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Socialist Women and ‘Urban Space’: Protest, Strikes and Anti-Militarism, 1914–18

Matthew Stibbe, Anna Hammerin, Katharina Hermann and Ali Ronan

‘The revolution has a female face’. So reads the title of a book originally written in Russian and first published in 2021 in German translation by Olga Shparaga, a former philosophy lecturer at the European College of Liberal Arts in Minsk. Now a Vilnius-based activist and educational spokesperson for the Belarusian coordination council led by exiled former presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Shparaga presents a feminist reading of her country’s recent history of strikes and protests. For her, the demonstrations in Minsk and other Belarusian cities following the falsified presidential elections in August 2020 represent a ‘revolution in progress’ in which women have played and continue to play a ‘central role’:

On 12 August, after three days of post-election terror unleashed by the [Lukashenko] regime against the peaceful marchers, they formed their first chain of solidarity ... [They] led Belarusian society out of its paralysis and initiated the large-scale demonstrations in the weeks that followed. To this day they take part in the dissidents’ protests, assert the right to a political voice, and insist that the link between state violence and domestic violence be recognised.¹

This chapter argues that the European-wide food protests, strikes and anti-militarist demonstrations that preceded and accompanied the revolutions in Russia in 1917 and Central Europe in 1918–19 also had a female face, one, moreover, that is perfectly visible if one knows how and where to look and is sufficiently motivated to do so. It is not an attempt to essentialize these revolutions as female, to the exclusion of men and male actors. Nor is it an attempt to deny the role of class in explaining wartime strikes and protests, and in shaping the cultural meanings ascribed to them by contemporaries. It is, however, intended as a counter-narrative to mainstream accounts which tend to be based solely on male scripts and subjectivities, and then, uncritically, to universalize from the

particular. It also seeks to challenge scholarship that, either by default or by design, has gendered the revolutions that ended the First World War as male first and foremost.²

In what follows, we establish a countervailing method for uncovering the voices of European women protestors, strikers and anti-militarists during the years 1914 to 1918 which involves placing particular emphasis on the ‘small-scale’, the ‘everyday’, the ‘non-hierarchical’ and the ‘innovative’. We are influenced here by the ‘spatial turn’ in recent histories of social movements, particularly German historian Julian Aulke’s study of urban spaces in the German Revolution from November 1918.³ As Aulke shows, spatialization of protest and conflict can be an especially useful way of bringing to light voices of people who are usually dismissed as ‘unpolitical’ and placing them at the heart of narratives of revolution. This can also be applied to the pre-revolutionary period before 1917–18. According to Aulke, ‘it is especially the time around the beginning of the 20th century, with its high point in the revolutionary era, when the masses, located in the public space of the streets and squares, begin to identify with the rapid dynamism and new qualitative dimension’ of politics beyond established parliamentary parties and trade unions.⁴ In this chapter, we aim to recapture some of the hitherto overlooked ‘dynamism’ inherent in socialist women’s experiences of the spatial dimensions of wartime protest.

One particular aspect of wartime protests that has been largely neglected in the previous scholarship is the close ties of solidarity between working-class women and teenagers of both sexes, all of whom were increasingly visible in public spaces. True, in his famous 1907 pamphlet *Militarism and Anti-Militarism*, which was translated into several languages before the war, the German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht had already claimed: ‘He who has the youth has the army.’⁵ This was a reference first to fears that under Prussian state-of-siege legislation, the military could be called out in a peacetime strike-breaking capacity, and second to hopes that young working-class soldiers might refuse to perform such a role if the anti-militarist propaganda of the social democratic Left could reach them first. But in 1914–15, as even Liebknecht was forced to concede, the military all over Europe had been surprisingly successful in mobilizing most seventeen- to twenty-one-year-old men into the armed forces, and whisking hundreds and thousands of them away to war, including tens of thousands to their deaths. Particularly after 1916, as we will show, it was the thirteen- to sixteen-year-olds and their mothers who were now in the vanguard of national and cross-border struggles against *wartime* militarism.⁶

More generally, we are interested in the new informal alliances that socialist women formed across the 1914–18 period, and deliberately foreground these over the emphasis in many other studies on formal (and often pre-existing) local, national and transnational networks.⁷ The Marxist urban geographer Edward W. Soja has written that urban streets are the 'vulnerable point' in the capitalist system, a space that can bring together 'landless peasants, proletarianized petty bourgeoisies, women, students, racial minorities, as well as the working class itself'.⁸ However, we will argue that a gendered and historical perspective can add to this by recognizing urban spaces as points of vulnerability for masculine tropes about the need for 'order', 'discipline', 'hierarchy' and vertically structured forms of solidarity only. We illustrate this by focusing on four case studies: Germany (including the German-speaking parts of Habsburg Austria), Britain, Sweden and Switzerland. Germany, Austria-Hungary and Britain were of course belligerents from August 1914 onwards, while the other two countries remained neutral throughout the period under review. However, what all of these different cases have in common is that the framework for political protest had to take place in the context of a war-induced state of emergency, understood both in narrowly legal terms – the suspension of key civil rights such as freedom of speech, association and assembly under state-of-siege laws and wartime defence regulations – and in a discursive sense. Indeed, while for men, the wartime 'emergency' was often understood in abstract terms, as a matter of mobilization and related labour shortages, conscription, falling birth and rising death rates, requisitioning, economic planning and so on, for women and children, it increasingly came to be about something more immediate – having enough food to eat on a daily basis and daring to hope for peace while knowing that the real enemy, death or life-changing illness through 'severe nutritional deprivation', industrial accidents or lack of fuel and medicines, was advancing ever closer to their, and their children's, doors.⁹ In Germany alone, as one recent study reveals, 'between 1914 and 1917 the accident rate ... for wage-earning women tripled and for minors doubled', while 'the accident rate for men actually declined'. This reflected 'the failure to train women and juvenile workers with no experience in the production of metal and chemicals' and the fact that men already 'had some experience of this type of work'. And yet

In many cases the women themselves chose the most dangerous jobs because they paid better. Women also often preferred night shifts because they left free time during the day to stand in food lines with their families.¹⁰

Two other considerations shape our approach to socialist women's history in the chapter. First, although protests and strikes grew in intensity in the last two years of the war, we begin in the winter of 1914–15 because this is when urban working-class women first began to demonstrate their potential to spearhead opposition to war outside of formal hierarchies, particularly, but not only, as Ute Daniel argues, in the German case.¹¹ The link between more famous personalities in the already well-networked international socialist women's movement – such as Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai and Margaret Bondfield – and the now barely remembered female activists who engaged in underground activities or street protests in favour of peace will be laid out in the first section of the chapter, on the March 1915 Bern conference and the run-up to it. However, in the remaining three sections – on protests, strikes and anti-militarism – the largely anonymous and forgotten female activists of urban and suburban neighbourhoods will be at the centre of our analysis. Their voices, in other words, will provide the foundation for our argument in favour of a new, de-hierarchized understanding of protest during wartime. In particular, we are interested in highlighting the potential that anti-war protests brought for new types of solidarity beyond the centre – between peace campaigners, women munition workers, army deserters, fatherless teenagers, disabled ex-soldiers, missing foreign persons and POWs stranded thousands of miles away from home. These solidarities in turn called forth new ways of envisaging what a just society might look like.

Secondly, in choosing to focus on examples of urban protest drawn from neutral as well as belligerent countries, we are conscious that we are making a contribution to the urban history of the Great War more generally.¹² As Pierre Purseigle has noted in a recent essay, understanding how cities and their predominantly civilian populations experienced the years 1914 to 1918 requires us to 'pay particular attention to the geography of belligerence'.¹³ However, in addition we would contend that a feminist approach to urban geographies of war forces us to rethink the historical and gendered meaning of the term 'belligerence' and the related concepts 'militarism' and 'anti-militarism', in order to embrace territorial spaces that, while neutral or at least not *at war* in official terms, were still involved, at state and international levels, in the (co)-construction of military norms and in the accompanying reproduction of material and social relations. As we shall see below, this also made urban and suburban landscapes in Switzerland and Sweden far from neutral spaces when it came to the gendered politics of wartime protest and the articulation of new solidarities among, between and beyond socialist women activists.

The International Socialist Women's Conference in Bern and the Bern Peace Manifesto

European-wide socialist opposition to the First World War can be traced back to the International Socialist Women's Conference that took place in the Swiss capital Bern from 26 to 28 March 1915. Only around twenty-five delegates were able to attend this event: seven from Germany, six from Russia, four from England, three from the Netherlands, two from Switzerland and one each from France, Italy and Poland.¹⁴ Most of them came as private individuals, without a mandate from their respective national organizations. However, Clara Zetkin, the conference's chief instigator and chair of the women's section of the now defunct Second International, enjoyed the backing of the 'Gruppe Internationale', a revolutionary opposition group within the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) led from September 1914 by Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches and Franz Mehring. They encouraged her to establish contact with like-minded activists in other European countries. For instance, with their knowledge, she sought out links with the Swedish Social Democrat women's leader Anna Lindhagen, a city councillor in Stockholm and editor of the journal *Morgonbris* (Morning Breeze). The latter took a firm anti-war stand and in December 1914 published an appeal by Zetkin – first written in November 1914 – for women of all countries to oppose the war and campaign for an immediate peace without annexations.¹⁵

Zetkin also responded positively to a call from female anti-war socialists in Britain in January 1915 for cross-border contacts to re-establish peace and made a trip to Amsterdam in February–March 1915 where she met members of the Dutch section of the Socialist Women's International (SWI), including Mathilde Wibaut and Henriette Roland-Holst.¹⁶ A January 1915 'Open Letter to the Women of Germany and Austria' was signed by 180 British female anti-war activists, including representatives of the British Section of the SWI, among them Independent Labour Party (ILP) members Margaret Bondfield, Marion Phillips and Ada Salter. The latter also made sure it appeared in the ILP newspaper *Labour Leader*, edited by the pacifist and No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) founder Fenner Brockway. Together with Mary Longman, secretary of the British section of the SWI, Bondfield, Phillips and Salter attended the March 1915 Bern conference, where they represented the anti-war ILP, the Women's Labour League and women trade unionists.¹⁷

Zetkin's choice of the Swiss capital as the venue for this conference was no accident. Although Switzerland was not a belligerent nation, the outbreak of war

had diverse impacts on its society and politics. As a neutral country in the centre of Europe, it was an important refuge for deserters and draft-dodgers and attracted pacifists and socialists from all over the continent. Indeed, Lenin and Nadeschda Krupskaja, Inessa Armand, Willi Münzenberg, Angelica Balabanova and others spent some years in Switzerland during the war.¹⁸ There was also a home-grown anti-war movement with especially strong links to Germany. Thus extracts from Zetkin's November 1914 appeal to socialist women of all countries to position themselves against the war was first published on 1 December 1914 in the Swiss Social Democrat women's newsheet *Die Vorkämpferin* (*The Female Pioneer*), its German equivalent, *Die Gleichheit* (Equality), being unable to print it at all due to censorship restrictions.¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, it was published in full in the *Berner Tagewacht*, a Swiss daily newspaper which was then still available for purchase in Germany.²⁰ Meanwhile, *Die Vorkämpferin*, taking advantage of the lack of pre-publication censorship in Switzerland, sponsored a number of women's peace assemblies in the winter of 1914–15. After an anti-war demonstration in Zurich on 18 December 1914, it reported that as well as large numbers of men, 'over one thousand women' had taken part.²¹ Another demonstration, held in March 1915 under the slogan 'Girls! Boys! Join the Free



Figure 2.1 Anti-war demonstration on the Quaibrücke in Zurich, March 1915. Willi Münzenberg (wearing a flat cap) is standing directly in front of the banner which reads: 'Girls! Boys! Join the Free Youth'. Reproduced with permission of the Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Zurich, Switzerland.

Youth' and organized by the then leader of the Swiss Socialist Youth, Willi Münzenberg, inspired Zetkin to call for similar action to revive the SWI on an anti-war basis.²² This was the background to the deliberations at Bern at the end of March 1915.

Most accounts of the Bern conference focus on the split that emerged between a 'pacifist' majority of twenty-one led by Zetkin and a radical, proto-Bolshevik minority of six led by Inessa Armand, which consisted of five of the six Russian delegates and the one delegate representing Poland.²³ The majority resolution put forward at the conference called on all 'women of the working classes' to unite in opposition to the war and in solidarity with their husbands and sons conscripted into the opposing armies. At the behest of the British delegation, it also announced that the SWI, 'notwithstanding the fundamental differences in the socialist and bourgeois conceptions of the peace question, expresses [its] sympathy with non-socialist friends of peace and in particular with the forthcoming International Women's Peace Congress in The Hague'.²⁴ By seeking to amend the majority 'pacifist' resolution and instead calling for a 'class against class' policy – in other words, a policy of encouraging armed proletarian uprisings across Europe in order to seize control of all governments on behalf of the working class – Armand is said to have anticipated the position adopted by Lenin and the so-called Zimmerwald Left in September 1915.²⁵ From this point of view, the Bern conference was a 'lost opportunity to have taken the first step towards the creation of a Third International'.²⁶ It may have been the 'first platform of the international anti-war movement', but in no way could it be regarded as being on a par with the manifesto of the Zimmerwald Left, because there were 'too many [ideological] inconsistencies attached to it'.²⁷

The debate over whether the resolutions passed at Bern were truly socialist or not, in other words whether they paved the way for a decisive break on the part of the international socialist women's movement with pre-war Social Democracy and a shift towards Communist internationalism, or whether that break had to wait until the Zimmerwald meeting in September 1915, or later still to the founding of the Comintern in Moscow in March 1919, only gets us so far, however. In particular, it obscures two other important features of the Bern conference: first, its anti-capitalist thrust, and second, its specific appeal to proletarian women to fight for an end to the 'murderous' conditions not only in the trenches, but also on the home fronts, and to build new local, national and transnational networks to support this. A motion by the British delegation, which was translated into one of the conference's main resolutions, criticized what it claimed was

the endeavour of individual capitalists and capitalist groups to drive up the prices of the necessities of life and of the entire army and navy, to depress wages and to worsen working conditions in general, but especially to worsen the exploitation of women and children. Against such practices ... the working people should fight with all determination regardless of the domestic political truce [in their respective countries] ... In all nations, the behaviour of capitalists stands in blatant contradiction to the lip service they pay to patriotism ... [In practice] they represent an international fraternity of profit-hunters.²⁸

The image of the war presented here was, on the one hand, of an all-encompassing conflict that suited the interests of capitalists and arms manufacturers in every European country, not just belligerents, and conflicted with the interests of workers everywhere. On the other hand, it was also a view from the edges, laying bare the suffering caused by the war on a smaller scale, particularly as it affected women and children, and channelling the possibility of protest into the specific, the immediate and the everyday. As Toni Sender, one of the German delegates at Bern and a future Social Democratic Reichstag (parliamentary) deputy for the city of Frankfurt am Main, put it, the war had to be stopped and sovereignty



Figure 2.2 Women working in an arms factory, c. 1917, place unknown, Germany. Source: Alamy.

renegotiated for the sake of 'the wives of soldiers.' By this she meant the working-class women whose 'loved ones were in the trenches' and who, by 1915, were often faced with the choice of hunger/'near famine' for themselves and their children or 'working in munitions factories', in other words for the capitalist war machine.²⁹

And what Sender said of Frankfurt is also confirmed in Sean Dobson's study of another German city, Leipzig, where, from 1915 onwards,

the mortality of young women increased much more quickly than that of other groups, probably as a result of their high accident rate on the job, the fact that they had to work long hours while also caring for a family, (often without a man's wage), and their propensity to deny themselves food in favor of their children.³⁰

Socialist women and anti-war protest

The delegates at Bern, and those who helped to distribute the conference's final Manifesto in flysheet form, understood that the domestic economic bargaining that fuelled the continuation of the fighting after the winter of 1914–15 had also made it harder to see the war from the (male-defined) centre of mainstream labour movements as a capitalist war fought against the material interests of the working class. More specifically, some skilled working men, especially in the metal industries, were paid higher wages (while being offered conditional exemptions from military service) in return for their loyal support for their country's war effort. Some working-class women also got better-paid jobs, at least in comparison with the kinds of employment they might have been in before 1914, although they were rarely paid the same rate as men for performing the same tasks.³¹ Their bureaucratically organized and easily hoodwinked trade unions had joined majority Social Democrat party groupings in national parliaments in expressing cautious support for the war (or, in neutral countries, for emergency economic and mobilization measures). This meant, among other things, agreeing not to call strikes for the duration of the fighting. Many socialist women indeed abandoned their pre-war internationalism in 1914 and opted to support their nations' respective war efforts, arguing, among other things, that this would allow female workers to find their own political 'space' and social recognition as crucial members of the organized labour movement. Henriette Fürth, for instance, a pro-war Social Democrat activist in Frankfurt am Main, wrote in 1917:

We abhor war now as we have done in the past ... but we nevertheless give our sanction to the battle that has been forced upon us ... and are prepared ... to sacrifice all we possess, our body and soul, until the very last drop of blood has been spilt, so that ours will be a victory, a final victory bringing a peace in which Germany will bring to all the blessings of a civilisation and culture worthy of mankind.³²

In the meantime, the poorest-paid and least unionized women – whether their menfolk were fighting and dying at the front or working long hours on the home front or both – were in the best position to see how higher prices, the no-strike policy and depressed wages for the majority were actually making the workers worse off, while allowing the war to continue indefinitely.

Those who did participate in anti-war protests after 1914 typically had some prior experience of class struggles, albeit less through the socialist parties and unions organized by men and more through community-based forms of confrontation with authority.³³ During the war, this also made them well-placed to experience feelings of solidarity with teenagers, war cripples and soldiers unwilling to go back to war after periods of leave, as well as enemy POWs.³⁴ Those women who stayed working in the traditionally female-dominated textile industry instead of moving into munitions, for instance, in parts of Saxony,



Figure 2.3 Women and children queuing for bread in First World War Vienna, exact date unknown. Source: Archiv der Bundespolizeidirektion Wien/Vienna.

Greater Vienna or Lancashire, 'did not share in the general improvement in women's wages and were badly hit by war-time inflation'.³⁵ This, together with the 'endless lines for food, hyperexploitation at work, hungry children and loved ones in danger at the front' or, in neutral countries, mobilized to defend the nation's borders, all bred a particular resentment among working-class women towards militarism and the soldierly and civilian elites who profited from it.³⁶

This was one reality. Political persecution by the army and the state was another. After the winter of 1914–15, socialist women risked arrest if they involved themselves in anti-war or anti-militarist activities, and especially if they tried to establish contact with deserters in hiding or revolutionary groups in exile abroad. In Britain, for instance, this is what happened to members of the No-Conscription Fellowship, originally formed to oppose the introduction of compulsory military service into Britain, but from 1916 forced also to defend individual conscientious objectors threatened with jail after refusing to obey the new mandatory call-up.³⁷ As more and more pacifist men went to prison or into hiding, women assumed much of the campaigning work. Joan Beauchamp, for instance, who worked for the NCF and went on to become a founder member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and her fellow NCF members Violet Tillard and Lydia Smith were all prosecuted and the first two imprisoned towards the end of the war for publishing anti-war material, for failing to reveal the whereabouts of NCF printing presses and/or for refusing to pay fines.³⁸ Similar things happened to the eighteen-year-old socialist and anti-militarist Bertha Volk, a Swiss-born German national who was arrested in 1918 and sentenced to a six-month period of imprisonment followed by expulsion from Switzerland after distributing literature calling on Swiss soldiers not to shoot at strikers;³⁹ to the London-based anarchist Lilian Wolfe, imprisoned in 1916 alongside her partner Tom Keell for 'printing a leaflet against the war';⁴⁰ and to Florence Exten-Hann, a working-class anti-war activist and secretary of the South-East branch of the NCF, whose house was raided as late as 1919 'by police ... collecting information on "subversives"'.⁴¹ The militarist system was certainly not on the side of proletarian women or those who campaigned alongside them to mobilize protest from the margins.

Beyond the world of illicit printing and campaigns against conscription, food riots were the principal arena in which anti-war sentiment began to take shape. They first appeared in major urban conurbations of continental Europe in autumn 1915 and grew in number and intensity as the war continued, even reaching the American cities of New York, Boston and Philadelphia in 1917.⁴² They also brought home to independently organized women what Klaus

Weinhauer refers to as the ‘power of localization’, in other words the ability of micro-level protests to challenge state authority indirectly by encouraging previously marginalized actors to engage actively in the (re)ordering not only of ‘food distribution’ but of the related urban-political categories of ‘space, time, experience and expectation.’⁴³ Although the police sometimes sympathized with the ‘demands’ and ‘rightful concerns’ of the adult women present, the appearance of young protestors of both sexes at street demonstrations typically made them more prone to use violence.⁴⁴ Following disturbances in Leipzig in May 1916, for instance, the local police called in the reserve army and issued an order banning all under-eighteens from gathering in the streets after 8pm, even though they were aware that the protests had been started by housewives in response to escalating shortages and food prices.⁴⁵ The events escalated into the police resorting to the sharp ends of their sabres, followed by press reports blaming the male teenagers for the police’s ‘upsetting abuse of older women and young girls.’⁴⁶

Such ‘objectifying’ of working-class adolescents as ‘wayward’ troublemakers in fact brought young people and women food protestors closer together in a ‘quest for [the rearrangement of] local order.’⁴⁷ Because in warring and even in some neutral countries, censorship measures meant that the local press was banned from reporting on events such as these, working-class women were also suddenly confronted with the immediate injustice of their teenage children being accused of having caused mayhem and physical damage through rioting, when in fact much of the rampaging was done by the police and military. In the aftermath of the Leipzig food riots, for instance, 106 minors, but only eighteen adults, were prosecuted after being arrested for public order offences by the police.⁴⁸ Censorship, meanwhile, became a personal, communal and family issue, as proletarian women, foreign POWs and war-weary soldiers on leave were brought closer together politically by the growing mistrust that all had for what was reported in the newspapers about teenagers at home and ‘the situation at the front and in the army.’⁴⁹

Under wartime emergency regulations, all forms of protest had to be organized carefully to prevent the police from being able to trace them back to the source. Simply being suspected of helping to distribute anti-war pamphlets, or of arranging for them to be published abroad, could lead to non-judicial arrest and detention.⁵⁰ It was also tiring and dangerous, as the work of distribution in urban areas usually had to be ‘started each day after sunset’ and was typically carried out by women walking the streets alone, irrespective of considerations of personal safety.⁵¹ In Stockholm and other cities in neutral Sweden like

Norrköping, Gothenburg and Malmö, many of the women who came out in support of the localized hunger protests in spring 1917 complained of being manhandled and threatened by the police. Worse still was the threat of being *byråskriven* ('bureau-written' or entered onto the register of the national bureau for prostitutes), for a woman registered as a prostitute was forced to endure physical examinations twice per week and to accept limitations on her freedom of movement.⁵² Furthermore, to be bureau-written meant to be 'dead to one's family'.⁵³

In Berlin, several of the female Young Socialists detained on suspicion of disseminating banned anti-war literature were also accused of prostitution and/or were held in 'protective custody' at Police Headquarters on Alexanderplatz alongside 'wayward' teenage girls arrested for 'soliciting'.⁵⁴ They were assumed to have been morally as well as politically misled and therefore faced a kind of 'double jeopardy' – as young women *and* as socialists – to which their male counterparts were not exposed. Yet illegally distributing leaflets or engaging in food protests symbolized more than a willingness to risk imprisonment, if that is what it came to. It was also about asserting one's physical and bodily presence in the (nocturnal) urban landscape and reclaiming it as political 'space' that belonged to women as much as men.⁵⁵

This was especially important as, alongside state repression, women campaigners on the anti-war left also had to contend with the indifference and sometimes even the active hostility of men within the ranks of mainstream Social Democratic parties and trade unions. In part this was a hangover from ideological battles between left and right in the last decade before the outbreak of war, when conservative voices had used scare-mongering tropes such as 'strike terrorism' and 'disorderliness' to delegitimize labour protest and reinforce calls for state/military intervention against 'unruly' or 'unpatriotic' trade unions. In response, as Amerigo Caruso has shown, the organized labour movement itself took up slogans like 'order' and 'discipline' in part as a 'defensive gesture against the [conservative] discourse about the irrationality of the masses'.⁵⁶ The war, however, and the decision by most Social Democratic parties to prioritize national defence over international solidarity, sharpened this tendency considerably, and made its gendered aspects more visible. Sophie Ennenbach, a senior functionary in the SPD in Frankfurt am Main since 1909 (and close collaborator of Toni Sender), remembered that after she refused to give information to the police about who might be responsible for the local distribution of flyers containing the Bern Peace Manifesto, she was accused by male party leaders of bringing the party and its patriotic pro-war policy into disrepute:

In general, it was now hardly possible to have a personal conversation with a great number of party comrades without them losing all self-control. One forgot all friendliness, all courtesy and – only cursed the revolutionaries [*die Revoluzzer*]. On the other hand, it was equally unpleasant to hear the political tirades coming each day from the mouths of the press in their lead articles. All of this drove us to secretly get together with all the women who were trying to find a way out of all the horror.⁵⁷

Ennenbach, Sender and other anti-war socialist women were eventually forced out of the Frankfurt SPD and into the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), founded in 1917.⁵⁸ But even before then, the fact that attempts were being made by the party to pressure them into silence meant that they had to organize and meet separately from the pro-war majority, a situation faced by many other anti-war leftists across Europe during this period.⁵⁹ Indeed, the situation in Frankfurt was probably more typical of the European-wide scene than that in Berlin, where the anti-war left was better organized and had already taken control of many of the local Social Democrat associations by early 1916.⁶⁰ A leading role here was played by socialist women from the German capital, including four who had travelled to Bern in March 1915: Martha Arendsee, Käthe Duncker, Agnes Fahrenwald and Margarete Wengels.⁶¹

In Frankfurt, one solution, which reflected Ennenbach's pre-war experience of organizing educational work among proletarian housewives and domestic servants, was to focus agitation on quite specific local issues, including industrial accidents in the city's munitions factories where women were employed in increasing numbers:

Who could forget the women with the sulphur-yellow, emaciated faces who ... had survived an explosion in the munitions factory, how it would have rained torn-off arms and other parts of the body as the deadly pressure hurled upwards [seconds] before? And yet so many women willingly worked 'in the munitions' because at least it meant they 'earned something'.⁶²

Female socialist anti-war activists also sought to show their solidarity with women food protestors gathered at major markets. In Switzerland, for instance, the war led to increasing inflation and shortages of essential goods. The country was highly dependent on food and fuel imports, and these were significantly disrupted by the Allied economic blockade of the Central Powers and counter-measures taken by Germany and Austria. Unemployment, especially in the first years of the war, and the missing salary of the men who were recruited for

military service led to financial problems for working-class households. As the war continued, increasing numbers of middle-class families needed support too.⁶³ In 1914, 220,000 Swiss men were mobilized to defend the country's borders. Soon thereafter, the number of soldiers on active duty began to decline, reaching a low point of 38,000 in November 1916,⁶⁴ but significant numbers of men were still called up for several months' service in any given year. At that time, there were no family separation allowances and the jobs of these men were not secure.⁶⁵ The women left behind therefore had to shoulder a multiple workload to support their families while earning on average only 59 per cent of the salary of a male worker (and even less in female-identified industries like textiles, now in decline due to the war's disruption of traditional markets and supplies of raw materials from overseas).⁶⁶ These were the problems that brought the women to take to the streets. Indeed, working-class Swiss women, like their counterparts in Germany, Austria and Sweden, were far more likely to take part in outdoor protests against the continuation of the war and against local actions by military commanders and the police than they were in events to promote female suffrage.⁶⁷

Cooperation between socialist women, suffragists and youth campaigners

Middle-class women dominated national suffrage societies in all of the countries under consideration in this chapter, but after 1915, they too could also be mobilized to challenge the police brutality and sexual double-standards that characterized military rule, bringing them into contact with socialist women.⁶⁸ One example is the petition launched by the *Verein Frauenwohl Groß-Berlins* (Women's Welfare Association of Greater Berlin) to the education ministers and parliaments of all the individual German states in September 1915 demanding the abolition of the celibacy requirement for women teachers, a lifting of the ban on hiring married women in schools, and legislation guaranteeing equality of pay between male and female school-teachers. Here again, it was the uneven consequences of the war and capitalism for marginalized groups that was at stake. A married or unmarried male teacher was able to retain a superior salary *and* stay out of the trenches, while a widowed female teacher with children might be forced (back) into the classroom at a low wage by the death of her husband and an inability to feed her children on his meagre war pension alone. Meanwhile, in a nod to male sensibilities, married women whose husbands

were serving in the army were banned from the classroom, even if it made economic sense for them to be there, and unmarried women teachers had to remain celibate or risk instant dismissal (or an illegal abortion) if they became pregnant out of wedlock.⁶⁹ All in all, this made women second-class employees of the state, just as they were frequently second-class workers, with inferior rights and poorer wages, in factories. Exactly the same point was made by the pro-socialist League for the Protection of Mothers (*Bund für Mutterschutz*) in its petition against a proposed new Reich law restricting female access to contraception in 1916.⁷⁰

In Glasgow, Scotland, it was an arbitrary increase in rents, combined with a long-standing failure by the city's landlords to carry out essential repairs to housing, that mobilized action from working-class women and middle-class reformers in the form of a rent strike. The secretary of the Glasgow Women's Housing Association was the suffragist and socialist activist Helen Crawford, who saw the potential to make rent a point of departure for political mobilization of working-class women against the war and against militarism.⁷¹ Crawford was a former member of the militant pro-suffrage Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) who had quit that organization in 1914 over its pro-war stance. Instead she joined the anti-war ILP in Glasgow and in 1915 helped to create a local branch of the pro-socialist United Suffragists, which had forty members by November.⁷² Unlike the WSPU, the United Suffragists also invited men such as the East London MP George Lansbury to become members, thus cementing the link between the ILP, the UK-wide labour movement and the suffragist cause.⁷³ Crawford supported this alliance but was definitely on its more militant wing.⁷⁴

The significance of the Glasgow rent strike for left-wing female activists should not be exaggerated; as June Hannam and Karen Hunt note, when it came to communication of ideas, 'even experienced socialist women' like Crawford 'did not break into the male dominated columns of the ... socialist press [at national level] or even the local Glasgow *Forward*'.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, in addition to contributing to the cementing of pre-existing links between the ILP, the labour movement and suffragists at national level, it also marked the emergence of new bonds of solidarity between local socialists, anti-war campaigners and middle-class neighbourhood activists to replace older political networks that had been destroyed by the majority mainstream socialists' and feminists' support for the war. In this sense, it built on ideas already foreseen by Sylvia Pankhurst and the radical East London chapter of the WSPU in 1913, including use of the slogan: 'No Vote, No Rent', which was now, in effect, extended to 'No Peace, No Rent'.⁷⁶

In Sweden, a country which like Switzerland was not actually at war during the period 1914–18, anti-militarism took the form of constant pressure on Prime Minister Hjalmar Hammarskjöld and his successors after March 1917 to engage in neutral mediation, both to bring the present war to an end, and to ensure that it was followed by a permanent peace. A starting point was the *Kvinnornas Fredssöndag* (Women's Peace Sunday) in June 1915, when about 88,000 women took part in 343 meetings all over Sweden in order to demand that the Swedish government proactively pursue an anti-militarist and pro-peace policy.⁷⁷ The above-mentioned Social Democrat women's leader Anna Lindhagen served on the organizing committee, as did working-class trade unionists Anna Sterky and Signe Svensson-Vessman, and suffragist/anti-poverty campaigner Agda Östlund.⁷⁸ An address read out at all of the 343 meetings on 'Women's Peace Sunday' called for a permanent peace based on compulsory arbitration of international disputes, the granting of female suffrage and democratic control over the foreign policy of all countries. Otherwise, the address noted, the post-war world would be stuck with the old militarist system, whereby 'states periodically enter a state of war with intervals of peace that would be used for rearmament'.⁷⁹

Apropos the wartime economic exploitation of working-class families for the profit of big business, one form of localized protest that socialist women got involved with in Germany concerned work- and community-based campaigns to end *Sparzwangserlässe* (compulsory savings regulations) for pre-adult workers of both sexes. These were introduced arbitrarily in particular military districts where the local authorities feared that young people in work had too much money and were spending it on the 'wrong' things: gambling, smoking, alcohol. Under local regulations, a significant proportion of teenagers' earnings were paid into closed accounts controlled by the communal authorities, proletarian mothers not being trusted to act responsibly on their sons' or daughters' behalf. In Berlin alone, the number of such forced savings accounts had risen to 104,000 by 1 April 1918, containing 8.75 million marks.⁸⁰ Military commanders on the home front were seemingly unconcerned that such regulations risked further impoverishing working-class households, particularly those that relied on the wages of teenage members to pay the rent or to offset the absence or death of the father-husband. Young people and women who repeatedly distributed leaflets protesting against the war or the compulsory savings orders were closely watched by the police and were subject to arrests and house searches. This happened, for instance, in Braunschweig, where the local military commander introduced a savings regulation as early as 22 April 1916. A leafleting campaign, followed by

street protests and a five-day strike involving, among others, 120 teenage girls from a local mill construction company, the *Braunschweigische Mühlenbauanstalt Amme, Giesecke & Konegen* (AGK), forced him to withdraw it after only two weeks, causing ripple effects in the neighbouring industrial towns of Halle and Magdeburg and as far away as Düsseldorf and Berlin, where similar *Sparzwangserlässe* had also been introduced.⁸¹

What particularly worried the authorities was the apparent ‘failure’ of parents – in most cases adult women workers – to keep their children away from the protests. When a crowd of 1,800 adolescents, among them 300 girls, gathered in the centre of Braunschweig on the evening of 3 May 1916, the police appealed in vain for the adult workforce to rein them in. The following afternoon,

the police were replaced by the military. Hussars rode into the city at various points ... with rifle butts. In the meeting of the unions with factory executives, a sympathy strike by adults was considered. The next day, May 5th, the General Command withdrew the savings decree entirely.⁸²

In Switzerland, too, the year 1916 saw the first food riots and the beginnings of cooperation between unorganized women protestors and disaffected young people, backed to some extent by the official socialist women’s organizations.⁸³ Thus on 1 August 1916 (the Swiss national holiday), the Social Democratic Youth and the Social Democratic women’s association of Zurich organized an anti-militarist assembly. The police forbade the demonstration, which was planned as a follow up to the meeting. But the young people and women decided to march through the city centre, anyway, calling what they were doing a *Spaziergang* (stroll) instead of a demonstration. The labelling of the march as a *Spaziergang* in fact reflected a tactic already used in protests before the war in Germany as well as Switzerland, and had become a part of what Amerigo Caruso calls the transnational ‘democratic protest culture’ of those years.⁸⁴ The point, as Caruso explains, was to assert the right of workers to ‘occupy civic space’ by taking a ‘stroll through the streets and parks of their respective cities.’⁸⁵

At first, the police in Zurich in August 1916 stood back but after some time they called for reinforcements. Without warning, they suddenly blocked the path of the marchers and confiscated their anti-militarist banners. While the police claimed that the violence was started by the protestors, the protestors stated that the police had provoked them by seizing their banners, using their sabres and conducting arrests. The public outcry that followed was huge. Two days later, the Social Democrats organized a big solidarity demonstration for the victims of police repression. The police action was also criticized in the city assembly (*Stadtrat*).⁸⁶

When hunger protests broke out in the Swedish capital Stockholm in late April 1917 – an extension of disturbances that had already begun around two weeks earlier in the seaport of Söderhamn, more than 150 miles to the north – a similar process was observable. What started as neighbourhood protests by working-class housewives demanding bread and the lifting of ration cards, and by women factory workers opposed to rising milk prices, soon led to a confrontation between demonstrators and police in front of Sweden's parliament building, the Riksdag, with 'tens of thousands of people' taking part.⁸⁷

Subsequent media representations of the events of 1 August 1916 in Zurich and 21 April 1917 in Stockholm at best presented women participants in the demonstrations as misled, and at worst airbrushed them completely from explanations for the rise in social discontent. Yet this did not mean that women food protestors were content to leave the riskier work of defending urban space to others. Reading between the lines of press reports on unorganized street protests, hitherto unpoliticized working-class women were often the instigators, especially when the issues at stake revolved around neighbourhood economic conditions.⁸⁸ Socialist women endorsed their actions by word and deed. Few of the demonstrators were consciously pro-Zetkin or supporters of the SWI, and in the Swedish case, fewer still were likely to have been aware that Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries had passed through Stockholm on 13 April en route for Petrograd. Indeed, one recent study concedes that 'Lenin's visit [to the headquarters of the Socialist Left Party] does not seem to have had any impact' on the street demonstrations later that month in the Swedish capital.⁸⁹ However, those neighbourhood female activists who had heard of Zetkin, whether in Switzerland, Germany, Britain, Austria or Sweden, understood that fulfilling the demands of the Bern Peace Manifesto required a focus on local and small-scale action, and on horizontal forms of collaboration between different groups of anti-war campaigners as a means of gradually building up to larger-scale industrial and urban protest. This is what we turn to in the next section.

Large-scale strikes and mass action

While Dan Diner has argued in his universal history of the twentieth century that urban street demonstrations in the winter of 1918–19 in Germany and Austria 'took on a pronounced social-revolutionary character and availed themselves of the language of class',⁹⁰ in fact it seems that this was already the case during the industrial stoppages of winter 1917 and 1918, a point also made

by Veronika Helfert in her study focused in particular on the Greater Vienna region.⁹¹ The intention was ‘to force the end of the war through a political mass strike’, and in this sense women workers were key to success.⁹² They had less to lose than the men, since they could not be threatened with being called up to the army if they refused to go back to work. They were also less inclined to listen to the voices from the pro-war wing of the SPD and trade unions warning against strike action.⁹³ Anna Hornik-Strömer, one of the leaders of the January 1918 strike in Vienna and later a long-term activist in the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ), wrote in her memoirs:

The Austrian women and mothers were deeply impressed by the peace offer made by the Bolshevik government [in December 1917]. Finally, a belligerent power was extending its hand in peace, finally the murderous war would come to an end, finally women would be allowed to be human again. The striking workers from the munitions factories streamed back to their homes, laughing and crying for joy. ‘Now the killing is finally over’. ‘Now our sons and husbands are finally coming back!’⁹⁴

Shop-floor agitation to join in solidarity with the Viennese workers had already begun in several German cities in the second half of January and was led by the USPD and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. In Berlin, the Spartacist League (as the ‘Gruppe Internationale’ was now called) directly addressed women as well as male workers in a flysheet demanding ‘What our Austro-Hungarian brothers have started, we have to finish!’⁹⁵ Cläre Casper-Derfert, the only female member of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards’ executive committee, described what happened next in the German capital after the strike there had started:

On 29 January all gatherings were banned and on the [following day] the union building was occupied. Then the masses poured into the street. On 31 January there were huge demonstrations in all parts of the city. The police tried to break us apart on foot and on horseback and fired into the crowd. But we gathered again in the back streets and gave the police a hard time. On the same day the imperial government announced the intensified state of siege and the introduction of extraordinary courts-martial. The police were reinforced by 5,000 NCOs from the army. On 1 February the militarisation of all large factories was declared. A number of revolutionary workers’ leaders were arrested, including Leo Jogiches, the organisational head of the Spartacist League.⁹⁶

Although the strike collapsed in the early days of February, at its height more than one million workers across Germany came out. Alongside Casper-Derfert

in Berlin, two women are known to have been elected to the strike leadership in Dresden, a further two in Mannheim and one each in Bremen and Gotha. In Hanover, women actually outnumbered men on the local strike committee.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, in Austria, two women had already been elected onto the fourteen-strong Viennese workers' committee on 18 January 1918.⁹⁸ Although an exact figure cannot be put on the total number of women participants in the German strike,⁹⁹ alongside the strikes in Vienna and Budapest it is clear that this was, as Ursula Herrmann puts it, the 'largest peace campaign ... with the greatest participation of women during the First World War'.¹⁰⁰ Full adult suffrage, including for women, is known to have been on the list of demands made by the strike leaderships first in Vienna and elsewhere in Austria-Hungary, and then in Berlin, Dresden, Kassel, Mannheim and Nuremberg.¹⁰¹ But more than this, the strike wave represented the culmination of a fundamental change in the relationship between working-class women and the state which had already begun to take shape through localized food protests in 1915 and which was crucial in bringing about the revolutions in Central Europe in November 1918.¹⁰² Thus in Halle, women accounted for 22.7 per cent of the strikers in the machine-tool factory Wagelin & Hübner, 32.6 per cent in the machine-tool factory Weise & Sons and 60.4 per cent in the machine-tool factory Auto-Schachtschabel. In Bremen, 52.5 per cent of those on strike at the Hansa-Lloyd-Werken were women. The proportions were even higher at the Universelle cigarette machine plant in Dresden (54.5 per cent), the machine-gun parts factory Quast & Co. in Berlin (57.1 per cent), the printing workshop Kühn & Sons, again in Berlin (64.9 per cent) and the tin packaging plant Singewald & Co. in Leipzig (90.7 per cent).¹⁰³ All of these cities, except Dresden, were strongholds of the USPD.¹⁰⁴ They were also places that since 1915 had seen a significant rise in the female workforce, and in female membership of the metal workers' union in particular.¹⁰⁵ The same applied in the industrial parts of Austria, where women already made up more than 23 per cent of strikes in 1916 and 1917, rising to as much as 53 per cent in January 1918.¹⁰⁶

In Sweden, industrial unrest in 1917 was linked to growing food shortages caused by the Allied economic blockade and the counter-measures taken by the Central Powers, a rapid increase in exports to Germany at the same time as imports from North America were hindered by the United States' entry into the war, the government's inequitable rationing system amid dramatic price increases, Prime Minister Hjalmar Hammarskjöld's '[incorrect] belief that the right of Sweden to international trade would be upheld by international law', and a poor harvest in 1916.¹⁰⁷ Hammarskjöld himself was increasingly known as

'Hungerskjöld', as he was held personally responsible for the mismanagement of food distribution. On 30 March 1917, he resigned, and by May 1917, talk of revolution was in the air as hunger demonstrations grew in intensity. Most historians date the beginning of the 1917 hunger riots to the formation of a male-dominated workers' committee on 16 April in the coastal industrial town of Västervik, to the south of Stockholm.¹⁰⁸ This five-man committee (no women were elected to it) was charged with taking control of the protest movement and food supplies in the town – in conscious imitation of the soviets that had sprung up in Petrograd and elsewhere in Russia since March 1917. It issued a manifesto putting forward demands of the workers and the socialist movement: affordable food for all, distribution of land and seeds to grow potatoes, an eight-hour working day and release of those arrested during hunger protests. The Västervik manifesto then supposedly provided a model for similar hunger demonstrations throughout Sweden in the weeks that followed.¹⁰⁹

Yet in fact, as Swedish journalist and author Ulf Wickbom has shown, the unrest started not in Västervik, but in the rural, suburban sawmill areas in the coastal area around Söderhamn, to the north of the capital. Here four women, soon joined by 200 others, gathered to stage Sweden's first hunger protest on 11 April 1917, marching six miles into the urban area of Söderhamn with demands for bread and the abolition of ration cards. These women – housewives and mothers – may not have been previously politically active themselves, but they were the wives and daughters of men who belonged to the socialist movement, so were politically aware. Indeed, to cite Olwen Hufton, a historian of women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, female-led hunger protests at times of revolutionary unrest cannot be understood by generalizing from the male experience but only by focusing on women's historically reproduced 'rôle in the family economy'.¹¹⁰ It was during the years 1789–96 in Paris, at the height of the French Revolution, that working-class women (the *sans-culotte* wives) first understood how 'traditional notions of a moral economy' might be 'blended with democratic principle to produce vigilant market practice'.¹¹¹ The socialist women of Söderhamn, like their French foremothers, knew that they might fail in their efforts to go 'right to the top', but were still determined to 'confront authority ... as the innocent empowered to speak on behalf of their suffering families'.¹¹²

In fact, despite their fruitless demands to the Söderhamn Bread Bureau on 11 April for more by way of provisions, the Söderhamn women did not go home empty-handed; they returned with a new sense of their own political power and how to assert it, as a few days later, they staged a school strike, keeping their



Figure 2.4 The women's hunger protest in Söderhamn, Sweden, on 11 April 1917. Source: Photo courtesy of Bengt Herrman Private Collection via Arkiv Gävleborg, Sweden.

daughters and sons at home on the grounds that there was 'nothing to put in the children's lunch boxes'.¹¹³ The School Board attended a gathering in the public meeting house in the presence of 600 (unnamed) women and three (named) men, where it agreed to the women's demands to change the length of the school day to allow the women to feed the children what little they could before they left home and after they returned. The protocol clearly states that the School Board's agreement to the demands 'was greeted with cheers from the women' in attendance.¹¹⁴ This example was soon followed by other local communities, and the new school day was soon introduced across the entire region by the regional School Board. Thus the women were actually in charge of events and pushed through proactive social change in Söderhamn for a few weeks during April and May of 1917.¹¹⁵

The events in Söderhamn were also reported in the Stockholm and other Swedish regional newspapers – albeit in derogatory terms¹¹⁶ – and from the date of the initial action (11 April 1917), Swedish women across the country started to conduct forced inventories of farms and shops, primarily of potatoes. Meanwhile, in a further demonstration of the growing inter-dependency between suburban and urban forms of women-led unrest, on 26 April, female factory employees in Stockholm – who had undoubtedly read of the Söderhamn



Figure 2.5 Women's 6,000-strong hunger march, here passing along Vasagatan, one of Stockholm's central thoroughfares, en route to the Milk Central, 26 April 1917. Source: Alamy.

events and the activities by other women these had triggered around the country, as well as the big demonstration in front of the Riksdag on 21 April – downed tools and set out on a march to the Milk Central to protest against the high prices for dairy products. They poured out of the Stockholm shoe factory, the Munich brewery, the Tobacco monopoly, the Barnängen textile factory, the Liljeholmens jersey factory and many others – until they were 6,000-strong.¹¹⁷ A newspaper reported that even 'a large number of workers' wives and half-grown girls with braids on their backs' joined the large mass of women.¹¹⁸ The Swedish hunger demonstrations are today considered to be the largest social protest movement in the country's recent history.

Similar events took place in Switzerland, building up to a large-scale demonstration in Zurich on 10 June 1918. Here an organized procession of women with around 1,000–2,000 participants, led by the socialist Rosa Bloch-Bollag demanded that the cantonal authorities in Zurich take action to mitigate the effects of the rapidly increasing inflation and poor food supply in the city.¹¹⁹ The women tried to gain entry to the canton council meeting to put their demands, but were turned down. The police did not disperse the demonstration even though it had caused massive disruption to traffic. They argued that they



Figure 2.6 The events of 17 June 1918 in Zurich, when Rosa Bloch-Bollag led a delegation to the canton council, as presented in the *Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung*, No. 26, 29 June 1918, 322. Courtesy of Schweizer Illustrierte/Ringier Publications, Switzerland.

found themselves confronted by a mob of 'agitated women' under the influence of 'mass suggestion' and that they could not have cleared the streets without acts of violence.¹²⁰ Once again, fear of the 'crowd', rooted in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century psychology, was being used to deny political agency and rationality to women and young people in particular.¹²¹ After being denied access to the meeting, the women marched again on 14 June, this time with the support of the Zurich workers' union. After the demonstration on 17 June, a delegation of women was invited to present their demands in front of the council. It was, as the social democratic women's periodical, *Die Vorkämpferin*, put it, a historic day. It was the first, and until 1970 the only time that women were able to address the Zurich cantonal council.¹²² The events were also captured in the *Schweizerische Illustrierte Zeitung*, which published several photographs of the proceedings,

making it clear that this was a delegation of women wage-earners, led by socialist Rosa Bloch-Bollag, who were presenting their ‘complaints about the [mismanagement] of food distribution’ to the cantonal authorities.

In Munich, a slightly different situation emerged. Here, the most prominent strike leaders were not workers at all, but the German-Jewish theatre critic and socialist journalist Kurt Eisner and next to him, an academically trained Russian-Jewish immigrant and Bundist, Sonja Lerch, born Sarah Rabinowitz in Warsaw, Russian-Poland, in 1882.¹²³ Sonja was the wife of Eugen Lerch, a Francophile man of letters and aspiring professor at the Ludwig Maximilian University, who in 1918 disowned her because of her political activism. Unbeknownst to him, she had already been a member of the workers’ council in the Ukrainian port of Odesa during the Russian Revolution of 1905, before escaping to Central Europe via Constantinople and completing a doctoral dissertation at the University of Giessen in 1912 on the development of the Russian workers’ movement.¹²⁴ In 1917, despairing at the inaction of other pacifist groups, she joined a USPD-friendly discussion circle in Munich led by Eisner, and in January 1918, she was one of the key figures, alongside Eisner and the revolutionary poet Ernst Toller, in the strike movement there. Indeed, on 26 January Lerch stood as the only speaker alongside Eisner when plans for the strike were announced ‘before a crowd of 250 sympathisers’ at the Kolosseum Beer Hall, and over the next five days she accompanied him as he sought to whip up support for the walk-out at various sites across the city.¹²⁵ In total, 8,000 women munitions workers downed tools in the Bavarian capital, and on 1 February 1918, Lerch and two other women strike leaders were arrested on charges of high treason: the sisters Betty and Emilie Landauer. In addition, three men were arrested for the same offence: Eisner, Carl Kröpelin and Hans Unterleitner. Several others followed, including the otherwise unknown woman worker Anna Niedermeier, who was held for one day on 15 March and willingly told her interrogators that she had joined the strike in solidarity with her co-workers in Germany and Austria and in order to force the governments there to make peace.¹²⁶

Before her own case could be brought to trial, however, Lerch was found hanging in her cell at Munich’s Stadelheim jail on 29 March 1918, in circumstances that have never been satisfactorily explained. Eisner blamed her apparent suicide on the actions of her estranged husband, who had demanded that she quit political activism and, shortly after her arrest, had it officially announced in the Munich press that he had instigated divorce proceedings against her.¹²⁷ But it was still far from certain whether she took her own life, or whether persons unknown had a hand in her death. At her funeral in Munich’s New Israelite

Cemetery on 1 April 1918, the anarchist Josef Sontheimer interrupted proceedings to claim that she had sacrificed herself for the cause of revolution and was himself promptly arrested by police officers sent to keep an eye on proceedings and to prevent the making of political speeches.¹²⁸

According to Sontheimer and others, peace was the salient political issue in the strikes of 1917 and 1918, with the Russian Revolutions of February and October 1917 the key inspiration. The last year of the war is also interesting because of the (often invisible) work that women did in supporting industrial action in the reproductive sphere. This can be seen in particular in respect to the nationwide strike or *Landesstreik* in Switzerland on 12 November 1918.¹²⁹ The stoppage was called by a group of leading socialist politicians and trade unionists, the so-called *Oltener Aktionskomitee* (OAK), in protest at the mobilization of the military in Zurich and Bern to safeguard 'order' on the first anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. This was a clear bid for control of the streets and urban workplaces. The OAK drew up a list of nine demands, which would have to be met before any return to work would be considered:

1. the immediate re-election of the national council on the basis of proportional representation;
2. active and passive suffrage for women;
3. the introduction of a universal duty to work;
4. the introduction of the forty-eight-hour week in all public and private enterprises;
5. the reorganization of the army in the sense of a people's army;
6. securing food supplies in agreement with agricultural producers;
7. old-age and disability insurance;
8. a state monopoly for imports and exports; and
9. the repayment of public debt by the wealthy.¹³⁰

With the proclamation of the strike by the OAK on 11 November, to begin the following day, the women's action committee of the Swiss Social Democratic Party published a call in Zurich's main socialist newspaper, *Volksrecht*, for women to join the strike and be active in different ways: housewives should take care of the food supply and keep children away from the street to prevent clashes with police and military forces.¹³¹ This measure was important because schools were closed during that time due to the Spanish Flu pandemic. But keeping the children from the streets was a difficult endeavour. Luckily the socialist teachers' association of Zurich had thought about that in previous discussions about their role in the event of a possible mass strike.¹³² Together with the Social Democratic

women workers' association, they organized special childcare during the course of the strike. They collected the children and led them to areas outside the city where they spent their days playing and receiving educational classes on socialism. Women also saw it as their task to talk to soldiers and 'explain' to them that they too were part of the working class.¹³³ This meant that they took on the role of mediators between the soldiers and the strikers, asking them not to shoot their brothers and sisters, and in so doing risked arrest and imprisonment for sedition, as in the case of Bertha Volk mentioned above.

Although Swiss women have often been written out of the historiography of the *Landesstreik*, and although the strike itself collapsed after just a few days, these examples show how crucial female participants were, both as strikers in their own right, and as performers of the kind of reproductive labour which allowed others to strike in the knowledge that their children were being looked after and that they themselves would still be fed.¹³⁴

Anti-militarism and urban spaces

The two Russian Revolutions of 1917, the peace negotiations between the Bolsheviks and the Central Powers at Brest Litovsk from January 1918, ending in a formal treaty in March, and at the same time the prolongation of the war in the west, helped to intensify the anti-war activism of socialist women in the countries examined in this chapter. However, at the same time they brought to a head a growing division between pacifists on the one hand, and anti-militarists on the other, with implications for the immediate post-war period too. It therefore seems proper to end the chapter with a reflection on the extent to which wartime protest in urban spaces may have helped to sharpen, or conversely to render less relevant, the distinction between those socialist women activists who rejected violence altogether (sometimes referred to as 'absolute' or 'extreme pacifists'),¹³⁵ and those who felt that the physical attacks by governments and militaries against them justified the use of force in response (sometimes known as 'Bolsheviks', although this could be misleading and did not always imply membership of a Leninist group).¹³⁶

The pacifist/Bolshevik division among socialist women may in fact have been less important than the common focus on militarism versus democratic revolution, in other words the notion that militarists in all countries – neutral as well as belligerent – were hell-bent on standing in the way of the movement to assert the sovereign will of the people for an end to war on terms that would

benefit workers of both sexes. These sentiments were expressed, for instance, in a piece published in the Austrian Social Democrat women's newspaper, *Die Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung*, at the time of the January 1918 strike in the Dual Monarchy for 'peace, freedom and bread', in solidarity with the workers of Russia. Here the anonymous author reflected on what the struggle against militarism across Europe had come to mean in terms of the 'techniques' now deployed by the militarists to preserve their system:

The unmasked horrors of military justice, the heart-breaking misery in the internment camps, the brutalisation of the militarised workers, which resulted in severe punishment for uttering any free word in defence of human dignity, the revelations that everyday experiences in the workplace brought with them, all of this trembles in the hearts of the male and female workers. Add to that the unreasonableness of the censorship. Every blank column in the Social Democratic newspapers had to lead to the assumption that some cruel truth had again been suppressed.¹³⁷

War also turned urban streets into sites of heightened class conflict. First the police and military deployed sabres against food protestors, but by summer 1918, at least in Germany, they were using tear gas grenades, even though 'these weapons were in short supply and had actually been intended for [use against] enemy soldiers'.¹³⁸ In one case, recently documented by Christopher Dillon, security police in the Bavarian town of Ingolstadt used Bromoacetone tear gas to clear a crowd of several hundred soldiers and civilians who had gathered on 22 May 1918 in front of the town hall to protest against the war and against the abuse in custody of a local man who had gone absent without leave from the army after suffering shell shock. Ninety-seven people were arrested, among them thirty-five women.¹³⁹ Tear gas was used again at the *Türkenkaserne* in Munich on 7 November 1918 as a means of protecting the barracks from a revolutionary crowd.¹⁴⁰ For the Bavarian military, rapidly running out of material resources in 1917–18 and with the home front beginning to crumble, notions of self-preservation meant that the fight against the internal enemy had become as important, and almost as violent in terms of its 'technique', as the fight in the trenches. The same applied elsewhere, for instance, in Austria, Sweden, Switzerland and Britain. Here too, in the face of strikes and demonstrations in 1917–18, the home front increasingly turned into the 'inner front' in the battle to sustain militarism.¹⁴¹

Yet there were signs of hope that the struggle against militarism was also changing in response. In particular, socialist women as housewives and waged

workers had displayed their international solidarity through their opposition to military training in schools, a precursor to the formation of school councils (*Schülerräte*) in schools in early post-war Austria which campaigned against the continuation of military drill in the curriculum,¹⁴² and by planning for education of children in anti-militarism during strikes, for instance, in Switzerland in late 1918 ('He who has the youth, has the army!', as Liebknecht said). Hiding deserters and conscientious objectors, visiting men in prison and supporting their wives and children materially and emotionally were also activities that increased in volume in all countries in the last year of the war. In Britain, for instance, branches of the explicitly socialist and anti-militarist Women's Peace Crusade (WPC) were established in August 1917 in the industrial centres of Blackburn, Nelson, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Leicester, Melksham in Wiltshire and Belfast.¹⁴³ In 1918, the Crusade ignited in the industrial towns of Hull, Reading, Norwich, Exeter, Rothwell and Market Harborough.¹⁴⁴ By September, there were 123 branches across the country with at least two branches having 'almost 1000 members'.¹⁴⁵ In North-East Wales, at a demonstration of the Wrexham WPC, the women had let out a great cry of 'Heddwch!' ('Peace!') while at a WPC rally in Burnley the Red Flag was sung.¹⁴⁶ In Glasgow, the Crusade visited over ninety local churches while in Nelson, more than 3,000 women had turned out for the Crusade organized by socialist Selina Cooper.¹⁴⁷

In the ILP in Lancashire (then including the urban area of Greater Manchester) 'many ... shared [WPC member] Hannah Mitchell's opinion that "War in the main is a struggle for power, territory or trade, to be fought by workers, who are always the losers"'.¹⁴⁸ In Blackburn, the daughter of socialist anti-war activist Ethel Derbyshire remembered:

I've been at the ILP rooms. They used to have dances of a Saturday night, and so many of the boys had got their calling-up papers and wouldn't go; and they knew that the military police were coming for them at such a time and they would be arrested. So they used to be all there at the dance, and they used to come for them, quite young boys, eighteen, nineteen, seventeen, and they'd wait, and they'd sing the Red Flag, when they went.¹⁴⁹

After 1918, these anti-militarist campaigns went in different directions. Many of those involved in 'hands off Russia' campaigns turned to communist parties in their own countries. This applied, for instance, to Helen Crawford in Britain and to Anna Hornik-Strömer in Austria.¹⁵⁰ Others were drawn to communist front organizations like the League Against Imperialism, founded by Willi Münzenberg in 1927 and including socialist women activists from a variety of countries,



Figure 2.7 British delegation at the second international conference held by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Zurich, May 1919. Helen Crawford is second on the left, middle row; Annot Robinson is fifth on left, back row; and Ellen Wilkinson is second on the left, front row. Source: Alamy.

among them – albeit briefly – the British Labour MP ‘Red Ellen’ Wilkinson.¹⁵¹ However, not all accepted the communist line, and there were also ways in which anti-militarism brought pacifists and socialists closer together rather than driving them apart. The second WILPF congress in Zurich in May 1919 is an example of this, coinciding as it did with the men's peace conference in Paris. It was attended on the British side by Wilkinson, Annot Robinson and Crawford, among others, all of whom attempted to push WILPF's pacifism in a more pro-socialist direction.¹⁵² The resolutions adopted by this conference included a demand for the ‘establishment of full equal suffrage and the full equality of women with men politically, socially, and economically’ as well as a call for the ‘abolition of conscription’ in all countries permitted to join the League of Nations.¹⁵³

In respect to the west's ‘military interventions’ in Bolshevik Russia and Hungary, the congress added its voice to the

protests against the warfare now being waged, without open declaration of war, upon peoples who are experimenting in a new social and economic order, which may prove to have a great contribution to make to the world, and which has not yet had a fair trial.

All aggression against the Lenin and Kun regimes, whether by armed force, by supply of munitions or money, or by blockade, should be immediately halted, it continued.¹⁵⁴

Community-based and transnational campaigns organized by lesser-known women were equally important in developing the anti-militarist struggle at international level even after the First World War had officially come to an end. In April 1919, for instance, the wives of German POWs still being held in Britain and France staged rallies in Berlin with the goal of demanding that the new republican government make the prior release of all prisoners a precondition for signing any peace treaty. Peace while the Allies still held POWs would be no peace, but a continuation of militarism under another name.¹⁵⁵ Yet so too would be a peace that allowed the militarists in Germany to regain their power. This is why, for instance, during the counter-revolutionary Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch in March 1920, unarmed working-class women in Frankfurt am Main supported the men in continuing a general strike ‘until the army submitted and actually left the town,’¹⁵⁶ and why in Leipzig and the Ruhr valley they ‘participated in the fighting, helping to build barricades, supplying the [armed proletarian men] and even emerging from cover to halt *Freikorps* fire so that male comrades could scramble to better positions.’¹⁵⁷

A second example comes from Sweden, a country which had never been *at war* during the 1914–18 period, but one which still felt itself to be *in war* in 1919, particularly as the victorious Allies continued their blockade of Germany – including restrictions on trade with neutral countries – after the signing of the November 1918 armistice.¹⁵⁸ On 28 January 1919, women’s peace groups, including representatives from the Social Democratic Party, organized a mass meeting in Stockholm and collected 48,812 signatures in favour of a peace built on Wilsonian principles, especially arbitration between nations and freedom of the seas.¹⁵⁹ Again, the intention was that this action should coincide with the opening of the peace talks in Paris, the city in which the new battle lines between militarism and anti-militarism were now being drawn. It was, as Irene Andersson puts it, a call ‘for universal peace’ from Sweden’s women’s movement – socialist as well as bourgeois – in spite of that country’s neutrality in the 1914–18 war and notwithstanding its subsequent position as a non-signatory of the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁶⁰

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for a less hierarchized understanding of urban and suburban protest during the First World War, and for an approach that is also

alert to the gender biases in the existing historiography of this period. Action that is emotion-based, community-focused or conducted by persons hitherto excluded from the bureaucracy and decision-making processes of established labour organizations is not in and of itself 'unpolitical', nor are crowds mindless and devoid of purpose. The war changed the parameters of protest and created new spaces for political action, both in the metaphorical sense – new ways of imagining citizenship at national and international levels – and in a literal sense – the urban/suburban landscape as a site of physical struggle and rival claims to legitimate ownership between militarists and anti-militarists. Above all, the war brought out the ability of working-class women to bring together the smaller world of the neighbourhood – increasingly female-dominated in the wake of the mobilization of young men – and the larger world of joined-up protests, strikes and anti-militarist activism.

Our focus on the urban and suburban has also led us to identify commonalities between cities *at war* and cities which, while they were not actively involved in armed hostilities, were still forced to live *in war*. Mary E. Cox's recent study, *Hunger in War and Peace*, while ostensibly focused on how women and children in Germany experienced food scarcity between 1914 and 1924, makes quite clear that the political and social impact of the Allied economic blockade extended to Switzerland and Sweden too (as indeed it did to the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Spain).¹⁶¹ In response, governments in these neutral countries developed their own forms of (interior) militarism, mobilizing troops to defend their borders, and taking advantage of the all-round state of emergency to rearm, take control of streets and workplaces, and extend the reach of military justice into the civilian sphere. In so doing, they called forth opposition to militarism, voiced through spontaneous, grass-roots protest against the authorities at home and expressions of solidarity with blockaded and grieving populations in belligerent countries. Women and young people were at the forefront of these campaigns. But while, in contrast to activists from the middle-class women's movements, they were relatively new to battles against sex discrimination, for instance in the spheres of waged work, marital status, reproductive rights and voting rights, they were not inexperienced proletarians. Rather, as Sean Dobson has shown in the case of the German city of Leipzig, the chief target of women's and teenager's wartime street protests and wildcat strikes was the *Klassenstaat*, the state which protected the class privileges of landowners, factory owners, employers and male union bosses, and which failed to ensure a fair and even distribution of food and other necessities of life.¹⁶² As such, they 'defin[ed] themselves as members of a working class [community], not as women per se'.¹⁶³

Finally, the findings of this chapter support the call for a Europeanization of the Russian, German and Austrian Revolutions of 1917–18, in other words a recognition that the fight against militarism and for a just and lasting peace extended beyond national borders and beyond the dividing line separating belligerent from neutral countries.¹⁶⁴ Wartime protest, strikes and anti-militarism opened up unforeseen fissures within internationalist women's movements, especially between socialists and pacifists, as well as, by 1918–21, between anti-war Social Democrats and Communists. But they also created potential for new solidarities and new places for (re)imagining the social and the political. Socialist women who challenged the boundaries of citizenship and contested the state's monopoly claims on sovereignty within their own neighbourhoods, parties and movements also found themselves coming into contact with other outcast groups: conscientious objectors, deserters, prisoners of war, hungry mothers and underweight children, and above all teenagers whose lives and prospects had been turned upside down by the war. It was for their sake – and not just for abstract ideals such as 'world peace' or proletarian 'power' – that socialist women continued their campaigns after 1918 to prevent the Allied victory and the Central Powers' surrender from inaugurating a new age of militarism and social injustice in Europe. As a mark of their success in bargaining for an expanded notion of citizens' rights and normalizing the idea that the masses might have political claims on the state and employers rather than vice versa, conservative thinkers and counter-revolutionary jurists in the 1920s like Carl Schmitt were forced – in response – to adjust their own definition of sovereignty to exclude these very same forces of democracy and co-determination which threatened their understanding of an ordered, hierarchical world. 'Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception', wrote Schmitt in his essay collection *Political Theology*, first published in March 1922,¹⁶⁵ thus underscoring just how much ferment had taken place at the level of gendered political imaginaries as well as routine, legally constituted forms of state and global governance since the beginning of the war in 1914.