

A People's History of the German Revolution

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1918–19

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Foreword by Mario Kessler

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Contents

<i>Foreword by Mario Kessler</i>	vii
<i>Introduction: What German Revolution?</i>	xiv
1. Industrialization and the Emergence of the German Working Class	1
2. The Rise of Popular Radicalism	12
3. War, Suffering and Resistance	24
4. The Road to the November Revolution	41
5. The Kaiser Goes, the Generals Remain	57
6. Provocation, Revolt and Repression	73
7. Women in the War and the Revolution	88
8. Death Agony of the Revolution	102
Conclusion	115
<i>Notes</i>	120
<i>Index</i>	149

I

Industrialization and the Emergence of the German Working Class

For centuries, “Germany” was little more than a vague geographical expression for any number of distinct, and often mutually hostile, petty states in central Europe. These countries may have all spoken one variations of German but were typically satellites orbiting around greater empires. To the west, German territories, like the Rhineland, looked to France and incorporated aspects of the greater nation’s culture from everyday expressions to wine. The city of Hamburg was a trading partner of Great Britain and so looked to the north for both commerce and culture. Bavaria shared her Catholic faith and much of her foreign policy with the Austrian Empire while the Northeastern kingdom of Prussia had a King who was the vassal of the Russian Czar.

Well into the nineteenth century, most of these people identified with whichever regional entity they were born to; they thought of themselves as Saxons, Hessians, Bavarians, or Prussians rather than as Germans. As mentioned above, the German language varied greatly in practice, the basic root language was everywhere modified, often with a bewildering assortment of local slang and manifold pronunciation. Even in the twenty-first century, one may purchase Austrian-German phrasebooks that, if sold largely in jest, fittingly show how variant “German” can be.

In 1871, a German nation-state was created with the unification of German-speaking lands, though this still excluded Austria and German portions of Switzerland. Historians often credit Prussian leader Otto von Bismarck for cleverly engineering this unification; but this was only possible as a result of a series of historical developments. A growing class of capitalists clamored for the economic advantages unification would bring. As Capitalism emerged in numerous German states, it transformed masses of urban plebeians and erstwhile peasants into a class that could only survive by selling its labor power, that is, a working class. At

the same time, the structures and institutions left from feudalism most notably the guild system—rotted, later to be swept away forever. While freed from the old feudal fetters, the common people also lost many protections they had grown to depend on: extensive church charity, freedom to collect wood from the common lands, guilds that ensured that at least some artisans could make a good living.

This transformation was uneven and occurred within specific historical confines. Germany, unlike England or France, lacked the experience of a unified feudal nation-state. The division of the German populace into many petty and not so petty principalities meant that the rising middle class or bourgeoisie, as the French would say, struggled for both national unity and the overthrow of feudal productive relationships. This was a mighty task, which the good burghers proved totally incapable of achieving. Their failure left more room for common people lower in the social hierarchy while paradoxically giving the old feudal lords a chance to reinvent themselves as nationalists.

In 1830, the German bourgeoisie led the masses in an attempt to forge a nation-state that would serve their material interests. Unlike their French and English counterparts, the capitalists of Germany were still living in societies abounding in feudal privileges, rights and restrictions. The German bourgeoisie was relatively poor and dispersed by the standards of their neighbors to the West—a situation that put would-be revolutionaries at a distinct disadvantage. Moreover, the separation of the nation into numerous states combined with an unfortunate geographic position, which limited opportunities for Atlantic trade, left the bourgeoisie unable to establish industrial and commercial centers comparable to Lyons, Paris, Manchester or London.

Thus, even though the economic growth of Germany proceeded almost without interruption after 1815, the middle class suffered from its inability to conquer the political supremacy so necessary for its expansion. Of course, the governments of Germany were aware of the contribution the capitalists made to their kingdoms and therefore granted some reforms like the Prussian Tariff of 1818. In fact, a pattern emerged during the struggle between feudal lord and capitalist, which the radical Frederick Engels concisely summed up: “Every political defeat of the middle class drew after it a victory on the field of commercial legislation.”¹ Though common people often lived through the same social change and economic growth, they shared unequally in the rewards.

This situation continued from 1830 to 1848, by which time capitalism had grown to sufficient strength that it could no longer sit idly and watch its most important interests hampered by all manner of feudal fetters. At the same time, the common people compared their lot unfavorably with that of the French and of the British. As is so often, the spark that ignited the situation came from abroad. On February 24, 1848, the Parisian masses drove King Louis Philippe out of town, abolished the monarchy and proclaimed a republic.

Within a few weeks, on March 13, Vienna erupted as well, breaking the power of their old regime. This event was quickly imitated in Berlin where an uprising broke out on March 18. In the capitals of the smaller German states similar revolts took place. Although details varied from place to place, the middle-class parties in all the states argued for national unity, constitutional rule and other reforms of a democratic nature. In each German state these revolts were suppressed and the revolution was finally crushed by the end of 1849.

The role of the common people in the drama of 1848–9 remains a matter of great controversy. This results in part from a lack of reliable sources from that time period. In fact, the lack of clear indications of the thoughts and feelings of common people who did not leave the numerous written records of the elites plagued those who seek to write people's history. In any event, the debacle of 1848–9 postponed the unification of Germany and thus allowed the continuation of regionalism.

With the ultimate unification of Germany at the end of the Franco-Prussian War up until the outbreak of World War I, a politically unified nation-state quickly transformed itself into a major industrial power. This rapid technological change created a large and increasingly restless working class. That this new class was created in less than half a century, as opposed to the much longer transition in Great Britain, meant that German society became more polarized than other nations.

To explore these developments, a discussion is needed about the objective conditions of German labor in terms of living standards, lifestyle and so on. This assessment of objective conditions will be balanced through consideration of subjective narratives, that is, voices of workers who lived in that historical period. This examination will not limit itself to the stereotypical male industrial worker. Rather, it will survey male and female and all those workers who lived from labor rather than property, regardless of the trade.²

Many of the problems German workers faced a century and more ago do not sound so remote or different to those that workers face today. One of the glaring omissions many make is to overlook the number of individuals working in the service industry. In an era before the almost countless mechanical devices that simplify everyday tasks, the better-off relied on servants to provide comfort in the form of meals, serving coffee, cleaning clothing and so on. These jobs were different from those in the factory or the mining pit but not necessarily better.

Doris Viersbeck, a cook and housemaid in Hamburg in the last decades of Imperial Germany, has detailed the systematic abuse she was subjected to in many wealthy homes. Although she had to rise at 6 a.m. every morning, Doris was repeatedly awoken in the middle of the night to prepare fresh coffee for her insomniac master. Cursed, threatened and bullied by employers, despite working in what may have appeared a welcome alternative to factory labor, she describes a hellish situation. In her autobiography, she pleads, "I just wanted to be treated like a human being."³

The resentment felt among women "in service" sometimes expressed itself in peculiar ways. Responding to questions from a pastor in 1909, a woman we know only as "Frau Hoffmann" put forth an unusual theory on the difference between the rich and servants. "There are a lot more pretty faces among the servants than in the upper classes," this retired maid argued, because the "upper classes don't get out in the air enough and they don't eat everything. Many of them have clumpy faces. Some have a nose like a fist."⁴

Another woman, whose name we don't know, went to work packing shoes in a factory where she found a co-worker who was pregnant with the unacknowledged child of a higher factory functionary. The man now rejecting his former lover, "was looking for another victim for his lust; his eyes fell on me, but he didn't have much luck because I bluntly brushed him off."⁵ As a result, she was fired and back on the streets looking for work.

Although it was difficult to organize female factory workers, it was far from impossible. While more conservative male workers confidently predicted that women would never become an important part of the work force, history has proven them wrong. Women remained neither completely marginal nor impossible to organize as the rapid expansion

of female trade unions from under seven thousand in 1895 to over a million in 1919 shows.⁶

Returning to our example of the discharged woman above, she later decided to become a barmaid only to find that she was subject routinely to sexual harassment from male customers. "Often I cried bitterly after the customers were all gone because I had to put up with so much ... [many asked] 'where do you live? Can I come and visit you?' And then they would try to kiss me or otherwise fondle me."⁷ That her situation was far from unique among barmaids was of scant comfort.

The objection could be made that these accounts mainly came from women members of, or at least sympathetic to, German socialism. Yet, the culture of sexual predation that proletarian females suffered at the hands of the upper class is documented by middle-class, religious and anti-socialist sources. A social reformer and early bourgeois feminist, Minna Wettstein-Adelt spent three and a half months working in four different factories in Chemnitz, Saxony. She was shocked to find that working-class accusations against men of her class were justified.

The middle-class reformer noted the fanatical hatred of "ink wipers" as the factory women dubbed clerks and businessmen working in offices. As one 30-year-old woman told her, a proper factory girl "does not associate with any damned ink licker ... better the direst, blackest worker than such a vile loafer and toady!" Working beside such women, Wettstein-Adelt came to share "their sentiments wholeheartedly." It is young businessmen who "if a working girl refuses to give herself willingly to them, they use intrigue, slanderous remarks to the director, malicious suppression and harassment." The conservative female author then sighs that this pushes working women into the arms of Social Democracy since these men treat the "girls better, more politely and more humanely than others."⁸ Of note is the fact that the Social Democrats were also among the earliest advocates of the legalization of homosexuality.⁹

It would be mistaken to think that unsolicited sexual advances were only a female problem. Male food servers experienced this sort of unwanted sexual harassment as well. Franz Bergg, a waiter at an expensive restaurant and casino near Danzig at the end of the nineteenth century, recalls the "not infrequent" instances of sexual stalking of waiters by "men who in their public life held important offices and were considered pillars of religion and morality."¹⁰ Moreover, he repeatedly

speaks of the hunger of waiters while they were serving copious amounts of fine food to the rich since “we weren’t given at all enough to eat.”¹¹ Of course, they were punished if caught eating the scraps left over by their well-fed customers.

Perhaps more surprising is the burning resentment Bergg felt for the system of tipping. His bitter complaint is worth quoting at length:

We’d actually sold ourselves, sold ourselves for tips! Oh, this custom! This jingling invitation to humiliation and subjection that suppresses a free humanity! It seduces the giver into arrogance and misanthropy; and it robs the receiver of the last vestiges of human dignity. Tips are not really wages for work performed; they are compensations for special services. First you have to show yourself worthy of this dog’s pay. We tried to do so by running, bowing, and fawning and with a thousand little attentions of look, manner and gesture.¹²

Still, the often-hungry wait staff had no choice but to swallow their pride along with whatever scraps they could pilfer and behave as expected.

It was little better among rural farm workers. While many farm owners lived a comfortable life, this was rarely true for the large number of landless workers who were forced to work for them. Franz Rehbein, a farm worker in Pomerania until he lost a hand in a threshing machine in 1895, paints a sad portrait of the lot of farm workers after harvest:

None of the farmers had anything for us day laborers to do ... With pent-up rage you see the prosperous farmers driving to their visits and amusements, unconcerned about the increasing misery of the day laborers ... There you sit, a wretch who would gladly work; but the people for whom you’ve worked yourself to death for low wages in the summer are now shrugging their broad shoulders indifferently.¹³

Fritz Pauk grew up in a village that was deeply conservative. Social Democracy or any sort of radicalism was constantly attacked and turned into a monster to scare children. In fact, when he and his friends misbehaved as children, an aunt would say, “The Social Democrats are coming!” and the kids “ran away like rabbits.”¹⁴ Pauk later became less frightened of this particular ghost over time as life dealt him reasons to

be less supportive of the status quo. At the age of ten, he worked for a farmer whose mistreatment cost him a foot.

He relates how around 1898–9, the winter came and “I froze in my ragged clothes. I didn’t have any decent socks anymore. All I had was a crummy pair of shoes given to me by one of the farmhands . . . Then one day my left foot got badly swollen . . . I couldn’t walk and had to stay in bed.”¹⁵ After four weeks, the farmer, at last, called a doctor and Fritz’s foot had to be amputated. This limited the boy’s future employment prospects and “for a long time my heart broke when I watched my chums playing, without being able to join in.”¹⁶

Of course, having access to such narrative accounts is not the norm as few workers achieved the education needed to document them. Nonetheless, there is statistical evidence that suggests that the physical markings of class were not unique occurrences. Gottlieb Schnapper-Arndt was related to the Frankfurt branch of the Rothschild family and did not have to work for a living, nevertheless he became curious as to the condition of the common people. Among his other various scholarly studies, Schnapper-Arndt studied military draft records for a period of five years in the latter part of the nineteenth century. From this evidence, he discovered 62.3 percent of all males were rejected as unfit due to “general body weakness, hernia, varicose veins . . . and other deformities.”¹⁷

In the years before World War I, the life expectancy of average German citizens was roughly half of what it would become by the twenty-first century. In the first decade after German unification in 1871, a female at birth could look forward to only an average of 38.5 years while boy babies could expect even less with an average of 35.6 years. By 1914 this rose to 51 years for a girl baby at birth and 47 years for their male counterpart.¹⁸ During this same period, the average working week fell from 72 hours (with mainly 12-hour days) to a 54–60 hour working week (with 10-hour days).¹⁹

German common people felt alienated mainly in reaction to their own exploitation but also in reaction to the exploitation they witnessed of others. The injustice of the society towards others often caused revulsion. Otto Krille, later a factory worker in Dresden, recalled his short-lived career as a scribe in a real estate office. The work seemed easy and the owners regularly gave him a glass of wine. He soon realized that the freely flowing wine “was only there to put the buyer in a good

mood for the fleeing.” The worst assignment for the young Krille was when he was dispatched to collect rent from a widow who had a little grocery store. “I quickly saw that she was very badly off, and when she made promises with tears in her eyes, I returned to the office empty-handed.” He was sent back with a more seasoned colleague who had her serve them wine and made promises to help with the boss. A few weeks later, they closed the widow’s store.²⁰

Soon the real estate office also closed amid an economic downturn and Krille was out of work. He sought out employment at a textile factory, the first of many industrial jobs. His life experience had taught him a different lesson than that of the church or army. “The fate of an entire class of people was soon frighteningly clear to me,” Otto Krille remembered, “Day after day, week after week, year after year, always this monotonous life with no variety. For centuries, thousands of lives had just been unwinding, like the threads on my machine.”²¹

Nor was this the perception of workers alone. Krille’s dire picture of industrial life was validated by the famous social scientist, Max Weber. The scholar, who was in no sense a radical, described the modern German factory as functioning with “hierarchic authority structure, its discipline, its chaining of men to machines, its spatial aggregation and yet isolation of the workers ... its formidable accounting system that reaches down to the simplest hand movement of the worker.”²² Naturally, there were important differences even within any given work place as more highly skilled workers had better wages and conditions. These better-off workers were often considered a “labor aristocracy.”²³

In fact, the German common people were always as complicated and contradictory as one would expect. One historian who examined Hamburg police informer reports that began in 1892 revealed workers were neither helpless victims nor heroic rebels but rather extremely complex individuals. They liked to gamble and could sometimes justify dishonesty by unfair treatment by their superiors. Interestingly, class identification was fundamental to them and they had a distinct suspicion of those in higher socio-economic classes. Of course, the truth of police agents is always to be suspected and their eavesdropping was limited to male workers in taverns.²⁴

If work life was scarcely a pleasure for most, neither was home life. Rural conditions had always been hard except for the better off, urban living proved to be little softer. Even if wages slowly rose in the latter

part of the nineteenth century, urban housing was to remain tight. Crowded and expensive, working-class families were shoe-horned into tiny, typically depressing flats. Towns over 5,000 inhabitants witnessed over 70 percent of all apartments having three or less rooms in 1910. Berlin, the German capital, was even worse with perhaps as many as three out of every ten residents living five or more people to a room.²⁵ A female investigator in 1913 found that Berliners not uncommonly had a home that consisted of “A living room and tiny kitchen; with two adults and three children, that means that everyone sleeps in the same room, all three children in one bed.”²⁶

In 1891, a Christian organization, known as the Evangelical Workers’ Association of Hamburg and Karlsruhe, reported on the condition of the average workers’ housing. “The landlord supplies only the essential materials and the worker then repairs the defects, without any compensation,” a report from Hamburg noted; “as a rule, two families use one toilet, in some cases four to five families have to make do with one.”²⁷ In these flats, another report from Karlsruhe commented, there is little decoration beyond some landscape art reproductions and “quite often a portrait of Lassalle [an early German Socialist leader] or [Karl] Marx, but also the first German Emperor ... [among more religious workers] pictures of saints in Catholic households—Luther portraits among Protestants.”²⁸

Significantly, by this period, over 99 percent of Germans were classified as literate by the government.²⁹ This gave commoners easy access to the radical ideas spread by socialist newspapers and booklets. Still, such miserable housing drove men to drink, women to despair and most everyone to anger. It meant that couples often found normal sexual relations difficult, if not impossible.³⁰ All this combined with unsatisfactory, sometimes horrific, work lives meant many families became dysfunctional with domestic violence, child neglect and all the familiar urban disorders one would suspect. The average people in Imperial Germany also changed jobs with frequency in hopes of finding a kinder boss or higher wages. In some instances this helped, usually it did not.

Sometimes they gave up completely on the industrializing Kaiser’s realm and left their country for good. Overseas emigration, largely to the western hemisphere, was 626,000 for the period 1871–80, while the following decade of the anti-socialist laws saw 1,342,400 individuals bidding good bye to the land of their birth. In 1891–1900, 529,000

Germans called it quits on the fatherland followed by another 279,600 emigrating in the next ten years.³¹

For others, the choice was a type of internal emigration through beer and schnapps. In Germany, the cult of sobriety was never as pervasive as in English speaking societies. This did not suggest constant intoxication, rather it was seen as one of the good things in an otherwise difficult life.³² It was an outlet for all the many frustrations that average Germans faced. One scholar went so far as to contend that “alcohol was one of the indispensable foundations of the modern social order. Without it, contemporary social and political conditions would long since have become intolerable.”³³

Another reaction to the misery of life in Imperial Germany was to engage in petty theft. The idea of getting some of “their own back” by pilfering goods was widespread. In Hamburg, as employers ignored trade union warnings that only a living wage would prevent stealing, the docks became the source of an unofficial, and unlawful, wage supplement for many poorly paid laborers. According to Hamburg police records, the number of goods in transit that were illegally expropriated by dock workers soared from 906 in 1900 to 3,217 in 1913.³⁴ This is doubtlessly a severe undercount, as it does not include thefts from railroads or other means of transport. Nor would it include small amounts of food that workers ate immediately and may never have been reported.

This slide into illegality was in no way unique to Hamburg or dockworkers since crime against property was more closely related to poverty than poor morals. In a study looking at the connection between rye prices (rye was an important part of the German diet) and crimes against property in Bavaria, largely Catholic in the south, researchers found a correlation. The higher rye prices went, the more crimes against property rose.³⁵ A few years later, a follow up study looking at the German provinces of Prussia, largely Protestant in the north, employed this same methodology of looking at grain prices and crime rates. The result was that based on the “data for the years 1882–1910, we find a significantly positive effect of poverty on property crime.”³⁶ In other words, neither confessional belief nor region changed the relation between poverty and property crimes.

In the decades before World War I, the German common people lived, loved, had children (legitimate or not), formed friendships and engaged in social activity. Most were straight, many were gay. Some

women remained passive but many became active and resisted the old male-dominated system. They were typical humans living their lives in a myriad of ways. Some were avid revolutionaries; most were looking forward to the hope of a gradual improvement of their conditions. They were diverse in any number of ways: gender, region, religion and occupation. What they had in common, increasingly, was a shared hatred for the capitalist system in which they labored. This would result in an explosion during the pressure cooker of world war. Some must have known the verse by German poet Goethe:

You must conquer and rule
Or serve and lose,
Suffer or triumph,
Be the anvil or the hammer.³⁷

Increasingly, common people decided they would rather be the hammer.