

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN POWER:  
REVOLUTIONARY GERMANY, NOVEMBER 1918 -  
JANUARY 1919

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by  
Andrew M. Lippert

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Thesis Approvals:

Jay Lockenour, Master's Thesis Advisor, Associate Professor of History

Temple University

Rita Krueger, Master's Thesis Reader, Associate Professor of History

Temple University

## ABSTRACT

Few historical works focus on the period of German history immediately following World War I. Fewer still inquire about how the Majority Social Democratic Party (MSPD) regime exercised power. This paper looks at the rhetoric in the MSPD's party organ *Vorwärts* to understand how they presented themselves to the German people following the collapse of the Imperial regime. The official party organ provides unique insight into how the MSPD regime transitioned from a party in opposition to leading the provisional government and how it justified holding that power. The official party newspaper of the radical *Spartakusbund* coupled with the conservative *Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* provide a context to further understand the rhetoric of the MSPD and how the opponents of the majority socialist regime responded to the interim government. The MSPD was in a difficult position after the collapse of the Imperial regime, which was exacerbated by a hostile rhetorical environment. Upon assuming power, the MSPD was hesitant and defensive but grew into their position of leadership, winning the largest portion of votes in the January 19th election of 1919 as well as the early elections of the Weimar republic.

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## INTRODUCTION

The scholarship of the period immediately following World War I in Germany largely avoids or ignores the interim Majority Socialist Part of Germany (MSPD – *Mehrheits Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) government. The legitimacy of the new socialist government following the abdication of the Kaiser and collapse of the Imperial system is generally overlooked. Instead, the focus has overwhelmingly been on the right wing extremism that culminated with Nazism. Events such as the creation of the *Freikorps*, the Kapp and Beer Hall putsches, the failure of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism have taken the spotlight. However, these pivotal moments in German history have their foundations set in the revolutionary months of late 1918 and early 1919.

The rhetoric of the majority socialist government reflects the context of their ascension to power. The MSPD, represented by its official party organ *Vorwärts*, functioned in a reactionary way once power fell to them. In November 1918 the interim government was tentative, hesitant to exercise power and took a defensive position as it was criticized and attacked in the press. The rhetorical environment in the wake of the war and the collapse of the Imperial government was tense, and at times hostile. In December 1918 the national assembly and electoral campaign created conditions that allowed the MSPD to be more comfortable and confident in power; in contrast to governing a fractured nation, electoral politics was familiar ground. The Spartacist uprising in January 1919 once again forced the interim socialist government to react to the situation, causing the leadership to take extreme measures to squash the revolutionary

opposition and quell the rebellion. The actions and rhetoric of the interim majority socialist regime reveal a party governing with a defensive stance after being thrust into power that quickly develops into a confident and capable governing power. The first three months of the revolution reveal a party desperately holding on to the power that was unexpectedly thrust upon them.

The issue of legitimacy and deployment of power was a crucial point for the fledgling social-democratic government. After a protracted history of non-democratic governance, how did a new and untested regime exert its power? How did the MSPD take control of government and garner legitimacy and authority to govern in a democratic fashion? How did they present themselves to the people and convince them to consent to this new system of government? The rhetoric presented in the official party organ, *Vorwärts*, provides a basis for understanding the actions of Ebert, Scheidemann, and the majority socialist leadership. Similarly, consideration of the rhetoric in *Die Rote Fahne*, the party organ of the revolutionary Spartacus League (*Spartakusbund*) and later Communist Party of Germany (KPD - *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*), as well as the conservative *Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* will provide a context within which to place the analysis of *Vorwärts*.

The official organ of the Social Democratic Party of Germany was founded in 1891 but circulation did not reach significant numbers until after the turn of the century. In 1902 print runs of *Vorwärts* amounted to 56,000 editions, this number quickly doubled to 112,000 in 1906, it increased by fifty percent to 165,000 in 1912.<sup>1</sup> Distribution of *Vorwärts* reached more than 300,000 for both the morning and evening editions at the

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<sup>1</sup> Schulze, Volker. "Vorwärts, Leipzig/Berlin (1881 - 1933)." *Deutsche Zeitungen des 17. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*. Ed. Heinz-Dietrich Fischer. Verlag Dokumentation: Pullach bei München, 1972. p337.

time of the German revolution in November 1918.<sup>2</sup> The post-war population of Berlin was just under two million,<sup>3</sup> meaning a readership of 300,000 constituted approximately 16-17% of the population of Berlin. Figures from the early Weimar republic place circulation of *Die Rote Fahne* at 30,000 in 1920.<sup>4</sup>

The predominance of World War II has pushed many elements of German history to the sidelines in favor of the more popular and prominent content. The revolutionary moments after World War I are no exception. This rich period of German history was a fundamental turning point for Germany as it moved away from monarchy to a democratic paradigm. The developmental process that ultimately established the Weimar republic in August of 1919 was tumultuous and went through several revolutionary iterations before a democratically elected and sanctioned government was created.

The provisional majority socialist government following World War I is not often a primary focus of scholarly works, many of which provide broad coverage of the period with highlights of what are deemed the interesting parts: those moments involving armed revolutionaries fighting in the streets or political assassinations. Eric Watt's *The Kings Depart* provides a sweeping overview of the political environment of Germany.<sup>5</sup> Watt argued the abdication of the Kaiser after World War I had a profound effect on the political system in Germany and caused the right-wing to lose any cohesiveness that would have provided a counterbalance to the political left.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, there were sociological and ideological schisms between the progressive and liberal parties of the

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<sup>2</sup> Schulze, p342.

<sup>3</sup> Figures for the end of 1917 are just under 1.7 million and around 1.9 million in late 1919.

<sup>4</sup> Koszyk, Kurt. "Die Rote Fahne, Berlin (1918 - 1933)." *Deutsche Zeitungen des 17. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*. Ed. Heinz-Dietrich Fischer. Verlag Dokumentation: Pullach bei München, 1972. p394.

<sup>5</sup> Watt, Richard M. *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Germany: Versailles and the German Revolution*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> Watt p222-223

German center.<sup>7</sup> The sudden shifting in the balance of power of German politics left the Majority Social Democratic Party, the largest cohesive political group, in control of the German state after the abdication of the Kaiser and the resignation of Prince Max von Baden. According to Watt, the MSPD leaders had been “conditioned only for a role of opposition” and were not prepared to lead a government physically, mentally, or emotionally.<sup>8</sup> The MSPD never seriously sought revolution and were at a loss for a course of action when power was unexpectedly handed to them. Once the initial surprise of being thrust into power had passed, the majority socialists quickly developed as a governing party. Prior to the war, socialism in Europe had a strong international bond and shared ideology in pursuit of the worldwide socialist revolution and overthrow of capitalism. As tensions increased and war was seen to be increasingly unavoidable, the lofty solidarity of international socialism was cast aside in favor of the opportunity for participation in the national system. After the war, Ebert and his fellow MSPD leaders resumed the pre-war sentiments in favor of worker solidarity in order to build a MSPD-USPD coalition. In a bid to form a functional government, the moderate MSPD had to appeal to the more radical USPD in order to ensure a coalition capable of governing.

The purpose of the revolution, for Majority Socialists, was not to further the international socialist revolution, but bring parliamentary democracy to Germany. They also held to the common belief that universal suffrage within a democratic government would necessarily place the proletariat in a dominant position. With the bulk of the voting population comprised of socialist leaning proletarians, it seemed an obvious matter of fact that socialism would win in open elections and therefore no need to force the

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<sup>7</sup> Jones, Larry Eugene. German Liberalism and the Dissolution of the Weimar Party System, 1918-1933. The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Watt p219

revolution. Most importantly, in Watt's analysis “there was little real danger that Germany would become Bolshevik.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the concerns of the MSPD leadership and their fear of continued revolution, there was too great a divide, both ideologically and methodologically between the leaders of the German Left, like Rosa Luxembour or Karl Liebknecht, and Lenin or other Bolshevik leaders for Germany to follow the Bolshevik revolutionary model.

Offering another interpretation of the revolution, Stefan Berger argued the push by workers and soldiers from below forced the fledgling Ebert government to alter its original plans, which were minimal to begin with: gain power and hold elections.<sup>10</sup> The overriding theme for Berger was that “Ebert did not want to be the German Kerensky.”<sup>11</sup> To this end, Ebert turned to the remnants of the Imperial army for protection. Berger also believed that Ebert was wrong to fear the Bolshevization of Germany, but that this fear ultimately forced him into a decision that detracted from the stability of Germany. Berger claimed Ebert’s fear of bolshevism was irrational because the workers’ and soldiers’ councils were loyal to the MSPD government and could have been used to further democratization and reinforce the administration of the MSPD government.<sup>12</sup> He claimed that the USPD was too diverse in “aims and outlook to form a major threat to the MSPD” despite Ebert’s view of the independents as a party of revolutionaries.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the true revolutionaries were the communist radicals of the *Spartakusbund* led by Rosa Luxembour and Karl Liebknecht, not the independent socialist that had split off from

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<sup>9</sup> Watt p523

<sup>10</sup> Berger, Stefan. Social Democracy and the Working Class in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany. New York: Longman, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Berger p96

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

the MSPD. Berger believed that the revolutionaries did not pose a real threat and that “the German revolution is best interpreted as incomplete.”<sup>14</sup>

German historian of the revolutionary workers' and soldiers' councils Wolfgang Mommsen argued that the councils did not want a complete restructuring of German society along communist lines, but rather they were a “temporary democratic self-organization of society, which sprang up spontaneously in a situation where the authority of the traditional political institutions had completely vanished.”<sup>15</sup> The council movements were an effort by the German people to take on the task of administration themselves in lieu of total anarchy in the wake of governmental collapse. The trouble occurred as moderate MSPD members left the councils, allowing them to be dominated by radical elements. Despite this drift to the extreme, the councils were not always in favor of furthering the revolution and were often dragged along in the various putsches and uprisings.<sup>16</sup> This vein of reasoning differs with commonly accepted views that the councils were “instruments of the revolutionary struggle for power.” Mommsen goes on to argue that the early stages of “the workers’ and soldiers’ councils deployed primarily *defensive* (Mommsen’s italics) rather than offensive energies.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the councils’ primary objective was the dissolution of the old military and political order. There was no plan to permanently be involved in the military or administrative hierarchies of the new order and the councils worked within the pre-existing frameworks

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<sup>14</sup> Berger p102

<sup>15</sup> Mommsen, Wolfgang J. “The German Revolution 1918-1920: Political Revolution and Social Protest Movement.” 1978. Translated by Jane Williams. Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany. Ed. Richard Bessel and E.J. Feuchtwanger. London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1981. See also: Mommsen, Wolfgang J. "Die deutsche Revolution 1918-1920: Politische Revolution und soziale Protestbewegung." *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* , 4. Jahrg., H. 3, Sozialgeschichtliche Aspekte europäischer Revolutionen (1978), pp. 362-391. p25

<sup>16</sup> Mommsen p27

<sup>17</sup> Mommsen p29 – Mommsen cites Reinhard Rürup as a prominent advocate for this stance but disagrees with him.

without seeking fundamental or systemic change. Due to the nature of the councils' actions, they should not be "considered as proletarian dictatorships in the classical sense." They clearly lacked the power and will to directly confront the bureaucracy and the argument that they should be seen as "potential organs for implementing a thorough democratization of the bureaucracy...[must] be considered an exaggeration."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Mommsen points out that the extreme left took political and media strongholds by force but believed with proper direction and leadership, enabled by controlling and utilizing such objectives, the masses would quickly come to their aid.<sup>19</sup> This makes clear why the revolutionary violence and determination needed to hold back the counterrevolution did not exist amongst the revolutionary left. They had enough initiative to launch the revolution but not pursue it to fulfillment. Barring a select number of Spartacists, few were willing to force the revolution as Lenin had done in Russia. Several prominent KPD leaders acknowledged that the German people were not ready to follow through with the socialist revolution by force of arms.<sup>20</sup>

The in-depth account of the Spartacist uprising in Berlin by Eric Waldman<sup>21</sup> focused on creating an accurate and detailed account of the events. Due to the narrow focus of his work, he was able to include complexity within the otherwise faceless and monolithic *Spartakusbund* that many often left out. Waldman argued that the uprising was initiated by spontaneous action and the revolutionary leadership had to play catch-up

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<sup>18</sup> Mommsen p30

<sup>19</sup> Mommsen p40

<sup>20</sup> Waldman p185: Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, and Karl Radek were opposed to the uprising. In particular, Luxemburg is noted for believing that the best situation that could emerge from an uprising was a Berlin Commune, a la Paris in 1871. However, despite not being against the full-fledge revolution, she believed the KPD leaders had an obligation to support the spontaneous uprising of revolutionary workers and soldiers.

<sup>21</sup> Waldman, Eric. The Spartacist Uprising of 1919 and the Crisis of the German Socialist Movement. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1958.

after the masses took the initiative.<sup>22</sup> The KPD was not prepared for the showing of support demonstrated by protesters in Berlin. The communist leadership had no choice but to follow the masses. Waldman argued the aims of the revolution were to disarm the counterrevolution, arm the proletariat, merge the revolutionary troops into a Red Guard, overthrow the Ebert government and hold new elections of workers' and soldiers' councils.<sup>23</sup>

Watt followed the same line of argumentation that the Spartacist leadership was caught by surprise as the workers and soldiers took to the streets.<sup>24</sup> Once the workers of Berlin were on strike and the city all but shut down, those who had been calling for a proletarian revolution had no choice but to follow through on their words and lead the masses. Even with demonstrations as evidence of popular support, there was still hesitation and conflict between the principal leaders of the KPD.<sup>25</sup> Rosa Luxemburg was a staunch critic of Lenin and the methods of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. She also advocated for a more thorough education of the masses such that the proletariat would rise up together, not a small group of radicals as was the case in Russia and during the Spartacist uprising. Luxemburg was not in favor of launching the revolution because she understood that the proletariat at large was not ready. Conversely, Karl Liebknecht was a man of action and an "impatient activist."<sup>26</sup> He strongly pushed for full revolution and had the backing of the majority of the Spartacists. On a specific point of differentiation, Watt regarded the goals of the revolution to be the complete dismantling of the German nation as the first, and most crucial, step towards the KPD's ultimate goal of building a

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<sup>22</sup> Waldman p184-185

<sup>23</sup> Waldman p188

<sup>24</sup> Watt p254

<sup>25</sup> Watt p220

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

socialist system.<sup>27</sup> This contrasts with Waldman's interpretation and Mommsen's argument that councils were working within the preexisting structure to install parliamentary democracy. The Spartacist uprising in Berlin ultimately failed due to lack of leadership and brutal suppression by government troops. Watt asserted that the Spartacists "had not bargained on Ebert's actually resisting their revolution, and they had no stomach for fighting in the streets."<sup>28</sup> In the wake of the revolution and the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, Watt believed that German socialism was "irrevocably fractionalized" while moderates were "thoroughly compromised by the armed and resurgent right."<sup>29</sup> The dependence of the Ebert government on the paramilitary right-wing groups left no hope of mending the divide amongst socialists. Ebert had betrayed the ideals of socialism in an effort to consolidate the power of the fledgling government. Berger proposed that the Spartacists sought an alternative to parliamentary democracy with a comprehensive social revolution and overthrow of the bourgeois order.<sup>30</sup> He also advanced the argument that the leadership was a step behind the masses in January 1919.

Two books primarily focused on the *Freikorps* and Nazism briefly addressed the Spartacist uprisings. They both posit a view that the left was mired by indecisiveness or inactivity. Robert Waite<sup>31</sup> is the most perfunctory and views the events of January 1919 as the best moment for a communist future in Germany.<sup>32</sup> He argued that "while the leaders of the Left bickered, and did nothing, the government leaders acted."<sup>33</sup> Waite did

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Watt p265

<sup>29</sup> Watt p273

<sup>30</sup> Berger p97

<sup>31</sup> Waite, Robert G. L. Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952.

<sup>32</sup> Waite p60

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

not address the politics of the revolutionaries or the differences that resulted in revolt.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Nigel Jones<sup>35</sup> followed the generally accepted trope that the Spartacists lacked support to follow through with violent revolution. “Liebknecht and Luxemburg lacked the ruthlessness of their Russian colleagues, their followers were less organized, and, most important of all, they faced the relentless opposition of the army officers who were determined, at all costs, to stop the revolution in its tracks, and, if possible, to reverse it.”<sup>36</sup> As one should expect from a *Freikorps*-centric book, true agency rests with the aggressive and proactive military forces. Jones disregarded the intricacies and motivations of the revolutionary groups, promoting a conception that they could not back up the rhetoric with action while agents of the government acted with a clear objective.<sup>37</sup>

The long term consequences of involvement with the *Freikorps* for the MSPD government were counter to the intended results. By uniting with Imperial military remnants to put down the revolutionary movement, the MSPD caused irreparable harm to its relationship with the other socialist parties and groups. “That a government of the left had used military and right-wing paramilitary formations to fight and murder its former comrades was to divide the organized working class in the Weimar Republic and cause bitter resentment amongst ordinary workers.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, continued repression by a socialist government “caused much disillusionment and resentment amongst workers,”

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<sup>34</sup> As an aside, Waite and Watt both provide good histories of the engagements between the left revolutionaries and the *Freikorps*.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, Nigel. The Birth of the Nazis: How the Freikorps Blazed a Trail for Hitler. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Jones p31

<sup>37</sup> Jones asserts that there were only approximately 1000 hardcore Spartacists willing to stand and fight (p60) and that “they did not have the numbers, the weapons, or the will to convert their stated intention of overthrowing the government into reality.” (p61)

<sup>38</sup> Berger p98

who looked to other groups for support, namely the USPD and KPD.<sup>39</sup> The MSPD government could not placate the workers and did not have the loyalty of conservatives, in Berger's opinion, as evidenced by the Kapp putsch in March 1920. Characteristically, Mommsen provided a different view of the *Freikorps*. He believed that it would not have been needed in most cases as the uprisings would have failed in their own time due to contradictions and lack of popular support.<sup>40</sup> The fact that there was no equivalent Lenin or Trotsky in Germany, especially after the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, was especially important. He did not believe that German socialism had enough momentum to come to fruition.

There are several areas of agreement regarding the Spartacist uprising of January 1919. Primarily, the leadership was disorganized and unprepared to take the step from active agitation to full scale armed revolution. There was also not a consensus amongst the leadership for a method of revolution. The Spartacist uprising was the most coherent attempt to further socialist goals and after the tragic outcome of January 1919 German socialism was damaged beyond repair. After the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, there was no one to step in and fill the leadership void created by their deaths. The main point of contention amongst the scholarship rests on the goals of the KPD. Mommsen is the greatest opponent to the general trend. It is hard to look past the agitative revolutionary rhetoric, but Mommsen went to the roots of the social movement by analyzing the worker's and soldiers' councils; he looked at what courses of action they were pursuing.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Mommsen p41

The revolution of 1918/19 can be credited with accomplishing a number of significant objectives: the end of monarchy, democratization of the political system, universal suffrage, the eight hour work day, and a commitment to the nation without the top down structure of a monarchy. However, Berger argued these supposed victories of the revolution were already in the works before 1918.<sup>41</sup> Some may see the above changes as the legacy of the revolution but the bulk of the scholarship focuses on the negative consequences of the events of 1918-1920. The revolution created a “deep divide between Social Democracy and Communism”<sup>42</sup> with the KPD holding the MSPD responsible for the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht and the MSPD accusing the KPD of undermining democracy by attempting to create a Leninist style dictatorship. Too much socialist blood was spilled during these years for reconciliation. The ongoing strife amongst the left-wing parties was not the only impact of the revolution. Article 48 of the Weimar constitution can be seen as a direct result of the perpetual conflict of these years. Watt argued the drafters assumed the dictatorial powers granted by Article 48 would only be employed in the case of a full scale war or communist insurrection.<sup>43</sup> This was not to be the case as it was employed many times in the short life of the Republic.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, for some participants in the Weimar Republic’s founding, most notably Hugo Preuss, the inclusion of this provision was a sign of German unwillingness to abandon authoritarian rule; that the people were unready for the responsibility of democracy. Watt also argued that the experience of the MSPD with the *Freikorps* showcased the necessity of having an army under the explicit and direct control of the

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<sup>41</sup> Berger p100

<sup>42</sup> Berger p103

<sup>43</sup> Watt p313

<sup>44</sup> 250 times by Watt’s count (p529)

government.<sup>45</sup> Despite a wide range of disagreement on specific details, the bulk of the scholarship can agree that the division of the left created by the revolution was long lasting and ultimately the end of German socialism.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Watt p314-316

<sup>46</sup> I differentiate between the DDR and the ideologies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The ideological underpinnings of the DDR are more closely connected to bolshevism and the USSR than to earlier socialist or communist movements originating in Germany. While interesting in its own right, a comparative study of such material is neither the purpose nor within the scope of this paper.

## CHAPTER 1

### THRUST INTO POWER: THE REVOLUTION IN NOVEMBER 1918

*Vorwärts - November 1918*

The Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany, under the leadership of Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann, came to power during a time of chaos as World War I drew to a close in the Fall of 1918. Upon assuming power the Social Democratic interim government used their official party organ, *Vorwärts*, as a primary means of communication with the people. Several rhetorical themes were developed by the party leadership and the editors of the party organ during November 1918. First, the importance of maintaining order as the Empire collapsed, the war was lost, and the nation was demobilized became a paramount concern. Second, the MSPD made efforts to contrast the socialist revolution underway in Germany with that of Russia's Bolshevik revolution in order to distance themselves from the Soviet Union as well as the radical ideology of the German extremists--specifically Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and the Spartacists. Finally, there were frequent statements that the new German government would be of the people: a *Volksrepublik*, *Volksregierung*, or *Volksstaat*.<sup>47</sup>

The efforts by the majority socialists to promote unity and order in the crumbling German state began before Prince Max resigned as chancellor and the MSPD officials were given control of the government. A November 8th article on voting rights ended with a dual purpose of indicting the Imperial regime as the cause of Germany's

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<sup>47</sup> People's Republic, People's regime, and People's State. These terms frequently appeared in *Vorwärts* articles.

predicament as well as reaching out to the people to promote unity and civility.<sup>48</sup> The article contained colorful and apocalyptic rhetoric to make the case for socialist control. Civil war and famine were threatening the destruction of the German people and some form of order needed to be restored. Only two ways forward were presented: either through force and violence or an appeal to the people. Social Democracy was to choose the later option; one that was more democratic, fair to the people, and would distance Social Democracy from the Imperial system. It was an appeal to the workers, soldiers, and policemen in the streets to help restore order rather than resort to violence. The Social Democrats advocated democratization and reform of the Prussian system as the only course to restore order; to do away with the Imperial regime that had brought disaster to Germany. To do so would require the removal of reactionary elements along with strong support for Philip Scheidemann, the cabinet's only Social Democrat.<sup>49</sup>

As representatives and leaders of the working class, the Social Democrats called on the workers of Berlin to bide their time. While control of the government passed from Prussian officials to the Social Democrats and the system was reformed to become democratic, unrest and disruption by the working class would only cause trouble and complicate the process. They challenged the disparate socialist groups to cast aside their old quarrels and unite in pursuit of a common goal: the establishment of socialism and democracy in Germany.<sup>50</sup> Being perceived as leaders of the German working class, if they could not keep their constituents in line and restore order, then they could have quickly lost legitimacy. Indeed, as the situation worsened in late December 1918 and the

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<sup>48</sup> "Gleiches Männer- und Frauen- wahlrecht in Reich und Bundesstaaten!" *Vorwärts* 8 Nov. 1918.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

first months of 1919, continued unrest would test the MSPD leadership and its ability to maintain control over the country.

With the resignation of Prince Max as Chancellor and the abdication of the Kaiser it was clear that the old regime was over, but the future of the German state was not yet determined. Friedrich Ebert's first priorities as interim Chancellor were to restore peace and order as well as secure foodstuffs for the starving Germans. He denounced thievery, looting, and plundering in the face of starvation as misery for all. Those most affected by such acts were the poor and working class.<sup>51</sup> He encouraged people to leave the streets, to end strikes and demonstrations, so that order could be restored. Ebert appealed to the existing bureaucracy of the Imperial regime in an effort to prevent anarchy in Germany. He asked all public authorities and officials to work with the interim MSPD government; that preventing civil war, mass starvation, and returning order to Germany could only be done with the cooperation of the existing logistical networks of the Empire. Otherwise, Germany would “surrender to anarchy.”<sup>52</sup> The most pressing issue for the new socialist government was preventing the growing demonstration movement from sliding into anarchy or, in the worst case, civil war. The confluence of an extremely difficult war that had pushed the German people to the breaking point, the collapse of the Imperial government, the ascension of an unproven and unorganized governing body, and no clear end to the threats towards the German populace created an unsteady environment within which the majority socialists had to work.

The MSPD argued that all socialists, regardless of minor ideological subdivisions, had achieved a grand objective: they had witnessed the downfall of Imperial tyranny and

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> “An alle Behörden und Beamten!” *Vorwärts* 9 Nov 1918.

the installation of a social democratic government. It was imperative that all socialists set aside their differences and work together, that the working class remain “united and cohesive” for “without this it cannot work!”<sup>53</sup> The Bavarian Social Democrats were used as an example for their comrades in Berlin. The Bavarian socialist factions had come together in opposition to the old Imperial system and reached an agreement on a course for the entire state to follow.<sup>54</sup> Socialist solidarity in pursuit of a common goal had triumphed in Bavaria while in Berlin they were still fighting amongst themselves. The MSPD held up the Bavarian example and asked Berliners if they wanted to be left behind as other parts of the country moved on. The triumph over the Imperial government should have been “breathtaking enough to make all of that (referring to ideological differences) forgotten.” A new socialist order could only be successful when built on the foundations of an “unanimous and united working class.”<sup>55</sup> The use of Bavaria as an example demonstrated how a united working class resulted in cooperative and directed governance. Extrapolating to the national level, a united German working class would be the foundation of a strong national Social Democratic government that would prevent the splintering of Germany and lead the nation.

Socialist solidarity was touted again in the November 11th edition of *Vorwärts*. The MSPD leadership presented Baden as another example of socialists putting aside their differences and incorporating the *Bürger* majority party into the political decision

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<sup>53</sup> “Kein Bruderkampf!” *Vorwärts* 10 Nov 1918.

<sup>54</sup> The Bavarian Socialist Republic was established on 7 November 1918 under the leadership of prominent independent social democrat Kurt Eisner. In line with other socialist demands, the Bavarians sought the abdication of King Ludwig III as well as the Kaiser, the establishment of workers' and soldiers' councils, an 8 hour work day, and an immediate end to the war. Bavaria was also to be an independent state. Kurt Eisner was assassinated in February 1919. Leadership passed to playwright Ernst Toller, who declared Bavaria a Soviet Republic. The experiment in Munich was put down by the *Freikorps* in May 1919.

<sup>55</sup> “Kein Bruderkampf!” *Vorwärts* 10 Nov 1918..

making process.<sup>56</sup> With growing cooperation around the nation, the MSPD leadership stressed the importance of not letting Berlin fall behind. They needed Berlin to be the center of the new order and lead the nation. The article continued the plea for unity and backing of the government, it took a more aggressive and assertive rhetorical approach meant to inspire the proletarians in the street to have confidence in the new Social Democratic regime. Ebert, Scheidemann, and Landsberg promised to “bring about socialist unification” and that efforts were already “definitively fruitful.” As Germany was fighting the “most difficult fight of its life” the socialist leadership sought to inspire confidence in itself and reassure the people, to encourage them that the new government was fighting alongside the citizens to bring them socialism, peace, and bread.<sup>57</sup>

These overtures of solidarity were aimed at those people still in the streets, to remind them what had been accomplished in a few short, relatively bloodless, days. The collapse of the Imperial order, abdication of the Kaiser, and ascension of the socialists to power was put into a historical context that every German on the street would recognize and relate to: the revolution of 1848.<sup>58</sup> Although the events of 1848 did not result in a full fledged revolution and the overthrow of tyranny, the revolution of November 1918 was cast as finishing what was started seventy years earlier. As Ebert, Scheidemann, and the rest of the party leadership worked to create a new image of Germany, they adhered to a rhetorical theme designed to reinstate normality and focus the people on the tasks of

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<sup>56</sup> “Regierung der vereinigten Socialdemokratie.” *Vorwärts* 11 Nov 1918.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* The November 10th article *Kein Bruderkampf!* made a brief comparison between the revolutionary events of 1848 and 1918: “*Einen Sieg hat das deutsche Volk und insbesondere auch daß Berliner Proletariat errungen, der ohne Beispiel in der ganzen Geschichte dasteht. Selbst die Ereignisse von 1848 verblassen gemessen an dem gewaltigen Umsturz, der sich am 9. November 1918 vollzogen hat.*”

restoring order, restarting the economy, and securing their livelihood as well as providing a historical connection that would give added purpose and significance to the revolution.

The MSPD leaders made a concerted effort to distance themselves from radical groups. The MSPD's history was rooted in Marxism and they did not want to be associated with the Bolsheviks, the Russian revolution, or the domestic German radicals of the Spartacist League.

The turmoil in the streets of Berlin worried the Social Democratic leaders. They did not want to see Germany fall into anarchy, nor did they want to have a civil war or counterrevolution. Ebert's appeal to the still extant Imperial bureaucracy on November 9th not only served to promote order but also a degree of continuity within the German state. Whereas Lenin had actively sought armed conflict and civil war in his revolutionary efforts, Friedrich Ebert reached out to the existing bureaucracy in an attempt to prevent the events that had transpired in Russia from occurring in Germany. He distanced himself and the MSPD from the recent events of the Bolshevik revolution. Furthermore, he differentiated mainstream socialism, in the form of the MSPD, from German radicals such as Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and the extreme Spartacus League. The Spartacists in particular were proponents of arming the proletariat and leading a violent workers' revolution akin to the Russian revolution.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The Spartacists, led by Liebknecht and Luxemburg, wanted to emulate Lenin and the Bolsheviks' revolutionary methodology, but there were significant differences in their vision of communism and ultimate goals. Rosa Luxemburg was a patient revolutionary and adhered to an orthodox belief in Marx's teachings. She believed that only by letting the capitalist system run its course, to the inevitable final financial crisis that would bring it down, would the proletariat be able to rise up and provide a viable alternative in socialism. Lenin was very impatient and pushed for armed revolution to accelerate the downfall of capitalism. Liebknecht also wanted to push the revolution, as Lenin had done. See David Renton's Classical Marxism: Socialist Theory and the Second International. Manchester, England: New Clarion Press, 2002 for an overview of pre-World War I socialism. Robert C. Tucker's The Lenin Anthology. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975 is an excellent compilation of Lenin's thought.

On November 10th, the MSPD leadership once again took strides to denounce the Russian example saying: “if group works against group, sect works against sect, then Russian chaos begins, the general decline, misery instead of happiness.”<sup>60</sup> The Majority Socialist leadership strongly desired to avoid replicating the events of the February and October revolutions in Russia.<sup>61</sup> They were concerned with the potential strength of the revolutionary tide in Germany, the influence of Liebknecht, Luxemburg, and their radical Spartacists, as well as possible Bolshevik backing of the Spartacists. With the benefit of hindsight, Watt argued there was no possibility of bolshevism spilling over into Germany but ignored the real fears of Ebert, Scheidemann, and the other MSPD leaders on display in *Vorwärts*. Berger more accurately understood Ebert's fears but oversimplified the context, reducing it to a simple desire not to mirror Kerensky in Russia. The fears of Spartacists action led the Majority Socialist leadership to issue a warning to those who would seek to undermine what had been accomplished. They denounced the behavior of a small group working to thwart the efforts of the workers' and soldiers' councils.<sup>62</sup> They were determined that no small minority should interrupt the efforts of the working class.<sup>63</sup>

The socialist leadership seized the opportunity to claim success where past groups had failed. The revolution of 1848 was used to anchor the revolution of 1918 in German history but also to showcase the success and importance of the events underway in November. Taking advantage of further comparison, the German socialist revolution had come to pass with very little bloodshed and the MSPD used this point to show that

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<sup>60</sup>“Kein Bruderkampf!” *Vorwärts* 10 Nov 1918.

<sup>61</sup> The February 1917 (white) revolution in Russia resulted in the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the institution of a provisional parliamentary government headed by Alexander Kerensky. The October (red) revolution brought the communist Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, to power.

<sup>62</sup> "Kein Bruderkampf!" *Vorwärts* 10 Nov 1918.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

socialism did not have to take the violent course as it did in Russia under Lenin and the Bolsheviks. This argument allowed Ebert and Scheidemann to discredit the radical Spartacists whom resembled the Bolsheviks ideologically and methodologically. The majority socialists had achieved peacefully that which the Bolsheviks had needed armed conflict to obtain. In a world wary of war, the newly communist Russia and potential spread of communism, the majority socialists distanced Germany from the trend set by the Bolsheviks in 1917.

Finally, spearheading a fundamentally democratic movement, the majority socialist leadership attempted to set themselves up as champions of the German people. The MSPD was emphasizing its role as representative of the people as early as November 8th.<sup>64</sup> This core rhetorical strategy in the early days of the revolution also contributed to distinguishing the majority socialists from the policies of the Imperial regime. The MSPD joined with the majority parties to enact legislation that would reform the electoral system of the empire<sup>65</sup> to provide proportional representation and equal voting rights at the state and federal level for both men and women.<sup>66</sup> The Social Democrats took special credit as proponents of this new legislation.<sup>67</sup> As self-proclaimed defenders of the peoples' interest, along with pursuing a true democratic ideal in agreement with socialist beliefs, it was advantageous to attach the Social Democrats to suffrage reform. Additionally, the MSPD was operating under the prevailing proletarian belief of the early twentieth century that the expansion of democratic participation would necessarily

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<sup>64</sup> "Arbeiter, Parteigenossen!" *Vorwärts* 8 November 1918.

<sup>65</sup> *Reichstag* representatives were elected via universal male suffrage for those 25 years and older under the Imperial electoral system. Gilbert and Large, 71.

<sup>66</sup> "Gleiches Männer- und Frauen- wahlrecht in Reich und Bundesstaaten!" *Vorwärts* 8 Nov. 1918.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

culminate in a government dominated by the working class as it was the largest single contingent of industrial society.

The Social Democrats moved quickly to declare that the future German government was to be formed as a people's regime (*Volksregierung*).<sup>68</sup> Ebert called for aid from the people in helping to consolidate the Social Democratic victory and strengthen the freedom they had won. By reaching out to the people for cooperation and labeling the new government as a *Volksregierung*, the MSPD was creating a new precedent moving forward into an era of participatory democracy. They also continued to draw connections with the revolutionary uprising of 1848 by reiterating how much they had accomplished.<sup>69</sup> In doing so the young socialist regime attempted to fabricate legitimacy by attaching itself to the historical precedent established in 1848.

On November 10th, the MSPD presented the immediate aims of the new socialist government: 1) negotiate a peace settlement to end the war, 2) secure foodstuffs to feed the German populace, 3) orderly demobilization of 10 million soldiers, and 4) organize the economy.<sup>70</sup> The MSPD government could not govern without the assistance of the Imperial bureaucratic remnants; order could not be restored without the cooperation of the people. Similar sentiments were expressed in previous articles. The people were drawn into a shared responsibility with the fledgling government because these tasks could not be completed without cooperation from the people.<sup>71</sup> Restoring Germany to a state of stability could only be accomplished as a joint effort of people and government. Working with the people to restore order and aid them with food would encourage

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<sup>68</sup> "An die deutschen Bürger!" *Vorwärts* 9 Nov. 1918.

<sup>69</sup> "Kein Bruderkampf!" *Vorwärts* 10 Nov 1918.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

confidence in the ability of the new government and would further draw the people into ownership of a new Germany.

The days following the abdication of the Kaiser and dissolution of the Imperial government mark a chaotic and important period of German history. During this tumultuous time the MSPD had to come to terms with its history of marginalization under the Empire. The anti-socialist laws passed by Bismarck in the late 1870s marked over a decade of concerted attempts to marginalize, discredit, and eliminate socialism in Germany. Additionally, the structure of the *Reichstag* and *Bundesrat* severely limited democratic forces and ensured authoritarian control by the Chancellor and Kaiser. For these reasons the Social Democratic party existed only as a party of opposition to the ruling government, despite a growing membership and influence within the *Reichstag* in the decade before World War I, for the duration of its existence until control of the government was passed down to it on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1918. The history of socialism in Germany was haunted by questions of legitimacy with regard to its existence, let alone as a ruling party. This matter was compounded by the nature within which the MSPD came to power. The majority socialists were not elected nor did they ride the wave of a full fledged revolution; if anything, the Social Democrats were against a full workers revolution.<sup>72</sup> The Social Democratic leadership did not co-opt the revolutionary sentiments of the workers to further their own goals and establish themselves as legitimate leaders of the revolutionary movement in Germany as they moved forward into

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<sup>72</sup> Friedrich Ebert's famous quote--"If the Kaiser does not abdicate, Social Revolution must come. But I don't want it; I hate it like sin."--shows that by the end of WWI, at the very top, the MSPD had ceased to be a true marxist party in pursuit of a social revolution. From: Scheidemann, Philip. *The Making of New Germany: Memoirs of a Social Democrat, Volume II*. Translated by J. E. Michell. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1929, 1970.

a new social democratic era. Instead, the MSPD took a tentative, roundabout path by sprinkling their rhetoric with democratic sentiments.

The emphasis of inclusion of the people in the governing process was a reminder to the German people that they had a stake in the future government. The purpose was to create the impression that every German was directly connected to their government through the democratic process. The MSPD's emphasis on the importance and involvement of every citizen was an intelligent tactic to highlight how the new order differed from the old. Differentiating themselves from the Imperial government could only benefit the fledgling MSPD government. However, the frequency at which this altruistic and idealistic version of democracy was invoked becomes conspicuous. The many references to the new government as “one of the people” and emphasizing the ownership of the government by the people shows a timid regime. It is possible to lead from the foreground in a democratic fashion without falling into tyranny, but the majority socialist leadership appears uncomfortable in the spotlight. The nearly continuous overtures to the people were subtle attempts to spread the responsibility of governing. Socialist rhetoric often employs the strategy of communal ownership and responsibility, but, in the context of the November revolution, the MSPD appears weak holding power. The repeated references to a peoples’ government and the nature of the appeals to the people in the days following the revolution portray a hesitant government, one on the defensive.

The way in which the MSPD leadership communicated to the German people, through the party organ *Vorwärts*, reflects the marginalized past of socialism in Germany and suggests a tentative government; one unsure how to proceed and how the people will

respond. The focus of the majority socialist party was primarily on calming the revolutionary fervor in the streets, restoring order, and emphasizing the ideological differences between the MSPD and the Imperial regime, Bolsheviks, and Spartacists. One cannot discount the necessity for civil order and the importance it plays in the ability for a political body to competently and effectively govern a populace. However, as a party that had proclaimed adherence to a Marxist theory of development and revolution, the MSPD's unwillingness to seize the initiative and usher in the socialist revolution suggests either weakness and timidity on their part or a reversal of decades of fervent revolutionary rhetoric from their prior role as a party in opposition. Their task of containing the chaos and restoring order was tremendous. It is to this end that the MSPD leadership used less animated and fiery language than one would expect of a self-proclaimed Marxist party; especially during a revolutionary period with the potential outcome of a state founded on Marxist principles.

#### *Die Rote Fahne - November 1918*

The Majority Social Democratic Party and *Vorwärts* represented a large slice of the German working class, but it did not speak for the entire proletariat. During the First World War the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* split into a number of smaller factions; these factions were primarily created through disagreements on the SPD leadership's decisions in favor of nationalism, the *Burgfrieden*, and support of the German war effort. Early in the war the *Spartakusbund* (Spartacus League) emerged as the primary organization representing radical socialists and communists, led by Karl

Liebkecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and other prominent radicals.<sup>73</sup> *Die Rote Fahne* (the red flag), the official party organ of the *Spartakusbund*, provides a comparison to further understand the context within which the MSPD leadership was operating.

The Spartacists were leading critics of the Ebert-Scheidemann regime. Their attacks and criticisms directed at the interim MSPD government created an environment of increasing hostility. In November 1918 the Spartacists firmly supported the revolution that was underway.<sup>74</sup> They actively worked to promote the continuation of the revolution to a socialist German state, and ultimately the world revolution, with advertisements for mass demonstrations at which prominent Spartacists would speak.<sup>75</sup>

The Social Democrats and Spartacists were in conflict on many points. Karl Liebkecht wrote a scathing editorial criticizing the Social Democrats for their support of the war and abandoning the Socialist International. He condemned the *Burgfrieden* of 1914 as being only "mass death, millions of miseries, cultural destruction, hell."<sup>76</sup> He wrote of a new *Burgfrieden* being established by the MSPD and "fanatical hatred" against any who oppose the new unity; Scheidemann and his consorts were cited as the loudest in the conflict.<sup>77</sup> Liebkecht's goal was to encourage the German working class to continue the revolution, that they had only succeeded in toppling the autocracy and completion of the bourgeois revolution.<sup>78</sup> A November 20th article continued the attack on Ebert and Scheidemann for not pursuing the socialist revolution. They were accused of establishing

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<sup>73</sup> Additional leading figures of the radical *Spartakusbund* included Leo Jogiches, Paul Levi, and Clara Zetkin.

<sup>74</sup> The Spartacists were in full support of some of the reforms being made by the MSPD government, such as the expansion of voting rights, the eight hour workday, etc.

<sup>75</sup> *Die Rote Fahne*. 20 November 1918. *Die Rote Fahne* advertised three meetings on the 21st of November at which Karl Liebkecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and Paul Levi would speak. They then follow up afterwards reporting on the large numbers of people in attendance.

<sup>76</sup> Liebkecht, Karl. "Der Neue Burgfrieden." *Die Rote Fahne*. 19 November 1918.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

a proletarian form, by utilizing the council system, with bourgeois content, by not taking strides to further the revolution. The article also pointed out that the soldiers and workers in urban centers had built councils while the rural areas and small town continued to function in the old, imperial system.

The leaders of the *Spartakusbund* had many connections with the Bolsheviks and, despite not desiring to follow Lenin's revolutionary model, promoted international solidarity in pursuit of the worldwide revolution. The November 18th issue included an article with a series of telegrams from the *Tsarskoje* which supported the German proletariat, encouraged placing Karl Liebknecht at the forefront of the new peoples' regime, and reminded them that they would not have power in any regime that included princes, capitalists and "*Scheidemänner*".<sup>79</sup>

By the end of November the Spartacist rhetoric in *Die Rote Fahne* began to attack the interim MSPD government more aggressively. Articles accused Ebert, Scheidemann, and the Majority Social Democrats of being false socialists that only desired a bourgeois revolution. While the Social Democrats were working to calm the revolutionary fervor in the streets, with *Vorwärts* articles that appealed to national sentiments and endowed the people with responsibilities of democratic government, the radical *Spartakusbund* was agitating the masses, organizing mass demonstrations, and working to undermine the Social Democrats' efforts to stop the revolution.

#### *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung - November 1918*

The *Spartakusbund*, with its party organ *Die Rote Fahne*, represented one end of the German ideological and political spectrum composed of radical proletarians. The

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<sup>79</sup> "Vom Schauplatz der Revolution." *Die Rote Fahne*. 18 November 1918.

conservative newspaper *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*, which advocated the interests of German conservatives, serves as a counterweight to further contextualize the rhetoric of the Social Democrats.

German conservatives generally supported Kaiser Wilhelm II and lamented the sudden abdication of the Kaiser on November 9th. The *Kreuzzeitung* ran a number of articles reporting on the whereabouts and actions of the Kaiser-in-exile in the Netherlands.<sup>80</sup> An article in the November 9th edition addressed the resignation of Prince Max von Baden, the abdication of the Kaiser, and the continuation of the German government under the new Chancellor Friedrich Ebert. Kaiser Wilhelm II was regarded as the beloved emperor and king whom reigned as a courageous soldier and leader with the peoples best interests at heart.<sup>81</sup>

The new chancellor was granted a brief biographical sketch that was designed to provide the conservative readership of the *Kreuzzeitung* all they needed to know about the Social Democratic leader. Ebert was portrayed as a leading Social Democratic representative in the *Reichstag* of proletarian upbringing who was a self-defined dissident.<sup>82</sup> Further clarification of conservatives' views of Ebert came a few days later in an article expressing concern about a "red dictator." The chancellor was not mentioned by name but referred to as an illegal dictator. The legality of Ebert holding office was questioned and there was palpable fear that he was formulating laws behind the scenes that would undermine traditional German political and economic life. He was further criticized for not being a strong leader; it was unclear if Ebert, the executive council of

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<sup>80</sup> "Der Kaiser in Holland." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 11 November 1918 and "Die Fahrt des Kaisers nach Holland." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 12 November 1918.

<sup>81</sup> "Der Reichkanzler Max, Prinz von Baden." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 9 November 1918.

<sup>82</sup> "Der Neue Kanzlerkandidat." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 9 November 1918.

peoples' representatives, or the soldier's and workers' council were in control.<sup>83</sup> In the eyes of conservatives, he was a dangerous revolutionary politician that was a threat to traditional German social, economic, and political life.

In addition to casting Ebert in an unfavorable light, there was fear of bolshevism spreading in Germany along with a clear sense that the bourgeoisie and conservatives would not idly watch from the sidelines. The "militaristic character" of the revolution, embodied by the mutiny at Kiel and attempts to form a Red Guard, was a cause for concern. Conservative coverage in the *Kreuzzeitung* did not distinguish between the soldiers' and workers' council being established in Germany and their Russian counterparts of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917; the formation of councils was equated to the spread of bolshevism. In response, there were demonstrations by the bourgeoisie and a statement from the National Liberal Party encouraging people to vote as well as work together towards democracy and German membership in the League of Nations.<sup>84</sup> There were further assurances that the Bourgeoisie, while slow to wake from its lethargy, would form its own councils to oppose those of the workers and soldiers.<sup>85</sup>

The conservatives were, unintentionally, working in tandem with the radical Spartacists to create a sociopolitical environment hostile to the efforts of the majority Social Democratic leadership. The Spartacists wanted to propel the revolution into a full fledged proletarian uprising while the conservatives saw the expanding council system as the spread of bolshevism and the end of traditional German ways of life. The MSPD had to contend with the potential of violent action by their disaffected comrades in the Spartacus League as well as ameliorate the concerns of the bourgeoisie, and potentially

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<sup>83</sup> "Diktatur, Bürgertum und die Konservativen." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 18 November 1918.

<sup>84</sup> "Kundgebungen der bürgerlichen Parteien." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 14 November 1918.

<sup>85</sup> "Diktatur, Bürgertum und die Konservativen." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 18 November 1918.

some conservatives, to deter or prevent a counterrevolutionary action. Furthermore, the Social Democratic leadership needed the cooperation of the Imperial Army to manage demobilization and, in the event that peace negotiations fell through, the defense of Germany. The attempt to accommodate such a wide range of concerns contributed to the hesitant and defensive rhetoric and actions in November 1918.

## CHAPTER 2 IN SEARCH OF A MANDATE: THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF DECEMBER 1918

*Vorwärts* - December 1918

In December of 1918 a national assembly of workers' and soldiers' councils was scheduled to plan Germany's future. The national assembly was the first opportunity for the interim MSPD government to put principles of democracy into action and directly incorporate representatives of the people, especially the grass roots workers' and soldiers' councils, in the national decision making process. Electoral results gave the Majority Social Democrats the largest share of seats on the council of the national assembly.<sup>86</sup>

The rhetorical themes established in November continued into December, with two more themes added during the bid for election as the foundations were set for the future German government.<sup>87</sup> First, contrast with the old regime was paramount; the people needed to know how the MSPD's vision for Germany was different. Secondly, the matter of legitimacy was taken up by the socialists. The transfer of power from the Kaiser to Prince Max to Friedrich Ebert was legally questionable and the MSPD chose not to address it in public discussion during the tense days of the revolution.

In December, the MSPD was still concerned with the continuation of unrest, strikes, and food shortages, especially in dense urban centers like Berlin, that had been a

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<sup>86</sup> Electoral results were reported on the front page of the December 15<sup>th</sup> issue of *Vorwärts*. The workers' councils voted 349 votes for the MSPD, 281 for the USPD, and 79 for the *freien Berufe* (free professionals). These votes gave 7 delegates to the MSPD, 5 to the USPD, and 1 for the *freien Berufe*. The soldiers' council declared 204 votes for the MSPD and 121 for the USPD which translated to 4 MSPD delegates and 2 USPD delegates. The total number of delegates on the council for the national assembly was 12 MSPD, 7 USPD and 1 *freie Berufe*.

<sup>87</sup> The themes of unity and order, the people as a foundation for a democratic government, and contrasting German socialism with Bolshevism that were established in November continued in December.

primary focus of their efforts to reinstate order in November. Contrasting their rhetoric in November, *Vorwärts* articles in December are more forceful and direct. None of the timidity displayed in November was present in December. Articles proclaimed the "socialist revolution [was] in jeopardy" with "imminent catastrophe clearly emerging every day."<sup>88</sup> The economic outlook was grim: the land was neglected, there was no livestock, a shortage of raw materials, and a manufacturing sector tooled for war rather than peace time goods.<sup>89</sup> The MSPD looked to its proletarian base to rebuild the country and the economy. The working class was to make sure that the German people "remain spared hunger, civil war, and what inevitably follows civil war: the devastation of all the achievements of the revolution, [the worker's] revolution."<sup>90</sup> The MSPD placed the future of Germany in the workers' hands, indeed, the workers were a necessary and integral component for economic recovery. This rhetoric was a radical deviation from the previous month and was used to animate the workers, to spur them back to work. It suggests a leadership more comfortable in power, less afraid of continued revolution, and looking ahead to Germany's future.

To compliment the need for the working class to be the foundation of the new order the MSPD encouraged people to visit employment offices for work placements. Invariably some of these placements would have been away from urban centers, such as farming, mining, or other rural tasks. This served two purposes for the MSPD government: primarily, it encouraged people to look for employment and provided them with a place to start looking; secondly, anything that would reduce the number of people concentrated in cities, like Berlin, could only serve to benefit the MSPD as there would

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<sup>88</sup> "An die deutschen Arbeiter! Ein Aufruf der Regierung." *Vorwärts* 15 December 1918.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

be fewer people to feed, making the limited food supply available to the city go faster, and fewer potential demonstrators in the streets if the situation worsened. Furthermore, they could spin their motives as revolutionary patriotism. Those looking for work were doing their duty and “[guarding the] revolution before the onslaught of any kind of reaction” as well as “[saving] it also from devastation through famine and economic dissolution.”<sup>91</sup>

Ebert's opening speech for the national assembly reminded those gathered that the new German republic was in its infancy and encouraged his comrades to be patient, to allow the republic to develop.<sup>92</sup> As the leader of the young socialist regime, confronted with the “hardest challenge,” Ebert encouraged everyone to work together: “only through uniform volition can the unending difficulty of the situation be mastered.”<sup>93</sup> He argued that the public economic life should always be active, and that safety, food, clothes, electricity and heat should be assured.<sup>94</sup> Ebert called on the German people to think not of themselves, but rather to work together for the communal effort. He vowed that the MSPD and the “victorious proletariat [would create] no new class dominance. It conquers first all the politics, then the economics, of class differences and establishes the equality of all. That is the great ideal thought of democracy.”<sup>95</sup>

The theme of solidarity amongst socialists was prevalent throughout November and December. Some representatives used the national assembly as a platform to argue about individual member's past records, mainly those that supported the Imperial regime during the war, but those working to rebuild Germany continued to peddle the notion of solidarity amongst socialists. They continued to implore their comrades to set aside

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<sup>91</sup> “Ihr müßt arbeiten!” *Vorwärts* 15 December 1918.

<sup>92</sup> “Die Eröffnung. Erster Tag.” *Vorwärts* 16 Dec 1918.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

differences and make the victory of social democracy the priority.<sup>96</sup> The socialists did not have a cohesive common cause to unite against after the Kaiser's abdication and collapse of the Imperial order. Socialists of various stripes returned to the promotion of their specific ideological agendas. Early during the national assembly, the USPD passed a resolution not to associate with the Majority Social Democrats.<sup>97</sup> The anonymous author of the article reporting on this event encouraged his readers not to “take this grim resolution too literally,”<sup>98</sup> suggesting that the USPD’s actions were aimed at making a statement rather than as a roadblock for the MSPD. The author claimed that a relationship and association between the USPD and MSPD would “develop naturally.”

The MSPD would not have constituted the majority in a general election, despite being the largest socialist party. It was imperative that it win support from fellow socialists to ensure victory in the future election. Appealing to socialist solidarity was the best strategy and the rhetorical patterns demonstrated in *Vorwärts* show us the importance Friedrich Ebert, the MSPD leadership, and the party organ placed on this theme.

The majority socialist government had to find a narrow middle path that would satisfy the fundamental socialist principles of their base while appealing to and incorporating the non-proletarian sections of German society. As Adam Przeworski argued in his book *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, “by broadening their appeal to the middle classes socialist parties dilute the general ideological salience of class and, consequently, weaken the power of class as a cause of the political behavior of

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<sup>96</sup> “Kongreß der A.- und S.-Räte.” *Vorwärts* 17 Dec 1918.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

workers.”<sup>99</sup> Przeworski was referring broadly to the differences and complications between the idealistic nature of socialist ideology, the reality of democratic politics and the compromises to both idealism and ideology that must be made in the course of participating in a bourgeois democratic system. The MSPD was acutely aware of this dilemma as the debate between socialism and anarchism, on the matter of whether or not those adhering to the Marx-Engels world view should participate in the legislative bodies of the state, had been long standing by the time of World War I.<sup>100</sup> The MSPD chose the moderate path: they stalled the revolution, prevented the progression towards communism, and sought to broaden its electoral appeal. The majority socialists looked to consolidate the center while at the same time defend itself from counterrevolutionary sentiments and radical communists. In doing so, they could no longer make the claim to “represent the interests that constitute the public goods for workers as a class but only those interests which workers share as individuals with other people.”<sup>101</sup> The MSPD would not be able to obtain a majority of the vote in a free democratic election only on the basis of class; the German proletariat was spread across a number of political parties and trade unions. The majority socialists had alienated large segments of the German left wing with its support of the war and its actions in November. In order to be successful in a general election the MSPD needed to broaden its appeal, thus undermining the base principle of socialism: to advance the cause of the working class. Once class solidarity is compromised as a voting block, once individuals no longer feel that a specific allegiance

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<sup>99</sup> Przeworski, Adam. *Capitalism and Social Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985. p105.

<sup>100</sup> Przeworski’s categorizes those who wish to realize a communist paradigm without participating in the bourgeois state as Anarchists and those who seek to participate in democratic government to legislate their way to communism as Socialists.

<sup>101</sup> Przeworski, pp105-6.

is demanded of them as a member of the proletariat, voters are more likely to organize and vote along other categorical lines.

The calls for solidarity served the second purpose of promoting order and stability as well as encouraging the proletariat to not lose sight of the larger goal of a socialist future for Germany. Continued unrest, especially in the dense urban centers, was a significant element contributing to the nervousness of the socialist leadership. Restoring order and a prosperity to the daily life of the German people would require time, patience, and hard work from all Germans. But if progress was not made to the people's satisfaction, whether the people's wants and desires were realistic or not, then they could lose support and the credibility of the regime would be damaged.

Unrest and patience go hand-in-hand: without patience, unrest quickly turns into revolt, uprising, and the next phase of revolution, namely the end of the Ebert-Scheidemann regime. The majority socialists had managed to halt the revolution and attempt to establish social democracy, but they feared further unrest would lead to a continuation of the revolution and civil war ending in the bolshevization of Germany. The calls for solidarity and patience were utilitarian, aimed towards the promotion of order and stability. They also betrayed the underlying nervousness and fear of the socialist leadership; fear of their own failure to restore order to Germany and a continuation of the revolution as had happened in Russian in the autumn of 1917.

Building on the sentiments of socialist solidarity, the MSPD leadership continued to promote the new government as a people's regime. The proletariat was the focus of this rhetorical strategy; articles in *Vorwärts* insisted that the revolution belonged to the working class and the new government belonged to the people.

Ebert encouraged the people to be active participants in the democratic process. The vote scheduled for January 19th, 1919, would allow the people to place their "fate in their own hands" as quickly as possible as well as be the ultimate test and demonstration of the political power of the working class.<sup>102</sup> He charged the bearers of the revolution to demand a consistent majority that could hold a uniform line for the expectations of the state along the interests and ideals of the revolution.<sup>103</sup> Such a statement promoted the idea of an accountable democratic government; a concept that was at the core of the revolution's purpose. This was put into practice during the national assembly as representatives from the workers' and soldiers' councils were provided with the opportunity to contribute to the nation building process in mass meetings held by the MSPD. Chancellor Ebert was adamant that the sooner the national assembly was successful in establishing a government that expressed the will of the entire German people, the sooner the German peoples' republic would be healthy and strong and able to realize its socialist purpose.<sup>104</sup>

The meetings held by the MSPD provided statements from workers' and soldiers' council representatives that were ideal for providing first-hand accounts of the nature of German socialism. One soldier representing a council from the Baltic spoke of the threat the Bolsheviks posed to the region. As 300,000 German soldiers withdrew it was assumed that the Red Army would replace them. Confronted with this eventuality, the soldier questioned the nature of bolshevism and the impact a Bolshevik presence would have on the region: "One says the Bolsheviks are socialists. But I do not believe so...we are good socialists, have developed and acquired our own food stuffs." The soldier

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<sup>102</sup> "Wahlen am 19. Januar: Sieg der Sozialdemokratie auf dem Kongreß." *Vorwärts* 20 December 1918.

<sup>103</sup> "Die Eröffnung. Erster Tag." *Vorwärts* 16 Dec 1918.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

reflected on the confiscation of vast amounts of material and supplies, valued at 2,000 million Marks, by the Red Army. He remarked that both the Imperial regime and the Russians had been oppressive in the region, but under the government of a workers' and soldiers' council, the Baltic lands had relative freedom.<sup>105</sup>

Another council representative from Bielefeld recounted the course of revolution in the region and commented on its bloodless nature. The representative claimed that “in Bielefeld there are neither Independents nor Spartacists. They also do not have designs to emulate the Russian procedure of workers’ and soldiers’ councils, but build a peoples’ council, who have power in their hands.”<sup>106</sup> Again, the rejection of bolshevism and moderation of German socialism were emphasized. The focus was on spontaneous bottom-up democracy and the peaceful, bloodless transition to socialism as a superior choice to the violence of the communist alternatives.

These representatives showcased by *Vorwärts* provided genuine and candid voices extolling the differences and virtues of German social democracy. In comparison with the Soviet model, German socialism was demonstrably peaceful, egalitarian, and promoted freedom. Russian communism was established through a top-down methodology: the Bolsheviks conquered Russia with Lenin at the head of his revolutionary vanguard. The establishment of social democracy in Germany emerged as a bottom-up phenomenon: the MSPD was handed power in a moment of crisis as the German people demonstrated in the streets and formed workers’, soldiers’, and peoples’ councils. Social Democratic leaders seized on this key difference and brought people like the above representatives to the foreground to extol the superior revolutionary methods of

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<sup>105</sup> "Um Deutschlands Zukunft." *Vorwärts* 17 Dec 1918.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

German social democracy. In doing so, the MSPD strengthened their position as champions of democracy and socialism at a time when the course forward for Germany was being decided by representatives of the people and there was fear of Bolshevik influence on Germany's development.

It was important for the majority socialists in Germany to distance themselves from their fellow Marxists in Russia. Although there were a number of different interpretations of Marx, many saw the Bolshevik regime as the model of socialist and communist ideology and methodology. The MSPD made efforts to reassure the non-working class and property owning parts of society that social democracy would not destroy property but "observe the interests of the entire people without consideration of property."<sup>107</sup> Philip Scheidemann was quoted as claiming the future was the most important thing and that socialism must be practical. In contrast to the vast seizure of property in Russia, the discussion of property and quote from Scheidemann in the December 20th article was meant to calm the fears that Social Democratic electoral victory would lead to the nationalization of all property in Germany. Such a statement can also be seen as the MSPD providing signals that it did not plan to socialize Germany. Following Przeworski's argument, the MSPD needed to win support from the Bourgeoisie to compensate from the votes it lost to the USPD, Spartacists, and Trade Unions. It was imperative for the MSPD to reject the Bolshevik system and mollify German property owners.

The MSPD also felt it was necessary to point out and emphasize differences between the Social Democratic plan for governance with the Imperial regime that proceeded it. Friedrich Ebert proclaimed that the revolution shattered an old regime that

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<sup>107</sup> "Wahlen am 19. Januar: Sieg der Sozialdemokratie auf dem Kongreß." *Vorwärts* 20 December 1918.

"had become rotten."<sup>108</sup> He condemned the previous regime, accused the Junkers and heavy industry of having displaced the power of the state, and demanded that a free socialist people's republic should seize freedom.<sup>109</sup> The emphasis was placed on the violence, militarism, and oppression of the empire. The articles published in *Vorwärts* consistently reminded readers of the tyranny and brutality of the Imperial order and contrasted it with the socialist ideals that would lead the way to a people's republic. The soldier representing the council in the Baltic provided a candid example to compare the situation in the region under the two systems. The soldier referred to the Baltic as a "powder keg," the "violence of militarism [had] the entire population against the German soldiers" and that the Baltic peoples in Estland, Livland, and Kurland<sup>110</sup> were treated like convicts under Imperial rule.<sup>111</sup> Once the soldiers' council assumed command of the region, the soldiers' representative claimed to have delivered freedom to "not only our comrades, but also the entire population."<sup>112</sup> According to the report of the soldiers' representative, under the Imperial regime, German officers were extorting the Baltic lands and sending supplies back to their families in Germany. This practice siphoned resources and material out of the Baltic and turned the people against the occupying German forces. The collapse of the militaristic Imperial regime created a space for a soldiers' council to be established which brought relative freedom to the Baltic peoples and better relations between occupiers and occupied. The soldiers' council representative made a strong case for the new regime by comparing the current status in the Baltic to how it had been under Imperial militarism. Where Imperial Germany was rapacious,

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<sup>108</sup> "Die Eröffnung. Erster Tag." *Vorwärts* 16 Dec 1918.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Modern day Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

<sup>111</sup> "Um Deutschlands Zukunft." *Vorwärts* 17 Dec 1918.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

oppressive, and authoritarian, Social Democratic Germany was supportive, egalitarian, and cooperative. The soldiers' representative closed with a remark about the need for democracy and that "the Republic must be built on democratic foundations because only so can the accomplishments of the revolution be safeguarded. We will not let the toppled dictator be replaced by a new dictator."<sup>113</sup> The Kaiser was considered to be a dictator and the soldier reiterated the danger of counterrevolutionaries imposing a new dictatorship if the revolution was to fail.

The final theme that emerged in December pertained to matters of legitimacy. As champions of democracy, the MSPD needed to derive its authority to govern from the people. The representatives that had been gathered for the national assembly had the expressed purpose of establishing a legitimate interim governing body as well as determining a date for the general election--January 19th, 1919. At the national assembly, Friedrich Ebert was quick to remind the assembled representatives that the republic was young and still in danger. The new order had yet to consolidate its power and establish itself as the rightful leader. Compared to the one thousand year Wittelsbach legacy or the five hundred year Hohenzollern dynasty, the new socialist order lacked legitimacy and its future was uncertain. Speaking to the assembled representatives of the workers' and soldiers' movement, Ebert encouraged his fellow socialists to stay the course. He recognized that the revolution had not yet produced a functioning governmental body and appealed to the experiences of the seasoned contingent of Socialists that understood the time and work required to establish a new political entity.<sup>114</sup> The assembled representatives of the revolutionary movement were charged

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> "Die Eröffnung. Erster Tag." Vorwärts 16 Dec 1918.

with the creation of a lawful foundation for a government that expressed the will of the entire German people.

The articles that appeared in December 1918 represented a significant change in the rhetoric of the MSPD since the outbreak of revolution in November. There continued to be a focus on order and unity along with an emphasis on the people as a democratic foundation of the new regime. The difference was in the approach used by the MSPD. In November, there were appeals to the people to leave the streets, stop demonstrating, and attempts to halt the revolution, whereas, in December the emphasis was for people to go back to work in order to contribute to the future stability and success of Germany. The MSPD also increased its criticism of the Imperial regime and the Bolsheviks. It needed to define itself and its vision for the future of Germany, finding useful comparisons in those two regimes. Contrast allowed the majority socialists to establish what they were not. Finally, in December the MSPD was in a position to address the matter of legitimacy. The prospect of a general election in January 1919 lessened the importance of whether or not the emergency interim governance of the MSPD and councils had any legal foundation. Ebert was able to acknowledge the lack of legitimacy but look ahead to the January general election and emphasize it as a moment of democratic triumph for Germany; a moment that would establish the first German national government legitimated by democratic principles and founded on the expressed will of the people.

Over the course of the revolution, the socialist government had become confident enough in its position to aggressively address its base as well as the German people. The socialists may have been uncomfortable with their sudden ascension to power after the abdication of the Kaiser and resignation of Prince Max, but electoral politics placed them

in a familiar and more comfortable position. The election of delegates and the upcoming national assembly provide an impetus and concrete point of focus for the party. Using more aggressive rhetoric to spur the proletariat into action could have been dangerous during the revolutionary agitation of early and mid-November; in December, it served to bolster the regime and provide momentum going into the national assembly and general election.

### *Die Rote Fahne - December 1918*

The hostility demonstrated by the Spartacists in *Die Rote Fahne* in November 1918 continued into December, with special emphasis on the national assembly. Articles expressed animosity towards Ebert, Scheidemann and the MSPD regime; attacked the national assembly; and advocated the continuation of the revolution.

The Spartacists were not participants at the national assembly and demonstrated against Ebert, Scheidemann, and the MSPD regime in dissatisfaction. The MSPD party organ was accused of contributing to the counterrevolution and the reconstitution of capitalism.<sup>115</sup> *Vorwärts* was further attacked for its efforts to make factory elections into a voting scandal. An article in *Die Rote Fahne* claimed the voting by workers in factories embodied the two parties' conflicting views: "there the old bourgeois parliamentarianism, here the organizing of revolutionary workers' representation."<sup>116</sup> The Spartacists had been trying to distinguish themselves from the MSPD since they separated and formed their own political party. Their efforts during the revolution revolved around claiming to be the true voice of the proletariat. The Spartacists worked to undermine Ebert, Scheidemann,

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<sup>115</sup> "Die Sünden der Revolution." *Die Rote Fahne*. 10 December 1918.

<sup>116</sup> "Der Anschlag der Scheidemänner das Rätesystem." *Die Rote Fahne*. 15 December 1918.

and the MSPD in general. Their expanded efforts in December focused on implicating the party organ *Vorwärts*, along with the MSPD leadership, in stalling the revolution and actively working with the counterrevolution.

The national assembly was a focal point of German politics in December 1918. Representatives from the councils throughout Germany met in Berlin to determine the course for the German state. The radical members of the Spartacus League gave an ultimatum to Ebert and the MSPD that the national assembly "must demonstrate if the workers' and soldiers' councils will work"; whether they would be scapegoats or the heart of the revolution.<sup>117</sup> The Spartacists accused the national assembly of being afraid of the peoples' voices as well as a general election.<sup>118</sup> Ultimately, the national assembly was declared a failure and a continuation of the politics of the "old regime."<sup>119</sup>

All of the hostility and dissatisfaction with the national assembly was expressed in the form of mass demonstrations called by the Spartacus League. These demonstrations were against Ebert, Scheidemann, and the national assembly; they were in favor of a stronger national council system. The demonstrations were designed to continue agitation of the proletariat and had specific revolutionary aims.<sup>120</sup> Mass demonstration were viewed by the leadership of the proletariat as a tool to educate the masses: a demonstration was "a revolutionary sacrifice, it was political struggle, a political school

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<sup>117</sup> "Die Regierung Ebert-Haase und die A.- und S.-Räte." *Die Rote Fahne*. 10 December 1918.

<sup>118</sup> "Sie kneifen vor den Massen Aus!" *Die Rote Fahne*. 19 December 1918.

<sup>119</sup> "Selbsmord des Rätekongresses." and "Reichskonferenz der A.- und S.-Räte." *Die Rote Fahne*. 20 December 1918.

<sup>120</sup> "Heute Montag große Massendemonstration!" *Die Rote Fahne*. 16 December 1918. The goals were published with one announcement of mass demonstrations on the 16th of December: 1) the establishment of a German socialist republic; 2) all power to be placed with the workers' and soldiers' councils; 3) the executive council be made the highest legislative and governmental power, elected by the central council; 4) the removal of Ebert (*Ebertschen*) from the council of people's deputies; 5) immediate action for the protection of the revolution: disarming the counterrevolutionary forces, arming of the proletariat, and creation of a Red Guard; 6) immediate call from the central council to the proletariat of all nations to build workers' and soldiers' council in order to realize the socialist revolution.

for the masses."<sup>121</sup> Workers and soldiers were not expected to have the same political experience or literary background as the revolutionary vanguard; demonstrations allowed for political education through action, speeches, and solidarity.

December 1918 saw the continuation of revolutionary agitation by the Spartacists as well as continued hostility towards Ebert, Scheidemann, and the MSPD regime. However, by the time of the national assembly the MSPD had regained its confidence and was no longer allowing other groups to determine the character of the political environment; the Social Democrats began to push back and exert themselves as a confident political party. The exclusion of the Spartacist leaders from the national assembly pushed the Spartacist League to the sidelines in an attempt to marginalize their direct influence on the political process.

#### *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung - December 1918*

The national assembly served as a focal point for Social Democrats to rally around as well as demonstrate their plan for the future of Germany. Likewise, it provided conservative elements in Germany an opportunity to reflect on the changes underway and continue voicing their concerns for the emerging Social Democratic system.

The revolution of November developed at the expense of centuries of monarchical tradition. German conservatives and supporters of the monarchy viewed the events of November as the destruction of what the Hohenzollern dynasty had spent five hundred years building: the dream of a strong German empire. In their view, the empire had provided order, security, a fair economic existence, and freedom in which Germans could live, work and develop. This was attained through the firm ruling hand of a monarch. The

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<sup>121</sup> "250 000 Demonstranten!" *Die Rote Fahne*. 17 December 1918.

opinion expressed in the *Kreuzzeitung* was only a centralized and strong government could achieve the same successes as the Hohenzollerns; they challenged the socialists to the task of rebuilding the "wounded and bloodied fatherland."<sup>122</sup> This was a hollow challenge and unrealistic comparison. It demanded of the councils something that was against their very nature. The councils were inclusive while the previous system had been exclusive. It assumed that only an authoritative government, like the imperial monarchy, could create the conditions deemed necessary for prosperity.

Coverage of the national assembly by the *Kreuzzeitung* emphasized conflict between the socialist factions. The Spartacist demonstrators intruded on the meeting<sup>123</sup> and there was great tension between the Majority and Independent Social Democrats.<sup>124</sup> Reminders of the divisions amongst the socialist political parties were used to show that despite all the talk of solidarity from the MSPD, little had been done to unite them on a single political agenda. The *Kreuzzeitung* also reprinted headlines from other conservative newspapers demonstrating religious concerns regarding the socialist leadership. These articles claimed that the councils were anti-Christian and that the revolutionary government in Bavaria was attempting to install a Zionist regime.<sup>125</sup>

The purpose of the national assembly was to bring socialists together and create a plan for Germany's future. Conservatives also took advantage of the opportunity to express their visions. Conservatives were tasked with formulating their own program for

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<sup>122</sup> "Aufruf für die Wahl zur Nationalversammlung. An unserer Freunde im Lande." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 4 December 1918.

<sup>123</sup> This is the same demonstration mentioned in the Dec 16th and 17th issues of *Die Rote Fahne*. The six objectives printed in the December 16th announcement of the mass demonstration were read to the national assembly, according to coverage by *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung* from December 17th..

<sup>124</sup> "Reichskonferenz der A.- u. S.-Räte." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 17 December 1918.

<sup>125</sup> "Aus anderen Blättern." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 17 December 1918. The anti-Semitic fears are directed primarily at Kurt Eisner, the leader of the Bavarian Peoples' Republic, and his finance minister Edgar Jaffe, both of whom were Jewish.

a post-Hohenzollern Germany with the notable qualifier of not taking a step backwards.<sup>126</sup> The socialist future of Germany was not guaranteed, it was still possible to "gather all forces to maintain law and order" and "give the new constitution a legal form."<sup>127</sup>

There were many concerns amongst conservatives. They did not believe the councils or national assembly held any legal basis or authority and feared the socialization of the economy, especially heavy industry. There were also regional grumblings of secession and looming peace negotiations that threatened to fracture the empire. The viewpoint advanced in the *Kreuzzeitung* was for a policy akin to *Großdeutschland*: the union of German speakers and German culture under German governance.<sup>128</sup> They were of the opinion that no German land and no German people should be under foreign control, that all Germans should work together for the future of their nation: "alienation from the empire could provoke [the Germans]."<sup>129</sup>

Conservatives continued to mistrust the Ebert regime and the council system. Germany was rapidly transitioning from a long established monarchical tradition into a new, and as yet undefined, paradigm. The turmoil of the war and the aftermath in Germany created a great deal of concern and unease amongst the German conservatives that was represented by the articles in *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung*. They believed they were witnessing the end of the German lifestyle they had known and voiced their

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<sup>126</sup> "Aufruf für die Wahl zur Nationalversammlung. An unserer Freunde im Lande." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 4 December 1918.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> This view was an interpretation of the right to self-determination as represented in President Wilson's 14 Points.

<sup>129</sup> "Ebert über die Einheit des Reiches." *Die Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*. 15 December 1918.

displeasure. The concerns presented by conservatives were rebuffed by the more confident MSPD.

### CHAPTER 3

## VYING FOR POWER: THE SPARTACIST UPRISING OF JANUARY 1919

*Vorwärts* - January 1919

The MSPD's rhetorical strategy continued to evolve in the new year as the general election approached on January 19th. The results of the national assembly in December provided the MSPD with the support needed to continue their work towards the general election. In the eyes of the MSPD, the majority had spoken and bestowed upon them the right to lead the people as a provisional, interim government. Consequently, the themes of legitimacy and unity, present in December 1918, ceased to be prominent elements of Social Democratic rhetoric. The effort to define themselves in contrast with the Imperial regime was similarly diminished. In place of these prior themes, the MSPD was forced to address the sudden and violent week-long uprising of the *Spartakusbund* that began on the 5th of January. First, in response to the armed uprising in the streets of Berlin, articles in *Vorwärts* attempted to characterize and define both groups in order to contrast their actions and political aims. Second, the Spartacists were contextualized as a minority versus the will of the majority. Third, the MSPD's discussion of the imminent election created continuity with the rhetoric of December while they continued to promote it as proof of the democratic foundation of a new Germany. Finally, the MSPD began considering the post-election environment and the role of Germany in a new international order and the revival of national interests in order to unite Germans in a common cause.

The armed revolt by the Spartacists, many of whom were previously members or supporters of the SPD, posed a significant problem for the majority socialists and was a

direct challenge to their governance. The MSPD made efforts to distance itself from the radical politics of the Spartacists and the Bolsheviks in December 1918. Their rhetorical efforts in January 1919 emphasized the differences between the two groups.

The dismissal of Emil Eichhorn as the chief of police sparked mass protests in Berlin.<sup>130</sup> A small group of armed Spartacists occupied the building housing *Vorwärts*, the official party organ of the MSPD. The conflict progressed into bloody urban combat. The MSPD denounced the actions of the Spartacists and called for the workers of Berlin to support the Social Democratic government as elements of the army advanced to "suppress the second Berlin revolution in blood."<sup>131</sup> The Spartacists received many different labels from the MSPD press during the uprising, all of them aimed at characterizing the revolutionaries in the worst possible way. The Spartacists were repeatedly labeled as a minority group and criminals.<sup>132</sup> From the perspective of the Social Democrats, the violent uprising was being conducted by a small group of petty criminals that acted in the manner of a gang as they looted and pillaged Berlin in their effort to establish an oppressive and brutal tyranny.<sup>133</sup> Friedrich Stampfer called the Spartacists dictators and "wicked civil war agitators who are at once as wicked as the

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<sup>130</sup> Waldman, p165-171. Eichhorn was a member of the USPD and it was believed that, in an action of direct support for the radical elements of the left, he ordered the police to remain neutral and not intervene during the Christmas incident of December 1918. The MSPD led provisional government relieved him of his position; he refused to comply and found support amongst the radical left.

<sup>131</sup> "An die Leser des "Vorwärts!" *Vorwärts* 6 January 1919. The 5th Spandau Guards regiment was tasked with putting an end to the revolution.

<sup>132</sup> "Aufruf des Zentralrats aller A.- und S.-Räte." and "Eichhorns Abschied. von Friedrich Stampfer." *Vorwärts* 7 January 1919.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

world war agitators of yesterday."<sup>134</sup> The week spanning the Spartacist uprising is filled with articles that demonized the Spartacists.<sup>135</sup>

In addition to labeling the Spartacists as criminals, terrorists, and barbarians, the articles in *Vorwärts* provided an interpretation of their actions and goals. The Spartacists were portrayed as desiring a second world war to push the worldwide revolution.<sup>136</sup> They were proclaimed to "intend no freedom, they want terror, [Spartacus is] the dictator of machine guns!"<sup>137</sup> In the eyes of the majority socialists, the Spartacists desired an opportunity to initiate civil war<sup>138</sup> and overthrow the MSPD regime.<sup>139</sup> They were a small group that succumbed to the delusional ideas of their leaders and attempted to attain power through violence.<sup>140</sup>

In contrast to the *Spartakusbund* the majority socialists were cast as champions of the people; they were the antithesis of the Spartacists. The Social Democrats were against violence<sup>141</sup>, anarchy, and oppression.<sup>142</sup> They stood for free elections, free speech, and free press.<sup>143</sup> They supported the right to self-determination<sup>144</sup> and the interests of the entire population.<sup>145</sup> The Social Democrats aspired not to anarchy, but a higher order.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> "Eichhorns Abschied. von Friedrich Stampfer." *Vorwärts* 7 January 1919.

<sup>135</sup> Articles are littered with such rhetoric labeling the Spartacists as barbarians and vandals, treasonous, corrupt, dictators, thieving common criminals, etc. "Ebert-Scheidemanns Drohung" *Vorwärts* 9 January 1919; "Der Entscheidungskampf" *Vorwärts* Extra Evening Edition 9 January 1919. "Strassenschalcht Wilhelmsstrasse -- Unter den Linden" *Vorwärts* Extra Evening Edition 9 January 1919. "Der 4. Kampftag!" *Vorwärts* 10 January 1919. "Der Entscheidung zu!" *Vorwärts* 10 January 1919.

<sup>136</sup> "Der Entscheidungskampf" *Vorwärts* Extra Edition 9 January 1919.

<sup>137</sup> "Der 4. Kampftag!" *Vorwärts* 10 January 1919.

<sup>138</sup> "Der Entscheidung zu!" *Vorwärts* 10 January 1919 and "Gewaltsamer Tod Liebknechts und R. Luxemburgs." *Vorwärts* 17 January 1919.

<sup>139</sup> "Der Entscheidungskampf" *Vorwärts* Extra Edition 9 January 1919.

<sup>140</sup> "Vier Tage vor der Wahl." *Vorwärts* 15 January 1919.

<sup>141</sup> "Der Entscheidungskampf" *Vorwärts* Extra Edition 9 January 1919.

<sup>142</sup> "Wähler, Wählerinnen!" *Vorwärts* Extra Edition 9 January 1919.

<sup>143</sup> "Der Entscheidungskampf" *Vorwärts* Extra Edition 9 January 1919.

<sup>144</sup> "Der Entscheidung zu!" *Vorwärts* 10 January 1919.

<sup>145</sup> "Das Document der Schuld. An das deutsche Volk!" *Vorwärts* 14 January 1919.

<sup>146</sup> "Gewaltsamer Tod Liebknechts und R. Luxemburgs." *Vorwärts* 17 January 1919.

The MSPD wanted to continue the current path towards the general election, on the 19th of January, that would create a legislative body with the power to form a government. Their primary aim was to "help shape the constitution of the Republic to correspond with the interests and wishes of the productive people so that the necessary foundations for the building of socialism could be established."<sup>147</sup>

The MSPD led the interim government based on the decisions of the national assembly held in December 1918. They continued to act on the results of the national assembly as an approval of their course of action and a mandate to continue their plans. Articles in *Vorwärts* frequently contextualized the violent January conflict as the minority revolting against the majority. The conflict unfolding in the streets of Berlin was "a small minority against the greater will of the people, especially the Berlin population and against the pronounced will of the workers' and soldiers' councils throughout Germany."<sup>148</sup> They viewed the decisions made by the national assembly in December as the expression of the people's will and the actions of the Spartacists were in defiance of the majority. Friedrich Ebert, in an address to the troops that liberated the *Vorwärts* building, insisted the national assembly was the true expression of the people and that it garnered support from the majority of the people.<sup>149</sup> The Spartacist uprising represented a counterrevolutionary threat to the provisional government and the MSPD called on the majority, that had expressed its will at the national assembly, to demonstrate their support

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<sup>147</sup> "Vier Tage vor der Wahl." *Vorwärts* 15 January 1919.

<sup>148</sup> "Aufruf des Zentralrats aller A.- und S.-Räte." *Vorwärts* 7 January 1919.

<sup>149</sup> "Eberts Aufsprache an die Truppen." *Vorwärts* 12 January 1919.

for the regime by fighting to protect the revolution and the Ebert-Scheidemann government.<sup>150</sup>

The insistence on the part of the majority Socialists that the Spartacists needed to abide by the decisions of the majority was a reflection of the MSPD's commitment to democratic principles, the establishment of a democratic foundation for Germany, and a return to civility. Democracy cannot function if minority groups resort to violence, assassination, and armed revolt to achieve the goals they could not obtain politically. The deaths of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were leveraged by *Vorwärts* to condemn all sides of the conflict and shame the offending parties towards a path of civility. An article covering the deaths of the two leading Spartacist figures claimed them to be victims of the violence that they started.<sup>151</sup> Although they were accused of being responsible for plunging Berlin into a civil war, that caused numerous deaths on both sides, the deaths of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were considered to be tragic and unjustified; murder was condemned as an unacceptable political tool.<sup>152</sup> If the uprising of the Spartacists was not sufficient to force a return to civil dialogue, then the barbarity evidenced by the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Liebknecht and Luxemburg gave renewed urgency to the need for civil discourse in German politics.

The prospect of the general election became a beacon for the MSPD and Germany as a whole. The 19th of January was repeatedly looked to as a turning point for the nation. The new national assembly was to be "elected by the freest voting in the world" to

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<sup>150</sup> "Arbeiter! Genossen! Alle Mann auf die Strasse! Die Revolution ist in Gefahr!" *Vorwärts* 7 January 1919.

<sup>151</sup> "Gewaltsamer Tod Liebknechts und R. Luxemburgs." *Vorwärts* 17 January 1919.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

establish "a government of [the people's] wishes."<sup>153</sup> The MSPD claimed to "protect the right of self-determination before all counterrevolutionaries or terrorist efforts" and, in contrast to their opponents, placed sovereignty in the hands of the people.<sup>154</sup> As the day of the election neared, articles in *Vorwärts* began reminding readers over the age of 20 to vote and provided them with instructions to ensure their ballot was counted.<sup>155</sup>

The national election in January was cast as "the beginning of a new epoch" for Germany.<sup>156</sup> It was believed that only a democratic government supported by the majority of the people could enter meaningful peace negotiations with the Entente.<sup>157</sup> Philip Scheidemann argued "the Germany that goes to the peace table [would be] a different one than that which went to war in 1914" as a result of the election.<sup>158</sup> Germany was in the midst of a fundamental transition taking it from an imperial monarchy to a free, democratic state. The new Germany further aspired to be a member of the international community and was "willing to integrate itself into a lasting peace league of free and equal peoples."<sup>159</sup> Scheidemann appealed to the right of national self-determination inherent in President Wilson's Fourteen Points when he declared Germany

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<sup>153</sup> "Das Document der Schuld. An das deutsche Volk!" *Vorwärts* 14 January 1919.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> "Auf zur Wahl!" *Vorwärts* 19 January 1919.

<sup>156</sup> "Es lebe die Sozialdemokratie!" *Vorwärts* 19 January 1919.

<sup>157</sup> This argument was put forth in an article by Philipp Scheidemann, on the 19th of January 1919, that echoes events within the German leadership under Prince Max during the turmoil of October 1918 as articulated by Klaus Schwabe (*see bibliography*). Interpretations of three notes from President Woodrow Wilson led to the understanding that the Kaiser's abdication was necessary to "insure better armistice terms and better peace terms." (Schwabe, p104) The German leadership came to the conclusion that Wilson needed Germany to have a democratic government before meaningful negotiations would go forward. Based on Scheidemann's article, these beliefs were perpetuated by the MSPD government led by Ebert and Scheidemann.

<sup>158</sup> Scheidemann, Philipp. "Friedenswahlen." *Vorwärts* 19 January 1919.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

open to those who wanted to leave as well as welcoming those who wanted to join, specifically Austria, with an interpretation that suggested a future *Großdeutsch* policy.<sup>160</sup>

In addition to the appeal to the larger international Germanic community, efforts were made during the Spartacist uprising to lay the foundation for national pride and unity. The MSPD distanced itself from, and defined itself as different than, the Bolsheviks in Russia. The fear of Bolshevism continued to be used as a tool to demonstrate the differences between social democracy and other types of socialism or communism that were emerging. The Spartacists were linked with the Bolsheviks as being an extension of Russian despotism; the uprising was an example of the intentional expansion of Russian anarchy designed to "unleash a new world war."<sup>161</sup> It was imperative for Germany to defend its borders against the Russian threat. The same article clamoring for defense against the Bolsheviks also declared a need to "protect against the Polish annexation of [German] land."<sup>162</sup> The positing of supposed external threats was meant to provide the German people with common goals. The return of some 800,000 German POWs being held by the western powers, primarily France, was also employed with the same purpose.<sup>163</sup> These matters were not intended as a distraction from the tumult raging in the streets of Berlin, rather they were elements of a forward looking plan to restore common cause and unity to a fractured populace. These articles in *Vorwärts* provided potential common ground for the German people to rally around once the Spartacist threat had been addressed, the election had transpired, and a national government was established.

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* "Wir öffnen die Tür unseres Hauses nicht nur damit, wer will hinausgehen, sonder auch, damit wer will, hereinkommenkann. Wir grüßen Deutschösterreich!"

<sup>161</sup> "Das Document der Schuld. An das deutsche Volk!" *Vorwärts* 14 January 1919.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> "800 000 Deutsche in Kriegsklaverei." *Vorwärts* 15 January 1919.

During the month of January, the MSPD's rhetorical strategy made it clear that the Spartacists were not a viable alternative to the social democracy of the MSPD. The Spartacists emerged as being concerned with their own interests and not those of Germany. The repeated connections made between the Spartacists and the Bolsheviks made the Spartacists look more like Russian agents, an extension of Bolshevism, than a political party concerned with the future of Germany and German interests. In contrast, the MSPD emerged in January with the well being of the German people and nation as the focus of their efforts, especially as advocates of an open democratic process. While not detailing specifics of future policies, the Social Democratic government of Ebert and Scheidemann began to address future national concerns and Germany's place within the post-war international community. Meanwhile, the Spartacists continued to push the narrower concerns of the working class and alluded to the spread of communism in an effort to initiate the worldwide revolution.

#### *Die Rote Fahne - January 1919*

The Spartacist Uprising marked the peak of power for the German communists led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. The armed actions of the revolutionary workers and soldiers in Berlin were sparked by the dismissal of police president Emil Eichhorn and came to a bloody conclusion with the intervention of government troops and the murders of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. The chaos and turmoil in the streets of Berlin was reflected in the newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*, supporting the revolutionary workers and soldiers. Whereas clear rhetorical themes emerged in prior months, the coverage of the weeklong uprising did not focus on broader issues of the revolutionaries,

aside from the ultimate long-term goal of realizing the revolution. Instead, *Die Rote Fahne* provided a reactive, moment-to-moment commentary on the course of events. As a result, the articles in the newspaper draw upon a wide range of topics but do not linger on any individual one, with the exception of the negative opinion of the MSPD government. At the beginning of the uprising articles were presented with a confident disposition. However, as the week progressed and the government responded to the actions of the armed revolutionaries, the tone in *Die Rote Fahne* became increasingly hostile towards the Ebert-Scheidemann government.

The dismissal of Berlin police president Emil Eichhorn was viewed as a direct attack on the revolution by the Ebert-Scheidemann regime.<sup>164</sup> *Die Rote Fahne* defended Eichhorn against the accusations levied by *Vorwärts* that he was a supporter of revolutionary extremists and complicit in the Christmas eve conflict between revolutionary sailors and government forces.<sup>165</sup> The revolutionary newspaper speculated that Eichhorn was being removed for political reasons. It argued that Eichhorn and his revolutionary security force needed to be out of the way in order for Ebert and Scheidemann to move against the revolution.<sup>166</sup> *Die Rote Fahne* ventured further into conspiracy theories when it implicated the government in a secret plan to launch a surprise offensive in June 1919 against Poland and Russia.<sup>167</sup> This speculation was based

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<sup>164</sup> "Eichhorn entlassen. Ein neuer Handstreich Ebert-Scheidemanns gegen die Revolution." *Die Rote Fahne* 5 January 1919.

<sup>165</sup> On December 24, 1918, there was a military confrontation between revolutionary sailors occupying the Imperial Castle and government troops. Initial success by the First Guards Cavalry Rifle Division against the sailors was followed by an intervention of armed workers and portions of Eichhorn's security forces. (For further reading see Waldman, pp144-146)

<sup>166</sup> "Der neueste Streich der Gegenrevolution." *Die Rote Fahne* 5 January 1919.

<sup>167</sup> "Politische Uebersicht." *Die Rote Fahne* 5 January 1919.

on reports of soldiers taking up arms to defend the border against a potential Polish invasion.<sup>168</sup>

The progression and initial success of the revolution in Berlin inspired the Spartacists to confidence. The outbreak of mass demonstrations and the occupation of a number of newspapers, including *Vorwärts* and *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung*, led the revolutionaries to proclaim that the Ebert-Scheidemann regime had reached the zenith of its power and crumbled overnight.<sup>169</sup> The position of Ebert and Scheidemann was deemed untenable in a speech by Liebknecht. He labeled the majority socialist leaders as guardians of capital that must be overthrown in order for the masses to have peace.<sup>170</sup> He believed the proletariat was maturing and coming to understand the extent of its power as it went through the political school of revolution.<sup>171</sup> There was a sense of urgency that the revolution was in danger; that the masses needed an appropriate target for their energy and swift action.<sup>172</sup> However, it was expected that the government would produce a response and the revolutionary press did its part to help prepare for the inevitable confrontation. The expectations were that the government would lay siege to the revolutionary elements and were biding their time to sharpen their swords before a surprise attack against the Spartacists.<sup>173</sup>

As the revolution sputtered, the rhetoric in *Die Rote Fahne* quickly became more hostile and critical of the government. The circumstances that led to the current state of affairs were revisited by *Die Rote Fahne* in an attempt to explain the actions of the

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<sup>168</sup> *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* printed an article about the danger of invasion two days later on January 7th.

<sup>169</sup> "Was machen die Führer?" *Die Rote Fahne* 7 January 1919.

<sup>170</sup> "Liebknechts Rede" *Die Rote Fahne* 7 January 1919.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> "Eichhorn Bleibt." *Die Rote Fahne* 6 January 1919 and "Was machen die Führer?" *Die Rote Fahne* 7 January 1919.

MSPD government and denounce the majority socialists as capitalists or bourgeoisie masquerading as socialists. The revolutionary government that emerged on November 9th, headed by Ebert and Scheidemann, was believed to have the interests of the revolutionary proletariat at its core. The majority socialists had proclaimed support of the revolution in the past and suddenly, once in power, did everything they could to hinder and stall the revolution.<sup>174</sup> Socialists and revolutionaries had believed they were going to be led to the socialist revolution by a socialist government, instead the revolutionary wave was confronted with the wall of the Ebert-Scheidemann regime.<sup>175</sup> From the perspective of the revolutionary workers and soldiers, once it was clear that the majority socialists were not on the side of the revolutionaries, they were necessarily on the side of the bourgeoisie and the capitalists. Thus Friedrich Ebert and Philip Scheidemann became mortal enemies of the revolution. They were "executioners in the name of capitalism." Holding the "bludgeon of capitalism" they "needed the blood of the proletariat to prove they wanted to fulfill their duties faithfully to capitalism" while they hid behind the phrases of freedom, brotherhood, and the interests of the proletariat. The Ebert-Scheidemann government allied itself with the remnants of the German military; purposefully sanctioning and arming what the Spartacists viewed as reactionary, counterrevolutionary forces. The actions taken by the majority socialists were clear evidence that the leaders of the self-proclaimed socialist government, who had "held their hands over the Russian revolution of 1917 and blessed it", were not socialists. "All illusions over the function of Ebert-Scheidemann [were] destroyed."<sup>176</sup> In the face of defeat, the revolutionaries resorted to the most basic ideas of Marx and Engels to attack

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<sup>174</sup> "Versäumte Pflichten." *Die Rote Fahne* 8 January 1919.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> "Der Totenkampf der Ebert-Scheidemann." *Die Rote Fahne* 10 January 1919.

the MSPD government. True socialists fought with valor, in defiance of death, against the whip of the slaveholder for the eradication of the rule of capital and the abolition of class dominance.<sup>177</sup>

The victory of the majority socialists over the Spartacists was viewed by the revolutionary press as the permanent establishment of the "white terror."<sup>178</sup> The Ebert-Scheidemann government's first efforts after the uprising was over were to disarm the revolutionary workers and soldiers, which displeased the revolutionaries who felt it was the bourgeoisie who needed to be disarmed.<sup>179</sup> The quelling of the Spartacist threat, and their subsequent disarmament, led to popular oppression of revolutionary supporters. *Die Rote Fahne* published a number of eyewitness accounts of murders perpetrated by government troops.<sup>180</sup> The perceived bloodthirsty nature of the majority socialist regime was cited as going above and beyond any actions taken by the Hohenzollerns.<sup>181</sup> The article claimed that no example of brutality and terror could be found in German history and drew comparison to the Russian Czars.<sup>182</sup> The crimes committed by the Ebert-Scheidemann regime in the name of the free press were presented with an added element of hypocrisy as the revolutionary presses suffered a worse fate than the bourgeois press had under Spartacist or Imperial censorship: editorial offices were militarily occupied and materials were destroyed, editors and street vendors were arrested, delivery personnel were dispossessed of their bicycles and mistreated, customers of the revolutionary press

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<sup>177</sup> "Und dennoch siegt die Revolution!" *Die Rote Fahne* 12 January 1919.

<sup>178</sup> The model of the Russian revolution was co-opted by the various groups of the German revolution. The Kaiser took the place of the Czar (old Imperial/Monarchic order), the Ebert-Scheidemann regime was equated with Alexander Kerensky's Russian republic (white revolution/terror), and the Spartacists/Communists represented Lenin and the Bolsheviks (red).

<sup>179</sup> "Entwaffnung." *Die Rote Fahne* 13 January 1919.

<sup>180</sup> "Der weiße Schrecken." *Die Rote Fahne* 13 January 1919.

<sup>181</sup> "An Unsere Leser!" *Die Rote Fahne* 15 January 1919.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

were attacked and beaten by government troops and bourgeois mobs, technical assistants were heckled, and equipment was sabotaged.<sup>183</sup>

The Spartacist uprising was a brief moment of expressed proletarian power in Berlin. The initial successes of the Spartacists inspired confidence that the Ebert-Scheidemann regime had reached the peak of its power and was faced with inevitable downfall. Once the government assessed the situation and military forces began advancing on Berlin, the mood amongst the revolutionary left quickly changed. Friedrich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann, and other prominent majority socialist leaders became increasingly viewed as pawns of the bourgeoisie and agents of capitalism; in essence, they had betrayed their previously professed revolutionary principles. The suppression of the Spartacist uprising fractured the German left and created wounds that would persist for many years to come.

*Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung - January 1919*

The turmoil in January 1919 had a profound impact on Berlin and all of Germany. The Spartacist Uprising was viewed by some as the second phase of the revolution; an observation based on the example provided by the recent conflict in Russia between Lenin's Bolsheviks and the Kerensky government. The similarities and relationships between the Spartacists and the Bolsheviks were key elements as the conservative press attempted to report on and make sense of the events taking place in Berlin. These events were the headlining moments of January, with the bulk of the news focused on them, but there were several other topics being presented to the readers of the *Kreuzzeitung*. Unlike the MSPD or Spartacist newspapers, the *Kreuzzeitung* continued to incorporate

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

international news, often on the front page, that was left out by its counterparts. The international coverage of the *Kreuzzeitung* mainly focused on news from the nations of the Entente and the opening of the Paris peace conference. The election on the 19th of January also took a prominent position in the newspaper.

The Spartacist Uprising in January marked the point of greatest turmoil of the German revolution. Germany went through a number of significant changes in the months immediately following the ceasefire, but the uprising was viewed as a fundamental turning point. The *Kreuzzeitung* presented the Spartacist uprising as the second phase of the revolution that would once again put Berlin through "large scale agitations and riots of a revolutionary character."<sup>184</sup> Large demonstrations signified the beginning of new efforts by the extreme contingent of workers and soldiers to express their will. These efforts quickly progressed into armed street fighting, barricades, and the occupation of buildings in Berlin. As the Spartacists occupiers entrenched themselves, the *Kreuzzeitung* noted that the course of events was ultimately dependent on how the "great leading parties" would respond to the Spartacist Terror.<sup>185</sup> Furthermore, the conservative press's opinion continued to be expressed from an authoritarian point of view: the enemies of the government needed to bear the consequences of their actions and the government needed to demonstrate that it was prepared to use any and all means to restore order.<sup>186</sup> This dominant and authoritative view paralleled the belief expressed in December 1918 that the firm hand of the monarch had been the impetus behind an orderly and prosperous German existence. The Ebert-Scheidemann regime was criticized

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<sup>184</sup> "Die Zweite Phase der Revolution." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 7 January 1919. "In der Tat deutet alles darauf hin, dass Berlin nun zum zweiten Male Aufregungen und Unruhen revolutionären Charakters in grossen Ausmaßen wird durchmachen müssen."

<sup>185</sup> "Schreckensherrschaft in Berlin" *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 9 January 1919.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

for its hesitation and procrastination, which allowed Liebknecht and the Spartacists to acquire territory day by day.<sup>187</sup> By not acting swiftly and decisively, the *Kreuzzeitung* argued, the removal of Spartacist forces in Berlin required more sacrifices than would have been necessary if the government had acted sooner.<sup>188</sup> However, it is noted that the government's strength and support amongst the people grew hour by hour.<sup>189</sup> The people of Berlin supported the government and one article in the *Kreuzzeitung* went so far as to argue that the Government needed to allow the arming of greater masses of revolutionaries.<sup>190</sup> The articles in the *Kreuzzeitung* were not supportive of the majority socialist government outright, but the concerns and criticisms of Ebert and Scheidemann were significantly reduced compared to December. The greatest complaint presented in the *Kreuzzeitung* was the time it took for the government to act. Once deployed, Government troops acted with great care, whereas the Spartacists were repeatedly cited as extraordinarily brutal.<sup>191</sup>

Newspaper offices were primary targets of the Spartacists during the uprising. *Vorwärts* accurately stated that the goals of the Spartacists were not military, but intellectual as they tried to spread their ideas.<sup>192</sup> The *Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* was also subjected to censorship by Spartacists.<sup>193</sup> The limited editions of the newspaper repeatedly provided warnings to that effect.<sup>194</sup> The terror of Spartacus was preventing the distribution of the *Kreuzzeitung* and the editorial staff would not and could not work

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<sup>187</sup> "Die Kämpfe in den Strassen Berlins." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 12 January 1919.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> "Schreckensherrschaft in Berlin" *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 9 January 1919.

<sup>190</sup> "Die Kämpfe in den Strassen Berlins." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 12 January 1919.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> "Der Entscheidung zu!" *Vorwärts* 9 January 1919.

<sup>193</sup> "Es gibt keine Ruhe!" *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 7 January 1919.

<sup>194</sup> "Die Zeitungsnot in Berlin." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 9 January 1919.

under such conditions.<sup>195</sup> The control of the presses in Berlin demonstrated to the conservatives at the *Kreuzzeitung* the character of the Spartacists first hand.

The coverage of the deaths of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg by the newspaper presented a definitive articulation of how the two prominent radical figures were perceived by German conservatives. No remorse was conveyed by the conservative *Kreuzzeitung*: "Few people will give the human feeling of compassion precedence before the feeling of relief. Liebknecht and Luxemburg have brought unspeakable disaster to Germany, they have brought up hatred and the bloodiest terror."<sup>196</sup> They were both deemed fanatics: Liebknecht hated all that existed and Luxemburg was a clever and calculating Bolshevik of true Russian and Polish descent.<sup>197</sup> According to the *Kreuzzeitung*, there were deep connections between the Spartacists and the Bolsheviks. They claimed to have reports of Bolsheviks in German uniforms, even women firing machine guns.<sup>198</sup> Karl Radek and other soviet agents were providing the Spartacists with money and some Spartacists fighters admitted to being paid large sums to fight.<sup>199</sup> The connections between the Bolsheviks and the Spartacists were clear to conservatives. There was little, if anything, to distinguish a Spartacist from a Bolshevik, especially when an individual wearing a German uniform could be either.

In addition to coverage of the uprising, issues ranging from German national sovereignty to the opening of the peace conference in Paris made their way into the newspaper during the week of turmoil. The territorial integrity of Germany was a matter

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<sup>195</sup> "Der Kampf gegen Spartakus." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 12 January 1919.

<sup>196</sup> "Liebknecht und Rosa Luxemburg erschossen." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 16 January 1919. The quote in German used the verb großziehen, suggesting an almost parental relationship with the revolution.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> "Spartakus und Sowjetregierung." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 16 January 1919.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

of primary significance. Articles in the *Kreuzzeitung* expressed great concern that the German empire would either be broken apart, invaded, or states would secede. One article in particular appealed to the right of self-determination inherent in President Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points with concern for the future of Germany as a whole nation.<sup>200</sup> The immediate cause for this concern was the occupation of the Rhineland by French troops as an excuse for France to create a military frontier and retake lands lost during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.<sup>201</sup> The annexation of German territory was considered a potential impetus for further fracturing of the German nation.<sup>202</sup> Furthermore, there was fear of a Polish advance into German territory and discharged German soldiers were reportedly taking up arms to defend the border.<sup>203</sup> The threat of Poland and the Bolsheviks to the east spurred an assertion that it was the duty of every German government to watch and protect the eastern border, not only to protect Germany, but to protect humanity.<sup>204</sup> In addition to matters regarding the physical integrity of German land, news from the Entente and peace conference made headlines in the *Kreuzzeitung*. The most prominent of these headlines regarded Marshall Foch's statement that the stipulations of the ceasefire had not been met and further penalties were to be imposed on Germany in the form of heavy industrial equipment. The claim was regarded by the *Kreuzzeitung* as a "mockery of justice" because the Entente had not fulfilled its obligation of providing foodstuffs for the German people.<sup>205</sup> Despite the

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<sup>200</sup> "Die Aufteilung Deutschlands." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 7 January 1919.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> "Der Vordringen der Polen." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 7 January 1919.

<sup>204</sup> "Spartakus und Sowjetregierung." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 16 January 1919.

<sup>205</sup> "Fochs neue Bedingungen." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 16 January 1919.

turmoil in the streets of Berlin, the readership of the *Kreuzzeitung* continued to be appraised of international issues that other newspapers were not covering.

Finally, the national election on the 19th of January was marked as an exceptional day in the conservative press just as it was by the socialists. The election represented a new era for Germany. According to the *Kreuzzeitung*, there was some concern amongst the public that the Ebert-Scheidemann regime could ignore the outcome of the vote if it did not to affirm their position in power. These concerns were reportedly allayed by statements from the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* that the Ebert-Scheidemann regime called itself a provisional government and stood by democratic principles and the supreme will of the people.<sup>206</sup> The election itself drew the greatest participation ever recorded at that time and saw significant participation by women, who were exercising their right to vote for the first time.<sup>207</sup> In stark contrast to the earlier street fighting, the *Kreuzzeitung* noted that Berlin was especially calm for the day of the election, but government troops were stationed throughout the city, prepared to act at a moments notice.<sup>208</sup>

The blatant hostility and mistrust directed towards the MSPD government dwindled as the majority socialists fought the Spartacists. Articles in the conservative press did not foray into full support of the socialist regime, however there were moments when common threats aligned the goals of the majority socialists and conservatives. The *Kreuzzeitung* continued to provide a broader perspective than its socialist counterpart. The readers of *Vorwärts* were mainly provided with updates on the revolution, both in

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<sup>206</sup> "Die Stellung der Regierung zum Wahlergebnis." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 20 January 1919.

<sup>207</sup> "Die Wahlen in Berlin." *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* 20 January 1919.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

Berlin and around the nation, while the readers of the *Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* kept larger German interests as a part of the conversation.

## CONCLUSION

As World War I drew to a close in the fall of 1918 the German government went through a series of transitions that placed power in the hands of the majority Social Democratic Party. The MSPD had existed only in opposition until their ascension to power on November 9th, 1918. They immediately began to advocate for democratic principles and the power of the people. However, their rhetoric and actions were those of a party unprepared to govern and lacking a program to move forward. They abandoned many of their Marxist ideals and worked to promote stability rather than advance a revolutionary proletarian agenda. The revolutionary *Spartakusbund* realized the non-revolutionary character of the majority socialists and used increasingly aggressive rhetoric, denouncing the MSPD leadership as false socialists. Conservative rhetoric in *Die Neue Preußische Kreuzzeitung* joined in the criticisms of the Ebert-Scheidemann regime. There was a concern amongst conservatives that bolshevism was spreading and the German way of life they had come to know was at an end.

In December 1918 the provisional government led by Ebert and Scheidemann began adjusting to its leadership role and became more confident in their position. The national assembly of workers' and soldiers' councils created an environment of electoral politics that placed the MSPD leaders in a more comfortable and familiar position. The national assembly and the prospect of a national election in the near future gave the governing party a concrete focus. The increased confidence shown in December brought the matter of legitimacy to the forefront. The election scheduled for January 19th, 1919, allowed the MSPD to reiterate their belief in democratic principles and cast themselves as champions of the people. The Spartacists continued their agitation in December,

promoting a stronger council system in opposition to the Ebert-Scheidemann regime and national assembly. Meanwhile, conservatives questioned the legality and legitimacy of the councils and national assembly. The rhetoric in the *Kreuzzeitung* continued to reflect fears of the end of German traditions as well as socialization and the possible fracturing of the German empire.

The Spartacist uprising in January 1919 marked a turning point in the German revolution. The majority socialists survived a direct, armed challenge to their governance. The uprising provided the MSPD with an opportunity to squash their revolutionary adversaries and demonstrate once and for all that the majority socialists were not associated with the Bolsheviks. Their actions in suppressing the Spartacists uprising became direct evidence of their belief in the supreme will of the people and the new democratic epoch that was to begin on the 19th of January. The revolutionaries continued to attack the regime as false socialists. From their perspective, the actions of the interim government proved for all to see that Ebert and Scheidemann were not socialists, but puppets of the bourgeoisie and agents of capitalism. While the actions of the government created deep wounds in the German left, it ameliorated some of the concerns of the conservatives. Articles in the *Kreuzzeitung* did not advocate support of the majority socialists but the blatant hostility and mistrust of the previous months was no longer a prominent theme.

The Majority Social Democratic Party came to power in a turbulent and complex moment of German history. Their experiences as a party of opposition under the empire had a profound impact on their actions and methods once power was thrust upon them. Furthermore, their governance was continually under attack from both ends of the

political spectrum. The revolutionary period after World War I was a crucible for the Majority Social Democrats. Their evolution shows a fledgling governing party quickly maturing into a competent and authoritative governing force. The electoral victories in January 1919, along with the first two elections in the Weimar republic, provide further proof of the effectiveness of their governance.

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