

# Opposing Fascism

*Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe*

This innovative volume draws together in a wide-ranging collection a series of new perspectives on the everyday experience of Europeans in the 'age of fascism'. The contributions go beyond the conventional stereotypes of organised resistance to examine the tensions and ambiguities within the communities, both national and local, that opposed fascism. The authors show that under the pressures of civil conflict, occupation and even everyday life, motives were rarely as pure and political alignments seldom as straightforward as our reassuring collective memories of fascism and war have led us to believe.

The combination of original research and engagement with current debates makes this collection invaluable both for researchers in the social and political history of World War II and for students of modern European history.

TIM KIRK is Senior Lecturer in History, University of Northumbria at Newcastle. His previous publications include *Nazism and the Working Class in Austria* (Cambridge, 1996).

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*Edited by*

Tim Kirk and Anthony McElligott



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## Preface

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This book had its origins in History Workshop 26, held at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle in 1992. Most of the chapters were presented as papers in a conference strand on 'Popular Resistance to Fascism'. The aim of this strand was not to assemble a series of papers which would provide a systematic or representative 'coverage' of the theme for all parts of Europe; that would have been impossible in any case. It was, rather, to invite papers which re-examined the perspectives of the post-war historiography of fascism, a theme which has only slowly begun to free itself from the taboos and political imperatives of the Cold War. There were important gaps in the geographical range of the collection, and new contributions had to be solicited. The intention in doing so, however, was never merely to fill a national or regional gap but to extend the range of critical perspectives and new approaches. The editors would like to thank the original conference participants for their patience with this process, and the authors of the additional chapters for the efficiency with which they delivered their contributions. We should also like to thank Sarah Kane, who translated Yves Le Maner's article. Thanks are also due to the University of Northumbria Small Research Grants Committee for its support during the preparation of the manuscript for publication; and to the Department of Historical and Critical Studies at the University of Northumbria, and the Research Committee of the School of History and International Relations at the University of St Andrews for their financial support for the translation of Le Maner's article. Both universities also provided important technical and administrative support. Last but by no means least we should like to thank Liz Harvey for her encouraging critical advice on the manuscript.



# 1 The German revolution defeated and fascism deferred: the servicemen's revolt and social democracy at the end of the First World War, 1918–1920

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*Nick Howard*

## **Introduction**

The November revolution of 1918 was the culmination of a series of struggles protesting against the political and social conditions brought about by the world's first war of industrialised mass slaughter. Strikes, mass desertions and mutinies led to the collapse of the discredited Wilhelmine political system and thwarted the plans of generals, admirals and politicians to prolong the war. Thus the Weimar Republic was born during a revolution to end the First World War.

The main feature of the foundation of the Republic was the disintegration of the entire armed services, together with the powers of the officer corps, the army High Command and its civil service offshoots, that formed the central pillars of the authority of the state.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, the servicemen's revolts and the interventions by the social democrats are examined from contemporary reports, proclamations and press accounts and from subsequent memoirs and debates. They reveal the widespread advance of the revolution in the army when the Majority Social Democrats (MSPD) and the left-wing Independent Socialist Party (USPD) took office, initially with the general approval of the revolutionaries. After the removal of the Kaiser, however, the social democrats maintained the structures of the central state that the revolutionaries sought to abolish.

In the five months before the events of November 1918, the resistance to the war of growing numbers of soldiers on the western front took the form of widespread desertion and gave impetus to revolutionary changes prior to the outbreak of the naval mutiny at Kiel. By 4 November, the sailors' revolt had become public knowledge as General Scheüch of the High Command bowed to political pressure and had reduced press censorship on 2 November. News of the far more numerous actions against the war by the soldiers had earlier been suppressed. The impact of

desertion was examined by the Reichstag Commission of Enquiry in the 1920s and evidence as to its scale points to a massive soldiers' movement of wholesale opposition to the war from August 1918 onwards, against which the generals were powerless. The numbers of deserters were estimated at more than three-quarters of a million<sup>2</sup> and combined with voluntary surrenders, deaths and injuries, they reduced army divisional strengths on key sectors of the western front to a reported one-twelfth of the 1914 levels.<sup>3</sup>

Widespread hunger and exhaustion at home fomented a wave of industrial strikes against the military and political establishment in at least fifty-five towns and cities in January 1918. Opinion among war resisters moved rapidly to the left, though the soldiers' movement generally grew without political party leadership. Later, deserters and mutineers looked to moderates within the left and right of the social democratic movement for guidance. With support from USPD activists and shop stewards from the factories and occasionally from the tiny Spartacist group of supporters of Karl Liebknecht, who was imprisoned as a war resister in 1916, strikers and mutineers set up soldiers' and workers' councils as their instruments for revolution.

Evidence of fascism in the period is minimal, despite the rise of anti-semitic groups during the war.<sup>4</sup> However, right-wing social democrats who organised against the revolution supported their arguments with calls to patriotism, military glory and warnings against 'asiatic bolshevism'. Such slogans encouraged the defeated generals and politicians to hold on to their declining power and similar propaganda was used later by the Nazis in their ideological onslaught against the Republic.

### **The disintegrating army and the rising tide of revolution**

The organisational cells of the revolution, the German Soldiers' and Workers' Councils (Arbeiter und Soldatenräte, ASR), were initiated in two phases. The workers' councils originated in the great munitions strike of January 1918, in which over half a million workers participated under the leadership of workers' committees. The strike was strongly anti-war but was called off after a few days by three right-wing social democrat leaders on the central strike committee: Friedrich Ebert, Philip Scheidemann and Otto Braun, who respectively became Reich president, prime minister of the Republic, and prime minister of Prussia. To discourage further industrial action, the military High Command victimised trade union activists by sending them to the trenches on the western front. Their banishment had the effect of spreading the strikes to the troops.

The soldiers' councils originated in the practice of what Erich Vol-

kmann, a retired army major writing in 1925, called the *verdeckter Militärstreik* or hidden army strike.<sup>5</sup> Mass desertion began in early 1918, and as the sufferings of the war increased, from May to October developed into mutinies on a massive scale. The existence of this movement was hidden from most citizens by censorship, but key industrialists met in private on 23 August 1918 to discuss the significance of pending collapse. The steel magnate Hugo Stinnes informed the Hamburg shipowner Albert Ballin that 32,000 soldiers had deserted in recent weeks, that thousands of conscripts were refusing the call-up, and many more were hiding in the Silesian forests where local women provided them with food.<sup>6</sup> Deserting soldiers could not draw official attention to themselves by the open formation of councils, but in occupied Belgium they gained protection from the size of their movement and were supported by the local population. The mood of the soldiers is reflected in a soldier's poem found in a train:

It is all a swindle:  
The War is for the Wealthy,  
The Middle Class must give way,  
The People provide the corpses.<sup>7</sup>

Initially the soldiers' and sailors' councils formed a collective voice and an organised means to cope with material and food shortages. Politically, the councils demanded the removal of the Kaiser, full democratic rights and a solution to the problem of the future status of the deserters and mutineers.

On 24 October Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff issued an order to all troops in the field to continue the war in the west, in defiance of Max von Baden's interim government, which the generals had previously authorised to seek an Armistice. On 28 October the Admiralty moved to prolong the naval war. The interception by revolutionary servicemen of these plans finally brought the resistance movement into the open. Overnight, deserters became mutineers and revolutionaries demanding the removal of the Kaiser and the High Command, an end to martial law, and an immediate democratic government to end the war. The soldiers acted against their officers, stripping them of the insignia of rank, occupying army bases, taking over troop and hospital trains, seizing military stores, organising the retreat and freeing prisoners in the weeks before the Armistice on 11 November 1918. The generals of the High Command prepared rapidly for civil war. Some senior officers, with equal urgency, organised to escape an armed confrontation in the homeland that would lead to the loss of their authority as the national leaders of German society.

Their fears were justified. From spring to autumn 1918, an estimated 750,000 to one million soldiers gave up the war, the vast majority from, or en route to, the western front. After the breakdown of the German spring offensive in June 1918 with the loss of over 400,000 men, the generals tried to replace them by combing out industry and agriculture. Warned that, if he succeeded, much of the forthcoming harvest would have to be sacrificed,<sup>8</sup> General Ludendorff invoked military law to divert workers from farms and factories to the front, thus worsening the food shortages that accelerated the army's eventual collapse. Many strikers in uniform plundered army food stocks on a large scale.

An early sign that desertion had turned to mutiny came on 6 June 1918, when the commanding general of the 41st Infantry Division near Beaumont-Hamel ordered those officers and men refusing to enter the trenches to be shot.<sup>9</sup> The threat, if carried out, had little effect. The same division again refused to fight on 8 August and was one of seven that gave up, leaving a twenty-kilometre section of the Amiens front completely undefended. As desertions increased, so reserves dwindled in the base camps in the homeland and in the armies of occupation. Whole bodies of men surrendered to individual Entente soldiers. Retiring troops met fresh divisions going into action, with shouts of 'blackleg' and 'you're prolonging the war'. Many of the officers lost their influence and were swept along with the rest<sup>10</sup> as the soldiers' movement took on the language of striking workers. However, surrendering did not resolve the problems of hunger at home.

In mid October the army High Command, desperate to keep the Allied advance from entering Germany, called upon civilian politicians in the war cabinet for a sudden round-up of 637,000 men, but to no avail.<sup>11</sup> On 17 October Ludendorff reported many deserters in Mauberge, at that time only twelve miles from the front. Significantly he labelled them as 'shirkers', not as capital offenders under martial law, under which deserters could face the firing squad. Many among the dwindling band of officers were reluctant to take extreme action against these so-called 'shirkers' and face the risk of spreading the revolts. Middle-class recruits to replenish the active officers corps were depleted at the end of September.<sup>12</sup> Dissatisfied with Ludendorff's cover-up, the commander of the Sixth and Seventeenth Army Groups in northern France and Belgium wrote, on 18 October, to the interim Chancellor Prince Max von Baden, insisting that Ludendorff was hiding the truth from the politicians:

Our troops are over-fatigued and altogether melting away in a terrible manner. Very many machine guns have gone missing and there are shortages of trained riflemen and rifles, artillery pieces and gunners, munitions are lacking, lorries lack

fuel and our reserves of manpower are already declined to exhaustion. Thousands of pillagers drift around the rear bases. We can no longer withstand heavy enemy attacks because of a lack of reserves, and in each retreat we always have to abandon a large part of our *matériel*. The divisions can, on average, put only one thousand active men into the fight compared with 12,000 at the beginning of the war.<sup>13</sup>

One officer thought he had Russian *bolsheviki* under him, not German soldiers.<sup>14</sup> Generals who feared the spread of revolution on the Russian pattern could do little but report the phenomenon of mass desertions to their superiors. The signal station at Kovno in the east, which intercepted and publicised Hindenburg's call for a last-ditch battle, was in the hands of revolutionaries by 24 October and used its powers to link up the increasingly organised deserters.<sup>15</sup> The movement was in the open politically six days before the start of the Kiel mutiny.

### **The hidden army revolt in Belgium**

Historians have argued that generally the attitudes of front soldiers in the trenches prevented acts of revolt, which began only after the soldiers had marched back in a disciplined fashion to the homeland, there to be subverted by revolutionaries.<sup>16</sup> By this reasoning, the German revolution did not begin until the Kiel mutiny, which the sailors spread to the soldiers via the workers' councils in the towns and cities, and thence to the reserve troops in the base camps. Though this was the situation in the coastal region, some 10,000 soldiers' councils were set up<sup>17</sup> and, by 11 November 1918, 110 towns and cities were in the control of the soldiers' and workers' councils. The sailors had triggered the rapid spread of the revolt, but the actions of the soldiers were more audacious before they reached home from France and Belgium than they were after they came into contact with the organised councils of social democrat workers.

Events in Belgium showed the distinct strengths of the soldiers' revolt. According to Heinrich Brüning, a lieutenant at the time, desertions there were truly a mass phenomenon in the late summer of 1918. He was astonished to find that the numbers of deserters living in groups in cellars in Belgian cities, in attics and lofts, had reached such proportions that the German military police had given up their raids.<sup>18</sup> Everywhere desertion was linked to the food shortage, as the deserters plundered and took control of army food stocks on an increasing scale.

The switch from covert German army desertions in Belgium to open socialist intervention was reported in the contemporary press but has subsequently received little attention from historians.<sup>19</sup> The initiatives of the mutinous soldiers triggered a short-lived insurrection in Brussels and

in the larger Belgian towns. Evidence of previous mutinous activity in Belgium came from the working-class conscript, Oskar Hippe.<sup>20</sup> During Hippe's journey to the front as a raw recruit in late September 1918, hundreds of troops demonstrated against the war as they moved towards it. 'Equal rations, equal pay, then the war can stay away!' they chanted. If the officers called for discipline, they replied in unison, 'Out with the light, out with the knife, let him have it within an inch of his life!' Hippe's fellow soldiers removed the ammunition from their troop train, climbed an adjacent hill and shot up the locomotive. Threatened by a shock brigade, they continued to the front, staged their own retreat and commandeered another train to take them to Brussels. There an organised soldiers' resistance to the High Command was being set up.

General Maercker, the commander of the first *Freikorps* authorised by the MSPD, described such behaviour as the spark of revolution flying around the contaminated bases, but denied that any front soldiers took part, insisting that these events took place behind the lines.<sup>21</sup> The *Kölnische Zeitung* put these events in a different perspective, describing how on the barracks square at Beverloo in north-east Belgium, 70,000 returning front soldiers fought with weapons against their officers. They set up a soldiers' council, commandeered automobiles, festooned them in red and drove into Liège, Namur, Brussels and Antwerp, forming soldiers' councils en route. Contacts had been made between deserters and Belgian resisters who helped them to survive, among whom were social democrats whose links with German socialists had saved the lives of two of their leaders, Legros and Colleaux, who had been sentenced to death by the military commandant for spying.<sup>22</sup> Soldiers joined up with Belgian workers from the outer suburbs of the towns and cities. In the city centres, they evicted German civilian officials of the military government, occupied public buildings and court houses, freed Senator Colleaux, broke up Belgian nationalist preparations for victory rallies, removed Belgian, French, English and American flags and raised the red flag.

In Brussels, the soldiers' movement against the military government began on the evening of Saturday 9 November and victory was proclaimed at three o'clock in the afternoon of the following day. The press reported continuous fighting, and forty Germans were killed in central Belgium, in battles in which some Belgians took part on both sides. Armistice day celebrations in the larger towns were overwhelmed by demonstrators who tore down national flags and monarchist symbols. The soldiers drove off a counter-attack led by German and Belgian nationalists and freed military and political prisoners. The Press Bureau of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council in Cologne received telegraph reports signed 'Friend', 'Henry' and 'Nottebohm', to cover the identities

of the senders. The short-lived socialist revolution in Belgium proclaimed a republic, demanding a universal and equal electoral franchise. Revolutionary German soldiers marched under the red flag through the working-class suburbs, released French prisoners and joined up with a general strike, arresting the Belgian mayors and senior judges. A leading Belgian citizen declared to the press, 'What has just happened here is far worse than the Great Strike of 1913. You will see that no-one has won the World War but the Socialists and nobody has lost it but the property owners.' In speeches at the strike rallies, speakers declared that reparations for war damages, a central demand of the Allied armistice terms, should not be paid for by squeezing them out of workers' living standards.<sup>23</sup>

The Beverloo and Brussels soldiers' councils set up an internationalist and working-class model for the November revolution but without a revolutionary socialist base to consolidate their gains. For most German soldiers, returning home was the priority and they were preoccupied with organising transport formations and saving German army food supplies needed in the homeland. To accelerate their return to Germany, the Brussels soldiers' council handed their authority to the social democrats in Cologne who ordered them to relinquish the positions of power they had so easily won for the Belgian social democrats. Discipline was difficult to maintain and some soldiers went on a looting spree, damaging city-centre properties, which the soldiers' councils later repaired before they withdrew to Germany.

The Beverloo council also came under the control of the Cologne Soldiers' and Workers' Council, where the middle classes, alarmed at the 'terrible, unplanned nature of the demobilisation' on 8 November had tried to prevent the convening of a revolutionary council in the first place,<sup>24</sup> calling instead for a welfare committee. The Cologne council resisted this move but the social democrats persuaded the middle-class parties to withdraw, promising that they would bring the soldiers under control. They ordered the councils in Belgium to share authority with officials of the International Belgian Relief Agency, administered by Herbert Hoover. Food supplies in Belgium were later organised by the controllers of the post-Armistice Entente food blockade, who were determined to keep food supplies out of the hands of the workers' councils in a starving but revolutionary Europe until bourgeois governments were firmly in place.<sup>25</sup>

The mass withdrawal of the revolutionary soldiers from Belgium, through the Maastricht strip east of Beverloo, began immediately after the Armistice. At the Maas bridges it was resisted by officers with whom fire was exchanged, but after negotiations and the surrender of weapons,

the rebels moved into neutral Holland. A British diplomat reported that 70,000 troops under the control of their councils carried huge quantities of food, cattle and clothing on to Dutch trains and organised a return en masse to Germany.

British officers in charge of the Entente armies moving under armistice into Belgium and the Rhineland reported that the German soldiers' councils were 'in charge of everything, including railways, telegraphs, telephones and wireless' and that officers, stripped of their badges of rank, were ordered by the soldiers to use their skills to help the troops to return home.<sup>26</sup> After the withdrawal of the Beverloo and Brussels soldiers' councils, authority was handed over by the victorious Entente armies to the Belgian nationalists and the middle classes. A week after their eviction, mayors and judges were re-instated and the workers' councils of Antwerp, Beverloo and Namur and the executive of the Brussels Central Soldiers' Council were dissolved.<sup>27</sup> On 19 November the Belgian authorities called in the British army to restore order in Namur.<sup>28</sup>

The events in Belgium were replicated in most German cities in these early November days, though it was the MSPD that restored order, not the British army. From press coverage of the formation of soldiers' and workers' councils in seventeen cities and towns over the two days before 9 November, revolutionary sailors linked up with the soldiers in only six cases.<sup>29</sup>

### **The army in revolt and the prospect of civil war in the homeland**

As the revolutionary movement spread in Belgium, and to Germany's main cities, the German Naval and High Commands, faced with acts of armed desertion, of food retrievals and raids on army stores, prepared for civil war. On 2 November, Admiral Ritter von Mann selected loyal submariners in preparation to sink rebellious battleships and three days later unsuccessfully sought cabinet permission for an attack on Kiel by land and sea.<sup>30</sup> The *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* reported that, in the aftermath of the mutiny, the ageing cruiser *Schleswig-Holstein* was torpedoed with the loss of 330 lives.<sup>31</sup> On 4 November the Kaiser prepared to lead the civil war and ordered the conversion of his sixty castles into hospitals. On the following day many large industrial enterprises were occupied by the military command. Joffe, the Russian ambassador, was expelled on the same day and on 7 November all officers on leave were recalled by the High Command.<sup>32</sup> The freedom of political assembly conceded by the civilian government of Prince Max on 3 November was cancelled by General Scheüch on 6 November.

On 5 November General Groener, Ludendorff's successor, gave the coalition cabinet his assessment of the situation. Diverting attention from the High Command's troubles in the west, he stressed Germany's vulnerability to bolshevism from the east. Half a million troops had moved from east to west after the armistice with bolshevik Russia on 4 December 1917 of whom around 50,000 had deserted, some after 'bloody confrontations between officers and men'.<sup>33</sup> Erzberger, leader of the Centre Party, contradicted Groener, stating that a bolshevik state of mind was entering the country from the western battlefield. Scheidemann, who had warned in late September that the state of the collapse was so advanced that workers' and soldiers' councils might be meeting in the halls of parliament within a week,<sup>34</sup> now saw 'asiatic bolshevism', coming from 'a land of millions of illiterates with a trifling amount of trade and commerce', as a greater danger than the advancing enemy. 'My party will therefore take care that Germany will be spared from it.'<sup>35</sup>

On 7 November Scheidemann gave his party's view that attempts by the High Command to ban the formation of workers' and soldiers' councils was 'like trying to stop the rain' and urged the government to give the MSPD a greater role in office with powers to restrain their growth. Groener considered the alternatives and discussed with the High Command the measures that might be needed to prevent the revolution from spreading to the army:

I had thought originally of a border defence between the homeland and the army, but it was too late for that. It would have had to be put in hand long ago and now there were no reliable troops in the homeland. Next we discussed the question of *Freikorps*. It was also too late for these to prevent the Revolution, but thanks to the OHL [High Command], over the November days and after they were kept in mind and then proved their effectiveness. Had the *Freikorps* been authorised and built up in August, we would not have had a Revolution. In any case it was now becoming an actual fact that was impossible to stop. The OHL sent one troop section that was holding the rear of the fighting front, back to Berlin. From this troop, the Brigade of Guards, one could expect that the unconditional discipline of the old traditional military concepts could be set against the Revolution. But this measure was of no use, because the battalions sent to Berlin had been disarmed in the homeland before they reached their destinations, by a Division allocated to Verviers [in Belgium] that had marched off without orders.<sup>36</sup>

Revolution was already widespread in the army. On 8 November, Generals Hindenburg, Groener and von Plessen studied the reports:

The councils had seized power in the big cities, on the Coast, in the west and south. The huge magazines and supply depots of all kinds were in the hands of the revolutionaries and the food supplies and munitions that would last only a few days and were needed by the field armies for their journey back, had already been

repeatedly intercepted, particularly in Cologne and Munich. The border troops had almost all gone over to the revolution and those despatched there by the Command authorities, who had been pointed out as completely reliable troops, were immediately shot through with the evil influences of the homeland. The troops at base were fully contaminated, and the field army showed traces of subversion. Disbanded troops and uncountable numbers of deserters stormed in many thousands onto the railway lines into Liège and Namur. In view of this situation, the planned advance against the homeland was hopeless.<sup>37</sup>

On the afternoon of 8 November General von Linsingen resigned, after his orders to send aircraft to attack the trains bringing mutinous sailors to Berlin were countermanded by war minister General Scheüch. On 31 October Scheüch had consulted the commander of the airforce over the use of aircraft against the revolution, but was advised that it would be impossible for aircraft to distinguish between friend and foe.<sup>38</sup> However, Scheidemann arranged for the cabinet to send Gustav Noske, a fellow executive member of the MSPD, on a mission of parley to Kiel. He proved that his party could take control of the sailors' mutiny but failed to stop the spread of revolution.

The breakdown of authority to this degree was a real prospect. On 8 November, at Spa the Kaiser proposed to put himself at the head of his army, to seize Cologne and the Rhine and reconquer Berlin. At once the High Command summoned fifty officers with front-line experience to general headquarters in Belgium to assess the strength of the Kaiser's following. Of the thirty-nine who arrived, only one officer said his troops would obey the monarch's orders. Fifteen were doubtful and twenty-three said no. Would the army march against bolshevism in their own country? Nineteen said no, eight did not know and twelve said maybe, if their villages, herds or families were attacked.<sup>39</sup> The High Command, on Groener's advice, rejected the Kaiser's proposal. General von Oldershausen gave a situation report on the military transport. After the order had been made to withdraw from Belgium on 4 November:

The most complete networks and largest railway stations and enormous quantities of supplies got lost. Only three or four days' supplies were left on 8 November. If the advance against the revolutionaries on the Rhine went ahead now with strength, there would doubtless be a long pause in the flow. Since the morning of 7 November, stocks were already on the move in enormous quantities. I produced a map at once after my return from Berlin on the 7th on which the progress of the revolution according to the reports of the line commanders could be made known. On the map were indicated spares depots and the sources of army provisions, so that one could clearly recognise the threat. From a glance at the map on 8 November one learnt that the maintenance of continued provisions was only possible if one operated with the revolutionaries through parleys. The use of force would obstruct the Rhine lines for days and must lead to catastrophe for the army.<sup>40</sup>

Mass desertion, mutiny and the dismantling of the army threatened the social structure of the German war economy. The High Command recognised its total vulnerability to this movement. On 7 November it sent Major von Jahreis from Spa to Cologne to assess the strength of the revolution. Two hundred sailors from Kiel had reached Cologne on the previous night and set up an insurrectionary council.<sup>41</sup> Groener used the major's report as the key to the High Command's strategy for the maintenance of its authority without recourse to armed action. The role of the social democrats was seen as central to the avoidance of civil war. Jahreis summarised the situation in his notes:

Movement set on foot by the Rabble. Terror. Opinion of the mass of the population probably for the announcement of government reform but against this kind of movement. In spite of this, the unconditional surrender of almost all the troops and the population, because the people have lost their nerve. Therefore the next outcome is the Rabble. Moderate and independent social democrats unite, after that cleverly and energetically take the Rabble in hand. The weapons of resigning troops collected, individual people from these troops armed again. Security service herewith organised. Complete success. Order restored. New authorities perplexed by administrative affairs. Therefore Danger, Rabble in short time the new power. Remedy: Re-instatement of the old regime impossible. Mass of the troops depraved, won't shoot. Mass of the population against the old regime. Therefore, support all those guaranteeing order in the new authority.

- a) through the former administration's officials.
- b) through military authority maintained by hand picked troops to be used as police in the cities.
- c) supported by citizens' defence groups from the better elements.

Greatest danger: the homewards turning army with officers who've lost the greater part of their authority.

Proclamation: Fight against terror to guarantee the new authority. Attainment of influence through the officers' corps doubtful, therefore soldiers' councils with extensive rights. Immediately. Don't wait until force is engaged!<sup>42</sup>

From this report Groener drew up plans to save the officer corps. On 9 November, the High Command ordered all officers in the west armies to stay at their posts, renounced any intention to unleash a civil war and sought harmony with the new government for calm and security, to spare the homeland from the worst. Weapons could still be used against criminals and plunderers. This order was not to be sent by wireless, to prevent its interception by the revolutionaries. Where soldiers' councils existed, friendly relations should be the objective. The order seemed like a surrender but its purpose was to save the officer corps.

On 10 November, 3,000 soldiers' council delegates assembled at the Busch Circus in Berlin to set up a Berlin executive council for all soldiers'

and workers' councils and to endorse a revolutionary council of Six People's Representatives of the MSPD and USPD under Ebert and Hugo Haase for each party. After the withdrawal of Max von Baden, they headed a depleted cabinet of bourgeois ministers of state, including General Scheüch who stayed on as war minister. On the same day, General Groener ordered all armies to set up 'Soldiers' Councils of Trust', elected jointly by the officers and the rank and file, that could guarantee military discipline. The role of these trustworthy councils was clear. They formed the basis for Groener's secret alliance with Ebert made later that day by phone and renewed daily for the ensuing period. The officer corps should disengage, except in the narrowest sense as appropriate, from all economic and social problems and should uphold the commanding authority of the army over the troops. A Soldiers' Council of Trust was set up at the High Command Headquarters and as its mouthpiece a representative of Admiral Scheer's 'lads' was appointed to organise the distribution of thousands of leaflets calling for the maintenance of order and discipline and the protection of food and supply depots under the officers. Where independent soldiers' councils already existed, trustworthy delegates were to be sent from the officer corps to take control.

On 12 November, the Council of Six restored the power of the officers and replaced their insignia of rank in order to organise the demobilisation at a pace that met the requirements of the employers and to place food supplies under official control.<sup>43</sup> Most seriously for the revolutionaries, the decree gave authority to the officers to use weapons to prevent food plundering. However, no official demobilisation order was issued until 19 November, when the Prussian government decreed that soldiers over twenty-four should be released. A general order did not come through until 31 December, which still retained twenty-year-old conscripts.<sup>44</sup> On 12 November, the Council of Six announced that martial law was lifted. However, in practice it continued to be exercised at the discretion of the officers as the fear of famine spread.

The political line of the High Command, voiced by the Council of Trust at Kassel, was published in a leaflet on 19 November. It sought to consolidate the social democrat government of Ebert and Haase, enthused over its intentions to call a parliamentary assembly and offered the collaboration of the officers in the field army, to allow the construction of the new Reich. The leaflet declared: 'We refuse to allow our victory over the old dictatorship to be misused for the building of a new dictatorship, which must lead to a Russian situation.'<sup>45</sup>

### **Dismantling the army: the soldiers' councils and the crisis in the homeland**

After the first phase of revolution, millions of soldiers proceeded to dismantle the armed services, under the duress of hunger and economic crisis. As the soldiers moved from mutiny to massive self-demobilisation, they faced loss of earnings, rising unemployment and shortages of fuel and food. Malnutrition, disease and the threat of famine were spreading, particularly in the mining regions and in many manufacturing towns. Overall food supplies were down to less than half and in some areas to one-third of pre-war levels as a result of the combined effects of Ludendorff's programme and the food blockade. Rationed supplies contained on average one-eighth of the pre-war levels of protein in the second half of 1918.<sup>46</sup> There was a dramatic increase in deaths among those vulnerable to famine. On average, in the month of October 1918, 6,172 people per day died in Germany, excluding deaths on the battlefields, as compared with an annual daily average of 2,542 deaths in 1913.<sup>47</sup>

Before the MSPD came to power, its executive council warned against using 'Russian methods' of enforced food requisitions to deal with the food shortage.<sup>48</sup> Ebert's government threatened those who plundered food supplies or hindered their transportation. It decreed that officials of the old regime must stay in place, property must be protected and food supplies thus maintained.

Meanwhile the leadership of the council movement was unclear as to its own role. Decrees came each day from the Berlin executive of the councils, to be countermanded after the intervention of the Council of Six. On 10 November a new state was declared by the executive council of the MSPD. However, this announcement was over-ruled on 11 November after Ebert's call to existing state and local officials to stay in office. The Berlin executive then supported this move, believing that it could supervise the actions of the officials of the military state. Complaints followed from soldiers' councils that the new bodies set up by the revolutionaries were being stripped of their powers. On 12 November the Berlin executive limited these powers to single factories or troop formations covering domestic matters.

Simultaneously, to maintain the security of the new state, the Berlin executive called for the formation of a 2,000-strong Red Guard to defend the gains of the councils. General von Scheüch, still in office as war minister, opposed this with an order that action committees to maintain sole military authority be set up independently of both the soldiers' and workers' councils and of the political parties. On 13 November, at a meeting of soldiers' council delegates at the Alexander Guards Regiment,

the Berlin executive annulled the Action Committees but the call for a Red Guard was defeated by delegates from the Council of Trust on the High Command General Staff, on the grounds that soldiers should stay outside of party politics. The Berlin executive suspended its call for a Red Guard.

However, the Council of Six sent out telegrams on 11 and 13 November restoring the military powers and the prestige of the admirals and generals who had lost the war at enormous cost and defied the authority of the political powers to prolong it on 24 and 28 October. Hindenburg moved his headquarters from Spa to Kassel on 14 November and was greeted by Albert Grzesinski of the MSPD, a full-time executive officer of the Metal Workers' Union and the leader of the local soldiers' and workers' council. He declared his loyal patriotism, affirming that Hindenburg belonged to the German people, whose armies he had led to 'shining victories'.

The restored officer corps moved rapidly to fill the vacuum of authority on the streets. Despite the lifting of martial law on 12 November, an estimated eighty-six people were summarily executed in Berlin, Bremen and Hanover for plundering food and other items over the first three days of the Weimar Republic. Sixteen police were killed defending the royal palace where the kitchens were cleared of luxury foods.<sup>49</sup> Conflicts over self-demobilisation and food requisitions between the councils and the new social democrat–military alliance could not be resolved by military means, without the danger of provoking the civil war the High Command was still anxious to avoid. As later inquiries revealed, the striking soldiers had removed not only thousands of tons of food on their march away from the war, but also nearly two million rifles, over 8,000 machine guns and 400 mine throwers.<sup>50</sup> Under such circumstances, resistance by the state to the activities of revolutionary soldiers and sailors before the declaration of the Republic was minimal. The High Command and its civilian subordinates were helpless against seizures of food from army camps and stores, powerless to prevent rebellions against the officers, the occupation of railway stations, public buildings, local and national newspapers, the sackings of mayors, city and state officials, judges and court officials, the freeing of political and military prisoners, train seizures, the loss of control over communications and, most hurtful of all to the honour of the officers corps, the removal of insignia of rank.

### **The soldiers' and workers' councils: power without authority**

At the high point of the revolution, power was in the hands of the soldiers and workers. The MSPD executive in Berlin moved rapidly to provide the leadership they lacked, but with the intention of depriving them of all immediate power. On the morning of 10 November delegates from the soldiers' councils at the Berlin barracks were persuaded by MSPD functionaries to follow the party's policy of calling for parliamentary elections to replace the powers of the councils. Pending a general election, authority was to remain in the hands of the old state functionaries and the High Command of the officers corps. On 11–12 November, the government brought into office by the revolutionary activities of the soldiers and sailors ordered them to re-submit themselves to the authority of their commanders. The unlawful possession of weapons was made punishable by five years in prison on 14 December 1918. No further gains were won for the soldiers from this submission, apart from those political freedoms already conceded by the Kaiser's government in early October 1918 and re-stated on 12 November by the Council of Six as part of a package of trade union and civil rights. Other social reforms were promised after the elections, which were still months ahead.

The surrender of popular authority was not clear to the soldiers' councils at local level. A severe test of their autonomy came from Bremen within a day of the disciplinary order of 12 November. A group calling itself the 'Bremen Flying Division' was involved in small arms fighting at Hanover railway station after it had executed three sailors and arrested thirty-four others who had been scouring the district for food supplies. A food retrievals expedition of 150 sailors was sent back to Bremen, where the press reported that twenty were subsequently executed under martial law. The authorisation for these killings was, according to Paul Fröhlich, leader of the Hamburg sailors,<sup>51</sup> the responsibility of Robert Leinert, MSPD chairman of the Hanover soldiers' council and later chairman of the First National Conference of Soldiers' and Workers' Councils. However, the Bremen soldiers' council later reported that the 'Flying Division' was a group attempting a putsch in Hanover on its own account.<sup>52</sup> The *Berliner Tageblatt* protested strongly against the arbitrariness of these executions that were made possible by the reaffirmation of martial law as a means to resolve disputes over food supplies.

The re-imposition of the powers of the army officers in this respect, and the re-instatement of mayors and other civic officials, marked an immediate attack by the social democrats on the revolutionary councils.<sup>53</sup> Both wings of social democracy were agreed at this stage on the need to

subordinate the councils, despite the sympathy they received from within the ranks of the USPD. It was argued that without the efficiency of the officers and the state bureaucracy the smooth demobilisation of the army and the feeding of the people would be impossible.<sup>54</sup> However, the councils already had both tasks well in hand. The mass demobilisation of the army and the retrieval of its food supplies and of other hidden stocks were organised by the soldiers in disregard of the decrees of the MSPD and without the joint authority of the officers and the state officials who deferred to them.

The real motivation for the measures taken by the MSPD leadership lay in its fear of the revolutionary threat from below, which they feared would open the door to bolshevism. Paradoxically, the vast majority of council activists were social democrats and the MSPD's traditional leadership over the working class made them the first choice for leadership of the councils. The party built on the loyalty of its followers to restore the lost authority of the officer corps. In so doing, however, the MSPD made inevitable the civil war that was to follow.

Many soldiers' councils objected at once to the restrictions on their revolutionary powers. Councils in Leipzig, Chemnitz, Dresden, Kiel and Bremen protested, on 14–17 November, that the restoration of the authority of the officers would lead to bitterness and unrest, not to improved efficiency and law and order.<sup>55</sup> In Leipzig the move was seen as the beginning of a counter-revolutionary tendency.

After the executions in Hanover and Bremen, many returning soldiers who had organised food retrievals ignored the councils as centres for food re-distribution. Others became angry at the return to officer control and fought to prevent it, or expelled the middle-class party representatives who attempted to dominate the councils from within. Thus the soldiers on the council at Stargard in Pomerania, on receiving the news that the officers were mobilising soldiers returning from the front to attack their council, boarded the troop trains and persuaded them to boycott the mayor's official reception. When a later attempt was made to retake the base, the soldiers' council set up machine guns around the station and successfully kept it at bay.<sup>56</sup> This base was led by Wilhelm Necker, newly recruited by the USPD. A campaign of public lies alleging corruption and bolshevik depravity preceded the failed attack.

In some cities, the middle classes moved into the soldiers' and workers' councils with the intention of immobilising them. In Bonn, middle-class parties were given parity on the soldiers' and workers' councils with the MSPD. In Greifswald, the head of the police and the local battalion commander were put at the head of the councils. In Dessau and in the smaller towns in Saxony, Hesse, Thuringia, Mecklenburg, Pomerania,

Westphalia and East Prussia, local company directors sat on the councils. Where this tactic failed, right-wing newspapers urged the middle classes to set up citizens' councils to oppose the soldiers and workers. In Leverkusen, a centre of the chemical industry, a detachment of bourgeois delegates including Carl Duisberg, the director of Bayer, infiltrated the council of soldiers and workers.<sup>57</sup>

Both the middle classes and the social democrats preferred to tackle hunger through the semi-controlled market arrangements of the Reich Food Office, headed by Emanuel Wurm, the new USPD minister of food, who was denied the dictatorial powers he required. The revolutionary council at Kovno urged the soldiers to by-pass the old state machinery and to take control of the operation to retrieve the food stocks of the armies of the western front. On 16 November, Kovno sent a message to all soldiers' councils urging restraint in the use of trains for self-demobilisation, as the prior task was to retrieve the army's enormous foodstocks in the west to prevent a disastrous famine.<sup>58</sup>

However, growing hostility to the councils in the press and from the social democrat–military alliance caused many returning soldiers to act independently of the councils, rushing homewards without waiting for demobilisation papers and on the way selling and directly distributing commandeered food stocks at the railway stations or in the city centres. News reports from as far apart as Belgium, Bochum and Reichenhall described German and Austrian soldiers selling flour, sugar, coffee, rice, dried fruit, cigarettes, clothing, sheepskin, cows, sheep, horses, goats, footwear and weapons, mostly at bargain prices. The press described events in Reichenhall as 'hamstering' (hoarding) on a grand scale, a wartime practice for city dwellers, who had descended in hundreds upon farms and villages buying, bartering or scrounging food. These informal methods circumvented both rationing and the more exploitative aspects of the black market, which nevertheless also flourished in the wealthier quarters. French intelligence agents reported in early January 1919:

Immense stocks of all sorts in the army magazines have become the loot of the soldiers. The latter are to be seen in all the large towns of Germany as well as Berlin selling cocoa, tea, flour and potatoes which are punctually delivered – life in Germany tolerable because hidden stocks are coming to light without difficulty.<sup>59</sup>

The speed of the demobilisation process, and the resulting fall in the army's demand for meat, enabled German butchers from the beginning of February 1919 to increase the weekly meat ration by 100 grams and to continue the wartime extra allowance for heavy industrial workers.<sup>60</sup> However, these changes in the pattern of activities of the soldiers' movement after 10 November did not represent real progress towards their revolutionary objectives of removing the powers of the old state. In fact

they marked a retreat before the MSPD's determination to protect that power.

The revolutionary left was in a very weak position in resisting the attack on the councils. At the very peak of the revolution in November the Spartacists had a mere fifty members in Berlin.<sup>61</sup> Lacking an independent organisation and having no clear forward plans, the revolutionaries in the soldiers' councils simply began to demobilise themselves by hastily dismantling the bulk of the armed services. Groener wrote to Ebert on 14 December 1918 complaining of the helplessness of the High Command: 'If the authority of the state is not restored, the whole army must disintegrate. The soldiers' councils must disappear.'<sup>62</sup>

The MSPD struggled to prevent the disintegration of the state. Ebert tried to mobilise the many regiments of front soldiers still returning from the battlefields against their own councils. Civic receptions on the Stargard pattern were arranged in Berlin, but the soldiers, despite their adherence to discipline during their march home, simply dispersed themselves on arrival without awaiting orders or passes of release.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, their return in an orderly fashion enabled a powerful militaristic myth to be created that aimed to discredit the revolution. Ebert's speech to home-coming soldiers in Berlin on 10 December disregarded the role of the councils in the revolution and praised the army's undefeated glory.<sup>64</sup> Force was used against the revolutionaries by nationalist officers who arrested the Berlin executive of the councils on 6 December, but unarmed protesters freed them. The same officers then murdered fourteen demonstrators, thus stoking the fires of civil war. Within ten days of this attempted putsch, workers were murdered by security patrols in Dresden, Gladbeck and Essen.

From January 1919 to March 1920, the MSPD, fortified by its success in the election for a National Assembly on 19 January,<sup>65</sup> gave Noske, its new minister of war a free hand to unleash Maercker's *Freikorps* on the councils and their followers. The High Command was now armed for the civil war it had dreaded in November. Two days after the election Groener complained to the cabinet that the army in the west had vanished and only 130,000 men remained in the east. With the disappearance of the army had gone the strength of the soldiers' movement, which was now dispersed and disorganised; its activists were confused by the attacks on them from the social democratic leadership, despite the votes most of them had given to Ebert. Bloody repression followed against those left-dominated councils that resisted take-over and dissolution in Bremen, Munich, Halle, Brunswick, Leipzig and Hamburg. Those that survived in central Germany and the Ruhr as strike committees, or which supported workers resisting low wages, long hours and hunger, were also violently

suppressed. Greater Berlin, with its population of 3.9 million and 30,000 deserters was under military law from 3 March to 5 December 1919. A general strike broke out on 5 March, food shops were attacked and five police died quelling food riots. At once, *Freikorps* armoured cars and artillery, supported by aircraft grounded the previous November, attacked the working-class districts of eastern Berlin, at a cost of between 1,500 and 3,000 lives. Some remnants of the soldiers' movement in the republican army defended the area, but were overwhelmed by Germany's 'real soldiers' revived by Noske.<sup>66</sup> Estimated deaths in this one-sided civil war were put at 15,000 throughout Germany.<sup>67</sup> Paul Fröhlich, in his diary of events over the period from December 1918 to the Kapp putsch of 1920, recorded forty-six bloodbaths and massacres perpetrated by armed soldiers against workers. There were seventeen states of siege, and twelve hunger riots in districts where rebels were deliberately starved of food. There were also some 5,000 strikes in 1919, including those of bank officials and office workers.<sup>68</sup>

The final wave of the soldiers' movement confronted generals and right-wing nationalists who staged the Kapp putsch in March 1920. They brought it down within a week by general strikes and armed resistance.<sup>69</sup> However, the putschists avenged the earlier defeat of the officer corps when General von Watter's *Freikorps* of 120,000 non-commissioned officers and right-wing students invaded the Ruhr and for months waged bloody terror against the striking communities. President Ebert gave the army's new commander, General von Seeckt, power of courts martial against trade union activists and other rebels in the Ruhr. The massacres were followed by the re-building of the regular army, which also recruited groups of the *Freikorps*. The defeat in the Ruhr marked the end of the servicemen's revolt, though its immobilisation had begun when political authority was handed to the MSPD and the USPD at the Busch Circus on 10 November 1918.

The communities of the soldiers in revolt and in self-demobilisation were transient. On 18 November 1918, recognising their own lack of control, the state authorities gave authority to the soldiers' councils to issue discharge papers, pay travelling allowances out of local government funds, and to find accommodation and priority travel on the railways, in order to accelerate the demobilisation process. In a move initiated by Haase, wholesale amnesty was granted to deserters.<sup>70</sup>

By rapidly re-integrating soldiers and sailors into civilian life, Germany's rulers were following a policy described by the commander of the naval base at Kiel as 'letting off as much steam as possible from the now overheated, seething boiler'.<sup>71</sup>

The steam did not evaporate; nor did the revolutionary crisis vaporise. The employers were not ready to buy social and industrial peace at any price. Some employers, in particular the coal owners, encouraged by the direct attacks on the councils by the High Command, staged counter-attacks against the revolution and demanded longer hours than undernourished workers were prepared to give. The mining companies sparked off waves of strikes that were put down with force by the newly restored military authorities.<sup>72</sup> Following the bloody suppression in January 1919 of the Liebknecht uprising in Berlin, itself partly provoked by the decision of the MSPD to refuse demobilisation to soldiers aged twenty and under,<sup>73</sup> unemployed workers and other protesting marchers were shot down in Munich, Hamburg, Dresden, Stuttgart, Nuremberg, Bremen, Buer and Wilhelmshaven.

The communities of five million ex-servicemen, brought together in their massive rush to dismantle the authority of their leaders, continued as working-class communities based not on the nationalist myth of the front soldier, but on the solidarity of the strike, in or out of uniform. They grew hostile to the Weimar Republic and to the MSPD, the party that procured their defeat. In the June 1920 election, after their punishment by General von Watter for having struck and fought to save social democracy from the Kapp putsch, five and a half million voters deserted the MSPD, the political partner in the military alliance that had defeated the revolution. Most went over to the left-wing parties.

### **Conclusion: from failed revolution to nazism**

The conditions for revolution are not one-sided. A trial of strength between the mass of people who no longer wish to endure the old system of authority is matched against those in power who can no longer continue to exercise it. Power and authority throughout the German Empire during the First World War required absolute obedience to the orders of the High Command, at work and in the services. Once the soldiers refused to obey instructions and the officers failed to carry them through, the war aims of the ruling class became unattainable. Despite a fighting retreat from August to October 1918 by remnants of the army in France and Belgium, the generals knew the war was lost after 8 August 1918. In turning to the social democrats to secure the peace, the High Command was forced to surrender its power of command to the soldiers' councils, in the hope that the MSPD would bring them into line with the nationalist interest and restore control to the officers. After the servicemen's revolt, however, the social democrats could no longer deliver obedient and loyal workers to the rulers of the defeated Republic. The exodus of the revol-

utionaries to the USPD and the KPD in the elections of 1920–24, caused Ludendorff and his industrialist allies to search for a new force through which to impose their authority, and to undermine that of the social democrats who had rescued the generals from political oblivion in November 1918. They found it eventually in the Nazi Party. Tragically, millions of Germans who had witnessed the MSPD's betrayal of the servicemen's anti-war movement and who later felt betrayed during the great inflation of 1923, came to believe in the myth of an undefeated army.<sup>74</sup>

Few gave credence to such ideas at the peak of the revolution. The Berlin newspaper, *Die Welt am Montag* reported that a thousand nationalists rallied in Berlin on 4 November 1918, shouting 'Down with the Jews, long live Ludendorff!' Several hundred soldiers and workers singing the Internationale and crying 'Long live Liebknecht!' dispersed them without force. Within nine weeks, however, the same racists and nationalists were applauding the murders of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, lynched by guard officers after the formation of the *Freikorps* that Groener wished had been available to crush the revolt in August 1918.