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STIBBE, Matthew <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7269-8183>>, PAINTER, Corinne and SHARP, Ingrid

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History beyond the Script: Rethinking Female Subjectivities and Socialist Women's
Activism during the German Revolution of 1918–19 and its immediate aftermath

MATTHEW STIBBE, CORINNE PAINTER, AND INGRID SHARP

Denn die einen sind im Dunkeln
Und die andern sind im Licht.
Und man siehet die im Lichte
Die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht.

For some stand in the shadow
And others in the light;
You don't see those in the shadow—
Only those standing in the light.

Bertolt Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper*/
*The Threepenny Opera**

On 4 April 1920 Wilhelmine Woythe, née Reineke, a 32-year-old working-class activist and mother of three from the industrial town of Hörde, just to the south of Dortmund, was arrested by the *Sicherheitspolizei* (Prussian paramilitary police, responsible for state security) on suspicion of being a member of the recently defeated Red Army of the Ruhr. Alongside a handful of other women and several hundred men, she was held in effect as a prisoner of war, without charge or access to legal counsel, in the barracks of what was then an elite training

school for *Sicherheitspolizisten* at Sennelager near Paderborn.¹ Some of the men were later convicted and sentenced by military courts for various political offences, including ‘rebellion’ (*Aufuhr*)—applied in cases involving possession of weapons or munitions—and ‘breach of the peace’ (*Landfriedensbruch*)—the catch-all charge used against other Red Army suspects.² There were insufficient grounds to indict Woythe for any offence, however. When interviewed by an examining magistrate from the specially appointed military court (*ausserordentliches Kriegsgericht*) in Dortmund on 26 April, she resorted to a standard female script or narrative framework that played up to the gendered expectations of her male interrogator(s) concerning womanly passivity by deliberately effacing any political motive for her involvement in the Ruhr Uprising. She had only joined the Red Guardists ‘out of curiosity’, she said, and had tricked them into accepting her into their ranks by donning a Red Cross armband and posing as a nurse.³ The magistrate was unable to find any legally admissible evidence to challenge her manifestly implausible account, and as a result she was

* Last stanza of the final song in the 1931 film version. Cited in Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. and intro. by Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb (Stanford, Calif., 2007), 246. English translation by Martin Greenberg, *ibid.* 140.

¹ Sennelager served as a drill grounds (*Truppenübungsplatz*) for the Prussian army before 1914, and as a POW camp during the First World War. The police training school was based there from late 1919 or early 1920. See Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Westfalen, Oberpräsidium Münster, K0001/4981, Tagesbefehle der Sicherheitspolizeischule III, Sennelager, 4 Jan. 1920–21 Mar. 1920.

² See *ibid.* K0001/5387, Ausnahmezustand; Standgerichte, Listen von Rotgardisten, 1919–20.

³ *Ibid.* K0001/5417, Liste derjenigen Gefangenen, gegen welche kein oder ungenügendes Belastungsmaterial vorliegt, Sennelager, [Apr.] 1920, fos. 14–28, at fo. 20 (verso)–21 (recto).

not sent for trial. Nonetheless, it is likely that she remained at Sennelager until the military state of emergency was lifted in all four administrative districts of the Ruhr (Düsseldorf, Arnsberg, Münster, and Minden) in June 1920. This, in any case, is what the Reichswehr commander for Westphalia and the unoccupied part of the Rhineland recommended in a note to the camp director on 30 April:

It can safely be assumed that Frau Woythe's claim that she only fell in with the Red Guards out of curiosity is a lie. Since September [19]19 she has played a leading role in the KPD [Communist Party of Germany] and was elected onto its action committee in preparation for the recent disturbances. She is an agitator and a dangerous communist. We would disagree with any decision to release her.⁴

Woythe's story is not only interesting as a personal example of the abuse of emergency police and military powers delegated by the Reich president to various organs of the state under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution (*Weimarer Reichsverfassung*). It also serves as a good illustration of a particular set of methodological problems faced by historians of the German Revolution of 1918–19 and its immediate aftermath when it comes to documenting and interpreting female revolutionary subjectivities, especially in moments of high political

⁴ Ibid. Wehrkreiskommando VI to the camp director at Sennelager, 30 Apr. 1920, fo. 7 (recto).

drama or ‘rupture’.⁵ When faced with (male) state authority in the person of the military court official, Woythe gave a distorted view of her own situation by claiming to have acted from what, under the prevailing gender order, were taken to be acceptable, womanly motives: unguarded curiosity, naive impulse, and/or a (non-political) desire to heal and mother the men, who—apparently—had done the real fighting or agitating. In this sense, she performed a version of ‘socially admissible’ femininity that can be found in other post-revolutionary situations in Europe and the wider world at various junctures since the eighteenth century.⁶ The fiction that women’s ‘political consciousness had been a temporary impulse for a naturally unpolitical sex and class’ was a way of reassuring male elites that whatever extraordinary things might happen during wars and revolutions, there would be no long-term challenge to the gender order from poorer, working-class women. In both the institutional and wider cultural senses, the latter still seemed to know that their only admissible place was beneath men and beneath their social betters.⁷ By ascribing to herself motives deemed to be socially acceptable—that is, motives which did not challenge the prevailing power structures—Woythe created a script to justify her revolutionary actions as a momentary aberration that could be safely overlooked by the military court.

⁵ On the notion of the ‘moment of rupture’, see Kathleen Canning, ‘Claiming Citizenship: Suffrage and Subjectivity in Germany after the First World War’, in ead., Kerstin Barndt, and Kristin McGuire (eds.), *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York, 2010), 116–37, at 119.

⁶ Wendy Arons, *Performance and Femininity in Eighteenth-Century German Women’s Writing: The Impossible Act* (New York, 2006), 55.

⁷ Carol R. Berkin and Clara M. Lovett (eds.), *Women, War, and Revolution* (New York, 1980), 4.

For historians of women during the German Revolution of 1918–19 and the twelve months that followed, a key methodological challenge has been—and remains—how to recover the subjectivities of female activists like Woythe and place them on an equal footing with male subjectivities without falling into the trap of reproducing the prevailing gender norms of the past. True, following Joan Wallach Scott’s critical re-evaluation of gender as a useful analytical tool for making ‘women visible as active participants’,⁸ in recent decades scholars of women, war, and revolution have done much to reveal roles beyond the standard tropes about female passivity. For instance, there are now detailed studies examining the exploits of the *Barrikadenbräute* (women revolutionaries on the barricades) who fought against government troops in Vienna in March 1848, or deconstructing the myths surrounding the *pétroleuses* (female incendiaries) who supposedly set fire to prominent buildings in the final days of the Paris Commune in May 1871.⁹ To take another example, recent research has highlighted the importance of the International Women’s Day demonstration in Petrograd that sparked the Russian Revolution of 23 February 1917 (8 March 1917 in the new calendar).¹⁰

Alongside this, studies by Ute Daniel, Belinda J. Davis, Maureen Healy, Christiane Sternsdorf-Hauck, and others have shed new light on the agency of working-class women in

⁸ Joan W. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, *American Historical Review*, 91/5 (1986), 1053–75, at 1075.

⁹ See e.g. Gabriella Hauch, *Frau Biedermeier auf den Barrikaden: Frauenleben in der Wiener Revolution 1848* (Vienna, 1990); and Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca, NY, 1996).

¹⁰ For the latest findings, see Jane McDermid, ‘The Role of Women Workers in the 1917 Russian Revolution’, *Theory & Struggle*, 118 (2017), 82–95.

the major cities of blockaded Central Europe during the First World War, and on the political importance of female-led food protests in establishing new ideas about the rights of the (patriotic) citizen.¹¹ This represents an advance both on previous work by the labour historian Helga Grebing in the 1990s, who eschewed gender as a category and concentrated on those institutional arenas such as the armed forces, party committees, and workers' and soldiers' councils where very few women were actually to be found,¹² and on earlier accounts from the 1960s and 1970s that focused solely on the small number of full-time activists in the organized bourgeois and socialist women's movements.¹³

That said, in the latest writing on the revolution of 1918–19 there is still a marked tendency to rely on eyewitness testimony from men, who often viewed women through the prism of contemporaneous attitudes and masculine experience. For Munich in 1918–19, for

¹¹ Ute Daniel, *The War from Within: German Women in the First World War*, trans. Margaret Ries (Oxford, 1997; 1st pub. in German, 1989); Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, 2004); Christiane Sternsdorf-Hauck, *Brotmarken und rote Fahnen: Frauen in der bayerischen Revolution und Räterepublik 1918/19* (rev. edn Cologne, 2008; 1st pub. 1989). See also the relevant contributions to Sybille Kraft (ed.), *Zwischen den Fronten: Münchner Frauen in Krieg und Frieden 1900–1950* (Munich, 1995).

¹² Helga Grebing, *Frauen in der deutschen Revolution, 1918/19* (Heidelberg, 1994).

¹³ Richard J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894–1933* (London, 1976); Werner Thönnessen, *The Emancipation of Women: The Rise and Decline of the Women's Movement in German Social Democracy, 1863–1933*, trans. Joris de Bres (London, 1973; 1st pub. in German 1969).

instance, the recently published diaries of the Jewish academic Victor Klemperer are now mined as avidly as those of the reactionary schoolteacher and essayist Josef Hofmiller, while the typical bohemian ‘dreamer’ of that time and place is taken to be a male writer or dramatist.¹⁴ Even attempts to rehabilitate November 1918 as the ‘true beginning’ of Germany’s late twentieth-century democracy—in place of the hitherto emphasized and much-vaunted (West German) Basic Law of May 1949—have rendered revolutionary women marginal to the mainstream national narrative.¹⁵ Seemingly without playing any active part in it, the female half of the German population benefited from the revolution by becoming the lucky (or inert) recipients of the vote following an executive decree issued by the all-male Council of People’s Representatives on 12 November 1918. In other words, this was (and still is) a narrative of democratic beginnings mediated by men and weighted in favour of objectified forms of citizenship and fixed definitions of revolution.

¹⁴ See e.g. Michael Brenner, *Der lange Schatten der Revolution: Juden und Antisemiten in Hitlers München 1918–1923* (Berlin, 2019); and Volker Weidemann, *Dreamers: When the Writers Took Power, Germany 1919*, trans. Ruth Martin (London, 2018; 1st pub. in German 2017). Also Victor Klemperer, *Man möchte immer weinen und lachen im einem: Revolutionstagebuch 1919* (Berlin, 2015), published in English as *Munich 1919: Diary of a Revolution*, trans. Jessica Spengler (Cambridge, 2017); and Josef Hofmiller, *Revolutionstagebuch 1918/19: Aus den Tagen der Münchner Revolution* (Leipzig, 1938).

¹⁵ See e.g. Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19: Der wahre Beginn unserer Demokratie* (Berlin, 2017); and Joachim Käppner, *1918—Aufstand für die Freiheit: Die Revolution der Besonnenen* (Munich, 2017). For a broader critique, see Hedwig Richter, ‘Demokratiegeschichte ohne Frauen? Ein Problemaufriss’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 68/42 (2018), 4–9.

Two historians have nonetheless been instrumental in bringing to the fore hitherto neglected voices and conceptualizing a new way of writing the history of the revolution which places these voices centre stage. Moritz Föllmer, in a journal article on male subjectivities in 1918–19, has argued that the ‘unscripted character’ of the German Revolution—in other words, the (historically atypical) failure of rank-and-file activists to narrate it as a ‘success’ by relating it back to a shared memory of previous revolutions—cannot be reduced to ‘objective’ causes alone. Rather, it was also linked to the ‘diversity and complexity’ of the emotions, bodily experiences, and gendered identities encountered by the men who took part in it.¹⁶ And Kathleen Canning, in a series of publications, has refocused attention on the achievement of female suffrage in November 1918 as a sudden, real-life event with multiple, overlapping meanings. In particular, it allowed radical middle- and working-class women to imagine new, open-ended forms of citizenship and relationships with the state and civil society which incorporated, but went well beyond, the right to vote and stand in elections.¹⁷

In this essay, we seek to advance the agendas set out by Föllmer and Canning while adding what we consider to be an important emotional history dimension to the discussion of

¹⁶ Moritz Föllmer, ‘The Unscripted Revolution: Male Subjectivities in Germany, 1918–1919’, *Past & Present*, 240/1 (2018), 161–92, at 162.

¹⁷ Canning, ‘Claiming Citizenship’. See also Kathleen Canning, ‘Das Geschlecht der Revolution: Stimmrecht und Staatsbürgertum 1918/19’, in Alexander Gallus (ed.), *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19* (Göttingen, 2010), 84–116; and Kathleen Canning, ‘War, Citizenship and Rhetorics of Sexual Crisis: Reflections on States of Exception in Germany, 1914–1920’, in Geoff Eley, Jennifer L. Jenkins, and Tracie Matysik (eds.), *German Modernities from Wilhelm to Weimar: A Contest of Futures* (London, 2016), 235–58.

female revolutionary subjectivities. The emphasis will not be on women as a social category, but rather on the gendered ways in which female participants in the events of the years 1918–20 communicated recorded, and narrated their experiences in retrospect. Our approach is influenced by Ute Frevert’s contention that emotions can be historicized, not least by investigating the different ways in which they are managed and regulated, or ‘lost and found’, at particular times and in particular contexts.¹⁸ Examining the working through of certain key emotions in women’s narrative accounts of the revolution, we argue, is also important methodologically because it provides a common thread through what would otherwise be a very diverse set of experiences and recollections. More specifically, excavating such emotions helps to reveal patterns of gender-specific subjectivity in a revolution characterized by a lack of scripts to guide women as well as men through the process of individual and collective sense-making.

In order to illustrate this further, we focus on six different but overlapping emotions that commonly appear in autobiographical accounts and other life writings by female veterans of the German labour, socialist, and anti-war movements during the twentieth century: passion and pain, rage and revulsion, and sympathy and solidarity. In our conclusion we argue that the key issue for future investigation is not whether German women participated in the revolution of 1918–19, as numerous historical sources already available to current scholarship, when read in a critical and open-minded way, clearly indicate that they did.¹⁹ Rather, the more pertinent question for researchers is to identify what changes might

¹⁸ See Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found* (Budapest, 2011).

¹⁹ Cf. Helen L. Boak, ‘Women in the German Revolution’, in Gaard Kets and James Muldoon (eds.), *The German Revolution and Political Theory* (Cham, 2019), 25–44; Ingrid

emerge in our understanding of the revolution and its legacy when we bring women's subjectivities out of the shadows and into the centre of the narrative.²⁰

Emotions and the 'Moment of Rupture'

What emotions did women invoke when they sought to reconstruct what it was like to live in Germany in the years 1918–20, to take part in a revolution on a personal and political level, and to discover new dreams and horizons in what was a historical 'moment of rupture', not only for themselves and their families, but for their neighbourhoods and communities?

Although we are among the first scholars to pose these questions in relation to female socialist activists in 1918–20, we are not the first to approach the history of emotions during the First World War era from a gendered perspective. Benjamin Ziemann, for instance, when examining ordinary German women's subjective perceptions of their experiences on the home front through the family letters that they wrote between 1914 and 1918, found that they typically expressed themselves 'not in terms of agency or citizenship, but rather in a bleak

Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, '“In diesen Tagen kamen wir nicht von der Straße . . .”: Frauen in der deutschen Revolution von 1918/19', *Ariadne: Forum für Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte*, 73/74 (2018), 32–9.

²⁰ For the parallel Austrian case, see Veronika Helfert, *Frauen, wacht auf! Eine Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte von Revolution und Rätebewegung in Österreich, 1916–1924* (Göttingen, 2021), esp. 18–19, 85 and 335–6.

language of despair caused by economic misery and personal bereavement'.²¹ Of course, binary conclusions such as these could merely suggest that the selection and interpretation of historical documents are themselves not activities that can be carried out in a space free of gendered assumptions. Nor, when read too literally, can recovered sources like letters and diaries overcome what Scott refers to as the tensions 'between the seemingly fixed language of the past and our own terminology'.²² This critical point applies as well to those who take a different, but equally absolute or unequivocal line to Ziemann. Historians of emotions are not only interested in uncovering the past, in other words. Rather, they are also involved in a continuous (re)appropriation of the (meta-)category of gender in the present.²³

In fact, the memoir and autobiographical sources handed down to us suggest that for socialist women, as for revolutionary men, there was no clear-cut script, and also no neat demarcation between the private/familial and the public/political. Reconstructing what it was like to mourn for lost and injured loved ones while at the same time developing new claims to citizenship required more than a focus on symbolic events such as reliving the first time that German women were able to vote in state and national elections (in January 1919), and the first time an elected female deputy addressed the Weimar National Assembly (the Social Democrat Marie Juchacz in February 1919), although these were important occasions to

²¹ Benjamin Ziemann, 'Weimar was Weimar: Politics, Culture and the Emplotment of the Weimar Republic', *German History*, 28/4 (2010), 542–71, at 549. See also id., 'Geschlechterbeziehungen in deutschen Feldpostbriefen des Ersten Weltkrieges', in Christa Hämmerle and Edith Saurer (eds.), *Briefkulturen und ihr Geschlecht: Zur Geschichte der privaten Korrespondenz vom 16. Jahrhundert bis heute* (Vienna, 2003), 261–82.

²² Scott, 'Gender', 1075.

²³ Ibid. 1054.

some.²⁴ It also demanded new forms of what Liz Byrski calls ‘emotional labour’—that is, subjectively managing the emotions that accompanied the end of the war and the downfall of the old regime, and channelling them into socially and politically meaningful reflection.²⁵ This might be achieved by women memoirists making themselves ‘clearly visible in the demonstrations and street processions that mushroomed in Germany’s towns and cities’ in November 1918, as Helen Boak puts it.²⁶ Yet it might involve navigating the gendered ‘economy of emotions’ in less flagrant or self-referential ways.²⁷

By putting this emotional labour at the centre of our understanding of gendered narratives of the revolution, we in turn begin to reinterpret the revolution more generally as a struggle to define and embody new forms of citizenship beyond the unmediated, spontaneous ‘given’ of the vote. Becoming a citizen in an objectivized sense was one thing; seeing the point of being a female revolutionary and anti-militarist in 1918–20 in the context of a lifetime spent in political struggle, and sharing that understanding with others, something else. The latter required mediation, negotiation, and above all, a willingness to live beyond socially sanctioned forms of female behaviour. As revolutionary emotions to be worked through by means of gendered reconstructions of the past rather than inherited scripts, passion and pain, rage and revulsion, and sympathy and solidarity were rarely presented in

²⁴ See Unda Hörner, *1919: Das Jahr der Frauen* (Berlin, 2018), esp. 30–1 and 52–5.

²⁵ Liz Byrski, ‘Emotional Labour as War Work: Women Up Close and Personal with McIndoe’s Guinea Pigs’, *Women’s History Review*, 21/3 (2012), 341–61. Also Lucy Noakes, *Dying for the Nation: Death, Grief and Bereavement in Second World War Britain* (Manchester, 2020).

²⁶ Helen L. Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic* (Manchester, 2013), 64.

²⁷ Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 9.

female narratives as random or disconnected flights of fancy, but as states of political and personal awareness that emerged after years of campaigning against war and social injustice. Furthermore, while for men the absence of scripts seems to have led to disorientation, as Föllmer suggests, in revolutionary women's accounts it featured more positively as one of the liberating and empowering aspects of the years 1918–20.

Passion and Pain

Writing in the late 1950s, as humankind faced the possibility of complete annihilation through nuclear war, the anti-totalitarian French sociologist Raymond Aron wrote that 'the men and the nations who share the benefits of modern industrial civilization are divided chiefly by ideological prejudices and human passions'.²⁸ What had grown in intensity since 1945, he argued, was not the 'human passions' themselves, but the existential threat posed by the 'bomb'. In fact, passions had always been dangerous when mixed with democratic politics. 'Societies', he noted, could be entirely 'swept along by human passions', a phenomenon first seen during the reign of terror in revolutionary Paris in the early to mid-1790s.²⁹ Gerhard Ritter, the conservative German historian and lifelong critic of the November 1918 revolution, agreed: democratic or militaristic passions, unchecked by traditional statecraft and the rule of law, he wrote in 1947, had allowed the 'demonic' abuse

²⁸ Raymond Aron, *On War: Atomic Weapons and Global Diplomacy*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (London, 1958; 1st pub. 1957), 126.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 101.

of power by modern ‘demagogues’ from Danton and Robespierre to Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler.³⁰

What we see here is two men constructing scripts about revolutions and other threats to the established order in modern European history with the benefit of hindsight and with a clear-cut conservative political agenda in their present. An opposing narrative, adopted by some men and women in the past, is that revolution or a radical restructuring of the social order are impossible to achieve without commitment to an insurgent politics that puts passion before law and risks pain before submission to established authority.³¹ Conventional wisdom in the nineteenth century saw politically rebellious men as ‘passionate’ and women as too soft, too docile, and too beholden to ‘motherly love’ for the rough-and-tumble world of war and politics.³² In Frevert’s words, women were held to be ‘good at tolerating and enduring, whereas men went with their heads against the wall’.³³ Moving forward to the early twentieth century, women in Weimar Germany were often described by politicians from the nationalist right to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) as having been rewarded with the vote for the ‘endurance’ and ‘productivity in the workplace’ that they had supposedly shown during the years 1914–1918, and definitely not for their protests against the war or as a result

³⁰ Gerhard Ritter, *Die Dämonie der Macht: Betrachtungen über Geschichte und Wesen des Machtproblems im politischen Denken der Neuzeit* (6th edn Munich, 1948; 1st pub. 1947).

³¹ See here Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (eds.), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago, 2001).

³² Föllmer, ‘The Unscripted Revolution’, 182.

³³ Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 116.

of their long-standing campaigns for the vote.³⁴ In many sympathetic historical accounts of the years 1918–19, men were—and still are—depicted as the truly passionate champions of anti-militarism, war refusal, citizens’ rights, or republicanism, and women as the incidental beneficiaries of a new democratic beginning, thereby privileging male (and front-line war) experience once again.³⁵ Or conversely, as Föllmer shows, where a ‘narrative of failure’ crept into contemporary depictions of the November 1918 revolution, this was typically presented as a failure of ‘male subjectivity’ rather than as a product of the ‘complexity of German society’ more generally.³⁶

Where does this leave female revolutionary subjectivity and passion? Across the political spectrum, as plenty of studies have shown, the granting of suffrage to all German women on 12 November 1918 opened up new possibilities for female subjectivities and real or imagined forms of emancipation, whether from gender inequalities or from other, albeit related, social and political ills such as poverty, ill-health, exploitation of disadvantaged

³⁴ Quotes taken from Adele Schreiber, ‘Die Sozialdemokratin als Staatsbürgerin’, in Anna Bloß (ed.), *Die Frauenfrage im Lichte des Sozialismus* (Dresden, 1930), 97–147, at 101. This view of why women were granted the vote is challenged by, among others, Hedwig Richter and Kerstin Wolff (eds.), *Frauenwahlrecht: Demokratisierung der Demokratie in Deutschland und Europa* (Hamburg, 2018); and Bärbel Sunderbrink, ‘Aufbruch der Frauen im revolutionären Lippe’, in ead., Julia Schafmeister, and Michael Zelle (eds.), *Revolution in Lippe: 1918 und der Aufbruch in die Demokratie* (Bielefeld, 2019), 100–17.

³⁵ Two of the best works here are Benjamin Ziemann, *Gewalt im Ersten Weltkrieg: Töten, Überleben, Verweigern* (Essen, 2013); and id., *Contested Commemorations: Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture* (Cambridge, 2013).

³⁶ Föllmer, ‘The Unscripted Revolution’, 166, 175.

consumers, educational failure, or (especially on the right) national oppression in the form of the Versailles diktat.³⁷ For women on the left, however, parliamentary democracy did not guarantee the kind of social restructuring necessary to secure full citizenship. Apart from anything else, very soon after November 1918, non-socialist, clerical, and even reactionary–monarchist parties like the German National People’s Party (DNVP) were encouraging women to use their vote in the forthcoming National Assembly elections as a ‘duty’ (while in effect instructing them to leave it to men to inject the ‘passion’ into anti-socialist politics and nationalist state-building).³⁸

Left-wing versions of citizenship required something more: a willingness to own one’s physical and bodily presence in the public sphere. This could take the form of writing and delivering leaflets and acting as a leading spokesperson for political movements, as Hilde Kramer, a 19-year-old socialist activist, did in Munich and Berlin. It could also mean willingness to experience pain and imprisonment, as Kramer did in January 1919 (for publicly criticizing the Eisner government from a far left perspective) and again from May to August 1919 (as former secretary to the executed Red Commandant of Munich, Rudolf Egelhofer).³⁹ When reactionary forces attacked strikers in Berlin during the ‘March Battles’

³⁷ See the works by Canning cited in notes 5 and 17. Also Julia Sneeringer, *Winning Women’s Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002); Raffael Scheck, *Mothers of the Nation: Right-Wing Women in Weimar Germany* (Oxford, 2004); Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, esp. 100–8.

³⁸ Matthew Stibbe, ‘Anti-Feminism, Nationalism, and the German Right, 1914–1920: A Reappraisal’, *German History*, 20/2 (2002), 185–210.

³⁹ See Hilde Kramer, *Rebellin in München, Moskau und Berlin: Autobiographisches Fragment. 1900–1924*, ed. Egon Günther and Thies Marsen (Berlin, 2011).

(*März kämpfe*) of 1919, Cläre Jung, a 26-year-old Berlin-based journalist with socialist sympathies, was quick to volunteer to fetch guns to defend the revolution. She recognized that being female offered her some protection: ‘a woman is always beyond suspicion’, a statement that proved to be correct in her case as she was not stopped in her mission.⁴⁰

Working-class women, on the other hand, often felt that they had been under suspicion for far too long. Anna Arnold, born in 1886, remembered that she and other proletarian housewives and mothers had already been attacked by truncheon-wielding police during hunger protests against wartime conditions in Hamburg. The aim of such violence, she argued in her undated memoir written for the archive of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED-Parteiarchiv) in East Germany, probably in the late 1950s, was to break up the socialist women’s anti-war movement by physically injuring its key members, but this was only partially successful: ‘Their blows beat us into bravery [*schlugen uns tapfer*]. “You dogs, you want to stand in the way of starving war wives [*hungrnde Kriegerfrauen*]”, we cried.’⁴¹

In some cases, passion could go one step further, towards a willingness to sacrifice one’s own life to the cause of the revolution. Emilie (Milli) Bölke, born in 1901 and a Young Socialist from a politically engaged working-class family in the industrial town of Mülheim an der Ruhr, gave the following highly emotive account of the martyrdom of some of the Red Cross nurses during the 1920 Ruhr Uprising in her 1958 testimony for the SED archive:

⁴⁰ Cläre Jung, *Paradiesvögel: Erinnerungen* (Hamburg, 1987), 73.

⁴¹ Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der ehemaligen DDR beim Bundesarchiv (henceforth SAPMO-BArch), SgY 30/0020, Anna Arnold, unpublished memoirs, n.d., fo. 18 (recto).

Dressed in white tunics and red and white head scarves, many women nursed and looked after the Red Guardists . . . Many of them were brutally murdered by the brutish white troops. In Dinslaken six women who had cooked for the Red soldiers were . . . sentenced to death and shot on the market square . . .

When the comrades found out that Margarete Becker [from Lünen] was to be shot, they organized a demonstration. They sent a number of children to the prison . . . who sang a revolutionary song when Margarete was led out into the courtyard. Deeply moved, but with dignity and composure, she cried out to the assembled proletarians: ‘I die for freedom! [*Ich sterbe für die Freiheit!*]’.⁴²

In other retrospective accounts by women revolutionaries, passion appeared to manifest itself through personal relationships, experienced in terms of newly awakened sexual desires, platonic attachments, or both. However, the essential core of revolutionary passion in November 1918 was not depoliticized or ahistorical romantic feelings, but the

⁴² SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/0083, Milli Bölke, unpublished memoirs, 24 Oct. 1958, fo. 34 (recto). The execution of Becker is also mentioned in Günter Gleising and Anke Pfromm, *Kapp-Putsch und Märzrevolution 1920*, 3 vols. (Bochum, 2010–14), vol. iii: *Totenliste der Märzgefallenen aus dem Rheinisch-Westfälischen Industriegebiet* (2010), 38. In the same volume, four Red Cross nurses murdered in Dinslaken are named: Franziska Eckert, Josefa Eckert, Aenne Pelikan, and Hedwig Rabschinski. The date was 2 Apr. 1920 (14–15). In the second volume of this series, up to fourteen Red Army auxiliary nurses and cooks are listed as having been shot in the town. See Günter Gleising and Anke Pfromm, *Kapp-Putsch und Märzrevolution 1920*, vol. ii: *Gräber und Denkmäler zwischen Rhein und Weser erzählen Geschichte* (2014), 147–8.

presence of a desire for ‘sudden self-transformation and[/or] enthusiastic sacrifice’, which—as we shall see below—could express itself through rage and revulsion as much as through attachments to others.⁴³ Indeed, German socialist women in 1918–20, like their male counterparts, were free to redefine passion in a way that was not open to their forebears in 1789 or 1848. In their autobiographical accounts, revolution had less to do with ‘family romance’ or any other kind of imagined familiarity,⁴⁴ and more to do with asserting themselves as (unfamiliar) citizens and political subjects. Personal relationships had to fall into line with their passionate involvement in revolutionary protest. To paraphrase the British writer and social critic Alison Light, when they wrote about the years 1918–20 they constructed an image of themselves as falling ‘in love *in* history, *in* [their own] particular time’,⁴⁵ and thus without having to defer to the gendered scripts in which they had been socialized. Following the French historian Jules Michelet, Light coins the term ‘radical romance’ to denote the relationship between passion and political protest in a given historical moment. Thus defined, ‘radical romance’ (or as we would prefer to call it, revolutionary passion) can involve attraction

[to] what we don’t have, what we need and admire, as much as [to] what we share . . . [It] speaks to the transcendent, to dreams and visions, and to what

⁴³ Föllmer, ‘The Unscripted Revolution’, 184.

⁴⁴ Frevert, *Emotions in History*; Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London, 1992).

⁴⁵ Alison Light, *A Radical Romance: A Memoir of Love, Grief and Consolation* (London, 2019), p. xiii. Emphasis added.

poets call the imagination—to what we do not yet know we are longing for. It can also be a sign of our discontent with what society has to offer.⁴⁶

Passion and pain allowed revolutionary women in the years 1918–20 to conjure up their own transformative visions of the future in much the same way that Volker Weidemann argues that Munich's (male) poets and writers were able to 'dream' their way to (temporary) power in the Bavarian capital during the last weeks of 1918 and the early months of 1919.⁴⁷ The 19-year-old Hilde Kramer even sought to explain her radical approach to personal relationships, and the fact that they might end as suddenly as they began, in a letter written to two of her former schoolteachers in Thuringia from her cell in Munich's Stadelheim jail in July 1919:

You ask about my fiancé . . . My fiancé—it would be more accurate to call him my boyfriend—is a student I got to know in November when we were both working for the soldiers' council . . . We will not marry on principle. If we are no longer happy together, then we want to be able to separate without bitterness and without interference by any outside authority . . . Here in Bavaria we are more open-minded about such things, as free love has become more routine.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. xix.

⁴⁷ Weidemann, *Dreamers*.

⁴⁸ Hilde Kramer to Ms Fischer and Ms Koch, 16 July 1919, reproduced in Kramer, *Rebellin*, 132–4, at 134.

It is worth repeating that women like Kramer did not form an emotional attachment to a male revolutionary and then join the revolution; rather, it was through their revolutionary activities and the experience of working together for a shared vision that new, and not necessarily permanent or familial, attachments emerged. The middle-class German–Jewish writer and dramatist Lola Landau, born in 1891, was another example. Horrified by the injustices she saw in the German capital during the war, she began working with other women to bring an end to militarism. They pretended to be a knitting circle, an appropriate social activity for middle-class women, while they plotted the overthrow of the imperial regime that had led to such terrible suffering and abuses. Through her anti-war activism she later met and fell in love with German author and pacifist Armin T. Wegner. Although Landau was already married with two children, their passion for revolution became a passionate affair.⁴⁹

Relationships such as these challenged bourgeois norms. Kramer denounced marriage and Landau chose to divorce her husband precisely at a time when these women were already participating in an attempt to revolutionize the social order. In such a historical moment, passion for revolution did not develop along familiar gendered, linear, or theoretical–dialectical lines. Passion might be deliberately ‘lost’ by some, or burn out in others, and yet be ‘found’ again and again. It was when men sought to remove women from public space—in other words, from the sphere of involvement in revolutionary activism, with all its potential for encountering passion and pain in pursuit of a political cause—that a gendered sense of injustice was most keenly felt. Milli Bölke, for instance, remembered what it was like to act as a courier smuggling arms and other materials between Oberhausen and Mülheim during the 1920 Ruhr Uprising while dodging government forces:

⁴⁹ Lola Landau, *Vor dem Vergessen: Meine drei Leben* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987).

We couriers had to be constantly on duty. There was more than enough to do: sleeping quarters and refreshments had to be provided for the Red Guardists, communications had to be maintained, reports sent out. We youths were all on the scene, including many girls, who were not pleased that they were only allowed to act as messengers and medical orderlies.⁵⁰

Bölke's 1958 account of the years 1918–20, during which she and her sister joined her parents in a protracted moral and physical battle, full of dangers and sacrifice, to save the revolution in her particular corner of the Ruhr, might even be seen as a hitherto unacknowledged *radical* twentieth-century alternative to Lynn Hunt's 'family romance of the French revolution'—indeed, radical and unfamiliar enough for there to be no 'usable scripts' to guide it. It might also be identified as the hidden female counterpart to what Föllmer describes as revolutionary men's 'quest for a civilian masculinity' during the November Revolution as they struggled subjectively to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable—namely, the self-interested versus the idealistic aspects of their opposition to militarism and associated class inequalities.⁵¹ Her account ends with her entry into the KPD on 1 January 1921, aged 20; her arrest for distributing communist leaflets—luckily for her at a time when martial law had ended and basic constitutional rights had been restored in the Ruhr; and her one-day prison sentence for 'contempt of court'.⁵² However, being a mother, separated from one's children, and held without charge or time limit in a prison camp under special regulations

⁵⁰ Bölke, unpublished memoirs (as n. 41), fo. 32 (recto).

⁵¹ Föllmer, 'The Unscripted Revolution', 173.

⁵² Bölke, unpublished memoirs (as n. 41), front cover notes.

introduced during a government-imposed military state of emergency represented a different kind of barrier to self-transformation, especially when it came with the possibility of being charged with a capital offence (armed rebellion). This, we can safely assume, was why the KPD official Wilhelmine Woythe, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, decided to reinvent herself as a woman ‘out of place’⁵³—somebody who had foolishly allowed feminine curiosity to get the better of her more temperate, motherly, restrained feelings—when she was interviewed by the official from the military court in the Ruhr in April 1920.

Rage and Revulsion

Rage, according to Frevert, has been associated with claims to power since antiquity. In the modern era, and especially after the French Revolution, it was appropriated by men who were deemed sufficiently strong and self-disciplined to channel their emotions into supposedly ‘rational’ judgements and political acts. Female rage, on the other hand, was associated with chaos rather than affective action. It was deemed too dangerous, too volatile, too bodily, and, above all, too out of control to form the basis of collective struggle or the creation of a new political order.⁵⁴ It was better confined to the private sphere, and to (non-political or temperate) expressions of despair, as Ziemann found in the letters written by soldiers’ wives during the war.⁵⁵ The view that women lacked political maturity and self-control, and that they needed to be educated and led in the ways of class struggle by men, was very prevalent

⁵³ Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 118.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 92–5, 112–19, and 214.

⁵⁵ See n. 21.

in the German (and Austrian) labour movements before 1918.⁵⁶ Male trade union leaders in particular blamed women for organizing wildcat strikes and for fomenting opposition to the official pro-war line adopted under the *Burgfrieden* or political–industrial truce of 1914. Their position was shared by the political police—particularly in Berlin, the capital of Imperial Germany—who from 1915 noted with growing alarm the role that women working-class activists were playing on the revolutionary left wing of the SPD.⁵⁷ Concerns were raised not only about female participation in the big strikes of April 1917 and January 1918, but also about smaller-scale incidents that were allegedly exploited by radical socialist agitators for purposes of anti-war agitation among what were seen to be easily misled women. Following a series of explosions in August 1917 at an armaments plant in Hennigsdorf, a town just to the north-west of Berlin, and rumours of deaths, a police mood report from district I (Berlin Mitte) spoke of ‘panic’-induced ‘cases of mass walk outs’ in local factories, ‘especially among the female population’.⁵⁸ Yet more malign forces were also thought to be at work in the German capital, including the anti-war Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany

⁵⁶ Matthew Stibbe (with Olga Shnyrova and Veronika Helfert), ‘Women and Socialist Revolution, 1917–23’, in Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe (eds.), *Women Activists between War and Peace: Europe, 1918–1923* (London, 2017), 123–72, esp. 136 and 143. For Austria, see also Helfert, *Frauen, wacht auf!*, esp. 124–8, 143–4, and 170–1.

⁵⁷ See the evidence in Ingo Materna, Hans-Joachim Schrenkenbach, and Bärbel Holtz (eds.), *Berichte des Berliner Polizeipräsidenten zur Stimmung und Lage der Bevölkerung in Berlin 1914–1918* (Weimar, 1987).

⁵⁸ Landesarchiv Berlin, Pr. Br. Rep. 30, Berlin C Polizeipräsidium, Nr. 15821, Stimmungsbericht des I. Kommissariats, 18 Aug. 1917, fo. 256 (recto). On the explosions at Hennigsdorf, see also Materna, Schrenkenbach, and Holtz (eds.), *Berichte*, 220, n. 8.

(USPD), the Revolutionary Shop Stewards movement, and most worryingly of all, the Young Socialists, made up of teenage male and female followers of the imprisoned Spartacist leader Karl Liebknecht in Berlin (with further branches in Braunschweig, Hanover, Hamburg, Magdeburg, Stuttgart, and parts of the Ruhr).⁵⁹

In late February 1918 Colonel Max Bauer, member of the army general staff and adviser to Hindenburg and Ludendorff on industrial matters, claimed in a written response to a memorandum on the January strikes drawn up by the Prussian minister of the interior that the latter had failed to recognize that the recent growth in trade union membership had come especially ‘from male youths and unmarried women workers’. Such ‘elements’, he continued,

⁵⁹ On the USPD and its role in mobilizing female workers for strikes and peace demonstrations during the war, see Ursula Herrmann, ‘Sozialdemokratische Frauen in Deutschland im Kampf um den Frieden vor und während des ersten Weltkrieges’, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 33/3 (1985), 213–30; on the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, see Ralf Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement*, trans. Joseph P. Keady, ed. Radhika Desai (Leiden, 2015); and on the Young Socialists, known from 1918 as the Freie Sozialistische Jugend or Free Socialist Youth and from 1920 as the Kommunistische Jugend Deutschlands or Communist Youth of Germany, see Walter Sieger, *Die junge Front: Die revolutionäre Arbeiterjugend im Kampf gegen den Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 1958). See also Hans-Kai Möller, ‘Gertrud Rast’, in Olaf Matthes and Ortwin Pelc (eds.), *Menschen in der Revolution: Hamburger Porträts 1918/19* (Husum, 2018), 149–52.

‘were more receptive to agitation and entirely incapable of calm and considered reflection’.⁶⁰

The Prussian minister of war, Hermann von Stein, shared such prejudices, writing just after the war that the greatest threat to unity had come from that segment of the working-class population born around 1900 which was ‘barely out of school when the war began’. These youngsters of both sexes, often with absent or dead fathers, were not being socialized according to typical pre-war gender norms, were earning too much money, and were easily incited to vent their rage against their patriotic elders and betters, for instance by supporting strikes.⁶¹ Although directed against young men as well as young women, there was much in Stein’s account that echoed the traditional (negative) ‘male’ interpretation of female revolutionaries as ‘hysterical’ and ‘politically volatile’.⁶² In the last two years of the war it was not uncommon for young women from the socialist left to be arrested and held in detention under protective custody orders (*Schutzhaftbefehle*), as happened, for instance, to the radical anti-war protestors Erna Halbe, aged 25, and Gertrud Rast, aged 20, in Hamburg in 1917.⁶³

⁶⁰ Max Bauer, Entwurf einer Stellungnahme der Obersten Heeresleitung zur Denkschrift des preußischen Ministers des Innern [Bill Drews] über die innenpolitische Lage, 21 Feb. 1918. Reproduced in Wilhelm Deist (ed.), *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914–1918*, 2 vols. (Düsseldorf, 1970), ii. 1192–1200, at 1195–6.

⁶¹ Hermann von Stein, *Erlebnisse und Betrachtungen aus der Zeit des Weltkriegs* (Leipzig, 1919), 154.

⁶² Helfert, *Frauen, wacht auf!*, 116.

⁶³ Möller, ‘Gertrud Rast’, 150. On Erna Halbe, see also Boak, ‘Women in the German Revolution’, 31.

How did female revolutionary activists perceive and narrate their sense of rage during the war and up to November 1918 in retrospect, and what role did gendered explanations play for them? The hunger, the exhaustion, the police brutality, the dangerous working conditions, and the seeming indifference of government officials and even officials from the Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany (MSPD) and Free Trade Unions are all portrayed as giving rise to new learning experiences in the management of emotions. Yet in the memoirs and other writings of women activists from the time, rage was certainly not cast as a hysterical reaction, but more as something that stemmed in unscripted fashion from their revulsion at the poverty and suffering caused by the war, and at the men in powerful positions—including leading figures in the workers' movement itself—who actively supported the war's continuation.

Sometimes this revulsion was expressed in particularly searing terms. The above-mentioned Anna Arnold, a working-class war widow raising a child on her own in Hamburg, recalled in epic, almost Brechtian terms 'the hunger, the cold [and] the death' all around her in the last two years of the war:

I went to the doctor to see if I could get milk for my child and myself. He sent me to the priest, who gave me some milk coupons, but said, 'Make sure you come regularly to church.' For fear of not getting any more coupons, I attended church. At the end of the service, the priest read out the plea: 'Lord bless our princes and regents, bless our weapons, that they may overpower our enemies.' From revulsion at how the priest had blessed these weapons of

murder [*Mordwaffen*], I never went to church again, and did not get any more milk coupons. This was one more disappointment to add to all the others.⁶⁴

At other times, revulsion came from the experience of unequal power relations in the labour movement, and particularly the domination of the Free Trade Unions by what were held to be arrogant and patronizing male ‘bigwigs’ (*Bonzen*) who disliked militancy among younger female workers and wanted to uphold the wartime industrial truce with employers. Cläre Casper-Derfert, for instance, born in 1894 and a leading figure in the metalworkers’ union in Berlin since 1916, recalled the displeasure of one of the senior male functionaries in that union, Wilhelm Siering, when she organized a strike at an armaments plant in Charlottenburg: ‘He said that I was to blame for all the hardships that the strike had cost the workers. I responded by telling him that his continuing support for the war [*seine Durchhaltepolitik*] had cost them even more.’⁶⁵ It was her revulsion towards Siering and other ‘Bonzen’, she argued, that caused her to join the USPD in April 1917 and to put herself forward as the only woman to be elected to the executive committee of the Berlin Shop Stewards movement during the January 1918 mass strike. After the failure of the strike, she allowed ‘large stockpiles of guns and munitions’ to be stored in her flat on behalf of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards because it was ‘my inner conviction that I had to sacrifice everything, including my own life, to the struggle against the warmongers [*Kriegstreiber*]’.⁶⁶ Insisting that she was not in awe of Richard Müller, the Shop Stewards leader who became

⁶⁴ Arnold, unpublished memoirs (as in n. 40), fos. 18–19 (recto).

⁶⁵ SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/0148, Cläre Derfert-Casper, unpublished memoirs, 14 Apr. 1958, fo. 10 (recto).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

persona non grata in the German communist movement after 1922 because he left the party and rejoined the SPD, she nonetheless admitted that she had admired his courage and determination in 1918. Writing in opposition to the standard party line in the GDR of the 1950s, but nonetheless for the official SED archive, she noted:

Of course, Richard Müller, like many others, returned to the SPD—largely due to monetary pressures. But during the November Revolution he played an important role. The complete erasure of his name today is not right. One can hold the opinion that he chose the wrong path in later life, but his services to the revolution should nonetheless be acknowledged. Above all else, what impressed me most about him was his clear and consistent opposition to the [official] SPD line—and in contrast to many other [functionaries], he was never condescending [*nie überheblich*].⁶⁷

‘Never condescending’ can be read in this context in particular as respectful towards women activists in the metalworkers’ union and the USPD, and later in the Berlin workers’ and soldiers’ councils. Being condescended to, as a woman, and having to deal with men who put the war and good relations with employers before the interests of the increasingly female workforce in the metal industries, was what had most enraged Casper-Derfert about her wartime experiences in the Berlin labour movement.

The young communist and middle-class ‘rebel’ Hilde Kramer, who had been at the centre of many of the strikes and far-left street protests in Munich between autumn 1918 and spring 1919, and had travelled to Berlin in December 1918 as a delegate of the International

⁶⁷ Ibid. fo. 40 (recto). On Müller, see also Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics*.

Communists of Germany (IKD) group, was also in no doubt that revulsion informed her rage and her political choices:

In the last months of the war I made strenuous efforts to educate myself as a ‘socialist’, and discovered just how little I knew. . . I frantically swotted up on ‘wages, prices, and profit’ and other pamphlets which were supposed to open up a new world to me, but in fact merely convinced me that I could never grasp anything about scientific socialism. My beliefs were not based on [abstract] knowledge, but solely on my own feelings. These feelings in turn came from observations that I had made myself, and on my revulsion towards a society that could bring about a war like this one.⁶⁸

The mention here of ‘observations that I had made myself’ should not be interpreted as purely self-referential; it also reflects a conscious assertion that revulsion and the rage it gave rise to could be channelled into political opposition to ‘militarism’ and commitment to transformative social change. Nor should this extract from Kramer’s account be read as a call to balance emotions against rationality; rather, for her, reason and thus revolutionary action stemmed from a positive working through of emotions like revulsion and rage—emotions that had previously been associated negatively with female ‘hysteria’. In this sense, her outlook was not too dissimilar from that of many of the male revolutionaries around her who, as Föllmer has shown, also struggled to square their own gendered subjectivities with the ‘objectivism of Marxist theory’.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Kramer, *Rebellin*, 46.

⁶⁹ Föllmer, ‘The Unscripted Revolution’, 165.

Instances of rage leading directly to acts of violence by revolutionary women are much harder to find in retrospective accounts, and what we do have comes largely from male eyewitness testimony, much of it hostile and fantastical.⁷⁰ Even the more credible and down-to-earth reports still contain elements of voyeurism and hints of gendered anxieties about supposed female brutality. In Lichtenberg, a poor eastern suburb of Berlin, one member of the pro-Spartacist People's Marine Division, Franz Beiersdorf, later recalled what happened when he and his comrades caught hold of the chief of the local police district, Commissioner Dietz, during the March 1919 unrest:

At this moment, the women [of the district] could no longer be held back, because none of them had forgotten his threats to throw them into prison and shoot them. They boxed his ears with carpet beaters, scrub brushes and market baskets. His face was greenish yellow with fear, as his empty holster hung over his fat belly. To the last he had willingly shot [protestors], wounding many workers and killing soldiers. The women beat him half dead.⁷¹

⁷⁰ See Klaus Theweleit's now classic study of Freikorps mentalities, published in English as *Male Fantasies*, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, 1987–9), first published as *Männerphantasien*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main 1977–8).

⁷¹ Cited in Belinda J. Davis, 'Homefront: Food, Politics and Women's Everyday Life during the First World War', in Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (eds.), *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 2002), 115–38, at 129.

Here, then, is further evidence of rage, but of the more immediate and spontaneous kind.

Absent from this male account is the kind of ‘emotional labour’ that might have led to more open-ended ways of imagining the link between revulsion, anger, and commitment to revolutionary change.

Sympathy and Solidarity

It was not only rage and revulsion that gained new currency in the historical moment of November 1918. In their autobiographical writings, revolutionary women gave voice to their opposition to war through open expressions of sympathy with the suffering of men, and in particular those men who had fallen foul of military discipline and regulations or had been killed or badly wounded on the battlefield. This in turn led to new ways of narrating class solidarity. Sympathy, as Frevert tells us, is a very different emotion to empathy. In particular, it is gendered differently, in terms of both political activism and subjective historical experience. Thus it is possible to experience empathy by feeling one’s way into the situation faced by an ‘other’ (as in the German word *Einfühlung*), while still regarding that ‘other’s’ suffering with relative indifference or contempt.⁷² Lenin, for instance, in his pamphlet *State and Revolution* (1917), might empathize with the abject misery and ‘mindless drudgery’⁷³ of the housewife under bourgeois capitalist rule, while still believing that unwaged housework had nothing meaningful to contribute to the class struggle, which depended solely on factory-

⁷² Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 177–8.

⁷³ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge, 1993), 2–3.

based agitation and the revolutionary aspirations of the (predominantly male army of industrial wage-earners. Solidarity, from this point of view, was a product of democratic centralism—in other words, of party-controlled, hierarchically organized, work-based relationships. Productive rather than reproductive labour—and the historical question of who or what it was for—was identified as a male domain that women might gradually enter, but only if they were willing to learn from men, not challenge their authority.

Sympathy, on the other hand, particularly when it is embedded in gendered discursive structures as opposed to being merely a privately experienced emotion, implies a more authentic and active coming together. It is not ‘value neutral’ or possible to feel solely from the relative comfort of the ‘onlooker’s’ or theorist’s vantage point.⁷⁴ Rather, to sympathize means to reject injustice in a directly partisan way, and to feel that its overthrow is both urgent and a valid end in its own right. It also entails a different, more immediate manner of perceiving the ‘power of those who inflict . . . suffering’ and how that power can be challenged.⁷⁵ The authority of the German military in 1918, for instance, was based solely on the continued willingness of men to fight and kill when ordered. If they refused, they would certainly have the sympathy and earn the solidarity of revolutionary women, who recognized in their refusal to accept orders and their willingness to lay down their arms a means of bringing together *all* the victims of war and militarism, male and female, civilian and combatant, young and old, in a historical moment of transcendence.

In Berlin, Martha Arendsee, then aged 33 and active in the local USPD, recalled witnessing just such a moment on 9 November 1918 when she led a group of revolutionary women through the streets of the German capital:

⁷⁴ Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 190.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

After we had already begun our march towards Alexanderplatz, a company of soldiers, with an officer leading them, was coming in the opposite direction. We women invited them to join us and told them that the revolution had begun. They explained to us that they had just come from drill practice and were tired and hungry. We then went along our ranks and collected donations of bread, which we gave to the soldiers. The officer said to the soldiers: do as you want!, whereupon they joined us.⁷⁶

Here, a gendered form of solidarity, expressed through women reaching out to reassure, feed, and care for male soldiers, is being narrated. Similar events were recorded at several of the military barracks in central Berlin on 9 November, where crowds of protestors, including women, persuaded soldiers to hand over their weapons and accompany them, after first releasing their comrades held in military detention. Lucie Gottschar-Heimbürger remembered the events at the Maikäfer barracks on 9 November when a young worker, Erich Habersaath, was shot dead by an officer, but not before a group of pro-Spartacist Young Socialists had called for the ordinary soldiers to hand over their weapons:

The soldiers had been locked up by their officers. One of our young female comrades talked to the soldiers through a window . . . we all . . . agreed that

⁷⁶ SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/0017, Martha Arendsee, unpublished memoirs, n.d., fo. 65 (recto).

we absolutely had to persuade the soldiers to hand over the barracks to the workers.⁷⁷

This in itself represented something new, for previously, as the historian Veronika Helfert notes, ‘demonstrations headed or organized by women and young people were typically dismissed as leaderless, with women denied positions of influence’ by their male comrades.⁷⁸ Now they really did have a role in the way the revolution was conducted, defended, and celebrated at the ‘moment of rupture’. The ‘moment of rupture’ in turn developed its own nuanced, if temporary, gender politics in the narratives constructed by women revolutionaries. Human beings in combatant nations, they acknowledged, had been ravaged by several years of hunger and food shortages, with members of both sexes subject to a significant loss of autonomy over their bodies and everyday lives compared to peacetime. However, in the midst of the economic and emotional turmoil of war, it was the bodies of men which seemed most destroyed—and most deserving of sympathy. Cläre Jung, who opposed the war and was horrified by the experiences of her male comrades who had been conscripted, hid deserters in her home in Berlin and helped them to flee the city.⁷⁹ Her actions represented a humanitarian effort to save men who had been psychologically damaged by their military service, but also a way of expressing solidarity with them. Anna

⁷⁷ Lucie Gottschar-Heimburger, unpublished memoirs, in Bezirksleitung Berlin der SED (ed.), *Geschichte der revolutionären Berliner Arbeiterbewegung*, 2 vols., vol. ii: 1917–1945 (East Berlin, 1987), 31–2.

⁷⁸ Helfert, *Frauen, wacht auf!*, 127.

⁷⁹ Jung, *Paradiesvögel*, 34.

Rehme, an independent, wage-earning, 19-year-old Young Socialist who had moved from her home town of Würzburg in Bavaria to Berlin in 1916, likewise recalled:

Most of my political activity took place in eastern Berlin, in the district of Friedrichshain . . . Here, the political persecution of anti-war activists and revolutionary workers got worse at the end of 1918. Many soldiers deserted and went underground. We had to feed and house them, because they had no ration cards. Not a day went by without us hearing about fresh arrests of our comrades and friends. It was the same on the evening of 8 November 1918 [the day before the revolution]. We had gone to the workers' education building on Schicklerstrasse to listen to a debate. But the event could not take place as the main speaker had been taken into custody. So we stood on the steps outside the lecture hall and talked about the arrests.⁸⁰

Anti-war working-class women from smaller industrial communities might feel this sense of being under siege even more strongly, because they had often been to school with, or grown up alongside, the men who were arrested for desertion or who were killed or maimed. Milli Bölke, the Young Socialist from the industrial and garrison town of Mülheim an der Ruhr, recalled how the girls who were left behind when the boys were conscripted embarked on a political journey accompanied by a mixture of emotions that involved first, sympathy for the young men who were forced to go to war, and second, solidarity with them as anti-militarist comrades:

⁸⁰ SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/0755, Anna Rehme, unpublished memoirs, n.d., fos. 1–2 (recto).

In November 1918 many of our young male comrades did not come home. Gerhard Bohnes, our much loved and talented youth leader . . . who had given us encouragement and guidance from the field in our anti-militarist campaigns, came back with a terrible jaw wound and reminded us constantly of the horrors of the war . . . After he died from his injuries, his burial in the cemetery at Mülheim-Broich turned into a strong demonstration of allegiance to the cause of anti-militarist youth.⁸¹

Some of the working-class men returning to the Ruhr and other parts of Germany wanted revenge against the ‘militarists’ who had sent them into war, but they did not take it—at least not yet, and not in violent form until the Ruhr Uprising of March–April 1920. The ‘restrained nature’ of most revolutionary men’s acts of violence in 1918–19 is attributed by Föllmer primarily to the continued influence of working-class patterns of protest in the pre-1914 period, ‘which had occasionally entailed throwing stones or bottles at the police or beating up scabs, but not arson or lynching’.⁸² However, hitherto hidden female subjectivities may also have played a role here, particularly in the working-class districts of big cities and in smaller industrial towns that found themselves at the centre of a peculiarly strong local as well as national ‘moment of rupture’ in November 1918. In Hamburg, for instance, Anna Arnold remembered that in the days after 9 November

more and more soldiers came home, almost all of them armed, and we all hoped that there would now be a final reckoning with the warmongers . . . I

⁸¹ Bölke, unpublished memoirs (as in n. 41), fo. 15 (recto).

⁸² Föllmer, ‘The Unscripted Revolution’, 173.

heard some of the workers say: ‘five grams of lead should be enough for these criminals’ . . . But at the time no-one was able to offer the kind of steadfast leadership [*konsequente Führung*] that would have made the revolution a success and saved us from so much suffering [later on].⁸³

Here, then, solidarity is expressed in terms of sympathy with the soldiers’ unrequited desire for (masculine) vengeance as a marker of genuine revolutionary change.

In Mülheim an der Ruhr, on the other hand, Milli Bölke was proud of her father, a left-wing Social Democrat and later a KPD supporter, and in 1918 a member of the reserve army stationed on the home front who had protected enemy POWs from harm and then stowed captured weapons away in the family home. Soldiers everywhere seemed to lay down their arms and join the anti-war movement of women and young people, a moment of rupture that could be cast in terms that gave equal weight to female subjectivities:

In the November days of 1918 we believed that victory had already been won. My father Hermann Bölke, who was a member of the workers’ and soldiers’ council in Oberhausen, stood guard, with rifle in hand, at the railway station and the post office. He kept watch over the prisoners of war who were being repatriated and made sure that that they were not molested. He helped to store weapons so that they did not fall into the hands of counter-revolutionary elements, and to monitor the fair distribution of food . . . Every now and again we girls [Milli and her sister] were allowed to help father clean and grease the pistols and we were very proud of this. For our entire family, father and

⁸³ Arnold, unpublished memoirs (as in n. 40), fos. 20–1 (recto).

mother in the KPD, we girls in the Young Socialists, this was a matter of course. We all hoped that the weapons would be used again.⁸⁴

Sympathy and solidarity, then, provided an important gendered route into citizenship claims in the new, ‘free’ Germany, where the injustices and power structures of the old regime were challenged. Revolutionary women, writing in retrospect, often chose to express their female subjectivity in this way. There was no inherited tradition of solidarity between working-class women and soldiers, but nor was one needed or expected. Adherence to particular gendered hierarchies, ideological doctrines, or established party lines—hitherto the supposed realm of men—was beside the point. Another Young Socialist, the 24-year-old Berlin university student and future KPD member Franziska Rubens, recalled how, after seeing Karl Liebknecht speaking to the crowds from the balcony of the royal palace on 9 November, she and a group of fellow women students who had formed links with working-class members of the *Freie Jugend Groß-Berlins* (Free Youth of Greater Berlin) earlier that year had suddenly felt a profound and emotionally powerful, but otherwise wholly unrehearsed sense of solidarity with the revolution:

Together we stormed down [Unter den] Linden as one mass . . . endless columns of vehicles, soldiers with bayonets, red flags fluttering . . . And amid all this there is a quite personal memory, which Marthel [Martha Globig, a Young Socialist friend] and I still look back on even today. On one of the first days of the revolution we bumped into each other at another demonstration in the city. I squeezed Marthel’s hand in excitement and said to her,

⁸⁴ Bölke, unpublished memoirs (as in n. 41), fos. 15 (recto) and 26 (recto).

‘Congratulations, Marthel! We’ve done it, we’ve won!’ Whereupon she smiled indulgently [at my naivety] and replied, ‘What are you saying! This is only the beginning!’⁸⁵

In this particular moment, then, remembered around forty years later, female agency could be constructed and made meaningful not in spite of, but because of the absence of a single overarching script. Indeed, while Föllmer found that revolutionary men often seemed to narrate the events of 1918–19 in terms of failure, and to attribute this to a ‘lack of masculine vigour’, revolutionary women were far less likely to assign failure either to themselves or to men.⁸⁶ Rather, they were able to draw on and work through a diverse range of emotions—from passion and pain, through revulsion and rage, to sympathy and solidarity—to develop their own more open-ended and affirmatory discursive frameworks for (re)interpreting what was often presented to them, in official party narratives and by men, as a revolution that had ‘failed’ on subjective grounds.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/0787, Franziska Rubens, unpublished memoirs, n.d., fos. 4–5 (recto). On the Freie Jugend Groß-Berlins, which was founded on 5 May 1918—the centenary of Karl Marx’s birth—and brought together working-class youth educational associations and university students sympathetic to their cause, see also Sieger, *Die junge Front*, 148.

⁸⁶ Föllmer, ‘The Unscripted Revolution’, 161.

⁸⁷ See also Heinrich August Winkler, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Revolution von 1918/19: Ein Rückblick nach 60 Jahren* (Bonn, 1979), 11–12.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, we asked what would happen if we placed women activists at the centre, rather than the margins, of the revolution of 1918–19 and its immediate aftermath. The answer is that a women-centred analysis not only brings female subjectivities out from the shadows, but demonstrates that left-wing women, just like left-wing men, struggled, without a script, to bring together competing emotions into a single narrative to explain what the revolution was about and who it was for. Also, like their male counterparts, they suffered directly when the revolutionary imaginary of 1918–20 came up against the repressive reality of counter-revolutionary violence, whether in Berlin, Munich, the Ruhr, or elsewhere.⁸⁸ Not lack of political imagination or aspiration, in other words, but terror from the right, supported by the republican-controlled paramilitary security police and the Reichswehr, prevented them from developing their newly won citizenship rights into something more than the vote. Yet most notable of all is the fact that, unlike socialist men, the women discussed in this essay did not narrate the November Revolution and its aftermath as a ‘failure’. Instead, they chose to incorporate it into a broader, life-affirming narrative of self- and societal transformation. Placing women’s voices and emotions centre stage, then, not only offers a more complete and differentiated picture of the 1918–20 period, but also exposes the previously hidden complexities, varieties, and nuances of female agency within the revolutionary camp, the many positive expressions of that agency, and the need for more critical questioning of prevailing power structures, both then and in present-day historiography.

⁸⁸ See e.g. Gleising and Pfromm, *Kapp-Putsch*, vol. iii: *Totenliste der Märzgefallenen*, who list at least twenty ‘Red’ women killed, murdered, or executed alongside hundreds of their male comrades in the Ruhr in 1920.

For the female revolutionaries mentioned in this essay, choosing to become a revolutionary was not an impulsive decision; it grew out of pre-war and wartime interests and campaigning. It set them on a course of radical political action that, where archival materials exist, can be traced throughout their lives. They compensated for the lack of a 'script' by fitting their revolutionary activities into the greater narratives of their lives. The November Revolution might not have lived up to their expectations, and the counter-revolutionary violence of 1919 and 1920 might have seemed at first like the end of their journey, but they found ways to continue and develop their visions for a better, fairer world and to remain involved in organizations to realize them. For each revolutionary, these experiences were specific to the individual, and scope remains for further research into the later lives of these revolutionaries.

After her release from prison in Munich and expulsion from Bavaria, Hilde Kramer worked in Berlin and Moscow in the early 1920s to aid the construction of a new state. The Soviet Union was a great disappointment to her; the cultural gulf she perceived between the industrial workers who travelled from Germany and the rural Russian communities went far beyond the language barrier, and she believed that important political work in Germany had also been neglected.⁸⁹ She spent the latter part of the 1920s and the early 1930s working in Berlin for left-wing publications and trade unions, and joined the dissident Communist Party-Opposition (KPD-O) group in 1928. When Hitler came to power her life was thrown into turmoil once again and, after relying on the charity of comrades for financial and emotional support, she came to Britain in 1937. During and after the Second World War she was involved with the Labour Party and wrote documents for the National Health Service Act. The Labour election victory in 1945 may have represented an opportunity to construct the

⁸⁹ Kramer, *Rebellin*, 89.

kind of state founded on social justice that she had fought for in Munich in 1918–19 and again in Moscow and Berlin in the 1920s.⁹⁰

Lola Landau also attempted to build the nation overseas that she had envisioned in 1918. As a Jewish activist, she keenly felt the rise of the right throughout the inter-war years, and in 1936 she emigrated to Palestine. Her vision of women reaching out across borders to create stronger links than the international proletariat and to build a new society, free from war, had not been realized in Germany.⁹¹ Jews from across Europe were arriving in Palestine and were finding ways to work together despite language barriers and cultural differences. She recognized that they were not yet one people, but believed that their descendants would become a kind of ‘patchwork nation [*ein aus Fetzen und Flickern zusammengesetztes Volk*]’.⁹²

Other female revolutionaries applied the skills they had developed during the revolution in their later activism. Erna Halbe, after being released from detention at the end of the war, was elected to the Hamburg Soldiers’ and Workers’ Executive Council—the only woman alongside twenty-nine males.⁹³ She was also a founding member of the KPD in Hamburg in 1919, but after falling out with the party during its Stalinist phase she joined the KPD-O in 1929 and another dissident left-wing group, the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (Socialist Workers Party, SAP), in 1931. During the early Nazi period she was again subject to a protective custody order and spent several months in a concentration camp before going into exile in 1934, first in Prague, then in France, and finally in the United States. In 1951 she settled in Frankfurt am Main, where she was an active member of the SPD until her death in

⁹⁰ Ibid. 190.

⁹¹ Landau, *Vor dem Vergessen*, 52.

⁹² Ibid. 384.

⁹³ Boak, ‘Women in the German Revolution’, 31.

1983.⁹⁴ Cläre Jung remained in Berlin under the Third Reich and used her networks, resources, and skills in the resistance movement. During the First World War she had been arrested and questioned by the authorities for hiding deserters, and had drawn on her bourgeois upbringing to demand respect and deny any involvement in plots.⁹⁵ In the 1930s she used these techniques again when she gave her identity documents to a Jewish friend who was trying to flee to Belgium. In the event that the authorities questioned Jung, she planned to feign ignorance and claim the documents had been stolen.⁹⁶ In sum, she continued to play the role society expected of her in public, so that in secret she could continue to fight the regime that represented everything she stood against.

Milli Bölke, on the other hand, worked openly as a KPD youth official in the Ruhr during the Weimar Republic and then spent much of the Nazi period in the Soviet Union, ending up in 1943 as secretary to Erich Weinert, president of the anti-fascist National Committee for a Free Germany. As a party veteran, first in the post-1945 Ruhr area, and then from 1956 in the GDR, she fought actively against West German rearmament and Western military intervention in Vietnam.⁹⁷ Franziska Rubens was less fortunate: like her friend Martha Globig, she fell victim to the Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union, being arrested in Moscow in 1936, where she had lived in exile from the Nazis since 1933. Although she

⁹⁴ Christina Lipke, 'Erna Halbe', in Matthes and Pelc (eds.), *Menschen in der Revolution*, 41–3.

⁹⁵ Jung, *Paradiesvögel*, 34.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 182–3.

⁹⁷ See SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/0083, Rede auf der Trauerfeier für Genossin Milli Bölke am 3. Dezember 1971 im Krematorium Berlin (funeral oration for Milli Bölke on 3 December 1971 at the Berlin crematorium), fos. 56–61 (recto).

survived many years of imprisonment in the Gulag, her first husband, Hermann Bergmann, and her son, Peter, did not.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Cläre Casper-Derfert carried on working for the trade union movement and the KPD in Germany, both legally and underground. She joined the party again in June 1945 when it was licensed to re-form by the Soviet occupation authorities in Berlin, and in April 1946 she followed Martha Arendsee, Anna Arnold, Lucie Gottschar-Heimbürger, Anna Rehme, and many other veteran communist activists into the new Socialist Unity Party, the SED. Needless to say, she continued to act as guardian of the particular memory of the Revolutionary Shops Stewards movement and its role in the tumultuous events of the last year of the war. This led her, at least implicitly, to reject SED first secretary Walter Ulbricht's 1958 definition of November 1918 as a 'failed bourgeois-democratic revolution fought to a certain extent with proletarian methods and means'.⁹⁹ For her, it was and remained a proletarian revolution full stop. Gottschar-Heimbürger's membership of the KPD-O from the late Weimar period to the Second World War (which did not prevent her from coming back to the KPD/SED after 1945) may be indicative of similar views; indeed, in its 1930 programme, the KPD-O pointedly cast the November 1918 revolution as 'proletarian in origin', with real power briefly held by the working class through its representative organs.¹⁰⁰

The revolution represented many different ideas and opportunities to the revolutionaries discussed here, but for all of these women it irrevocably altered gender norms and expectations in a way that ruled out any return to pre-war relations. While the Third

⁹⁸ Stibbe, Shnyrova and Helfert, 'Women and Socialist Revolution', 123.

⁹⁹ Walter Ulbricht, 'Über den Charakter der Novemberrevolution', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 6/4 (1958), 717–29, at 729.

¹⁰⁰ *Plattform der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands (Opposition)* (Berlin, 1930), 19.

Reich and the Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union may have been perceived by some as the end of all hope for the revolutionary aims of 1918—namely democracy, social justice, and equality—for others they constituted another field of struggle and in some cases led them to renew their commitment to these values. The November Revolution was in this sense neither the beginning nor the end for them; it was one scene in the continuum of their lives.