so rotten that it would collapse at the first shock.”⁴³ In the power vacuum of early November 1918, the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte* dominated the political landscape.

These Councils derived their power and legitimacy from their status as organs of localized politics, through which local army units and factories could elect representatives and hold them accountable. Noske’s account of the *Vertrauensmännerversammlung* on November 6, 1918, casts serious doubts on the feasibility of council government, especially in the short run. At this meeting of nearly 1,000, Noske described how “orderly credentials were only issued [to *Vertrauensleute*] in rare cases... Therefore anyone who wanted to come in.” In the end, “whoever mustered the most lung power could speak.”⁴⁴ Whether real government by workers and soldiers, as was desired by many in the USPD, could function in practice remained largely untested given the short time frame during which the Councils held authority in Germany. It is important to note, however, that Noske described the Councils in their infancy. In fact, the war continued for nearly another week after the uprisings in Kiel and Hamburg.

In Hamburg, proponents of the Council system quickly established them. Workers elected representatives to the *Arbeiterräte*, who together with the *Soldatenräte* elected the

⁴¹ Ibid 35

⁴² Morgan 162

⁴³ Noske 7

⁴⁴ Ibid 24

Executive, which in turn elected the Presidium, which held executive powers. Comfort argues, however, that at this time a majority of the USPD in Hamburg was opposed to the doctrine of dictatorship by the proletariat. Instead, the party saw the Councils as a necessary prerequisite to parliamentary democracy. Only when the Councils completed “social revolution” through the socialization of industry and the breakup of concentrations of political power in the hands of the industrial and societal elites, could true parliamentarianism be established.⁴⁵ In contrast, the SPD took a pragmatic approach toward the Councils. They recognized the massive public support for them, but viewed them as a temporary structure to be replaced with parliamentarianism as soon as a constitution and national elections could be completed, rather than as a tool to break up the socioeconomic hierarchy.⁴⁶

The SPD saw its fears regarding Council government confirmed in the aftermath of November 10 Executive meeting, wherein the USPD dominated Executive chose a predominantly USPD Presidium.⁴⁷ Dr. Heinrich Laufenberg became the Chief Executive of the new government. Comfort describes Laufenberg as a “convinced advocate of Council government,” who later joined the KPD following the dissolution of the USPD.⁴⁸ However, according to Morgan, Laufenberg also possessed some political skill, as evidenced by his control of the Hamburg government for two turbulent months of the revolutionary period. Additionally, he describes Laufenberg during these months as “working for socialist unity.”⁴⁹ On November 12, he moved to dissolve the Senate and *Bürgerschaft*, a motion that passed in spite

⁴⁵ Comfort 42

⁴⁶ Ibid 43

⁴⁷ Ibid 44

⁴⁸ Ibid 45

⁴⁹ Morgan 163

of strong opposition by the SPD members.⁵⁰ The Laufenberg government thereby alienated the SPD and the powerful Hamburger business elite, which contributed to local cooperation between these groups.

In contrast, in Kiel Noske quickly moved to coopt the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte*. In a meeting “with a pair of party leaders” on the evening of November 6, Noske noted that:

...there were rumors that had penetrated Kiel, that revolutions had come to other cities. Apparently a Republic was proclaimed in Munich, and in Hamburg sailors were also in power... It was clear to us, that now the revolutionary movement would inexorably proceed. Maneuvering was no longer possible, but rather it meant we must take the reins firmly in hand.⁵¹

Unlike the adversarial relationship between the SPD and USPD in Hamburg, Noske cooperated closely with Arthur Pop, a leader in the USPD. After another day of “boundless debate,” the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte* in Kiel appointed Noske Governor of Schleswig-Holstein in all questions military. In exchange, the SPD granted the USPD the right to select the chairman of the *Soldatenrat* “as a counterweight.” Immediately thereafter, Noske moved to secure his power. He met with Vice Admiral Souchon in order to secure 60-80,000 soldiers, and subsequently confirmed his ascent to Governorship and his command with the Government in Berlin. “For the first time in world history there was a man who, though never a soldier, had command of 80,000 soldiers transferred to him.”⁵²

In a later conversation with Hugo Haase, who arrived in Kiel from Hamburg on November 7, Noske reiterated his feeling that cooperation between the SPD and USPD was necessary. He wrote:

⁵⁰ Comfort 46

⁵¹ Noske 25

⁵² Ibid 26

We discussed the situation in the Reich and were of a mind that it now depended on the leaders of the two Social Democratic parties to work together, because only thereby could immeasurable disaster be avoided.⁵³

During this period, Haase worked to bridge the divide between SPD and USPD both in Hamburg and Kiel, although Dr. Laufenberg thwarted his attempts at reconciliation in Hamburg with his heavy handed and unilateral actions.⁵⁴ The SPD and USPD did cooperate for the first half of the revolutionary period, and Noske acknowledged that "In Kiel and many other places Majority Social Democrats and Independents came together to complete common work."⁵⁵ This demonstrates that cooperation between the SPD and USPD was not impossible, especially in the early period of the revolution, when both parties were divided primarily as a result of the war, rather than the hatreds that developed out of the fighting of the revolutionary period.

Hamburg, on the other hand, experienced a very different outcome in the revolutionary period, due in large part to Laufenberg, who in Comfort's estimation refused "to cooperate with SPD leaders, unless, of course, they renounced their entire platform and adopted his."⁵⁶ The dominant Hamburg banking families quickly rallied against Laufenberg's dissolution of the Senate and *Bürgerschaft*, using their wealth as a bargaining chip to regain political power. Only four days after the dissolution of the Senate, a delegation of bankers led by Warburg informed Laufenberg that:

...the major banks of Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, etc. were just on the point of obtaining a huge import credit from America... If a council and assembly of citizens were to appear from Hamburg instead of a Senate and *Bürgerschaft*, this

⁵³ Noske 27

⁵⁴ Comfort 56

⁵⁵ Noske 59

⁵⁶ Comfort 56

distrust [between American bankers and German proletarians] would lead to grave uncertainties, and Hamburg's credit would be endangered.⁵⁷

By utilizing their economic capital, the Hamburger bankers instigated the restoration of the Senate and *Bürgerschaft* only days after their initial dissolution. Although the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte* intended this as a temporary restoration, the Senate quickly set about reclaiming its old prerogatives. Further, the Senate also took the offensive against the influence of the USPD. Senator Petersen recruited Frederick Baumann, a former army officer, to “pack” the *Soldatenräte* with SPD delegates, an act that demonstrates the alliance between the “anything but revolutionary” Hamburg SPD and the Hamburger business elite.⁵⁸

On the national scale, union and business leaders formed a similar alliance through the Stinnes-Legien Agreement, which was established on November 15, 1918. Unlike in Hamburg, the trade unions, rather than political parties, negotiated the arrangement, which achieved many longstanding union demands. Historian Gerald Feldman notes that the agreement established:

...recognition of the unions, mandatory collective bargaining and wage contracts, worker committees..., the termination of employer support for yellow unions, and the introduction of the eight hour day... [Further], it also provided important arrangements for collaboration in the demobilization and even beyond.

Additionally, the architects of the agreement made provisions for the employment of every returning German soldier to his prewar job, and most importantly, established the Working Community, which was intended to:

⁵⁷ Ibid 47

⁵⁸ Ibid 61

...carry out this agreement as well as to regulate further measures needed for the demobilization, the maintenance of economic life and the securing of the possibilities of existence for the workers, especially the war-disabled.⁵⁹

Through this agreement union leaders achieved many of the most important union demands through negotiations, rather than strikes or violent confrontation.

That business leaders conceded so readily to union demands is indicative of the tremendous uncertainty in Germany in the days immediately following the birth of the Republic and the armistice. It also demonstrates that during this crucial early period, the two German socialist parties possessed sufficient influence to effect changes on the German economy and society. While even together the SPD and USPD lacked the armed strength and sufficient public support to effect radical changes, such as the total restructuring of the army or a purge of reactionaries from the highly conservative civil service, more modest goals like the promotion of officers loyal to the republic were feasible. Historian August Winkler notes: "the People's Commissars were forced to work together with the old elites to a certain extent... Still, the cooperation was greater, and the changes fewer, than conditions demanded."⁶⁰ The Stinnes-Legien Agreement illustrated the weakness of the traditional German elites in November 1918, and their willingness to cooperate with moderate Socialism to stave off Bolshevism. Had the SPD and moderates in the USPD pursued more ambitious reforms, it is possible that they could have achieved more in the way of army reform and nationalization of some industries like coal or electricity, rather than settling for an agreement that made socialization less possible in the short run, and thereby consolidate the position of the Republic.

⁵⁹ Feldman 107

⁶⁰ Heinrich August Winkler and Alexander Sager. Germany: The Long Road West. Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. 342-343

In contrast to national cooperation between business and labor, in Hamburg Baumann proved remarkably successful in his efforts to undermine USPD control of the *Soldatenräte*, to such an extent that soldiers loyal to the SPD took almost total control of them.⁶¹ These *Soldatenräte* then used their power to undermine Laufenberg, causing him to step down as Chief Executive on January 19, 1919.⁶² Shortly thereafter, he was arrested. As Comfort notes, “By January 19, 1919, the threat posed by the Council Government had been largely eliminated.”⁶³ Although serious unrest continued into 1919 including a serious conflict between the local SPD and Noske as Minister of Defense, by the end of January 1919 the SPD and its bourgeois allies firmly controlled Hamburg.⁶⁴ On March 16 elections were held for the new “Constitutional *Bürgerschaft*,” in which the SPD won an absolute majority of 50.5% of votes. Eight days later, the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils formally ceded authority to the *Bürgerschaft*, ending Hamburg’s experiment with council government.⁶⁵ In both cities leaders from both Social Democratic parties, including Gustav Noske himself, resolved political questions without widespread violence.

These two cities highlight the possibilities for cooperation, or at the very least for non-violent transition from council to parliamentary government. In each case, the differences between the SPD and USPD were not insurmountable. The transitions in Kiel and Hamburg took place before the worst excesses of the *Freikorps* in 1919, which suggests that these events rather than ideological and class differences within the working class primarily caused the

⁶¹ Comfort 52

⁶² Ibid 54

⁶³ Ibid 56

⁶⁴ Ibid 71

⁶⁵ Ibid 58

divide within the German working class. In heavily SPD Hamburg, this divide began with a transfer of support from the SPD to the USPD between the January 1919 and June 1920 elections, and subsequently with a massive increase in support for the KPD after the USPD fell apart.⁶⁶ Altogether, Hamburg and Kiel illustrate the possibility for political transition to parliamentary democracy without bloodshed, in stark contrast to the cases of Berlin and Munich.

Berlin 1918-19: The Birth of the *Freikorps*

After four years of war, working class Germans especially faced severe economic hardship. Between 1914 and 1918, real wages fell 25%. Worse, during the period of July-December 1918, ration levels were at one sixth of prewar consumption in the categories of “meat, fish, eggs, lard, cheese, and cereals,” according to A.J. Ryder.⁶⁷ In view of these conditions, Ebert and the People’s Representatives needed to move quickly, in order to stave off starvation or Bolshevik revolution.

When Ebert made his pact with Groener on November 10, 1918, he desired the restoration of “*Ruhe und Ordnung*” – peace and order, both through the repatriation of the army and the prevention of Bolshevik revolution. Like the other Social Democratic politicians of his day, Ebert felt deeply opposed to violent revolution. According to Prince Max, Ebert told him on November 7, three days after the initial sailor’s revolt, that: “I want no part of it... I hate it as I hate sin.”⁶⁸ Within the ranks of the SPD, Ebert was relatively conservative, a man who worked

⁶⁶ Ibid 179-180

⁶⁷ Ryder 216

⁶⁸ Waite 2

his way through the party, and whom Richard Hunt describes as “the career bureaucrat.”⁶⁹ Ryder describes him as “practical, shrewd, sober and patriotic,” in contrast to the older generation of socialists, who were internationally minded and drew on the spirit of romanticism. Ebert was a diligent bureaucrat, and “was little interested in the Marxist theory which meant so much to middle-class intellectuals.”⁷⁰ Throughout the revolutionary period and the early years of the Weimar Republic, Ebert worked dutifully to complete his responsibilities.

Ebert demonstrated his commitment to the idea of *Ruhe und Ordnung* in three separate appeals made on November 9, 1918 at the outset of the Republic. In his first statement to the German citizenry, Ebert stated:

Citizens! The former Chancellor Prince Max of Baden has, with the consent of all the state secretaries, entrusted me with the duties of Chancellor. I am about to begin the new business of the Chancellor. I am going to form the new government, in consultation with the parties, and will therefore report the results to the public shortly... Fellow citizens! I ask you all for your support during the hard work that awaits us; you know how heavily the war threatened the people’s sustenance, which is the first prerequisite of political life.⁷¹

Here Ebert expressed the core goals of the SPD: 1) that food supplies must be restored as quickly as possible in order to 2) establish parliamentary and democratic rule in Germany. It is also critical that Ebert took great pains to maintain continuity of government; after Philip Scheidemann proclaimed Germany a republic on November 9, Ebert turned “purple with anger,” and told Scheidemann “You have no right to proclaim the republic. What becomes of Germany – whether she becomes a republic or something else – a constituent assembly must decide.” However it is important to note that Ryder draws this quote from Richard Müller’s *Die*

⁶⁹ Hunt 21

⁷⁰ Ryder 24

⁷¹ Friedrich Ebert. “Aufruf Eberts an die deutschen Bürger vom 9.11.1918.” Ritter, Gerhard A., and Susanne Miller. Die Deutsche Revolution 1918-1919. Hamburg: Hoffmann Und Campe Verlag, 1975. 79-80

Novemberrevolution. Müller, a USPD member and later a member of the KPD, certainly wrote with some bias against the SPD at this time. In stark contrast to the anti-monarchist USPD and Spartakists, Ebert actually asked Prince Max to serve as regent on November 9, further demonstrating his strong desire for continuity and his resistance to change.⁷²

In his appeal to the civil servants that same day, Ebert again emphasized the role of his government as a guarantor of order, and the need for *Ruhe und Ordnung*, stating:

The new government took over the management of the business in order to protect the German people from civil war and famine and to enforce its legitimate demands for self-determination. It can only carry out this work if all authorities and officials in urban and rural areas lend it a helping hand... A failure of the organization (the civil service) in this difficult time, would consign Germany to anarchy and the most terrible misery.⁷³

Again, Ebert reiterated his desire to ensure peace, a restoration of normalcy, and the prevention of civil war. In the first appeal by the new government to the German people, Ebert, Scheidemann, and Landsberg, who would shortly thereafter become People's Representatives, stated that: "Today the liberation of the people was completed." This statement expresses the significant ideological gap between the SPD and the USPD. For Ebert and his colleagues, the establishment of universal suffrage for men and women over twenty and plans for a national assembly constituted the completion of the revolution.⁷⁴ Even for the moderate leaders of the USPD, this establishment of the democratic component of social democracy was insufficient. Rudolf Hilferding, for instance, wrote in *Freiheit* on November 18, 1918 that:

⁷² Ryder 153

⁷³ Friedrich Ebert. "Aufruf Eberts an die Behörden und Beamten vom 9.11.1918." Ritter, Gerhard A., and Susanne Miller. *Die Deutsche Revolution 1918-1919*. Hamburg: Hoffmann Und Campe Verlag, 1975. 80

⁷⁴ "Aufruf der neuen Reichsregierung vom 9.11.1918." Ibid 80

Democracy must be anchored in such a way as to make reaction impossible. The administration must not serve as a hotbed for counter-revolutionary activists. But above all, we must prove that we are not merely democrats, but also socialists. Pushing through a series of provisional measures is completely possible. They must be enacted so that here, too, positions can be set up that any capitalist counter-attack will be unable to take.⁷⁵

Hilferding, one of the most influential intellectuals in the USPD, expressed in this article the need for reforms to solidify the position of the new Republic. These included both socialization reforms through nationalization of industry, as well as an increase in the number of socialist, or at least reliably republican, soldiers and civil servants.

Ebert was not alone in his calls for a return to normalcy. In Bavaria for example, Kurt Eisner emphasized that the new “Workers’, Soldiers’, and Farmers’ Council will ensure the strictest order.”⁷⁶ But Ebert expressed exceptional antipathy toward any revolutionary outbursts upon becoming Chancellor. In the final words of his first statement as Chancellor, Ebert exhorted the German people to return to normalcy. “Fellow citizens!” he stated, “I ask you all urgently: Leave the streets! Ensure *Ruhe und Ordnung!*”⁷⁷ Friedrich Ebert, despite his position as the first republican Chancellor of Germany, sought the fastest possible end of the revolution that brought about the Republic. To that end, he pursued his policy of alliance with the army officer corps.

At that time four armed units existed in Berlin: the National Association of Deserters, the Security Force, the People’s Naval Division, and the Republican Soldiers Army.⁷⁸ However, each of these forces lacked either the cohesion or affinity for Social Democracy necessary to

⁷⁵ Winkler 342

⁷⁶ Kurt Eisner. “Kurt Eisner proklamiert die bayerische Republik in der Nacht zum 8.11.1918.” Ritter, Gerhard A., and Susanne Miller. Die Deutsche Revolution 1918-1919. Hamburg: Hoffmann Und Campe Verlag, 1975. 61

⁷⁷ Ibid 80

⁷⁸ Waite 3

restore order to Berlin under Ebert's authority. Ebert subsequently turned to the Army High Command. Robert Waite argued that "Fritz Ebert was not prompted by any sinister motives when he appealed to Groener for help."⁷⁹ However, as noted above, AJ Ryder emphasized that Ebert's own understanding of the goals of the revolution, coupled with Groener's desire to firmly establish parliamentary rather than government, meant that Ebert acted contrary to the spirit of his arrangement with the USPD in the Council of People's Deputies when he assented to the Ebert-Groener Pact.⁸⁰

Initially, the SPD and USPD agreed to form a joint government, the "Council of People's Representatives." Each party held three seats, and although tensions ran high, for the moment both parties expressed willingness to govern in the present, even as their goals for the future diverged sharply.⁸¹ Like in Hamburg, the USPD leadership accepted the principle that parliamentary government would be established eventually (although the rank-and-file was more divided), but with the understanding that in the interim Council Government would rule. In this way, the leaders of the USPD hoped to begin the socialization of industry and break up the power bases of the elite.⁸² On November 15, USPD People's Commissars assented to a semi-official press statement together with the SPD Commissars, which stated that the government would call a constituent assembly as soon as possible.⁸³

On November 18, the Representatives established a commission on socialization, which included major socialist intellectuals like Karl Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding as well as

⁷⁹ Ibid 6

⁸⁰ Ryder 160

⁸¹ Ryder 154

⁸² Ibid 158

⁸³ Ibid 159

prominent German academic economists.⁸⁴ But the Socialists on this committee, schooled in Marxist orthodoxy which called for the socialization of industry when it reached a critical mass of concentration, felt that the dire conditions then present in German industry did not lend to socialization. All the while the Spartakists harped on the impotency of the People's Commissars, and demanded the introduction of the six hour day for miners.⁸⁵ Altogether Berlin was chaotic during the month of November, but the SPD and USPD navigated the strains of joint government with tenacity and skill, in spite of the substantial ideological divide between them.

However, historian Gerald Feldman is critical of the SPD for not taking advantage of the council movement to push forward the cause of socialization. "Insofar as the movement (of *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte*) was inspired by any program or idea," he writes, "it was a vague expectation of a more thoroughgoing democratization and of the socialization of key industries." Feldman argues that the SPD "pursued an extremely dilatory tactic" with regards to socialization, the socialization commission notwithstanding. Had the SPD instead worked with the councils and the USPD rather than with the old order, more meaningful progress on the front of socialization and the breakup of concentrations of economic power could have been made.⁸⁶ Instead, the Stinnes-Legien agreement, which achieved many of the medium-term goals of the Trade Unions, lessened SPD enthusiasm for socialization, which was never meaningfully pursued.

On December 6, a series of events unfolded that undermined the fragile stability of the government of the People's Commissar's. On two separate occasions, soldiers under the

⁸⁴ Morgan 148

⁸⁵ Ryder 167-169

⁸⁶ Feldman 104

influence of Count Wolff Metternich attempted a coup.⁸⁷ In this first instance, Emil Barth ended the coup attempt simply by ordering the soldiers to leave. Later that day, another group of soldiers entered the Chancellery, and told Ebert they intended to make him President and demanded that the constituent assembly meet on December 20. Ebert defused the situation, saying that he could not accept the Presidency without his colleagues' approval, nor could he decide when to gather the constituent assembly, as that was the prerogative of the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte*.⁸⁸

Despite the failure of both of these attempts, rumors spread to the city of Berlin. Upon hearing this news, a gathering of Spartakist protestors, already agitating for left wing dictatorship and against the constituent assembly, decided to march on the city center. Town Commandant Wels ordered his troops to block the march, and after protestors refused to stop, a shot went off in the crowd. The soldiers immediately opened fire with a machine gun, killing sixteen Spartakists and wounding twelve.⁸⁹

Spartakist leadership grew more provocative as a result of the violence, and Liebknecht began a series of armed demonstrations and fiery speeches which Berliners viewed as posturing for the outbreak of civil war. The USPD also felt pressure as a result of the violence, and Hugo Haase and his fellow People's Representatives faced calls from within the party to resign from the Council.⁹⁰ This pressure was especially pronounced given that the Spartakists at this time still operated under the umbrella of the USPD at this time. The USPD People's Representatives

⁸⁷ Waite 7

⁸⁸ Ryder 178

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid 179

grew increasingly agitated with the state of affairs. According to Morgan, after a meeting between the Representatives and Cabinet ministers, the USPD Representatives “left the meeting furious and convinced that the government was abetting counterrevolution through practically criminal political negligence, if not positive complicity.”⁹¹

Ten days later, the Reich Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils convened. Despite USPD support for the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte*, the SPD held an overwhelming majority of delegates at the Congress, with 288 SPD delegates to 90 Independents, 10 United Revolutionaries (the joint Socialist delegation from Hamburg), and members of various liberal or military affiliations as well as unaffiliated workers, for a total of 489 delegates.⁹² The extent to which the proportion of delegates represented the actual political climate of Germany is uncertain, in part because workers and soldiers did not vote for their representatives. Instead, the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte* selected delegates, with representation derived from the 1910 census – a census which did not take into account the massive growth of the urban underclass during the war. Altogether, this meant that the Congress was at least partially undemocratic, even for the groups (workers and soldiers) that it supposedly represented.⁹³

In describing the Congress, Holger Herwig writes: “The first German ‘revolutionary parliament’ was anything but revolutionary. Here he directly addresses Ryder’s work, noting that Ryder describes the Congress as “the Climax of the Revolution,” in contrast to what Herwig describes as a tendency to minimize the importance of the Congress. However, Herwig then dismisses Ryder’s assessment of the Congress, noting that in this chapter Ryder’s work contains

⁹¹ Holger H. Herwig. "The First German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and the Problem of Military Reforms." *Central European History* 1.02 (1968) 152-3

⁹² Morgan 188

⁹³ Herwig 152-154

factual inaccuracies – the most glaring of which is in his discussion of the Hamburg Points, wherein he claims that the Congress passed the proposed eighth point, which described the previous seven as guidelines rather than policy. This, Herwig notes, is factually inaccurate; the Congress recognized the eighth point as emasculating the other seven, and voted it down.⁹⁴

The SPD majority supported parliamentary government; together with the soldiers and democrats, supporters of parliamentary government carried the day. When on the first day of the Congress the SPD moved to hold National Assembly elections on January 19, the motion carried 400 to 50. A contradictory motion by the USPD to support the power of the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte* against the National Assembly failed 344 to 98. These figures indicate that not all supporters of the National Assembly opposed some role for the Councils, highlighting the varied approaches to socialist government held at this meeting. At least a small fraction of members contended that Councils and the National Assembly could coexist. Additionally, in contrast to Ryder's assertion that this vote by the Congress indicated that the "masses... repudiate[d] proletarian dictatorship," the Congress, as noted, was not a democratic body chosen by free and fair elections from among workers and soldiers.⁹⁵ Consequently, this vote cannot be interpreted as widespread disillusionment with the council idea across the whole proletariat, but rather of opposition to government by Councils among the heavily represented SPD and their allies.

At the Congress, the SPD and USPD divided crucially over the formation of the *Zentralrat*, the Central Council of the *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte*. The SPD delegates sought to

⁹⁴ Ibid 154

⁹⁵ Ryder 181

relegate the *Zentralrat* to an advisory body to the People's Representatives and Cabinet with little real power, and at the onset of discussions of the issue passed a motion to that effect without any debate. The USPD delegates were furious, and united around the ideas proposed by Richard Lipinski of Leipzig. Lipinski contended that the *Zentralrat* should promulgate legislation, and have authority to appoint and dismiss the cabinet, as well as "parliamentary supervision" of that body.⁹⁶

Hugo Haase opposed his own party in this regard, and instead proposed a motion that would allow the *Zentralrat* to review laws and dismiss Cabinet members in case the two bodies reached a stalemate. However, the USPD delegates did not accept this compromise. When the motion initially proposed by SPD came to the floor, the USPD voted unanimously against it save Haase; even fellow People's Representative Emil Barth did not support him. When the SPD refused to compromise on the issue, the Independents chose to abstain from voting in the elections for the *Zentralrat*.⁹⁷ The Congress then elected the 27 members of the *Zentralrat*, none of whom was an Independent Socialist. Writing in 1922 of the Congress, Karl Kaustky noted:

Our party presented a grotesque appearance, as perhaps no other party has done in the history of the world. Its right wing was in the government, and its left wing worked for the downfall of that very government... What kept it together was no longer a common program, a common tactic, but only a common hatred of the majority socialists which had been inherited from wartime.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Morgan 189-190

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Ryder 183

For the Independents, this disconnect between party representatives and the Co-Chairman of the People's Representatives marked a serious strain on the unity of a party which already contained a wide assortment of radical leftists and moderate Socialists.

Despite these defeats, the USPD succeeded in two other areas: socialization and military policy. With regard to socialization, Ryder and Morgan diverge significantly on the Congressional discussion of the issue. While both acknowledge that Hilferding spoke at this meeting, Ryder in his account casts Hilferding as opposed to immediate socialization, whereas Morgan describes Hilferding's "strong speech" as a major factor in the socialization resolution.⁹⁹ However, Ryder's account is misleading, in that he describes the content of Hilferding's speech, which called for fewer strikes and addressed the difficulties associated with immediate socialization, without noting that he ultimately came down in favor of a resolution supporting investigations into socialization.¹⁰⁰ The Congress unanimously supported the resolution – a major symbolic victory for the Independents.¹⁰¹

The two socialist parties also addressed the "military question" – the question of whether and how to reform the military. F.L. Carsten, writing on the Congress, argues that: "the anti-militarist mood was not confined to the extreme left, but embraced wide circles."¹⁰² Holger Herwig however, notes that the military question initially was not on the Congressional agenda, but rather only came to the fore in light of two events.

⁹⁹ Morgan 191

¹⁰⁰ Ryder 182

¹⁰¹ Morgan 191

¹⁰² Carsten 18

The first was the issue of frontier defense, for which the German Army began recruitment on December 10, only six days before the Congress. The General Staff began discussions of the *Grenzschutz*, or border defense, question on November 9 and 10, even before Germany signed the armistice. Groener later claimed in his diary that Ebert knew and approved of these plans, a charge which Herwig disputes, largely on the basis of Ebert's support of a "civilian militia."¹⁰³

On the first day of the Congress, delegates proposed that the *Soldatenräte* together with the People's Representatives should resolve military questions. Ebert opposed this move, and argued instead that the future *Zentralrat* and the People's Representatives should resolve the question. Ebert thereby ended discussion of the military question until the second day, when Barth, using his position as a People's Representative, reopened the issue, and attacked the "villainous and felonious bandits" that made up the *Grenzschutz* troops, and further argued that the whole program was "a reckless provocation of the Entente." Herwig argues that this moment marked "the time... for a clear statement regarding the official position of the Provisional Government on the military issue." He notes the dichotomy between Ebert's role as Chancellor and as a Socialist and Co-Chairman of the People's Representatives. Ebert decided to only address the question of *Grenzschutz*, rather than initiate a conversation regarding his pact with Groener, as Herwig argues he should have. He said:

Should we then ultimately, meekly, and without resistance surrender our supplies of provisions, war materials, and all else that we possess in the East...? Do you not realize that our potato supply and the grain supply of Prussia and Germany depends on a large degree on the supply that we have in Prussia and in

¹⁰³ Herwig 155-157

Posen? In the interest of our starving people we were forced and obliged to do everything necessary in order to protect the East.

Ebert defended the army command, largely on the grounds of preserving food supplies for Germany. Nevertheless, as Herwig notes he missed a crucial opportunity to publicize his alliance with Groener, and thereby secure support from the largely SPD Congress for his actions. In two votes to dissolve the *Grenzschutz*, Ebert and the SPD prevailed.¹⁰⁴

Later that day, the People's Naval Division under Lieutenant Dorrenbach stormed into the Congress and expressed a host of demands undermining the authority of officers and supporting the power of the *Soldatenräte*. The delegates demanded that the Sailors leave, but this reignited the military question, which Herwig notes "might have been permanently tabled" otherwise.¹⁰⁵

The next day delegates adopted the so-called "Hamburg Points," named for the SPD delegate from Hamburg who presented them. Although at this time the USPD and SPD ruled jointly in Hamburg, the fact that an SPD member rather than an Independent proposed these points is telling. These points included:

1. The power of command over army and navy rests with the government under the control of the Executive Council (of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Berlin). In the garrisons the power of military command is exercised by the local workers' and soldiers' councils in cooperation with the highest power of command...
2. ...it is decreed that all badges of rank be removed and no weapons be carried when off duty.
3. The soldiers' councils are responsible for the reliability of the units and for the maintenance of discipline...
4. ...The congress demands the abolition of all decorations and insignia and of the nobility.

¹⁰⁴ Herwig 157-158

¹⁰⁵ Ibid 158-159

5. The soldiers elect their own leaders...
6. Officers... may remain in their positions... if they declare that they will not undertake anything against the Revolution.
7. The abolition of the standing army and the formation of a people's militia are to be speeded up.¹⁰⁶

The delegates rejected an eighth point, which stated: "Preceding statements are merely general guidelines."¹⁰⁷ The Hamburg Points represented a major victory of the anti-militarist position, and the High Command responded quickly and vigorously. According to Groener, "Hindenburg threatened his own and my immediate resignations if the government accepted this resolution."¹⁰⁸ Two days after this telegram, Groener met with the People's Representatives and the newly elected *Zentralrat*, and subsequently attacked each of the seven Hamburg Points. After Groener spoke, Ebert stated:

...to begin with, it was intended that the Congress set up general guidelines, the execution of which, however was to be left up to the government... [We] are unanimously agreed that these regulations do not apply to the front line troops. No one entertains any doubts that the decisions cannot simply be implemented as they now stand... This also pertains to the discussions regarding the troops of the frontier defense forces.

Herwig argues that Ebert thereby repudiated the Hamburg Points in practice, since he thereby declared them "general guidelines," and further, exempted the field army and *Grenzschutz* formations until further notice. While Ebert could not speak for the entirety of the People's Representatives, the *Zentralrat*, comprised entirely of SPD members, did not oppose him, and the three USPD People's Representatives could not do so, in spite of their protests.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Carsten 19

¹⁰⁷ Herwig 159-160

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 162

Unfortunately, the tragedy of December 6 then gave way to the disaster of December 24. On December 23, the People's Naval Division demanded 80,000 Marks from Commissar Barth in exchange for the keys to Imperial Palace and Stables and vacation of the premises. Both Ryder and Waite agree that by this time the Division had outlived its usefulness, Ryder noting that "they performed no useful service," and Waite describing some its members as "Adventurers and oafs of all sorts," who in the words of Dorrenbach himself were "an organized band of robbers."^{110 111}

The immediate cause of the conflict was the sailor's demand for 80,000 Marks, which Ryder describes as "wages... in arrears." According to Ryder, "the government promised to pay them in full, provided they evacuated the palace," an arrangement that the sailors agreed to, if they could hand over the keys of the palace to Emil Barth, one of the USPD People's Representatives, rather than Otto Wels, a Majority Socialist the sailors blamed for the violence of December 6th.¹¹² Barth then informed them that he could not pay without the authority of Town Commandant Wels, who refused to pay without the authorization of Ebert.¹¹³ The sailors then seized Commandant Wels, whom they held prisoner in the Imperial Palace. Ebert lobbied the sailors for Wels' release, which was not forthcoming. The following morning, acting under Ebert's order to secure Wels' release, General Lequis and his *Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen* Division opened fire with artillery on the palace.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Ryder 188

¹¹¹ Waite 10

¹¹² Ryder 188

¹¹³ Ibid 188

¹¹⁴ Ibid 190

General Lequis' troops bombarded the palace for almost two hours beginning at 7:40 A.M.¹¹⁵ Barth, stunned by the sound of artillery fire in Berlin, immediately called Ebert, who did not answer, and then met with fellow USPD People's Deputy Hugo Haase. Together they then found Ebert, who stated that he did not order the use of artillery (though not that he had not ordered the operation), and thereupon contacted General Scheüch and requested a ceasefire.¹¹⁶

In the meantime, a crowd arrived, likely drawn by the sound of artillery fire. The soldiers ceased fire, and began to mingle with the crowd. "The troops," Ryder writes, "fraternising with the crowd, were soon in no mood to continue the action," and shortly thereafter the government agreed to a truce, in which the sailors would vacate the palace, receive their pay, and join the Republican Guard.¹¹⁷

Ultimately, Ebert chose to rely on the army to rescue Wels, rather than negotiating with the sailors, who later demonstrated their willingness to do so. Consequently, the responsibility for the escalation of the crisis, and the results of it, rests primarily with Ebert.

Two major consequences followed the events of December 24. In light of the violence towards the sailors, coupled with what appeared to be outright lying on the part of Ebert, the three USPD People's Commissars decided to withdraw from government on December 28.¹¹⁸ Their withdrawal resulted in the formation of a new cabinet, which included most prominently

¹¹⁵ Waite 11

¹¹⁶ Ryfer 190

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Noske 63

Gustav Noske.¹¹⁹ Noske strongly supported the move within the army to establish the *Freikorps*. Groener's call to the government on December 14 regarding the establishment of a volunteer army highlights the views within the army to that end:

The introduction of the right of combination makes the army unusable. The carrying of arms, badges of rank, and the duty to salute must be reintroduced. The position of the professional officers... must be secured. If an army on the old basis is impossible for internal political reasons, an army has to be created from volunteers!¹²⁰

In Gustav Noske, the "bloodhound of the revolution," Groener found a man willing to support the army and grant it the latitude necessary to defeat Bolshevism by any means necessary.

In his memoir, Noske himself used the phrase "bloodhound," but emphasized that he acted to restore order, in line with Ebert's early emphasis on *Ruhe und Ordnung* in the city of Berlin. He wrote: "All right! One has to be the bloodhound! I do not shirk the responsibility!"¹²¹ Essentially, Noske described himself as seeking out the anti-government forces in Berlin and destroying them. However for the radical left, which faced the brutality of Noske's *Freikorps*, this moniker embodied the hostility they felt towards him that developed during the revolutionary period.

After the USPD People's Representatives resigned from office, Emil Eichhorn, the Berlin chief of police, remained the only USPD member in office in Berlin. In the struggle of December 24, Eichhorn's *Sicherheitswehr* supported the sailors against the army, a move that further indicated his political unreliability. Worse, he held Spartakist sympathies, an attitude which the SPD could not accept given the rising tide of communist agitation in the winter of 1918-19. In

¹¹⁹ Ryder 193

¹²⁰ Carsten 16

¹²¹ Noske 68

light of these factors, the SPD government needed to remove Eichhorn from office – which it achieved by charging Eichhorn with embezzlement and anti-government agitation on January 3rd.¹²² Noske wrote of the situation

Eichhorn was relieved of his duties as police president by the Prussian government, but refused to give up the post. Therefore, he had to be brought out of the house (his office) at the Alexanderplatz... The thing went horribly wrong, Eichhorn made no move to give up his post... [and] still held onto his office as Berlin Police President for another week.¹²³

Eichhorn's stubborn refusal to leave and the apparently political nature of the charges brought against him exacerbated tensions in Berlin. On Sunday, January 5th leaders of the USPD and the Spartakists, including Liebknecht, addressed a crowd of 700,000 people.¹²⁴ That evening, noted Noske, the revolutionary shop stewards, to whom Emil Barth belonged, voted 80 to 6 in favor of conflict with the SPD and government.¹²⁵

The next day, January 6th, 1919, large segments of the working class in Berlin rallied under the leadership of the USPD and Spartakists. One year later, the Communist Newspaper *Rote Fahne* wrote of the rally:

From Roland to Victoria stood the proletarians head to head... They brought their weapons with them, they flew their red banners. They were ready, to do everything, to give everything, even life itself. An army of 200,000 men unlike anything Ludendorff had seen... And there the unheard of happened. The masses at 9 o'clock waited in the cold and fog. And somewhere, the leaders sat and deliberated. The fog rose, and the crowds still stood. But the leaders deliberated.¹²⁶

¹²² Ryder 200

¹²³ Noske 66

¹²⁴ Ryder 200

¹²⁵ Noske 69

¹²⁶ Noske 69

Though uncertain, in view of the army's disarray in Berlin in early January 1919, the Independents and Spartakists on that day possessed the opportunity to mount a challenge to the Ebert government. Already on January 5, Spartakists occupied several buildings in the newspaper district, including the *Vorwärts* office.¹²⁷

However, Noske noted that in reality: "No! The masses were not ready to take power..."¹²⁸ Further, Winkler notes that the seizure of the newspaper district constituted a spontaneous effort on the part of some "armed demonstrators," rather than a coordinated effort at revolution by the radical left. Winkler argues that once Liebknecht and the Spartakists latched on to the idea of proletarian revolution in January 1919, "the Council of People's Deputies (by this time entirely made up of SPD members) had no choice but to accept the challenge of the radical minority of the Berlin proletariat and meet the attack on democracy with force." However, he concedes that once the sides joined in combat, the Spartakist rebels were hopelessly outmatched.¹²⁹ It is unclear why, given the hopeless situation of the Spartakists, the SPD felt the need to respond violently rather than negotiate. Very possibly, Ebert and Noske overestimated the strength of the rebels, however, this does not justify the subsequent brutality of the *Freikorps*, or Noske's failure to adequately reign in these troops.

Indeed, throughout the struggle the USPD attempted to negotiate peace between sides. Though the Berlin USPD affiliate supported the Berlin uprising, the party's central committee opposed it. Within Berlin, Ledebour feared that the SPD wanted to engage in talks merely to

¹²⁷ Ryder 200

¹²⁸ Noske 70

¹²⁹ Winkler 348-349

buy time to prepare for a counterattack. Unfortunately, subsequent actions by the SPD proved him right.

On January 10, Ebert ordered the *Freikorps* to attack.¹³⁰ That evening, the *Freikorps* successfully recaptured the *Vorwärts* building. A prelude to the terrible atrocities of the volunteer formations took place that night, when the *Freikorps* shot several prisoners and brutalized others.¹³¹ By January 14, the *Freikorps* occupied Berlin according to a predetermined plan, and elections proceeded unhindered on January 19th.¹³²

During the battle for Berlin, *Freikorps* members committed the most famous atrocity of the revolutionary period, the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. On the night of January 15, officers of the Volunteer Division of Horse Guards escorted Liebknecht through a back door in the Eden Hotel. The sentry on duty, Runge, struck him with his rifle butt, after which the officers drove him down the Charlottenburg Highway and killed him. Rosa Luxemburg received the same treatment.¹³³ Noske, in his discussion of Liebknecht and Luxemburg's deaths, argued that:

He (Liebknecht) and Frau Luxemburg were the prime culprits for the degeneration of an initially bloodless transformation into civil war with all its atrocities. Hundreds of thousands lived in fear in terror in the first two weeks of January. A great number of men lost their lives the January struggle.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Waite 60

¹³¹ Ryder 203

¹³² Waite 62

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Noske 76

By blaming Liebknecht and Luxemburg for the January revolution, Noske sought to exonerate himself before the nation. His most outrageous assertion comes shortly thereafter, in which he claimed:

If we speak of the murder of Liebknecht, a charge that has by no means been proved, a much better explanation for it would be the boundless indignation and hypnosis...¹³⁵

Here Noske attempted to dispute the very fact that Liebknecht was murdered, and in so doing remove his guilt through his association with the *Freikorps*. This argument is Noske's weakest – there is no dispute that *Freikorps* officers murdered Liebknecht and Luxemburg in cold blood. Though the government established a court-martial to try those convicted, many Germans perceived it to be a show trial, and the two defendants found guilty each received two years in jail, hardly a fitting punishment for murder.¹³⁶ Though no evidence links Noske to these murders, the reality remains that these murders took place under his command during the battle for Berlin. Consequently, both he and Ebert share some responsibility for the murders for failing to control the troops they ordered to retake the city.

After the unrest of January 1919, the National Assembly moved on February 25 to create the provisional *Reichswehr*. Noske noted that the urgency was such that:

In order to not waste time, the three coalition parties, together with the German People's Party introduced the draft as an initiative... Speakers of all parties stressed the urgency of the creation of a good disciplined force under the guidance of trained officers... That we needed so many troops in the interior of the country, was attributable only to the Putsch tactics of the Independents and Communists.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ Ryder 204-205

¹³⁷ Noske 114-115

The provisional *Reichswehr*, discussed in detail below, established the foundation for integrating the *Freikorps* into the army, and thereby provided the troops necessary for Noske to maintain order across Germany.

At the beginning of March, the USPD held a party conference, which demonstrated the new radicalization of both the party program and of at least a substantial segment of the party's membership. The USPD issued seven demands, which sharply contrasted with the party's earlier concessions of principle to the SPD in exchange for cooperation with that party.

The most important of these demands called for:

- 1) Classification of the *Rätesystem* in the constitution. Decisive participation of the councils in the legislative, state and local government and in the factories.
- 2) Complete dissolution of the old army. Immediate dissolution of the mercenary army formed by volunteer corps. Disarming of the bourgeoisie. Establishment of a people's militia from the ranks of class-conscious workers. Self-government of the people's militia and election of leaders by the team. Abolition of military courts.
- 3) The socialization of capitalist enterprises is to begin immediately. It must immediately be carried out in the fields of mining and power generation (coal, water, power, electricity), the concentrated iron and steel production, as well as other highly developed industries and the banking and insurance...¹³⁸

The integration of the *Rätesystem* into the constitution indicated a permanent role for the councils. This is markedly different from the party's earlier approach to council government, which in the words of Hilferding saw council rule as a transition during which the two socialist parties could "anchor" democracy. In the second point, the USPD reiterated the seventh Hamburg Point, but also added to it. The USPD demanded that the brutal *Freikorps* as well as

¹³⁸ "Programmatische Kundgebung des USPD Parteitages, Anfang März 1919." Ritter, Gerhard A., and Susanne Miller. Die Deutsche Revolution 1918-1919. Hamburg: Hoffmann Und Campe Verlag, 1975. 324

the entirety of the old army be dissolved, a response to the violence perpetrated by the *Freikorps* from January on. Further, the call to “disarm the bourgeoisie” suggests a growing sense of class antagonism and a belief that the workers needed to hold a monopoly on force. This contrasts with the SPD, which at the same time actively worked to compromise with the Center and liberal parties in Germany. Lastly, the desire for socialization contrasts with the slow progress of the socialization commission. In each of these points, members of the USPD expressed dissatisfaction with the progression of the revolution, and demanded an end to the violence committed by the *Freikorps* under the Noske’s authority. Each of these points also reflects the growing radicalization of the USPD membership as a response to the actions of SPD.

The final struggle for Berlin took place in March 1919, when Communists proclaimed a general strike. “Again,” wrote Noske, “the workers were called to general strike aimed at the fall of the regime.”¹³⁹ In response, the Prussian government declared Berlin under a state of siege on March 3rd, 1919.¹⁴⁰ The same day, Noske published an order stating that “All open air meetings are prohibited,” and which also banned the emergence of new newspapers.¹⁴¹

After the first battle for Berlin, the Communists in that city understood that a general strike was the only way to defeat the government, whose *Freikorps* could not be defeated in combat. To that end, Communist leaders explicitly instructed their followers not to engage in violence. Unfortunately, the People’s Naval Division and the Republican Militia did not operate under the command of Communist leadership, and engaged in fighting against the *Freikorps*.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ibid 101

¹⁴⁰ Ibid 103

¹⁴¹ Ibid 104

¹⁴² Waite 71

Fighting between the *Freikorps* and Spartakists continued until March 13th, whereupon the last pockets of Spartakist resistance surrendered. In ten days, at least 1,200 people died. In this final battle, both sides held on with tenacious dedication, but once fighting broke out the outcome was not in doubt.¹⁴³

The struggle between the *Freikorps* and the radical left in Berlin followed a wildly different trajectory from that of Hamburg or Kiel. Rather than resolution with minimal violence, on two separate occasions Berlin degenerated into armed conflict between the SPD backed *Freikorps* and the revolutionary forces of the Spartakists and communists. In many ways, Ebert, Noske, and the SPD precipitated the crisis in Berlin. By circumventing the USPD members of the People's Representatives and asking the army to rescue Otto Wels, Ebert undermined the fragile relationship between the two Socialist parties and caused the USPD to leave the government. Once the USPD, the only party which could even hope to bridge the gap between SPD and Spartakists, left the government, the SPD needed to rely on the army to protect against future unrest. Not only this, but the SPD also fomented this unrest, by dismissing Emil Eichhorn on what appeared to be political charges, and failing to seize upon the opportunity afforded by the national USPD's offer of mediation. All of these decisions by the SPD contributed to the fateful armed conflicts of January, and the tragic events of March. Further, as Winkler notes, "the excess of violence... transformed the division between the moderate and radical forces in the worker's movement into a yawning abyss."¹⁴⁴ That is not to say that the Spartakists were blameless, or that they did not instigate against the government. But by ordering the brutal crackdown by the *Freikorps* and then failing to restrain them afterwards,

¹⁴³ Morgan 236

¹⁴⁴ Winkler 350

Noske contributed to the growing radicalism of the USPD membership, and thereby not only increased the divisions between the USPD and SPD, but also brought the USPD closer to the radical ideas of the communists.

Munich 1919: The Last Communist Resistance

On November 7th, two days before the proclamation of republic in Berlin, the King of Bavaria fled Munich, and in the name of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils Kurt Eisner proclaimed Bavaria a republic.¹⁴⁵ Allan Mitchell argues that "The timing of the revolution in Bavaria also determined its peculiar character." Rather than a majority Socialist government, Eisner and his USPD colleagues took over, making Bavaria the largest state of Germany ruled by a USPD government.¹⁴⁶

However, Eisner's government did not precipitate the crisis with the government in Berlin. Throughout this period, Social Democrats and Independents worked together. From the outset, Erhard Auer, leader of the Bavarian SPD, agreed to work with Eisner, and served as interior minister in Eisner's cabinet.¹⁴⁷ Though these two did not agree on policy, and struggled throughout 1918 and early 1919 for political power, they did manage to come together and form a unified Socialist government, something exceptional during the revolutionary period.

On February 21, a young nobleman named Count Anton Arco-Valley shot and killed Kurt Eisner. Mitchell notes that his motivation is still unclear. Shortly thereafter, one of the members of the Revolutionary Workers' Council shot Erhard Auer in the *Landtag*, leaving him seriously

¹⁴⁵ Mitchell 98-100

¹⁴⁶ Ibid 35

¹⁴⁷ Ibid 106

wounded.¹⁴⁸ These two actions undermined the stability of Bavaria, ironically just as Eisner was on his way to resign from office. “In the January elections,” noted Noske, “the Independents suffered a complete failure. They did not even obtain 3 percent of the votes cast and just one parliamentary seat, despite all their efforts.”¹⁴⁹ The USPD actually obtained three seats in the January 1919 election, and it is unclear from where Noske derives his information. However, despite this discrepancy, the USPD in Bavaria undeniably suffered a humiliating defeat in January 1919.¹⁵⁰ Had Eisner been permitted to resign, it would have allowed Bavaria to transition peacefully to a parliamentary regime. As Allan Mitchell notes, by this time Germany was securely, if not peacefully, in the hands of Ebert, Noske, and the *Freikorps*. He writes, “So long as the Berlin government survived and had the Free Corps at its command, the sovietization of Bavaria was a mirage.”¹⁵¹

As Mitchell notes, the most important consequence of Eisner’s death was “the reopening of the council question.” The new *Zentralrat*, which ruled in the name of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils, pursued a policy of reconciliation, by inviting the SPD and the Free Trade Unions to each send a delegate. Further, the *Zentralrat* also initiated negotiations between itself, the SPD, and the USPD, in a group styled as the “Commission for the Restitution of Unity between the Social Democratic Parties.” After negotiations, the six representatives present (three from the *Zentralrat*, one each from the SPD, USPD, Free Trade Unions) agreed on a five point platform design, the most important of which was: “The *Landtag* legally elected on January 12 will be recalled as soon as conditions permit.” Within the USPD, the demand for the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid 272

¹⁴⁹ Noske 134

¹⁵⁰ Mitchell 217

¹⁵¹ Mitchell 275

Landtag exacerbated the intraparty tension that developed throughout the revolutionary period. When the USPD met to discuss the platform, the members began rioting.¹⁵²

The *Zentralrat* then moved to secure its power through a series of measures. Noske emphasized the February 22 order promulgated by the Chief of Police and the City Commandant, both of whom were USPD members, which stated: “Whoever takes actions against government authority or prompts such, will be shot according to the provisions on the state of siege.” According to Noske “All Munich newspapers were occupied and not allowed to reappear.”¹⁵³ In contrast, Mitchell notes that the *Zentralrat* ordered the seizure of all “bourgeois press.” Technically Noske’s comments are true, since the Marxist parties represented on the *Zentralrat* did indeed occupy their own newspapers, however his words further his objective of discrediting the USPD and Communists and accusing them of causing the crises of the revolutionary period. It is also important to note that shortly after the seizure of the newspapers, the *Zentralrat* ended the occupations in the face of protests by the bourgeois parties, and instead settled for “an indulgent censorship.”¹⁵⁴ Although *Zentralrat* did in fact take these actions and thereby contribute to the destabilization of Bavarian politics through the angering of bourgeois parties, in his account Noske clearly expressed his biases against the radical left, and conflates and exaggerates these events such that it makes his account less reliable.

On Friday, February 28, the SPD won a major victory at the meeting of the Council Congress when the Congress rejected 234-70, a motion which stated “Bavaria be declared a

¹⁵² Ibid 277-280

¹⁵³ Noske 135

¹⁵⁴ Mitchell 281

socialistic soviet republic.” In a subsequent vote, the Congress moved to restore the *Landtag*, a motion that passed with only thirteen dissensions. However, this victory was marred by tragedy, when on March 1, guards shot and killed three protestors marching in opposition to the Congress vote. Though it is unclear whether these guards held any political affiliation, the Communists and radical USPD blamed the Social Democrats for the deaths, further escalating tensions in Munich.¹⁵⁵

Following the vote, the Council Congress moved to invite members of the various political parties to a provisional cabinet. The SPD, whose support was vital, refused to allow its members to join, noting that “a cabinet qualified to rule could only be nominated by the parliament.” The SPD could not accept government from the Council Congress, which would thereby cement the authority of the councils and make the cabinet beholden to them. In their counteroffer, the SPD proposed a cabinet that included SPD and USPD members, but also explicitly stated that the Congress and *Zentralrat* “possess no legislative jurisdiction or executive authority.” Although political wrangling continued for a week, the Congress accepted a revised version of the SPD offer on March 8th, over strenuous protests from the Communists.¹⁵⁶

Finally on March 18, the new *Landtag* convened and immediately passed an Enabling Act, which gave Johannes Hoffman, the new SPD prime minister, power to “proclaim laws and regulations,” to be reviewed by the *Landtag* when it met. Hoffmann worked to improve conditions in Bavaria, but Munich remained chaotic. On April 1st, for example, 3,000

¹⁵⁵ Ibid 286

¹⁵⁶ Ibid 287-289

“revolutionary soldiers” met in Munich and demanded the creation of a Red Army and a Communist system of councils. Hoffmann also struggled with the BVP over efforts by the National Assembly in Weimar to eliminate special Bavarian privileges. Although he brought the BVP into line regarding Bavaria’s position as an integral part of the Reich, as Mitchell notes, “At best the political attitude of Bavarian Catholicism toward Social Democracy... was one of bare toleration... as things now stood, it verged on malevolence.” When Hoffmann left for Berlin in early April, Bavaria still faced widespread unemployment and instability.¹⁵⁷

Disastrously for the SPD, Hoffmann left for Berlin just as Bavaria’s radicals made a bid for power. Ernst Niekisch, the former SPD Chairman of the *Zentralrat*, threw in with the radicals in Augsburg, and together they developed a program calling for a soviet republic, alliances with the Bolsheviks in Russia and Béla Kun in Hungary, and socialization of the economy. On April 4, radicals from Augsburg presented this program to the *Zentralrat*, which voted to rescind the order to recall the *Landtag*. The *Zentralrat* then moved to establish a *Räterepublik*.¹⁵⁸

After the SPD, which initially supported the *Räterepublik* withdrew its support, the USPD, which received a mere 2.5 percent of votes in the January election, became the only party that supported the new *Räterepublik*.¹⁵⁹ This “Pseudo Soviet Republic” lasted only a week. On April 14th, the garrison of Munich deposed the Bavarian Soviet Republic.¹⁶⁰ The next day, a new Communist regime, headed by Leviné, took power, and proceeded to make preparations for defense of this second soviet republic. Meanwhile, Hoffmann maintained:

¹⁵⁷ Ibid 291-300

¹⁵⁸ Ibid 301-306

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 306-310

¹⁶⁰ Noske 136

The regime of the Bavarian Freestate has not resigned. It has transferred its seat from Munich. The regime is and will remain the SINGLE possessor of power in Bavaria and is alone qualified to release legal regulations and to issue [administrative] orders...¹⁶¹

During the chaotic days between of the Pseudo Soviet Republic, Hoffmann attempted together with Schnepferhorst to launch a coup d'état in Munich, in order to prevent "starvation [and] civil war." When Schnepferhorst and his six hundred men failed to take control of the city in the face of tenacious communist resistance, Hoffmann recognized that his own strength in Bavaria could not suppress the revolution in Munich.¹⁶²

Negotiations between the sides proved impossible in spite of the collapse of the "real" Soviet Republic on April 27th, when the Hofbräuhaus "parliament" expressed no confidence in then ruling Executive Council in Munich. This vote resulted in the resignation of Leviné and 35 communists from government. Tragically, by this time Hoffmann had already accepted aid from the Ebert government, in the form of *Freikorps* troops under the command of General von Oven. As Mitchell notes, this meant that Hoffmann could only accept "unconditional surrender" and the willing submission of all communist leaders for arrest – conditions the Communists of Munich would not comply with.¹⁶³

That same day, the *Freikorps* encircled the city. Dachau fell on April 30th. In despair, Rudolf Eglhofer, Command of the Munich Red Army, ordered the execution of hostages held in the *Luitpoldgymnasium*. The guards killed 20 people, "their bodies so horribly mutilated that it was not possible to identify them at all."¹⁶⁴ Although von Oven planned to attack on May 2nd,

¹⁶¹ Mitchell 314

¹⁶² Ibid 317

¹⁶³ Ibid 327

¹⁶⁴ Waite 88

the *Freikorps* troops outside the city caught word of the massacre, and small groups began infiltrating the city on the evening of May 1st. By May 3rd, the *Freikorps* held the city, and at least 600 people had died.¹⁶⁵ Accounting for the subsequent atrocities committed by the *Freikorps*, Robert Waite estimates that between 1,000 and 1,200 people died.¹⁶⁶

In his description of the battle for Munich, Noske wrote “After bloody fighting in the vicinity of the city, the invasion of Munich began on May 1st. Because violent resistance was made, the loss of life was not insignificant.”¹⁶⁷ Here Noske tried both to minimize the scope of the tragedy, and attribute the ensuing slaughter to the Communists, who engaged in “violent resistance.” Similarly, Waite defends the General von Oven, who on May 5 gave the infamous order that “Whoever is caught with arms in his possession will be shot on the spot.” Waite notes that von Oven’s order actually included three additional provisions requiring that court-martials take place in courthouses, that all prisoners be subject to them, and that any extra-judicial killings or “*Feldgericht*” were prosecutable offenses.¹⁶⁸

However, it is puzzling that von Oven waited two days after the fall of Munich to issue this order, rather than before or even immediately after the attack. Waite concedes that “such orders did not effectively dampen the ‘Freebater spirit,’ nevertheless he maintains that “the Supreme Commander of the forces of liberation did try to stop indiscriminate shooting.”¹⁶⁹ It is implausible that von Oven did not know about *Freikorps* atrocities and abuses elsewhere in Germany by this time, and therefore also highly likely that he was aware of the potential for

¹⁶⁵ Mitchell 330

¹⁶⁶ Waite 90

¹⁶⁷ Noske 139

¹⁶⁸ Waite 92

¹⁶⁹ Ibid

excesses by his own troops. Instead, it appears that von Oven simply anticipated and accepted these excesses, and issued his order on the 5th in an attempt to tone down the violence prior to the restoration of the Hoffmann government. Mitchell does not assess von Oven's actions; but largely blames the *Freikorps* for the terrible brutality during the fall of Munich.¹⁷⁰

As for Noske's assertion, it is true that the Spartakists exacerbated tensions and worsened the final outcome of the battle of Munich through the *Luitpoldgymnasium* massacre. However, by insisting on unconditional surrender, Noske made peaceful resolution all but impossible. And while the Spartakists did offer spirited resistance to the *Freikorps*, the murder of innocents, including 21 Catholic workers on March 6th, cannot be explained even as excesses in a combat situation. Spartakist resistance ended three days earlier. The slaughter that took place in Munich, 1919 is attributable to the indiscipline and brutality of the *Freikorps*. Ultimately Noske, as Minister of Defense, was responsible for the actions conducted under his command. Like Berlin, Noske did not initiate the violence in Munich. But the brutal crackdown conducted under his orders further exacerbated tensions between the SPD and USPD, and contributed to the greater radicalization of the latter's members.

Conclusion: The Food Crisis of the Revolutionary Period

At the final session of the Armistice Commission on November 11, 1918, Secretary of State Matthias Erzberger implored the Allies to let up their blockade, noting that the situation was dire. "The German people have suffered gravely through the blockade... The flu which has been raging particularly severely has carried away young people of both sexes in Germany on

¹⁷⁰ Mitchell 329-331

account of deficient nutrition.”¹⁷¹ The German people faced starvation and exposure to the elements, especially given the harsh winter of 1918-19, in which Munich had 22 inches of snow on the ground as late as April.¹⁷²

Conditions were so bad that even the Allied delegations, in particular the United States’ delegation, recognized the dire conditions in the territories of the defeated Central Powers. Herbert Hoover, then working for the United States Food Administration, noted that Germany and the other Central Powers desperately needed an end to the blockade, in order to stave off famine. “Unless anarchy can be put down and stability of government can be obtained in these enemy states,” he wrote, “there will be nobody to make peace with and nobody to pay the bill to France and Belgium for the fearful destruction that has been done.”¹⁷³ In a later memorandum to President Wilson, Hoover wrote that “The problem of sustaining life and maintaining order in enemy territories revolves primarily around the problem of food supplies...”¹⁷⁴ In essence, Hoover argued that only by lifting the blockade, and opening up food imports to Germany, could the German government prevent the rise of Bolshevism, a specter all the more fearful due to the ongoing Russian Civil War.

In his article entitled “The Economic Origins of *Noskepolitik*,” William Carl Mathews argues that this food crisis was central to decision making by Ebert, Noske, and the SPD during

¹⁷¹ “Negotiations Concerning the Final Session of the Armistice Commission at Compiègne on November 11, 1918, 2:15 AM... Article XXVI.” Suda Lorena Bane, and Ralph Haswell. Lutz. The Blockade of Germany after the Armistice: 1918-1919: Selected Documents of the Supreme Economic Council, Superior Blockade Council, American Relief Administration, and Other Wartime Organizations. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1942. 5

¹⁷² Mitchell 299

¹⁷³ Herbert Hoover. “European Food Situation.” Suda Lorena Bane, and Ralph Haswell. Lutz. The Blockade of Germany after the Armistice: 1918-1919: Selected Documents of the Supreme Economic Council, Superior Blockade Council, American Relief Administration, and Other Wartime Organizations. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1942. 17

¹⁷⁴ Herbert Hoover. “Memorandum by Mr. Hoover to the President, January First, 1919, on Blockade Policy as approved by the President.” Ibid 24

the revolutionary period. Rather than describing the suppression of revolts solely in political terms, wherein the SPD and radical left possessed diametrically opposed views of Germany's future and conflict was inevitable, Mathews argues that "Noske tried to restore the authority of the state in order to prevent a breakdown of the food supply, the transportation system, the energy supply, and the industrial sector of the economy."¹⁷⁵

In addition to Ebert and Noske, Mathews notes that "all Social Democrats" recognized both the current food shortages and the impending food crisis in Germany.¹⁷⁶ Coal shortages, beginning in 1916/17, only served to compound the problem. These in turn were exacerbated by the collapse of 1918, and the ensuing violence between Germans and Poles, which undermined coal production in the coal rich region of Silesia.¹⁷⁷ In 1918-19, the SPD leadership recognized the tremendous threat posed by the economic desperation of the German people, as did the politicians of the USPD and other major parties. The SPD acted to restore stability to Germany, and to protect against revolutionary communism.¹⁷⁸ Despite the largely successful SPD efforts to reestablish order and secure food supplies, Mathews notes "that Noske, [and] the SPD... underestimated the staying power and potential of the reaction and turned a blind eye to the problem of militarism in 1918/19."¹⁷⁹

The food and energy crises during the revolutionary period of 1918-19 are critical components of the Ebert and Noske's aggressive approach toward unrest at that time. However, on several occasions, the Ebert and Noske chose military force even when

¹⁷⁵ William Carl Mathews. "The Economic Origins of the Noskepolitik." *Central European History* 27.01 (1994) 66

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid* 68

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid* 77

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid* 85

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*

alternatives existed. In Berlin, the *Freikorps* used small scale fighting against the People's Naval Division in March, 1919 to justify a virtual reign of terror, wherein over 1,000 people died. In Munich, von Oven, operating under Noske's command, refused any surrender except unconditional surrender, an attitude that resulted in another 1,000 deaths. By May, 1919, many Germans knew of the excesses of the *Freikorps*. And yet, von Oven waited until May 5th, two days after the fall of Munich, to issue his order forbidding extrajudicial courts-martial or executions.

Whereas the Spartakists and later the communists often incited to violence against the government, the responsibility for escalation rests with Ebert and Noske, who failed to reign in the *Freikorps*. Whether or not they could truly control the *Freikorps*, they nevertheless chose to use them when violence could have been avoided, or failed to pull back the *Freikorps* after they had crushed resistance. In the case of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, Noske openly questioned the reality of Liebknecht's murder, in order to exonerate himself and the *Freikorps*. He repeatedly blames the Spartakists and Communists for the escalation of violence, and the transformation of the peaceful revolution into bloodshed. But in both Berlin and Munich, the *Freikorps* responded with disproportionate force, and committed widespread atrocities.

During the uprisings of 1918-1919, significant segments of the USPD experienced radicalization in response to these actions by the *Freikorps*. Through the Party Program of March 1919 the USPD expressed a growing disillusionment with the inadequate progress achieved through the November Revolution and its aftermath, as well as with the perceived rebounding of counterrevolutionary forces, most notably in the army and civil service. While

German socialism contained both economic and social divisions, the deepening of these divisions largely took place in the 1918-1919 revolutionary period.

The Council of People's Representatives represented one of the most promising avenues for socialist reconciliation and the consolidation of democracy. Likewise, the ideas articulated by Hilferding and others supporting the use of the council system to firmly entrench democracy against counterrevolution, offered a middle way that could bridge ideological divides and reconcile the German working class. Unfortunately, the SPD, especially Ebert, clung too rigidly to the idea of parliamentary democracy. As the radical left grew frustrated with the lack of progress, the SPD used violent force to suppress it, further compounding the split between these two sides.

Chapter 2: The Formation of the *Reichswehr*

On February 25th the National Assembly approved the formation of the Provisional *Reichswehr*.¹⁸⁰ Nine days later, Ebert, Noske, and War Minister Walther Reinhardt published the Law Concerning the Formation of a Provisional *Reichswehr*, which stated: "The *Reichswehr* should be formed on a democratic basis through combination of existing Volunteer Formations and through the recruitment of volunteers."¹⁸¹ Robert Waite argues that Noske pushed for this law in order to centralize the *Freikorps*, but also notes that while the law centralized command of the *Freikorps*, it did not moderate them or end their indiscipline.¹⁸² In sharp contrast to the aspirations of the USPD membership, whose March program called for the dissolution of the *Reichswehr* and specifically singled out the *Freikorps* for dissolution, the SPD and the other

¹⁸⁰ Noske 114

¹⁸¹ Ludwig Rudolf Georg Maercker. Vom Kaiserheer Zur Reichswehr: Eine Beitrag Zur Geschichte 395-396

¹⁸² Waite 78-9

Republican political parties granted these formations formal legal status, at least for the time being. More importantly, they retained the services of Generals who often expressed hostility towards the radical left. In so doing, they further exacerbated tensions with the left of the USPD, and increased its hostility towards the government.

During these debates, several army officers proved crucial to the development of the new *Reichswehr* and the navigation of the post-revolutionary period: Walther Reinhardt, Wilhelm Groener, and Hans von Seeckt. As each played a critical role in the development of the *Reichswehr* and the relationship between government and army in the post war period, it is important to discuss each in some detail.

At the end of the war Walther Reinhardt was a 45-year-old colonel from Württemberg. That November, he accepted an appointment as Head of Demobilization at the Prussian Ministry of War, and subsequently developed a close relationship with Ebert, largely due to his defense of the Chancellery immediately following the revolution.¹⁸³ F.L. Carsten notes that from the beginning Reinhardt was acutely aware of “the difficulties... connected with the fact that he as a Württemberg colonel was to rank higher than the Prussian generals.” Given this, Reinhardt secured a good working relationship with Noske, and also endeavored in January 1919 to form a unified plan of action among the generals, meeting with Hindenburg and Wilhelm Groener.¹⁸⁴ Though Groener, like Reinhardt, was a Württemberger, their relationship remained tense throughout the period, and the two often disagreed.

¹⁸³ "Reinhardt, Walther." Deutsche Biographie. Web.

¹⁸⁴ Carsten 24

Wilhelm Groener, the architect of the November 10 alliance between Ebert and army command, was a second major figure in the formation of the *Reichswehr*. Groener began World War I as Chief of Field-Railways, where he provided invaluable service supplying the German field armies. Beginning in 1916 he served as Chief of the War Office, where he developed a good working relationship with labor unions. However, he was dismissed from the War Office on August 16, 1918, and thereafter served as a frontline commander. After Ludendorff resigned, Groener succeeded him as Quartermaster General, which placed him into a close working relationship with Field Marshall Hindenburg.¹⁸⁵ In addition to the November 10 alliance, Groener by his own account communicated daily with Ebert. Carsten asserts that Groener wrote Hindenburg's December 8th letter to Ebert. Altogether, Groener was instrumental in establishing and maintaining the close cooperation between Ebert and the officer corps. Most importantly he strongly opposed the *Soldatenräte*, which he felt, together with much of the officer corps, undermined the discipline, morale, and overall combat readiness of the troops.¹⁸⁶

Although Reinhardt and Groener agreed that in questions of discipline and command officers should be supreme, the two seriously disagreed over a January 19th decree promulgated by the Reich government, as represented by Ebert and Noske, and cosigned by Reinhardt as Prussian War Minister. Among other things the decree stipulated that:

1. The highest power of command belongs to the Council of People's Deputies, selected by the Central Council of the German Socialist Republic.

¹⁸⁵ "Groener, Wilhelm." Deutsche Biographie. Web.

¹⁸⁶ Carsten 28

2. The exercise of the power of command the Council of People's Deputies transfers, insofar as it does not issue direct orders, to the Prussian War Minister...
4. The leader of higher echelons, of units, and other formations exercise the power of issuing orders.¹⁸⁷
5. In regiments, independent battalions and similar formations *Soldatenräte* must be elected... Purely military orders, which cover the training, command, and use of troops, originate from leaders alone; they require no Soldier's Council countersignature.
9. Appointments are the responsibility of the War Ministry... The *Soldatenräte* themselves are not authorized to remove or eliminate leaders, but they can ask for their deposition.
11. The *Soldatenräte* are not authorized to get mixed up in, other military departments or civil administration... Any guidelines, orders, etc. issued by them alone have no validity.¹⁸⁸

As Carsten notes, this decree caused a “wave of indignation,” both among the *Soldatenräte* and the officer corps, each of whom regarded it as a betrayal.¹⁸⁹ Under these terms, the *Soldatenräte* were relegated to role very similar to Hindenburg's *Vertrauensräte*: soldiers unions with the power to redress grievances and improve quality of life, but lacking in command authority. This contrasts heavily with the “Hamburg Points” adopted by the Congress of *Arbeiter* and *Soldatenräte* in Berlin on December 18, 1919.¹⁹⁰ At the very least these demands amounted to joint command authority exercised by the *Soldatenräte* and the “highest power[s] of command,” which included the Council of People's Deputies and potentially high ranking military officers. Consequently, the councils rejected Reinhardt's compromise out of hand.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Ibid 25

¹⁸⁸ Maercker 388-391

¹⁸⁹ Carsten 26

¹⁹⁰ Herwig 160

¹⁹¹ Carsten 18-19

That the officers reacted so strongly to this decree is somewhat surprising, given that it virtually eliminated the power of the *Soldatenräte* in all questions of command. "The soldiers' councils," Groener wrote:

...must be classified as entirely bad; they are the worst enemies of quick recuperation because they aim at political power and undermine all discipline. In the form of *Vertrauensräte* one can consent to their cooperation in the social and economic sphere only; all further reaching demands must be refuted most energetically, especially those touching on politics and discipline...

...Disobedient councils [are] to be removed, if need be by force of arms...The High Command is of the following opinion: 1. Politics do not exist in the army. 2. *Soldatenräte* which do not toe the line have to be eliminated. As the ministry of war shows a very conciliatory attitude towards the *Soldatenräte*, the High Command thinks it highly desirable that the corps stiffen the back of the war minister in this question by requests and protests...¹⁹²

Here Groener attacked Reinhardt directly by suggesting that the officer corps should "stiffen [his] back." It is interesting to note that though Groener attacked Reinhardt for his "conciliatory" attitude and efforts, he did not call for the elimination of all *Soldatenräte* in this speech, but rather solely of those that "do not toe the line." Further, he accepted *Soldatenräte* "in the form of *Vertrauensräte*," which was a virtually meaningless distinction given the provisions of Reinhardt's decree. Groener's rigidity in his policies contrasts with what Carsten describes as Reinhardt's "political acumen"; Reinhardt recognized the need to concede appearances to the socialists by accepting some form of soldiers' councils, while maintaining

¹⁹² Ibid 28

the command authority for the officers.¹⁹³ Fortunately for Reinhardt during this period, he found a powerful ally in Gustav Noske, who supported him against Groener.¹⁹⁴

Like Reinhardt, Hans von Seeckt recognized the importance of political realism. Seeckt's letters to his wife are particularly revealing in this regard. Although a conservative, Seeckt wrote that "With *Herr* Ebert and comrades I can perhaps [work], in spite of our diametrically opposed views on the world and economic matters..." In a later letter to his wife, he wrote that:

Everything depends on our succeeding in making the government firm and keeping it firm; whether it pleases us or not, there is nothing else and whoever can, should help. Who is unable to do so, or cannot bring himself to do it, should at least not disturb. But that is done by stupid newspaper articles which publicize the many weaknesses... of the republic. That is also done by resolutions and speeches against the military decree which emanate from the officers' side. It is very easy to say 'This is unheard of,' and then do nothing; it is very difficult to try to find usable timber among the ruins. Politics is the art of what is possible...¹⁹⁵

Here, Seeckt argued for an end to the sniping and political attacks that characterized the postwar period. Rather than supporting Groener's attack on Reinhardt, Seeckt rejected these attacks as unnecessary criticism from officers who offered no real positive solutions. As noted earlier Groener's demands coincided in many respects with the actual decree Reinhardt passed – the fundamental difference was one of form rather than substance. Carsten argues that the maxim: "Politics is the art of what is possible," characterized Seeckt's outlook throughout this period.¹⁹⁶ However it is important to note that as time went on, Seeckt gravitated towards Groener's ideas, even as he maintained his political pragmatism.

¹⁹³ Ibid 30

¹⁹⁴ Heinz Hürten. "Reichspräsident und Wehrpolitik. Zur Praxis der Personalauslese." Kolb, Eberhard, ed. Friedrich Ebert Als Reichspräsident. Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag GmbH, 1997. 194

¹⁹⁵ Carsten 31

¹⁹⁶ Ibid 32

The Treaty of Versailles

In late April 1919, General von Seeckt departed for Versailles as part of the German delegation. He received instructions from Groener, that Germany must be allowed an army of 300,000 men and general conscription. Almost immediately, Groener's demands collapsed; the Allies insisted on German ratification of the Treaty without revision, and Count Brockdorff-Rantzau quickly conceded to the reduction of the army to 200,000 and after a "transitional period" to 100,000, hoping in vain to barter for Allied concessions elsewhere. Groener wholly rejected this concession and telegraphed Scheidemann, informing him that a 100,000 man army would result in:

1. Germany's becoming absolutely powerless abroad, even against aggression by its smallest neighbors;
 2. The impossibility of maintaining the authority of the government internally...
- ... It would amount to the complete suicide of the German nation.¹⁹⁷

Groener and the German officer corps emphatically opposed this restriction and the so-called "guilt clause," which placed all of the blame for World War I on Germany.

However, Groener also recognized the impossibility of continued war with the Allies. He wrote: "It is our duty to think not of ourselves but of Germany. A new war would mean foreign troops right up to the capital... *Finis Germaniae*."¹⁹⁸ In this struggle he once again faced Reinhardt as his primary rival. Ironically, in this instance Reinhardt the political realist led the party in favor of the *Oststaat* proposal, which called for the formation of a defensible nucleus of a German state east of the River Oder, and a subsequent resumption of hostilities with the

¹⁹⁷ Carsten 37-38

¹⁹⁸ Waite 144

Allies, rather than the ratification of the *Diktat* of Versailles.¹⁹⁹ Crucially, Hindenburg did not attend this general's conference, and resigned after the German government signed the Versailles Treaty. Groener argued vigorously against this plan, which historian Heinz Hürten describes as "foolhardy"; a desperate gesture that abandoned the west of Germany and could not ultimately succeed.²⁰⁰

Carsten, who offers the most thorough treatment of these internal debates, relies heavily on Groener's account of these events, which is problematic. As noted above, Groener and Reinhardt had strong personal and professional dislike for one another, a point Carsten acknowledges.²⁰¹ However, he then goes on to rely heavily on Groener's account of events, even relying on Groener's *Lebenserinnerungen* as a source when quoting Reinhardt. Although Groener may have accurately recorded Reinhardt's overall sentiments, it seems highly unlikely that Groener recorded with complete accuracy the words of his primary professional rival. Further, Groener does alter the record in subtle but substantial ways between the official record and his own. For example, in the June 19 Weimar Conference Groener stated that "If the war ministry were able to collect a million men at the Elbe, resistance would not be impossible... [However] After initial successes the military action would finally be condemned to failure." But in his own account of events, he stated:

In the conference at Weimar on 19 June I declared my readiness to resume the struggle if the minister of war were prepared to put a million men at my disposal. This the war minister declared to be impossible.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Carsten 39

²⁰⁰ Hürten 194

²⁰¹ Carsten 29

²⁰² *Ibid* 40-41

Groener through this second statement bolstered his credentials with conservative officers, by suggesting that he was willing to continue the fight, when in reality he argued against continuing the conflict. He also used this statement to attack Reinhardt in the War Ministry, by suggesting that Reinhardt failed to furnish troops for the defense of the Fatherland.²⁰³

In spite of the problems with Carsten's reliance on Groener, other historians, notably Hagen Schulze, support his characterization of Reinhardt as a powerful force behind the *Oststaat* plan, noting that he supported the *Oststadtidee*. Additionally, Schulze describes a private meeting between Groener and Reinhardt on the June 18, wherein Reinhardt told Groener that he called the Weimar Conference in order to convince Noske and the Generals of the *Oststaat* plan. Although Groener was highly critical of Reinhardt, it appears that Reinhardt did actively support the *Oststaat* plan at the Weimar Conference.²⁰⁴ At this meeting Seeckt continued to practice cautious political realism. Although initially uncommitted in the *Oststaat* debate, he quickly recognized the futility of continued struggle with the Entente. He realized there that without civilian support, any military intervention would be impossible. He subsequently gave complete support to Groener, who opposed the plan.²⁰⁵

The *Oststaat* debate is crucial for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the officer corps continued to operate with a massive degree of independence. Secondly, it shows that even officers like Reinhardt, who was ostensibly loyal to the Republic, expressed views and made proposals in this period that bordered on treason. If the officer corps reinitiated hostilities with the allies, or established a separate government in East Prussia, they would have been

²⁰³ Ibid 41

²⁰⁴ Hagen Schulze. "Der Oststaat-Plan 1919." Vierteljahrshefte Für Geschichte (1970) 154-155

²⁰⁵ Carsten 42-3

operating outside the bounds of their authority, and in direct contravention to the final decision of the civilian government. That the officer corps strongly considered this course of action suggests both the power imbalance between the officer corps and the government, and that the officer corps was less reliable than Ebert and Noske credited them with in this period.

While the generals debated the merits of the Versailles Treaty, the National Assembly also engaged in serious debates over the treaty. Noske, like many of his contemporaries, attacked the treaty as unfair. He wrote that “Negotiations over the peace treaty were rejected, probably the first case in history that a great nation was defamed by such insolent victors.”²⁰⁶ After the treaty was signed, many Germans referred to it as the *Versailler Diktat* for this reason.

Like the officer corps, Noske felt that the treaty left Germany militarily vulnerable.

The abolition of conscription and the limit of 100 000 man mercenary army meant the complete defenselessness of Germany. A recruited troop, with the proposed restrictions on ordinance should not be a tool of war, but instead a police force that, as experience teaches, risks becoming a Praetorian gang.²⁰⁷

Noske’s criticism of this provision reflects the longstanding practice of conscription in Germany. Although the Prussian (and later German) officer corps reflected the nobility disproportionately, Prussian men universally served in the military well before German unification. The officer corps and Noske felt that this practice was necessary, in order to maintain a large body of combat trained men in order to protect Germany. In view of their history, wherein Germany remained divided and victimized by the other nations of Europe for centuries before Bismarck’s Germany, German officers and many politicians felt that a powerful military was necessary for national survival. Similarly, Germans of all political parties considered the division of the

²⁰⁶ Noske 148

²⁰⁷ Ibid

German *Volk* a grave offence because of this same history. Noske harshly attacked the division of the German people, describing the treaty as the “mutilation and dismemberment of Germany.”²⁰⁸

For example, Noske noted that at a USPD rally on May 11, the speaker opened the meeting by attacking the provisions of the proposed treaty.

The peace, which the Entente asks of the German people, is a violent peace (*Gewaltsfrieden*) of the worst kind. No German populations who want to live in the state community (*staatlicher Gemeinschaft*) with the German people should be severed from them against their will.²⁰⁹

However, Noske’s description of this USPD speech belied the reality that nearly all of USPD leadership recognized the need to sign the Versailles Treaty, no matter how harsh. On May 12, *Die Freiheit*, the USPD newspaper in Berlin, published an article that stated:

Not signing means: the withholding of our prisoners of war, the occupation of our raw materials areas, the intensification of the blockade; means unemployment, starvation, mass deaths; means a terrible catastrophe, which more than ever will bring on the compulsion to sign. It is the proletarians who would suffer most frightfully from the consequences.

This acceptance of the inevitability of signing the Treaty did not mean that the USPD did not deplore the conditions imposed therein, as Noske noted. Rather, as David Morgan argues, the USPD derived its willingness to sign from a “conviction that Versailles would sooner or later go down with the entire bourgeois order.” This, together with other motivations like the preservation of revolutionary gains and a fear of counterrevolution from the right, drove the USPD towards its policy, and against another general strike.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Ibid 148

²⁰⁹ Ibid 149

²¹⁰ Morgan 262-264

In the Cabinet, opposition to the treaty of Versailles provoked a government crisis. Philipp Scheidemann, then Chancellor of Germany, vigorously opposed the treaty and instead proposed negotiations with the Allies. However the Allies recognized Germany's weakness in 1919, and "refused to yield on any points of substance."²¹¹ This left only two options: armed resistance or the ratification of the treaty.

Contrary to Groener's description of him, in his memoirs Noske emphasized the impossibility of resistance. Though Noske noted that "The possibility of resistance was carefully considered in all cases," his admission that "There was not the slightest chance of success" hardly evokes that same perception of Noske as Groener's "fire and sword" wielding Minister of Defense. In fact Noske repeated in his memoir *ad nauseam* the impossibility of violent resistance, given Germany's exhaustion and the aforementioned blockade, which continued until Germany signed the Versailles Treaty. In his most pronounced iteration of this sentiment he wrote:

The resistance of the German people was broken by unheard of sacrifice, overextension and four-year starvation. In their great majority they remained incapable of bringing new victims and bearing increased deprivation. This was also reflected in the attitude of the majority of the National Assembly.²¹²

It is crucial to recognize that in his memoir, like Groener, Noske sought to respond to his critics. From the right, the SPD faced constant criticism for the Armistice and the Treaty of Versailles, the *Dolchstoßlegende*. By emphasizing the emotional and economic desperation of the German people in 1918-19, Noske refuted critics who claimed that the politicians lost the war that the troops had won. He simultaneously addressed the harsh critics on the left, who attacked him

²¹¹ Carsten 223

²¹² Noske 150

for the brutal crackdown against communists and radical independents in 1918-19. Noske was certainly aware of these criticisms, and that he took offense at them is evidenced in his memoir, where he includes a poem circulated in Independent newspapers entitled "Noske Dreams." In this poem, Noske dreams about the crimes he has committed. The decomposed corpses of those who died in the revolution confront him, and at the climax of the poem these corpses shout at him:

We stand brave! None more!
 Shot for shot. Stab for stab!
 No cry of pain will be given to you,
 Until you on the gallows hang.²¹³

This poem and other similar sentiments reinforced divisions between Majority Socialists and Independents. Noske considered himself a victim. By showing compassion and emphasizing his opposition to further war with the Entente, Noske addressed this and other criticisms, wherein his opponents accused him of working with and being a tool of the militarists in the officer corps.

In the end, Germany did not resume hostilities over the Versailles Treaty. Philipp Scheidemann resigned rather than sign the treaty, remarking famously: "What hand would not whither, which would lay us in such chains!"²¹⁴ While the SPD and *Zentrum* delegations in the Reichstag supported the Treaty, the DDP opposed it. Consequently, the cabinet collapsed shortly after Scheidemann's resignation, and the Bauer Cabinet succeeded it. On June 28, 1919 Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles. Germans expressed tremendous outrage at the provisions of the treaty, most especially the war guilt clause, the 100,000 man army limitation,

²¹³ Ibid 158

²¹⁴ "Scheidemann, Philipp." Deutsche Biographie. Web.

and the forcible separation of ethnic Germans from the German state. Together with the Weimar Constitution, which delegates signed on August 11, 1919, the Treaty of Versailles in some respects meant a return to normalcy.²¹⁵ The war was finally over, and so too was the German Revolution.

Between Versailles and Kapp

After the Treaty of Versailles, the officer corps, like Germany as a whole, began the process of reconstruction. As the Treaty mandated the end of the General Staff, the *Truppenamt* (troop office) under von Seeckt replaced that organization. During this period Reinhardt and Groener continued their personal and professional rivalry, which took on even greater dimensions as the creation of a new army began. On June 29th, for instance, Groener raved against Reinhardt in his diary, writing that “the *Herr* War minister, the *Schweinehund* to whom I am as bothersome as the devil, continues the struggle against me by means that slowly have become almost indecent.”²¹⁶ In particular the two struggled over the allocation of powers of command – Reinhardt desired that the Reich Minister of Defense have power of command, while Seeckt and Groener adamantly opposed this demand, preferring instead a command structure in which the generals had final powers of command.²¹⁷

Groener became increasingly more hostile towards Reinhardt. He contacted both Ebert and Noske in order to undermine his position. In a volatile meeting on September 11, 1919, Groener stated that:

²¹⁵ Carsten 49

²¹⁶ Ibid 52

²¹⁷ Ibid 54-56

...without mincing his words, he had wished to see General von Seeckt, and not Colonel Reinhardt, as the leading military personality in the ministry of defense... The controversy between Noske and Reinhardt on the one side and me on the other assumed sharper and sharper forms... Reinhardt stressed that Seeckt as chief of the *Truppenamt* could not possess independent powers of command, but was a part of the defense ministry, and that the powers of command rested with Noske... the first decisive issue for me is the personal one, Seeckt or Reinhardt. As Noske had long decided in favor of Reinhardt, the whole palaver was pointless...

One week later Groener left the army. Reinhardt and Seeckt continued to struggle against one another, with Seeckt attempting to secure independence for the *Truppenamt* from Reinhardt. By 1920, the two men felt such hostility toward one another than their relationship was “very acrimonious.”²¹⁸

During this period, the first real indications of officer’s hostility towards the government emerged. As part of the new constitution, the National Assembly changed the German flag from black, white, and red to black, red, and gold. Almost immediately, the officer corps began protesting against this small change. Colonel Franz Ritter, for instance, in a letter to the Munich *Gruppenkommando* noted that his troops “unanimous[ly] demand[ed]... that the old German colors of black, white, and red should be retained.” Lieutenant-Colonel von Hagen of *Reichswehr* Regiment 29 echoed this sentiment when he said:

I and my officer corps will take the oath only with the reservation that:

- 1) We shall be permitted to continue to wear the black, white, and red cockades;
- 2) We shall not be forced to take the oath to the black, red, and gold colors;
- 3) The black, red, and gold colors shall never be hoisted on our buildings...²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Ibid 55-58

²¹⁹ Ibid 58-60

In terms of symbolism, by refusing to adopt the new Republican colors, army officers demonstrated their loyalty to the traditions of the old German Army and the *Kaiserreich*. By refusing to adopt the new colors, the officers also worsened an already hostile relationship between themselves and the workers, including those who supported the SPD.

Returning troops from the disastrous Baltic Campaign only exacerbated these tensions. The Baltic Campaign was a series of military actions that took place after the Armistice in the Baltic States and Poland, which the Soviet government ceded to Germany following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. Large numbers of German *Freikorps* members participated in this campaign to expand Germany eastwards, fighting first as allies of the local ethnic Latvians against Soviet aggression, before ultimately turning on the local population and attempting to seize territory for Germans.²²⁰

The Allied Governments demanded the withdrawal of these *Freikorps* troops, and on August 5th Ebert ordered the troops to withdraw under allied pressure. In the eyes of the *Freikorps*, this new “betrayal” only compounded that of the Armistice and Versailles. Rather than accept this order, the *Freikorps* and their officers joined the “Russian Army of the West” under Prince Pavel Awaloff-Bermond, ostensibly to combat Bolshevism in the Baltic. The initial German defeat at Riga quickly transformed into a rout during the months of October and November 1919. When the *Freikorps* finally returned to Germany, defeated and embittered, they blamed above all government in Berlin. As General von der Goltz, commander of the *Freikorps* in the Baltic, wrote:

²²⁰ Waite 94 – 133

We easily could have done away with all these enemies... if the weak-kneed German Government had not allied itself as a fifth enemy with the other four (the Red Army, local Soldiers Councils, Latvian Government, and the Entente). Germans can only be defeated by Germans. The mission stimulated and enticed me. I never guessed at that time that a dull sword had been placed in my hands and that my worst enemy would be my own people and my own government.²²¹

For Germany, the failure of the Baltic Campaign meant the return of tens of thousands of violent anti-Republican soldiers, many of who blamed the Republic for the ignominy of Versailles and their defeat in the East.

It is important to note that the government did not oppose the *Freikorps* during the Baltic Campaign, and in fact aided them through financial support even as Ebert and the government publicly disavowed the campaign, which preserved the *Freikorps'* operational freedom and prevented Entente retaliation against the whole of Germany. When von der Goltz, inquired as to the position of the government should his *Freikorps* troops join the White Russian Army, Ebert, Noske and Müller responded that they would have no jurisdiction over that army.²²² In spite of this the government continued to provision the troops. In an October 9 speech to the National Assembly, Noske tore into USPD critics of government policy, saying:

You are complicating Germany's position abroad by malicious and unjust criticism of the military administration... You are licking the boots of the British and French commissioners in Berlin... I have been advised to place an immediate blockade on all supplies [to the Baltic] but in consideration of the Latvian province, I deem that such stringent action is not desirable at this time. The immediate blockade of supplies would naturally result in plundering by the troops.²²³

In essence, Noske argued that the USPD was unpatriotic for supporting Britain and France against the *Freikorps*, even though the SPD government in Berlin officially did not support the

²²¹ Ibid 129-133

²²² Ibid 124

²²³ Ibid 136

troops. Further, he acknowledged that the government did supply these troops, but tried to justify this by stating that otherwise “plundering” would occur. His claim that the government only supported these *Freikorps* out of humanitarian concern for the already suffering people of Latvia is indeed dubious.

The return of these troops in late 1919, who felt no loyalty to the Republic that had provided for them, meant the arrival of a large body of men sympathetic to conservative causes and putschist tendencies. Most remarkable is the government’s willingness to rely upon the officers of these formations. Men like Major Bischoff, who in his own words had thought of a Putsch “uninterruptedly since November 9, 1918,” found themselves welcomed back into the *Reichswehr* by their peers in the officer corps.²²⁴ Such was the state of the German army in the months immediately preceding the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch.

That many German officers refused to cooperate on minor issues like the flag is indicative of the disdain these officers felt towards the Republic. Worse, the SPD permitted the reintegration of the officers of the Baltic troops into the *Reichswehr*. While Ebert and Noske could not have known that men like General von der Golz considered the Republic as a “fifth enemy” undermining the Baltic operations, they did not have to retain officers who fought outside the chain of government and army command. In all likelihood, they did not recognize the threat these men posed, and wanted to permit the skilled officers fighting arguably the leftover battles of World War I to return to the army. Unfortunately, this only strengthened anti-Republican forces in an already ambivalent *Reichswehr*.

²²⁴ Waite 136-137

During this same time period, the USPD experienced remarkable growth as a party. Between January and October 1919, USPD membership grew from 300,000 to 750,000 members. In Berlin the party held more support than the SPD, and after the debacle in Munich the USPD in that city went from receiving 10 percent of the SPD vote to 170 percent of that party's vote. In addition to growth, the USPD in this period experienced increasing radicalization. Morgan writes: "As the civil war developed, all factions in the party (USPD) reacted with bitterness." The USPD in this period felt that "[The SPD] had led to the division of the socialist movement... and obstructed socialist renewal at a time when the gains of the revolution were in danger of being dissipated."²²⁵ After the violence of the post-revolutionary period, the USPD correctly interpreted the preservation of the army officer corps as a threat to the Republic. When the SPD proved unwilling to address what the Independents considered the threat of counterrevolution, large segments of the USPD's membership lost faith in the efficacy of parliamentary government, and continued to draw closer to the left wing radicalism espoused by the communists.

The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch

The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch represented the final gasp of the *Freikorps* for mainstream political influence during the Weimar Period. After the Putsch failed, Germany continued its development as a republic, and the *Reichswehr* continued to develop into a small, highly professional force of 100,000 men. Although many of the officers continued on in the army, little room existed for the tens of thousands of Great War veterans and adventure seekers who made up the *Freikorps*, especially when they, in Carsten's words, "kept discipline badly, had

²²⁵ Morgan 242-246

little respect for law, and even less for the republican order.” Von Seeckt, writing in 1928, stated that:

...it was impossible to take them over into the *Reichswehr* wholesale and in formations, under their leaders... In the new *Reichswehr* there had to be a very strict discipline, not resting on the individual alone; the *Freikorps* were partly not willing, and partly not capable, of submitting unconditionally to such a discipline...²²⁶

Given that even among the officer corps little support existed for the long term operation of these irregular units, it is unsurprising that the *Freikorps* faced dissolution in 1920, especially considering the size limitation imposed upon the *Reichswehr*. Faced with the choice between undisciplined *Freikorps* and professional soldiers, the officer corps chose the latter.

Unfortunately, the government, rather than army command, initiated this process, and thereby provided the impetus for the coup. Officially, the government sought to comply with the Treaty of Versailles by reducing the armed forces. In particular, they sought to disband the Erhardt and von Loewenfeld Naval Brigades, partially because of these units' reputation, but more importantly because of the Entente contention that the Naval Brigades counted towards the 15,000 man naval limitation. Consequently, army command sought to pass command of these units to the navy, who would then disband them.²²⁷ As Robert Waite argues, the Treaty was both the immediate and the long-term cause of the Putsch, in that it caused a “violent reaction among the nationalist-military circles.”²²⁸

Noske himself described the goals of the Putsch as twofold, political and military. He quotes the demands put forth by the Putschists as:

²²⁶ Carsten 75

²²⁷ Carsten 76

²²⁸ Waite 142

- A) Political: The concentration of the whole national movement, while preserving the complete independence of the numerous existing organizations... The ultimate goal is a united front of all national-minded people regardless of party affiliation.
- B) Military: Against the aspiration of influencing the troops, the *Einwohnerwehr* and the Volunteers (*Freikorps*) in a republican-socialist sense, there should be a national education (*Aufklärung*) through oral and written propaganda as a counterbalance... and the implementation of care for the economic wants of the troops should be carried out through the representative bodies.²²⁹

These demands highlight the ideological weakness of the Putsch, which from its inception undermined the possibility for success. Although Noske was not inclined to be kind to the counterrevolutionaries in his writing, he was fair to label the ideas of the Putschists as haphazardly thrown together. The officers leading these *Freikorps* designed a political program as an afterthought – their primary objective was the overthrow of the Republic. After that, the officers envisioned the elimination of socialist influence on the soldiers, the harnessing of the national spirit, and the restoration of Germany under the monarchy.

Historian Eberhard Kolb briefly investigates the possibility that the Putsch was influenced by “the rightist political offensive” that began that March, and more importantly whether the putsch was a “concentrated action.” Although a compelling narrative of right-wing conspiracy, Kolb notes that “no evidence” exists of this cooperation.²³⁰ Waite supports a similar conclusion in his writing, noting that “Lüttwitz called on a great variety of politicians and in long, noisy conferences managed only to convince them that he was their worst enemy.” He achieved similar results through his conversations with the generals, including von Seeckt. So

²²⁹ Noske 201

²³⁰ Eberhard Kolb. “Friedrich Ebert: Vom „vorläufigen“ zum definitiven Reichspräsidenten.” Kolb, Eberhard, ed. *Friedrich Ebert Als Reichspräsident*. Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag GmbH, 1997. 135

inept was Lüttwitz that Kapp allegedly told a friend: “For God’s sake, Lüttwitz even hands them the calling card of the counterrevolution!”²³¹

The significance of the build up to the Putsch, insofar as it relates to the troubled relationship between the Social Democratic Government and the army officer corps, lay largely in the failure of Noske to address the indications of putschism as defense minister. As early as August 1, 1919, Major von Hammerstein-Equord, Lüttwitz’s own son-in-law as well as his subordinate, reported to General Groener about Lüttwitz’s “dark plans.” Given that this encounter took place only a month before Groener’s departure from the army, it is unclear whether Groener felt any compulsion to pass the information on to his rival Reinhardt or Reinhardt’s supporter, Noske. Carsten, for his part, wonders whether “it [was] the instinctive solidarity among the officers which prevented them from warning the government?”²³²

Ryder argues that “a minister of defense [Noske] was well aware of the feelings of the army... [he] knew, too, that some of the *Reichswehr* officers were playing with the idea of establishing a military dictatorship with himself as the head.”²³³ Noske did not deny this, noting in his memoir that “Such plans [of establishing a “Strong Man”] were put to me by all sorts of people.”²³⁴ However, whether or not he overestimated his own personal relationship with the army officers, as Ryder argues, Noske, together with Ebert, acted too slowly to prevent the Putsch. Noske wrote that “On March 9, I was made aware of the fact that

²³¹ Waite 147

²³² Carsten 46-47

²³³ Ryder 240

²³⁴ Noske 196

Generallandschaftsdirektor Kapp and the former Captain Pabst were very busy. I could not obtain some of the information.”²³⁵

The next day, Lüttwitz met with Ebert and Noske, and demanded that he remain in control of the naval brigades and that Reinhardt be replaced by General von Wrisberg as Chief of the Army Command. Further, he demanded the creation of a government of technocrats, save for Noske, who could remain, and a new election for President. In so doing he “identified himself with the political programme of the German Nationalist Party.”²³⁶

After this meeting, Ebert and Noske did not act immediately to suppress any counterrevolutionary activity, they simply asked Lüttwitz to resign.²³⁷ Noske’s decision is baffling, given that by his own admission he knew that Kapp and another co-conspirator Pabst were “very busy,” the day before this meeting.²³⁸ Ryder notes that Noske “remained obstinately trustful of his generals, whose loyalty he believed to have won by his energetic measures against the communists,” and also did not want to act against disruptive subordinates, “in order not to create bad feeling.”²³⁹ Noske, it seems, simply did not understand the magnitude of the threat, or the scope of hostility toward the republic among the officer corps. Admiral von Trotha best demonstrated this hostility; when ordered by Noske to investigate the attitude of the naval brigades, he replied that everything was in order.²⁴⁰ It is highly significant that even the chief of the German Navy and a man Noske relied upon and trusted, secretly supported efforts of the putschists.

²³⁵ Ibid 207

²³⁶ Carsten 77

²³⁷ Ibid

²³⁸ Noske 207

²³⁹ Ryder 240-241

²⁴⁰ Ibid 241

Lüttwitz refused to resign his command. When Noske relieved him of his command, Lüttwitz again did not follow this order. After waiting an entire day, the government issued arrest warrants for Pabst, Kapp, and other conspirators, but putschist sympathizers in the police warned them, and they managed to avoid capture. On March 12, the Noske and the government received word that one of the two Naval Brigades, the Erhardt Brigade, planned to march on Berlin. Later that night, Noske met with the generals in the defense ministry, where Generals von Oven and von Oldershausen, who earlier that day attempted to negotiate with Erhardt, relayed the demands of the putschists: reinstatement for Lüttwitz, immediate elections for both the Reichstag and the Presidency, and a cabinet of technocrats.²⁴¹ Again, despite Lüttwitz's later claims that contrary, the putchists' demands coincided with those of the German Nationalist Party identically.

At this meeting, the generals demonstrated through their actions the tremendous divisions between the SPD and the German officer corps. Noske powerfully described this moment, where the officer corps demonstrated loyalty to the army rather than the government.

In my room sat and stood General Reinhardt, my Chief of Staff Major von Gilsa, General von Seeckt, von Oldershausen, von Oven, Admiral von Trotha, some other officers and Secretary of State (*Ministerialdirektor*) Rauscher. I set the consequences of the Putsch before them... My request, to go to the troops and lead them to battle, was however only supported by General Reinhardt and Major von Gilsa. The other officers raised objections: *Reichswehr* will not shoot *Reichswehr*, police officers officers have been seen on the way to Döberitz (to join the putschists); the battle would at best lead to a dreadful bloodbath, with an inevitable defeat for the weak Berlin forces.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Carsten 78

²⁴² Noske 209

In his account Noske noted the defeatism of the officers in addition to their desire not to engage in fighting between army units. Ultimately, Noske “broke off the meeting with a profound sense of disgust” at the responses given by his generals.²⁴³ However, he did not hold himself responsible for retaining these generals, who demonstrated at this meeting their ambivalence towards the Republic. As Defense Minister of the Weimar Republic, Noske cannot absolve himself of responsibility for his failure to recognize an impending coup. Likewise, he failed to recognize the magnitude of sheer indifference towards the republic among his own generals.

This contrasts with General Rabenau’s account of the meeting, which Robert Waite relies upon. Although the substance does not vary, the implications indeed do. In this account, after Noske asked whether the generals would fight and Reinhardt exhorted his peers to so, General von Seeckt, “The Sphinx with a Monocle,” responded:

Troops do not fire on troops. Do you perhaps intend, Herr Minister, that a battle be fought before the Brandenburg Gate between troops who have fought side by side against the common enemy?... When *Reichswehr* fire on *Reichswehr*, then all comradeship within the Officer Corps has vanished.

When Noske suggests first a general strike, and then that the police be mobilized, Seeckt only smiled and noted the impossibility of resistance.²⁴⁴ Rather than cowardly generals deserting the state in its hour of need, Rabenau described Seeckt in quasi-heroic terms, as a general who would not countenance a civil war between the *Reichswehr*.

After this meeting the government fled. In the days that followed, the “new Republican army” that was the provisional *Reichswehr* by and large either sat idle, or actively supported

²⁴³ Ibid

²⁴⁴ Waite 155

the Putsch. In some instances, officers remained neutral because of “pressure from below,” as in the case of Dresden, where soldiers threatened to kill officers who supported the counterrevolution.²⁴⁵ Carsten disputes von Seeckt’s claim that “The mass of the officer corps of the *Reichswehr* by no means took the side of Herr Kapp and General von Lüttwitz,” noting that “Seeckt’s evidence was not in accordance with the facts.”²⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, the officer corps varied widely in its beliefs, with the largest group of officers, including Seeckt, remaining neutral. While this might technically satisfy Seeckt’s claim that these officers did not declare for Kapp, it is also true that they did not openly declare for the Republic.

Noske echoed Seeckt’s sentiments in his memoir, saying immediately after the general’s meeting in Berlin, writing:

I justified the proposal to go to Dresden for the time being with the need to quickly win influence with the troops outside of Berlin. I was certain that in their great majority they would remain true... My confidence was not misplaced. The vast majority of the *Reichswehr*, officers and soldiers, had done his duty loyally.²⁴⁷

But Noske, writing in the years after the Putsch during an active political career, was not concerned with writing an objective history of the period. With this statement he emphasized that he had not failed as Defense Minister, and that the confidence he placed in the majority of the German Army was warranted. This definition of loyalty, wherein Noske equated indifference to the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch with support for the Republic, is tenuous indeed.

²⁴⁵ Carsten 86

²⁴⁶ Ibid 88

²⁴⁷ Noske 210

He continued, writing: "In several garrison towns it came to fighting, because soldiers absolutely loyal to the government were attacked out of deep mistrust."²⁴⁸ Noske asserted that the soldiers engaged in combat during this period did not initiate violence, but were victims of it, thereby continuing his narrative of hostile workers instigating attacks against soldiers. In his discussion of the Red Army of the Ruhr, Noske oversimplified, and claimed that "after the news of the Putsch, the Communists rose up as if for an expecting signal and entered into the fight for a dictatorship of the proletariat."²⁴⁹ By describing this wide working class response with varied motives as a Communist attempt at revolution, he attempted to discredit this movement and neatly fit it into his narrative of the radical workers versus the state. But he ignored the negotiations that began immediately after the Kapp-Lüttwitz government collapsed, as well as the ambiguous beginnings of armed conflict between the Red Army of the Ruhr and the *Freikorps* garrisons there.

Ultimately, the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch failed in the face of a massive general strike. Waite, in describing the failure of the Putsch, writes: "Seldom in history has a general strike been so comprehensive, and never has one been so effective in blocking the functions of government."²⁵⁰ Ryder echoes this sentiment, writing: "But the main reason for the failure of the Putsch was the general strike which brought all activity to a standstill. Majority socialists, Independents and trade unionists acted for once in solidarity... altogether twelve million people took part."²⁵¹ This strike is yet another example of the combined strength of the German

²⁴⁸ Ibid

²⁴⁹ Ibid

²⁵⁰ Waite 160

²⁵¹ Ryder 242

socialist parties. Acting in tandem, the SPD and USPD mobilized German workers non-violently against the putschist government, and brought about its collapse in only four days.

Ironically, as a member of government Noske signed the strike order on, which reads:

The military putsch is here. Erhardt's marine division is marching toward Berlin to force a transformation of the government. The *Freikorps* members who fear disbandment want to install reactionaries in high government positions... We did not make the revolution so as once again to legitimize the bloody *Freikorps* regiment. We will not sign a pact with the Baltic criminals.

Workers, comrades! ...Use every means possible to negate the return of bloody reactionary politics. Go on strike, put down your work, and stop the military dictatorship... Forget your divisiveness.²⁵²

Through this statement, the SPD leaders, including Ebert as well as Noske, both urged the workers to strike and denied their own complicity in the rise of the counterrevolutionary threat.

The government did "legitimize the bloody *Freikorps*," albeit temporarily, through the Provisional Reichswehr Law. Regarding the "Baltic criminals," Noske defended the government's decision to supply them, and did not stop the reintegration of many of these officers into the army when they returned to Germany. The call to the workers to "Forget your divisiveness" rings hollow when considering that the SPD itself precipitated many of the deep divides separating the workers of the SPD and USPD.

Once the Kapp-Lüttwitz regime collapsed, the united socialist-republican front against dictatorship quickly collapsed as well. This is perhaps the greatest tragedy, that the German socialist parties could not transform the consensus against the Putsch into meaningful political change. During the general strike, Karl Legien emerged as a unifying force – a trade union

²⁵² "Appeal of the Social Democratic Party for a General Strike." Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. The Weimar Republic Sourcebook. Berkeley: U of California, 1994. 16

veteran, signatory of the Stinnes-Legien Agreement, and chairman of the *Allgemeine Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund* for thirty years. As part of the strike, Legien and the trade unions developed an eight point program, which called for:

...the leaders of the Putsch [to] be disarmed and punished, the civil service purged of counterrevolutionaries, local government democratized, social legislation extended, counter-revolutionary army units dissolved and replaced by republican units, food distribution taken out of the hands of profiteers, and the trade unions consulted on the choice of the new government.

What Ryder fails to note is that the trade unions demanded the dismissal of Noske.

Nevertheless, broad consensus existed among German workers for change. Legien recognized this opportunity, and actively sought the reconciliation of the two socialist parties.²⁵³ Regarding this strike, Franz Kruger, leader of the Berlin SPD, noted:

The parties and trade unions do not have the power to call an end to the general strike unless the working class can be sure that the power of reaction in the country and in the state is broken in every respect.

David Morgan writes that “even conservative Majority Socialists saw an opportunity” to change the status quo.²⁵⁴ The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch offered a virtual second chance at the Revolution of 1918 – widespread anti-militarist sentiment, a discredited army, and a massive accumulation of power in the hands of the socialist parties.

But as of 1918, mistrust between the two socialist parties undermined the grounds for cooperation. Ironically, the fear of Bolshevik revolution felt by Ebert and Noske in 1918-19 and their subsequent reliance on the *Freikorps* directly contributed to the inability of the USPD to cooperate in 1920. According to Ryder, the USPD, wary after the failed experiment of joint

²⁵³ Ryder 242

²⁵⁴ Morgan 326

government under the Council of People's Deputies, refused to form a government under Legien.²⁵⁵

Morgan, whose book focuses on the USPD, develops a much more nuanced argument, and also notes the complicity of the SPD in the missed opportunity of 1920. The Majority Socialists and trade unions, he notes, while eager to use the opportunity afforded by the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch to make reforms, also desperately wanted to end the strikes as quickly as possible, fearing cooptation by "extremists." Because of this, the trade unions lifted the strike as soon as the three parties in government acquiesced to the eight point program. Unfortunately, they made this move unilaterally, and the USPD refused to abandon workers elsewhere in Germany, who continued striking. Consequently, Legien could not form a trade-union based government, since USPD affiliated trade unionists continued a strike against the government. That these continued strikes failed to effect change is further evidence that the two Socialist parties did indeed need one another, despite a failure on both sides to recognize this. The USPD, upon realizing that these strikes could not succeed, reentered negotiations with Legien, "But," writes Morgan, "there is no doubt that participation in such a government would have been embarrassing for the Independents, given the mood of many of their followers, and this may well account for their lack of enthusiasm." Both parties continued negotiations for a few days, before talks faltered and Legien declined to become chancellor, effectively ending any hope of implementing the eight point program.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Ryder 243

²⁵⁶ Morgan 236-239

After the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, Noske resigned, and out of solidarity Reinhardt resigned from his post in the Army Command, where he was succeeded by Seeckt - though he did not resign from the Army.²⁵⁷ “Thus the tenacious struggle,” writes Carsten, “which Groener and Seeckt had waged against Reinhardt for so long, ended with their victory. The only general who was prepared to defend the republic by force of arms resigned his post and was replaced by a general who had refused to do so.” Further, Carsten argues that Seeckt sympathized with the Putschists. Whether he did, his actions upon succeeding Reinhardt certainly give that impression. In his decree of April 18, Seeckt stated that:

There are numerous indications that many members of the *Reichswehr* do not see clearly into what a situation we have got through the events of March, and that we must take the consequences for the results of our political short-sightedness.... Although it cannot be denied that the majority of misdemeanors can to some extent be excused on grounds of military obedience, we must nevertheless realize and acknowledge that offences have been committed in our ranks which call for punishment... By such offences, I not only understand those connected with the political events of the past weeks, but above all the cases of gross indiscipline and brutal behavior which have occurred in certain units. I do not intend to tolerate or to forget such occurrences.

In this decree, Seeckt described armed rebellion against the republic to be “political shortsightedness.” Further, he emphasized that the greatest offense was not treason, which is traditionally defined as betrayal of country or government, but “indiscipline.” Unsurprisingly, out of an army of 100,000 men and 4,000 officers, only 172 were discharged.²⁵⁸

Had the SPD and USPD cooperated to establish meaningful army reform, it is unlikely that they could have prevented some form of right wing counterrevolutionary putsch similar to the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch. Winkler notes that had the two socialist parties pushed too hard in

²⁵⁷ Ryder 243

²⁵⁸ Carsten 92-95

1918-1919, the result would have been “the civil war the Social Democrats so rightly abhorred as the worst of all evils.”²⁵⁹ But the actions taken by the *Freikorps* under Noske in those years were tantamount to civil war, such that Morgan entitles his chapter on January to May 1919 as “Civil War.”²⁶⁰ Further, whereas suppression of the left radicals necessitated a violent military response, the collapse of the Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch suggests that concerted strikes could undermine a reactionary government sufficiently to bring about its collapse. Whether the SPD and the USPD at the head of a republican army would have thought to resort to strikes rather than force against putschists is unclear. But both before and after the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, the SPD government chose in favor of the professional *Reichswehr* and against the citizen militia espoused in the Hamburg Points and the USPD platform of March 1919. By stubbornly clinging to a disloyal army, the SPD alienated the USPD, and in turn drove many of the USPD rank and file away from parliamentarianism towards the ideas of the KPD and other more radical leftists.

The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch marked the end of the *Freikorps*. For General von Seeckt, who could not abide indiscipline, the irregular and often brutal *Freikorps* represented a holdover from the turbulent revolutionary period of 1918-19, one that did not disappear when some semblance of stability emerged. As noted earlier, faced with the 100,000 man limit on the *Reichswehr*, Seeckt opted for regular troops over the freebooters. However, by no means did this mean the end of the flirtation between the German officer corps and the political right – a flirtation that became officially enshrined under the Nazi regime some 13 years later.

²⁵⁹ Winkler 345

²⁶⁰ Morgan 212

Most significant was Noske's departure. As perhaps the only SPD minister who evoked any form of respect from the officer corps at large, Noske exerted the greatest influence of the creation of that army. As Carsten argues:

Between the largest and most influential party, the Social Democrats, and the army there developed a chasm which was never bridged. Noske had succeeded in partly mitigating the contrast between the army and Social Democracy; before the Putsch the large majority of the officers were loyal to him and recognized his work. But this relationship too was destroyed by the events of March 1920.²⁶¹

After his departure, Dr. Otto Geßler acted primarily as a shield for the army, rather than as a Defense Minister. Seeckt constructed a military apparatus that was technically proficient and ostensibly apolitical, but one that valued "Reich" and "Fatherland," rather than "constitution" and "republic."²⁶²

The Struggle in the Ruhr

The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, which represented the end of the *Freikorps*, paradoxically also marked the last sustained attempt at radical leftist revolution. Although the KPD continued to plan and prepare for violent revolution after the events of March-April 1920, no other uprising during the Weimar Period lasted as long as the Red Army of the Ruhr nor performed as well in combat.

After the Putsch, workers engaged in armed resistance against the new government and its supporters in the *Reichswehr* almost immediately. In Leipzig, auxiliary troops fired on a peaceful demonstration on March 14. In response, an armed force of workers estimated at between 600 and 3,000 men rallied against the soldiers and engaged in sporadic fighting which

²⁶¹ Ibid 97

²⁶² Ibid 114

resulted in a citywide stalemate. In nearby Halle, workers seized the supplies of local *Volkswehr* units and chased off *Reichswehr* troops after two days of skirmishing. In Thuringia too, workers engaged in large engagements against *Reichswehr* troops. However, each of these uprisings ended within a few days, either through negotiated settlements or, as in the case of Thuringia, after they quietly “petered out.”²⁶³

The Ruhr *Aufstand* (uprising) began on March 15, 1919.²⁶⁴ Morgan cites two primary causes for the strength and prolonged duration of the uprising: “endemic industrial conflict and widespread political radicalism... [and that] the army [in the Ruhr], was, relatively speaking, very weak.”²⁶⁵ Historian Erhard Lucas notes that in military terms: “The superiority of the Red Army was based in substantial part on the fact that their organization was fundamentally different from that of the military and police.” However, Lucas also argues the Red Army, which excelled in the early street fighting of the rising due to its loose organization, for this same reasons performed poorly when placed into the context of *Stellungskrieg* (Trench/Static Warfare) against regular units of the *Reichswehr*. This fundamental problem of discipline in a voluntary armed force plagued the Red Army of the Ruhr for its entire existence.²⁶⁶

Altogether, the workers in the Ruhr responded in several different ways. In Elberfeld the district leaders of the SPD, USPD, and KPD came together to demand immediate socialization, a dictatorship of the proletariat, and a system of councils. That the SPD district leader supported these demands is indicative of the varied visions of what socialism meant, even within that

²⁶³ Morgan 335-336

²⁶⁴ "Gerade Auf LeMO Gesehen: LeMO Kapitel: Weimarer Republik." LeMO Kapitel - Weimarer Republik - Innenpolitik - Märzaufrüstung 1920. Web.

²⁶⁵ Morgan 336-337

²⁶⁶ Erhard Lucas. Märzrevolution 1920. Frankfurt Am Main: Verlag Roter Stern, 1973. 76

party. Further, it also demonstrates that many German socialists, of varied backgrounds and parties, perceived the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch as an opportunity to institute their vision of socialism.²⁶⁷

Elsewhere, as in the case of Hagen and Bochum, the workers armed themselves. In his estimation of the uprising, Noske noted that:

In the Rhineland-Westphalia *Industriegebiet*, Communists rose after news of the coup as though at an expected signal, and went into the fight for a dictatorship of the proletariat, which was only resolved by considerable troop deployment.²⁶⁸

Although Noske describes the rebels as “Communists,” the KPD actually played a small role in the fighting in the Ruhr. Winkler describes the army as “the paramilitary arm of a proletarian mass movement far larger than the KPD,” which contained many “leftist communists” (as distinct from the KPD) and syndicalists, as well as members of the USPD, SPD, and KPD.²⁶⁹ While Morgan, as noted earlier, acknowledges that the workers’ uprising in the Ruhr supported proletarian dictatorship, he also argues that the *Reichswehr*, specifically “unreconstructed *Freikorps*,” initiated the fighting. He writes that only after General von Watter deployed these *Freikorps* troops against the uprising was it that “The armed workers responded aggressively.” The Red Army subsequently defeated the *Freikorps* in several battles, most notably the town of Wetter, where they forced a *Freikorps* unit to surrender. The workers thereby expanded their weapons stocks, and prepared for future struggle. After a decisive victory on March 16, wherein Morgan writes that “a larger Free Corps unit was badly mauled by a workers’ army while trying to march out of the district,” many *Reichswehr* units withdrew. On March 18, the workers

²⁶⁷ Morgan 337

²⁶⁸ Noske 210

²⁶⁹ Winler 370

chased the *Reichswehr* out of the Westphalian segment of the Ruhr, and by March 20, *Reichswehr* troops withdrew from the entirety of the region, following a decisive battle for the city of Essen.²⁷⁰

By this time, however, the Kapp-Lüttwitz government no longer held power in Berlin – Kapp resigned on March 17. An awkward situation ensued, wherein workers from the Ruhr, whose numbers included SPD and USPD members as well as KPD, leftist KPD members, and syndicalists, were then technically engaged in rebellion against the restored Republican government. Morgan highlights the absurdity of these units, which sided with Kapp against the Republic, becoming “once again the authorized agent of a legal government.” Ultimately, these soldiers were never punished, since von Seeckt later secured from Ebert the authority to do so exclusively for the army command.²⁷¹ SPD leaders of the Red Army movement recognized the need for peace, and met in Hagen on March 20, where they formally declared that the Red Army had never intended to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. Additionally, conference called for the disillusion of the *Reichswehr* and the establishment of a people’s military.²⁷²

Accordingly, Reich Commissioner Karl Severing met with the representatives of the forces in the Ruhr on March 23 and 24. In the final Bielefeld Agreement, representatives of SPD, USPD, and KPD, together with Severing and the Center Party Minister of Posts Giesberts agreed to the eight points of the Legien Agreement, together with an outline for the disarmament of the Red Army of the Ruhr and its replacement by what Morgan describes as “local security forces in which the workers should have a predominant share.” Lastly, the two parties agreed

²⁷⁰ Morgan 337-338

²⁷¹ Carsten 95

²⁷² Morgan 339

that "If these points are loyally observed, there will be no entry of the *Reichswehr* into the Rhenish-Westphalian Industrial Area."²⁷³

Unfortunately, like the struggle in Munich a year earlier, the left communist and syndicalist members of the Red Army of the Ruhr did not acknowledge the agreement, and in Ryder's words "wanted to exploit the crisis to rekindle the revolution and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat."²⁷⁴ The government in Berlin considered the continued refusal of the remaining Red Army members to disband a violation of the Bielefeld Agreement, and ordered General Watter to restore order. This final iteration of the revolutionary spirit of 1918-19 degenerated into bloodshed.²⁷⁵ At final count, 1,000 workers and 200 soldiers died in the violence.²⁷⁶

The Red Army of the Ruhr and the *März Aufstand* significantly impacted the course of working class politics in Germany. The SPD, USPD, and KPD initially cooperated against the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, and once that government collapsed, the parties moved to make peace with the reestablished legitimate government in Berlin. However, left communist and syndicalist workers continued fighting, and contributed to the brutal crackdown by the regular army.

The conflict also precipitated an international crisis, with French troops occupying cities in Western German in retaliation for the violation of the demilitarized zone on the Rhine. This

²⁷³ Ibid

²⁷⁴ Ryder 244

²⁷⁵ Morgan 339

²⁷⁶ "Gerade Auf LeMO Gesehen: LeMO Kapitel: Weimarer Republik."

event also accelerated the growing disillusionment with the Weimar Republic on the German right, particularly images of black French colonial troops occupying German cities in the West.

However, for the German working class, the conflict in the Ruhr represented yet another example of military brutality against the workers. Further, the socialist government in power supported this action, which further divided German socialists along SPD versus USPD and KPD lines. Morgan argues that the Putsch, together with the subsequent violence in the Ruhr “helped exacerbate the tensions within the labor movement, and the concomitant crisis of purpose,” as to whether the USPD should support parliamentary government or revolutionary dictatorship in order to establish socialism.²⁷⁷

Voting Trends and the Split at Halle

“The six months from April to October (1920) were the USPD’s last as a united party,” writes Morgan. In his discussion of the collapse of the USPD as a political force, he notes that the Third International triggered the final collapse, but that well before this time “the possibility of a split had hung over the party.”²⁷⁸ As a party founded by anti-war exiles from the SPD, the USPD contained a disparate assortment of radical leftists and orthodox social democrats. That the party remained together as long as it did is an achievement in and of itself.

Between 1919 and 1920, the USPD experienced a massive upswing in support. Whereas in the National Assembly election of January 19, 1919, the SPD received 37.9% of the vote to the USPD’s 7.6%, in the Reichstag election of 1920, the SPD received 21.6% of votes to the USPD’s 18.8%. By comparison, the KPD received only 1.7% of votes in 1920. From a voting

²⁷⁷ Morgan 340

²⁷⁸ Morgan 341

perspective, the 1920 election appeared as almost a turning point, one where the USPD might eclipse the SPD as the largest socialist party.²⁷⁹

However, between the 1919 and 1920 elections, nearly 2.87 million fewer voters voted for the socialist parties. In part this reflects overall voter turnout, but the socialist share also declined by over 3% between 1919 and 1920 (including the KPD figure for 1920), suggesting that either voters abandoned the socialist parties for other parties, that SPD voters chose not to vote, or both.²⁸⁰ Whatever the case, this drop is significant, because it indicates that a significant number of socialist voters chose either not to vote or to abandon the party. This supports the hypothesis that the actions of the SPD together with the army alienated large segments of the working class.

Even more telling is the aforementioned movement by voters from the SPD to the USPD. Nearly 5.9 million fewer voters voted for the SPD in 1920 than in 1919, a drop of over 50%. This number cannot be explained by decreases in voter participation alone – and must instead be viewed in the context of the events of 1918-1920, most especially the violent suppression of resistance by the *Freikorps* movement and later the regular *Reichswehr*.²⁸¹

In Hamburg, Richard Comfort argues that “The big difference in 1920, of course was made by the very large number of new voters on the lists... In every case, a relatively large increase in eligible voters was associated, in working-class districts, with a large increase in the USPD vote.”²⁸² He thereby supports the idea that USPD (and later KPD) support derived from

²⁷⁹ Ibid 448-449

²⁸⁰ Ibid

²⁸¹ Ibid

²⁸² Comfort 162

social and economic differences within the working class, rather than by the violence of the revolutionary period. Comfort correctly notes that overall, the population of Hamburg rapidly increased between March 1919 and June 1920, from approximately 662 to 757 thousand people. However, this does not prove that population increases in working class districts contributed to increased USPD support. In fact, in many of Hamburg's districts, voter participation declined even as population increased. This is especially true in the working class districts. Further, in many districts where the USPD received increased votes in the 1920 election, the SPD also experienced a similar decrease in number of votes received. Altogether, electoral evidence demonstrates a major increase in USPD votes received between the Jan. 1919 and Jun. 1920 elections, and a similar decrease in SPD support.²⁸³ Wheeler notes that "By the summer of 1920 the USPD was on the verge of surpassing the SPD both at the polls and in membership."²⁸⁴ That this upswing occurred after the violence of the revolutionary period and the suppression of the Red Army of the Ruhr suggests that rather than an increase of low skilled workers, the events of the previous two years significantly impacted voting decisions, as well as overall voter participation. Despite these electoral victories, the USPD could not overcome the internal tensions prompted by harsh Soviet attacks on the right wing of the party, which were intended to reorient the USPD toward a Leninist program.²⁸⁵

In October 1920, the USPD met in Halle for a Party Congress, where the party debated the 21 Conditions, which the Soviet Union and established as conditions for membership in the Third International. These conditions included:

²⁸³ Ibid 182-185

²⁸⁴ Wheeler 305

²⁸⁵ Morgan 356

- 2) Every organization that wishes to affiliate to the Communist International must regularly and methodically remove reformists and centrists from every responsible post in the labor movement and replace them with tested communists.
- 7) The parties that wish to belong to the Communist International have the obligation of recognizing the necessity of a complete break with reformism and 'centrist' politics and of spreading this break among the widest possible circles of their party members. Consistent communist politics are impossible without this.
- 15) Parties that have still retained their old social democratic programs have the obligation of changing those programs as quickly as possible and working out a new communist program corresponding to the particular conditions in the country and in accordance with the decisions of the Communist International.
- 21) Those party members who fundamentally reject the conditions and Theses laid down by the Communist International are to be expelled from the party.²⁸⁶

Many in the USPD, especially the on the right wing of the party, felt that these conditions were intolerable. Essentially the USPD, which up until this time operated as a viable alternative to the Majority SPD vision of social democracy, would abandon its independence as well as its identity as a social democratic party. Further, if the party carried through these reforms, many prominent officials would be forced out of office as "reformists and centrists," some of whom still supported the synthesis of Council and Parliamentary government.

At the conference, Walter Stoecker of the party's left wing vigorously supported the 21 Conditions, stating:

Especially in an epoch like the present one, when we are faced fairly certainly with grave, decisive conflicts with the bourgeoisie in the near future, it is important to cultivate the Marxist revolutionary offensive spirit again in the forward-driving German proletarian masses and ruthlessly to combat the feeble passivity of the right wing.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ Minutes of Second Congress of the Communist International. Web.

²⁸⁷ Morgan 366-367

In his address, Stoecker highlighted the most important positions of the USPD's left wing. Class struggle did not loom far in the future, to be achieved through elections or reforms. The USPD must immediately prepare for the coming conflict between the bourgeois and the working class. This sentiment echoes that of both the KPD and the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union. That more than half of the delegates present sided with Stoecker in favor of the 21 Conditions demonstrates the major changes within the USPD. In the early days of the revolution, Liebknecht and Luxemburg presided over a small, if vocal, faction of the USPD. Now, in October 1920, the radicals held sway.

Ultimately, after more than eight hours of speeches in which Zinoviev spoke in favor of the 21 Conditions and Hilferding against, the USPD voted 237 to 156 in favor of the conditions and affiliation with the Third International. In a stunning conclusion to the Party Congress, Arthur Crispian, chairman of the USPD, stated:

A party of this party has accepted the Twenty-One Conditions of admission prescribed by the Third Communist International. This party is consequently obligated... to enter the German Communist Party, Section of the Third Communist International... They have thereby dissolved their organizational bonds with the members of the party who adhere to the Leipzig Action Program and want to remain in the present organization of the USPD. By adopting the Däumling-Stoecker motion (in favor of affiliation) this assembly has ceased to be a party congress of the USPD.²⁸⁸

Despite this procedural coup d'état, the left wing of the party prevailed in its objective of affiliation with the Third Communist International. The left wing subsequently joined KPD, which restyled itself the VKPD. This new party counted 449,700 members in January 1921,

²⁸⁸ Ibid 378

which was one-third of the SPD's 1.2 million during the same time period, but more than five times greater than the old KPD's 78,715 members.²⁸⁹

This split of the USPD, itself an offshoot of the SPD, had a profound impact on the course of German working class politics. Between the June 1920 and May 1924 elections, for instance, the KPD, ballooned from 2.1% of votes cast in Germany to 12.6%.²⁹⁰ Hunt argues that in general, the divisions between the KPD and SPD took on socioeconomic terms. He notes that in general "skilled and better-paid workers predominated there (in the SPD)," especially relative to the base of the KPD. However these distinctions did not shake the larger class identity as a member of the proletariat. As Hunt writes, "A great many workers appeared to have lived in both worlds: ...a petty bourgeois mentality at home but a socialist mentality in the shop and... polling booth."²⁹¹ For virtually the entirety of the Weimar Period, the KPD agitated against the SPD, and weakened the ability of the latter to compromise, for fear of losing working class support. The KPD could only achieve this, however, because of the massive influx of workers from the former USPD. In contrast, the USPD, although often divided during its brief history, at least attempted to meaningfully cooperate with the SPD during the period of rule by the Council of People's Deputies, and as a whole acted as a more tractable partner than the VKPD ever was.

Conclusion

²⁸⁹ Ibid 383-384

²⁹⁰ Comfort 180

²⁹¹ Hunt 146-147

David Morgan, describing the SPD before the First World War, describes four distinct factions within the SPD: radical leftists, left center, right center, and revisionists.²⁹² After the war, these groups coalesced around the new socialist parties – the radical leftists became the Spartakists and later KPD, while the left center formed the largest component of the USPD. The consequence of Ebert and Noske’s decisions of 1918-1920 is that they drove a majority of the center left into the arms of the radical leftists, through violent suppression of workers, and through an inability to denounce the army command, even when alternatives existed.

Through economic or military reforms, the SPD government could have undermined significant sources of conservative or reactionary support, and thereby “anchored” the Republic against the forces of counterrevolution. In so doing, the SPD also could have effected reconciliation between the major socialist parties. This is not to say that the SPD should have abandoned its commitment to parliamentary democracy in favor of council government. It is to say, however, that the SPD failed to appreciate the potential of the councils to effect reforms, even when these councils overwhelmingly identified with the SPD, as was the case in at the Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils. Ebert, Noske, and the SPD did not even pursue modest reforms, like the removal of openly anti-republican army officers or the socialization of the coal mines, both of which were feasible. Had the SPD done so, it could have weakened the forces of conservatism and increased the power of pro-Republican forces.

Further, the SPD did not need to rely on the old officer corps indefinitely, nor did it need to grant the *Freikorps* unrestrained freedom to eliminate radical leftist revolutionaries. In Berlin, Munich, and the Ruhr, the *Freikorps* behaved ruthlessly toward both revolutionaries and

²⁹² Morgan 27-30

the local populations. Through these actions, the *Freikorps* pushed the left and right wings of the German socialist movement further apart. Whereas the Majority Socialists on the right felt increasingly dependent on the *Freikorps* to restore order, on the left many Independents grew disillusioned both with the Majority Socialists and with the promises of parliamentarianism.

Even after the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, the two German socialist parties proved unable to cooperate. By that time, the membership of the USPD felt such disdain toward the SPD, that even if its leaders had been more receptive to a coalition government, such a government would have been impossible. While this fault lay with the USPD, it cannot be understood except as a response to the actions of the SPD, who pursued parliamentarianism and order without acknowledging the opportunities during the revolutionary period for meaningful change.

This split was not inevitable. The cooperation between the SPD and USPD in Hamburg, Munich for a time, and most of all in the Council of People's Representatives suggests that despite social and ideological differences, real cooperation could and did take place. The USPD members who chose the KPD at Halle did not do so simply because of abstract arguments, or because of class differences between them and the SPD membership. They did so, because they perceived the actions of the SPD in the revolutionary period to be contrary to the interests of German working class, and as such sought another, more radical alternative.

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