

***FRONTSCHWEINE AND REVOLUTION:
THE ROLE OF FRONT-LINE SOLDIERS IN THE
GERMAN REVOLUTION OF 1918***

By

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M.A. Syracuse University, 1986

**Submitted to the graduate program in History and the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

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Date approved: May 22, 2007

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Abstract

This study considers the political behavior of German soldiers returning from the trenches of the Western Front at the conclusion of the First World War. The dissertation argues that this behavior played a large but underappreciated role in the early stages of the German Revolution of 1918. The dissertation identifies six factors that shaped the response of the front-line troops to the political cataclysm that overcame their homeland in 1918. They are: *exhaustion* (physical and emotional), *isolation* (from revolutionary agitation), *alienation* (from all those who had not shared their experience), *selection* (both by soldiers themselves and the army's leadership), *cohesion* (referring to elements that bind soldiers together including, *esprit*, patriotism, and camaraderie), and *management* (of soldier perceptions by the officer chain of command). The study uses these six factors to explain why those who fought at the front responded to the revolution so differently from soldiers in the rear areas, the homeland garrisons, and the Eastern Front. The differences and their consequences were enormous. When selected elite units failed to obey the orders to suppress revolutionary activity, their failure left the Kaiser no option but to abdicate. Then, in the aftermath of the Armistice, while soldiers' councils elsewhere took on a radical character and overthrew the old authorities, the Field Army returned to Germany in orderly columns led by their officers. However, when the officers attempted to preserve the old formations in order to provide border security, support an orderly demobilization, and act as a counterweight to the activities of the Far Left, the front-line troops, instead, abandoned the army in order to return home as rapidly as possible. As a result, the Supreme Headquarters' plan to use elite troops to quash the Spartacist movement in Berlin miscarried as the few remaining "reliable" troops were driven out of the capital in late December. The Ebert government saw no resort but to call on ruthless volunteer formations, the *Freikorps* to restore order. This measure, in turn, split the Left and poisoned the political atmosphere during the early years of the Weimar Republic.

FRONTSCHWEINE AND REVOLUTION:
The Role of Front-Line Soldiers in the German Revolution Of 1918

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation began as a seminar paper presented to the graduate students and faculty Syracuse University's History Department. At the time, I was a young captain pursuing a master's degree in history while serving with the school's ROTC instructor cadre. During that same assignment, both my daughters were born in snowstorms common to that part of the country. It is a measure of how long this project has taken that, at the moment this dissertation is submitted, one daughter has completed a year of graduate study, and the other has just finished her sophomore year in college, while I am well into middle age and retired from military service.

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For Rose

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION: THE DIVIDED ARMY

The German Empire's defeat in the First World War was comprehensive. By late 1918, Germany military and civilian leaders had cause to wonder which would give way first, the enfeebled institutions of the Second Reich or its beleaguered army on the Western Front. The question was decided on November 4, when naval mutinies at Kiel launched a revolutionary tidal wave that swept irresistibly across a nation exhausted by war. The day after the sailors' uprising, Erich Ludendorff's replacement as First Quartermaster General, General Wilhelm Groener, told the Imperial cabinet that the army's powers of resistance on the Western Front were nearly spent.¹ When the Armistice came a week later, it found the German forces in France and Belgium exhausted, depleted, and staggering under the blows of the Allied armies. A series of political and diplomatic events, the declaration of the republic in Berlin, the Kaiser's abdication and flight to Holland, and, finally, the armistice agreement signed at Compiègne on 11 November 1918, may very well have spared the *Westheer* from a humiliating battlefield collapse.

Foch, Haig, and the other Allied military leaders had been surprised by the German request for armistice at the beginning of October. Dogged German resistance

¹ "Only for a brief period can that resistance last which the Army will be able to lend against the assault of our outside enemies in view of their tremendously superior numbers and the threat from the direction of Austria-Hungary." Ralph Lutz, ed. Document No. 514: Extract Concerning Session of the Secretaries of State on November 5, 1918, *Fall of the German Empire, 1914-1918*, Vol. II, (Stanford University, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1932, pp. 500-507.

along the front had led them to believe the war would drag into 1919. A few weeks after the fighting had ended, an American officer working with the International Armistice Commission in Spa, Belgium offered additional reasons to doubt the totality of the Allied victory. In an urgent report to General Pershing, he wrote:

Observation of German troops passing through this city convinces me that a large portion of the German Army is in extremely fine moral and physical condition (and ready) to resume active military operations east of the Rhine. It would appear that the reports of disorder and demoralization among German troops have applied only to second-line troops which were sent to the rear early in the present withdrawal. The first-line troops who have come under my observation have been well-disciplined, orderly and apparently still full of fight. Their transportation has been covered with evergreens and German flags and their retreat has been given the aspect of a triumphal return to Germany.²

If this unidentified American observer discerned a clear contrast between “second-line” German troops who had left the scene and the combat formations marching through Spa later, the same distinction was recorded by a German general on the staff of the Crown Prince’s army group. During the early days of the German revolution, General Hermann von Kuhl was gratified to find that front-line units had remained under the control of their officers but was appalled at the anarchy that prevailed in the army’s rear areas. There, he observed, troops plundered supply trains, released prisoners, and sold their weapons to Belgian civilians. The garrisons of the supply installations and replacement depots seemed to lose all trace of discipline. He observed in disgust that “trucks filled with booty hurried toward the homeland.”³

² Historical Division, Department of the Army, *The Armistice Agreement and Related Documents of the United States Army in the World War, 1917-1919*. (Washington: 1948), Vol. X, 148.

³ Von Kuhl, in *Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der Verfassunggebenden Deutschen Nationalversammlung*, 4. Reihe, *Die Ursachen des deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, (Berlin: 1925-1929), Vol. VI, 23. Hereafter referred to as UDZ.

The American observer and the German general drew similar conclusions. The German Revolution of November 1918 had apparently provoked dramatically different responses from the troops in France and Belgium and those elsewhere. The troops at the front remained under the control of their officers while the troops in the rear overthrew their chain of command and replaced its authority with their own Soldiers' Councils. However, the contrast went beyond the Western Front. The vast majority of German occupation units in the East and in the garrisons of the Home Army had also deposed their officers, established Soldiers' Councils, and declared their emphatic support for the revolution. While the front-line soldiers in the West seemed relatively unmoved by the news of the revolution, the soldiers in the rear areas in Belgium and France, in the occupation forces in Russia, and the garrisons inside Germany were active in proclaiming their common cause with the mutinous sailors who had started the revolution. The differing reactions continued through the ensuing weeks. While soldiers in the Field Army's rear areas often made their way home as individuals, improvising or confiscating what transportation they could find, the front-line troops marched West in well-ordered formations following the demanding march schedule provided by the Field Army headquarters, the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL) and its subordinate staffs.

The early stages of the German Revolution--the naval mutinies, the Kaiser's abdication, and the proclamation of the new republic--also provoked vastly different reactions from the front-line troops and the rest of the German army. These disparate responses highlighted the divisions that existed in the *Kaiserheer* in the last stages of the war, divisions that would have profound importance for the course of the revolution. On one hand, during the critical weeks of November and December 1918, the soldiers and

sailors of the German armed forces provided the revolution with much of its energy and almost all of its armed strength. Inside Germany, the institutions of the old empire crumbled in face of the militantly revolutionary garrisons and the Soldiers' Councils who led them. Many saw in these councils the same revolutionary potential as that manifested the year before in the soviets of post-Tsarist Russia. On the other hand, the armed forces, in the specific form of the front-line divisions of the Western Front, also seemed to offer the greatest potential for counter-revolution. When the combat troops marched across the Rhine, they were led by the old officer corps and they marched, almost invariably, under the banners of the old monarchy. The apparent political separation between "front" and "rear" could hardly be more profound. The rank and file of the military provided much of the initial impetus of the revolution and, paradoxically, in the units manning the trenches on the Western Front seemed to pose the greatest potential to undo the achievements of the revolution, most notably, the abdication of the Kaiser and the establishment of a socialist-dominated republic.

To a certain extent, the German army's complex and diverse responses to the revolution were to be expected. The German army that fought the First World War was an intricate and diverse social organism. Like the other mass armies of the war, it had evolved through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the small, relatively simple regimental organizations of the dynastic period to a gigantic and complex army with forces spread from the Caucasus to the English Channel. The size of the *Kaiserheer* and the lethal technology it wielded were based on an elaborate logistical and administrative organization. Whereas Frederick the Great's 18th century army was able to deliver "tooth" to the battlefield with relatively little "tail," the front line forces of

German army of 1918 were significantly outnumbered by the support services, depot units, and homeland garrisons. These rear area support services, included railroad engineers, bakers, truck drivers, nurses, supply clerks, signalmen, blacksmiths, and bridge builders, all of whom performed the vast number of tasks essential to the army's maintenance in the field.

This intricate differentiation in soldier function necessarily resulted in the evolution of unique sub-cultures within the German military. The truck driver behind the lines inevitably looked at his military role in a different way than the machine gunner on the Western Front. The supply clerk issuing uniforms to new replacements in Munich or Dresden naturally felt himself a different kind of soldier than the *Frontschweine* (“front-pigs”), as the men in the trenches called themselves. The fairly standardized regimental culture of the Frederician period gave way to separate sub-cultures within the wartime army though this development befuddled the senior military leaders as well as the Kaiser himself, who persisted in believing that the only “true” soldiers were those who bore arms in combat.

The army was geographically divided as well, most significantly between East and West. Of the eight million soldiers wearing *feldgrau* in 1918, something like three and a half million were deployed on the Western Front. The draconian terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty had left Germany with an enormous protectorate carved out of the corpse of Imperial Russia. In order to secure this empire, Ludendorff left a massive army on the Eastern Front even as he was stripping that front of its best units to support his offensive plans in the West. Three quarters of a million German troops served in outposts that reached from the Baltic coast to Georgia. Another million garrisoned other

occupied areas (Rumania, Belgium, and France.) Two hundred thousand troops were found in smaller German contingents supported Germany's allies in such far-flung fighting fronts as Mesopotamia and Macedonia. Finally, the garrisons of the *Heimatheer* (Home Army) counted two and a half million men.⁴

The divisions in the German army also reflected other aspects of the Second Reich's military demography. The one most scrutinized by historians has been the army's reflection of the Wilhelmine society's iniquity with the noble class dominating the senior ranks, the middle class granted access only to the junior and non-commissioned officer positions, and the proletarians and farmers' sons restricted to the enlisted ranks. Still other factors militated against the ideal of soldierly camaraderie and a few generalizations suggest the nature of these divisions. For many, the concept of the German Empire competed with their identification with the region of their birth. Bavarian soldiers were often suspicious of Prussians and both Prussians and Bavarians were often very suspicious of Silesian Poles and Alsatians. Reserve officers outnumbered and envied the "active" officers of the pre-war army and both categories looked down on the "wartime" officers that dominated the junior levels of the officer corps. The older *Landwehr* soldiers tended to serve in quieter sectors than the other units of German infantry but they had reason to be jealous of the even older *Landsturm* men in garrisons safely behind the line. Regular infantry envied the storm troops units which spent much of their time out of the line and were transported to the front by truck instead of foot march. The young replacements sent to the front in 1918 had a vastly different view of military service than their older brothers who had marched off to war in the fall of 1914.

⁴ German troop strengths from Erich von Volkmann, *UDZ*, XI. 1. 241.

Drill sergeants continued to find that Rhenish farm boys made more pliable human material than young fellows drafted from the industrial cities of the Ruhr.

Military function, geographical stationing, regional origin, length of service, age, along with previous civilian occupation and social background may all have been factors in determining how soldiers responded to the revolution. None of these divisions, however, was as crucial to the early course of the German Revolution as the chasm that separated those who served behind the line and those who had endured the terrible experience of service in the trenches of the Western Front in the last stages of the war.

Yet the behavior of the front-line soldiers in the critical weeks of November and December 1918 presents a curious anomaly. Why would they be restrained in their response to the revolution? Why would they continue to obey the orders of officers who continued to lead them into harm's way in a war that was hopelessly lost? Certainly, the men at the front had suffered the most in the cause of German militarism. Thus, apparently, they had the most to gain from the revolution. The revolution promised the combat soldier more than political reform; a successful revolution would be the guarantee of their physical survival. Under these circumstances, one imagines the *Frontkämpfer* would celebrate the revolutionary achievements of the sailors whose mutiny launched the overthrow of the *Second Reich*. Instead, as we will see, the front-line soldiers, upon returning to the homeland, often expressed a special contempt for the sailors they encountered (a contempt, incidentally, that was often mutual). One also imagines the troops of the Field Army would extend whole-hearted support to the Soldiers' Councils in the homeland. The political program of these councils aimed at preventing old elites from reasserting their traditional authority and no men had endured more under the old

elites than the men at the front. Yet the weeks after the end of the war saw countless fistfights and, in a few rare cases, pitched battles, between returning front-line soldiers and the revolutionary garrisons inside Germany.

Thus, the seemingly anomalous actions of the *Frontkämpfer* during Germany's defeat and its subsequent political upheavals present two puzzling questions. Why was it so and did it matter? Why were the men who climbed out of the trenches on November 11, so different from the rest of the army? Beyond that, how and why did these differing perceptions shape the early history of the Weimar Republic? This dissertation proposes to offer answers to these questions by looking at what the front-line soldiers went through before and after the end of the war and by considering how these soldiers were led, manipulated, supported, and feared by the leaders of post-war Germany. The study will argue that the terrible ordeal endured by German soldiers on the Western Front in the last stages of the First World War set them apart from the remainder of army, shaped their response to the dramatic political events that accompanied Germany's defeat, and thrust upon them, through their response, a decisive role in determining the outcome of the German Revolution.

The historiography of the German Revolution usually assumes that difference existed between the front-line soldiers and the rest of the army without exploring the question of why it existed. West German historians have tended to be much more interested in the Soldiers' Councils created within Germany and for a long time debated whether these councils might have served as the basis for a "third path"⁵ for Germany's political destiny, offering an alternative, on one hand, to the Weimar Republic and its

⁵ See, for example, Reinhard Rurup, "Demokratische Revolution und der "dritter Weg;" Die deutsche Revolution von 1918/1919 in der neuen wissenschaftlichen Diskussion." *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 9 (1983) 278-301.

fatal compromises with the old elites, and, on the other extreme, the excesses risked in a Soviet-style Spartacist regime. Though the front-line units often formed their own Soldiers' Councils, these associations rarely supported a revolutionary agenda and, thus, have seemed far less interesting to German scholars. When Western historians have looked at the political behavior of the front-line soldiers it was usually through the lens of what came almost two decades later, the ascent of National Socialism. However, the fact that the old *Frontkämpfer* were disproportionately represented in the early leadership of the National Socialists (including the *Führer* himself) overshadows the fact that most of the hundreds of thousands of combat veterans of 1918 marched back to their homes and returned, as best they could, to the lives that had been interrupted by the war, without involvement in extremist politics.

Across the ideological divide of the Cold War, historians in the former German Democratic Republic were more attentive to the differences between front-line troops and the revolutionary soldiers in the rear. However, looking at these phenomena through a Marxist lens prevented them from examining the motivation of the *Frontkämpfer* with objectivity. Thus, in East German accounts of the revolution, the men who marched home under the control of their officers were portrayed as ill-informed dupes or homesick pragmatists. That is, until some of these same men volunteered to serve in the *Freikorps*. At that point, the former front-line soldiers were transformed into bloodthirsty mercenaries and treacherous class enemies. There is an important kernel of truth to this view, but, because of the ideological limits of East German analysis, it often seems more caricature than characterization.

A completely satisfactory explanation for the way soldiers behave under specific conditions of extraordinary stress must necessarily be elusive. Through the course of modern warfare and, especially since the First World War, psychologists, officers, and historians have struggled to understand why men act the way they do when their circumstances are dominated by danger and uncertainty. Though dated, the most comprehensive description of the political behavior of German soldiers during the revolution was provided by Ulrich Kluge's *Soldatenräte und Revolution*.⁶ Kluge suggested three material and political factors for the front-line troops' initially passive response to the revolution: 1) the German High Command successfully subverted the efforts of revolutionaries to agitate among the soldiers of the front; 2) the desperately difficult transportation situation during the return of the Field Army to Germany restricted the movement of revolutionary forces and prevented the coordination of revolutionary efforts; and 3) the soldiers' uncertainty over the situation in the homeland limited the appeal of political activists.⁷

While Kluge's three factors certainly contributed to the failure of revolutionary elements to gain political power among combat units of the West, they are not, by themselves, completely persuasive. Kluge's explanation seems to beg additional questions. Why were the efforts of the OHL (Oberste Heeresleitung; roughly Supreme Headquarters) to subvert the Soldiers' Councils (*Soldatenräte*) not successful elsewhere within the army? If the difficulty of the retreat from France and Belgium limited revolutionary agitation within front-line units, why was this not the case in the more difficult withdrawal from Poland and the Ukraine? Finally, if uncertainty over the

⁶ Ulrich Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution: Studien zur Militärpolitik in Deutschland, 1918/1919*. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975).

⁷ Kluge, 104-105.

situation within Germany provoked soldiers to shy away from radical appeals, why were the occupation troops in the East not similarly reticent?

We return to the argument that the soldiers on the Western Front represented a unique cohort and their political outlook was, likewise, unique. As the Armistice approached, the political objectives of the men in the trenches may be summarized succinctly: early peace and the fastest return to home and family possible. They were indifferent to such issues as the rate of socialization in German industry, the role of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils in sharing power with the central government, or the federal structure in the new German state. Theirs was the agenda of war-weariness, homesickness and despair. When the end of the war made the first goal a reality and the second a near-term possibility, the political views of the *Frontschweine* saw little alteration or evolution. Why? Even generalizations can be risky. Nevertheless, this study will use six factors--exhaustion, isolation, alienation, selection, cohesion, and management--to explain the peculiar response of the German front-line troops to the dramatic events that took place in a period of about ten weeks between late October 1918 and the end of that year.

Clearly, at this point further elaboration of these concepts is necessary to establish the framework of analysis; thus:

1) *Exhaustion*, for our purposes, refers primarily to the mind-numbing fatigue that prevailed in German lines in the last months of the war when incessant Allied attacks consumed German reserves and forced the OHL to leave units at the front for weeks without relief. It also refers to the profound war-weariness felt by front-line soldiers on both sides of No Man's Land in the fourth year of the conflict. Both forms of exhaustion,

physical and emotional, contributed to the dull indifference most front-line soldiers felt toward the world beyond the trenches by late 1918.

2) *Isolation*, as a factor, encompasses both the geographical and informational separation of the German fighting men from the sources of revolutionary agitation. While the young replacements in the homeland casernes were exposed to a full array of anti-war and anti-military propaganda, and the soldiers in the East had opportunity to fraternize with Bolsheviks, the front-line soldier in the West, unless on leave or convalescing in the rear, was relatively insulated from such influences. This was especially the case after leaves were cancelled and mail service broke down in the last days of the war. This condition of relative insulation persisted through the difficult return march across the Rhine in November and December 1918. (Where the isolation broke down, however, the behavior of the combat units would begin to more closely resemble the other elements of the army.)

3) *Alienation* describes the sullen hostility felt by the *Frontschweine* towards those who did not share their misery and the constant danger besetting them. In broad categories, these included civilians on the Home Front (excluding, of course, the soldier's family), rear-area troops, and the officers who planned and directed operations on the various army staffs. It describes the phenomenon common to almost all modern armies in a lengthy war: the jealousy and resentment felt by those exposed to lethal danger and those who were not. This alienation manifested itself not only in attitudes but, as the *Westheer* marched across the Rhine, physical attacks on the representatives of the Soldiers' Councils within Germany.

4) *Selection* includes both the choices made by the German High Command to put the most combat effective units and the best trained most fit men on the Western Front as well as the self-selection conducted by every front-line soldier when faced with the difficult choice of remaining with his unit under the command of his officers or, instead, seeking an escape from danger, a release from military coercion, and an opportunity to return home. For military reasons, the OHL put the men least susceptible to political agitation at the front. War-weariness, homesickness, and despair pulled thousands of men out of the line when the last months of the war expanded opportunities for desertion, surrender, or some form of shirking. Thousands, however, chose to remain with their units to the Armistice and beyond.

5) *Cohesion*, in this essay, will refer to several related phenomena : the camaraderie between men who share difficult experiences together; the loyalty felt by soldiers toward a specific leader, the *esprit* a soldier may feel toward a unit; the relationship between officers and men (either positive or negative), and, finally, the limited and as of October-November, 1918, the rapidly waning influence of national patriotism.

6) *Management* is the term used here to refer to what one Marxist historian called “special handling.”⁸ In the context of this argument, it will be the term offered in describing the active efforts of the German army’s chain of command to manage the perceptions and political outlook of the rank and file. The development of this factor will suggest the strength of Kluge’s argument that the OHL “subverted” the effect of the revolution on front-line soldiers but will extend this by attempting to show that every level of the officer chain of command had a role to play in this subversion.

⁸ Dieter Dreetz, “Rückführung des Westheeres und Novemberrevolution,” *Zeitschrift fuer Militärgeschichte* (DDR), 1968, 586.

A sociologist with an interest in military affairs could challenge the choice of terms and add or subtract the factors listed here. In the first place, these factors are interrelated and overlapping. As an example, an infantry battalion commander returning to Germany in December 1918 might seek to *manage* the patriotic feelings of his men by taking defensive measures to *isolate* them from seditious agitation, and offensive actions, in the form of patriotic flyers and speeches to increase their *alienation* toward the agents of revolution. Similarly, a *Frontkämpfer* considering desertion (*self-selection*) would weigh the loyalty he felt toward his comrades (*cohesion*) against the anxiety he felt for his hungry family (in part, a failure of *management*) and conviction that, these worries and the worsening situation at the front had pushed him to the limit of human endurance (*exhaustion*). Nevertheless, I believe the use of all six factors will permit a relatively nuanced consideration of the dilemmas faced by German front-line soldiers and a useful analysis of the choices they made. With these goals in mind, each chapter will conclude with a brief analysis built on the six factors which, again are: exhaustion, isolation, alienation, selection, cohesion, and management.

What kind of choices did the front-line soldiers confront? Consider, first, what the front-line soldier would experience in the last year of the war, for them a genuine *annus horribilis*. After spectacular but extravagantly costly victories in the spring of 1918, the German army on the Western Front found its hard-won triumphs to be an illusion. From mid-summer on, the German forces in the West was subjected to a series of grinding and seemingly inexorable Allied counteroffensives. For the German soldiers at the front, the disappointment in the failures of the spring evolved into despair in the autumn as the Allies exerted their overwhelming superiority in manpower and materiel.

Though punch-drunk from fatigue, the news of peace negotiations awakened hope among the troops even as it undermined the credibility of the Reich's senior leaders. In November, rumors of revolution, in turn provoked perplexity among the soldiers at the front as well as ill-informed anxiety over the situation inside Germany. After the cease-fire on the 11th, the front-line soldiers were given little time to reflect on the defeat of the Reich, because the Armistice terms demanded that they make a difficult forced march out of France and Belgium and across the Rhine. Returning to Germany, they were baffled, on one hand, by the heroes' welcome offered by the populace, and on the other, the open enmity of their comrades in the homeland garrisons. They were frustrated by the pace of a demobilization plan that seemed designed to keep them from returning to family and jobs before Christmas. By the end of the year, the bulk of Western Front veterans had found their way home as the old army disintegrated. Those who remained in the ranks of the Kaiser's old regiments experienced one final defeat and humiliation on Christmas Eve as a crowd of Berliners drove the tiny remnant of the Guard Corps out of the capital.

However, the *Frontkämpfer* were hardly the innocent victims of events and circumstances in 1918. With every significant development of that fateful year, the front-line soldiers had critical choices to make and these choices drove events in a way that is sometimes overlooked. Consider the choices made in the last weeks of the war. In late September, after Bulgaria led the domino-fall of Germany's allies and Ludendorff had demanded the government seek an armistice, there could be no illusions about the outcome of the war; Germany had lost. Yet the German forces on the Western Front continued to hold the line for another month, the thin *feldgrau* line bending but not breaking in the face of Allied attacks. Granted, during this period, thousands of German

soldiers deserted, surrendered, or just did what they could to avoid danger. However, many thousands more remained at their posts along the four hundred kilometer front. By doing so, they spared the German generals the humiliation of a clear-cut and decisive defeat. By their desperate defense through October and into November, German combat troops would offer unjustified credence to the first great lie of the postwar period, that Germany was “undefeated in the field.” This lie, of course, served as the basis for another, more pernicious lie, that Germany had been “stabbed-in-the-back.”

When, in early November, political unrest threatened the monarchy, front-line soldiers in a number of hand picked units were given another opportunity to make an important choice. The OHL ordered two front-line divisions to seize Rhine crossings as the first stage of a campaign conducted by the Field Army to suppress the revolution. Another veteran combat unit received the mission of securing the key government buildings in the center of the capital. Finally, the army called its most famous storm troop formation to Spa, Belgium, to guard the person of the Emperor himself. Pulled out of the trenches, the front-line soldiers in each of these units were asked to take arms against their countrymen. In each case they refused. The Kaiser lost his last hope of using the *Frontkämpfer* to crush the revolution, and the Hohenzollern monarchy was doomed.

A few days later, the troops on the Western Front were presented with yet another dilemma. The war was over, the Kaiser was gone, and revolutionary forces were in charge in the homeland. Support units behind the line had already begun to dissolve and stream back across the Rhine in a disorderly stream. Under those circumstances, should they, the combat veterans, remain with their units and continue to obey their officers, or

overthrow the chain of command and organize their own withdrawal from the occupied countries, or abandon their formations and seek the quickest road home as individuals? Almost to a man, they chose the first option. Their reasons were overwhelmingly pragmatic but the consequences were profound. The appearance of well ordered, disciplined units marching across the Rhine crossings and in the cities of Germany added yet more unjustified evidence that the army had not been defeated in battle. The success of the return march, the *Heimkehr*, also encouraged the officer corps in a false hope that the old army might yet be preserved. Finally, the appearance of the steel-helmeted combat veterans parading down the avenues of Germany's cities sent a shudder through the revolutionary workers' and soldiers' councils and the leaders of the radical Left, the Independent Socialists and the Spartacists. Here, it seemed, was counter-revolution on the march.

Notably, the hopes of the officer corps and the fears of the Left began to evaporate as the Field Army moved into the interior of Germany. At this point, the war-weary veterans had another choice. The circumstances of the army's demobilization offered them the option of staying with the army to become part of a postwar military, waiting for an official discharge to be processed, or, if that took too long, setting out for home on their own. The *Frontschweine* voted with their feet and, by January, the old army no longer existed. Some waited for the money, the suit, and the stamped documents that went with an official discharge while many others did not. This phenomenon was repeated in microcosm when the OHL ordered nine elite divisions to march into Berlin in early December. Groener and his staff hoped these divisions would serve as the government's powerful sword for suppressing its enemies on the Left. Instead, the

government prevaricated and the soldiers, after enjoying the welcome provided by Berliners, saw little reason to remain in crowded casernes waiting on developments. Instead, they went home for Christmas. Only a handful remained when the government finally called for help, on Christmas Eve, 1918. After a pitched battle outside the Imperial Palace, this handful was presented with one final dilemma: would they be willing to fire on a crowd of civilians who stood between them and the government's enemies. They chose not to fire. The last battle of the old army was an embarrassing defeat that exposed the defenselessness of the Provisional Government and emboldened its Spartacist opponents. Two weeks later, the civil war that Germans had dreaded began in earnest.

The scope of the analysis in this dissertation and the limitations of available sources make this a military and political rather than a social history. The story of the front-line soldiers' role in the German Revolution of 1918 is told primarily through the relatively well-documented actions and attitudes of their leaders, political and military, as well as those that greeted them when the army came home, and, finally, those who feared them on the Left. The common soldiers had little opportunity during the last weeks of the war and the first days of the peace to record their experiences and feelings and few went back to reconstruct these events. The story, then, is taken from official documents, unit records, the memoirs of officers and politicians, and the observations of journalists. Nevertheless, this essay seeks to tell the story of soldiers in very difficult circumstances. The *Frontschweine* were important actors in a decisive moment in modern German history. In large measure, their role has been skewed by the ideological requirements of Nazism and Communism or overlooked by historians more interested in other aspects of

the German Revolution. More broadly, their story reminds us that the study of military culture requires an examination of the complexity of modern armies and the likely existence of numerous sub-cultures. It also serves as a case study in the role of armies in defeat and disintegration, and armies in times of revolution.

Chiefly, however, it is a story about how soldiers behaved in a specific set of trying circumstances.

Chapter Two

THE LAST DITCH

German Front-Line Soldiers in the Final Days of the First World War

The *Frontschwein*'s Dilemma

During the last weeks of the war, German officers on the Western Front were forced to acknowledge painful conclusions. Increasingly, they found that their units were unable to sustain the battle against the Allies' overwhelming material and manpower superiority. This was the situation of the 9th *Landwehr* Division defending a sector in the Argonne Forest. On October 8, the operations officer of the 9th sent this grim assessment to its higher headquarters, the I Reserve Corps:

After the heavy fighting of the last several days the combat strength of the division has sunk even further. Because of severe losses the 116th Regiment has only about 100 men on the front line. Among the troops, who have been in 14 days of unbroken combat, there is manifested such an exhaustion that they are no longer in the condition to defend against an enemy attack.

His Excellency, the Commanding General has ordered me to report if I was of the view that the fighting strength of the division has come to an end. I believe this moment has arrived.⁹

Up to that point in the war, a third-rate unit like the 9th *Landwehr* Division would have held a quiet sector of the front. However, by the fall of 1918, German reserves were so exhausted that the middle-aged *Landwehr* men of the division found themselves directly in the path of Pershing's powerful offensive. Elite units, too, were sounding notes of despair. The 2nd Guards Artillery Regiment facing the BEF on the Somme recorded

⁹ US National Archives (hereafter NARA), Records Group 165, Box 131, Folder: 9th *Landwehr* Division War Diary and Annexes, 119 (Division Autry Ia Nr. 5853, October 8, 1918).

ruefully on October 9 that any pleasure it could derive from its past victories were now clouded by “the foreboding signs of complete defeat.” The front was giving way and, what was worse; one no longer could count on the “previously unshaken heroic spirit of the infantry.”¹⁰ On October 17, the war diary of the 6th Guards Brigade reported that the strain of prolonged combat and heavy losses had rendered the nerves of the troops “kaput” and predicted among them “the extreme measures that the officers use to hold them in place will completely fail.”¹¹

The signs of impending collapse seemed unavoidable and, even though National Socialist mythology would later claim that the German army was “undefeated in the field,” the unit records of the *Westheer* argue otherwise. Marshal Foch’s strategy of continuous attack along the length of the Western Front had been designed to consume the German army’s thin reserves and, if the policy was inelegant, it was, nonetheless, brutally effective.¹² Through the summer and fall, battlefield losses, desertion, disease, and malnourishment had sucked the strength out of the German divisions holding the line. The average strength of a German infantry battalion had plummeted from eight hundred men at the beginning of the year to five hundred and below by autumn. The Kaiser’s forces on the Western Front had been driven, seemingly, to the limits of endurance. In early October, Ludendorff conceded the desperate situation when he demanded the German government seek an armistice. If this was a necessary measure, it was also an admission of defeat with a devastating effect on German front-line morale. Clearly, the war could not go on much longer.

¹⁰ NARA, RG 165, 121, Folder II, 17 (War Diary of the 2nd Guard Artillery Regt. Oct. 9, 1918).

¹¹ *Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv* (hereafter BA-MA), PH 8/I/67, Third Guards Division Annexes (Report of 9th Grenadier Regt., Oct. 17, 1918).

¹² The chief of staff of Army Group Crown Prince wrote, “The steadily widening battle ate reserves and even more reserves.” BA-MA, Nachlass Schulenberg, N58/1, 212.

Given these circumstances, the historian must contend with the fact that, when the Armistice came, the German line was unbroken and the German troops on the Western Front continued to inflict heavy casualties on the attacking Allies up through the last days of the war.¹³ Indeed, the German request for armistice caught Allied military leaders by surprise.¹⁴ Moreover, just hours after the fighting had ended, the German troops picked themselves up out of the trenches and marched back into Germany in disciplined and orderly formations, their bands playing the old marching songs of the Second Reich. Perhaps the collapse was not so imminent and the German army's defeat incomplete.¹⁵

Assessing the actual condition of the German army at the end of the war has proven to be an important historical problem. Could the tired divisions on the Western Front continued to fight on? Could they have retreated back across the Rhine and prolonged the war into 1919? Would their remaining powers of resistance have been sufficient to wring better peace terms from the Allies? During the inter-war years these were questions central to the claim that the Kaiser's military had been "stabbed in the back" by the "November criminals."¹⁶ In large measure, of course, the answers to these question were terribly complex and, perhaps, inaccessible. That, because in the last weeks of the war continued resistance of the German army hinged on decisions made by

¹³ One recent analysis finds estimates that the Germans on the Western Front inflicted over 1.1 million casualties on the Allies between the battles that turned the tide in the summer of 1918 and the end of the war. See James Mc Randle and James Quirk, "The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I," in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, No. 3, (July 2006), 667-702.

¹⁴ For a provocative, if not always convincing, discussion of the historical problem, see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, (London: Penguin Press, 1998), 310-314.

¹⁵ Four years after the war, the famous historian and scathing critic of Germany's war leaders, Hans Delbrück wrote that, "the front troops were weakened by thousands of deserters in the rear areas and even by those few who went over to the enemy. Nevertheless, with the exception of a very few, the army fought on flawlessly until collapse and kept itself in order even during the retreat following the armistice." Quote from "Ludendorff's Self-Portrait," from Hans Delbrück. *Delbrück's Modern Military History*, Arden Bucholz, ed., trans. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 191.

¹⁶ The Reichstag commission investigating the causes of German collapse during the Twenties considered these questions through hundreds of pages and fifteen volumes of testimony (UDZ).

thousands of individual soldiers crouched in dugouts and shell holes along the front. In the fall of 1918, each of these men were confronted by a stark choice, continue to fight in a war against overwhelming enemy forces in a war that was clearly lost, or abandon unit and comrades to seek some sort of life-preserving alternative in surrender, desertion, or mutiny. For our purposes, the factors that shaped these decisions are crucial to analyzing their behavior in the final weeks of the war and the earliest weeks of the peace.

Exhaustion: The Demands of *Materialschlacht*

Military historians tend to be fascinated by “first battles” and the special attention to the initial engagements of a war is understandable. First battles, as a phenomenon, allow the scholar to pass judgment on the foolish tactics, flawed assumptions, and inadequate organizations of peacetime militaries. To paraphrase Sir Michael Howard, peacetime armies almost always “get it wrong.” The campaigns of 1914 offer a conspicuous case in point. The slaughter in Alsace-Lorraine, on the Marne, and at Tannenberg, in turn, exposed the glaring flaws in French tactics, German planning, and Russian leadership. Yet last battles have their own peculiar and interesting characteristics, especially in a long war. Though pre-war cadres may have been decimated by the latter stages of a prolonged conflict, belligerent armies usually have refined the business of killing their enemies to a level they were incapable of at the beginning of the conflict. Last battles tend to be bloody. By the same token, last battles frequently feature one side fighting with its back to the wall, frantic to stave off defeat. Last battles tend to be desperate. Spotsylvania in 1864 along with Okinawa and Berlin in 1945 serve as grim examples of these two characteristics. Bloody and desperate certainly describe the fighting on the Western Front in 1918 where casualties surpassed those of

the previous years. Though the opposing armies had not solved the tactical problem of breaking through the enemy's trench system, they had largely solved the technical problem of destroying the men who held them.

In the summer and fall of 1918, the Allied armies demonstrated their mastery of *Materialschlacht*, the battle of material.¹⁷ Allied industrial production, supported by American raw materials and American dollars, had provided the French and British army the engines required for a deadly program of attrition. General Petain had captured the essence of it the year before when he warned the French army, "Artillery conquers, infantry occupies." It was, of course, more than just artillery. *Materialschlacht* called for the orchestration of tanks, aircraft, poison gas, and small arms as well. Yet the delivery of overwhelming high explosive artillery fire was the key. The other weapons were complementary.

To be a German defender in the path of a major Allied attack late in the war was to experience the horrors of Dante's Inferno. The impact of the first rounds of a preparatory barrage was his signal that the next hours would be spent cowering under "drum-fire" (*Trommelfeuer*) with the chance of survival slim. By 1918, the Allies had enough medium and heavy guns to obliterate entire trench systems. The BEF demonstrated the point in September 1918 by crushing the formidable Hindenburg Line under an avalanche of shells.¹⁸ The stunned survivors of such bombardments usually could offer little resistance.

¹⁷ According to Hew Strachan, the terms dated back to the German's exposure to the BEF's lavish expenditure of ordnance at the Battle of the Somme. "The Morale of the German Army, 1917-1918." From *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle, eds. London: Leo Cooper, 1996, 384.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the techniques of *Materialschlacht*, see, among others, Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Firepower: The British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904-1945*, (Barnsely: Pen and Sword Books, 1982), 131-138, J.P. Harris, *Amien to Armistice: The BEF in the Hundred Days*

By late 1918, the British were probably the most proficient in delivering such destructive barrages, followed closely by the French, but even the inexperienced American Expeditionary Force could use artillery to annihilate entire enemy units. On November 1, the German 52nd Infantry Division moved up to the Argonne front to relieve the 41st Infantry Division. Before the relief was complete, the 52nd was inundated by American artillery fire and destroyed as an effective force. In the course of the fighting that followed, the division headquarters staff found itself in a blocking position trying to hold the gap blown in the German lines by the enemy barrage. At the end of the day, from a strength of perhaps ten thousand men, the division chief of staff could muster just 206 dazed survivors whom he herded back behind the line to become the corps reserve. Most of the missing men had been killed or wounded by artillery fire.¹⁹ Its fate provided frightening testimony to the lethal effect of Allied artillery in the last year of the war.

Drumfire barrages brought much death and mutilation, and men that survived such barrages faced the prospect of nervous exhaustion. David Grossman, in his book *On Killing*, a thoughtful analysis of the behavior of men in combat, has given insights into why this was so. Grossman observed that we normally associate two human responses to mortal danger—“*fight or flight*”—but there are actually four. Along with fighting or fleeing, studies have revealed two further responses: *posturing* and *submission*. Posturing involves any activity by the threatened person designed to cow or discourage a possible assailant without actually attacking him. Thus, the primitive tribesmen brandish weapons at each other in order to avoid the nastiness of close combat and modern

Campaign, (London: Batsford, 1998), and Shane Scheiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War*, (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1997), 71-114.

¹⁹ NARA, 165/201/Folder: Correspondence with German officers and copies of *Reichsarchiv* documents on the effect of American artillery fire (Letter from Major Douglas to Colonel Sorley, dated October 14, 1923).

soldiers use wild, un-aimed automatic weapons fire to make their enemies seek cover and cease their own fire. Submission, of course, mean offering the aggressor gestures of surrender and indications that one intends no harm. Any four of the options—fight, flight, posturing, and submission-gives a threatened person an opportunity to act, to discharge the adrenaline and other chemicals his body produces at the approach of danger. In the presence of the threat of grievous bodily harm, action of any type is preferable to inaction and, thus, therapeutic.²⁰

Consider then, the poor *Frontschwein* sitting in a shelter with his comrades during an Allied preparatory bombardment of several hours duration. None of the four options was available to him. He could not fight the shells that caused the walls of his hiding place to shudder. Neither could he flee; to leave the shelter would have likely have been certain death. Posturing was of no use and one does not surrender to a barrage. The soldier was forced to stew in his own fear, often for hours; there could be no discharge of stress and nervous energy associated with anxiety. J.F.C. Fuller later observed, “. . . what produced ‘shell-shock’ much more than the sudden danger [was] prolonged danger in a static position, where the man cannot get away from it.”²¹ For the German front-line soldier of 1918, the consequences of enduring this prolonged Allied bombardments was short term nervous exhaustion and, in many cases, long term emotional problems. After such a bombardment, one German soldier wrote, “No one can express what this means . . . Our battalion lost half its strength in a single day . . . Many have had their ear drum

²⁰ Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. (New York: Little, Brown, and Co.,1995), 1-15. Grossman can be taken to task for some of his sources but his arguments are always provocative and often persuasive.

²¹ Fuller quoted in Alex Watson, “Fear in combat and combating fear: British and German troops in endurance warfare, 1914-1918.” unpublished paper.

ruptured, without having a scratch, one man has gone crazy from the explosion of a shell. One would think that almost everyone has had a nervous collapse.”²²

Casualties and exhaustion: the effect of the nearly continuous Allied offensives had a diabolical two-edged effect. On one hand, the enormous firepower and material superiority of the French, British, and Americans ensured that, wherever they struck a blow their enemy would suffer heavy losses. From mid-July, when Foch wrested the initiative from Ludendorff, until the end of the war, the German army lost approximately 420,000 men killed or wounded. A further 340,000 were lost as missing, some as prisoners of war, the others as deserters.²³ To this sum one must add an estimated one million cases of sickness.²⁴ To measure the full effect of 1918 on the German army, one must combine these figures with the nearly one million casualties suffered during Ludendorff Offensives, losses that had fallen, very disproportionately, among the very best units of the German army.²⁵ Given such casualties, it is little wonder that the *Westheer* was reeling at the end of the war.

The second effect created by continuous attacks was to ensure that those German soldiers that survived were pushed to the limit of endurance. As their casualties mounted, the Germans found themselves unable to make up the losses. The result was fewer and fewer men were asked to cover increasing wider sectors of the line without relief. Those

²² Soldier letter quoted in Klaus Latzel, “Die misslungene Flucht vor dem Tod, Toten und Sterben vor und nach 1918, in *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, eds. Jorg Duppler and Gerhard Gross, (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994), 187.

²³ Testimony of General von Kühl in Ewald Beckmann, *Der Dolchstoßprozeß in München vom 19. Oktober bis 20. November 1925*. (Munich: Suddeutsche Monatshefte, Gmbh Verlag, 1925), 76.

²⁴ Wilhelm Deist, “Verdeckter Militärstreik,” 150.

²⁵ According to the official medical reports, between March and July of 1918, the German forces in the West lost 124, 000 killed, 748,000 wounded, and 101,000 missing. Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministerium, *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkriege 1914/1918*. Bd. III, *Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld-und Besatzungsheer*. (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1934), p. 143 of Annexes.

who survived the Allied drumfire were, by the last weeks of the war, numbed by physical and nervous exhaustion. Units found themselves constantly shuttled back and forth to cover gaps in the line. On October 23, the First Army sent Army Group Crown Prince this report from the commander of the 51st Reserve Division, General von Kleist:

Since September 25, the division has been committed to defensive battles, found itself marching (with many night marches) or in inadequate quarters, usually in local bivouacs, at times in the rain and cold. Since October 16, the division has marched over 100 kilometers. It has been assigned since September 25, to six [different] armies and 15 [different] corps commands.

Due to the heavy fighting, the strenuous marches and the insufficient quarters in [un]imaginably unfavorable weather, the officers and men are completely exhausted. Despite the best will, the physical and spiritual strength has broken down. Under these conditions, the mood of the troops has suffered severely.

After complaining of the need for delousing, the increase in influenza cases, the inadequacy of replacements, and the requirement to consolidate his remaining infantry into provisional units, he concluded: "I believe that, at present, the division is no longer capable of defending against a serious enemy attack."²⁶

While von Kleist's message spelled out the effects of prolonged combat, it also suggested the other circumstances that contributed to the desperate fatigue of the German combat units on the Western Front. The offensives of March, April, May, and June had pulled much of the German *Westheer* out of its well-prepared position. The German breakthroughs had penetrated deep enough into Allied position to outrun supplies but not deep enough to achieve decisive results. The final outcome of Ludendorff's folly found the Germans defending from shallow, hastily-dug trenches around the perimeter of three

²⁶ NARA, RG 165, Folder : Army Group Crown Prince, Doc. 192/193.

vulnerable salients.²⁷ Then, through the summer, Germans had been driven back to their original lines and by September, they had lost much of these as well. The last three months saw the Germans in a general retreat that forced them to abandon most of their comfortable, well-constructed, and well-sited defensive positions. During the weeks before the armistice, German infantry defending from shell holes and slit trenches with little cover from either the elements or indirect fire.²⁸ Instead of resting or training, commanders were forced to commit the few units held in reserve to digging rearward defenses. The war of movement also meant that units saw less and less of the *Gulaschkanone* ,(field kitchens), delousing stations, or supply wagons with replacement uniforms and boots. The *Westheer* became a ragged, lousy, weather beaten, and poorly fed army.

Poor rations, lack of shelter, fatigue, and worsening weather made the German front-line soldier especially vulnerable to illness. The first wave of the worldwide influenza pandemic reached the German lines in the summer and the number of reported illnesses in the Field Army jumped from 350,000 in June to 630,000 in July.²⁹ As the impact of influenza abated in the fall, other illnesses—pneumonia, dysentery, trench foot, and even malaria—sapped the strength of the front-line formations. During the defensive battle around Cambrai in early October, for example, the nine divisions of the Seventeenth Army each lost nearly five hundred men a day to illness.³⁰

²⁷The frontage the army had to cover increased from 390 to 510 miles. Strachan, “The Morale of the German Army, 1917-1918,” 390.

²⁸ On October 30, the 16th Bavarian Infantry Division reported, “The health of the infantry is no longer satisfactory. Many colds have appeared as well as influenza. The reason lies, above all, in the relatively meager shelter of the people in the front line where they are forced to inhabit wet burrows for long periods. In addition there has been no opportunity for over a month to change underclothes or, above all, garments. . . The infantry regiments are no longer able to meet the demands of a major battle.” UDZ, II, Vol. 6, 324.

²⁹ *Sanitätsbericht*, Vol. III, Annexes, 143. Influenza accounted for 375,000 of those case. (Annex, p. 28).

³⁰ *Ibid*, 60.

The desperate shortage of men forced the German army into a variety of stopgap measures. The last months, divisions routinely pushed their pioneer companies to serve as infantry. At a higher level, the army pressed the cadres of weapons schools in the rear into front line service. The OHL combed lieutenants and captains out of staffs to lead companies and battalions short of officers. It became routine for battalions to consolidate their four infantry companies into three and for regiments to consolidate their three battalions into two. In August, the OHL directed ten divisions disbanded in order to flesh out the remainder on the front. By October, another twelve were dissolved. Such measures inevitably meant a heavy blow to unit morale and cohesion.³¹

These measures did not suffice to fill the gaps and average battalion strength continued to fall. The end result, again, was fewer men holding wider sectors for longer periods of time. Something had to give. After World War II, research into the psychological effects of prolonged combat revealed that every man has a breaking point; when exposed to the stress of combat for an extended period every soldier will reach a condition where he is unable to function and is useless to his unit. Whole battalions could be reduced to helplessness if not given rest periods away from danger. The armies of World War I recognized this, at least implicitly. For most of the war, units on the Western Front were regularly rotated in and out of the line at intervals of about five to ten days. Through four years of war, front-line soldiers on both sides of the line came to expect regular rest periods as a normal condition of service. Despite the desperate nature of the fighting of late 1918, German *Frontkämpfer* felt cruelly used when left in the line without relief. The commanders of such units could take an almost petulant tone in demanding relief for their weary men.

³¹ Eberhard von Hofacker, *Der Weltkrieg*. (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1928), 454.

What was possible for the other divisions in the army sector after the June attack, must indeed for the [3rd Bavarian] division, after making this attack with insufficient previous rest and training to the fullest satisfaction of all superiors and the immediately following stressful period in the trenches from June 6 to August 9 and carrying out the defense against the attack of August 10-14, henceforth also be possible.³²

In his research on the mutiny of the French 5th Division in 1917, Leonard Smith proposed that in a long conflict the relationships between superiors and subordinates shift in an important way. Among veteran troops, obedience to orders by the rank and file is dynamic. Over time, their willingness to comply is based on an implicit contract which remains in a constant state of negotiation. In combat, soldiers will evaluate every order to determine whether the value of the objective is proportional to the perceived risks involved in following the order. The point may seem almost banal, but in the leadership doctrine of most armies it remains a dirty little secret. The willingness of troops to follow the orders of an officer is conditioned by such things as previous experience of risk and the officer's demonstrated level of competence. Thus, if troops are ordered into an attack they see as hopeless, led by a lieutenant seen as untrustworthy or foolish, disobedience or even mutiny is a likely result. On the other hand, soldiers are willing to take risks when they see a reasonable chance of success and when they have learned to trust their chain of command.³³

Following the line of Smith's argument, by the fall of 1918, the unwritten contracts between leader and led in the German army were unraveling. Complaints like the one above from the 3rd Bavarian Infantry Division were common; the rest units had

³² NARA, RG 165, Eighteenth Army, 131, "Kampfwert der Truppe," report dated Aug. 15, 1918.

³³ Leonard Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11-17.

come to expect was not available for the under strength formations holding the line. Rest periods, if they came were shorter and subject to sudden interruption.

Before 1918, the German army could rebuild units burnt-out in heavy fighting behind the line or in a quiet sector. Given time, battalions could bring themselves up to strength with a draft of replacements from the recruit depot and, given more time, the new men would be trained and integrated among the veterans. During the war's final campaigns, the system broke down. In the first place, there were few quiet sectors and too few divisions to stem the Allied tide on the rest of the front. The replacement pool was inadequate and those sent forward at the end of the war--largely eighteen year olds from the Year Group 1900-- were virtually untrained. Almost no divisions could be spared from the battle long enough to turn the recruits into trained and useful members of a fighting unit. However, worse than that, the replacements of 1918 brought with them an unmilitary disposition and hostility to the army that made commanders wonder if their units would be better off without the new men. On October 10, the 80th Reserve Division complained,

The newly arrived and deployed replacements have proven themselves completely unusable and unreliable. Daily, the number of cases increase that, with the approach of weak enemy patrols, the newly arrived men run or allow themselves to be taken captive . . . The company and battalion commanders would rather fight with ten of the old remaining core of men (*Stammanschaften*) than fifty of the new replacements.³⁴

In the fall of 1918, the 80th Reserve Division, and every other German division on the Western Front, based their remaining defensive strength on their *Stammanschaften*, a dwindling nucleus of tired veterans. These hard-pressed men had neither the time, the energy, nor the inclination to consider complex political issues. On October 30, the 16th

³⁴ NARA, RG 165, Box 28, Folder X, Group of Armies Crown Prince, Annexes.

Reserve Division commented, “. . . morale improved, however the majority of men regard the most recent events [the exchange of notes between Wilson and the German government as well as the collapse of Germany’s allies] with a certain indifference and mental stupor.”³⁵

Another example demonstrates the simple priorities of men pushed to the limit. General von Schulenberg wrote of a highly-regarded division sent to his unit, Army Group Crown Prince, after it had been burned out in a continuous month of fighting in another army group during the fall of 1918. Schulenberg’s headquarters had to send it into the line almost as soon as it arrived. Despite its exhaustion, it performed well. No sooner had it come out of the line, the OHL committed to another battle. From there, it was returned to Army Group Crown Prince where it became a “fresh reserve.”

When we ordered the division forward [again] we received the report that the division had refused to comply and that the troops had explained that they wanted, for once, a chance to eat a hot meal and sleep under a roof, then they would allow themselves to be killed. The division had their hot meal, spent a night under a roof, and then, dead-tired, entered the trenches once again where they fought with the greatest bravery.³⁶

Such privation led to apathy and a desire to end their ordeal which, in turn, meant indifference to the political outcome of the war. In September, the Field Mail Censorship Office of the Sixth Army had observed:

War-weariness and dejection is universal. The letter writers accept as a naked fact—we cannot win—and connect that, in part, to the view that Germany must go under. Though, amid the ill feeling and dissatisfaction, a certain number argue for holding out [*Durchhalten*] with loyalty to the monarch and unchanged love for the Fatherland worth all the sacrifices. The number of letter writers who wish the death of the Fatherland is not much less. They say, Through any further [battlefield] successes, the war

³⁵ *UDZ*, VI, 2, 325.

³⁶ BA-MA, N 58/1, Nachlass Schulenberg, 226.,

could only be lengthened; with defeat we would achieve the desired peace!³⁷

In late October, a private wrote home:

After a short rest we were informed of the relief of Ludendorff. The news went through all of us with a great sigh, with the majority murmuring, ‘Thank God that this man, who as a soldier has long handled politics . . . that this obstacle . . . has disappeared.’ I hope another will soon take his place and give us peace.³⁸

The front line troops wanted an end to their ordeal and an opportunity to go home.³⁹ Nothing else really mattered and that was a fundamental reason why political agitation among the combat units fell largely on deaf ears.⁴⁰ Men overwhelmed by fatigue and war-weariness were more willing to surrender or straggle behind the line. However, they were not inclined to become energetic revolutionaries.

Isolation: The World Within a Shell Crater

Fraternization with the civilian population, according to Katherine Chorley, in *Armies and the Art of Revolution* is one of the most powerful “solvents” for an army in a revolutionary situation.

It refers to definite attempts on the part of civilians to seduce soldiers from their duty when they are under arms for a specific purpose, for example, in order to suppress a riot or insurrection. It is, of course, only an effective weapon when the troops are already hesitating in their allegiance, and if, at such times, soldiers are themselves not only hesitating but hesitatingly led, the effect is deadly.⁴¹

³⁷ Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds. *Frontalltag im Ersten Weltkrieg: Wahn und Wirklichkeit; Quellen und Dokumente*. Doc. 58, Report of the Sixth Army Field Mail Office Review Office, 203-204.

³⁸ Letter of Private Ludwig Schröder in *UDZ*, V. p.239.

³⁹ “Political influences have no appreciable effects on troops that are fresh. Tired troops see no possibilities of relief without a quick peace.” *World War Records: First Infantry Division, A.E.F. (Regular) German Documents, Meuse Argonne*, Vol. IV, (Washington: First Infantry Division Historical Section, 1933), Doc. 88: Report of the 37th Division, “Experiences During the Recent Actions, report of October 13, 1918).

⁴⁰ This was a point conceded by the East German historian, Dieter Dreetz in “Rückführung des Westheeres und Novemberrevolution, “ *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte (GDR)* (1968), 578-579.

⁴¹ Katherine Chorley, *Armies and the Art of Revolution*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 153.

The truth of Chorley's observation would be clear within the Home Army (*Heimatheer*) during the early days of the revolution in Germany.

Yet the solvent of fraternization could not work with the same effect on the Field Army. The soldier on the Western Front did not experience routine exposure to civilian misery and revolutionary propaganda that was regular fare for the homeland garrisons. Neither did he have the prolonged contact with Russian Bolsheviks that his comrades in the East did. Indeed, the case of the men returned from Russian captivity in 1917 offered a vivid example of the effect that fraternization could have on German soldiers. The soldiers on the Western Front called these men, "Bolsheviki," for almost to a man, the experience in the Russian camps had thoroughly converted these former prisoners to pacifism or even revolutionary Bolshevism. Initially, the army put these men into quarantine camps where, it was hoped, they could be retrained and reacquainted with army discipline. When the replacement situation became acute, in late 1918, the "Bolsheviki" were shipped west where they posed a huge problem to those responsible for getting them to the front as well as to the front-line commanders who received them.⁴² Thus, the 87th Infantry Division reported on October 31, "The former prisoners of war coming from Russia mean, at this time, not an increase in strength, but, instead, a great danger. Especially pernicious is their conduct, which undermines discipline . . ." The report went on to warn that the password of these men was, "Lights out, knives out, beat

⁴² The Deputy Commander of the V Army Corps complained that the prisoners of war returned from Russia were a "poisonous" influence not only on the young, impressionable replacements but also the civil population. E. O Volkman, *Der Marxismus und das deutsche Heer im Weltkriege*, (Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1925), footnote, 193.

him!” (*Licht aus, Messer raus, haut ihm!*) whispered or even shouted behind the back of officers.⁴³

In contrast to the *Bolsheviki's* direct contact with revolutionary influences, the conditions of combat in the West in 1918 dominated the combat soldier's attention, and they also served to discourage those who would seek to reach the front-line troops with powerful effect of face-to-face agitation. The danger the *Frontschweine* faced almost daily served to insulate them from that form of revolutionary pressure.

Nevertheless, the insulation of the Field Army was far from total in the months prior to the revolution. The OHL and its subordinate commands were unable to prevent the circulation of pacifistic and revolutionary material among the troops. In vain, the military authorities attempted to choke off socialist influences through threats, censorship, the prohibition of political activity among soldiers, and the outright suppression of hostile newspapers.⁴⁴ The ultimate failure of such measures is indicated by a report prepared by Lieutenant Colonel Faupel of the General Staff in late October 1918, “. . . the circulation of newspapers and pamphlets of the Independent Social Democrats, openly and secretly inciting to revolution, has a demoralizing effect at present . . . Measures must be taken immediately to prevent and render punishable the

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⁴⁴ For examples of such measures see. *Quellen zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politische Parteien*, (hereafter *Quellen*) Vol. 1/II : Wilhelm Deist, ed. *Militär und Innenpolitik 1914-1918*, threats (Document No. 404: Telegramm des Chefs der Nachrichtenabteilung im Generalstab des Feldheeres an das Kriegspresseamt. Anordnung von Massnahmen gegen den “Vorwärts.” Dated June 11, 1917. 1091-1092.), prohibition of political activity (Document No. 416: Auszug aus den Aufzeichnungen aus der Pressbesprechung. Stellungnahme des Vertreters des Kriegspresseamts zur Frage der Freigabe eines eines sowjetrussischen Funkspruchs. Date. December 31, 1917. 1120-1121), and suppression (Document No. 429: Auszug aus den Aufzeichnungen aus der Pressbesprechung. Stellungnahme des Vetreters des Oberkommandos in den Marken zu den Verbot des “Vorwärts.”, date. January 30, 1918, 1141-1143.

distribution of such pamphlets and newspapers in the Army.”⁴⁵ Of course, by October, such measures, even if successful would have had little effect on the outcome of the war.

The Allies also did their best to demoralize the German soldier. The impact of their efforts was recorded in the history of a field artillery regiment.

In the trenches the troops were bombarded with leaflets. At first, German troops were amused by the contents. But the repetition as well as the conditions under which the troops had to live, caused the propaganda to eventually have an effect. The propaganda emphasized the hunger in Germany, aggravation between Bavarians, Badenese and Wurttembergers against the Prussians, the war aims of the Junkers and Pan-Germans and, above all, militarism.⁴⁶

The effect of Allied propaganda was greater than the German chain of command wished to admit at the time. After the war, Hindenburg conceded, “The enemy said in his innumerable leaflets that he did not mean to be hard with us, that we should only be patient and renounce all that we have conquered, then all would be well . . . Such the soldiers read and discussed. The soldiers thought surely these could not all be lies, and permitted themselves to be poisoned and poisoned others.”⁴⁷

Throughout most the war, there was a continuous if limited contact between the front and the German homeland. The flow of mail, though the *Feldpost* was scrutinized by censors, while soldier leaves—with a good rail connection the *Frontkämpfer* could be home in matter of hours—along with newspapers and magazines, kept the lines of communications open. As the war dragged on, the flow of mail, leave-takers and

⁴⁵ U.S. Army, XI, 459.

⁴⁶ Eugen Taischik, *Das kgl. Preuss. 2. Rhein. Feldart. Nr. 23 im Weltkrieg*, (Altenburg, 1928,) 245. Between May and July, for example, the BEFlaunched four million leaflets at the German lines. Christoph Jahr, “Bei einer geschlagenen Armee is der Klugste, wer zuerst davonläuft. Das Problem der Desertin im deutschen und britischen Heer 1918,” from *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, eds. Jorg Duppler and Gerhard Gross, (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999), 259.

⁴⁷ Hindenburgs memoirs quoted in George Bruntz, *Allied Propaganda and the Collapse of German Morale in 1918*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Jan. 1938), 70.

publications led to a curious war of words between the Field Army and the Deputy Corps Commanders who were responsible for order in the corps districts of the homeland. The OHL blamed the Home Front for undermining the morale of the combat units while the military and civilian authorities inside Germany accused the soldiers who came home on leave of depressing the civilian populace with their stories of slaughter and futility. Both were justified. Thus, in a meeting of the Imperial Cabinet on October 17, when Ludendorff demanded a greater levy of replacements and complained of the depressing effect the Home Front was having on the Field Army, the Social Democrat minister Phillip Scheidemann responded, "I am willing to believe that hundreds of thousands of men can be mobilized for the Army, but any man deceives himself who believes that these hundreds of thousands would raise the spirit of the Army. It is my firm conviction that the contrary would be the case." After complaining of the depressing effect of the failed U-boat campaign, the clear evidence of Allied material superiority, and the collapse of Germany's allies, Scheidemann continued, "Men on leave come from the Army with ugly stories; returning from home they carry bad news back to the Army. This exchange of ideas depresses public spirit. We would be deceiving ourselves, if we tried to gloss it over."⁴⁸ Scheidemann's response to Ludendorff suggested the synergistic effect of homeland and front-line despair. As long as front-line troops were given opportunity to interact with the unhappy civilian population back home, there would be a corresponding depressing effect on the front.

The front-line soldier who had returned from leave in Germany was a critical source of information to his comrades in the trenches. The soldier in the line could scoff

⁴⁸ Ralph H. Lutz, ed. *Fall of the German Empire, 1914-1918*, (Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1932), Vol. II, 481.

at Allied leaflets and socialist tracts, but he would certainly have listened closely to the reports on hunger, war-weariness, and political agitation the men in his unit brought back from the homeland.⁴⁹ Leave was, of course, the chance for the front-line soldier to put the strain of front-line duty behind and also the opportunity to be exposed to the same revolutionary pressures faced by the troops in the homeland. Finally, leave allowed the *Frontkämpfer* the time to reflect on the nature of his experience and the prospects for the future. Only when leaves from the Western Front were halted, in the last weeks of the war, was this input to soldier attitudes cut off.

Under normal circumstances, the soldier at the front received news of events in Germany within several days of the actual event;⁵⁰ however, shortly after November 9, front-line units lost contact with the homeland as revolutionary activity and its attendant disorder interrupted the flow of mail to the front.⁵¹ This interruption had two effects. First, it provoked anxiety among common soldiers over the situation of their homes and families. Secondly, the rank and file became dependent on their superiors for information on events outside of the unit. It was a tense condition where rumors carried great weight. One soldier wrote in November, “The overall situation was lawless and we worried about what might be going on in our hometown. Rumor had it that some good and loyal divisions were fighting inside Germany to restore order.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Wilhelm Groener, Ludendorff’s replacement as the German army’s First Quartermaster General emphasized this point in his memoirs. *Lebenserrinerungen: Jugend, Generalstab, Weltkrieg*, ed. Hiller von Gaertringen, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1957), 492.

⁵⁰ According to his diary, Lieutenant Herbert Sulzbach, an artillery officer at the front, knew within three days of Ludendorff’s relief (October 26). He heard of the Kiel mutinies six days after the first outbreak. Herbert Sulzbach, *With the German Guns: Four Years on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1918), 235 and 246.

⁵¹ *Die Rückführung des Westheeres*, (German General Staff), (Berlin: Mittler and Son, 1919), 28.

⁵² Fritz Nagel, *Fritz: The World War I Memoirs of a German Lieutenant*, ed. Richard Baumgartner, (Huntington, WV: Der Angriff Pubs. 1918), 106.

The last days of the war saw the troops on the Western front cut off from news from the homeland. As we will see, the information vacuum during this pivotal time served to reinforce the efforts of the officer corps to insulate the *Westheer* from the infectious spread of revolutionary sentiment.

Alienation: The Uneven Burdens of Total War

In February 1918, Josef Huber, a soldier “*im Felde*” wrote a letter to the *Oberbürgermeister* of Düsseldorf in which he referred to a speech of January 22, in which the Lord Mayor had asserted that every child born to a German family represented a strengthening of the nation. What are these children to be used for, Huber asked? The way things were going, the boys will be used as cannon fodder and the girls will be pressed into service in an armaments factory. It was a fine thing to demand a victor’s peace in the current war,

. . . [B]ut not for us in the trenches or the shell holes, in my case in Flanders, or on the Somme where almost all of us were. We in the field these past three and a half years have slowly had our nose full, not only of this dog’s life [at the front] but also with the victors and heroes behind mother’s skirts at home, who fight there so bravely as long as others are putting their skins on the line at the front.⁵³

Not every front-line soldier was ready to make a public challenge of major government official, but Huber’s letter represented an outlook that was widespread in the German army in the last year of the war. Along with the war-weariness we have considered, there was a pervasive feeling that the war experienced by the men in the trenches was vastly different than the war experienced by the rest of the German nation.

Such feelings were, most likely, inevitable in what has been called history’s “first total war.” The idea of “total war” is, of course, a theoretical construct; as Clausewitz

⁵³ BA-MA, PH 2/479 *Feldpost* letter dated Feb. 15, 1918.

once noted, no war makes absolute demands on a nation's resources and no conflict sees the belligerents able or willing to abandon all restraints on the use of violence. However, the First World War came far closer to the "ideal" of totality than any previous war and, for Germany, this meant a burden of sacrifice and suffering was borne by every element of society. Yet the soldiers in the trenches were well aware that the burdens were not shared equally. As the "Great War" solidified the idea of a "front" and a "rear, those in the trenches knew they were doing the dying and a disproportionate share of the suffering. As the war progressed, the German front-line soldier, like his Allied counterparts on the other side of No Man's Land, came to envy and often despise those who had not suffered what he had suffered and those who could not understand what he had been through.

If such alienation is common to soldiers in modern war, it was exacerbated for German combat soldiers by the real and perceived abuses of privilege and power in the rear areas of the army and the homeland. A deep rift developed between men in the front-line formations and the soldiers in the *Etappe*, the staffs, the Home Army, and those in the civilian population perceived to be benefiting from the war. This rift produced tensions that carried over into the post-war period.

Among those at the front there was a special disdain for the troops in the *Etappe*. Among the combat troops, stories of the plush life of the shirkers in the rear were legion. One soldier, a former miner who later deserted, wrote bitterly that "the worst 'hyenas' of the battlefield are to be found in the ammunition and transport trains . . . Compared with the soldiers fighting at the front, it is easy for them to find food . . . To them, war is a

business, because they largely take possession of all that is of any value . . . “⁵⁴ An officer passing through the *Etappe* on the way to the front observed with loathing, “Where do all these gray crowds come from, seeing that leave has been entirely stopped? These are the slackers who are always looking for their units, but whose most fervent hope is that they will never find it.”⁵⁵ He and other front-line soldiers were embittered by what they saw in the rear areas of the army in Belgium and France. A union leader wrote Hindenburg,

If the men go on furlough, they are very much amazed to see that the line of communications zone is swarming with men and that officers of all ranks are to be seen whereas there is a lack of officers at the front . . . Much complaint is also heard about the poor quality and insufficient amount of rations at the front. The men compare it with in the food in the line of communications zone, where a great deal of buying and trading is done. Everybody lives well.⁵⁶

Not everyone in the rear lived well; yet that was the prevailing perception among the troops at the front.

The scorn of the combat soldier was not restricted solely to the denizens of the supply depots and ammunition columns. The conditions of the war separated the front-line fighter from the higher-level staff and commanders. The relative safety of these high-ranking personnel as well as their ignorance of conditions at the front made them special targets of resentment by both officers and men at the front. Such staffs, wrote one critic, “became removed from all comprehension not only of the needs but also the physical and moral capabilities of the troops.”⁵⁷ After the war, another observer wrote:

⁵⁴ No author cited; trans. By J. Koettgen, *A German War Deserter's Experience*, (New York: 1917), 106.

⁵⁵ Anonymous diary entry of October 23, 1918 in *Why Germany Capitulated on November 11, 1918: A Brief Study based on Documents in the possession of the French General Staff*. (1919), 58

⁵⁶ Ludwig Lewinsohn, *Die Revolution an der Westfront*, (Charlottenburg: Mundus Verlagsanstalt, 1919), 26.

⁵⁷ Martin Hobohm in *UDZ*, IX/1, 244.

The officers in the trenches frequently had to share both dangers and meals with the rank and file. The close comradeship sometimes entailed a definite leveling process. . . Also there emerged an antipathy to a certain extent common to both soldiers and officers in the trenches against rear officers and the General Staff. These, for their part, blamed the trench officers for their narrow-mindedness.⁵⁸

A particular grievance of soldiers in the line was the belief that higher-level staffs were deluded by excessively optimistic reports submitted by intermediate headquarters. They called the resulting situation *Frontfremdheit*, roughly “unfamiliarity with the front.”⁵⁹

By the end of the war, the front-line soldier’s feelings of alienation transcended hostility toward the staffs and the “hyenas” of the rear area. In many cases, the soldier in the trenches felt abandoned by the homeland itself. Lieutenant Rudolf Binding wrote:

If one cast one’s eyes from the Front, where there is certainly not much enthusiasm these days, back homewards, they meet a very pitiful sight. Many men will ask themselves whether there is any sense in going back, and some will envy those who have no home to go to. The only consolation to be derived from the prospect lies in the thought that all the screaming in Parliament and between parties is quite a superficial phenomenon, since all that is best, youngest and strongest in the country is at the Front.⁶⁰

Another officer, Franz Schauwecker, home on leave in the last year of the war wrote, “One appears alien in one’s own country. It is best to go out there again. Out there, meaning the front.”⁶¹

Both Binding and Schauwecker were officers. However, the German historian, Anne Lipp, has used an analysis of trench newspapers to refine our understanding of how

⁵⁸ Hans E. Fried, *The Guilt of the German Army*, (New York: MacMillan Co, 1942), 163. See also Albrecht von Thaer, *Generalstabdienst an der Front und in der OHL*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1958), 187-188. As the title suggests, von Thaer spent time at both the front and the OHL and his diary reflects the disgust of a front-line officer for the OHL’s lack of awareness of true conditions at the front.

⁵⁹ Kurt Anker, *Unsere Stunde kommt! Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen über das nachrevolutionäre Deutschland*, (Leipzig: Leipzig Graphische Werk, 1923), 32.

⁶⁰ Rudolf Binding, *A Fatalist at War*, (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1929), 189.

⁶¹ Franz Schauwecker quoted in Eric Leeds, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1979), 206.

the common German soldier viewed the “home front.” She finds that the troops tended to put the civilian population into three categories: 1) immediate family, 2) war profiteers (*Kriegsgewinnler*) and “pub strategists” (*Wirtshausstrategen*), and 3) the striking workers and anti-war activists.⁶² To the first two groups, the *Frontbürger* maintained a consistent attitude. Family members were adored and missed. On the other hand, those on the Home Front who were enriched by the war were bitterly resented. The older soldiers supporting a family held especially harsh feelings toward those being paid the inflated wages of the armaments industry. Also detested were those who sought to turn the conflict into a war of annexation. After the war an army doctor recalled:

The only war aim he [the front-line soldier] recognizes and can feel with his entire being was the motto: we fight a defensive war. Soon, though, in wide circles outside the front, the desire to defend gave way to the desire for conquest . . . In every case, the troops responded negatively to efforts for ‘securing of strategic position’ and ‘boundary rectifications’ in the east and west. . . And, when in the summer the successes that should have ended the war failed to occur, then the ‘Front’ lost all sympathy for the conduct of those circles who, even in July 1918, refused a peace based on *status quo ante*. The front-fighter showed an increasing exasperation against those in the homeland, in the army’s rear areas, and with the high staff’s active agitation for the goals of the Fatherland Party [a policy which included aggressive annexations].⁶³

To the third group, striking workers and anti-war activists, soldier sentiment seemed to follow the arc of Germany’s fortunes on the battlefield. In the spring of 1918, when the troops anticipated the coming offensive would bring victory and peace, the men at the front were hostile to the striking workers inside Germany. They felt that the likely interruption of production of ammunition supplies and other war materiel undermined the

⁶² Anne Lipp, “Heimatwahrnehmung und soldatisches ‘Kriegserlebnis’, “ from *Kriegserfahrungen. Studien zur Sozial-und Mentalitätsgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, eds. Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumreich, Dieter Langewiesche, and Hans-Peter Ullmann, (Essen: Schriften der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, 1997), 225-246.

⁶³ Lipp, “Heimatwahrnehmung,” 239.

possibility their attacks would end the war. (“Why shouldn’t we turn our mortars and machine guns around for a day and make mincemeat out of these dishonorable and ignoble dregs of the German people?”⁶⁴) Months later, after the Ludendorff offensives had foundered, the soldiers at the front were much more likely to see any form of anti-war activism in the homeland as a positive step in relieving their own misery.

The men in the trenches in 1918 had little opportunity for profound reflection on political matters; they nonetheless had cause and sufficient emotional energy to resent though who did not share their terrible experience. The alienation they felt toward those beyond the front would find expression in their response to the revolution and those who made it.

Selection: The Choices of the High Command and the Choices of the Individual

At the beginning of 1918, the “Second OHL,” the diumvirate of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, made extraordinary efforts to gather the best possible human material the decisive effort in the West. The average age, physical condition, and training of the combat troops on the Western Front marked them as the most “battle worthy” members of the Kaiser’s army. As we shall see, these same factors, taken together as the basis of combat effectiveness, were seen by Germany’s military leaders as guarantors of political reliability in a time of revolutionary turmoil.

The front-line soldiers of the German Army formed a relatively small elite within the Imperial Army. In an army of some six million men and a “Field Army” in France of over two and a half million, probably no more than a million and a half could be classified as “front-line” troops.⁶⁵ Two mechanisms determined the composition of this

⁶⁴ Ibid, 240.

⁶⁵ See footnote 4, Chapter 1.

core force: 1) the policies of the OHL which had aimed to supply the Western Front with the best available human material, and 2) the choices made by soldiers themselves during a period in the war when army discipline was collapsing.

The beginning of 1918 had seen the OHL seeking to cope with an acute manpower shortage. The losses of 1917 had just barely been made up and Ludendorff's plans for a massive offensive in the spring meant that the combat divisions deployed in France and Belgium had to be strengthened by every available means. Ludendorff decided to centralize the control of manpower replacement within his own headquarters. (Up to that point in the war, the replacement of losses had been the responsibility of individual corps and divisions and their respective Ersatz depots within the recruiting districts of the empire.) The First Quartermaster General used his new control to systematically strip the units outside the Western Front of their best soldiers.⁶⁶

The occupation forces in the east felt the effects of the First Quartermaster General's manpower program even before the final signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. As the best divisions of the *Ostheer* were ordered west to reinforce the upcoming offensives, they pulled all their soldiers over thirty-five and all fathers of large families out of the ranks and exchanged them for younger men from units remaining on occupation duty. Thus, the only soldiers under thirty-five remaining in the east were 150,000 recruits from the Class of 1899 who were undergoing training. In the spring of 1918, Ludendorff began to make demands of this pool of youthful manpower as well. Also remaining in Russia were soldiers who, because they were recruited from the former French provinces of Alsace-Lorraine, were considered less than completely reliable.

⁶⁶ The replacement situation was described by General v. Kuhl in his testimony in *UDZ*, III, 43.

Thus, in October 1918, the High Command East (*Oberbefehlshaber Ost* or *Oberost*) indicated that a remarkable fourteen per cent of their reported strength was Alsatians.⁶⁷

The impact of Ludendorff's selection process may be seen in the example of the 83rd Infantry Division stationed in Galicia in early 1918. From an authorized strength of approximately twelve thousand men, the 83rd found itself short two thousand. From the men that remained, 1,785 were between 36 and 41 years old, 1,626 were over 42. Additionally, 1,353 of the divisions were fathers with more than four children, and 1,055 were from Alsace-Lorraine.⁶⁸

Along with the pick of the men from the east, the *Westheer* also received the cream of the youthful replacement crop. When year group 1899 was called to the colors in the autumn of 1917, the army sent those considered most physically and mentally mature to the recruit depots in France and Belgium. As these conscripts completed their training, the Field Army fed them into front-line formations.⁶⁹ (Year group 1900 reported for duty in October and November 1918, though most of its members remained part of the Home Army during the revolution.).⁷⁰

Other parts of the army were "combed out" for men capable of front-line duty. In the summer of 1918, Ludendorff told subordinate commanders that the situation made it necessary "to get every physically fit man to the combat troops and to use men fit only for garrison deployment and labor in the most economical manner."⁷¹ Thus the army attempted to reach down into the homeland garrisons and the *Etappe* to reinforce the

⁶⁷ Ibid, 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 62-63.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 59.

⁷⁰ Ernst Schmidt, *Heimatheer und Revolution: Die militärischen Gewalten im Heimatgebiet zwischen Oktoberreform und Novemberrevolution*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 1981), 245-246.

⁷¹ *U.S. Army*, XI, 327.

front. The OHL even made claims on laborers in “essential” war industries and, as we have seen, prisoners returned from Russian captivity.

These measures proved insufficient to fill the ravenous requirements of the Western Front in 1918. The rear echelon commanders were able to procure exemptions for half the men chosen for front-line duty while industrial leaders were largely successful in preventing the diversion of factory workers into uniform in any significant numbers.⁷² Thus, some two thirds of the replacements fed into the depleted front-line divisions in the last year of the war were wounded veterans from the Western Front judged sufficiently recovered to rejoin the fight.⁷³

Those we consider *Frontschweine*, then, were predominantly the soldiers who were serving on the Western Front at the beginning of the year, selected conscripts from the Class of 1899, and the best soldiers the Eastern Front had to offer at that stage in the war. Again, they tended to be younger than the rest of the army, more physically capable, and more completely trained.⁷⁴ With regard to the analysis that is presented in the following chapters, the key question then becomes can these characteristics be related to the front-line soldiers’ political behavior during the overthrow of the monarchy and the days that followed that event?

The nature of military socialization in recent military history may indicate a partial answer. For almost every modern army, the purpose of an inductee’s initial

⁷² Von Kuhl in *UDZ*, 71. In the first quarter of 1918 the number of those exempted for war work actually rose by 123,000 (Ibid, 66).

⁷³ Ibid, 68.

⁷⁴ This is a generalization which does not account for the older men in the *Landwehr* units on the Western Front. These, for the most a part, held quiet sectors on the southern end of the theater. Not surprisingly, Allied intelligence rated all German units on the Eastern Front in 1918 as third- or fourth-class, while all first- and second-class divisions were deployed in the west. See Records of the Intelligence Section of the General Staff, AEF, *Histories of Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions in the German Army Which Participated in the War (1914-1918)*, (Washington: G.P.O. 1920). Hereafter, *251 Divisions*.

training is to break the ties with civilian society. If the training is successful then the soldier's sense of personal identity is, to some extent, aligned to the institutions of the military. The more complete the soldier's socialization, the less likely he would be to rebel against the authority of those above him in the military chain of command.

Traditionally, armies have found that those most susceptible to military socialization are young men, preferably farm boys, just out of school with relatively little experience of the world, either in creating their own families or establishing themselves in the world of work. Those least susceptible are likely to be older men with a more urbanized background who have had time to develop strong ties to family, work, and community, the kind of ties that would compete with the military's requirements for allegiance and obedience.⁷⁵

The military socialization process, the alignment of personal values and behavior with the values and behavior required by the army, was more likely to be well advanced among the three groups found on the Western Front than among the other groups in the German army. The process was certainly most complete among those survivors of the pre-war army's active and reserve formations. With the exception of a handful of cavalry units on the Eastern Front, all of these pre-war units were deployed on the Western Front.⁷⁶ Those that arrived on the Western Front as replacements between 1914 and 1917 might not be nearly as "militarized" as those who came from the pre-war army. Nevertheless, one can assume that those who joined the army in the first several years of the war had ample time for training and integration. They had also matured as soldiers in

⁷⁵ The role of socialization is considered in Kurt Lang, *Military Institutions and the Sociology of War, A Review of the Literature with Annotated Bibliography*, (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972), 55.

⁷⁶ "The Break-up of German Armies on the Russian Front in November 1918," *Army Quarterly* (UK) Vol. 34, No. 1, (April 1937), 34.

an environment where patriotism was still esteemed and the war was still viewed as righteous defense of the Fatherland. As John Keegan wrote in trying to explain the German army's resilience during the First World War, the German soldiers of 1914-1917 had been raised on "a diet of victory."⁷⁷ If they remained with their units into the waning days of 1918, they did so as much by positive choice as by compulsion. Among the conscripts of the class of 1899, there may have been time during the year for units to train them and integrate them among the veterans, although the class of 1900 was another matter entirely. The younger men transferred from units in the East were also an uncertain reinforcement. They shared the youth of many of their counterparts in the West, but many had been tainted by fraternization with the Bolsheviks. Like their comrades returned from captivity, their deployment to the Western Front proved a mixed blessing to army commanders there.⁷⁸ Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, serving as an army group commander on the Western Front, recorded in his diary a conversation with Colonel Heye of the OHL on October 20, 1918. Heye had proposed that twenty divisions would be brought from the East to reinforce the Western Front in order to remedy the desperate manpower situation. Rupprecht was dubious, telling Heye that most of these men were over thirty-five. Their most recent service had been "police duty" which meant they lacked any experience of war in the West. Worse, they had been tainted by "Bolshevik ideas."⁷⁹ Staffs at lower levels were making similar assessments. On September 24, the 213th Brigade offered this evaluation of its replacements.

⁷⁷ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1976. In the same section of the book, Keegan suggests that the armies of the First World War seemed to break, as the Russians, French, and Italians did in 1917, in their third year of war at the point where casualties had risen to equal the number of men in the pre-war cadres. Neither the British nor German army, he conceded, fit this predictive model.

⁷⁸ Kriegsgeschichtlichen Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, *Der Weltkrieg, 1914 bis 1918*, (Bonn: Bundesarchiv, 1956. repr.), XIV, 523.

⁷⁹ Rupprecht, *In Treue Fest: Mein Kriegstagebuch*, diary entry of October 20, 1918, 375-6.

The different forms of replacement—consisting partly of recruits, partly of old *Ostkämpfern* who had been exempt for years and who lack any knowledge of fighting methods in the West, partly of convalescents from other units, who, in part, have returned from the homeland with very poor attitudes—are, due to the lack of opportunity to train together and become acquainted with one another, have created the most unfortunate relations [within the unit].⁸⁰

Clearly, the elements of the German army beyond the front line fared less well against the test of military socialization. At the moment of the revolution in early November, the *Ostheer* was made up largely of older men from the *Landwehr* and *Landsturm*. For these graybeards, entry-level military training and socialization was a thing of the distant past, replaced in consciousness and the establishment of identity by ties with family, work, community and, frequently, party affiliation.⁸¹ By contrast, the Home Army consisted predominately of young, untrained draftees as well as older men considered unfit for anything but garrison duty. For this mixed bag of men as well, either serving out the war in monotonous jobs or waiting in anxiety for the next troop levy for the front, socialization was often incomplete or unsuccessful. The Social Democratic leader, Gustav Noske, sent to bring order in the mutinous North Sea ports in November, wrote this description of the young soldiers he found in the Ersatz units, “In the casernes at the beginning of the Armistice the youngest conscripts were billeted with the *Landsturm* people of the oldest year groups . . . Already in Kiel I was able to make the observation that all of the young people with little or no training were the most

⁸⁰ NARA, RG 165, Box 163, Folder 1, the 107th Infantry Div War Diary and Annexes, 27. Along with highlighting the poor quality of replacements, the report also reinforces the argument made earlier about isolation. It seemed that the more contact a soldier had with the Home Front or foreigners with seditious ideas, the less reliable that soldier was going to be.

⁸¹In their famous study of German troops in World War II, Shils and Janowitz found that married men with large families had ties that “prevented insuperably strong ties to the army unit.” Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II, in *Motivating Soldiers: Morale or Mutiny*, ed. Peter Karsten, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 286, fn. 9.

insubordinate elements. In Berlin this impression was sharper still . . . Deputations of young fellows came to me demanding discharge and speaking with an insolence that one would have to experience in order to believe it.”⁸²

As for the older soldiers, one finds special significance in the leadership of the soldiers’ councils formed after the overthrow of the chain of command in the homeland garrisons. They were, disproportionately, mature men with strong ties to their communities (bureaucrats, artisans, small businessmen, academics, etc.). Experienced Social Democratic party leaders were a conspicuous element.⁸³

The men at the front were younger and, if they had served for any length of time, were likely to be more adapted to the subordination found in military service. Such men made up the *Stammanschaften* that units relied on to hold the line in the last weeks of the war. When that essential “core” was gone, then little could be expected of a unit. The 213th Brigade again: “It must be added, that the moral value of the troops is thus considerably diminished, because no good core (*Stamm*) is available that can take the new, badly influenced new men—note the report of the leader of the last March (replacement) battalion—and assimilate and prepare them without harm [to the unit].”⁸⁴ One senses, then, a generation gap on either side of age cohort of these twenty-something veterans: on one end were the younger replacements, alienated teenagers who had grown up in the embittered and war-weary Home Front; on the other end; the older family men whose devotion to family, work, and political party competed with the loyalties demanded by military service. Holding a unit together in 1918 meant heavy reliance on

⁸² Gustav Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp: Zur Geschichte der deutschen Revolution*, (Berlin: 1920), 77. In a report of October 3, the 117th Infantry Division reported that, of the nine hundred replacements called forward to join the unit, some 115 were awaiting sentencing for breaches of military discipline. NARA, RG 165, Box, 164, Folder I, 117th Infantry Division War Diary and Annexes, pp. 12-13.

⁸³ Kluge, *Soldatenräte*, 110.

⁸⁴ NARA, RG 165, Box 163, Folder 1, 107th Inf Div War Diary and Annexes, 28.

the veterans in the “middle.” In the unit records, one frequently finds orders like the one from 80th Infantry Brigade that directed that straggler control points be commanded by an energetic officer supported by “several, reliable, older soldiers.”⁸⁵ The “older” men, of course were not the oldest in age but rather those who had been at the front the longest.

Through the course of the war, these soldiers who formed the *Stammanschaften* came to the front in units or as individuals on orders from army’s chain of command. As we will see, if the men in this core element remained there until the end of the war, it was largely by choice rather than the coercion of military authorities. The German Imperial Army suffered an unprecedented breakdown in discipline in late 1917 and 1918, and this, coupled with the growing unpopularity of front-line duty, caused hundreds of thousands of soldiers to evade that duty in a variety of ways. With the decline in discipline and the chaotic situation at the front, leaving one’s unit became both easier and less risky. The process of disintegration accelerated after the failure of the Ludendorff Offensives as German soldiers increasingly believed they were fighting for a lost cause. When armistice negotiations began, the process of disintegration gathered even more momentum; no soldier wants to be the last to die in a lost cause. Those who remained in the trenches could only hope to survive until their leaders made peace.

Both during and after the war, conservatives and apologists for the officer corps blamed the socialist parties for undermining the discipline of the German army. The critics made special note of such measures as the Reichstag amendment of April 25, 1917, sponsored by the socialists, which reduced the maximum punishments that could be awarded for military offenses. The amendment also directed all imprisonments be

⁸⁵ BA-MA, PH/8/I-157; 15th Inf Div Subordinate Units, Folder II, order of Sep 29, 1918, 48.

carried out within Germany.⁸⁶ Previous to that, the army had formed military prisoners into penal units for duty at or near the front. The amendment enabled a soldier at the front to avoid the dangers of combat if he was willing to endure a period of imprisonment. A front-line officer complained of the reduced punishments. A deserter, he said, “risks only captivity, and of long duration. A man with no sense of honor much prefers to find himself in captivity rather than a military penal company. After the peace he reckons with certainty on amnesty.” Such attitudes, the officer continued, were contagious.⁸⁷

Depressed morale, desertion, and localized acts of mutiny had cropped up already during the summer of 1917.⁸⁸ Even more evidence of the breakdown of German discipline came during the Ludendorff Offensives as entire German units broke off their attacks to loot Allied stores.⁸⁹ As the situation worsened, the OHL appealed to the War Ministry to take action. In July 1918, Ludendorff recommended more severe sentences, to include a more liberal application of the death sentence. In August he cited a report from the *Jäger* Division that troop commanders “more and more demand the death penalty for repeated cowardice in the face of the enemy.”⁹⁰ The War Minister, von Stein, responded by directing that any sentence of over six weeks be served in a front-line penal unit and that officers would henceforth be authorized to use weapons to correct insubordination.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Discussion of the penal system from Forschungsanstalt, *Weltkrieg*, XIV, 520.

⁸⁷ *Quellen*, II, p. 1288, fn. 2.

⁸⁸ Using French general staff documents, Strachan refers to localized mutinies among Saxon, Wurttemberg and even Prussian units in 1917, Strachan in *Facing Armageddon*, 387.

⁸⁹ Alexander Griebel, “Das Jahr 1918 im Lichte Neuer Publikation,” from *Vierteljahrshäfte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 6, No. 4, (1958), 362-267. The article cites one battalion commander’s belief that the failure of the spring offensives was largely based on alcohol looted by advancing German troops.

⁹⁰ *Jahr, Desertion*, 245.

⁹¹ Forschungsanstalt, *Weltkrieg*, XIV, 520.

Despite these eleventh hour measures, the military penal system of the German Army was, arguably, the most lenient of all the major belligerent nations. During the entire war, the Germans carried out only forty-eight executions. This should be compared to three hundred and forty-six executions in the considerably smaller British army. The French executed forty-nine soldiers just in response to the Mutiny of 1917⁹² while, in the aftermath of Caporetto, the Italians carried out daily executions. Significantly, the only death sentences carried out for desertion in the German army were for those instances taking place “in the presence of the enemy (“*vor dem Feinde*”).⁹³

Clearly, the fearful or war-weary German soldier had relatively little to fear if he left a troop train and got “lost” on the way to the front. In 1918, the result was widespread increase in a phenomenon called “*Drückebergerei*.” The comprehensive *Collins German Dictionary* defines *Drückebergerei* as “shirking” or “skiving” (a British term).⁹⁴ In the usage of the German army of World War I, the word could mean anything from finding oneself a cushy job in the rear to outright desertion. Most commonly, it referred to the soldier who “became separated” from his unit somewhere in the rear area and never found his way back.⁹⁵ To German commanders, in the summer and fall of 1918, the term *Drückebergerei* represented a disastrous hemorrhaging of front-line strength. No certain figures can be given for the number of *Drückeberger* behind the line at the moment of the armistice, but after the war the Reichstag committee charged with investigating the causes of Germany’s collapse in 1918 recorded estimates of between

⁹² Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience*, 213.

⁹³ Execution figures from the testimony of E. O. Volkmann, in *UDZ*, XI, 2. 64.

⁹⁴ *Collins German-English English-German Dictionary*, ed. Peter Terrell, et al, (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 175

⁹⁵ German army regulations made intent to stay away a necessary condition for proving desertion as opposed to “unauthorized absence.” Jahr, *Desertion*, 245-246.

three hundred thousand men up to a million.⁹⁶ The army's official history put the figure as high as one and a half million.⁹⁷

One of the most common ways for a soldier to evade duty at the front was to leave a troop train somewhere in Belgium or France.⁹⁸ In one instance, in May 1918, a unit reported that, from a shipment of 76 NCO's and 555 men destined for the front, three NCO's and 80 men were missing by the time the train reached its destination.⁹⁹ A report from the OHL in June, 1918, estimated ten per cent of the replacements dispatched from Germany failed to arrive at their units.¹⁰⁰ Once separated from his unit, the *Drückeberger* would often remain around a nearby train station for such installations offered opportunities to steal from supply trains and, if desired, catch a train ride to Germany. Thus, a major rail hub such as Namur might have as many as forty thousand deserters in its immediate vicinity. Other large stations such Maubeuge, Liege, and Brussels supported similar small armies of *Drückeberger*.¹⁰¹

That the German army let the situation get so far out of hand is one of the puzzles of the war. In mid-October, Ludendorff demanded that army commanders restore order in their rear areas. "The suspension of furloughs on the Western Front offers an

⁹⁶ Martin Hobohm who authored a study of social grievances in the German army for the Reichstag Investigating Committee judges the numbers of deserters behind the line at three hundred thousand. Erich Volkmann, a retired officer who rebutted Hobohm in a companion volume, estimated the number as high as a million. See Hobohm in *UDZ*, XI. 1, 184 and Volkmann in *UDZ*, XI.2, 66, respectively. Hobohm's findings have been reprinted in summary form in a more recent anthology, *Der Krieg des Kleinen Mannes, Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, ed. Wolfram Wette, (Munich: Piper, 1992), 136-145.

⁹⁷ Forschungsanstalt, *Weltkrieg*, XIV, 760.

⁹⁸ Desertions from rest areas behind the front and from the trenches themselves did become more common in the last weeks of the war. See French General Staff, *Why Germany Capitulated*, n.a. n.p.

⁹⁹ General von Kuhl in *UDZ*, III, 15. An example of the army's exasperation with the problem is seen in a secret memorandum of August 1918, in which the Deputy Commander of the Guard Corps, General Freiherr von Richtofen, threatened to take actions against officers in charge of replacement elements if those officers did not take stern measures to reduce indiscipline and unauthorized absences. BA-MA, PH 6/I/247.

¹⁰⁰ Deist, *Quellen*, 2,1,II. 1226, fn. 1.

¹⁰¹ Forschungsanstalt, *Weltkrieg*, XIV, 760.

opportunity to put a definite stop to the disorder which the overcrowding of railroad stations, the prevalence of unauthorized absences of troops, and the lack of discipline during rail movements produces in the rear areas.”¹⁰² However, the army’s rear area remained an area where the chain of command had to be uncertain of its authority. There were reports that, “from trains shots and stones were directed at the station commanders, and the troops took a threatening attitude towards the interposing NCO’s of the station guards, and answered orders with the call, ‘Beat him!’ The behavior bordered on mutiny. In fact, hand grenades were thrown from the trains into the station.”¹⁰³ The disorder continued on through the last days of the war and the first days of the peace.

For the front-line soldier seeking an escape from the trenches but lacking an opportunity to desert, there was another option. As the Allied general offensive forced the *Westheer* back through successive defensive positions, many German soldiers used the opportunity to give themselves up to the enemy. This was clearly a much riskier option than desertion.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Allied intelligence noted that, in the last months of the war that even “first-class” divisions were giving up thousands of prisoners.¹⁰⁵ The situation was so bad that it forced the Germans to reconsider their celebrated “elastic defense” tactics. In a report entitled, “Experience During the Fighting from September 25-30, 1918,” the 233rd Infantry Brigade reported that, while dispersion in the forward areas of the defense undeniably reduced the number of killed and wounded, it also increased the number of missing in action. Describing soldiers in outpost positions, the

¹⁰² U.S. Army, XI, 434.

¹⁰³ Von Kuhl in *UDZ*, III, 15.

¹⁰⁴ For an interesting recent analysis of the uncertain prospects involved in surrendering: see Tim Cook, “The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War, in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, No. 3, (July 2006) 637-666.

¹⁰⁵ For examples see *251 Divisions*, 54 (2nd Guards Infantry Division), 163-4 (4th Bavarian Infantry Division), and 110 (5th Infantry Division).

report stated, “If he does not know where his comrades are, he will make too much use of ‘the elastic defense [for fleeing or surrendering].’”¹⁰⁶ The 213th Brigade warned against putting new replacements up in forward outposts where they were only too willing to give themselves up to American patrols.¹⁰⁷

Whether surrendering, malingering, straggling or deserting, in the fall of 1918, German soldiers were abandoning the war by the thousands. The unraveling of institutional discipline and the opportunities offered by a thinly held front meant those front-line soldiers who had decided their own war was over could act on that decision without the dangers that existed earlier in the war. Given what we know about conditions at the front, the miracle, perhaps, was that anyone remained to hold the line. Yet, as we have seen, over a million men remained when the fighting stopped. Ernst von Salomon, a student who joined the *Freikorps* after the revolution, found many of his comrades were veterans of the Western Front. He wrote of them, “In the last years of the war, because of the diverse opportunities to avoid action, every front soldier was basically a volunteer and felt himself to be one.”¹⁰⁸

The “diverse opportunities to avoid action” had included exemption for war work, a safe job in the *Etappe*, as well as *Drückebergerei* or surrender to the enemy. Von Salomon may have overstated the case by calling the men who remained in the line volunteers. However, in late 1918, coercion alone did not suffice to keep soldiers in the trenches. Whether it was the leadership of strong officers, the bonds of comradeship, a sense of patriotic duty, or just dog-tired, unimaginative inertia, the *Frontschweine* on the

¹⁰⁶ NARA, RG 165, Box 164, “Editorial Translation of 117 Inf. Div. documents”, report dated Oct. 2, 1918, 1-4.

¹⁰⁷ NARA, RG 165, Box 163, Folder I, 107th Inf. Div. Subordinate Elms., War Diary entry of Sept. 22, 1918. 2.

¹⁰⁸ Von Salomon quoted in Hagen Schulze, *Freikorps und Revolution*, (Boppard am Rhein: Boldt Verlag, 1969),56.

Western Front on November 11 were the self-selected remnant after hundreds of thousand of other men had avoided the front, deserted, or surrendered themselves.

In the fall of 1918, then, the soldiers of the combat units of the Westheer were a relatively select group within a vast *Millionenheer*. Ludendorff had ensured the best of Germany's remaining soldiers were at the front at the beginning of that fateful year, and those who survived and remained with their decimated battalions until the armistice did so in spite of opportunities to evade the danger at the front. These circumstances, of themselves, suggest the front-line soldiers were a breed apart.

Cohesion: Camaraderie and Contradiction

Along with the emotional stresses of combat already discussed, much of what we know about the motivation of combat soldiers also comes from research from the Second World War. In particular, the groundbreaking work of Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz introduced the idea that soldiers fight, not for ideology or homeland, not for the patch on their shoulder or their regimental tradition, but for one another. In their investigation of why German units fought so tenaciously in 1944 and 1945 against overwhelming odds in a war that seemed clearly to be lost, Shils and Janowitz introduced the idea of the "primary group." The primary group was that small group of soldiers bonded together by experience and shared circumstances that formed the basis of an army's fighting strength.¹⁰⁹ Shils and Janowitz concluded that strong primary groups had been the basis of the German military's last ditch tenacity.

Much of what Shils and Janowitz concluded about cohesion in the *Wehrmacht* in the last days of the Third Reich may be read back productively into an analysis of the

¹⁰⁹ Shils and Janowitz, 267-268.

Kaiserheer in 1918.¹¹⁰ Both were armies that, despite a previous record of battlefield success, faced nearly certain defeat against enemies of overwhelming strength. Certainly, the record in both wars shows tenacious defensive fighting by German soldiers up until nearly the very end. However, between the two armies, separated by twenty-five plus years (1918 to 1944), at least three crucial distinctions must be kept in mind: 1) despite its desperate circumstances, the German army of 1918 was never driven back into its homeland; 2) despite efforts to “remobilize” the *Frontkämpfer* with “Patriotic Instruction,” ideology did not play the same role in motivating the Germans of World War I as National Socialism did in World War II; 3) as we have seen, the Imperial Army was unable or unwilling to use the murderous techniques employed by the Third Reich to enforce military discipline; i.e. there were no “flying tribunals” and summary executions in 1918.

In the case of the *Westheer* of 1918, considering the different aspects and venues of soldier motivation highlights the importance of primary groups.¹¹¹ Sociologists identify three different areas where motivation is necessary in the life of a combat soldier. The first is the motivation that brings him into the service. This may be influenced by patriotism, parental expectations, peer group pressure, and, especially in a conscript army, governmental coercion. The second area where motivation is needed is that which keeps the soldier in the ranks or, in the case of the First World War, in the trenches.

¹¹⁰ Indeed, the two authors use a soldier’s letter from World War I to describe the true motivation of a front-line soldier: “. . . [T]he idea of fighting, living, and dying for the fatherland, for the cultural possessions of the fatherland, is but a relatively distant thought. At least it does not play a great role in the practical motivations of the individual.” *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten* quoted in Shils and Janowitz, 270.

¹¹¹ Here I summarize John Lynn’s summary chapter of soldier sociology offered so concisely and clearly in his chapter, “The Elements of Victory: A Theory of Combat Effectiveness,” from *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-1794*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 21-42.

Here, lofty ideals give way more often to coercion, while the formation of primary groups serves satisfy the emotional needs of the fighting man and serve to steel him to his soldierly duty. Finally, there is the motivation that keeps the soldier on the firing line in the presence of mortal danger. In this case, Shils and Janowitz argued, primary group loyalty trumps all other motivations.

As suggested above, in late 1918, the German front line was held by each unit's *Stammanschaften*. These were the core of men who came into the army before war-weariness and the prospect of defeat had overcome patriotism and a sense of duty. These men had time to form primary groups, and these groups apparently sustained them even under the most fearful conditions. The replacements of 1918, on the other hand, possessed little or none of the motivation that serves to bring a soldier into the military and had not formed the bonds that would make them steadfast soldiers in the crisis the German army faced in the fall of 1918. Four days before the war ended, the 75th Reserve Infantry Division's diary recorded that the division commander had gone forward to investigate the report that thirty men had refused to move up to the front. He found that they were replacements just arrived. That night, in another regiment, another body of men disappeared. On these events the staff officer in charge of the diary wrote, "The older soldiers still, in the main, show the loyal sense of duty and have not failed in the recent battles. In contrast, the young replacements coming from the homeland are completely unreliable, without discipline, and thus refractory."¹¹²

The OHL recognized the importance of cohesion and, as it was forced to disband divisions to provide manpower to others, it attempted to ameliorate the effects of the reorganization by keeping men of the defunct units with their old comrades. When the

¹¹² NARA, RG 165, Box 157, 75th Res. Inf. Div. War Diary and Annexes, report of November 7, 1918.

men of the 202nd Infantry Division were divided up to strengthen three other divisions, the High Command ordered, “With the dissolution special attention is to be given to the tradition and the existing cohesion. As far as it is possible in the reinforced division, the troops from the dissolved units should be allowed to stay together in unified groups [regiments became battalions in their new assignments].” The gaining units were admonished to tell the OHL if they had been forced to parcel out the troops as individuals.¹¹³

Along with the loyalty of soldier for fellow soldier, the relationship between officers and men in the trenches further distinguished the army in the West from the remainder of the German armed forces. The key variables in determining the nature of these relationships were leadership, unit cohesion and the extent of “social grievances.”

When one seeks the sources of the disintegration of the German army in 1918, the social grievances in that body cannot be overlooked. The expansion into a mass army during the war had stretched and twisted the relations between officers and men and had led to vast hostilities between the ranks. After the war, both critics and defenders of the army agreed that social grievances had played an important part in the demise of the Imperial Army. But if social grievances undermined authority, their influence was not uniform throughout the army. The physical conditions of trench life, as well as the nature of the leadership found in the front line, served to alter the relationship between officers and men and reduced much of the bitterness that might have developed between the two military strata.

¹¹³ BA-MA PH/8/I-511, Excerpt of OHL Order Ib# 11230 to Army Group Crown Prince, date: November 4, 1918.

The grievances that weakened the army reached into every aspect of a soldier's existence. Basic living standards became a particular sore spot. Officers received better food, pay, and lodging than their men did, and the powers granted to officers led to further abuse of privilege. Soldiers were routinely overtaxed on work details, humiliated in the barracks, and, at times, apparently exposed to needless sacrifice to win promotions and decorations for their superiors. The arrogance and inhumanity of German officers and NCOs led, quite understandably, to widespread resentment within the ranks.¹¹⁴

The most flagrant abuses occurred in the *Etappe* and the *Heimatheer*. On this point, both the critics and advocates of the officer corps are in general agreement. The rear area was the home of the "*Etappenwirtschaft*," the "depot economy" where officers used their authority to create comfortable lifestyles and where corruption was widespread. In some places, officers lined their pockets by short-changing soldiers of their rations. Other descriptions cite depot commanders setting themselves up as lords with troops serving the role of serfs. A chaplain wrote: "In almost every assembly, the dissipated lifestyle of officers behind the front is mentioned . . . The food provided the men does not compare with that of the superiors."¹¹⁵ Another chaplain, assigned to occupation troops in Rumania in late 1918, expressed amazement that, while Germany was starving, the staff of his unit was being served turtle soup, pastries, and caviar.¹¹⁶ The corrupted nature of conditions behind the lines contrasted with the situation at the front. Speaking of the cases where officers supplemented their mess with rations taken from the troops, one officer admitted: "One should be open; it happened often. But it was

¹¹⁴ The extent of the grievances is illustrated in a survey reviewed in Hobohm's testimony in *UDZ*, XI, 1, 210.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 60.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 424-425.

energetically opposed in the field and more frequently at the lower levels than the upper. It occurred, I must honestly say, because the iron broom that would clean out such luxurious living was missing, but that [situation] was not allowed to begin in the field, but behind the lines where the abuse was greatest.”¹¹⁷

The prevalence of complaints about unjust treatment finally compelled the highest levels of the German hierarchy to respond. In June 1917, the Prussian War Minister, Hermann von Stein, exhorted the rear areas to set the example for the men by living a simple life style. Thus, they might quell complaints, for example, of unfair provisioning practices.¹¹⁸ In October 1918, von Hindenburg issued a memorandum that noted the number and nature of complaints against officers behind the line:

The complaint is made that the officers live better than the men at the expense of the latter. The accusations contained in such complaints are so serious I cannot help but challenge them. However, [even] the semblance of such a thing must be avoided. The troop officer lives and fights with his men and shares their joys and sorrows. The relationship to his men must be ennobled by an untiring solicitude for the welfare of every individual man in all matters within the officer’s jurisdiction.¹¹⁹

That the field marshal, after four and a half years of war, felt the need to issue such a message is evidence of the severity of the problem. Hindenburg felt compelled to respond to charges that indicated a fundamental failing in the German officer corps. If officers had to be prodded to perform their basic duty, that is, caring for the welfare of their men, then something was badly wrong with the German officer corps in 1918.

The chain of command, together with those who investigated the social conditions in the army, was drawn to the same conclusion about the chief source of the

¹¹⁷ Kurt Hesse, *Das Marne Drama des 15. Juli 1918: Wahrheiten aus der Front*, (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1920), 53.

¹¹⁸ Hobohm in *UDZ*, XI, 1, 26-27.

¹¹⁹ *U.S. Army*, XI, 450-1.

problem. The bulk of the grievances were based on the conduct of the young officers commissioned into service during the war.¹²⁰ The old officer corps had been nearly annihilated in the first years of the war. By the end of the war, some ninety-four per cent of the pre-war cadres had been killed or wounded. But while the ranks of the regulars were decimated, the size of the officer corps ballooned from 30,000 to 272,000. Such were the numbers required by the mass army that the new “wartime” officers were drawn, in part, from the upper, middle, and in rare cases, the lower classes and thus represented a break from the relatively exclusive nature of the old officer corps.¹²¹ The wartime officer obviously lacked the pre-war experience of the active officers and they received limited training before they found themselves holding positions of responsibility at the front and in the rear.

The complaints against them came from all levels. A unit pastor wrote that “. . . in fact the young age of many wartime lieutenants has often complicated the achievement of good relations between officers and men.”¹²² A major wrote that the poor relations between officers and men came from “a period when too much young blood came in, who no one had taught the duties of an officer.”¹²³ The front line had its share of young officers but one of the key factors that differentiated units in the trenches from the rest of the army, in terms of leadership, was the much higher percentage of active officers found there. These survivors of the old army served as examples to the younger leaders and were able to create a healthier atmosphere between the ranks.

¹²⁰ See complaints in Hobohm, *UDZ*, XI, 1, 61, 225-36, and 406-7.

¹²¹ Katzenstein testimony in *UDZ*, IV, 4.

¹²² Neter, quoted in Hobohm, *UDZ*, XI, 1, 228.

¹²³ Hesse, *Marne*, 54

In 1918, recognizing that their numbers limited the impact made by pre-war officers, the OHL attempted to comb out the staffs and *Etappe* for physically capable active officers. In this respect, the selection process that ensured the best soldiers were deployed to the Western Front was paralleled by an even more rigorous selection process for officers. The contrast in active presence at the front and rear was significant. The active and reserve divisions serving on the Western Front at the beginning of the last year of the war had a ratio of wartime to active officers of 4.66 to 1 and 8.7 to 1, respectively, while *Landwehr* divisions, many of which were deployed in the East, had a ratio of 33 to one. In the *Etappe* there were almost no active officers who had not been invalidated out of the line for wounds or nervous exhaustion. Conclusive evidence that the pre-war officers were disproportionately represented at the front was the fact the rate of battle deaths among active officers were four times the per capita rate for wartime commissionees.¹²⁴ Casualties among the active officers remained unusually high throughout the war.¹²⁵

The positive influence of these active officers was often indicated in the same letters that criticized the conduct of the young wartime officers. One labor union leader, complaining of the treatment of his membership by wartime officers, wrote to Hindenburg, “The men, however, stress the faultless behavior of the majority of the active officers in this particular.”¹²⁶ A member of the postwar *Reichstag* investigating committee spoke of hearing the complaint, “Yes, if we had our first captain, then all of this would not have happened, but when the public welfare student so-and-so who sat

¹²⁴ The statistics in this paragraph are drawn from Volkmann in *UDZ*, XI, 2, 111-2.

¹²⁵ Major von Bussche, in a report to the Reichstag quoted in E. O. Volkmann, *Der Grosse Krieg*, (Berlin: Hobling Verlag, 1922), 239

¹²⁶ Letter of A. Leonhardt, quoted by Hobohm in *UDZ*, XI, 1, 73.

with me on the same school bench became a lieutenant, then one could see how poorly he handled us.”¹²⁷ Even those hostile to the old army were forced to concede that the soldiers held the active officers in higher esteem. The reason, said one, was the nostalgia felt by the men for the “good old days” before the war and the first few months of victory when the officer–soldier relationship was the best.¹²⁸

The clear advantages the active officers had over their wartime counterparts derived from training and experience. These two advantages gave the pre-war officer confidence in his authority and allowed him to feel comfortable in looking out for his men without damaging the superior-subordinate relationship.

Already at the *Kriegsschule*, the cadet was indoctrinated with the idea that the officer must be an example and caretaker for the men entrusted to him, and it would go badly for the lieutenant who, while on field training or maneuver and at a halt or a rest stop, took a draught of water before his men had quenched their thirst, or, who had retired to his quarters to rest before he had seen to the accommodations for his people.¹²⁹

The survey of soldiers’ letters mentioned earlier found that the peacetime active officer as well as the reserve officer trained in peacetime seemed to have better appreciation for the mood and outlook of their soldiers.¹³⁰

If the example of the active officer was an important factor in reducing front-line grievances, the fact remains that, in 1918, the wartime officer carried the overwhelming burden of leadership in the trenches. When he was good, he was an inspiration to his troops, and when he was bad, he was the source of poor soldier morale. Whatever his qualifications, though, he was likely to be much closer to his men than the masses of

¹²⁷ Bernhard Schwertfeger in *UDZ*, IV, 43.

¹²⁸ Hobohm in *UDZ*, XI, 1; 226. For a useful analysis of the pre-war German army’s development of a more paternalistic leadership style, see Dennis Showalter, “Army and Society in Imperial Germany: The Pains of Modernization” in *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Oct. 1983), 607-612.

¹²⁹ Kurt Anker, *Unser Stunde kommt, Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen über das nachrevolutionäre Deutschland*. (Leipzig: Leipzig Graphische Werke, 1923), 45.

¹³⁰ Volkmann, *UDZ*, XI, 2; 135-136.

wartime officers who staffed the Home Army and the *Etappe*. The conditions of life at the front demanded a closer relationship and, in this respect, the German army of World War I was no different from any other army in the history of modern warfare. A text on military sociology indicates the universal nature of this front-line condition:

We state this cardinal rule: the closer a unit is to the line of actual combat and the more directly the men in it are engaged in action against the enemy, the more formal organizational control becomes diluted. Under the makeshift characteristics of front-line living arrangements with officers and men alike exposed to very considerable risks and suffering extreme deprivations, the military social structure, as officially defined, undergoes a partial disintegration and is replaced by an emergency social system.¹³¹

Expression of this “emergency social system” includes disdain for all non-combat soldiers and the near total disappearance of all etiquette surrounding rank, a tendency that has been noted by every observer of front-line behavior.¹³²

During the First World War, German soldiers called the emergency social system *Frontkameradschaft*, the “camaraderie of the front.” The barriers of class, which were so strong in the pre-war army, were largely broken down by the miserable and terrifying conditions on the Western Front. In modern historiography, it has become fashionable to dismiss *Frontkameradschaft* as a fantasy concocted by men like Ernst Jünger and later nurtured by the Nazis in order to carry on the myth that National Socialism was building on the social revolution that had taken place in the trenches.¹³³ Certainly, one must judge Jünger’s depiction of the front-line troops as the “princes of the trenches” and even more,

¹³¹ Lang, *Military Institutions*, 73.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³³ See, for example, Bernd Huppauf, “Schlachtenmythen und die Konstruktion des ‘Neuen Menschen’,” in *Keiner fühlt sich hier mehr als Mensch: Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkriegs*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irina Renz, (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993), 53-103 and Peter Knoch, “Kriegsalltag,” in *Kriegsalltag: Die Rekonstruktion des Kriegsalltags als der historischen Forschung und der Friedenserziehung*, ed. Peter Knoch, (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1989), 222-251.

Nazi propaganda, with a skeptical eye. Yet Erich Maria Remarque, a friend of neither Nazis nor militarists, had this to say about the leveling effect of trench warfare:

. . . the things that existed before are no longer valid, and one practically knows them no more. Distinction, breeding, education are changed, are almost blotted out and are hardly recognizable any longer . . . It is as though formerly we were coins of different provinces; and now we are melted down, and all bear the same stamp.

It is a great brotherhood, which adds something of the folk song, of the feeling of solidarity of convicts, and of the desperate loyalty to one another of men condemned to death . . .¹³⁴

There is enough evidence to conclude that relations were different and that, in many cases the order and discipline required of a functioning military hierarchy was based on a closer relationship between officers and men than the old army was used to. The officer was required to be less the “superior” and more the “leader.”¹³⁵ A front-line officer wrote of this phenomenon, “In the last years of the war the only thing that counted was personalities.” The new superior-subordinate relationships, he said, would have astonished the “brass hats” of the staff and the rear.¹³⁶ In the most famous shock formation of the war, troops called themselves “Rohr men” instead of referring to the unit’s official title (Storm Battalion Number 5) and observers were shocked to hear officers and men using the familiar “du” form with one another.¹³⁷ The effective leader developed a rapport with his troops and could instill a spirit in them that, according to another officer, “would not be betrayed in the sternest tests, although a large segment held the same political conviction as one otherwise holds responsible for the collapse.”¹³⁸ Adolf Hitler, the most famous of the *Frontschweine*, recalled that the officers at the front

¹³⁴ Erich M. Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (1928, repr. New York: Ballantine, 1987) 235-236.

¹³⁵ Schulze, *Freikorps*, 56. See also Hobohm, *UDZ*, XI, 1; 242.

¹³⁶ Neter, quoted in Hobohm, *UDZ*, XI, 242.

¹³⁷ Fried, *Guilt*, 165-167.

¹³⁸ Captain Muller-Brandenburg quoted in Katzenstein, *UDZ*, IV, 23.

were “respected by the men in quite a different way from the commanders from the rear” for whom the “peculiarities” of the front-line soldier were totally incomprehensible.¹³⁹

However strong the solidarity of the men at the front, officers were forced to use a different kind of leadership to hold their units together in the last desperate days of the war. When the 253rd Regiment was ordered into the line on November 8, the men showed signs of unwillingness to go forward. They complained that they had served more time on the front line than other units and had not had the rest they had been promised. The War Diary of the 76th Reserve Division recorded, “Through explanations offered by the regimental and battalion commanders and a general staff officer from division that relief was not available, the men were appeased.” The men were assured that “desires with respect to food and delousing will, if possible, be fulfilled.” As an additional palliative measure, the unit set up a council of trusted men (*Vertrauensrat*) to advise the chain of command on rations issues. Through these actions, the diary reports, the unit was able to restore officer control of the unit.¹⁴⁰ The example of the 253rd demonstrates how far the German army of 1918 had come from the old Prussian *Kadavergehorsam* (“discipline of the corpse”). To order tired and unhappy men into the line was no longer sufficient; German officers found themselves having to explain why and offer incentives. With the creation of advisory councils to deal with rations, the military hierarchy was driven to a small measure of power sharing that would have been

¹³⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, ed. John Chamberlain, et al (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939), 250. Ernst Jünger, who would become the most famous of the young front-line officers recalled the front-line camaraderie thusly: “The gleam of many an ideal that shimmered for me over our war aims has been dashed to the earth by war. One [thing] remains forever: this fidelity [between front-line soldiers] that cannot be shaken.” From Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel: From the Diary of a German Storm-Troop Officer on the Western Front*, trans. Basil Creighton (1921: repr. London: Allen Lane, 2003), 243.

¹⁴⁰ NARA, RG 165, Box 158, 76th Inf. Div. War Diary and Annexes, 22, entry of Nov. 8, 1918.

utterly inconceivable in the pre-war army.¹⁴¹ Officers would find that such improvised methods to keep men in the line in difficult moments of battle would prove even more useful in the days after the revolution.

The solidarity the front-line soldier felt for his comrades in the trenches, especially when that *Kameradschaft* extended to his officers must certainly have played a considerable role in the soldier's decision to stay with his unit or abandon it in the last days of the war. Abuses of power did occur at the front. However, one senses that such abuses were neither as widespread nor flagrant as they were a few miles to the rear, in the East, or back in the homeland garrisons. The argument here is not that the relationship of officers and men at the front was perfect, or even that it was "good" across the board; just that it was qualitatively different than the rest of the army. The terrible pressures of front-line combat pushed needy men together and, at the front, the common soldier was more likely to find officers willing to look out for the morale and well being of his subordinates. Under such conditions, the existing authority relationships were more likely to hold. The peculiar nature of officer-soldier relationships added another basis for the peculiar response of front-line soldiers to the revolution.

Management: The Manipulation of Despair

Thus far, it has been argued that late in the war the German front-line soldier was sustained by the presence of comrades (and, perhaps, his leaders). Though tired, isolated, and bitter, he had decided to remain with the remnant of his unit's surviving core of veterans. In the heat of combat, he fought for those comrades. In the intervals between battles, however, the chain of command owed him a reason to fight on. If some

¹⁴¹ In 1917, the German army authorized units to create "Food Committees" (*Menangekommisionen*) with enlisted representation to bring oversight to the quality of rations (*Quellen*, 6/II, 15, fn. 3)

semblance of risk-reward relationship was to be maintained, the army needed to justify why it continued to resist in the face of Allied material dominance and inevitable defeat.

As the war went on, the army sought to counteract the influence of socialist agitation and Allied propaganda through a program of “Patriotic Instruction.” Launched in the summer of 1917, the purpose of the program was to rekindle devotion to the monarchy and instill new faith in Germany’s ultimate victory. Within the Field Army, the “Patriotic Instruction” was conducted by a special information bureau staffed by officers chosen, in theory, for their competence and knowledge of the troops.¹⁴²

However, in the latter stages of the war, effect of the instruction was marginal; patriotic appeals rang hollow to the men in the trenches. One officer detailed to perform such instruction told a meeting of his fellow Education Officers, “If I tell the men at the front the things that have been proposed here, they will laugh in my face.”¹⁴³ A recent historical assessment finds the instruction deficient because of its abstract and pedantic nature and its failure to address the urgent needs of the front-line soldier: better food, better housing, and a chance for survival.¹⁴⁴

Those charged with maintaining soldier morale had other problems, as well. The premise that the Fatherland was fighting a defensive war and seeking a “peace of understanding” was badly undermined by the rapacious nature of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty that Germany had imposed on Soviet Russia. Though German soldiers were sustained by the hope that the spring offensives of 1918 would bring a quick end to the war, the failure of the offensives and the obvious reversal of battlefield fortune in the

¹⁴² *Quellen*, 1/II, Doc. 328: “Befehl des Chefs des Generalstabes des Feldheeres an die Oberkommandos der Heeresgruppen und Armeen betr. Die Einrichtung einer Aufklarungsorganisation beim Feldheer., ‘ 835.

¹⁴³ Walther Lambach, *Ursachen des Zusammenbruchs*, (Hamburg: Deutschnationale Verlagsanstalt, 1920), 81-82. Lambach believed most of the Education Officers were blind to the true mood of the troops.

¹⁴⁴ Jürgen Forster, “Ludendorff and Hitler in Perspective: The Battle for the German Soldier’s Mind, 1917-1944,” in *War in History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2003), 325.

summer led to a morale crisis and, as we have seen, a breakdown in discipline. Any illusions for the outcome of the war were removed at the beginning of October when Germany asked for terms of a cease-fire.

In the following weeks, army senior leaders understood that news of mutiny and revolution in homeland would have an unsettling effect on the troops. In late October, the army warned those units with wireless communication to limit the distribution of news that came from Germany. Signal personnel were to deliver messages into the hands of officers only.¹⁴⁵ Yet the disturbing news still leaked out. One corps headquarters reported: “First interception of wireless messages coming from Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils with fantastic content or warnings to maintain order are the only news from home which, in spite of all radio discipline, gets through to the troops and cause them greatest worries concerning their families at home.”¹⁴⁶

Along with rumor control, the chain of command had to offer some sort of positive motivation to the *Frontruppen*. Why should they fight on? One corps commander appealed to the soldiers’ sense of honor: “The honor of the army which has achieved the highest level of performance must stand, at the end, pure and untarnished.”¹⁴⁷ Others emphasized that the final shape of the peace agreement depended on their resistance. As an example, on October 21, one finds a division commander telling his men that, though their desire for relief and rest are justified, the crucial nature of the situation demands that they hold the line:

¹⁴⁵ *Translations: War Diaries of Units Opposing the Second Division (Regular)*, (Washington: Second Infantry Division Historical Section, 1935), Vol. IX, Meuse-Argonne Doc. 13, (148th Infantry Regiment War Diary and Annexes), unit order dated October 27, 1918.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Doc. 22 (88th Division; Selected Documents) Corps Kleist report to Fifth Army, dated December 5, 1918.

¹⁴⁷ Corps Bernsdorf Commander, October 22, 1918 quoted in Anne Lipp, *Meinungslenkung*, 166.

The political leaders of France and England want no part of a conciliatory peace, though Germany has offered the greatest concessions. They want to destroy us, to lay our country to waste. They believe this goal is near. That this is not the case is known by every member of the division who has taken part and seen in the recent battles how the French and American are taken down by our machine gun and artillery fire . . . [Until relief is possible] we must do our duty and hold on despite extreme fatigue and terrible weather.

The division commander, Major General Freiherr Quadt, finished on a grimly practical note by telling the chain of command to emphasize to their men that if the division was pulled out of the line at that moment, it would very likely be thrown into an even worse situation somewhere else.¹⁴⁸

Still other leaders made more visceral appeals for their soldiers to hold the line. On November 1, the 15th Bavarian Infantry Division published a division order that included this warning offering the specter of rape, pillage and destruction:

Comrades! You know all the regions—devastated, battered and smashed—over which this war has passed. That will be the fate of our homeland if our front yields and the confusing mixture of races [referring, most likely to French colonial and U.S. African American units] which represent our enemy is set loose to swarm over the German countryside.¹⁴⁹

One imagines that the impact of such exhortations depended largely on the remaining credibility of the chain of command and soldiers' perception that they were being treated with candor. Perhaps the most effective approach was recorded a day before the Armistice in the War Diary of the 2nd Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment, a unit of Wurttembergers: "Quiet on both sides. At 3:00 PM, the Battalion Commander, Captain Wolters, addresses the battalion and requests the members to persevere because

¹⁴⁸ NARA, RG 165, Box 15, Folder I, 75; 76th Res Div War Diary and Annexes. (Washington: Second Division Historical Section, 1935) (Doc. 35: 15th Bavarian Infantry Division War Diary and Annexes, Div. Order of November 1, 1918).

¹⁴⁹ *Translations: War Diaries of Units Opposing the Second Division, Regular*, Vol. IX, Meuse Argonne. (Washington: Second Division Historical Section, 1935) Doc. 35: 15th Bavarian Infantry Division War Diary and Annexes, Div. Order of November 1, 1918.

the Armistice was just around the corner. At 11:00 PM a strong hostile bombardment opens up. . . .”¹⁵⁰

“Better a Terrible End . . .”¹⁵¹

In the 33rd Landwehr Regiment, reports of an upcoming cease-fire proved to be the signal for disintegration. On the morning of November 11, the Third Battalion’s war diary recorded that much of the regiment’s Second Battalion had vanished during the night. It noted that, unfortunately, some of the Third Battalion had apparently gone with them. Number 8 Company had gone from twenty men to two, and Number 7 Company, from twenty-eight to twelve. The diarist gave the following reasons for the troops disappearance; 1) a weeklong tour in the trenches in the anticipation of a major enemy attack, and 2) reports of chaotic conditions in the homeland and rumors that a cease-fire was impending. “Soldiers were heard to say that they had no desire to be shot now, just before the peace.”¹⁵²

That same morning, at seven o’clock, the headquarters of the 1st Guards Infantry Division received a request relayed from the German Cease-Fire Delegation. It asked that, in order to secure more favorable conditions, units should continue to offer strong resistance. Such resistance was necessary to convince the Allies that German forces were still capable of resistance. An hour later, the 12th Company of the division’s 4th Foot Guards Regiment attacked through the morning fog and overran a small French bridgehead over the Meuse near Novvion. The guardsmen killed twelve and captured

¹⁵⁰ *Translations, 2nd Inf Div*, Vol. IX, (War Diary of the 2nd Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment from November 1 to November 11, 1918) Entry of November 10, 1918.

¹⁵¹ At the end of both world wars, Germans often used a rueful saying of uncertain origin which went (roughly), “Better a terrible end than terror without end.” (“*Lieber ein schreckliches Ende als Schrecken ohne Ende.*”)

¹⁵² NARA, RG 165, Box 121, War Diary Extract of the 3rd Bn. 33rd *Landwehr* Regt. p. 201.

fifteen *poilus* along with several machine guns. A few hours later, the Germans allowed the French troops to return under a flag of truce to recover their dead. The war was over.¹⁵³

Which incident accurately represents the condition of the German army on November 11? In a curious way, both do; the *Landwehr* troops and the guardsmen represent opposite ends of a single spectrum of behavior. The flight of the 3rd Battalion men reflects the advanced state of disintegration in the *Westheer* late in the war. On the other hand, the attack of the 12th Company on the French bridgehead reminds us that the German army was a ferociously lethal killing machine up to the very moment the war ended. The behavior of the war-weary *Landwehr* men tracks closely with Leonard Smith's prediction that soldiers' obedience is constantly being reevaluated according to a calculation of risk and rewards. The missing men from the 7th and 8th Companies had decided there was nothing to be gained from holding the line until the very end. The risks were still considerable; the rewards less than negligible. However, such an economic model of soldier behavior breaks down when attempting to predict the reaction of the 4th Foot Guards to the order to launch a last minute attack. Were the guardsmen too punch drunk with fatigue to measure the value of the probable outcomes (the temporary capture of a small piece of ground) against the dangers involved in storming French machine guns (the likelihood of death or wounds for many)? Or were they motivated by their unit's proud tradition or the quality of their junior officers or just the simple desire to support their comrades on either side? Or perhaps the men of the Fourth Foot Guards felt that, at this stage, to refuse to go forward would be to disavow what they

¹⁵³ The German attack described in Wilhelm Reinhard, *1918-1919: Die Wehen der Republik*, (Berlin: Brunnen Verlag, 1933). Though author of the book was the regimental commander at the time, he uses a French eyewitness account to corroborate the conduct of his men, 26-31.

had experienced, the sacrifices of their fallen comrades and what they themselves had endured. The question is impossible to answer. Likewise, one is hard-pressed to explain the Allied description of the seemingly suicidal resistance offered by German rear guards during the last days of the war. How did those machine gun crews make their risk/reward calculation? In such cases, Smith's model of soldier behavior lacks predictive power.

By the same token, having reviewed conditions as they existed in November 1918, one must challenge Wilhelm Deist's now famous argument that the German troops on the Western Front were conducting a "covert strike" at the time of the Armistice.¹⁵⁴ Certainly, that description might be applied to the hundreds of thousands of *Drückeberger* milling around railroad stations and supply dumps in northern France and Belgium. However, it fails to account for the more than a million men who remained on the front line in November 1918. Neither does it explain Allied reports of stubborn German resistance through September and October into November.

The German soldier at the front was forced to make difficult decisions in the fall of 1918. If one is pressed to pick one of the six factors as dominant in determining the outlook of German front-line soldiers as the end of the war approached, it must certainly have been exhaustion. Isolation certainly added to his anxiety about things at home. At the front there was little opportunity for soldiers to express their resentment of the staff, the rear area, or the homeland except through the time-honored practice of grouching. Selection had brought them to the front; self-selection held them there. This was

¹⁵⁴ Wilhelm Deist, "Verdeckter Militärstreik im Kriegsjahr 1918," in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes*, ed. Wolfram Wette, (Munich: Piper GmbH, 1992), 146-167. Anne Lipp attacks Deist's assertion on slightly different terms. She reminds us that desertion and surrender in the German army in 1918 was usually an individual decision and suggests the term "covert strike" overdoes the incidence of disintegration in the army. She points out that characterizing the situation as a strike would require the presence of collective action, to include leadership, coordination, and a recognizable set of objectives." Anne Lipp, *Meinungslenkung*, 146.

certainly important. There can be little doubt that loyalty towards comrades and unit had been a part of that self-selection. At that stage in the war, the various exhortations used by the chain of command to influence soldier behavior must have had relatively little impact.

Both the *Drückeberger* behind the line and *Stammmannschaft* in the trenches prayed that the politicians would work out a peace as soon as possible. Therefore, in the last several weeks of the fighting, whether a soldier stayed with his unit or abandoned it, the decision was shaped by political considerations. Yet the decision to stay or flee was rarely a political statement. By November 1918, issues like such as the outcome of the war or the future of the German monarchy were secondary to life and death considerations, as well as the support of one's comrades, cover from the rain, and the prospect of hot rations. With the end of the fighting, however, that would change.

This chapter has described the factors that made that body of front-line soldiers different from the rest of the German army, considering, in turn, their terrible exhaustion, their isolation from revolutionary influences, their alienation from those who did not share their experience, the relative strength of their cohesion compared to the remainder of the army, and, finally, the efforts of the army's leaders to impose a form of management on the attitudes of the soldiers and the information they received. The chapters that follow will examine how those differences shaped their responses to the revolution in Germany and how that response proved critical to the revolution's outcome.

Chapter Three

CAESAR WITHOUT LEGIONS

The Field Army and the Abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II, November 8-9, 1918

The Kaiser and His Army

On November 4, 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II left the Field Army headquarters to visit the front. His journey into exile was still five days away but, in a sense, Wilhelm was already in flight. A week before, he had already left Berlin where recent constitutional reforms—"the revolution from above"-- had stripped him of much of his power and where members of the Reichstag were openly debating his abdication. The Kaiser sought refuge with his generals at Spa, Belgium, but even here bad news followed him. There were reports of unrest in the High Seas fleet and the socialists continued to demand concessions from the government. The Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, urged the Kaiser to return to Berlin while continuing to relay news of political unrest in the imperial capital. There seemed no refuge from the world of problems that surrounded the Hohenzollern throne.

Under these mounting pressures, a trip west toward the front line offered a form of relief. Colonel Alfred Niemann, the OHL liaison to the Kaiser's court, described the heady feeling that day. "Away from the idle waiting amid the poisonous atmosphere that threatens to kill every healthy feeling in the homeland. Out at the front, the breeze of noble patriotism will free the soul. With our *Feldgrauen* [troops in field-gray], the Soldier-Emperor will come back to the awareness of the way the Germanic tribes have

joined into a single people to hold out for four years against the onslaught of the entire world,” Niemann later recalled.¹⁵⁵ The Kaiser and his entourage traveled first by Wilhelm’s personal train, and then by automobile convoy to visit, in the course of a single day, groups of front-line soldiers in the rest areas of fourteen different divisions. At every location, the Kaiser, putting on a cheerful front, spoke with the troops and took pleasure in handing out large numbers of Iron Crosses. During his visits, the front-line officers present assured the Kaiser that their men had lost all fear of Allied tanks and that, in the face of stubborn German resistance, Allied infantry was showing increasing timidity. At one point, the ceremonies were interrupted by a report of approaching Allied aircraft, followed shortly thereafter by the loud roar of anti-aircraft weapons. The Prussian monarch made a show of indifference, continuing down the ranks, talking to soldiers about home and relatives. When the attack passed, Wilhelm turned to the men and said, “May you indeed feel how gladly I share every privation and danger with you!” Clearly, the whole business had a rejuvenating effect on him and, when he returned to the headquarters in Spa, the Kaiser reported to those who stayed behind that his reception at the front had been enthusiastic.

To others in the party, the trip presented mixed signals. The front-line troops gathered to meet Wilhelm showed no signs of spontaneous joy at the presence of their emperor, although they had, nevertheless, presented a reassuring display of steadiness and loyalty under extreme circumstances. However, what the party saw on the road back to the Kaiser’s train had been a different matter. The farther they went back from the front, the more unpleasant were the sights encountered. As the Kaiser’s party passed

¹⁵⁵ Niemann, *Kaiser und Revolution Die Entscheidenden Ereignisse im Grossen Hauptquartier im Herbst 1918*, Berlin: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1928), 129.

supply convoys and baggage columns, they were met with intentional indifference, cold stares, and a studied unwillingness to offer the appropriate honors. It seemed that a different army crouched behind the front, and for those who were paying attention the signs were ominous.¹⁵⁶

Perhaps Wilhelm chose to overlook the surly reception he encountered behind the lines. As the end of war approached, the Kaiser expected the front-line army to be the last, most reliable bulwark of the monarchy.¹⁵⁷ Even if the navy and the rear echelon troops (the *Etappe*) of the army had been infected by revolutionary sentiment, the front-line forces (*Frontheer*) had stood steadfast against overwhelming odds in the battles of the summer and fall of 1918. Insulated from the seditious ideas sweeping Germany, and inspired by their leaders who were the last remaining cadres of the "old army," the heroes in the trenches would prove themselves *kaisertreu* if called on to defend their emperor.

The Kaiser's faith in and reliance on the army of the Western Front would be shattered over the period of two days, November 8-9, 1918. During these two crucial days the failure of the front-line troops to rally to their warlord was given stark expression. Indeed, over the last weeks of the war, the failing morale of German units on the Western Front convinced Germany's senior military leaders the war had to be ended before the final collapse of the army in the West, even if this meant abandoning the

¹⁵⁶ Description of the Kaiser's visit from Alfred Neimann, *Kaiser und Revolution*: 129-131, and v. Restorff, "Bericht des Kapitans zur See v. Restorff," in Alfred Niemann, *Revolution von Oben—Umsturz von Unten: Entwicklung und Verlauf der Staatsumwälzung in Deutschland, 1914-1918*, (Berlin: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1927), 389. Neimann's books are, arguably, the most valuable resources for the crucial events in Spa during November 1918; on one hand because he was an eye-witness, and secondly, because he included the accounts of other key eye-witnesses in the *Revolution von Oben—Umsturz von Unten*.

¹⁵⁷ General von Plessen, as head of the Kaiser's military entourage, did his best to shield Wilhelm from the most depressing news in the latter part of the war. See Maurice Baumont, *The Fall of the Kaiser*, trans. by E. Ibbetson James, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1931), 70-72.

Kaiser. When front-line troops seemed unable to secure the army's lines of communications against revolutionary forces, the High Command determined that logistical support of a counter-revolutionary offensive was impossible. At the same time, the unwillingness of front-line soldiers to fire on mutinous sailors and revolutionary demonstrators in Berlin virtually guaranteed the triumph of the revolution in the capital of the *Reich*. In fact, the front-line troops, represented by vote of several dozen regimental, brigade, and divisional commanders, further convinced the army's two senior leaders that the combat troops lacked the will to fight for the Kaiser against his enemies in the homeland. Finally, when the elite troops designated to guard the Kaiser showed signs of discontent, Wilhelm's courses of action were reduced to a single option: abdication and flight to Holland. Thus, when the Kaiser called on the front-line troops to rescue his throne, their indifferent response, expressed in actions of several key combat units and the attitudes of a handful of their officers, convinced Wilhelm that he was powerless to preserve his personal rule and the monarchy.

Who were these men in whom the Kaiser had misplaced his trust? On November 8, when Wilhelm II called on his army to follow him into Germany and strike down the revolution, he addressed the front-line soldiers of the Western front as the only true warriors remaining in uniform. The Kaiser's view of the army was a traditional one. The support troops, the garrisons of the interior, and the old men occupying the East were the necessary adjuncts to the heroes at the front, the "real" army. These others behind the line, the teamsters, the supply clerks, the telegraph operators, and others of their ilk, though in uniform, were hardly soldiers. They were men of lower quality, baser and more susceptible to the seditious ideas that had ignited the revolution inside Germany. In

Wilhelm's view, the thin gray line of heroes in the trenches was the shield of the Hohenzollern throne. However, by the fall of 1918 these "heroes" were being severely tested.

The Scapegoat General

On October 26, the chief of staff of Army Group Eichhorn in the Ukraine, General Wilhelm Groener, received a telegram from Field Marshal Hindenburg ordering him to report the Field Army Headquarters in Belgium.¹⁵⁸ An unenviable task faced Groener; he was being summoned from Kiev to take over the post of First Quartermaster General of the German Army. As the replacement for Erich Ludendorff, Groener would be charged with salvaging what could be rescued from a lost war.¹⁵⁹ As he left the headquarters in Kiev, Groener told his colleagues, "I understand very clearly that I will have to play the scapegoat."¹⁶⁰

As the virtual dictator over Germany's war effort, Groener's predecessor had gambled the nation's last reserves of strength and lost spectacularly. The failure of Ludendorff's spring offensives had shaken Germany's enfeebled allies and, in the weeks just prior to Groener's appointment, the armies of Bulgaria, Turkey, and Austria-Hungary had collapsed. Meanwhile, on the German home front, the Allied blockade had pushed

¹⁵⁸ Nachlass Groener, Microfilm Roll telegram of October 26, 1918.

¹⁵⁹ Ludendorff had inspired his own relief by announcing to the army that "for us soldiers" the terms of Wilson's Third Note were unacceptable and that Wilson's dishonorable terms required the army to continue resistance to the bitter end. To Prince Max this seemed an open attempt by the general to hijack German foreign policy. The effect on world opinion, when the prince's government was making a show of distancing itself from militarism, was disastrous. At that point, Prince Max forced Wilhelm to choose between himself and Ludendorff. In a heated session with the Kaiser on October 26, Ludendorff had tendered his resignation for the third time that year. This time the Kaiser accepted, but required Hindenburg to stay on. See Siegfried Kaehler, "Vier quellenkritische Untersuchungen zum Kriegsende 1918," in *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen-historische Klasse* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1960), 434-453.

¹⁶⁰ Helmut Heussler, *General Wilhelm Groener and the Imperial German Army*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1962), 118. (Heussler covers the period of Groener's life up until the end of the war. There is no complete biography, in German or English, of this important figure.)

the war-weary populace to the point of starvation. Widespread strikes earlier in the year had given clear evidence of the extent of unrest across Germany and rumors of revolution provided a backdrop to Germany's efforts to negotiate an "honorable" peace.

If Germany were to achieve any sort of satisfactory settlement, the army would have to hold out in the main theater, the Western Front. Here the prospects were grim and clearly getting worse. This was the situation that faced Groener when he arrived at the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL-Supreme Command) in Spa, Belgium on October 30, 1918. Events at home and at the front had seemed to be picking up a dangerous momentum. The Kaiser and the new Chancellor, Prince Max, both needed Groener's best-possible assessment of the army's prospects for holding out. To provide such an assessment, Groener needed to consider both quantifiable factors—manpower and materiel—and unquantifiable ones—morale and fighting spirit.

Groener seems to have been aware of the deplorable state of morale. As the Chief of Staff of Army Group Eichhorn in Kiev from March to October of 1918, he had seen discontent building in the morale of German occupation troops in the Ukraine. He also had access to the disturbing reports of the situation in the West. There were personal contacts as well. After Groener arrived to take up his new duties, a personal acquaintance, the division commander of the 192nd Infantry Division, wrote him:

My dear Groener! I don't know if I may still risk this letter. But my lines are not directed to the First Quartermaster General, but from a friend to an old friend. I am writing you because perhaps from the Great General Headquarters the insight into the troops does not go deep enough to truly measure the combat power for its real worth . . . The powers of resistance of the troops have come to an end. You know me well enough to know that I am no doomsayer. My division has not had a day of rest since May . . . The battle situation and losses haven't allowed even the withdrawal of companies . . . So far as I can see around me, it is the same with every other division. To this point, we have done our duty. The time

of our collapse comes dangerously close. It has become a matter of weeks. There comes, finally, a time where every influence for relief fails. We are coming to this situation.¹⁶¹

Groener could also build an impression of the situation on the reports of the subordinate army and army group headquarters. Yet, as a realist, the general was aware of the time-honored military practice of putting the best possible face on situation reports sent up the chain of command. With that in mind, Groener sent a staff officer, Captain Loose, on a four-day inspection tour for the express purpose of reporting on front-line morale. Loose interviewed senior leaders up and down the front and returned on November 3, 1918, with disturbing news. Everywhere, commanders and staff officers assessed the mood of the men as bad. The troops faced nervous exhaustion and a breakdown loomed. The men no longer tolerated pictures of the Kaiser, Hindenburg, and Ludendorff on the wall of their mess halls and trust in the OHL had been badly shaken. The leaders in both Army Group Gallwitz and Army Group Duke Albert asserted the men would no longer fight if peace didn't come quickly. "The men want peace at any price," Loose reported.

Even more disturbing were Loose's findings on the mood of the officer corps. Many officers sympathized with the democratic reforms in the government. Among the junior officers and even, in isolated cases, among older staff officers, there was an increasing mood of political indifference and occasionally, hostility to the regime. Other, more senior officers seemed shaken by the fear of Bolshevism. Loose warned that urgent

¹⁶¹ Letter from Major General Loeffler quoted in Wilhelm Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen: Jugend, Generalstab, Weltkrieg*, ed. Hiller von Gaertringen, (Goettingen: 1957), 457.

measures were required to steady the nerves and ensure the commitment of the officer corps.¹⁶²

Could the monarchy be preserved? Groener had taken up his new post convinced that the Kaiser, as a symbol and object of the officer's oath, was essential to holding the army together. Though a Württemberger and more open-minded in outlook than the Junkers surrounding him at the OHL, Groener had been solidly monarchist in his views and supportive of the Hohenzollern dynasty. Still, Groener acknowledged that the army's loyalty to the Kaiser had eroded as the war turned sour. On November 1, he wrote the Vice-Chancellor, Payer, that, in efforts to unite the populace, the phrase "fight for the Kaiser" would have to be replaced with "fight for the united German fatherland" since the cause of the Kaiser alone was not enough to motivate the men for a final, decisive battle.¹⁶³ In Groener's initial meetings with the civilian leaders of the government, he demanded that calls for abdication be quashed, warning that the army's steadfastness at the front depended on rejecting Allied demands for Wilhelm's removal.¹⁶⁴ At this point, the general seemed steadfast, but his views on the Kaiser place in Germany's future changed dramatically as the events of early November played out.

Wilhelm himself was defiant. Woodrow Wilson's "Third Note," delivered on October 23, called obliquely but unmistakably for the end of the German monarchy. Wilhelm responded with derision. When Dr. Wilhelm Drews, the Prussian Assistant Secretary of State, visited Spa on November 1 to sound out the Kaiser's views on abdication, the emperor turned him away. Insulated from the worst reports, the Kaiser

¹⁶² Deist, Document 500, "Auszüge aus dem Bericht des bayerischen Militärbevollmächtigten an den bayerischen Kriegsminister," Deist, footnote 4, 1356.

¹⁶³ Gerhard W. Rakenius, *Wilhelm Groener als erster Generalquartiermeister: Die Politik der Obersten Heeresleitung 1918-1919*, (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1977), 28-9.

¹⁶⁴ Deist, Document 500, "Auszüge aus dem Bericht des bayerischen Militärbevollmächtigten an den bayerischen Kriegsminister," Deist, , 1355-6.

remained convinced he could rely on the army to stand behind the throne.¹⁶⁵ More important, the army relied on him. If he were to abdicate, he would be leaving the heroic men at the front “in the lurch” [*im Stich zu lassen*]. The army would collapse and leave the homeland open to the enemy.¹⁶⁶

The Kaiser’s defiance was supported by the most trusted figure of the Second Reich, Field Marshal von Hindenburg. Yet Hindenburg did not make devotion to the monarchy his central argument in resisting abdication. Instead, according to Drews, he rejected abdication primarily because of the effect it would have on the Field Army. Speaking in a tone of deep “inner conviction,” Hindenburg argued that the army on the Western Front was being held together only through the authority of the officer corps. If that corps was to lose its *Oberste Kriegsherr* (Supreme Warlord) their authority would be weakened, thus causing, said the field marshal, “half the army to dissolve and scatter throughout the homeland as marauding robber bands. You can imagine the fearful result that would follow.” The Kaiser must remain at the helm, he continued. He and every other officer would consider themselves scoundrels if they were to abandon their emperor. The army could still make a stand that would bring some sort of an acceptable peace.¹⁶⁷

Significantly, Hindenburg’s argument indicated that the *Feldheer* was the critical element in determining Germany’s future. If the German army held out, the Allies might

¹⁶⁵ On October 30, the Bavarian representative to Berlin wrote: “There are still so many people in his entourage who tell the Kaiser he has the people behind him. H.M. is simply not informed.” Isabel Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888-1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1982), 289..

¹⁶⁶ Bundesarchiv Reich (Berlin-Lichterfelde; hereafter BA-R), R43/2403/6; Drews’ report on his trip to Spa. p. 4.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* This view was seconded by Groener. The army, he had said, recognized “no *Kaiserfrage* [Kaiser question].” Wilhelm was especially gratified by the stance of the new First Quartermaster General. Observing that the normally quiet Groener had spoken forcefully on his behalf, Wilhelm exclaimed, “That it was indeed a south German general who stood up for the German Emperor and the King of Prussia, what good that has done me!” Niemann, *Kaiser und Revolution, Die Entscheidenden Ereignisse in Grossen Hauptquartier im Herbst 1918*, (Berlin, Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1928)126.

be driven to offer tolerable peace terms. However, if the units at the front collapsed, then the homeland would be flooded by armed bandits or worse. According to Hindenburg's conception, the army was composed of men capable of both tenacious heroism and terrifying criminality. From the field marshal's vantage, the units at the front were a double-edged sword that must necessarily inspire both admiration and dread from the homeland. The Kaiser's role, thus, had been reduced to a symbol useful for rallying the support of the front-line troops.

Here and in repeated instances in the crisis of late 1918, Germany's military leaders used the soldiers in the trenches as both carrot and stick. By portraying the combat troops as both valiant heroes and latent brigands, the High Command appealed to the moral stature the *Frontschweine* had earned in German society in four years of war as well as their potential for armed violence against that same society. They would use this somewhat cynical application again and again in the days before and after the overthrow of the monarchy.

In the first days of November, the veterans holding the front seemed to be doing their duty and the army's leaders were cautiously optimistic about the *Westheer's* immediate future. Sufficient indications existed to convince many of those in high places that the army could hold out a while longer, perhaps until the spring. After all, the divisions on the Western Front army had withstood Foch's counteroffensives without breaking. The army was withdrawing in relatively good order to the Antwerp-Meuse Position. The Allied armies, plagued by supply problems, were pursuing only with difficulty. Perhaps there were enough stalwarts left to stop the Allied advance and earn Germany an acceptable peace settlement. At Berlin and Spa, there was still room, in the

first days of November, for a positive assessment of the monarchy's future. However, that situation changed dramatically on November 5 with the outbreak of full-blown mutiny in the High Seas Fleet.¹⁶⁸

No Watch on the Rhine

The events following the mutiny at Kiel seemed to confirm all of the doubts Germany's leaders held for the troops behind the front. After the naval authorities failed to contain unrest among the sailors in the North Sea ports, armed uprisings spread rapidly across Germany. The marines, military police, replacement units, and other local garrison forces placed in the path of the revolutionary tide proved unable or, more often, unwilling, to stop the onslaught. As the mutinous sailors carried the message of revolution from town to town on commandeered trains, resistance collapsed. The soldiers of the Home Army usually hailed the mutineers as comrades. Within a few days, revolutionary Soldiers' and Workers' Councils (modeled after the Bolshevik *soviets*) had replaced the imperial authorities in many of the cities of northern Germany and the industrial centers of the Ruhr.¹⁶⁹

Against this avalanche of bad news the Kaiser declared himself resolved to remain with the army. On November 8, he announced his goal of marching at the head of reliable front-line troops to put down the insurrection. After all, Hindenburg and Groener

¹⁶⁸ Prince Max, in particular, thought the OHL was slow to recognize the decline in both army and home front morale. See "The Abdication of the Kaiser," printed August 9, 1919 in the *Berliner Tageblatt* and reprinted in Hoover War Library Publications, *Fall of the German Empire, 1914-1918*, ed. Ralph Lutz, (Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1932), II, 529-530. According to the OHL's representative to the Kaiser, Lieutenant Colonel Niemann, Groener's initial report on the military situation was generally positive. See Alfred Niemann, *Kaiser und Revolution*, 123.

¹⁶⁹ The collapse of the Home Army is described in the impressive scholarship of Ernst-Heinrich Schmidt's *Heimatheer und Revolution, 1918: Die militaerischen Gewalten in Heimatgebiet zwischen Oktoberreform und Novemberrevolution*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981).

had assured him of the army's continued loyalty.¹⁷⁰ Wilhelm continued to resist the urgent pleadings of the chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, to return to the capital in order to take part in the key decisions that had to be made on the future of the monarchy. He had also rejected suggestions that he seek the sort of heroic death that would inspire the German people and arouse sympathy for the monarchy. When he had traveled west from Spa on November 4, some of his advisers urged that he venture beyond the division rest areas all the way to the trenches where the joy he had expressed in sharing the dangers of the front-line veterans could be fully realized by exposing himself to enemy fire. Though such a scheme would unite him with the stalwart *Feldgrauen* who had encouraged him a few days before, orchestrating the sort of heroic wounding or death such a gesture required would be problematic on a 1918 battlefield. Hindenburg weighed in against the plan and, more importantly, such a step would have violated the prohibition placed on suicide by the Kaiser's sincere religious beliefs. Rejecting the idea of a "death ride" [*Todesritt*] at the front, the Kaiser remained with the OHL and looked to them to prepare the *Heimatoperation*, the campaign to re-conquer the homeland.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ The Kaiser's outlook from the first hand accounts by the head of his military cabinet, Lieutenant Alfred Niemann, in Alfred Niemann, *Kaiser und Revolution: Die Entscheidenden Ereignisse in Grossen Hauptquartier im Herbst 1918*, (Berlin: Verlag fuer Kulturpolitik, 1928), 134.

¹⁷¹ The chief advocate of the imperial "death ride" plan was Admiral von Hintze, the liaison between Prince Max and the Imperial Cabinet. He gained a measure of support from Groener but was unable to convince Wilhelm of the necessity of such a measure. Paul von Hintze, "Aufzeichnungen des Staatssekretars v. Hintze," in Niemann *Revolution von Oben*, 366-369. See also, Isabel Hull, "Military culture, Wilhelm II, and the end of the monarchy in the First World War," in *The Kaiser: New Research on Wilhelm II's role in Imperial Germany*, eds. Annika Mombauer and Wilhelm Deist, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 250-258. Hull points out that the "death ride" scheme represented another effort by Germany's leaders to "instrumentalize" the Kaiser. Groener's gave his views on the "death ride" in his testimony the "Stab-in-the-Back" Trial of 1925: "His Majesty should go directly to the front and indeed not to parades, reviews, or awards of Iron Crosses, but instead into battle . . . [not to make a suicide attack, but to] simply be at the front, in the trenches, there where hundreds of thousands of German soldiers and officers also stood." Groener testimony contained in *Der Dolchstoss-prozess in Munchen: Ehrenrettung des deutschen Volkes; Zeugen und Sachverständigen Aussagen—Eine Sammlung von Dokumenten*, (Munich: Druck und Verlag G. Birke and Co., 1925), 214.

The problem with the Kaiser's plan was that it was built without a foundation. This became apparent to Groener when he returned to Spa on November 7, after a disturbing two-day trip to Berlin.¹⁷² The high-quality combat troops needed for such an operation were committed to the bitter defensive fighting at the front. The army in the West had no significant reserves. The OHL would need days, perhaps weeks to extricate any large-size force from the front and prepare them to march against the revolution.¹⁷³

Nevertheless, in response to government's earliest calls for help, the German high command had already pulled a handful of tired units out of the line. They included the 7th Cavalry Rifle Division, the 52nd Reserve Infantry Division, the 2nd Guards Infantry Division and a variety of smaller formations.¹⁷⁴ On the 8th of November, Groener met with the staff sections of the OHL to consider how best to deploy the three divisions. Much depended on these units, especially since the OHL had reports that *Rotarmisten* (Red Army troops) had seized the Rhine bridges. The army's line of communications, its lifeline to the interior of Germany, was in danger.

What happened to these three divisions is extraordinarily significant for the course of the German revolution and the Kaiser's decision to abdicate. We know relatively little about the 7th Cavalry Rifle Division. Presumably, the OHL chose it because of its limited exposure to combat.¹⁷⁵ It had been dismounted and converted to an

¹⁷² Though Groener had told the Social Democratic leader that the army would not consider the matter of abdication, events suggest at this point he may have begun to see the Kaiser as expendable. He also told the Chancellor the army needed an armistice within three days.

¹⁷³ See Groener's discussion in *Erinnerungen*, 449.

¹⁷⁴ Somewhere between November 5 and November 7, the OHL sent a *Sturm* (Assault) battalion, and two *Jaeger* (light infantry) battalions to support the military authorities in the Ruhr. (Deist, document 504, fn. 5, 1373). The government of Wurttemberg requested the elite Wurttemberg Mountain Regiment be released for internal defense. However, at the time of the request the regiment was unavailable as it was involved in heavy combat with U.S. forces and had been reduced to below battalion strength. (Schmidt, 139)

¹⁷⁵ V. Thaer, a lieutenant colonel and a senior member of the OHL's logistic staff. In his diary entry of November 7th, he recorded the view that the cavalry divisions were among the most reliable. *Albrecht von Thaer, Generalstabdienst an der Front und in der O.H.L., Aus Briefen und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1915-*

infantry division only a few months before. However, the 7th had seen enough action for Allied intelligence to give the division its lowest possible rating: “fourth class” (useful only in holding quiet sectors of the front)¹⁷⁶ On November 8, the OHL staff alerted the division for movement to the vicinity of Verviers.¹⁷⁷ The order was cancelled when the division’s higher headquarters, Army Group Duke Albert, protested that the 7th was in no condition for deployment against the homeland.¹⁷⁸

More is known about the 52nd Reserve Infantry Division. Made up of troops from the Rhineland, the division had seen action on the Western Front since October of 1914. Allied intelligence rated it as “second-class,”¹⁷⁹ though “probably not so good as other divisions similarly rated.”¹⁸⁰ The 52nd Reserve had suffered heavy casualties near Courtrai, Belgium, and been pulled out of the line on October 25.¹⁸¹ On November 5, the OHL responded to a request from the Prussian War Ministry by earmarking the division for employment against the naval mutinies at Kiel and Wilhelmshaven. While the unit was waiting for transport, the OHL changed its mission, directing it instead to move by rail to Hasselt in preparation for securing the Rhine bridges.¹⁸² As the unit

1919, ed. Siegfried a. Kaehler (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1958). The French army had relied heavily on cavalry units in suppressing the mutinies of 1917.

¹⁷⁶ Intelligence Section of the General Staff, American Expeditionary Force, *Histories of Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions Which Participated in the War (1914-1918)*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 156. Hereafter, referred to as AEF G2. The estimate of the division’s quality waffles a bit: “Its use on the Cambrai and Belgium fronts in September and October indicate that it might have been considered a third-class division after its reorganization.” Thaer identifies this unit as the 6th Cavalry Rifle Division, but this seems to be a mistake.

¹⁷⁷ Thaer, diary entry of November 8, p. 256.

¹⁷⁸ Deist, Document 503, fn. 5, 1373.

¹⁷⁹ Though not an elite “assault” unit, a second-class division could be used in an offensive role.

¹⁸⁰ AEF G2, 506.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 506.

¹⁸² Deist, Document 503, fn. 5, 1373.

began to arrive in Hasselt, a general staff officer from Spa, von Fischer-Truenfeld, left Spa to deliver further instructions to the division.¹⁸³

He returned to Spa on the morning of November 9, a shaken man. Fischer-Truenfeld described the situation at Hasselt as “catastrophic.” He reported that the troops of the 52nd Reserve Infantry Division were engaged in full-blown mutiny, fraternizing with the Belgians and selling or giving away their weapons. Officers had been deposed and the soldiers had fashioned red armbands for themselves to demonstrate their support for the revolution. Fischer-Truenfeld’s report added to the growing gloom at the headquarters during the decisive hours of November 9. Two of the three divisions assigned to secure the army’s supply lines had failed.

The staff expected better reports from the 2nd Guards Division. Both Germans and Allies alike considered it an elite division that had fought well in the toughest battles on the Western Front.¹⁸⁴ As a veteran Guards formation, Groener and his staff rated it as one of the most reliable in the army. This division, they believed, would be up to the task.

The division commander, Lieutenant General von Friedeburg, was not so sure. He had seen signs of wavering and unreliability among his men as early as August.¹⁸⁵ Since then, the division had been cut to pieces, losing the best of its experienced officers and NCO’s. Friedeburg was forced to consolidate the men in each of his three regiments

¹⁸³ Thaer, diary entry of November 2, 257.

¹⁸⁴ The AEF G2 described it as a “first-class assault division” but conceded it had taken very heavy losses between August and October, p. 54.

¹⁸⁵ Von Friedeburg had warned his division about shirking behind the line and the failure of infantry to secure supporting artillery in an order entitled “Relations of Infantry and Artillery during Fighting,” dated August 27, 1918, found in the pamphlet “Why Germany Capitulated on November 11, 1918: A Brief Study based on Documents in the possession of the French General Staff” (Paris: Lang, Blanchong, 1919), 51.

to two battalions of 200 men each.¹⁸⁶ He even lacked sufficient artillerymen to man the division's remaining guns. Making matters worse, the few replacements the division received since coming out of the line on November 1 were of uncertain quality. On November 3, for example, the 2nd Guards received a replacement draft of 160 men, many of whom were "*Bolsheviki*," men returned from captivity in Russia. Twenty of the replacements had deserted en route to the unit.¹⁸⁷

The depleted condition of the 2nd Guards Division brings into focus the acute dilemma faced by the OHL as it struggled to develop countermeasures against the revolution. Those units with the best fighting record were also the ones assumed to be best suited for use against internal unrest. Yet these were the same units most likely to be involved in the heaviest fighting and, thus, most likely to be under strength and overtired.

The division's employment against the revolutionary forces began badly. In Berlin, the War Ministry made anxious requests for reliable front-line troops to stiffen the local garrison. The OHL alerted the 2nd Guards and the division hastily formed an advance party to prepare the movement of the unit to the imperial capital. The party included elements of the division staff, the veterinary section, engineers, and elements of the division's supply trains. As the remainder of the division awaited transport, the advance elements moved to the army training area at Zossen, just south of Berlin. As each train arrived, it was greeted by mutinous members of the garrison. They isolated and disarmed the surprised guardsmen, who lacked instructions on how to deal with such

¹⁸⁶ The peacetime complement of an infantry regiment included three battalions of over one thousand men each.

¹⁸⁷ Details of the condition and employment of the 2nd Guard Division from von Friedeburg's own account "Die 2. Gardedivision am 9. November 1918." Von Friedeburg recorded this account at Potsdam, on August 1, 1927. It is included as an appendix to Niemann, *Revolution von Oben*, 425-427.

a reception. Thus rebuffed, the advance party returned to join the remainder of the division at Herbesthal on the German-Belgian border.¹⁸⁸

The incident, while relatively insignificant, tells us much about the frantically haphazard response the leaders of the old regime made to the revolution. Apparently no one told the 2nd Guards that revolutionaries had seized Zossen. Instead of leading the deployment to Berlin with combat troops, the division had sent its noncombatant support elements first, a routine procedure for an administrative move, but certainly not one to be used when resistance was expected. One can imagine the bewilderment of the guardsmen when attempting to detrain at Zossen.

By November 9, the division received a new mission. As it hurried to assemble around Herbesthal, the OHL ordered Friedeburg to secure the eastern approaches to the headquarters at Spa. The new guidance was based on reports of revolutionary units preparing to move on the Supreme Headquarters from Aachen. Herbesthal was a key rail junction between Aachen and Spa and the 2nd Guards were to provide security for both the emperor and the army's highest headquarters.

Even this order proved difficult to accomplish. On the way to Herbesthal, the men of the division saw increasing signs of unrest along the army's line of communications. Crowds of rear area personnel crowded around the intermediate rail stations demanding transportation home. Red flags decorated train cars and railway personnel abandoned their posts, forcing the 2nd Guards to load and move itself. At the train station in Liege on November 9, the Guards Fusilier Battalion of the Alexander Regiment was forced to repel a crowd of drunken mutineers from boarding their train. Slowed by the growing turmoil and shortage of rail cars, the only unit to reach their

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 425.

destination by November 9 was a part of the division artillery. The first infantry battalion did not arrive at Herbesthal until a day later.¹⁸⁹

Nevertheless, Friedeburg's assertion that his division was well in hand through November 9 carries a special significance. His claim conflicts with reports that reached Spa on the morning of November 9, which indicated that, along with the collapse of the 52nd Reserve Infantry Division, the 2nd Guards Division was "totally unreliable."¹⁹⁰ The origin of this damning evaluation is unknown but seems in keeping with the spirit of exaggeration, rumor, and increasing hopelessness that seemed prevalent within the headquarters at Spa in the last days of the war.¹⁹¹ By November 8, it already appeared to the OHL's harried staff that their efforts to use the three divisions to secure the Rhine bridges were unlikely to find success. The 7th Cavalry Rifle Division was unavailable, and the 52nd Reserve Infantry Division and the 2nd Guards were closing on their designated assembly areas too slowly to make an immediate impact.¹⁹²

This was the situation Groener faced when he called his staff sections together late on November 8 to review the prospects for marching the army against the revolution. Early in the day, the general consensus among the staff was that the field army should turn its strength as rapidly and powerfully as possible against the revolutionary forces inside the *Reich*. As the day went on, that consensus seemed to fade. The Chief of the Operations Section, Colonel Heye, expressed the view that there were not enough reliable

¹⁸⁹ Details of the 2nd Guards Division's experience around Herbesthal taken from Friedeburg, 425-427.

¹⁹⁰ Thær, 263. This comes from an eye-witness statement of Thær's written after the war, 259-264.

¹⁹¹ See Thær's description of the mood of the OHL staff on the evening of November 8, 261.

¹⁹² Reports of the unreliability of the 2nd Guard and 52nd Reserve Infantry had already reached Spa by the 8th according to an article appearing in the *Neue Preussische Zeitung* on July 27, 1919 (1-2) and reprinted as Document 523, "The Events of November 9, 1918, at Great Headquarters in Spa, Belgium," in *Fall of the German Empire. 1914-1918*, ed. by Ralph H. Lutz, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1932), pp. 537-548. Hindenburg, and many of the more monarchist senior members of both the OHL and the Kaiser's entourage pledged the article's veracity.

troops left to make a counter-revolutionary operation possible. On the contrary, by controlling the Rhine bridges the revolutionaries held the upper hand.¹⁹³ The Chief of the Quartermaster Section warned that the army had only enough provisions for eight days.¹⁹⁴ If the men at the front could not be fed, the army faced an even more disastrous prospect than had been previously imagined.

The meeting went into the evening. By its end Groener had decided the *Heimatoperation* was impossible. The army could not pull enough divisions out of line until the armistice was in place. Neither was there enough transport, as the difficulties and delays in moving just the 2nd Guards Division had demonstrated. Beyond these difficulties, if the army was to march on Berlin, it faced the prospect of fighting across six hundred kilometers of territory held by the revolutionaries. Some reports indicated that elements of the revolutionary forces were well armed and well equipped.¹⁹⁵ Even if all these problems were overcome--an unlikely outcome--what remained for every officer to consider was the prospect of bloody civil war, *feldgrau* fighting *feldgrau*.

The discussion within Groener's staff had ranged over a variety of topics, but, in every case, those present avoided the question of abdication. Nevertheless, everyone realized the Kaiser would have to be told his beloved army could not, perhaps would not, march to save his dynasty. This weighed especially heavily on Groener and Hindenburg who had, together, assured the Kaiser of the faithfulness of the men in the trenches just days earlier. How to convince the Kaiser the army could no longer be relied on? Earlier

¹⁹³ Thaer, 261.

¹⁹⁴ Thaer wrote that, in the course of the meeting he challenged that view, reminding those present that field units routinely hoarded enough supplies to sustain themselves two or three times longer than what their reported stocks indicated. He also pointed out that international relief agencies had established stocks for the civilian population of Belgium. In an emergency, these could be used to provision the army. Groener rejected this last idea, saying it would jeopardize the armistice negotiations. (Thaer, diary entry of November 8, 256-7).

¹⁹⁵ This was totally unfounded but typical of the wild reports that circulated during this period.

in the day, Colonel Heye had recommended summoning a number of front-line commanders, from regiment, brigade and division level, to meet at Spa the next morning.¹⁹⁶ From them, the Kaiser could receive a true, unfiltered picture of the army's condition. Groener decided to await the outcome of this unusual poll and to put off any further decisions until he had heard these representatives of the men in the trenches.¹⁹⁷ The key decisions would be deferred until the next day.¹⁹⁸

The *Armeeparlement*

Heye's recommendation led to one of the most unusual and controversial incidents in all of German military history: the *Armeeparlement*¹⁹⁹ of November 9, 1918. In effect, several dozen middle-level front-line commanders voted on the fate of their emperor. For the purposes of this study, the true significance of the *Armeeparlement* is found in who was chosen to attend. There were to be no staff officers or senior commanders. Instead, Heye asked for five regimental, brigade or division commanders from each of the ten armies closest to Spa.²⁰⁰ What he and Groener wanted was a candid assessment of the willingness of the front-line soldiers to fight a counterrevolutionary campaign on behalf of the Kaiser. Groener, in particular, did not trust the corps, army, and army group headquarters to relay such an assessment up the chain of command to the OHL. As we have seen, the First Quartermaster General already had reason to believe the worst news about soldier morale was being filtered out as it made its way to the

¹⁹⁶ Walter Goerlitz, *November 1918: Bericht ueber die deutsche Revolution*, (Hamburg: Gerhard Stalling, Verlag, 1968), 167.

¹⁹⁷ The course of the November 8 meeting is taken from Thaeer, 256, and 261-2, and Lutz, Document 523, 538-9.

¹⁹⁸ After the war, critics on the right bitterly criticized Hindenburg and Groener for not informing the Kaiser immediately once they had decided the *Heimatoperation* was not possible.

¹⁹⁹ This was the name given the meeting by von Hintze, the government's representative at the OHL, Baumont, 229.

²⁰⁰ They came from the following army groups from north to south: Army Group Rupprecht (Crown Prince of Bavaria), Army Group Crown Prince (of Prussia), and Army Group Gallwitz.

Supreme Command.²⁰¹ Better to hear first-hand the opinions of the men who had day-to-day contact with the front-line troops. One can hardly imagine Frederick the Great or the Elder Moltke relying on such an unusual council of war, but neither Frederick nor Moltke had ever been placed in the position in which Groener found himself on November 8.

For those front-line leaders chosen to attend, the summons meant a long, cold ride with an uncertain object. The trip was later described by one of the chosen fifty, a regimental commander named Major Huenicken. Alerted on the morning of November 8, Huenicken was picked up by a staff car in the early afternoon and taken to corps headquarters where he was told he had been chosen to go to the Supreme Commanders because of his courageous and capable service during the most recent weeks of combat. Chosen for what, no one could tell him, though some speculated correctly that he was to be interrogated on the morale and condition of his men. The next morning at four thirty, Huenicken left for Spa with another regimental commander. Six hours later, traveling through wind and snow, they arrived at the Supreme Headquarters. After submitting to numerous identification checks, they were ushered into the great hall of the Hotel Britannique which housed the OHL staff. There they found several dozen waiting officers, all in the same condition as themselves, tired, cold, unwashed, unfed, and uninformed. They greeted each other in whispers and speculated as to the purpose of their gathering.²⁰²

Sometime between ten and eleven o'clock, Colonel Heye of the OHL's operations staff greeted the front-line commanders: "On behalf of the field marshal [Hindenburg]

²⁰¹ State Secretary von Hintze wrote that the refusal of the 4th Bavarian and 18th *Landwehr* Divisions to go to the front had gone unreported by army group headquarters. See Hintze, in "Aufzeichnung des Staatsekretars v. Hintze," in Niemann, *Revolution von Oben*, 372.

²⁰² Hunicken's story from his article, "Das Frontheer und der 9. November: Erlebnisse eines Regimentskommandeurs in Spa," appendix to Niemann, *Umsturz*, 437-444.

allow me to welcome you here. The field marshal wanted to greet you himself, but is momentarily unavailable since he is with His Majesty in an extremely important, urgent meeting.” Heye went on emphasize the gravity of the situation to the officers present. Unrest had broken out in the homeland. There were urgent demands for peace at any price. Deserters in the army’s rear areas had seized several key rail junctions, threatening to cut off the army’s supply lines. Heye went on to tell them they would each, in turn, be asked two questions regarding the mood of their troops. “1) How do the troops feel toward the Kaiser? Is it possible for the Kaiser to lead the troops in battle to recapture the homeland? 2) How do the troops stand on Bolshevism?²⁰³ Will they take up arms in combat Bolshevism in their own country?”²⁰⁴

Before the assembled officers could be asked these questions Hindenburg entered the room. Huenicken wrote that the old field marshal’s eyes were red, his face pale, and his hands clenched with emotion. Behind him were Groener and General von Plessen, the Kaiser’s General-Adjutant, who was dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief. Hindenburg greeted the front-line officers and offered them his assessment of the situation. As Heye had done, he emphasized the army’s difficult situation, beset by enemies at the front and threatened by revolutionaries in the rear. The Kaiser, he said, wanted to turn the army around in the face of the enemy and march on Berlin in a difficult operation that would last at least two to three weeks.²⁰⁵ The situation was grave

²⁰³ The army’s leadership routinely used the word “Bolshevik” to describe the revolutionaries, indifferent to (and largely unaware of) the diverse shades of political ideology among those who opposed them.

²⁰⁴ Heye’s briefing from Hunicken, 439. Questions from The “Westarp Protokoll” (Kuno Graf von Westarp) reprinted in conservative newspapers on July 27, 1919. Reprinted in Gerhard Ritter and Susanne Miller, ed. *Die deutsche Revolution, 1918-1919*, (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuecher, 1965), 71.

²⁰⁵ Hindenburg’s briefing from the eyewitness accounts of Major Beck and Captain Roedenbeck, reprinted in Westarp, *Das Ende der Monarchie*, 65-66.

and the old field marshal urged every man present do his utmost to maintain order and discipline.²⁰⁶

After this brief address, Hindenburg withdrew. There was a moment of stunned silence among the officers in the room. Their shock was exaggerated by the fact the front-line army had not received mail or newspapers for two weeks. They had, in the words of one officer, “lived on rumors.”²⁰⁷ Gradually, as the impact of the field marshal’s words wore off, individuals around the room began to react with outcries of anger and dismay. An unknown major from the general staff then warned them that they did not understand how bad things really were. Revolutionaries had overwhelmed the Home Army and that telegraphic and telephonic communication between Germany and the army had been cut off. The army faced starvation since the depots east of the Rhine were being plundered by mutinous troops. Both the King of Bavaria and the Duke of Braunschweig had already abdicated. “One must reckon with a great catastrophe within the army.” The effect of the major’s words, when added to those of Heye and Hindenburg, was “shattering.”²⁰⁸

In this distressed state the officers were now called to answer Heye’s two questions. When he had first greeted them, thirty-two of the anticipated fifty commanders were present. During their briefing, seven more arrived. The remaining eleven officers were delayed by breakdowns or bad weather and did not take part. Starting with the representatives from the northernmost army, Heye called the front-line

²⁰⁶ Huenicken, 439. Von Schulenberg later criticized the field marshal for painting too bleak a picture of the situation. “Denkschrift des Generals Graf von der Schulenberg von 26 August 1919,” Niemann, *Revolution von Oben*, 347.

²⁰⁷ Westarp, *Das Ende der Monarchie*, 64-5.

²⁰⁸ Huenicken, 439. Some speculate the unknown officer was Major von Stulpnagel who later attacked Groener in the Court of Honor held in 1922.

officers into an adjoining room where another staff officer recorded their individual answers. Some time after midday the vote was complete.

To question 1) *How do the troops feel toward the Kaiser? Is it possible for the Kaiser to lead the troops in battle to recapture the homeland?* One officer answered yes. Fifteen officers believed it was more or less doubtful whether the troops would follow the Kaiser. Twenty-three said no, it was not possible.

To question 2) *How do the troops stand on Bolshevism? Will they take up arms in combat Bolshevism in their own country?* Eight discounted any possibility of employing their men against the Bolsheviks. Twelve officers believed the men would require an extended period of rest and training before such a battle could be attempted. Nineteen considered it doubtful whether any or all of their soldiers would be willing to fight against the Bolsheviks under any circumstances.

The overall impression, according to Heye, was that the front-line soldiers were totally exhausted and "fought-out." They wanted to go home and to have nothing but peace when they got there. Only a direct threat to home and family would inspire them to take up arms against their own countrymen. Heye swore the thirty-nine officers to secrecy and prepared to brief the Kaiser.²⁰⁹

In the years after the war, die-hard monarchists denounced Groener and Heye for the way the *Armeeparlement* was conducted. General Graf von der Schulenberg argued it was impossible to expect an impartial vote from men as physically exhausted and emotionally shaken as were the thirty-nine commanders on the morning of November 9. Even worse, Hindenburg's briefing to the front-line officers had described the situation in

²⁰⁹ The conduct and results of *Armeeparlement* comes from Heye's own account quoted in Groener, 457-458.

almost hopeless terms.²¹⁰ What is more, none of those summoned knew what the consequences of their answers would be.

Whatever Groener's motivations, the criticisms made by Schulenberg and others manifest an ironic element. If the officers called to Spa were too tired, cold, emotionally drained, and uninformed to answer impartially, what of the men they represented? Daily, the front-line troops in the trenches faced even greater levels of stress, privation, and uncertainty. Did Schulenberg expect them to be more steadfast than their commanders?

Whatever the conditions, the vote was in. The past weeks had shown the men at the front were increasingly unwilling to fight on. The three divisions of front-line troops dispatched to the Rhine bridges had failed to rescue the desperate situation. Now, through their own commanders, the front-line troops had turned a "thumbs-down" on the Kaiser's plan to recapture his empire.

Who Speaks for the "Front"?

As the front-line officers arrived and cast their votes on the fate of the empire, the army's leaders were meeting with the Kaiser to consider the same issues. Groener apparently decided not to wait for the outcome of the *Armeeparlement*. This may have been due to reports received late the evening before from Berlin. One in particular, forwarded by the Chancellery around midnight, was a warning from the moderate leaders of the Majority Socialist Party. It said that if decision were not reached on abdication immediately, they could not prevent the workers of Berlin from taking to the streets the

²¹⁰ Graf von der Schulenberg, "Denkschrift des Generals v. d. Schulenberg vom 26 August 1919," from Niemann, *Umsturz*, 347. See also in Colonel Max Bauer, *Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat: Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen von Oberst Max Bauer*, (Tuebingen: Osiander'sche Buchhandlung, 1921), 269 Groener argued that the vote was vindicated by subsequent events. (Groener, 458). Bauer, a bitter critic of those present at Spa, blamed Groener for the outcome of the *Armeeparlament*. He argued that the question posed to the front-line commanders should have been: "Who wants to abandon the Kaiser and who wants to help him save Germany from oath-breaking sailors, deserters, and other rabble?" (269)

next morning. Clearly, the Kaiser needed to hear the truth about the *Heimatoperation* as soon as possible. Together with Hindenburg, Groener confronted Wilhelm in the garden hall of the Villa Fraineuse, the Kaiser's quarters. Also present were the emperor's general-adjutant, von Plessen, the chancellor's representative to the OHL, von Hintze, and General Graf von der Schulenberg, the chief of staff of Army Group Crown Prince, as well as several others.²¹¹

Despite the urgency of the situation, neither Hindenburg nor Groener was eager to be the first to speak. As a Prussian of old-fashioned values, Hindenburg could not bring himself to deliver the bad news. Groener, in turn, believed it was not his place as a South German to urge the Prussian emperor to abdicate; that was properly the business of the Junkers in Wilhelm's entourage. However, as First Quartermaster General, Groener could lay out the military realities of the situation and leave it to Wilhelm to draw the appropriate conclusions.²¹² He told the Kaiser that a counterrevolutionary operation was out of the question. The army could no longer be relied on, and the loss of the Rhine bridges put the supply situation of the field army (*Frontheer*) in jeopardy.

Schulenberg stepped forward to offer a sharp challenge to Groener's views. From this point through the remainder of the day, he led the effort to block the Kaiser's abdication, and, as an army group chief of staff and a staunch monarchist, his views had to be reckoned with.²¹³ Schulenberg countered with his own estimate of the situation,

²¹¹ The account of the morning meeting comes from an eye-witness, Major Niemann, the OHL's representative to the Kaiser's court. Alfred Niemann, *Kaiser und Revolution, Die Entscheidenden Ereignisse im Grossen Hauptquartier im Herbst 1918*, (Berlin: Verlag fuer Kulturpolitik, 1928), 136-9. There are some contradictions between Groener, Westarp, Baumont, and Niemann on the exact sequence of discussions during the morning and early afternoon.

²¹² Groener's taken views from Groener, *Lebenserrinerungen*, 459.

²¹³ No one knew why von der Schulenberg was at Spa or who had summoned him. This was one of the minor mysteries of November 9. Westarp suggested it was a phone call from the ubiquitous Major Stulpnagel. Westarp, 48-49.

arguing that, even though the army as a whole was no longer reliable, enough steadfast units could be found to restore the situation. He granted that gathering such units might need eight to ten days. However, he said, once the army found out how its supply lines had been threatened by mutineers and deserters, there would be no problem in getting troops to fight the revolution. Groener replied that the time was past for such measures. “Events have overcome us.” The situation within the army was so uncertain that a campaign based on the slogan, “Fight for the Homeland” might engulf the army in a bloodbath within its own ranks.²¹⁴

As the argument went back and forth, Groener versus Schulenberg, the underlying contest was clear—who spoke for the front-line army? All other considerations were secondary. Between the two men, Schulenberg had the advantage. As an army group chief of staff, he was one rung lower in the chain of command and thus, by definition, “closer” to the men in the trenches. According to the unwritten rules of universal military culture, he had the moral authority to speak for the men in the trenches. Against Schulenberg’s assertions that the front-line troops were loyal, Groener merely said, “My information is different.”²¹⁵

As the exchange became more heated, the Kaiser intervened. After four years of sacrifice, his goal, he said, was to lead the army in good order back to the homeland. Groener’s replied, “The army will march home in peace and order under its generals, but not under the leadership of Your Majesty.”²¹⁶ The First Quartermaster General, he

²¹⁴ Ibid, 136-9.

²¹⁵ Baumont, 97. One imagines Groener referred here to the report of Captain Loose and perhaps the letter from Major General von Loeffler.

²¹⁶ Groener, 460. The Crown Prince wrote of this verdict: “He spoke as if any further discussion was useless in view of the programme he had imposed on the conference.” Quoted in Baumont, 98. On the other hand, Groener wrote the Crown Prince was not present (another mystery?). Groener, 459.

admitted later, had uttered a “monstrosity.”²¹⁷ Nevertheless, in his own mind, he had offered the truth as he saw it. The Kaiser angrily demanded confirmation of Groener’s views from the army’s senior commanders. Hindenburg attempted to calm the increasingly emotional atmosphere by offering his own assessment that existing circumstances meant that neither he nor Groener could take responsibility for the army’s reliability. Groener left shortly afterward, and the Kaiser continued to consult with his staff and the army’s other leaders. The question of who would be the spokesman for the fighting men at the front had not been satisfactorily resolved. The army’s senior leader, Hindenburg, the man known by many as the *Schattenkaiser*, “the shadow emperor,” had come down decisively on the side of Groener and thus, implicitly, abdication.

The Capital Falls

While Groener and Schulenberg were arguing, momentous events were taking place in Berlin. That same morning, the Prussian War Minister, General Heinrich von Scheuch, met with his staff to assess the situation in the imperial capital. Though Berlin was nearly surrounded by territory controlled by the revolutionaries, he remained convinced that the city’s garrison remained loyal and that the OHL was moving to support him with troops from the front.²¹⁸ Scheuch told his adjutant, “We in Berlin are now like a besieged fortress. All depends on us holding Berlin. As long as that is successful nothing is lost.”²¹⁹ The War Minister’s outlook changed dramatically over the next several hours. By midday, he was reporting to Spa that resistance against

²¹⁷ Groener, 460. Groener wrote he would not have been surprised if, at that moment, one of those present would have shot him for what he had said.

²¹⁸ Schmidt, 333.

²¹⁹ Gustav Boehm, *Adjutant im Preussischen Kriegsministerium, Juni 1918 bis Oktober 1919; Aufzeichnungen des Hauptmanns Gustav Boehm*, ed Heinz Huerten and Georg Meyer, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt, 1977) footnote 225, 59.

revolutionary forces had collapsed and that he no longer had any troops willing to defend the government.

On the face of it, Scheuch had ample means to defend Berlin. He and the military commander of the capital, Colonel-General von Linsingen, could call on an order of battle that included aircraft, armored trucks, tanks and almost sixty thousand men. However, what these numbers did not show was the quality of the troops. Most of the Berlin garrison was made up of replacement (*Ersatz*) battalions and, although the units often bore the names of proudest guards regiments in the army, they inspired little confidence in their leaders. The troops were either convalescents or young conscripts with less than ten weeks of training. All that remained to lead the Ersatz battalions were those officers considered unfit for the rigors of duty in the trenches. The OHL had earlier combed out the ranks of the officer corps to ensure that those fit for front-line service were in the trenches.²²⁰

As the threat of revolution grew through September and October, 1918,²²¹ Scheuch realized the need for high quality troops to stiffen the resolve of the garrison and pressed the OHL for reinforcements. Through most of the war, the army had maintained two combat-ready divisions in the vicinity of Berlin to ensure the capital against internal unrest. In the spring of 1918 Ludendorff took these divisions away, claiming that every available combat formation was needed to strengthen his upcoming offensive. When the offensive failed, the OHL did not replace the two divisions.²²² In early November, as we

²²⁰ Schmidt, 145-152.

²²¹ Along with the estimated 20,000 deserters in the Berlin area (Boehm, 51), the authorities were also concerned with the considerable number of veterans who had been “reclaimed” from the army to work in the war industry. If it came to a fight, there would be front-line veterans on both sides.

²²² Boehm, 51-2.

have seen, the Kiel mutiny had inspired the OHL to a failed attempt to move the 2nd Guards Infantry Division to Berlin.

The only truly combat-ready formations at Scheuch's disposal were three battalions of veteran light infantry (*Jaegers*). They had last seen action in Finland where they had fought as part of the German *Ostsee* Division against Finnish Red Guards. The three battalions had returned from Finland to Germany in August, where they were to be reequipped and brought up to strength in preparation for reassignment to the Macedonian Front. In September, when the Macedonian Front had collapsed, the High Command decided the *Jägers* could be better used around Berlin.²²³

Though the three battalions of *Jägers* probably numbered less than three thousand,²²⁴ Scheuch looked on them as the backbone of his security forces. In modern military parlance, they were the garrison's "center of gravity." They had already been in action against Bosheviks in Finland. Thus, while General Linsingen deployed the less reliable *Ersatz* battalions in a thin cordon around Berlin securing the capital against the onslaught of train-riding mutineers, he gave the Jaegers the key postings in Potsdam and the center of the city. There, in small outposts, the three battalions of front-line troops set up defensive positions around key buildings. A company from the most highly regarded unit, the 4th *Jäger* Battalion, or "Naumburger *Jägers*," guarded the War Ministry itself.²²⁵

In the days just prior to the revolutionary outbreak of November 9, the *Jägers* gave a good account of themselves. On November 7, they disarmed and apprehended several hundred mutinous sailors who had arrived at the Lehrter and Stettiner train

²²³ Schmidt, 254-5.

²²⁴ In rifle strength they almost certainly outnumbered the depleted 2nd Guards Division.

²²⁵ Schmidt, 353-355.

stations near the center of the city.²²⁶ On the next day, November 8, the *Jägers'* display of sound morale, disciplined appearance, as well as their heavily armed patrols, reassured the Kaiser's supporters in the capital.²²⁷

All that changed on the morning of the November 9. When thousands of workers took to streets carrying signs, "Brothers, Don't Shoot," the *Jägers* refused to fight. Or perhaps they were unable to do so.²²⁸ Between suspicious no-fire orders of uncertain origin and fraternization with the crowds, the reason for the *Jägers'* passivity is uncertain. What is clear is that, in their preparations for counterrevolutionary action, the chain of command in Berlin, from Scheuch on down, had failed to act with either decisiveness or clarity. Instead of deploying his troops in impressive masses, von Linsingen had distributed them in small bunches in and around the city. The troops lacked adequate ammunition for any serious fighting, and, worse, the authorities proved unable to feed them regularly.²²⁹ Instead of consistent guidance, constantly changing and contradictory missions confused the troops manning the guard posts. Instead of preparing the troops with detailed instructions, the chain of command left the garrison uncertain of when armed force would be used. The result was a debacle.

The troops responded to the uncertainty of their situation in contradictory ways. The Naumburgers around the War Ministry responded to a no-fire order from Scheuch by destroying their weapons. Reportedly disgusted by the War Minister's lack of resolution,

²²⁶ Boehm, 55-56. Two companies of the Luebbener *Jägers* were used to guard the sailors until the morning of the 9th when the irresolute local commander at Neuhammer released the prisoners. (Schmidt, 104)

²²⁷ Testimony of Colonel Schwertfeger, in *UDZ*, Vol. 4., 37.

²²⁸ Boehm, report received at the War Ministry at 1030. 60.

²²⁹ Payer, the Vice-Chancellor reported men of the Luebbener Jaegers around the Chancellory abandoned their post for lack of food. Friederich Payer, *Von Bethmann-Hollweg bis Ebert: Erinnerungen und Bilder*, (Frankfurt: Frankfurts Societaets, 1923) 161. A similar reason is given for the Jaeger's abandonment of the Kaiser's family at the *Neues Palais* in Potsdam.

the front-line troops felt it was better to break their rifles and machine guns than let them fall into the hands of the mob.²³⁰ Later in the day another element of the battalion, at the Alexander Barracks, responded positively to the exhortation of a leading Social Democrat, Otto Wels, and sent a deputation to the left-wing “*Vorwärts*” newspaper to express their sympathy for the revolution.²³¹

Through the morning, Scheuch was bombarded with reports that the units of the Berlin garrison were refusing to resist the crowds that surged towards the center of the city. The failure of the *Ersatz* battalions was distressing but perhaps to be expected. However, when the *Jaegers* gave way the effect on the remainder of the garrison was devastating. Captain Boehm recorded at 11:00 A.M., “The report hit like a bomb. It was clear the other troops would soon follow.”²³² Prince Max wrote later, “The action of the Naumburg *Jägers* had a most demoralizing effect on the whole garrison.”²³³

The news reached Spa via confused and exaggerated reports. Late in the morning, Colonel von Thær of the OHL staff heard that “blood was flowing in the streets,” and that there was fighting everywhere. The “allegedly reliable” *Jäger* battalions had thrown down their arms.²³⁴ Linsingen’s last message to the OHL said he had absolutely no troops left willing to shoot and he was no longer able to defend the

²³⁰ Schmidt, 354-5.

²³¹ Ibid, 388-9.

²³² Boehm, 60.

²³³ Prince Max of Baden, “The Abdication of the Emperor,” Document 522, in Lutz, 534.

²³⁴ Thær, 258. Thær wrote later that reports of the *Jaegers*’ unreliability were unfounded. They had not refused, they had been misused.

public buildings in the center of the city.²³⁵ In its capital, the old regime had collapsed with much more of a whimper than a bang.²³⁶

Oaths Under Fire

The Kaiser struggled to remain calm in the face of the depressing news. Up to that point, he had placed great faith in the loyalty of his front-line soldiers, and the events of the morning were a crushing revelation. First, Groener announced the army no longer stood behind the monarchy and, during the early afternoon, the elite troops of the Berlin garrison had given way before the mob. After Groener had left the morning meeting, Schulenberg's encouragement temporarily restored the Kaiser's resolve, but more bad news awaited Wilhelm. At around one o'clock, Colonel Heye arrived with the results of the *Armeeparlement*. After reading the results of the vote, the colonel summarized the results: "The troops are still true to Your Majesty, but they are tired and indifferent. They want only rest and peace. They will not march against the homeland; also not with Your Majesty at their head. They also will not march against Bolshevism. Above all they want an end to hostilities; therefore every hour is important."²³⁷

The Kaiser was shaken by this report but persisted in believing cohesion and discipline among the front-line soldiers depended on their loyalty to their emperor. The Kaiser then asked if the army could make an orderly march home without him. Schulenberg said no, Groener said yes. Heye answered, "The army will march home alone under its generals. In this respect, it is still solidly in the control of its leaders. And if Your Majesty marches with them, it will seem proper and pleasing to them. The army

²³⁵ Schmidt, 358.

²³⁶ Officers from the Guard Fusilier Regiment did fire on the crowds, and there were isolated instances of fighting around the city. The death toll for the day was fifteen. Walter Goerlitz, November 1918: Bericht ueber die deutsche Revolution, (Hamburg: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1968), 178.

²³⁷ Heye quoted in Ritter und Miller, Westarp Protocol, 71.

only wants no more fighting either inside [Germany] or outside.”²³⁸ The Kaiser clung to his belief in the fundamental loyalty of the troops. He said that, as their Supreme Warlord (*Oberste Kriegsherr*), he wanted to see the opinions of the army’s senior leaders in writing. “Hasn’t the army sworn an oath of loyalty (*Fahneneid*) to me?”

According to his critics, Groener replied: “In this situation such an oath is only a fiction.”²³⁹ Other versions of this exchange have Groener saying, “Oath to the colors? War Lord? These are only words, an idea.”²⁴⁰ Later Groener would not deny what he had said but wrote that this comment was offered to an unnamed general who couldn’t understand how the sailors and soldiers in the homeland could violate their oath.²⁴¹ No matter what the exact words or circumstances, Groener’s statement branded him forever as a traitor in the minds of German monarchists.

Schulenberg was especially vindictive, writing later that, because Groener had not arrived at the OHL until October 30, he had no basis for judging the mood of the troops.

Schulenberg wrote:

In the trenches and under fire is where one gets to know the moral[e] of the army. The favorite reading of the men is the Bible and certain of the Psalms. Their high sentiments of duty are coupled with a profound sense of religion. The army which for four and a half years has done its duty, and is permeated with such a spirit, would be incapable, even when foredone [sic] and exhausted by battle, of breaking its oath and deserting its King.²⁴²

Such remarks make it apparent Schulenberg, like the Kaiser, persisted in believing the myth of the unshakeable loyalty of the combat units long after the facts had exploded the

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Niemann, *Kaiser und Revolution*, 138-9.

²⁴⁰ Baumont quoting the Crown Prince’s account, Baumont, 112.

²⁴¹ Groener, 461.

²⁴² Schulenberg quoted in Baumont, 113. See also Westarp’s criticism of Groener’s lack of combat experience in *Das Ende der Monarchie*, 142.

myth. As he had in the morning debate with Groener, Schulenberg sought the moral authority associated with “knowing” the true nature of the men. Schulenberg believed such authority was reserved to officers who had extensive service at the front.

Groener’s record gave him no such authority. His front-line experience was limited. As a division and corps commander, he had served on a relatively quiet sector of the Western Front from August 1917 to February 1918. Beyond that, his background did not fit the “warrior” pattern. Son of a Wurttemberg paymaster, Groener had made his reputation as a highly capable staff officer and Chief of the Railway Section of the Great General Staff when the war began. Through the middle period of the war he served as the head of the War Office, the War Ministry’s agency for managing the economic support of the war. There, Groener had excelled, while establishing a name for himself as an officer with a unique ability to reach across party and class lines to deal with labor union leaders and Social Democratic party bosses. He was a technocrat with an uncommon feel for the mood and capacities of the workers who were carrying the war effort on the home front. These were among the skills sought by the Kaiser and Prince Max when looking for a replacement for the politically maladroit Ludendorff.²⁴³

From our vantage, it seems that the ability to see beyond the class prejudices of the noble officer corps was what set Groener apart from the other participants at Spa. Groener’s skill in dealing with working class representatives suggested an acute awareness of the “common man” that Schulenberg had not developed on an army group staff. Far better than Schulenberg and the others, Groener could sense that loyalty oaths had become irrelevant to men as desperately war-weary as the front-line troops were in

²⁴³ Heussler, 117-8. Interestingly enough, Schulenberg was also considered. He declined, saying he desired instead to stay with the Crown Prince.

the last days of the war. Groener sensed that, for troops cowering under Allied shellfire, old symbols carried little weight.

The Kaiser lacked any such awareness, but by early afternoon, November 9, he understood that some form of abdication was inevitable. He favored giving up his title as Emperor of Germany while remaining King of Prussia and allowed this announcement to go out.²⁴⁴ As he prepared for a late lunch, a report came from Berlin that showed the tide of bad news had not ebbed. Without confirming the fact with Spa, Prince Max had announced the Kaiser's full abdication. This new "treason" aroused fury in Wilhelm, but clearly his options were beginning to dwindle. He spent the remainder of the afternoon consulting with his advisers. The triumph of the revolution and the failure of the army to rally its forces against the insurrection meant that now Wilhelm's personal safety had become an issue.

The Case of *Sturmbataillon Rohr*

Responsibility for the security of the Kaiser, his entourage, and the OHL rested on the most elite unit in the German army, Assault Battalion Rohr (*Sturmbatallion Rohr*). Named after its commander, it was a famous combat unit, not a ceremonial guard.²⁴⁵ Created originally in 1915 as an experimental unit of combat engineers, the battalion's innovation in the development of storm troop techniques had made it the model for the assault battalions across the German army.²⁴⁶ Rohr and his men were well known across the German army.

²⁴⁴ Baumont, 114-6

²⁴⁵ The ceremonial Life Guards had remained in Potsdam when the Kaiser "fled" to the front.

²⁴⁶ Timothy Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine, The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War*, (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, 1981), 28-29. Ludendorff had observed a demonstration of the battalion's techniques shortly after he came from the Eastern Front to become First Quartermaster General. He decreed that every army on the Western Front build a similar unit.

To the leaders of the German army of 1918, military virtue and reliability was synonymous with combat effectiveness. The hierarchy of effectiveness put the *Ersatz* battalions of the Home Army at the bottom, followed, in ascending order, by the *Landwehr* units guarding the Eastern Front, the “trench” divisions of the Western Front (useful only for holding quiet sectors), mobile divisions, and then assault divisions. Assault Battalion Rohr was at the very top of the hierarchy. In such a position, the army’s leaders took the political reliability of the unit as a certainty. Thus, when the Supreme Command began to fear for its own safety, the battalion seemed a logical choice to take up security duties at the headquarters.

The battalion received the order to move to Spa on October 20. It had come out of the line on October 10 in the vicinity of Sedan after heavy fighting in the American sector. In the rear, the unit linked up with its 4th Company, which had been training replacements, and began loading on rail cars for the redeployment. According to the account of the adjutant, First Lieutenant Schwerin, the movement to Spa was the battalion’s first exposure to the “face” of revolution. There were clear signs of indiscipline among other units pulled out of the line. The Guards Grenadier Regiment Elisabeth, encountered on the way was, Schwerin subsequently wrote, the gratifying exception. Otherwise, the trip through the army’s disordered rear area demonstrated why the Supreme Headquarters had called for the Rohr Battalion.²⁴⁷

The battalion’s arrival on October 21, 1918, sent a sigh of relief through the staff sections of the OHL and cowed any Belgians who might have considered the German army’s impending defeat an opportunity for insurrection. The battalion announced its arrival by parading through the town of Spa, the troops impressive in their special,

²⁴⁷ Graf Eberhard v. Schwerin, “Der 9. November in Spa,” from Niemann, *Revolution von Oben*, 428.

leather-padded assault uniforms and camouflage-painted steel helmets. Even more impressive were the machine guns, trench mortars, flame-throwers, and light artillery Rohr's men brought with them. After this initial demonstration of strength, the infantry companies were posted to key positions around the headquarters and the Kaiser's villa, while the horses, transport, and heavy weapons were quartered outside Spa. Major Rohr regretted the dispersion of his unit but found it necessary due to the nature of its mission.²⁴⁸

Guard duty was not a routine to which the combat troops of the battalion were accustomed, and this led to an unhappy incident shortly after the battalion arrived. Groener discovered a sentry outside the general's quarters had absented himself from his post for what Schwerin called "very human reasons" (the call of nature?). The lieutenant hypothesized that incidents such as this may later have influenced Groener to describe the battalion as "unreliable."²⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the duties of the unit brought it into contact with the rear area troops who supported the OHL, including a naval signals unit whose sailors had shown considerable sympathy with their comrades in revolt at Kiel.

Rohr's men received their first call to action on November 7. In response to reports of a revolutionary Soldier's Council being formed in Spa, the commander dispatched his 4th Company to disperse it. Schwerin wrote the willing response of the younger, unblooded members of the battalion, as well as their eagerness to seize the alleged mutineers, revived the confidence of the officers. However, the report turned out to be a false alarm.²⁵⁰ The situation seemed more desperate the next day when the OHL received reports of three trainloads of mutinous sailors arriving at Verviers with the

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 430.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 429-30.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 431.

intention of marching on Spa. Rohr offered to send out motor patrols to check the reports but nothing came of it. That night, Rohr was ordered to prepare a demonstration of modern assault techniques for the general-adjutant of the Dutch queen in a training area two kilometers outside Spa.²⁵¹

The next day, November 9, began uneventfully. Major Rohr left the battalion command post early in the morning to conduct the demonstration which went on into the late morning. When he returned at 12:30, the major was summoned to the headquarters. He returned with the shocking news that the Kaiser was preparing to abdicate. At the direction of the OHL's deputy headquarters commandant, battalion's priority mission became security for the emperor's special court train (*Hofzug*). In an atmosphere filled with rumors and uncertainty, the deputy commandant also directed that the Rohr battalion was not to use their weapons except in the event of a personal attack on the Kaiser. Both Rohr and Schwerin believed this last order would have a severe impact on the morale and steadiness of their unit. They protested to the deputy commandant, a Major Muenchausen, but to no avail.²⁵²

The battalion spent the rest of the day preparing a defense around Wilhelm's train. The heavy weapons companies were pulled in from the outskirts of Spa, and the battalion was united for the first time in days. At 3:00 in the afternoon, members of the battalion encountered the Crown Prince who was on his way back to his own army group headquarters. Assault Battalion Rohr had been a personal favorite of the Crown Prince, and he had visited the unit often. The Crown Prince assured the soldiers the Kaiser

²⁵¹ Ibid, 432-3. According to Schwerin, this little episode has caused some excitement for conspiracy theorists who postulate that certain individuals were preparing the Kaiser's abdication to Holland long before it was announced.

²⁵² Ibid, 432-3.

would neither abdicate nor desert the army. The men responded with a “Hurra” as he drove away.²⁵³

At this point, one leaves Schwerin’s account to follow the discussion of Wilhelm’s plans for abdication. The Kaiser could not return to Germany since revolutionaries held the Rhine bridges. He might attempt a flight to Switzerland but that was many hundred miles away. He could accept his son’s invitation to come to his army group headquarters, but moving closer to the front increased the risk of capture by the Allies if the army fell to pieces. He could stay at Spa, but rumors of powerful Bolshevik columns advancing from Aachen had unnerved many in his entourage. Then, at 4:00 P.M., Major Muenchausen reported to General-Adjutant von Plessen that, regarding Assault Battalion Rohr, “no certain reliance remained.”²⁵⁴ The origin of the major’s assessment is unclear, but soon the news of the Rohr battalion’s unreliability spread around the headquarters.²⁵⁵ What is known is that, by the late afternoon, Hindenburg, Plessen and others were telling Wilhelm Kaiser that Assault Battalion Rohr could not be relied upon and that he must urgently seek asylum. Hindenburg warned, “I cannot accept the responsibility of seeing the Emperor hauled to Berlin by insurgent troops and delivered over as a prisoner to the Revolutionary Government.”²⁵⁶ The example of Wilhelm’s cousin, Tsar Nicholas II, was present in everyone’s thoughts.²⁵⁷ Through the evening, into the night, the former Kaiser vacillated between a stubborn determination to

²⁵³ Ibid, 423.

²⁵⁴ Westarp, 104

²⁵⁵ Colonel Bauer suspected the report of the battalion’s unreliability was trumped-up. The Kaiser, he believed, should have had a chance to speak to the men of the unit himself. Bauer, *große Krieg*, 269.

²⁵⁶ Baumont, 137.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 139.

stay with the army and a wavering commitment to leave for Holland the next day.²⁵⁸ The next morning the *Hofzug* was gone. To the surprise of many, including Hindenburg, Wilhelm had left at 5:00 in the morning. For security en route, he took a seventy man detachment from Assault Battalion Rohr.²⁵⁹ The *Frontschweine* had played their last bit part in the drama of the Kaiser's abdication.

What role had Rohr's battalion played in the Kaiser's decision to flee? Certainly reports of the unit's unreliability were a last straw in a series of events that had shaken the Kaiser on November 9. Was the unit truly unreliable? To certain key staff officers it was. To its own officers it was not. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between. One expects the sentries of the Rohr battalion greeted their own officers with a friendly heartiness. Together they had shared the worst fighting of the Western Front. Theirs was camaraderie enhanced by their status as an elite unit. On the other hand, one imagines that Rohr's front-line troops must have looked on the manicured, red-striped staff officers of the Supreme Headquarters with more than a little disdain.²⁶⁰ Unaccustomed to the dreary monotony of sentry duty, the front-line troops may have responded as soldiers have over the centuries, with a surliness characteristic of bored soldiers. Veteran storm troops were poorly suited to the stiff formality and rigid routine associated with guarding an emperor.

²⁵⁸ Naval Captain von Restorff, Deputy Chief of the Naval Cabinet observed Wilhelm's internal struggle the night of the 9th. *Umsturz*, 394-5.

²⁵⁹ Rohr later wrote that the no-fire order on the 9th had disturbed his men. However, signs of unrest in the battalion did not show up until the next day, after the abdication was announced and the OHL had ordered the creation of officially sanctioned Soldier's Councils. One of the first acts of the Spa Soldier's Council was to demand the disarming of Rohr's battalion. Rohr refused. Some of the battalion responded badly to the prevalent indiscipline in Spa, but enough of the unit remained together to provide security for the headquarters when the OHL returned to Germany. (Schwerin, in *Umsturz*, 433-4).

²⁶⁰ For a description of front-line resentment of high-level staffs, see Thaer, 187-8, and Hans Fried, *The Guilt of the German Army*, (New York: 1943), 163.

The Iron Division

Though not directly related to the Kaiser's abdication, the experience of the 7th Reserve Division (7th RID) offers an additional perspective on the problem the German army faced in using front-line troops to suppress the revolution's initial outbreak. Raised in Prussia, the division had compiled an enviable combat record during the war and had been nicknamed "the Iron Division." When the collapse of Austria-Hungary in late October threatened to expose the Reich's southern frontier to Allied invasion, the OHL redeployed the 7th RID to southern Bavaria where it would serve as "stiffening" for the odd units being assembled to protect the invasion routes from Austria.

One officer observing the arrival of the division was Captain Victor Mann, the brother of the famous author, Thomas Mann. Captain Mann served as the adjutant of an *Ersatz* unit quartered in southern Bavaria and was responsible for quartering the front-line veterans with his own troops. He awaited the arrival of the combat unit with skeptical anticipation. His own front-line experience suggested that titles like "the Iron Division" were rarely justified. Nevertheless, he conceded that disciplined and battle-tested appearance of the Prussians made a powerful impression on his young Bavarian replacements.

During the next several days Mann heard rumors of unrest in various parts of Germany. Then, on the night of November 8-9, his orderly woke him to take an urgent call directly from the OHL. The voice on the other end of the phone line ordered him to alert the 7th RID. The unit was to prepare for an immediate march on Munich where revolutionaries had seized power and announced that Bavaria had become a socialist republic. It was an emphatic order from the army's highest headquarters, yet Mann was

reluctant to carry it out. He reasoned that sending Prussians into the turmoil of Bavaria's capital was an invitation to disaster. His commander agreed, "Madness! Arouse Prussia against Bavaria! Munich is our business!" Nevertheless, Mann and his commander carried the order to the Iron Division's commander, a cavalry general with a white moustache and a weather-beaten face.

The Prussian officer received the order with an air of unhappy resignation. "An order is an order, even if I must take on Munich," he grumbled. Both Mann and his commander sought to protest when they saw the general's head sink onto his chest, "I don't want to do it." At that point, Mann recalled, "I recognized that he was a tired old man and as ready for the finale as all of us. He had no desire to shoot our *Frauenkirche* into ruins, even if it was full of revolutionaries." Nevertheless, the next morning, the 7th RID prepared to march on the Bavarian capital. Mann's commander asked for volunteers from his own officers to accompany the Prussians in a liaison role. When no one volunteered, the commander picked several officers from Munich, hoping that such men might serve to avert needless violence.²⁶¹ Meanwhile, when the young Bavarian troops of Mann's unit heard of the revolution in Munich, the response was "great equanimity." Most of the replacements were farmer's sons and they "wanted neither further war nor revolutionary tribunals nor burning palaces. They wanted to go home to their fields and workplaces."

The 7th RID marched on Munich as ordered. The lead battalion, reinforced by a battery of artillery, reached the outskirts of the city by train and unloaded in good order. Then, as it moved into the city, it encountered revolutionary troops. They were wearing sporting hats, garish scarves, and carried their rifles slung over their shoulders in the

²⁶¹ Mann, quoted in Schmolze, 118.

classic revolutionary position: muzzle down. The “Reds” called out to the front-line soldiers, “Brothers, comrades!” and announced that the time of slavery was over, freedom was born, and a peoples’ republic was being created. “Don’t raise your weapons against your brothers! Throw them down.” The battalion, almost to a man, laid their rifles on the street.

The operation was stillborn. The officers attempted to arouse their men to obedience with no effect. Giving up the effort, the officers returned to the nearest train stations where they sought a ride back to the garrison. The arrival of more units led to the same outcome. That night, the remnants of the division returned to Mann’s garrison where they sang, made speeches, and visited the local inns. He observed:

The Iron Division had melted like snow under the sun. They had defied week-long barrages and ducked under machine gun fire. At Verdun, and in Russia, in the Balkans and in Flanders, they had poured out their blood and covered themselves in glory, but now the cries of half-drunk louts suffice to turn them into a crowd of farmers, workers, and *petit bourgeois* who want to go home.²⁶²

After the Abdication

The abdication drew mixed reactions from the front-line troops who had participated in the momentous events of November 8-9. Schwerin wrote that Major Rohr’s men were bewildered. On the day after the Kaiser’s departure, some gave their support to the Soldiers’ Council set up among the troops in Spa.²⁶³ The Soldier’s Council’s chief demand was for the storm troops to be disarmed. The OHL refused. In the ensuing days, a handful of Rohr’s men left the unit without permission, but enough of

²⁶² The story of the Iron Division and its march on Munich taken from Mann’s account in *Revolution und Räterepublik in München 1918/1919 in Augenzeugenberichten*, ed. Gerhard Schmolze, (Düsseldorf: Karl Rauch Verlag, 1969),

²⁶³ On November 10, the OHL told the army to form councils that included officers and NCO’s. See Chapter 4.

Rohr's men remained under the control of their officers to provide a security force for the headquarters until it returned to Germany.²⁶⁴

The news of the abdication had a powerful effect on the discipline and morale of the 2nd Guard Division as it struggled to regroup around Herbesthal. November 9 brought increasing signs of collapse among the rear area personnel around the division assembly areas. The roads around Herbesthal were soon crowded with leaderless troops from these other formations, all making their way back to Germany. The roadsides were littered with abandoned weapons and equipment. Local Soldier's Councils demanded that the division disarm itself and November 10, the 2nd Machine Gun Company had to threaten violence in order to seize the machine guns of mutineers who threatened their trains. That same day, the division commander, Friedeburg, wrote that his own unit began showing signs of dissolution. Twenty guardsmen from a company guarding the train station deserted *en masse*. Individuals began to leave other units of the division.

The reaction of the division to the news of abdication was not unmixed. The men from two batteries of the 2nd Guard Field Artillery Regiment asked for permission to maintain their positions so they would have the opportunity to fire on the trainloads of revolutionaries anticipated from Aachen. Friedeburg's artillerymen realized that revolution meant an early end to the war and a chance to go home, but they had no love for the men who had made the revolution possible. In their time in the trenches, the front-line troops had learned to despise the malingerers, deserters, and war profiteers in the rear area. In holding this view, they reflected the alienation the front-line soldiers felt

²⁶⁴ Schwerin, in *Umsturz*, 435-6.

from all those who had not shared their experiences.²⁶⁵ The fact that these same revolutionaries threatened the food supply of comrades in the trenches may also have weighed on their minds. Weighing the prospects for violent confrontation on one hand and mass desertion on the other, Friedeburg asked for and received permission to march his division home.²⁶⁶

By the end of November 9, troops from the Naumburger *Jägers* were providing military security for the *Vorwärts* building, home of the most influential Socialist newspaper in Berlin.²⁶⁷ The government had hoped these front-line troops would cow the crowds with their military bearing. Instead the Naumburgers had gone over to the revolution. Based on the events of 1918, one could argue that Imperial Germany needed a force ethnically or geographically removed from the unhappy populace against whom they were to defend, and that General von Linsingen needed a force akin to the Tsarist Cossacks of the 19th Century or the Bourbon Swiss Guards of the 18th. Instead, he had relied on the Naumburger *Jägers*, recruited from a town approximately one hundred miles from Berlin. The Kaiser's generals discovered that expecting front-line troops to fire on their countrymen was quite a different prospect than sending them to fight Finnish Red Guards.

After the *Armeeparlement*, the thirty-nine front-line voters were finally offered lunch. As they were eating, they were surprised by the news of the Kaiser's intention to abdicate. Some left for the front that afternoon, others spent the night before returning to their units. After the war, some had second thoughts about their role in the events of

²⁶⁵ This phenomenon is seen in virtually every mass army of the 20th century. What the German army called the "hyenas of the *Etappe*," the U.S. Army later would call "REMF's."

²⁶⁶ Details of the division's experience around Herbesthal come from Friedeburg, 425-427.

²⁶⁷ Schmidt, 388-9.

November 9. Major Huenicken wrote that he regretted the answers he had given. He came to believe the whole affair had been a set-up job staged by Groener to reinforce a conclusion that had already been reached.²⁶⁸

Colonel Wilhelm Reinhard, commander of the 4th Foot Guards, held a similar view. Selected as one of the fifty commanders to represent the front, he had been delayed by a series of minor traffic accidents as well as the security checkpoints of the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division outside Spa.²⁶⁹ Reinhard recalled that at these checkpoints, for the first time, he heard rumors of revolution inside the homeland and the possibility that mutinous troops were marching on the army's headquarters. Because of the delays, he arrived well after the vote of the original thirty-nine officers. Nevertheless, he and three other latecomers were summoned to a briefing by the ubiquitous Colonel Heye. As he had done earlier, Heye described a desperate situation in the homeland and behind the front, emphasizing that the point that the army was cut off from its sources of food and ammunition on the east side of the Rhine. He then asked the four commanders whether, under these circumstances, the war could be continued. The unanimous answer was no. The second question: would the troops stand behind the Kaiser? The unanimous answer this time was emphatic and unanimous: yes. Apparently surprised by this response, Heye dismissed it as being of no consequence. He informed the front-line officers that formerly reliable units like the 4th *Jägers* in Berlin had gone over to the revolution and, more importantly, the Kaiser had already decided to abdicate and seek exile.

²⁶⁸ Huenicken, in Niemann, *Revolution von Oben*, 442.

²⁶⁹ Reinhard is the only source to mention the presence of the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division providing the external security to the headquarters at Spa. Apparently chosen for its political reliability, the unit would later feature prominently in the events leading up to the German Civil War (see Chapters 6 and 7).

For Reinhard, a die-hard monarchist, these events would become a bitter memory. ‘What would have been the result of the *Armeeparlament*,’ he reflected, ‘‘if the Kaiser had asked the thirty-nine officers himself instead of taking the report from Groener?’’ He believed the result might have been much different. Similarly, what had become of Wilhelm’s order that the army commanders be consulted, an order never carried out?²⁷⁰

The Politics of Despair

In his memoirs, published four years after the war, Wilhelm did not blame the front-line troops for the loss of his throne. He did include the obligatory accusations of betrayal against the socialists: ‘‘The conscienceless agitators are the men really responsible for Germany’s collapse. That will be recognized some day by the working classes themselves.’’²⁷¹ The Kaiser also explained his failure to crush the revolution: ‘‘Others say the Emperor should have returned home at the head of the army. But a peaceful return was no longer possible; the rebels had already seized the Rhine bridges and other points in the rear of the army.’’²⁷² (One finds it necessary to ask: which army? Weren’t the rebels wearing *feldgrau*?) He concludes his chapter on the war by praising the *Frontheer* which ‘‘ . . . after four and a half brilliant years of war with unprecedented victories, it was forced to collapse by the stab in the back from the dagger of revolutionists, at the very moment when peace was within reach.’’²⁷³ But the army in the west did not collapse.

²⁷⁰ Reinhard’s trip to Spa described in Reinhard, *Die Wehen der Republik*, 16-19. On the night of November 9, Reinhard was introduced to Groener and Hindenburg. Reinhard recalled that Groener’s reception was ‘‘extremely cool.’’

²⁷¹ Wilhelm II, *The Kaiser’s Memoirs*, trans. by Thomas R. Ybarra, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922), 340.

²⁷² *Ibid*, 290.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, 289.

Wilhelm's memoirs celebrate the battlefield achievements of his army and ignore the fact that, when the monarchy was threatened from within, the front-line army did not come to its rescue. The men in the trenches demanded a peace with or without the Kaiser. The three front-line divisions selected to begin the army's counterrevolutionary efforts at the Rhine crossings failed in their mission. The thirty-nine front-line officers summoned to Spa denied the army's readiness to fight for the Kaiser. The handful of front-line soldiers assigned to guard the imperial capital submitted to the revolution without firing a shot. The elite front-line unit assigned as the emperor's personal bodyguard was judged unreliable in the moment of crisis. Finally, the man the Kaiser selected to direct the final stages of a lost war proved himself ruthlessly frank as a spokesman for the front-line troops. "Oath to the colors? War Lord? These are only words, an idea."

The Kaiser and his entourage were shocked by these words because they held on to illusions about the German army and the German people long after reality demanded its due. During the course of the long war, the Kaiser's role in the German nation had diminished dramatically. He was overshadowed by Hindenburg, and relegated to the status of figurehead by Ludendorff. When the Kaiser recognized the sacrifices of his people with belated reforms, it was far too late. In 1918, the Hohenzollern dynasty was not a cause to die for.

The *Frontschwein's* Dilemma; Part II

The soldiers who remained at the front in the last days of the war displayed a dogged endurance in the face of daunting danger and privation. However, when asked to fire on their countrymen, the German *Fronttruppen* reevaluated the terms of their

obedience and decided their orders were no longer binding. When pulled out of the line and thrust, with little or no preparation, into an internal security role, the variables that determined their behavior operated and intersected in new ways.

Exhaustion: Most of the units chosen to combat the early stages of the revolution had exemplary combat records. Used wherever there was a crisis at the front, they were even more likely to be numbed with weariness than the less elite units holding the line. To be fully effective in any combat role, Rohr's battalion and the Second Guards Infantry Division needed weeks in a rest area.²⁷⁴ Instead, at short notice, they were thrust into an unfamiliar situation where the "enemy" was likely to wear *feldgrau*. On November 9, the Fourth *Jägers* was probably in better physical condition than these other selected units. However, like them, they had seen enough fighting to want an end to it. In Victor Mann's words, "They wanted to go home to their fields and workplaces." Certainly, emotional and physical exhaustion shaped the views of the thirty-nine officers who traveled through the night to reach Spa and the *Armeeparlament*. When the *Kaiserreich* needed fresh troops to defend itself against revolution, it had none.

Isolation: Of the selected units and officers considered here, perhaps only the Naumburger Jaegers had ready access to news about the progress of unrest in Germany after the sailors at Kiel had started their mutiny. The other units were astonished by their first contact with revolutionary forces. The best example is the advance party of the Second Guards Division arriving on the outskirts of Berlin to be greeted by revolutionary troops demanding that they surrender their weapons. Similarly, for the officers called to Spa on November 9, their initial briefing by Colonel Heye was their first exposure to

²⁷⁴ Interestingly, Colonel Bauer attributes the failure of the 2nd Guards directly to their exhaustion after weeks of uninterrupted combat. Bauer, *Große Krieg*, 269.

news of the revolution within Germany. For Rohr's storm troops, contact with the OHL staff was their first exposure to dissent. In almost every case considered here, the officers and men were asked to respond to a situation that was new and unfamiliar.

The combat veterans so long isolated from the world outside the trenches were ill-prepared to challenge the appeals to revolutionary camaraderie they faced at places like the government quarter of Berlin, the suburbs of Munich, or the train station at Herbesthal. In each case, the breakdown of the front-line soldier's insulation, the first contact with those who had already joined the revolution, was sufficient to undo the bonds of discipline and subordination.²⁷⁵

Alienation: During the crucial days of November 8-9, this factor probably played less of a role than the others. There are indications of it, however. Consider the artillery battery of the Second Guards that sought permission to fire on the trainloads of *Drückeberger* traveling through Herbesthal for example. If the Fourth *Jägers* would not fire on the crowds of Berliners on November 9, they were, nonetheless, willing to apprehend the sailors who arrived in Berlin during the previous days. Reinhard demonstrated a front-line veteran's contempt for the staff in his description of his trip to Spa. On the other hand, one might still imagine that the Naumburger *Jägers* and Rohr's storm troops were tactically and temperamentally ill suited for the mission of guarding government buildings in Berlin or resort hotels in Spa. Nevertheless, the resentment of front for rear probably played relatively little part in the events surrounding the Kaiser's abdication.

²⁷⁵ The chain of command in Berlin realized that crowd control was best accomplished when crowds were kept at a distance from soldiers. However, they failed to provide the barrier material—especially barbed wire—that would have given the security forces a measure of stand-off from the throng of Berliners that marched on the government quarter on November 9. Ernst-Heinrich Schmidt, *Heimatheer und Revolution, 1918: Die militärischen Gewalten im Heimatgebiet zwischen Oktoberreform und Novemberrevolution*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981), 226.

Selection: This factor too, proved less important than the others in dividing the front from the rest of the army on November 8-9. The OHL selected their very best units and yet, these units failed almost as completely as any unruly *Landsturm* battalion or replacement company. Yet the selection process during this period made a larger point about the condition of the front-line forces. The German High Command sought out the very best combat units to protect the Kaiser and fight the revolution. When these units refused to fight the revolution, it proved that, for the combat soldiers of the Western Front, war-weariness and a fundamental unwillingness to fire on their countrymen trumped all other considerations. By the same token, the officers selected for the *Armeeparlament* were probably among the best combat leaders available to the German army in 1918. However, their competence and leadership did not translate into a mindless devotion to the monarchy. On November 9, they were tired, cold, hungry and frank in their estimation of what their soldiers were willing to do.

Cohesion: Devotion to Kaiser and Reich provided little motivation to the men considered here. On the other hand, at the point where the soldiers of the 2nd Guards or Rohr's battalion, or the "Iron Division" refused their order, they did not turn on their officers. The soldiers' resistance was passive and did not seem to reflect hostility toward their own immediate chain of command. In each case, the actions of the *Fronttruppen* resembled more of a work-stoppage than a mutiny. Significantly, the 2nd Guards Division and the 7th RID returned to Prussia as units and the nucleus of *Sturmataillon* Rohr continued to act as the security force for the OHL into 1919.

The loyalty of officers to men seems to have been at work here, as well. The front-line commanders called to Spa refused to sugarcoat their assessment of the

condition of their troops and what they could accomplish. In describing the weariness of their troops, they hope to avoid having the OHL call on their units for missions they could no longer perform.

In Groener's view, cohesion in the form of loyalty one German soldier felt for another played an important role in failure of the monarchy's attempts to contain the revolution. In his testimony in the "Stab-in-the-Back" Trial of 1925, he said that, at the time, he was skeptical of any measures taken that would use "reliable" troops against "revolutionary" troops because "field-gray will not shoot field-gray" [*aber Feldgrau wird nicht gegen Feldgrau schießen*]. Any plans to use *Feldgrau* against *Feldgrau* was based on a faulty psychological assessment that believed that, after four years of suffering and camaraderie, that German troops would be willing to fight each other.²⁷⁶

Management: The story here is mixed. On one hand, in the units pulled out of the line, the chain of command had little opportunity to prepare their men for their sudden confrontation with revolution. With the exception of the Fourth *Jäger* Battalion in Berlin, the officers involved had little time to reflect on the kind of orientation their soldiers needed in order to be able to face revolutionary troops or civilian crowd. Yet, had there been time, one doubts that appeals to honor and patriotism would have had much effect. Add to this Groener's view that German soldiers were not going to be willing to fire on their fellow soldiers without some very special preparation.

Within the leadership of the monarchy, the will to rule had been overcome by apathy and doubt. Thus, when the revolution erupted across Germany, only a handful of

²⁷⁶ Groener testimony in *Ehrenrettung*, 216. Groener believed that the only way troops could be used effectively against the revolution would be if they belonged to a special unit set aside, trained, and indoctrinated for such a mission.

officers from the Home Army (*Heimatheer*) offered armed resistance and in Berlin on November 9, perhaps only a single officer died defending the property of the Reich.

Schulenburg and others believed the front-line troops could be motivated to fight the revolution by emphasizing the way the revolutionaries had cut off the army's supply line. It was an appeal based on both the front's alienation from the rear and naked self-interest. That message would have appeal later but not on November 9 when the army still had supplies on hand and the combat soldier's *Weltanschauung* was dominated by a desire for peace at virtually any price.

However, the events described above do feature at least one important example of the management of perception. One refers, of course, to the Groener's handling of the thirty-nine officers who participated in the *Armeeparlament*. By having his lieutenant, Heye, paint a bleak picture of the army's condition and combining that with the enormous moral impact of Hindenburg's grim personal assessment, Groener ensured that the assembled commanders would not feel compelled to contrive an excessively optimistic assessment of the attitude and capabilities of their men. Groener would, in turn, use this outcome of the *Armeeparlament* to manage the perceptions of the Kaiser who, until that point, had refused to believe the *Frontheer* would not march behind him to crush the revolution.

Unresolved Questions

The Kaiser and those who surrounded him failed to recognize how much the army had changed. In 1914, the Kaiser's army was a well-trained force led by a professional NCO corps, and an officer corps dominated by nobility. In 1918, it was a "militia army." The old NCO corps was buried at Passchendaele and Verdun, and the peacetime officer

corps had been decimated. Shop foremen as NCOs and schoolteacher-lieutenants led the front-line troops. When Wilhelm, Schulenberg, and Scheuch expected the “spirit of 1914” from these men, they would be disappointed.

The story is complicated by a number of unresolved loose ends. If the 2nd Guards Division was still in good order on November 9, as its commander claimed, why was it reported unreliable at Spa the day before? If the Naumburger *Jägers* refused to fire on the crowds in the streets of Berlin, was it for lack of will or lack of guidance? If Assault Battalion Rohr was not ready to defend the Kaiser, why did Wilhelm take seventy of Rohr’s men with him to the Dutch border? The final and most interesting question involves Wilhelm Groener. When did he decide the Kaiser was expendable and how did that shape his subsequent behavior? For example, did he, as Major Huenicken believed, anticipate the outcome of the *Armeeparlement* before the vote was taken? We are not likely to find definitive answers to these questions, but they are worth the continued attention of historians.

The truth in the story is also obscured by the available sources. The events of November 8-10 were recounted by the men who led the front-line troops, whether it was a lieutenant in the Rohr battalion or the First Quartermaster General himself. During the crucial two days these leaders struggled for the right to “speak” authoritatively for the front-line soldier. In the event, however, the front-swine were represented by their own actions. They were indifferent to any object but peace and the chance to go home and, in November 1918, theirs was the politics of despair. By their unwillingness to fight for the monarchy on November 8-9, they became key agents in the revolution’s first and greatest victory, the abdication of the Kaiser.

Chapter Four

Legions Without Caesar The German Army's Response to Armistice and Revolution, November 9-14, 1918

Armistice

The Kaiser's flight into exile on the morning of November 10, 1918, did not end the ordeal of the *Westheer*. Even without their "Supreme Warlord," the thin "spider's web"²⁷⁷ of troops holding the front lines endured another day of misery and danger before the end came. They endured ignorance as well; revolution had interdicted transport from inside Germany, and the forces on the Western Front were cut off from news from the homeland. In this situation, soldiers relied on what seemed to be improbable rumors of revolution, abdication, and armistice. For most soldiers, only the last—the prospect of peace—really mattered. One officer remembered that in the last several days of the war, whenever his staff car--marked with the headquarters flag of the Fifth Army--stopped by a body of soldiers, the men would crowd around his vehicle. Their question was always the same "Is it over?" Among these men, he recalled, "there was no trace of revolutionary spirit," but rather "exhaustion and the boundless desire for one word: cease-fire . . ."²⁷⁸

That desire was realized on November 11. The OHL announcement proclaimed baldly: "11:55 German time hostilities cease. Forward line will not be crossed in the

²⁷⁷ Letter of Major Beck, (future Chief of the Reichswehr General Staff) November 28, 1918, excerpted in Otto-Ernst Schuddekopf, *Das Heer und Die Republik: Quellen zur Politik der Reichswehrfuehrung, 1918 bis 1933*, (Hanover: Norddeutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1955), 25. History will eventually show that we fought for weeks on unbelievable frontages without a battalion reserve, having only a spider's web of fighters, not breaking despite the Entente's Generalissimo."

²⁷⁸ Schützinger, *Zusammenbruch*, 79.

direction of the enemy.”²⁷⁹ With a one-hour difference in their reckoning of time, the German forces observed the end of the war as five minutes before noon, not 11:00 as the Allied nations would remember it. Soldiers at the front were wary of the silence that came at mid-day. On the American front, the odd shell continued to come across the line as doughboy artillerymen vied to be the ones who fired “the last shot of the war.” Finally, however, the front was quiet and German soldiers could consider the reality of survival and the prospect of going home. In violation of the OHL directive, some moved cautiously into No Man’s Land to meet their former enemies, hoping to exchange their badges and decorations for food and cigarettes.²⁸⁰

In the command posts behind the line, unit journals, normally the most laconic of military documents, reflected the mixed emotions of front-line officers. The War Diary of the 32nd Infantry Regiment observed, “The joy over the announcement [of the Armistice] was lessened by rumors of the great severity of the cease-fire conditions imposed on us.”²⁸¹ The November 11 entry for the Second Battalion of the 31st *Landwehr* Regiment read, “The report [of Armistice] was received with joy that the bloody war is henceforth at an end, and pride that, until the last moment, when weapons were laid down, the battalion was undefeated.”²⁸² One battalion diary closed the daily entry with a simple, heartrending question, “What has all the sacrifice been for?”²⁸³

As troops along the front tried to make sense of their new situation, their officers were being called to orders briefs. The armistice conditions were indeed draconian and

²⁷⁹ G. Seiz, et al, *Geschichte des 6. Badischen Infanterie-Regiments Kaiser Friedrich III. Nr. 114 im Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. (Zeulenroda: Bernhard Spoern, n.d.), 516.

²⁸⁰ Weintraub, 324-325.

²⁸¹ NARA: RG 165, Box 163, Folder II, 103rd Infantry Division and Subordinate Units, War Diaries and Annexes, 26.

²⁸² NARA: 165/121/I, 1st *Landwehr* Division and Subordinate Units, 194.

²⁸³ NARA: 165/163/I, 103rd Infantry Division and Subordinate Units (2nd Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment), 79.

left no time in planning staffs or troop units for reflection or recuperation. German troops would have to be out of Belgium and France in fourteen days and across the Rhine in thirty-one.²⁸⁴ In this difficult situation, to whom would the army answer? Who would lead this difficult march out of the occupied territories? The answer for Seventh Guards Field Artillery Regiment came as the fighting stopped. “At the same time, at the beginning of the cease-fire, came the news of the abdication of His Majesty, the Kaiser Wilhelm II and the outbreak of revolution in Germany. A telephone call from the OHL confirms that General Field Marshal von Hindenburg, as before, remains at the head of the OHL and requires all command authorities and officers to do their duty under the new government,” Recorded one unit diary.²⁸⁵

This proclamation was reassuring. Paul von Hindenburg, the old Prussian field marshal who had seemed Germany’s pillar of strength through the long war, was still at the head of the troops. The old lines of authority seemed intact, at least within the army in the field. However, the report was misleading in one crucial respect. It suggested that the revolution in Germany had just broken out. In truth, by November 11, the revolutionaries had achieved its first major objective, the downfall of the monarchy and the acceptance of peace terms, and a new government, led by socialists and proclaiming a German Socialist Republic, was already in power in Berlin.

The soldiers at the front faced a world turned seemingly upside down and, in the days immediately following the Armistice, they were forced to make important choices. Though exhausted and confused, they had to decide whether to obey the old chain of command or emulate many of their comrades in the rear areas who were abandoning their

²⁸⁴ Frankfurter Zeitung, *Der grosse Krieg: Eine Chronik von Tag zu Tag. Urkunden, Depeschen und Berichte der Frankfurter Zeitung*. Vol. 97, (Frankfurt: Frankfurter Societats-Druckerei, 1918), 9958.

²⁸⁵ NARA: 165/179/I; Guard Ersatz Div. War Diary and Annexes, 116.

units and returning to Germany by the fastest means possible. Alternatively, those in front-line units might follow the example of the troops on the Eastern Front and in the homeland garrisons who were overthrowing their officers and replacing their authority with that of newly created Soldiers' Councils. The choices the *Frontruppen* made during these few days would be crucial to the future of the officer corps and the army, the popular perception of the new government, and the course of the German revolution.

The "Six-Headed Chancellor"²⁸⁶

The new government of Germany was the product of a spontaneous and seemingly irresistible uprising that had overwhelmed the Reich's overstained imperial structure. The pace of the upheaval had left the leaders of the socialist parties, supposedly the natural leaders of such a revolution, scrambling to stay ahead of the crowds in the street. The result of their efforts was a hastily contrived coalition government that would rule Germany for seven weeks, until January 1919, when national elections served to launch the Weimar Republic as a parliamentary democracy. The new government was an uncomfortable compromise between two competing and largely irreconcilable visions of where the revolution should take Germany. Thus, through the end of 1918, it would be a government divided against itself. The turmoil within this temporary political arrangement and the hostility the government earned from its enemies on the Right and Left created a situation of political instability in which the troops of the *Westheer* would play a central role in determining Germany's political future.

The head of the new government was Friedrich Ebert, leader of the Majority Social Democratic Party (*Mehrheitssozial-demokratische Partei Deutschlands-MSPD*)

²⁸⁶ This description of the provisional government is taken largely from Erich Matthias' introductory chapter in *Die Regierung der Volkbeauftragten, 1918/1919*, of *Quellen zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der Politischen Parteien*, Series One, Volume 6, Part I. XV-LXXXVIII. The

and co-chair, with Philipp Scheidemann, of the party's delegation in the Reichstag. Ebert had accepted the leadership of the new provisional government on November 9 as Berlin workers and soldiers of the capital's garrison marched through the city proclaiming the revolution. Driven by events in the street, Prince Max sought to give continuity and a semblance of propriety to a transfer of power by passing the chancellorship to Ebert.²⁸⁷ Though the new arrangement lacked any constitutional precedent, it conferred upon Ebert, in the days to come, a certain amount of legitimacy in the eyes of the old bureaucracy and the officer corps.

While Max pursued continuity, Ebert sought unity. The new chancellor decided the government should be built on an alliance of socialist parties, his own Majority Socialists and the far less numerous Independent Socialists (*Unabhängige sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands-USPD*). The Independents had been the left wing of the old Social Democratic Party, but had broken away in 1917 over ideological differences and the immediate issue of war credits. Though the ill will created by the split remained significant, Ebert believed that bringing the Independents into the government would present a reassuring front of socialist political unity and might serve to tame the USPD leadership, which, as outsiders, had become increasingly radicalized in the last year of the war. To this end, the leaders of the two parties agreed to a power sharing relationship based on equal representation in a ruling Council of Peoples' Delegates (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten-RdV*) that would serve as (and be referred to) as the

²⁸⁷ The confusion of that day were epitomized by Scheidemann proclaiming the new republic from the Reichstag shortly after Karl Liebknecht, leader of the far-left Spartacist League had proclaimed it from the Imperial Palace.

“cabinet” of the provisional government.²⁸⁸ The arrangement represented a considerable concession by the MSPD whose membership vastly outnumbered that of the USPD at the time of the revolution.²⁸⁹

The cabinet would include three members from each party. Ebert, his party co-chair, Philipp Scheidemann, and Otto Landsberg, all former members of the Reichstag, represented the MSPD. The USPD’s three members included Hugo Haase, the party’s leader, Wilhelm Dittmann, and Emil Barth. Ebert served as leader of the MSPD delegates, while Haase led the USPD members.

Barth was the “outsider” in the group. He had been plucked out of relative obscurity from the middle ranks of the USPD to serve in the cabinet. He was younger than the other members of the cabinet and during the war he had avoided military service by feigning a nervous disorder. Though relatively well known among the workers of Berlin, he had not served in the *Reichstag* as the other delegates had. While Haase represented the center of the USPD, Barth represented the left end of the deeply divided Independents. He had joined the cabinet with severe reservations and of the six delegates Barth was the most openly hostile to any accommodation with the old Wilhelmine elites.²⁹⁰ He was to be a key figure in shaping the government’s troubled relationship with the Field Army in the west and the OHL.

The most important member of the cabinet, however, was Ebert. Trained as a saddle-maker, Ebert had risen within the party ranks in the years before the war and, in

²⁸⁸ The term “*Volksbeauftragten*” has been variously translated as “peoples’ commissars,” “peoples’ deputies,” and “peoples’ commissioners.”

²⁸⁹ The conditions of the USPD’s participation were that the membership of the cabinet be exclusively socialist, that the heads of the ministries, though remaining in office, would be supervised by representatives of both the MSPD and the USPD, and that the cabinet recognize the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils as the source of their authority. (*Handbuch der Revolution in Deutschland, 1918-1919*, Vol. 1 (Vorabend 9-15 November) ed. Heinrich Marx, (Berlin: Alexander Grubel, 1919), 176.

²⁹⁰ In the words of Scheidemann, Barth often turned the meetings of the Cabinet into “political theater.”

the words of a German historian; his ascendance embodied the “triumph of pragmatism over theory in the Social Democratic party.”²⁹¹ Within the coalition government, Ebert retained the title of Chancellor and was clearly the first among six nominal equals. In the division of oversight responsibilities, Ebert took on the key jobs of overseeing the military and internal affairs.²⁹² Despite ideological differences, the Independents never challenged Ebert’s dominant position in the cabinet. However, there was a price to be paid for this role. In the years after the revolution, both ends of Germany’s political spectrum—Right and Left—would call him a traitor; traitor to the nation in the eyes of the Right, and traitor to the ideals of the revolution by the Left. Yet any judgment one makes of his actions during the period 1918-1919 must take into account the many challenges he faced: negotiating a peace treaty with the vengeful Entente, feeding a nation on the verge of starvation, drafting a new constitution, repelling Polish incursions on the eastern frontier, guarding against a leftist putsch, demobilizing a vast army and an economy geared for war, all while cooperating with an officer corps that despised his ideals and difficult coalition partners within his own cabinet.²⁹³

Though a spirit of cooperation marked the initial work of the coalition cabinet, these ideological differences were important. The political goals of Ebert and the MSPD had largely been realized through the reforms of October 1918 (the “revolution from above”). At that point, Ebert had been willing to preserve some form of constitutional

²⁹¹ Waldemar Besson, “Friedrich Ebert’s Political Road from the *Kaiserreich* to the Republic,” in *Friedrich Ebert, 1871-1971*, (Bonn: Inter Nations, 1971), 68-69. The Left nicknamed Ebert the “radish,” “red on the outside, white on the inside.”

²⁹² The remaining responsibilities were: Haase-foreign affairs and colonies; Scheidemann-finances; Dittmann-demobilization, civil rights and public health; Landsberg-press and public information; Barth-social policy.

²⁹³ Analysis taken, in part, from Holger Herwig, “The First German Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils and the Problem of Military Reforms,” in *Central European History*, 1963, Vol. 1, No. 2, 162-164.

monarchy. However, with the Kaiser's abdication, he and his party looked to the election of a National Assembly to establish Germany as a parliamentary democracy led by the Majority Socialists but including the *bourgeois* and conservative parties. Their immediate goal, in the aftermath of the turmoil of November 9, was the reestablishment of "peace and order." The Independents, on the other hand, sought to preserve the dominant position of the proletariat in German society and pressed for an early socialization of industry. They viewed the idea of a National Assembly with suspicion and, instead, looked to the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils (*Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte; A/S Räte*) established in every city and garrison in Germany to be the fount of political power. In the USPD's conception of the new order, the councils would follow the recent example of the Russian Soviets by supporting the dominant position of the proletariat and serving as the agents of social reform.

The workers' and soldiers' councils represented a force with which both the MSPD and the Independents would have to reckon. Their power was expressed in the famous meeting in *Zirkus Busch* on November 10. Three thousand members of the various Berlin councils gathered to recognize the cabinet and the provisional government and to elect their own Executive Council (*Vollzugsrat; VZR*) empowered, they declared, to exercise the councils' controlling authority over the government. In theory, then, the Executive Council held a position superior to the cabinet; in practice, the *Vollzugsrat* rarely intruded on the authority of Ebert and the other five delegates. Moderates dominated its membership of the Executive Council and, because its members came exclusively from Berlin, many outside the capital considered its authority suspect. Nevertheless, the nominal power-sharing relationship between the Cabinet and the

Executive Council served to confuse and irritate the army's senior leaders in their dealing with their new political masters.

The Secret Pact

While the socialists were consolidating their power in Berlin, the Kaiser's flight on the morning of November 10 had left the OHL staff stunned and irresolute.²⁹⁴ Some officers looked to arm themselves against the anticipated onslaught of the "Bolshevists," while others attempted to negotiate a working relationship with the new soldiers' councils created at the headquarters. Despite the revolution, the headquarters could not cease to function; an armistice was being negotiated even as Allied attacks continued up and down the front. The one hundred and eighty divisions holding the German line still needed guidance and provisions. The situation demanded action since the field army's rear area had collapsed into a chaotic state while the army's supply lines were apparently interdicted by revolutionary formations.

Thus, the day Wilhelm departed for Holland, the army's First Quartermaster General, Wilhelm Groener, confronted a desperate situation and two critical questions. One question, though painful, was relatively easy to answer. From the announcement of the Armistice conditions the day before, Germany had seventy-two hours to reply. Would the army support the Allies' draconian Armistice conditions? Groener knew that under the circumstances faced by his army the conditions could not be rejected. "For us

²⁹⁴ The importance of Wilhelm II was as a symbol, not a leader. By 1918, the senior leaders of the German military realized that the Kaiser was out of touch with the realities of modern war and lacked any sense of the true feelings of the troops. Similarly, Wilhelm inspired little affection among the army's rank and file. See Gotthard Breit, *Das Staats-und Gesellschaftsbild deutscher Generale beider Weltkriege im Spiegel ihrer Memoiren*, (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1973) 94-104

there remained no choice.”²⁹⁵ On the morning of the 10th, the OHL signaled the new government that it supported the acceptance of the terms.²⁹⁶

The second question involved the allegiance and internal cohesion of the army. Could the army support the new government? With the abdication of the Kaiser, the oaths taken by the German officer corps had become meaningless. To make matters worse, on the day of the Kaiser’s abdication, the OHL had issued an order calling for every unit in the army to create soldiers’ councils. Though Groener later disavowed the order as an error made by a misguided staff officer, to many officers at the front, it seemed that the OHL had already surrendered to the revolution.²⁹⁷

In this chaotic environment, Field Marshal von Hindenburg had chosen to remain at his post at the head of the army, and he became a fixed point of reference for the many senior officers who felt themselves unmoored from the certainties provided by oaths, rank, and social class. Despite the downfall of the monarchy he had served for his whole life, Hindenburg’s name carried enormous residual authority within the army as well as among entire German people. However, the victor of Tannenberg was unlikely to throw his willing support to a regime made up of socialists, especially those who had helped to hound the emperor off his throne. Realizing this, Groener advised him that the Ebert’s MSPD was the only remaining political force that could achieve stability in the homeland and avoid a Bolshevik takeover similar to the one that had taken place in Russia the year

²⁹⁵ Groener, 466.

²⁹⁶ Conditions in *Amtliche Urkunden zur Vorgeschichte des Waffenstillstandes*, Document 105: Dr. Staatssekretar a.D. v. Hintze im Grossen Hauptquartier an das Auswärtige Amt, message of November 9, 1918 (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1927), 262-263.

²⁹⁷ Groener, 469, fn. 5 cites a 1937 letter which puts the blame on Lieutenant Colonel Faupel of the OHL staff. The hyper-conservative Colonel Max Bauer later made the unpersuasive argument that Groener “could not socialize the General Headquarters rapidly enough.” Max Bauer, *Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat: Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen* (Tubingen: Osiander’sche Buchhandlung, 1921), 271.

before. Grudgingly, Hindenburg indicated his readiness to act in support of Groener's views.²⁹⁸

A few hours after the Kaiser's train had left for the Dutch border, Groener moved to solidify the position of the officer corps in the sudden power vacuum. He would use both the power of Hindenburg's name and legitimacy conferred from cooperation with the new regime. Under the field marshal's name, the OHL broadcast the following message to its subordinate headquarters:

That the army might return home in steadfastness and order, though the Fatherland is threatened with civil war through the menacing danger of Bolshevism, all officers are morally obligated to do their duty without reservation, deferring any existing misgiving of conscience with regard to the oath sworn to His Majesty the Kaiser and King, in order to save the German lands from the greatest danger.

On the same basis, I have decided to remain at my post and take over the supreme command of the German Field Army, in accordance with instructions spoken to me by His Majesty the Kaiser and King.²⁹⁹

In the remainder of the message, Hindenburg advised the army to withdraw its resistance to the creation of soldiers' councils and, instead, encourage the creation of "trustees' councils" (*Vertrauensräte*)³⁰⁰ for the purposes of advising the chain of command. He admonished the men to continue to obey their officers and announced that the OHL intended to work with the Reich Chancellor Ebert to restrict the spread of Bolshevism. The field marshal closed by advising officers that in the current circumstances they would have to use tact in dealing with enlisted men in order to avoid disturbances among the troops.

²⁹⁸ Groener, 468.

²⁹⁹ Lothar Berthold and Helmut Neef, *Militarismus und Opportunismus gegen die Novemberrevolution*, (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1978), Document 21: Befehl Hindenburgs an das Feldheer vom. 10. November 1918, 150-151.

³⁰⁰ Also translated as "trusted men," and "confidential agents."

Significantly, Hindenburg's message addressed "the army" but it was apparent that the army to which he referred was the army in the field; no other units faced a difficult march back to the homeland. The front-line troops in the West and, to a lesser extent, those in the East, had become "the army." The millions of men under the authority of the soldiers' councils in the homeland still wore the uniform but, in the eyes of the OHL and, increasingly to Ebert's government, they had become something else. Redefining the word was important, even if initially an unconscious adjustment: if the "army" was the only institution with the right to bear arms in postwar Germany, the OHL, and Ebert's government would benefit by limiting the scope of that term's usage to the men returning from the front.

The message also reprised several themes that the High Command had used frequently in the last weeks of the war: perseverance in the face of adversity (*Durchhalten*) and fulfillment of duty (*Pflichterfüllung*). Peace might be at hand, but, for the officer corps these two themes were still powerful and necessary for an army facing the uncertainty of the post-war period.³⁰¹ Now, instead of the Allies, the enemies were disorder, hunger, and Bolshevism.

Groener's influence is evident throughout the message of November 10, but he relied on the enormous residual power of Hindenburg's name to assert the continuing authority of the OHL. The power of the officers' oaths was transferred to the field marshal and, in announcing its cooperation with the Ebert government, the OHL was giving itself legitimacy in the eyes of those soldiers who had welcomed the revolution. Thus, the message could call on soldiers to obey their officers on the authority, not only

³⁰¹ Discussion of themes from Anne Lipp, *Meinunglenkung im Krieg, Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914-1918*, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht), 167.

of the old chain of command, but also of the new government. That was not all. By announcing the creation of trustees' councils, Groener hoped to undermine the position of the soldiers' councils formed or forming at the front.

Without Hindenburg's knowledge, Groener acted to bind the OHL and the Field Army even more closely to Ebert's government. Late on the night of November 10-11, using a secret phone line that bypassed the central switchboard at Spa and the Chancellery's switchboard in Berlin, Groener called Ebert to offer the army's support to the new government.³⁰² In return for this support, the general wanted the chancellor's assurance that the government would act to fight Bolshevism and the power of the councils and that it would support an early election for a National Assembly that would lay the basis for a representative parliamentary democracy. Ebert accepted the terms readily and thanked Groener for his support.³⁰³ The chancellor's agreement established one of the most fateful unions in modern German history.

It was also one of the most controversial. In establishing the details of the alliance, history has only the testimony of Groener, offered well after the event. There were no corroborating accounts since neither Groener nor Ebert confided the existence or nature of their pact to anyone else during the turmoil of 1918-1919. Instead, Groener first revealed the alliance in testimony before the "Stab-in-the-Back trial" of 1925, shortly after Ebert's death. What makes the general's account plausible, however, is that from November 11 forward the two men cooperated closely to achieve the goals set for their alliance. Indeed, Groener recalled that, during the critical period that followed, he

³⁰² In Groener's memoirs, he confides that his objective, shared by his staff at the OHL, was to preserve the influence of the army and the officer corps, "the strongest and best element of the old Prussiandom (*Preussentum*)."³⁰² 469.

³⁰³ *Eine Ehrenrettung des deutschen Volkes: Der Dolchstoß-Prozess; München/Okttober-November 1925.* (Munich: Druck und Verlag G. Birk und Co., 1925), 223-224.

and the chancellor made nightly use of the secret telephone line to confer with one another.³⁰⁴

The union between the life-long monarchist and the socialist party leader was not as unlikely as it may have appeared. In the first place, it was not a union of strangers. The two men had met and talked only three days before in Berlin, when Groener had refused Ebert's proposals for the Kaiser's abdication. They had come to know each other during the middle of the war during Groener's tenure as head of the War Office (*Kriegsamt*). He had been responsible for the allocation of resources within Germany's wartime economy. In this role, as Groener became deeply involved in labor negotiations, he had come to know Ebert well. Over time, the two had developed a relationship of mutual respect.³⁰⁵ Beyond that, Ebert's political views were anything but revolutionary ("I hate social revolution like sin."), while Groener had the reputation in the army for holding "progressive" views.³⁰⁶ Both feared "Bolsheviks" might hijack the revolution. Both also shared the nightmarish vision of what might happen if the Field Army escaped the control of its officers and returned to Germany as an unruly and heavily armed rabble ready to prey on the populace. For Groener and his colleagues, this would be the officer corps' final dishonor. For Ebert, such an outcome might fatally discredit his government.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 223. The Groener-Ebert Pact opened the general to bitter attacks from the Right (for compromising with the "November criminals") and the chancellor to attack from the Left (for selling out the revolution).

³⁰⁵ Ibid, Groener described Ebert as honorable and reliable man during the Stab-in-the-Back trial and defended the former chancellor against accusations of treason. *Ehrenrettung*, 200-203.

³⁰⁶ Groener's views were indicated in the Stab-in-the-Back Trial, when offered a document he had written during the war that stated that the struggle between the Allies and the Central Powers had contributed to a "democratic torrent going over the world and it is madness to stand opposed to it because those who oppose it are thrown completely on the trash heap. The way to deal with this democratic wave is to steer it, consequently to choose the pilot and the course so that we can ride the wave and come into port, even if the war goes badly." *Ehrenrettung*, 202. Groener may have lost his job at the *Kriegsamt*, in part, because of the sympathy he had shown for workers during labor negotiations.

Perhaps worse, the resulting anarchy might provoke an Allied intervention into Germany's interior in the name of restoring the situation.³⁰⁷

The two men believed they needed each other. Neither man, however, could deliver the complete support of the institution they represented. For his part, Groener's headquarters could only claim control (and that uncertain) over the front-line forces of the *Westheer*, at best about one quarter of the army's eight million men. On the other hand, Ebert could offer only the support of his half of the ruling coalition. Despite the limitations of the pact, Ebert's support gave Groener a vitally important weapon to use in his campaign to maintain control of the army in the field. Ultimately, however, the outcome of this struggle would depend on the general's ability to deal with the soldiers' councils already created or forming throughout the army.

The Soldiers' Councils

As an earlier chapter has suggested, the German army of 1918 was an army of disparate elements?; behind the front there was the *Etappe*; behind the *Etappe*, the homeland garrisons. Beyond the homeland garrisons, there was the occupation army in the East. Each part comprised significantly different types of personnel and the troops in each part served under dramatically different circumstances. Not surprisingly, the different elements of the German army responded to the revolution in significantly different ways. The units at the front were slow to create councils, and, in the case of some units, never created them. Among the combat units, the councils had less influence than anywhere else in the German army and, in virtually every front-line unit, the old lines of authority--from officer down to soldier—remained in place during the first days

³⁰⁷ An Allied intervention was a genuine fear of the provisional government. See Colin Ross' speech to the First Session of the Greater Berlin Soldiers' Council, Marx, *Handbuch*, 191-192.

after the Armistice. In these respects, the units at the front were different. However, to appreciate the unique behavior of the front-line troops in the West, one must consider the response of the rest of the army.

The Home Army (*Heimatheer*) was a polyglot organization of railway troops, garrisons, and administrative formations. Much of the manpower in this horde was found in the replacement (*Ersatz*) depots. Every regiment in the field had a corresponding *Ersatz* unit charged with in-processing, training, and shipping conscripts to the parent formation at the front. In late 1918, the *Ersatz* units had responded to the urgent demands of OHL by shipping off most of the soldiers who had received at least a minimum level of training.³⁰⁸

What remained were hundreds of thousands of untrained men from the youngest classes; eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds. These raw recruits were shoehorned into overcrowded casernes where facilities had often been badly neglected since the beginning of the war. There they were placed under the supervision of officers and NCOs incapable of front-line duty due to their age, nervous condition, or physical handicaps. Alongside them in the *Ersatz* barracks were thousands of men in convalescent formations, recovering from wounds and often none too eager to return to the trenches. Prior to the revolution, the generals who commanded the homeland garrisons had considerable doubts about the reliability of the *Ersatz* battalions under their command. One officer described the replacement formations as “bloodless, consumptive figures without any

³⁰⁸ Ernst-Heinrich Schmidt, *Heimatheer und Revolution; 1918: Die militaerischen Gewalten im Heimatgebiet zwischen Oktoberreform und Novemberrevolution* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt, 1981), 19.

value.”³⁰⁹ These doubts were significant since the homeland garrisons played a central role in the Home Army’s contingency plans for putting down revolutionary uprisings.

The misgivings of the Home Army’s leaders were amply borne out in the first week and a half of November. When army units from local garrisons were sent to quash the sailors’ mutinies in Kiel, the results were brief clashes followed by a complete defection of the army units over to the cause of the mutineers. As the sailors of the German fleet spread the news and the spirit of the revolution, the story repeated itself again and again, though, after Kiel, there was also no bloodshed.³¹⁰

In the span of just a few days, the military command structure of the homeland was completely overthrown. Everywhere local soldiers’ councils replaced the authority of the various army headquarters. Indeed, the garrisons in the homeland provided the revolution with its armed strength. Yet the transfer of power was not attended by widespread disorder and violence. In a number of cases officers were harassed and beaten. More often, revolutionary soldiers ripped decorations, cockades, and shoulder straps with badges of rank off the uniforms of officers either bold or foolish enough to appear in public wearing these symbols of the old regime. Nevertheless, instead of chaos, the soldiers’ councils of the *Heimatheer* usually became agencies for the reestablishment of order after outbreak of the revolution had created an initial outburst of lawlessness.

The immediate political program of the soldiers’ councils reflected the general desire of the German people for peace, voting reform, and the abdication of the Kaiser. Beyond these common goals, the soldiers’ councils reflected the general desire of the

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 18-19.

³¹⁰ Sebastian Haffner, *Failure of a Revolution*, trans. George Rapp (New York: Deutsch, 1973), 58.

rank and file to overhaul the trappings of militarism and the superior-subordinate relationships within the army. As an example, on November 12, the Soldiers' Council of Munich described the new order for officers and men remaining on duty:

On the order of the [new] Minister Rosshaupter, officers come with good intentions to supply the hundreds of thousands of comrades at the front and to discharge them in the homeland. The officers come, not as your superiors, but as soldiers who desire to work for the welfare of the people. You are not required to greet officers, on duty or off. Also, what officers order, can only be ordered in agreement with the council you have elected for your caserne. Be assured, that your soldiers' council will watch carefully that the officers do not exceed their authority.

The proclamation went on to warn officers to remain constantly aware of the "new spirit" of the Bavarian Peoples' State, to strip off their badges of rank, and work along with the enlisted soldiers to ensure order.³¹¹ This last point was important. In general, the Home Army's councils cannot be described as radical, though some were dominated by the USPD and by its extreme left wing, the Spartacists.³¹²

Within Germany, many leaders of the newly formed soldiers' councils realized the need for some sort of central direction in order to secure the "achievements of the revolution." To this end, the Executive Council of the Soldiers' Councils of Berlin claimed the right to speak for all the council movements within the Home Army. The provisional government recognized this authority on November 10.³¹³

However, from their creation, the local Home Army councils were jealous of their local authority. Inside Germany, even when officers remained at their post to conduct administrative functions, they were required to recognize the authority of the local

³¹¹ Berthold and Neef, Doc. 38: Aufruf des Soldatenrates München vom. 12. November, 1918. 171.

³¹² This paragraph summarizes Ulrich Kluge's discussion of the program of the soldiers' councils found in *Soldatenräte und Revolution: Studien zur Militärpolitik in Deutschland, 1918-1919* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975), 113-118.

³¹³ Ibid, 138-139.

councils. This new arrangement contrasted sharply with the continued dominance of the officer corps in the combat units and would serve as an inevitable source of conflict as the Field Army reached the borders of Germany.

In the East, the response to the revolution took yet another form. The German occupation army in the East numbered almost a million men scattered across a vast expanse of territory that included the Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic coast, and parts of White Russia. These garrisons were created from third and fourth-class units made up almost predominately of the oldest classes, the units the OHL felt it could most easily spare from the fighting in the West.³¹⁴

The frontier of Germany's eastern empire brought its occupation troops into contact with the Russian Communists and this proximity did much to shape the response of the German garrisons to the revolution in their homeland. Even before the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, the Bolsheviks had undertaken an active campaign to undermine the military effectiveness of the German forces inside Russia. The dispersion of the German forces made it difficult for the German chain of command to maintain close supervision over its troops and, in 1918, fraternization between the Bolsheviks and German soldiers became a regular occurrence.³¹⁵ Even before the Armistice, the effect of Bolshevik agitation was reflected in the mutiny of German troops in Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, and other locations.³¹⁶

³¹⁴ Kriegsgeschichtlichen Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, *Der Weltkrieg: 1914-1918*. 14 vols. (1944 reproduced Bonn: 1956), XIV, 753. The troops in the north along the Baltic coast were commanded by the Eighth Army; those in White Russia and Poland by the Tenth Army, and those in the Ukraine by Army Group Kiev.

³¹⁵ "The Break-up of the German Armies on the Russian Front in November 1918," *The Army Quarterly* (U.K.) XXXIV, (April-July 1937), 34-35.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

The difficulty of communication over long distances delayed the news of the revolution from reaching the far-flung German garrisons in the East. However, by the second week of November, almost every unit of the occupation army had created a soldiers' council. These councils were similar to those inside Germany in that the MSPD party men dominated the leadership and served as a moderating influence.³¹⁷ However, the soldiers' councils in the East held a much stronger position in relation to the old military authorities than their counterparts on the Western Front.³¹⁸ Thus, Point 3 of the Kiev Soldiers' Council stated: "Officers remain at their posts as long as they accept the program of the Soldiers' Council and enjoy the trust of their troops."³¹⁹ Similarly, the Soldiers' Council of the Tenth Army announced, in the days following the revolution, that they alone "held in their hands the supreme power in the Tenth Army and therefore, carried the supreme responsibility."³²⁰

What the *Soldatenräte* in Russia, Poland, and the Ukraine shared with the units on the Western Front was the urgent desire to return to Germany as quickly as possible. The homeward retreat of the German forces in the East began almost immediately after the conclusion of the Armistice. However, the conduct of the retreat in the East differed significantly from the orderly withdrawal of German units from France and Belgium. In particular, the Kiev Army Group, which controlled all German forces in the Ukraine, left thousands of men and much of its equipment behind in its frantic attempt to extricate itself from the occupied territories. The war diary of this headquarters recorded: "Under the rigid discipline of their officers, the German troops proved themselves the best in the

³¹⁷ Kluge, 95.

³¹⁸ Roland Grau, "Zur Rolle der Soldatenräte der Fronttruppen in der Novemberrevolution," *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte*, (GDR), 1968, 555.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, 562.

³²⁰ *Ibid*, 562.

world. No sooner had they shaken themselves free from this than they showed themselves more slovenly in their behavior and more cowardly in battle than the half-trained Ukrainian and Bolshevik troops.”³²¹

As the excerpt from the war diary suggested, in a number of instances, the withdrawal was accompanied by fighting. Skirmishes, in some instances against the Poles, in others, the Ukrainians or the Red Army, hastened the disintegration of the German forces. The 20th *Landwehr* Division, for example, refused to advance against the Bolsheviks and deserted *en masse*. When the Tenth Army headquarters in White Russia attempted to create a security unit for the East Prussian frontier, it was able to collect only a handful of volunteers.³²² And, although the Allies, the Ebert government, and the OHL wanted to maintain a German presence in the East--albeit for different reasons--the Germans finally had to request relief from this responsibility. As they admitted to the Allies in early December, they no longer had effective control over their troops in the Ukraine.³²³ Indeed, some of the soldiers' councils in that area had opened independent negotiations with Lenin's government.³²⁴

Clearly, the contrast between the conduct of the Field Army's troops in the West and those of the occupation forces in the East was considerable. The troops in the East created their councils spontaneously and, in their relationship with the officer chain of command, reserved the dominant position for themselves. The eastern councils also asserted their independence when dealing with the Soviets and the new Polish government. Cooperation between the soldiers' councils and officers, when it did occur,

³²¹ “Break-up, 42.

³²² Ibid, 38-39.

³²³ U.S. Army, X, 229.

³²⁴ Kurt Fischer, *Deutsche Truppen und Entente-Intervention in Südrussland, 1918-1919*, (Boppard: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1973) 71.

could not prevent the disintegration of many units. Finally, for some units the retreat from Russia became a rout.

The soldiers' councils also held the upper hand in the *Etappe*, the rear areas behind the line in France and Belgium. They frequently operated from a position of real strength: when support units and garrisons are added together, the troops assigned to the *Etappe* amounted to over a million men and they controlled access to the supplies the front-line forces relied on for sustainment. In the last year of the war, morale was poor and discipline had become notoriously lax within the *Etappe*. The chain of command often feared to exercise its authority and, in some places, covert soldiers' councils may have formed as early as August 1918.³²⁵ Front-line officers had been appalled by what they found behind the lines. A diary entry by an officer of the Guards found:

. . . a crowd of back-of-the-lines soldiers, cynical and insubordinate, squatting in wagons without lights, smoking and talking. I always feel I should like to clear them out and move them on, but they would probably fly at your throat if you attempted to do so. They are constantly roaring, 'Blow out the lights.' 'Out with the knives!' 'Three men to cut him!' and things of this kind. This may only be barracks room bluster, but such cries are significant and indicate the degree of savagery these men have reached.³²⁶

The chief of staff of one army group commented on the potential for unrest: "The danger of Bolshevism is great . . . One of the greatest sources are the train stations and assembly areas. Here, where men of all branches are assembled in great numbers, away from their units and unsupervised, those who would do ill have the opportunity to find a willing audience"³²⁷

³²⁵ Bauer, 260. Bauer was predictable in his claim that Jews were heavily represented in the leadership of these secret organizations as well as the councils that formed after the revolution.

³²⁶ *Why Germany Capitulated: A Brief Study based on Documents in the possession of the French General Staff* (1919?) n.d., n.a., n.p.

³²⁷ Kuhl, *UDZ*, III, 23.

The collapse of discipline and morale among the rear-area formations made for a volatile situation. Add to that, the hundreds of thousands of *Drückeberger* clustered around major towns and depots, and the upheaval that took place with the news of the Armistice is not surprising. General von Kuhl may have exaggerated only slightly in writing, “all bonds of discipline and order were loosed in a single moment.”³²⁸

If von Kuhl had been inclined to hyperbole, nonetheless his observations were confirmed by observers from the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) who sought to develop an accurate and coherent picture of the German army’s condition in the weeks following the cease-fire. Using interviews with German soldiers as well as with citizens of France and Luxembourg, one American report read:

From the moment it became known Armistice negotiations were under way, some unruly elements of the German Army, coming especially from troops of the rear billeted in Brussels, met of their own accord and abandoned themselves to all sorts of excesses: corteges flaunting the red flag, soldiers disregarding their officers and ransacking local supplies to make money, etc. No resistance whatsoever seems to have been offered by the terrorized officers.³²⁹

Another AEF intelligence summary of the same period quoted a “reliable source”:

The [train] stations and particularly the one in the city of Luxembourg were the scenes of much disorder. Officers had no control over their men, those who were on the trains or at the stations being treated with gross disrespect. While he [the source] had heard of cases of assault made upon the officers, he had no knowledge of specific cases. He had, however, heard that officers had been compelled to remove their insignia of rank and were only disrespected by their soldiers. Pillaging of military stores was open³³⁰

In some cases, these scenes of disorder occurred only a few miles behind the front.

³²⁸ Ibid, 23.

³²⁹ U.S. Army, X, report of November 25, 1918, 157.

³³⁰ U.S. Army, *The Occupation of Germany*, XI. 36.

The first priority for most of the men in the disintegrating formations in the *Etappe* was a speedy return home. Where the means were available, as in the case of transport units, the soldiers frequently took matters into their own hands and made their way east. Elsewhere, crowds of deserters and mutinous troops hijacked trains and rerouted them toward the German frontier.³³¹

Among those who remained, the news of the revolution inside the homeland led to the spontaneous creation of soldiers' councils. Prominent among these were the councils created in the major cities of the occupied areas, Brussels, Namur, Antwerp, and Beverloo. On November 10, the Soldiers' Council of Brussels announced it had taken control of the garrison newspaper and the local telegraph service. It offered comradely greetings (*Kameradgrüße*) to the homeland and the new government and declared that a commission under its control would assume responsibility for ensuring adequate food and lodging for the garrison and a speedy return to the homeland. While calling for order and discipline within the garrison, it added that only soldiers "on duty" need offer obedience and salutes to officers. Such messages suggested that the rear area councils could serve as a force for stability. However, among the large garrisons, anonymity and an absence of danger had offered ample scope for revolutionary agitation and, according to Ludwig Lewinsohn, a veteran of the MSPD and the leader of the Fourth Army's Soldiers' Council, these rear area *Soldatenräte* became a source of radical propaganda and a threat to the orderly retreat of the *Westheer*. Conflict between these councils and the front-line troops was, thus, inevitable.³³²

³³¹ *Die Rückführung des Westheeres*, n.a. General Staff pamphlet (Berlin: 1919), 15.

³³² Ludwig Lewinsohn, *Revolution am Westfront* (Berlin: 1919), 15.

The history of the soldiers' councils of the *Etappe* in the West is relatively sketchy. The most likely reason was that the units and garrisons represented by these councils disbanded themselves shortly after the Armistice in order to return to Germany well ahead of the combat formations. To linger after the front-line troops had departed would have put them in danger of reprisals from the hostile Belgian and French populations and capture by advancing Allied troops. When the rear area councils did come into contact with the withdrawing *Frontruppen*, the results suggested the gulf between the men in the trenches and the support troops. The American Third Army staff noted:

A Soldiers' Council (Soldatenrat) was established in Luxembourg. Among its member were several marines [*sic*; read sailors]. They were never very active here except in the first days of the withdrawal. The S.O.S. troops [Service of Supply; the AEF's synonym for *Etappe*] were the first to go . . . When the troops began coming back from the front, the council sank into insignificance. Many of the S.O.S. troops remained behind to influence the troops from the front. They met with a cold reception from many of the divisions coming back. They [the front-line soldiers] knew nothing of the political changes at home. In Luxemburg, for example, one regiment put up a machine gun to keep the damned SOS troops away.³³³

Anecdotal evidence such as this suggests the council movement in the rear areas of the Western Front played a relatively minor role in the course of the revolution. What is clear, however, is that, behind the lines the troops overturned the established military authority and set up councils on their own initiative. And, on their own initiative, these men returned to Germany using whatever means were available. Their behavior, as with that of the homeland garrisons and the troops in the East, contrasted sharply with that of the front-line formations.

³³³ U.S. Army, XI, 28.

While the soldiers in the trenches greeted the news of armistice with dazed relief, their officers waited anxiously to see if the rumors of turmoil in the homeland would provoke their men into denouncing the authority of the chain of command and proclaiming the formation of soldiers' councils. Instead, to the surprise of officer and men, the initiative to create *Soldatenräte* came from above. On November 9, the OHL issued an order calling for the establishment of soldiers' councils within the units of the Field Army and on the same day another, signed by Hindenburg cautioned the officer corps to the effect that "understandings with existing Workers' and Soldiers' Councils will be achieved through amicable means . . ." ³³⁴

As indicated already, Groener believed this call for the creation of soldiers' councils within the front-line formations was an egregious blunder. He immediately set about retrieving the error. On November 10, he sent a message to the officer corps advising them to take the council movement "in hand." On the same day, he issued an order calling for the establishment of "trustees' councils" (*Vertrauensräte*) in every company, battery, and squadron-sized unit and greater. ³³⁵ The *Vertrauensräte* were a thinly veiled ploy the undercut the soldiers' councils. They were organized with a top-heavy membership that usually included one officer, one NCO, and two enlisted men for each council. As for their role: "The Trustees' Councils are suitable for the closest cooperation with unit commanders in dealing with all economic and social questions [rations, accommodations, leave, etc.], as long as order remains in the army. The

³³⁴ Forschungsanstalt, *Weltkrieg*, XIV, 718.

³³⁵ Groener, 469.

leadership of the troops must, therefore, remain firmly in the hands of the commanding authorities.”³³⁶

Whether they were called trustees’ councils or soldiers’ councils, the *Räte* movement among the front-line units originated by order of the High Command. In this respect, then, Ulrich Kluge’s assertion that the OHL conspired to subvert the influence and revolutionary orientation of the soldiers’ councils was correct. Indeed, on November 16, the OHL distributed among officers a secret policy letter that admonished them to look on the councils as an “inoculation” designed to immunize the troops against more extreme influences. “The blunt reception of radical elements from the homeland is accomplished more smoothly through soldiers’ councils of the troops than through the officers.”³³⁷

Not surprisingly, the character of the front-line councils was often determined as much by officers as their soldiers. In the Seventh Army, for example, an officer organized the Central Soldiers’ Council.³³⁸ The Fourth Army Soldiers’ Council held its first meeting at a time and place determined by the army’s chief of staff. He issued a summons requiring representatives to report to the meeting in small groups so as not to run afoul of military patrols given the mission of dispersing soldiers in large gatherings.³³⁹ One officer elected to serve on a unit council observed in his diary, “Shop stewards’ committee [another translation of *Vertrauensräte*] is now being formed in all units . . . No one in the Regt. feels inclined for such things, but we are still ordered to

³³⁶ Ibid, 469.

³³⁷ Grau, 555.

³³⁸ Ibid, 555.

³³⁹ Details of the Fourth Army’s council from Lewinsohn, 7-8.

have them.”³⁴⁰ In some units—conspicuously among the Guards divisions—councils were never elected at all. In the Crown Prince’s army group, the command forbade soldiers’ councils units and allowed trustees’ councils only when soldiers specifically asked for them.³⁴¹

The composition of the front-line councils also reflected their moderate, un-revolutionary character. This was indicated by the disproportionate number of officers and NCOs serving on them when compared with the soldiers’ councils of the Home Army and the East. The council of the 414th Infantry Regiment, for example, consisted of four officers, five NCOs, and four enlisted men.³⁴² Even more significant was the dominant position of MSPD party members within the front-line councils of the Field Army. Fully one-third of the representatives sent by the *Frontruppen* to the First Congress of Soldiers’ and Workers’ Councils in Berlin (December 16-21) were MSPD party functionaries or editors of MSPD newspapers before the war.³⁴³

From their inception, the front-line soldiers’ and trustees’ councils cooperated readily with the officer corps in maintaining order and discipline in the Field Army. The first proclamation of the Fourth Army’s *Soldatenrat*, for example, called for every soldier to remain at his post and to guard his weapon from falling into unauthorized hands. “Our objective,” the council asserted, “consists of protection for our loved ones at home, in the

³⁴⁰ Herbert Sulzbach, *With the German Guns: Four Years on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, trans. Richard Thronger (Harnden: 1981), 249.

³⁴¹ BA-MA, N 58/1; Nachlass Schulenberg, 243-244. Schulenberg wrote that the original order calling for soldiers’ councils was evidence of the OHL’s unnecessary submission to the forces of revolution. The war diary of the 3rd Battalion, 32nd Infantry regiment recorded that, on the evening of November 10, the headquarters received an order for subordinate formations to elect soldiers’ councils. A division order followed a few hours later rescinding the previous directive. NARA; RG 165/163/II; 103rd Division Headquarters and Subordinate Units, 51.

³⁴² Grau, 558.

³⁴³ Of the seventy-five representatives dispatched to the congress from the *Westheer*, 25 had been SPD functionaries before the war, 19 were classified as “intellectuals,” (attorneys, doctors, engineers, etc.), 5 had been civil servants, 6 were merchants or artisans, one was a professional officer, and one was a factory foreman. Only two were workers. Grau, 568.

protection of jobs, and the securing of means of transportation and transportation routes in the interest of an orderly demobilization.”³⁴⁴ Such objectives were typical for the front-line councils and often their achievement meant that the councils were frequently little more than rubber stamps for the old command structure.³⁴⁵ One young medical officer noted, “The functions of these councils were very vague; officially they had to approve the orders given by the commanding officer, but in practice they confined themselves to supervising the distribution of rations, and to putting a stamp on any document, as nothing in Germany was recognized as valid without at least one stamp and several illegible signatures . . .”³⁴⁶

According to the newly established protocols for revolutionary authority, the soldiers’ council of the senior headquarters had a span of control which corresponded to the headquarters from which it was formed. Theoretically, then, the Soldiers’ Council of the OHL was a powerful agency that spoke for and guided the efforts all the councils within the Field Army.³⁴⁷ In reality, its authority and impact on events is debatable. On one hand, Groener pointed to the composition of the council, which included his own orderly sergeant as well as the enlisted servant of Admiral Scheer, and claimed that the OHL council served as a willing “mouthpiece” for the policies of the High Command.³⁴⁸ On the other hand, Marxist historians emphasized the memorandum the OHL council

³⁴⁴ Lewinsohn, 23.

³⁴⁵ Volkmann, *Marxismus*, 253.

³⁴⁶ Stephan Westman, *Surgeon with the Kaiser’s Army* (London: William Kimber and Co., 1968), 179.

³⁴⁷ Volkmann, *Marxismus*, 254. The original initiative for creating the OHL council apparently came from a Captain Meunier, a member of one of the intelligence departments on the staff. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Exhibit Item Do2 92/200 “Ausweis für Hauptmann Meunier, Mitglied des Vollzugsausschusses des Soldatenrates bei der OHL, Spa, November 13, 1918.” Meunier may have been the one who told the generals on November 9 that the troops around the OHL would not fire on their “feldgrau” comrades. Marx, *Handbuch*, 82.

³⁴⁸ Groener, 470. Colonel Bauer recorded that the initial demands of the OHL council indicated its frivolous character: the members wanted a certain lieutenant colonel to be more prompt in returning military greetings and they wanted ten trucks put at their disposal to transport their members around. Bauer, 271.

delivered to the Congress of Field Army Councils at December 1: “The creation of soldiers’ councils is the final and total conquest of militarism.”³⁴⁹

If it took the proper revolutionary attitude toward militarism, nevertheless, the Soldiers Council of the OHL was hardly a radical organ. Men with middle-class backgrounds dominated its seven-man executive committee.³⁵⁰ Upon meeting the membership of the senior council, Ludwig Lewinsohn, the chairman of the Fourth Army’s council, was gratified to find that they reflected the same Majority Socialist outlook as his own army-level council. In particular, the OHL *Soldatenrat* supported the MSPD’s fundamental goal of replacing the rule of workers’ and soldiers’ councils with an early convention of a National Assembly.³⁵¹

While Groener found the OHL council useful, it was also a nuisance and, over time, his relationship with the council’s leaders grew strained. For its part, the council made a great show of red armbands and banners, and demanded workspace and vehicles to support its activities, which, it believed, included monitoring the officers on the staff for signs of counterrevolutionary activity. For Groener, there was further aggravation. In accordance with the council’s efforts to create a parallel chain of command, it required that no order or policy could leave the headquarters without the approval of the council’s executive committee.³⁵² To circumvent the council’s interference, Groener asked the cabinet to send him a representative to act as the government’s sole conduit for its

³⁴⁹ Grau, 557. One suspects that, at first, the council members were inclined to offer a degree of deference to officers while at the OHL but later mimicked the sentiments of their more radical peers when away from the headquarters.

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 555.

³⁵¹ Lewinsohn, 64.

³⁵² Volkmann, *Marxismus*, 254.

dealings with the OHL.³⁵³ Ebert responded empowering a representative, one Herr Giebel, who proved much more compliant to the efforts of the OHL.³⁵⁴

Whatever their political aims, the OHL council usually proved willing to cooperate with Groener's goal of maintaining order in the front-line formations during its retreat from France and Belgium, even if this put the OHL's council in conflict with the *Soldatenräte* in the homeland. Together, both Groener and the OHL council needed to each other's cooperation if they were convincing convince the Field Army's rank and file that the existing command structure had to be maintained in order to accomplish the difficult retreat across the Rhine.³⁵⁵

The Fruits of Collaboration

If the *Westheer* was to beat the demanding deadlines of the Armistice agreement, it also needed uninterrupted supply lines with the homeland and the cooperation of officers and men within the front-line units. On November 10, the OHL had already invoked the name of Hindenburg in a telegram calling on the new government to secure these objectives. "The Field Marshal expects from the new government that it will use every means to secure the provisioning of the army and, to this end, prevent any interruption of railway traffic . . . Further, the troops must remain obedient to their officers; the Field Marshal expects support from the government in this respect."³⁵⁶ If the

³⁵³ BA-R, R 43/2485, f. 1, Document 35: "Telegram: "Vorschläge der OHL für Zusammenwirken zwischen Armee und Zivilstellen,"

³⁵⁴ The bulk of Giebel's correspondence with Berlin seems to consist of reports of misbehavior by homeland *Soldatenräte* or inquiries about his stipend. For the Soldiers' Council complaint that Giebel was insufficiently vigilant in his duties see, BA-R, R 43/2500/4, "Überwachung der OHL (Memorandum from the Soldatenrat of the OHL to the 'Reich Leadership')," December 24, 1918 (#5598).

³⁵⁵ For a Marxist interpretation of the significance of the retreat see Dieter Dreetz, "Rückführung des Westheeres und Novemberrevolution," *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte* (GDR) 1968, 578-589.

³⁵⁶ Lothar Berthold and Helmut Neef, *Militarismus und Opportunismus gegen die Novemberrevolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1978), Doc. 20: "Telegramm Groeners an den Reichskanzlers und die neue Regierung am 10. November 1918, 148-149.

cabinet resented the tone of this communication, it was not evident in their response. The day before the cease-fire, the cabinet had issued a proclamation aimed at those who might disturb the supply apparatus of the troops in Belgium and France.

The provisioning of our comrades on the Western Front is in great danger. At precisely this moment it must be absolutely maintained. We owe that to our comrades . . . Every act of plunder or confiscations of rations and fodder loaded on transportation allocated for the Field Army, every diversion or delay of transportation, every cessation of the loading process, must cease unconditionally.³⁵⁷

On November 11, the OHL sent the cabinet a phone message that described the desired conditions of authority within the front-line units.³⁵⁸ Two days later, the Ebert and his colleague issued the troops a virtual verbatim draft of the OHL's message under their own signatures. It read:

The Peoples' Government expects from you the strictest self-discipline, in order to avoid immeasurable harm. [To this end:]

1. The relationship between officer and soldier is built on complementary trust. For this, the willing subordination of the soldier under the officer and the comradely handling of the soldier by superiors are the prerequisites.
2. The superior relationship of the officer remains in place. Unconditional obedience in service is of decisive importance for the return to the German homeland. Military discipline and order in the army must, therefore, be maintained under all circumstances.
3. For the maintenance of trust between officer and soldier, the soldiers' councils have advisory voices on questions of rations, leave, and the imposition of military punishment. Their highest duty is to effect the **prevention of disorder and mutiny**. [emphasis in the original]
4. The same rations for officers, warrants, and men [as well as the same quarters]
5. Weapons are to be used against members of the people only in emergency and for the prevention of plundering.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ Marx, *Handbuch*, 167. The next day Groener sent his liaison with the cabinet, Colonel Haeften, another message requesting that the government intervene to keep the homeland soldiers' councils from interfering with the army's demobilization. BA-R, R 43/2485, f. 1. Groener message to Haeften, November 11, 1918.

³⁵⁸ BA-R, R43/2485, f.1 transcript of phone message from the OHL to Berlin, 12 November, 1918.

³⁵⁹ BA-MA, PH 8 I/511 Proclamation of the Peoples' Government, November 13, 1918.

For those willing to read between the lines, the message was clear. The tone of leadership in the German army had changed, the perquisites of rank were now subject to question, and the soldiers' councils had a useful role to play. But one should make no mistake, the officers were still in charge and to disobey the chain of command was to betray the new revolutionary order.

Meanwhile, in its own communication with the rank and file, the OHL and its subordinate headquarters harped constantly on the theme that order and discipline was going to be needed to get the army home safely. Army Group Gallwitz told the officers of its command to relay to their men that those who would desire to get home ahead of other men were violating the comradely trust soldiers should have for one another and undermining the well-being of all.³⁶⁰ In a division order issued on November 11, the 1st *Landwehr* Division reassured its soldiers that the same spirit that they demonstrated in four years of fighting would need to be maintained in the difficult march that lay ahead and the “oppressive uncertainty over the fate of our loved ones in the homeland.” The men were assured that everything possible was being done to give them some rest after the exertions of the previous weeks, to find them fresh clothes, and to restore postal communication with Germany.³⁶¹ On the day of the Armistice, the 255th Division headquarters warned its officers that for “the approaching return of the army to the homeland it is of extraordinary importance that leaders keep the troops firmly in hand.” It ordered that, within the division, staffs would be stripped of officers in order to reinforce the chain of command among the troop units, which would be consolidated

³⁶⁰ BA-MA, PH 8 I/511. Fifth Army transcript of message from Army Group Gallwitz, November 11, 1918.

³⁶¹ NARA, RG 165/121/I, 1st *Landwehr* Division Order, November 11, 1918, 20.

under “energetic, experienced officers.”³⁶² In the 4th Guards, the day after the fighting had stopped, Colonel Reinhard had recovered from his frigid trip to Spa and back and had assembled his men at the palace of Bouillon for a brief address. After calling on his troops to remember their fallen comrades and leading three cheers for the Kaiser, the colonel warned his men that, if they were to make an orderly march back to Germany, then they must remain steady, disciplined, and loyal.³⁶³ So it was up and down the chain of command. Though one officer recalled that the men understood “instinctively” that the return home would be perilous and required the old-style discipline, and the officer corps was taking no chances that any soldier might misunderstand that point.³⁶⁴

Along with reinforcing their own authority, the chain of command had to act quickly to quash the torrent of rumors that threatened to unsettle the troops.³⁶⁵ The 88th Division ordered: “First interception of wireless messages coming from Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils with fantastic contents or warnings to maintain order are the only news from home, which, in spite of all radio discipline, get through to the troops and cause them greatest worries concerning their families at home.”³⁶⁶ Even if revolutionary sentiment did create mutiny among the troops, fear for wife and children might nevertheless undermine good order and discipline. With this in mind, Groener sent a radio message to the Field Army on November 12 emphasizing that the food situation in the homeland was under control and that no soldier should fear for the well being of his

³⁶² NARA, RG 165/179/Doc. 54, 255th Infantry Division War Diary Entry for November 11, 1918, 145.

³⁶³ Wilhelm Reinhard, *Das 4. Garde-Regiment zu Fuss: Nach den amtlichen Kriegstagebüchern und persönlichen Aufzeichnungen bearbeitet*. (Berlin: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1924) 394. During the war the regiment had lost 4,700 men killed and 11,800 wounded.

³⁶⁴ Volkmann, *Marxismus*, 253.

³⁶⁵ BA-R, R43/2500/5 Transcript of phone call from Major ? of the OHL to the Reich leadership requesting news media—flyers, newspapers, etc.—to allay the absence of information and to call for the unhindered transport of supplies to the army.

³⁶⁶ *Second Infantry Division*, Vol. IX, Intelligence Documents: Doc. 22: Corps Kleist report to Fifth Army, dated December 5, 1918,

family.³⁶⁷ That same day another message came from Spa aimed at reassuring the troops by reporting that chaos had not overtaken the homeland, that the violence accompanying the revolution had been isolated, and that the Spartacists were not part of the new coalition government.³⁶⁸ Finally, yet another radio transmission on November 12 called on the chain of command to stamp out rumors that Field Marshal von Hindenburg had fled to Holland along with the Kaiser.³⁶⁹

While officers on the Western Front worked toward the common goal of maintaining order and discipline within the Field Army, their efforts did not necessarily reflect the solidarity of unanimously shared views. Some officers in the *Etappe* had abandoned their posts for the relative safety of the homeland. In the front-line units, many officers were dismayed by the order to create councils within their units. Reinhard of the 4th Guards believed that because the OHL was located deep in the *Etappe*, it was far too submissive in its relationship with the soldiers' councils, while unaware of how solid discipline remained among the combat units.³⁷⁰ At a much higher level, the war diary of Schulenberg's headquarters, Army Group Crown Prince, was scathing in its criticism of the OHL for its failure to act decisively against the chaos in the rear areas.³⁷¹

Yet few at the front fully appreciated the difficulties Groener faced. In particular, he anticipated a collision between the front-line forces and the homeland councils and urged the chancellor to bring councils under tighter control. In spite of the efforts of the officer corps, the general feared that agitation by the Home Army's *Soldatenräte* might

³⁶⁷ BA-MA, PH 8 I/511; Transcript of radio message "An Gruppe Soden," November 12, 1918.

³⁶⁸ BA-MA, PH 8 I/511; 213th Infantry Division message (unnumbered) "Reports from the Homeland," November 12, 1918.

³⁶⁹ BA-MA, PH 8 I/511; Transcript of radio message from Fifth Army 1a #777, November 12, 1918.

³⁷⁰ Wilhelm Reinhard, *1918-1919, Die Wehen der Republic*, (Berlin: Brunnen Verlag, 1933), 36.

³⁷¹ NARA: RG 165/27/IV, War Diary of Group of Armies Crown Prince, entries for November 13, 1918. 8-10.

undermine the relatively fragile bonds that held the *Westheer* together. With this same concern in mind, Ebert had already ordered the *Heimatheer* to render the returning field formations all possible assistance in their return to Germany.³⁷² Apparently, Groener was not completely satisfied with the government's efforts because he sent an additional telegram on November 11 asking the chancellor to appeal to the *Soldatenräte* in the homeland to support the orderly withdrawal of the *Westheer*. This message also contained a threat. If order is not maintained in the Field Army, the general wrote, it will be like a "storm flood (*Sturmflut*) flowing over the fields of the homeland and the army and the homeland will dissolve into chaos." He went on to observe gravely that no one who called himself a German would want to take responsibility for such a disaster.³⁷³

In dispatching such a warning to the head of government, Groener demonstrated his readiness to use the men returning from the front as a political weapon. The government depended on the officer corps to bring the *Westheer* home and that reliance made the troops and their good order vitally important in the officer corps' struggle to maintain their status and influence. In the same way that the Kaiser had warned that his abdication would lead to anarchy in the Field Army, Groener portrayed the front-line troops--according to his objectives of the moment--as either a force for renewed stability or source of potential chaos. The message he repeated to Ebert and his colleagues was that unless the officer corps was supported and the radicals suppressed, the OHL could not take responsibility for the consequences. Clearly, the *Frontschweine* were the essential pawns in the game being played by the old elites.

³⁷² Berthold and Neef, Doc. 22: "Aufruf des Reichskanzlers Ebert an das deutsche Heimatheer vom 10. November 1918. 151-152.

³⁷³ Ibid, Doc. 27: "Telegramm Groeners an den Reichskanzler Ebert am 11. November 1918," 160. The same text is found in BA-R, R 43/2500/5; Telegram from the OHL to Ebert, but dated November 13, 1918.

Closely tied to the OHL's efforts to maintain their grip on the Field Army was a battle over symbols. The most conspicuous of these was the red flag, the symbol of revolution. The soldiers' councils inside Germany and in the Field Army's rear had taken up the red flag and red armbands as the symbol of their victory over militarism. Yet, these symbols were slow to appear in the field army. In some cases, this was a result of official policy. In Army Group Crown Prince, for example, red armbands and flags were banned. Instead, the headquarters encouraged the troops to display their *Landesfarben*, the colors of their home state (for example, Bavarian blue and white). As the troops began to pull back into the rear areas, the same headquarters complained that the red flag was being used as cover for plundering and other excesses by troops in the *Etappe* and it urged the OHL ban the red symbols across the army.³⁷⁴ However the officers may have felt, there were members of the new government who believed that banning the red flag would be denying the revolution. In mid-November, it remained to be seen what banner the Field Army would carry when it crossed the Rhine.

Other symbols included the vestiges of monarchy that lingered on in the army after November 9. Though Wilhelm was in Holland and most of the twenty-odd remaining ruling houses in Imperial Germany were in flight or preparing to flee, the immediate aftermath of the revolution found the two largest of the four army groups on the Western Front commanded by crown princes. In the north, Rupprecht of Bavaria commanded the armies facing the British and Belgians, and south of him, facing the French and part of the AEF, was the Kaiser's son, Wilhelm of Prussia.³⁷⁵ Both princes wanted to lead their soldiers back into Germany. If they had no thrones to occupy, then

³⁷⁴ NARA; RG 165/27/IV, War Diary of Group of Armies Crown Prince, entry for November 14, 1918, 10.

³⁷⁵ South of Crown Prince Wilhelm, facing the bulk of the AEF was Gallwitz' Group of Armies, and south of Gallwitz was the army group commanded by Duke Albrecht of Wurttemberg.

they would align themselves with the front-line troops. On November 10, Rupprecht send a message to the revolutionary government led by Kurt Eisner and to the Bavarian commanders at the front:

Along with the royal house that had been joined with them for hundreds of years, the Bavarian people have a right to demand that a constitutional national assembly chosen by a free and universal vote decide the new form of government. It is a self-evident demand that the soldiers returning home be given the opportunity to present their voice. Bavarian soldiers can then decide, in unified harmony with the Bavarian citizenry at home, how the future cooperation with the ruling house will be decided.³⁷⁶

Rupprecht had a reputation for political moderation and military insight, but he was grasping at straws. Meanwhile, Crown Prince Wilhelm had offered his services to the new government and asked Ebert for permission to continue “as a soldier to do his duty.” Ebert denied his request and both he and Rupprecht followed the Kaiser into exile in Holland.³⁷⁷ Neither Ebert nor the more radical Eisner could afford to allow the crown princes, symbols of the old order, to lead their troops into the new republic.

The princes had left, but the generals remained. In the first few days after the revolution, Hindenburg, Groener, and the rest of the officer corps had moved decisively to assure the support and cooperation of the new government. And from the highest level, where Field Marshal von Hindenburg, who had issued the warning to the troops that, “The Armistice agreement requires a rapid return march to the homeland—under the prevailing conditions a difficult task requires self-discipline and the most loyal performance of duty from every one of you,” down to Colonel Reinhard’s address to the

³⁷⁶ Rupprecht of Bavaria, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, Vol. III, edited by Eugen von Frauenholz, (Munich: Deutscher National Verlag, 1929), 369-370.

³⁷⁷ NARA; RG 165/27/IV, War Diary of Group of Armies Crown Prince, entry for November 11, 1918, 8. and Wolfgang Zorn, *Bayerns Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert: Von der Monarchie zum Bundesland* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1986), 140-141.

4th Foot Guards requiring them to maintain the strictest order and discipline, the chain of command was reinforcing the idea that the only sure way for a front-line soldier to guarantee this expedient return to home and loved ones was by obedience. However, it was not to be the obedience of the old, pre-war army. The chain of command had made it clear that soldiers would have a say in such things as rations and leave. Commanders were encouraging their officers to handle their men with tact, to make regular demonstrations of concern for their soldiers' welfare, and to remind their men why their compliance with orders was necessary for a successful return to the Fatherland.³⁷⁸ How, then, would the *Frontschweine* respond to their new conditions of service?

The Case of the 115th Division

For a front-line force of perhaps one and a half million men and one hundred and eighty divisions, one would be hard pressed to describe any single unit as “average.” However, one could certainly describe the 115th Infantry Division as unremarkable. Formed in April 1915, it was a South German unit, recruited primarily from Baden and the provinces of the Rhineland. The 115th had arrived on the Western Front in February 1918 after duty in a relatively quiet sector in Rumania. Like so many other divisions, it had suffered heavy losses in the last months of the war, and though it had fought well enough to be mentioned in official German communiqués, Allied intelligence rated it as mediocre (“third-class”). A prisoner from the division told an interrogator from the AEF's First Division: “The desire to be taken prisoner is universal. The Prussians dare not desert because of consequences after the war. The Alsatians, on the other hand, are

³⁷⁸ See, for example, NARA, RG 165/179/54, 255th Infantry Division War Diary Entry for November 11, 1918.

anxious to cross the lines but often hesitate because of reprisals inflicted on their families by the authorities.”³⁷⁹

What is remarkable about the 115th is that a near verbatim transcript has survived from the first meeting of the soldiers’ trustees (*Vertrauensmänner*) and the division’s senior officers on the morning of November 14, 1918 in Lorentzweiler, a small town in central Luxembourg.³⁸⁰ The document offers a unique snapshot of the mood of the troops, their concerns, and their relationship with their superiors. Particularly fascinating is the record of the trustees airing their grievances before the division “First General Staff Officer,” a remarkable individual named Captain Römpler. The exchange between Römpler and the representatives of the division’s soldier records the negotiation of the new terms of authority in a front-line unit three days after the war had ended. Neither the officers nor the men were certain of their position in the exchange and the dialogue necessarily contained a certain amount of probing and testing. It was a reflection of a new and uncertain order.

On November 10, 1918, following the guidance of the OHL, the division commander, Major General Kundt, had issued an order for the establishment of trustees’ councils. He began the order by praising the men for their bravery and endurance and asserting that the division’s success on the battlefield had been based on the mutual trust

³⁷⁹ Description of the 115th Infantry Division from AEF G2, *251 Divisions*, 606-608, and *World War Records: 1st Division AEF, Summaries of Intelligence*, Vol. IV, (December 25, 1917 to November 30, 1918), G2 Memorandum, September 26, 1918; Subject: Enemy Information.

³⁸⁰ NARA, RG 165, Misc Records: “Documents of the 115th German Infantry Division on Conferences Nov. 10 and 14, 1918, of Staff Officers with Confidential Representatives of the Enlisted Men.” I am indebted to Gerhard Weinberg’s guide to the German records in NARA for highlighting this document. A particularly interesting feature of this transcript is the comment in the cover letter sent from the *Reichsarchiv* at Potsdam by Colonel Sorley of the US Army Historical Section to his chief, Colonel Spaulding (June 6, 1923): “These documents are not ‘operative’ in the sense of our authority for publishing; indeed I don’t think it would be a good idea to publish the picture of the town meeting in the German army in our country anyway . . .” One wonders if he believed the document might have a subversive effect on officer-soldier relationships in the US Army.

between officers and men, a bond which needed to be strengthened given the uncertain situation in the homeland. He then gave specific guidance for the number of trustees to be elected in each unit; for example one NCO and three men in each infantry regiment; for the division staff, one NCO and three soldiers from the infantry, one NCO and two men from the artillery, one NCO and one man from the pioneers, and a similar representation from the rest of the division's units.

These trustees will remain regularly housed and fed with the staffs to which they are assigned. They have the right all times to directly approach the respective commander to present the wishes of their comrades. In order to be familiar with these wishes, the trustees must remain in continuous contact with their comrades. The trustees have, as their highest duty, to perceive and to contribute to the prevention of the advent of every grievance within the established confines of the division, and, if they arise, to remedy them.

Trust for trust! [*Vertrauen gegen vertrauen!*]

Three days later, at 10:00 in the morning, General Kundt opened the first public meeting of the newly elected trustees. Present also were the various unit adjutants and Captain Römpler. The division commander promised the gathering a brief word before he turned the meeting over to the captain. He reviewed his purpose for bringing the representatives together and cited Hindenburg's proclamation in which the field marshal appealed to the Field Army not to "let him down"[*im Stich lassen*] Kundt also referred to a directive by the Fifth Army commander that emphasized the difficult supply situation and the need to avoid an "every man for himself" situation. He closed by admonishing the men to warn their comrades that deserting the unit at that point would have dire consequences. Deserters would soon find themselves without food and soldiers lacking proper discharge papers would not have access to government relief. With a final appeal

to “trust and order,” the commander turned the meeting over to his “Ia,” Captain Römpler.

Initially, Römpler continued in the same vein as Kundt, by citing official proclamations.

He read Ebert’s telegram thanking the OHL for their support and the text of another message signed by every member of the cabinet:

Telegram from the new government to the OHL: To General Field Marshal v. Hindenburg: We request for the entire Field Army to be ordered, that military discipline, peace and strict order in the army be maintained under all circumstances, that therefore the orders of military superiors be obeyed completely until a successful discharge, and that a discharge of army members from the army only proceed on the orders of military superiors. The superiors will retain their weapons and insignias of rank. Where soldiers’ councils or trustees’ councils have been formed, they will wholeheartedly support their [chain of command’s] efforts to maintain discipline and order.

Signed: Ebert, Haase, Scheidemann, Dittmann, Landsberg, Barth.

The captain followed this with supporting communications from Army Group Gallwitz and the Fifth Army Headquarters. By now, it was clear that Römpler was reinforcing the theme introduced by the division commander: the army’s chain of command supported the new government and the new government supported the chain of command. He quoted a Fifth Army order which made this point as well as an emphatic warning against desertion:

- 1.) All orders of the OHL and all military command authorities are given in the name of the present government. This government has repeatedly emphasized that these orders will be obeyed unconditionally.
- 2.) It is the desire of the government that only those discharged with appropriate documents can make requests for subsistence support.
- 3.) A Citizen’s Militia (*Bürgerwehr*) is being formed at the Rhine crossing sites that will let no one without sufficient documentation pass. People stopped without the necessary papers will be to the last in the demobilization to receive discharge.

At this point, Römpler finished his recitation of official message traffic and focused his comments on conditions inside the 115th Division. All these orders, he told the trustees, were already in effect with the division. Their common duty was to ensure that the 115th “remains a superb, reliable instrument for order in the new life of the state.” Against possible rumors of counter-revolution, he reassured the gathering that there was no plan for the division to take up arms against its countrymen (“. . . assuming we are not forced that way by others.”)

He informed the men that he had a number of important topics to cover before reaching the point in the meeting where he would entertain their questions and issues. By opening with subjects of immediate concern to the troops, it appears Römpler sought to retain the initiative and prevent a free-for-all “gripe session.” But, first, he revisited the issue of unauthorized departure from the division and asked the trustees to help ease the natural anxiety that every man had for his loved ones and the desire for the earliest possible homecoming. The soldier, he said, must remain “master of the human in every one of us.” The fastest way home was to remain with the unit.

Römpler then turned to a new issue, the fate of the men from Alsace-Lorraine and the west bank of the Rhine. By this time soldiers were aware that Alsace-Lorraine would be returned to France and that the western Rhineland would come under Allied occupation. With this in mind, the captain called on the trustees to talk with these men from the soon-to-be occupied areas, calm their fears, and pass on to them that their separation would be accomplished as the division approached the Rhine and the difficult rail situation began to sort itself out. Hearing this, a soldier spoke up: “What will be the condition of the Alsatians and those returning to the left bank of the Rhine? Will they be

treated as prisoners?” The captain answered no; there was no reason to believe that. The Armistice required the Germany army to leave those areas. “But legally discharged soldiers no longer belong to the army.” (Here, again, Römpler missed no opportunity to reinforce the need for soldiers to remain with the division until properly discharged.)

When there were no more questions on this point, Römpler changed to two topics that had preoccupied soldiers as long as there have been armies: leave and mail. On leave, he assured the men he understood their concerns; however, the disorder in the railway system made normal leave impossible. What about emergency leave, one soldier asked? The captain promised that each case would be examined on its merits, but in general, any form of leave would be difficult. Römpler offered commiseration for the lack of mail [*Feldpost*] and reported that almost nothing was going to or coming from the homeland. He then took a swipe at those who had created disorder inside Germany. “The reason for that [the interruption of mail] is that, at the moment of the upheaval in the homeland, the baby was thrown out with the bath water and that the reins dropped on the ground have still not been restored to the hands of the conductors.”

When no one followed this up with questions, Römpler abruptly changed the tone of the discussion. He was going to seek the advice of the trustees in setting an evening curfew [*Zapfenstreich*] for the division. This was a clever maneuver. Whether the curfew was set for eleven o’clock, eleven-thirty, or even twelve, was not crucial. However, by soliciting input from the representatives, the captain offered the men the idea that they had a voice (or at least the illusion of a voice) in the management of the division’s affairs. A soldier spoke up, suggesting eleven, but offered that the curfew should apply “to all classes.” Römpler asked if “all classes” meant officers, NCOs and

men. “General answer: Yes indeed.” At this point, Römpler may have been taken aback but he promised to bring the matter up with the division commander. Another trustee urged that men on official duty be exempted from the curfew. The captain responded that that would be understood: “Perhaps we can define the matter so: after eleven in the evening no one may remain outside quarters, if they are in pubs or clubs or whatever one will call them, except where official missions will require.” The transcript records general agreement.

At this, Römpler turned to a critical subject: what were trustees expected to accomplish? He told the group that the trustees would remain with the staffs to which they had been assigned. Even though this might put some distance between the trustees and the troops they represented, they must miss no opportunity to communicate with their comrades in their old units. A trustee protested that many trustees wished to remain with their units. Römpler replied that he would take this up with the division commander.

Before opening the meeting to issues raised by the trustees, the captain made a final point—one that was, to him, perhaps the most important. It had to do with the role of officers in the post-revolutionary army and the crucial struggle over symbols. He reminded them of the cabinet’s message announcing that officers would retain their weapons and badges of rank. This, he asserted, was connected with maintaining the appropriate relations between officers and men even though Germany’s form of government had changed dramatically. He made a cunning argument by referring to Germany’s recent enemies. He pointed out that French and American soldiers, though members of “republican” armies, behaved “properly” in the presence of their officers and observed military customs and courtesies very similar to those of the old imperial army.

He finished this point with an appeal to solidarity. Work with your comrades, he said, “so that slackening does not intervene and, again, recognize that the one who serves as leader is, first of all, a soldier!” The trustees needed to take this point not just to their own comrades but also the “host” of smaller units that were being attached to the 115th for the purposes of march control. These included several recruit battalions, a pioneer battalion, and an airship unit. The captain asked the men to accept the new arrivals and communicate the common desire to maintain the reputation of the division as well as the importance of supporting the new government with proper behavior. With that thought, he ended his prepared remarks with a flourish:

The orders for the onward march of the division are issued. It begins today and will, as I hope, incur no further delay. Rest days are necessary for resupply and for organizing units and resting our exhausted horses. But I hope that in the briefest possible time to see the waves of the river that we have defended with life and soul, belongings and the blood of our comrades for 4 1/2 years!³⁸²

At that point, Römpler announced he was prepared to entertain the questions and concerns of the trustees. He encouraged them to be frank. He also told them that at noon field kitchens would be operating outside the meeting area. “It gives me pleasure to be able to eat a bowl of soup together with you.”

This scenario reflected a superb piece of stage management by Römpler and the division staff. The presence of the field kitchen ensured that the exchange of views between the captain and the trustees would be followed by a pleasant experience emphasizing the renewed solidarity of the 115th, officers and men breaking of bread together. By eating with the men, the officers present would undermine rumors that they ate far better than the soldiers did. More important, the presence of the *Gulaschkanone*

³⁸² Presumably, he meant the Rhine.

would ensure that the trustees would not turn the meeting into an endless airing of grievances. The meeting would certainly end before twelve o'clock. For men who had endured much privation, the prospect of a hot noonday meal was likely to override most other concerns.

However, the first grievance raised by a trustee threatened to undo all of Römpler's plans for an amicable dialogue between subordinates and superiors. In response to the captain's call for a candid presentation of issues, an artilleryman stepped forward. "The comrades of the 1st Battalion/ 229th Field Artillery Regiment have tasked me to express the desire that Lieutenant Cypionka be relieved from the battery [command]."

This was a moment of truth. The entire tone of the meeting and the subsequent relations between the trustees and the officers might hinge on Römpler's response. If he promised the artilleryman that the chain of command would consider Lieutenant Cypionka's fitness for command, he risked undermining the authority of all officers. The captain would be suggesting that the trustees could have a say in who qualified to lead the units within the division. Similarly, had Römpler asked the trustees for more information about Cypionka's failings, he might have risked an embarrassing public dialogue on what was acceptable behavior by junior officers. At the other extreme, had he dismissed the trustee's concern as frivolous, or worse, insubordinate, Römpler risked insulting the complainant and, worse, exposing the whole business of the trustees' councils as a sham.

One imagines that the room grew very still as the trustees strained to hear the captain's answer. When he spoke, Römpler said precisely the right words: "I request that you see me afterwards. I will remain here at your disposal." It was an answer

respectful of the trustee's concerns, but it conceded nothing and avoided further consideration of a topic that might have taken the meeting in an ugly direction.

The discussion turned to rations as the adjutant of the 229th Brigade asked about rumors that officer rations were being cut. Here was a topic that Römpler must have anticipated. Officer rations, he told the group, were the same as that of the men. If the officer's mess, with its tablecloths and napkins, looked different than the conditions experienced by the troops, it was a function of the small group involved, not preferential treatment. This answer did not satisfy another trustee. "It has been observed that the portions of officers are considerably bigger and that the troops receive less meat. If one speaks with the cook about it, it turns out, that there are also bones with it." Römpler promised that both adjutants and supply officers would look into this question in order to ensure such [appearances] did not continue.

A soldier named Wicklein, a trustee from the 136th Infantry Regiment, complained that the commander of the Second Battalion required the men to execute an excessive number of "passes-in-review" during the unit's marches. Again, Römpler's response was deft. It was good practice to have the unit execute such a review at the beginning of a march and at the end, when the unit arrived at its quarters. However, there could be "different opinions" about whether it could be overdone. He promised to have the adjutant bring the issue up with the commander.

The line of questioning returned to rations. One soldier complained that the battalion canteens were in bad shape and that officers bought out the luxury items. Another soldier complained that some units had better conditions in their canteens than others. Finally, a trustee suggested that the *Vertrauensmänner* should have the right to

check supply conditions. Römpler responded that the units had mess councils [*Menage-Kommissionen*] to perform such functions.³⁸³ Several voices objected that some units did not have such councils. The captain promised that they would be reinstated immediately.

The next several questions concerned the division sutler and access to cigarettes, condensed milk and other supplements to rations. Römpler used this topic as an opportunity to return to his own agenda, the need for discipline and order. He told the men that the division sutler had retreated in the direction of Mainz. As for the sutler's wares:

. . . [W]ho can say whether or not a horde of misguided people have already seized it as booty. Along these lines, I will mention an example of the experience of the last several days: We should have met a supply train en route, in order to spare the troops the long way to Luxembourg. The train was stopped in Luxembourg and robbed, completely plundered. You can imagine what kind of difficulties that brings with it for a relatively small formation, such as a division. We must keep a clean table in our house.

To this a trustee responded: "One should promulgate a proclamation for peace and order in the division." One can imagine the captain's pleasure at this comment. "That is why the trustees are there, to deal with such subjects with the troops. Things will have gone to the devil, if we can't finally bring it about, that we prevent such things with our men, the one who have endured such battles." Another trustee suggested that a transcript of the meeting be made available to the representatives so that it could be used to inform the men. Römpler readily agreed.

A trustee asked if it would perhaps be possible the form of greeting between officer and soldier, perhaps replacing the salute with merely an erect bearing. The discussion had returned to the struggle over symbols. In some units in the *Etappe* and the

³⁸³ Unit level councils set up late in the war to advise the chain of command on rations issues.

homeland, the soldiers no longer saluted, though the men of the 115th were probably not aware of this. This may have been an awkward moment for Römpler. However, the transcript records that when Römpler said that, for the time being, there would be no change, his audience responded with “general joviality.” Apparently, this was not a compelling issue to most of the front-line trustees.

The soldiers’ questions ranged over a variety of issues. One asked if the division could carry the troops’ baggage. Römpler said no, for transport was too limited. Could the men dispense with their gas masks, helmets, and other gear? No, they would have to be carried, at least until crossing the German border. At that point, the division staff would look into depositing such equipment in army depots. What about clothing at the point of discharge? Römpler assured the men that no one would go home naked. This and other comments allowed a lighter tone.

A Trustee: It is desired that the company commander wish the company “Good morning” at the beginning of the march. Dr. Rapmund of Medical Company 115 has not introduced himself to the company (Laughter), and never says a word to the company while Dr. Keller and Senior Lieutenant Veith never neglected it.

Captain Römpler: This suggestion will also be complied with.

In an earnest tone, a veteran complained, “One should have directly warned the young comrades about order and prudence, because they are flighty. If an older comrade influences them a lot of good can be done. Now is not the time to pour oil on the fire.” Another veteran suggested that, “. . . if the troops had to carry three iron rations during the next three days, the younger troops would have eaten all of theirs within two days and the ‘older, sensible folk’ would be forced to look after them.” This complaint and several similar ones allowed Römpler again to exhort the trustees to be a stabilizing influence,

especially among the younger men and new recruits. When a trustee suggested that an occasional missed salute not be punished too severely, the captain answered carefully: “It is essential the military appearance be maintained as much as possible and that the troops do not descend into a gang of scoundrels [*Rasselbande*]. There is no one too careful that he does not miss a greeting on occasion. However one will not make it an obvious expression that an officer is not greeted exactly because he is an officer.” In other words, the rigid discipline of the pre-war army would no longer obtain; however, the chain of command would tolerate no open expressions of contempt for superiors. By this point, the meeting was winding down. Perhaps the field kitchens had added the aroma of freshly cooked rations to the proceedings. The transcript records that the meeting ended at 11:45 when there were no further questions.

By any standard, Captain Römpler’s performance must be considered a *tour de force*. He had answered every question carefully and respectfully without compromising the authority of the chain of command. Instead, he had used the meeting to recruit the trustees as allies in maintaining “peace and order” in the division. He had offered them the opportunity for input to relatively tangential issues without conceding any of the decision-making power held by the officer corps. In the uncertain environment created by armistice and revolution, the First General Staff Officer of the 115th Division had shown himself to be a nimble tightrope walker.

How does one explain Römpler’s clever handling of the trustees? Several possible answers suggest themselves: 1) Römpler was a uniquely gifted officer with special insights into the motivation and concerns of the soldiers of his unit. 2) The men of the 115th were unique in the willingness of its men to be co-opted into support of the

chain of command. 3) The tone of the meeting between the captain and the trustees reflected an on-going evolution of a much more flexible and negotiable relationship between officers and men, an evolution which had been under way across the German army during the last year or two of the war. With what is known about the conduct of front-line soldiers, both before and after the Armistice, one is drawn to a combination of 1) and 3) above. Römpler was, indeed, a clever officer and General Kundt was fortunate to have him as the division's principal staff officer. One imagines that staff colleges around the world could use captain's handling of the meeting as a leadership case study in the management of wavering and discontented troops. However, Römpler's readiness to acknowledge the concerns of the men and their willingness to accept his responses suggests that the two sides came to the meeting ready to listen to each other. One is reminded of Leonard Smith's thesis that obedience among veteran troops is a behavior that must be constantly negotiated, especially in a long war. At the meeting at Lorentzweiler on November 14, the officers and men came together in a mood to negotiate. In this respect, they seem to exemplify changes that had already been under way in the army for a considerable period of time. And, as the following chapters will show, if the 115th Infantry Division marched home in good order under the control of its officers, it was far from unique.

The *Frontschwein's* Dilemma: Part III.

The officers had apparently won the first round. Between November 9 and the Armistice, the bulk of the front-line divisions stayed in the trenches. There were instances of indiscipline and refusal at places along the front, but these were the

exceptions.³⁸⁴ Then, in the aftermath of the Armistice, the weary *Frontruppen* obeyed their officers, formed up behind the lines, and prepared to move east toward the homeland. A few miles behind them, officers in the *Etappe* were in flight or serving with their rank and cockades removed from their uniforms under the authority of local soldiers' councils. The revolution had approached the front but had not reached it, at least not yet.

The six factors that set the *Fronschweine* apart during the war were still operative; however, there had transpired dramatic changes in their relative importance. Consider the following:

Exhaustion: The men who held the line until the last shot were tired to the point of insensibility. The timetable prescribed by the Armistice ensured they would have little time to catch their breath before a physically demanding series of marches. If revolution required energy, there was little to spare at the front.

Isolation: The interruption of rail traffic and mail from Germany meant that, except for rumors, the front-line units had no access to information except via the chain of command. Isolation also meant that the front-line soldier had no access to the trains or motor transport that was carrying men from the rear areas toward the frontier. Instead, the soldiers found themselves in a sort of vacuum in which rumors, reports, and uncertain emotions mingled with the prospect of a long, difficult march. "When on the evening of November 11, when the German march columns crossed the Chier Valley in the direction

³⁸⁴ In some cases, front-line units were called out to suppress disorder in the rear. For example, on November 8, the 31st Bavarian Division was tasked to send two hundred men and twelve machine guns to Arlon to suppress a mutiny among a trainload of replacements from the 75th Reserve Division. The division's war diary records the mission accomplished without bloodshed. The next day, it disarmed elements of the 20th Pioneer Battalion, one of the Bavarian regimental commanders and his adjutant personally disarming the ringleaders. *Second Infantry Division*, Vol. IX, Intelligence Summaries, Doc. 37, War Diary of the 31st Bavarian Division, entry of November 8, 1918.

of the Rhine, many of the brave fighters from those bloody years had tears in their eyes . . .,” a veteran recalled. “However, soon the vitality of youth won out over all. For us, the revolution was an imaginary cloud-image [*Nebelgebild*].”³⁸⁵

Alienation: Those who had led the revolution inside Germany were men who had avoided service at the front: the sailors and the Home Army. The front-line troops had little contact with such men and, often, little affection for them. By the same token, rumors of peace negotiations had preceded reports of revolution so that few soldiers could identify the revolution as a proximate cause for the ending of their ordeal in the trenches. Where the front-line troops were initially confronted with the revolution, the appearance was often one that induced resentment. One corps headquarters reported:

Mechanics of an army transport park (to cite one example) drive with red flags squarely through all of the marching columns, hindering the smooth progress of the movement, calling themselves the Soldiers’ Council of the Fifth Army. The [front-line] soldiers look upon this as the grossest misconduct on the part of men who have never seen the enemy and hardly deserve the honorable name of soldier.³⁸⁶

Selection and Cohesion: The men who had doggedly remained with their units during the last weeks of the war, even as the evidence of Germany’s defeat became overwhelming, were the kind of men likely to remain when the firing had stopped. Indeed, to many soldiers struggling with the uncertainty of those days in mid-November, remaining with one’s comrades was to hang on to the few things that seemed reliable and real. And, just as the chain of command relied on the *Stammanschaften* to hold the unit together in combat, they would expect the core of veterans to help lead the unit home. Where units elected *Vertrauensmänner*, one expects that these representatives were

³⁸⁵ Schützing, 78-79.

³⁸⁶ Ibid, Selected Documents from the 88th Division, Doc. 22, Corps Kleist retrospective report dated December 5, 1918.

mature and respected veterans and, as the case of the 115th Infantry Division indicated, the officers relied on these older men to reassure the younger troops and to restrain those who might threaten the unit's discipline and order. At the front, the soldiers' representatives were an adjunct, not an alternative to the chain of command.

Management: This one factor clearly stands out above the other five. Almost immediately after the initial success of the revolution, the German officer corps began what soldiers today would describe as an "information operations campaign" designed to bind the soldiers at the front to their units and their chain of command. The campaign, though hastily improvised, exploited the isolation of the *Frontruppen* from other news (and the anxiety that caused), their alienation from the other sections of the army, and the cohesion built from shared suffering and the pride in their accomplishments. It had exploited the trustees' council as agencies for promoting peace and order. Above all, it had appealed to self-interest. Lacking other sources of information, the front-line troops had to believe their chain of command when it told them that the quickest and safest way home was to obey orders, that the only reliable way to ensure one would be fed was to remain with colors and comrades.

For hundreds of thousands of front-line soldiers, the circumstances that prevailed in the aftermath of the Armistice made their first important decision a simple and straightforward one: they would march home with their units under the control of their officers

Nevertheless, though the front-line officers may have been gratified at the initial conduct of the rank and file as they emerged from the trenches, maintaining control of the Field Army was only the first of several challenges facing those officers. While the first

question, how would the troops respond to events, had been answered, the questions that still remained were, perhaps, even more daunting. Could the planning staffs solve the puzzle of moving the great masses of troops and vehicles down a limited number of routes? Would their tired soldiers be able to make the exertions required by the demanding march schedule? Would the Allies or the French and Belgian populations in the occupied areas intervene to slow or block the march? What interference could be expected from the revolutionaries holding the Rhine bridges?

Troops were already on the move the day after the Armistice. The staff of Army Group Crown Prince, soon to be known as Army Group B, began a terse daily report: “The Field Army begins its march . . . Conduct and morale of front troops good. Disorder and confusion and reign within the units of the *Etappe*.” After briefly noting the slow progress in building trustees councils and the increase in desertions, the diary recorded gravely: “Once again, the OHL emphasizes that the future of the Fatherland depends on the orderly return of the army.”³⁸⁷ That aim remained in doubt.

³⁸⁷ NARA: RG 165/27/IV, Group of Armies Crown Prince, War Diary and Annexes, entry of November 12, 1918, 8.

Chapter Five

THE LAST MARCH

The German *Westheer*'s March to the Rhine, November-December 1918

Along the road, step upon step, in their faded, dirty uniforms tramp the gray columns. . . . Old men with beards and slim lads scarce twenty years of age, comrades without difference. Beside them their lieutenants, little more than children, yet the leaders of many a night raid. And behind them the slain. . .

from The Road Back by Erich Maria Remarque

The Field Army and the Fatherland

The conclusion of the First World War left the German forces on the Western Front with one last, difficult operation to conduct—their march home. The timetable for their journey was driven by harsh terms imposed by the Allies as part of the Armistice agreement. With more than three million men in its front-line and support units, the *Westheer* was required to vacate northern France and Belgium and march beyond the Rhine in less than a month. In a further eleven days, German troops would have to vacate a thirty to forty kilometer neutral zone on the east bank of the Rhine.³⁸⁸ It was a timetable that would have tested a fresh, confident, well-supplied army. The German army in the West in November 1918 was none of these things.

Many Germans believed their nation's future might depend on whether the Field Army in the west could return home intact. The day after the armistice, an officer in the War Ministry in Berlin wrote, "Anger, shame, loathing, and sorrow—that is how it all

³⁸⁸ *Amtliche Urkunden zur Vorgeschichte des Waffenstillstandes 1918*, (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1927), Doc. 105: State Secretary Hintze telegram to the Foreign Office, November 9, 1918, 262-263.

appears . . . What more can happen? Who can know? Perhaps—or probably—when this letter is in your hand Bolshevism will already be on top. If only the Field Army remains peaceful.”³⁸⁹ This was the view within the old officer corps and its conservative allies who hoped enough of the Field Army could be preserved intact to reestablish order in the homeland and suppress what appeared to them as the growing threat of Bolshevism. For the new coalition government of Friedrich Ebert, the Majority Socialist (SPD) leader who headed the ruling Council of People’s Delegates, the safe homecoming of the troops represented a huge, inherited responsibility. If the troops returned in disorder, or if thousands were captured by the Allies, his government would be held responsible. On the Left, the Independent Socialists (USPD) and the Spartacist League feared the returning front-line formations would be a potential White Guard to be used by a reactionary officer corps and their Majority Socialist accomplices to crush the revolution. Finally, the German populace feared that if the brutalized men from the front were not kept in check that they might return as a mob of armed marauders, looting and destroying as they moved.

As it turned out, the majority of front-line soldiers crossed the Rhine under the control of their officers. The operation succeeded and, in this last transitory triumph, the old army played an important role in shaping Germany’s political future. In the short term, the successful march rebuilt the shaken confidence of the officer corps. For those senior officers who entertained ideas of reversing the tide of revolution, the performance of the front-line troops in the last two weeks of November and the first days of December gave renewed hope that the old army could be used to strike down the revolution’s

³⁸⁹ *Adolf Wild von Hohenborn: Briefe und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen des preussischen Generals als Kriegsminister un Truppenfuehrer im Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Helmut Reichold, (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1986), 250.

radical elements. For the left wing of the USPD, the Spartacists and the revolutionary workers' and soldiers' councils of Germany, the field army's arrival on the west bank of the Rhine, often marching under the flags of the old empire, meant the revolution faced an impending crisis. *Die Rote Fahne*, the newspaper of the Spartacus League, observed: "Militarism in the Field Army was weakened at the outbreak of the revolution, but still not completely overthrown; it has not been completely destroyed by the revolution and, since then, it appears, it lives again; that is where the counter revolution can be expected."³⁹⁰ On the other hand, to those Germans shaken by the confusion and uncertainty that the revolution seemed to bring, the appearance of well-ordered front-line units was a reassuring even joyous occasion.

The Uncertain Road Home

For German forces in the west, the clock started at 12 o'clock noon, November 12. From that point, the Allies gave the German army two weeks--fourteen days—to be out of France, Belgium, Luxemburg, and Alsace-Lorraine. The Allies allowed a further seventeen days for the army to cross the Rhine and move beyond the occupation zones the Allied forces would occupy on the west bank at Mainz, Coblenz and Cologne.³⁹¹ It was a gargantuan task under the best of circumstances. With over three million men, including many sick and wounded, hundreds of thousand of horses, and thousands of vehicles, the divisions on the Western Front would have to march up to two hundred miles on a limited number of roadways, and cross a major river at a handful of crossing points, before finally dispersing to railheads and demobilization points. As well, the

³⁹⁰ *Die Rote Fahne*, "Rüstung der Revolution," December 2, 1918.

³⁹¹ Foch originally demanded that the Germans be out of the Rhineland in eleven days. Armistice conditions from Deutschen Waffenstillstandskommission, *Der Waffenstillstand, 1918-1919, I. Der Waffenstillstandsvertrag von Compiègne und seine Verlängerungen nebst den finanzielle Bestimmungen*, (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft fuer Politik und Geschichte, 1928), 23-35.

initial stage of the movement took the army through a hostile populace embittered by four years of occupation. Throughout the march, Allied advance guards would follow only a few miles behind, ready to take stragglers as prisoners of war.

The daunting nature of the task was made more extreme by the condition of the units at the front. The last months of the war had seen the infantry and artillery fighting for weeks without relief. On November 11, the *Frontheer* was physically and emotionally spent. Beyond that, four years of trench warfare meant that no units were conditioned to long marches. And, while moving healthy men would have been difficult enough, heavy fighting and the worldwide influenza epidemic had overfilled the army's aid stations and field hospitals, adding a major transportation requirement to the operation.³⁹²

The supply situation was equally grave. The final days of the war found the two northernmost and largest army groups on the Western Front, Army Group Rupprecht and Army Group Crown Prince, in the process of withdrawing to defensive positions on the Antwerp-Meuse Line. As they withdrew into eastern Belgium, these two formations were forced to abandon the fixed shelters, supply points, and depots that had provisioned them for years. Thus, even before November 11, the bulk of the army had to rely on makeshift logistical arrangements. Virtually none of the front-line divisions had enough horses to move their baggage and equipment, and the horses available were often broken-down, underfed, and unable to pull a normal load. The truck fleet was in similar condition and critically short of fuel. To make matters worse, the backbone of the

³⁹² Army's condition described in a publication produced by the general staff, *Die Rückführung des Westheeres*, (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1919), 2-3.

army's support structure, the railroad system, was overtaxed and on the verge of collapse.³⁹³

The withdrawal was further complicated by the conditions the Allies had imposed on the German forces to ensure that Germany was unable to resume hostilities at the end of the Armistice's term of thirty days. In addition to turning over 5,000 artillery pieces, 30,000 machine guns, 3,000 mortars, and 2,000 aircraft, the Germans were also required to surrender 5,000 locomotives, 10,000 wagons, and 10,000 trucks to Allied forces.³⁹⁴ The transfer of all this equipment posed an enormously complex problem. In particular, such a mass of weapons and vehicles would require thousands of drivers and crew to move them and a large security force to prevent such equipment from falling into the wrong hands. Any troops detailed to such missions would face danger from a hostile civilian populace and the possibility of being taken prisoner by the advancing Allies.³⁹⁵

Even without surrendering thousands of vehicles to the Allies, supporting the withdrawal of the Field Army represented an incredibly difficult task for the transportation, communication, and supply systems in the *Etappe*. Of course, that difficulty was magnified enormously by the fact that much of this support structure had collapsed with the news of the revolution. In the first three or four days after the abdication of the Kaiser, much of the service and support structure simply disappeared. The thousands of deserters in the army's rear area joined with lawless support troops to

³⁹³ Ibid, 3-8.

³⁹⁴ *Vorgeschichte des Waffenstillstandes*, Doc. 105, 262-263.

³⁹⁵ The following day, the OHL sent a protest note to the German government stating, among other things that it had only 18,000 trucks (only half of which were running), and such a shortage of railway assets that any surrender of equipment made to the extent demanded by the Allies would mean a "complete collapse of the army's supply system." *Vorgeschichte des Waffenstillstandes*, Doc. 107: Hindenburg to the Prussian War Ministry and Armistice Commission, 265.

plunder supply dumps, terrorize their officers, sell their weapons to the local populace, and commandeer eastbound trains to Germany.³⁹⁶

The unrest also spread to units closer to the front. A sergeant on the staff of the Fourth Army, Ludwig Lewinsohn, observed the displacement of the headquarters by train from Aloist to Mecheln. As his train stopped alongside a column of supply wagons, soldiers from the headquarters staff began to plunder food and liquor from the wagons. None of the officers present had the courage to protest or resist. At first only a few soldiers took part, but soon almost all joined in. What followed was an “orgy” as drunken soldiers pronounced death sentences on all officers.³⁹⁷ Widespread disorder also affected the army’s source of supplies in the Reich. In some cases, workers and soldiers’ councils within Germany confiscated supplies headed for the front and encouraged workers in depots and magazines to discontinue their work. Local authorities seemed powerless to intervene.³⁹⁸

Thus, the obstacles to a successful return march were enormous. But the consequences of failure were equally great. If the army could not meet the Allied timetable, it risked having thousands of soldiers taken prisoner by Allied forces.³⁹⁹ If supply arrangements collapsed, then the march was likely to turn into an affair of “every

³⁹⁶ Ibid, 14-15. See, for example, the interview of civilians found in *First Infantry Division, AEF, G2 Intelligence Reports*, Vol. IV, “Report on the Retirement of the German troops through Gravenmacher, [Luxembourg] November 12-22, and BA-R; R43/2500/5, “Transcript of telephone call between Ebert and the OHL, November 13, 1918. The conversation included descriptions of disorder behind Army Group Gallwitz, as drunken teamsters took empty wagons “at a reckless pace” in the direction of Germany.

³⁹⁷ Ludwig Lewinsohn, *Die Revolution an der Westfront*, (Berlin, Mundusverlagsanstalt, 1919). 5. Lewinsohn’s booklet must be considered one of the best eye-witness accounts of the march back to Germany. One must make allowances for his Majority Socialist outlook which tends to amplify the role played by Soldiers’ Councils of the Field Army.

³⁹⁸ “Rueckfuehrung,” 8.

³⁹⁹ This was the case with the Austro-Hungarian Army on the Italian Front in 1918. The Austrian staff muddled the cease-fire arrangements and hundreds of thousands of their troops were captured by the advancing Allies. Some thirty thousand of these last-minute captives would die in Italian captivity after the war.

man for himself.” Instead of a disciplined army, a desperate, hungry rabble would arrive on the frontiers of the homeland.

The Question of Authority

In the initial confusion that followed the outbreak of the revolution, the question of who would control the march seemed to have been settled in favor of the old chain of command. Hindenburg had stayed at his post and, under the uncomfortable scrutiny of the headquarters soldiers’ council, the OHL continued to issue orders to the army in the field. In the assembly areas behind the front, the officers seemed to have the combat units in hand. Perhaps even more important, the soldiers’ and trustees’ councils among the front-line units appeared to be willing to work with the traditional chain of command to ensure the progress of the retreat from France and Belgium. While the revolutionaries in the homeland claimed sovereignty over the organs of the Second Reich, the practical men of the *Frontheer*’s soldiers’ councils realized that if the army was to overcome the obstacles of the return march they would need to share authority with the old chain of command. Therefore, the role of the councils was limited by a power-sharing relationship that left the planning and execution of the march to the staffs of the divisions, corps and armies. In the first place, councils recognized they lacked the clear lines of communication and authority inherent in the traditional chain of command. The councils had no signal equipment of their own and there was no binding, legal reason why the soldiers’ councils in a division, for example, had to abide by the guidance issued by the corps council above it in the chain of command.

A more important basis for power sharing was the army’s dependence on the technical skills of the officer corps. While the Ebert government had granted the officer corps a degree of political legitimacy, the leadership and staff planning skills of the

officers gave them professional legitimacy among the *Frontruppen* so eager to be led home. This point was illustrated when the newly constituted executive committee from the Soldiers' Council of the OHL arrived at the operations section of the headquarters on the evening of November 10. Met by a Major Faupel of the General Staff, the seven-member delegation demanded a supervisory role in the direction of the army's return to Germany. Faupel ushered the members of the committee into a room outfitted with vast maps marked with unit boundaries and locations, complex transportation timetables, and stacks of marching orders. Faupel proceeded to offer an elaborate briefing emphasizing the vast complexity involved in bringing the army home and the danger that threatened if even minor parts of the plan miscarried. The committee members were suitably impressed and withdrew their demands, while expressing a desire to cooperate with the efforts of the OHL staff.⁴⁰⁰ Later, two members of the OHL Soldiers' Council told a British general on the Armistice Commission "they were permitting the German High Command to get the Army back to Germany because they could best do it."⁴⁰¹

Nevertheless, given the difficult conditions of the return march, the soldiers' councils in the front-line units had an important role to play. In particular, the initial disorder that followed the news of abdication and armistice required urgent action. Georg Kaisen, for example, spent his first days as chairman of his regimental council squashing rumors, encouraging men not to take off on their own, and warning his

⁴⁰⁰ Erich Volkmann, *Revolution über Deutschland*, (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1930), 69-71. Much of Faupel's exhibition may have been something of a sham. According to Schulenberg, the OHL delegated the most difficult aspects of the operation to its subordinate headquarters. It issued the timeline required by the Allies and established the boundaries that the four army groups would observe as they withdrew. Preoccupied, perhaps, by political issues, the Supreme Headquarters left the details of the march planning to the four army groups and their subordinate staffs. BA_MA; N58/1, Nachlass Schulenberg, "Erlebnisse," 244-245.

⁴⁰¹ Msg of MG Rodes to GEN Pershing, dated November 17, *AEF*, X, 106-7.

comrades of the danger of capture by the Allies.⁴⁰² In a similar vein, the Soldiers' Council of the Fourth Army issued a leaflet that proclaimed:

Comrades! The return march home has begun. Do you understand what that means? Do you know that the Fourth Army's 500,000 men, 100,000 horses, and uncounted vehicles must move at prescribed times and places so that they can be quartered and fed? And did you know that these millions of men, horses, and wagons stand on a sector of fifteen kilometers width with only three available roads and bridges? Seek to understand what all this means.

The leaflet went on to tell the men that the Soldiers' Council was working along with experienced officers to control the march and that discipline was the key to making the operation successful. The clear purpose of the leaflet was to shock the soldiers of the Fourth Army into understanding how disorder jeopardized their chances of getting home safely.⁴⁰³ The OHL council put out a similar flyers warning of the consequences if discipline broke down. One issued on November 17 began, "Through the spread of disorder all our achievements come to nothing. Maintain discipline and order throughout the entire return march." It went on to urge soldiers to protect the trains, supply columns, and depots from thefts that could threaten the provisioning of the army.⁴⁰⁴

The emphasis on good order and discipline did not mean relationships between officers and men were completely unchanged. As the army moved east, some unit councils demanded oversight regarding rations, leave, and punishments at the unit level.⁴⁰⁵ Within some units, soldiers were not required to render salutes to officers while off duty, following the spirit of the guidance that relations between officers and men

⁴⁰² Kaisen, 74.

⁴⁰³ Lewinsohn, 10.

⁴⁰⁴ Groener, 470.

⁴⁰⁵ Army Group D suggested bringing the representatives of the soldiers' councils into the military justice proceedings at the division level and below. The OHL responded that such adjustments to the established practice of military law were unnecessary. BA-R: R43/2500/5, Transcript of Representative Giebel's message to the cabinet (*Reichsleitung*), dated November 23, 1918.

were to be based on a “spirit of camaraderie” and mutual trust.⁴⁰⁶ From Groener on down the chain of command, officers often had little choice but to grudgingly accept these new revolutionary protocols.⁴⁰⁷

Despite such concessions, one also senses a spirit of deference in the front-line councils that contrasted with the revolutionary spirit prevailing elsewhere in the German army. When Ludwig Lewinsohn, the Chairman of the Soldiers’ Council of the Fourth Army was summoned to the headquarters to negotiate the role of his new council, he found the army commander, General Sixt von Arnim, an intimidating figure. Lewinsohn remembered the old general exuded a steely strength and nobility and a firmness of character that “extorted” a response of enormous respect from all present, even though, Lewinsohn adds, he represented a “collapsed system.”⁴⁰⁸ In another incident, members of the OHL council came to Groener unexpectedly to express their uncertainty over reports that Ebert had been dismissed. Groener replied he was not aware of such a change in the government, but that he could readily determine the truth of the matter. With that, Groener telephoned Ebert and explained the concerns of the council members in his office. Groener then invited the men to verify the presence of Ebert at the other end of the line. The soldiers declined and excused themselves, apologizing as they went for wasting the First Quartermaster General’s time.⁴⁰⁹

If the relationship between the front-line councils and the officer chain of command was often uncertain and uneasy, what was not ambiguous was the attitude of

⁴⁰⁶ Lewinsohn, 36.

⁴⁰⁷ In still other units, the chain of command used the difficulty of the re enforced a standard of discipline higher than that practiced in the trenches. See, for example, the Gruppe Soden (V Reserve Corps) order saying that behavior must be beyond reproach in order to avoid an Allied march into Germany. Order of November 16, Ia/IIa # 473, BA-MA PH 8 I/511.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁰⁹ Groener, 471.

the *Westheer*'s councils toward the new government. The front-line councils stood solidly and overwhelmingly in support of Ebert and the Council of Peoples' Delegates. The archival record contains dozens of messages from these councils expressing support both for the new government and the prospect of national elections, while denouncing the agenda of the Spartacists. This message, which came from the Field Army to Berlin on November 20, is typical:

The artillery of the 16th Infantry Division stands fully and completely behind Reich Chancellor Ebert and the current government which desires to lead us home in peace and order, represents the majority of the German people, and will establish peace with our enemies. We condemn the machinations of the Spartacus Group which disrupts the current government while wanting to bring power to itself in order to create a reign of terror.⁴¹⁰

The same day, the council of the 71st Infantry Brigade staff telegraphed, "We make the sharpest possible protest against the resolution of the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council of Berlin calling for the creation of a purely proletarian government, which would express the will of a small minority, and demand the convocation of a National Assembly."⁴¹¹ The next day, this telegram reached Berlin from the Soldiers' Council of the 167th Infantry Regiment: "We front troops want nothing to do with a Bolshevist government. After 4 ½ years of the hardest sacrifices, we want to live in a homeland of peace, order, and freedom. Only the current government can bring that to us."⁴¹²

What is abundantly clear in these messages is the decisive victory of the MSPD in establishing the political agenda of the front-line councils and the relationship of the

⁴¹⁰ BA-R: R43/2486/17; Telegram from Trustees' Councils of Field Artillery Regiments [illegible; all from the 16th Infantry Division], dated November 20, 1918.

⁴¹¹ BA-R: R43/2486/17; Telegram from the Soldiers' Council of the staff of the 71st Inf. Bde., dated November 20, 1918.

⁴¹² BA-R, R43/2486r, Telegram from the Soldiers' Council of Inf. Regt. 167, dated November 21, 1918.

councils to the new government. Though each message encountered in the archives is different in its details, the essentials are the same: full trust in the current government, denunciation of those who would challenge Ebert's coalition, and the insistence by the front-line troops that they have a say in the final construction of the new German state. The telegrams come from every kind of unit from army headquarters to medical company to provisional march units, but the similarities are striking enough to suggest that the Majority Socialist message was being promulgated from the higher level councils at army group and army level, down to the division, regimental, and battalion councils. This, in turn, implies the support of the officer staffs in making the Field Army's communications channels available for use in the MSPD's "information campaign."⁴¹³

There were more battles ahead. Perhaps they would only be political battles, perhaps not. Anticipating the possibility of open conflict Ebert and his allies had been strikingly effective in building support among the *Frontruppen* as the army began its march back to the Fatherland.

The Evacuation of the Occupied Territories

The German Army's evacuation of the occupied areas of northern France, Belgium, and Luxembourg was a race against time under the most difficult conditions. On one hand, Allied advance guards would march close on the heels of the retreating army, ready to capture those who failed to meet the required pace of withdrawal. The Germans also had to be concerned about the civilian inhabitants of the occupied zone. German wartime occupation policy had hardly been enlightened and no one could say

²⁵ Enough of these messages are signed to give the dominant, and none too surprising, impression that most councils were led by NCO's and junior officers.

how long it would be before the resentment of the French and Belgian people against their former masters exploded.

Fortunately for the Field Army, the danger from its own rear areas receded almost as suddenly as it had appeared. The disorder in the *Etappe* seemed to burn itself out in a matter of days. The most likely reason was that the most energetic revolutionaries took off for Germany on their own.⁴¹⁴ Elsewhere, the front-line councils used appeals of revolutionary solidarity to overcome the confusion in the rear areas. When the gasoline supply point for the Fourth Army was seized by the Soldiers' Council of Antwerp, the army's quartermaster asked the army's own *Soldatenrat* to intervene to restore the army's fuel supply. Lewinsohn and other Fourth Army council members traveled to Antwerp where they appealed to the unruly local soldiery to consider the need of their "proletarian brothers" from the trenches.⁴¹⁵ In Brussels, a government appeal for order served to quiet the chaotic situation.⁴¹⁶

Another threat that failed to materialize was widespread violence from hostile civilians. During the initial unrest in the *Etappe*, German troops sold weapons and supplies to Belgian civilians,⁴¹⁷ while Belgian mobs took advantage of the situation to plunder supply trains in Liege.⁴¹⁸ Yet, other than some sniping, major incidents of violence between French or Belgians and German troops did not break out.⁴¹⁹ Lewinsohn

⁴¹⁴ *AEF*, XI, 28. Major General Rhodes, the American representative to the Armistice Commission came to a similar conclusion in a message to General Pershing on November 24, but thought the rear area troops had been "sent" home ahead of the combat formations, an unlikely point, *AEF*, X, 152.

⁴¹⁵ Lewinsohn, 14-17.

⁴¹⁶ *AEF*, X, 157.

⁴¹⁷ Volkmann, 75.

⁴¹⁸ Leeb, 155.

⁴¹⁹ The famous author, Alfred Döblin, described an incident in which German troops detonated the contents of fifty ammunition wagons as they evacuated Charleroi. The resulting explosion killed several Belgian civilians and inspired local Belgian attacks on German troops, in, *Sieger und Besiegte: Eine wahre Geschichte* (New York: Aurora Verlag, 1946), 7-8.

believed the soldiers' councils were the reason. His Fourth Army council distributed multi-lingual appeals to the Belgian populace announcing the council's authority, and distancing themselves from the old regime's aggression against Belgium, while calling on brotherhood among peoples. The gratifying response, he wrote, was to find Belgians greeting German troops with, "*Vive la Republique!*"⁴²⁰ Another council leader, William Kaisen, observed a message from a Belgian mayor painted in large letters on a wall appealing to his constituents to avoid excesses against the retreating Germans. Kaisen wrote that the Belgians who lined the roads were relatively uninterested in the passing Germans. Their eyes were turned to the west, where the Allies and, especially, their own army were approaching.⁴²¹ In other instances, the Belgians approached the front-line units hoping the German soldiers would sell weapons and supplies as their comrades in the *Etappe* had done.⁴²² Nevertheless, the Germans felt the hostility of the Belgian people and this may have served to keep units closed up in good order.⁴²³

The German forces faced more than enough difficulties without civilian interference. At the northern end of the old front, the geography of road networks, terrain, and international borders posed a special problem for the retreating armies of Army Group A (formerly Crown Prince Rupprecht). Because the section of the Netherlands known as the "Maastricht Appendix" (Limburg province) jutted south near the German frontier and the Ardennes stretched north nearby, the available roads into Germany narrowed to just those few that passed in and around the old Belgian fortress of

⁴²⁰ Lewinsohn, 21-22.

⁴²¹ Kaisen, 70.

⁴²² Volkmann, 75.

⁴²³ All too often, the German sentries detailed to stay behind with the equipment to be turned over to the Allies abandoned it at the first opportunity. *Rueckfuehrung*, 10-11.

Liege. In the time available, they were not sufficient to carry the endless, retreating columns of Rupprecht's old army group.

This was the dilemma of the Schlieffen Plan in reverse. In the original conception of his infamous plan, Schlieffen had been willing to violate Dutch neutrality in order to gain maneuver room for his flanking maneuver around the French armies. In 1914, Moltke the Younger was more cautious and, instead of crossing the Dutch frontier, chose to squeeze his right wing armies through the narrow gap of open terrain around Liege. It was a modification that nearly compromised the German offensive before it started. Had the Belgians not withdrawn the bulk of their forces from around the fortress, and, had an opportunistic officer named Ludendorff not led a *coup de main* into the city, the timetable of the German plan would have been fatally delayed.

In November 1918, the retreating Germans were again marching to a demanding timetable, this time eastwards. Even before the Armistice, the OHL recognized the potential bottleneck around Liege and asked the new government to seek transit permission from the Dutch.

Throughout the war, the Dutch had maintained their neutrality through a perilous balancing act between the belligerents.⁴²⁴ As the war turned against the Kaiser's armies, the Dutch had anticipated a German request to march across the Maastricht Appendix with considerable dread. Ironically, however, in November 1918, the unsettled political situation in the Netherlands shaped the Dutch response: units of the Dutch army were in mutiny and the radical socialists in the Dutch parliament had proclaimed revolution.

⁴²⁴ Hubert van Serooskerken, *The Netherlands and World War I: Espionage, Diplomacy, and Survival* (Boston: Brill, 2001) 245-254. In order to deter invasion by either side, they had kept their army mobilized all four years of the war. In early 1918, in particular, they had genuinely feared a German invasion. The immediate cause of the mutiny was the cancellation of all leaves in anticipation of the German approach.

Unsure of their ability to resist a German incursion, the Dutch government agreed to German passage on the condition that transiting German troops leave their weapons at the border. By the end of the German retreat, some seventy thousand Germans marched through Dutch territory on their way home. The Allies were predictably furious.⁴²⁵

Along with opening of additional routes through the Netherlands, the restoration of order in the rear area, and the prevalence of general calm among the civilian populace, the march was initially blessed by favorable weather.⁴²⁶ Heavy rain or snowfall would have had a catastrophic effect on the rate of progress. As Georg Bucher wrote, “Those November days were sunny and beautiful, as though undying nature were rejoicing that the orgy of slaughter had come to an end.”⁴²⁷ Good weather by itself did not guarantee the Germans would be able to evacuate the occupied areas ahead of the Allied vanguards. The Allies, for their part, added a layer of difficulty after the march had begun by establishing intermediate phase lines that the Germans had to reach every day. The Allies also moved the target for the final evacuation from December 13, to 6:00 A.M., December 12, 1918. To reinforce their demands, the Allies announced that the separation between retreating Germans and advancing Allied troops was to be a mere ten kilometers.⁴²⁸

The new conditions increased the enormous demands on the German troops marching east. What was needed above all was for the army staffs to prepare precisely calculated plans, and then to allow the subordinate formations the independence to adapt

⁴²⁵ Later, during the negotiations at Versailles, the Dutch had to defend themselves against efforts by the resentful Belgians to annex the Maastricht Appendix and other parts of the Netherlands. Van Serooskerken, 266-322.

⁴²⁶ Volkmann, 76.

⁴²⁷ Bucher, 320.

⁴²⁸ *Rückfuehrung*, 12-13. Due to lack of transportation, the German were forced to leave behind millions of marks worth of equipment and several hospital, with their patients and doctors. *Vossische Zeitung*, “An den Rheinbrücken,” edition of November 28, 1918.

these plans as circumstances dictated. There could be no requests for new instructions up and down the chain of command if something went wrong because for an army on the move the telephonic and telegraphic links to handle such requests simply did not exist.⁴²⁹

The march required a flexible organization as well. Commanders redistributed their most capable leaders within the *Frontheer* in order to provide leadership where it was most needed. They put the most reliable divisions at the head of the long march columns in order to secure the way against resistance from the local populace or revolutionary forces. Under strength regiments were reorganized into three or four company organizations and smaller support units were amalgamated with larger march formation to enhance control.⁴³⁰ Thus, on the day of the Armistice, the 236th Infantry Division had to take under its wing two additional field artillery regiments, an anti-aircraft detachment, a machine gun sharpshooter unit, a road construction company, a veterinary hospital, a field slaughter house company, a munitions transport formation, and a variety of other small units.⁴³¹ Such amalgamation made good sense from an organizational and leadership perspective, but it became a headache for the combat units required to look after a veritable menagerie of support units.⁴³²

In order to make maximum use of available time and road-space, the plan put the marching soldiers on the roads during the day, and allowed headquarters and transport

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁴³¹ *2nd Infantry Division*, Vol IX, Intelligence Reports, 236th Infantry Division War Diary and Annexes, Report of December 31. In modern US Army parlance, combat units refer to such small, odd formations derisively as the “ash and trash.”

⁴³² Thus, on November 20, the 213th Division complained to its chain of command that it had yet to link up with a company of *Landsturm*, an artillery park, two flak batteries, two searchlight units, several supply formations, three road construction units, a POW labor company, a veterinary hospital, and a unit of ethnic Italians from the Austrian army [!]. BA-MA, PH 8 I/511 213th Inf. Div. Special Instructions, Ia/Ib #50, dated November 20, 1918.

vehicles on the roads only at night.⁴³³ March unit commanders maintained discipline within the moving formations while other officers manned checkpoints at bridges and other chokepoints. No one was permitted to march alone.⁴³⁴

Prodigies of planning and organization were necessary to bring the soldiers home, but the *Frontschweine* themselves would have to do the marching. For the most part, they achieved the difficult objectives set for them. They were motivated by the thought of home and loved ones, but even more, at this early stage of the march, by the fear of falling into Allied hands. The fear was real. In a report dated November 20, the American Expeditionary Forces Headquarters recorded that the French had captured an entire German battalion after it had failed to move beyond the prescribed phase line.⁴³⁵ Georg Bucher recalled one evening that his unit was moving into billets for the night when they heard the sounds of a military band.

The wind carried the music and gathered it up so distinctly that we could recognize the tune: *Sambre et Meuse*. The French were following us. We gazed at each other silently, looked with weary and uncertain eyes at the billets which had been assigned to us. An order was shouted. A stream of curses and abuse broke loose. Then we set our teeth and marched on past the scornfully grinning civilians, on into the night. March on or be taken prisoner—there was no other alternative.⁴³⁶

The German infantry and artillery units still managed to present an orderly appearance to the Allied officers assigned to observe the march. The G2 staff of the AEF's First Division learned from interviews with Luxembourgers that the first German troops to cross the frontier were men from the *Etappe* who “lacked discipline altogether.” However, by November 17, the first front-line formations appeared. “All these troops

⁴³³ *Rückführung*, 7.

⁴³⁴ BA-MA, PH 8 I/511; 213th Inf. Div. Order # 52/XI, dated November 21, 1918.

⁴³⁵ *AEF*, XI, 124-5.

⁴³⁶ Bucher, 321.

showed good discipline. The officers spoke but little, seemed depressed. The men seemed much in ignorance of the armistice conditions and of the general situation.”⁴³⁷

About the same time, the American representative with the Armistice Commission, Major General C. D. Rhodes, made an urgent report from his vantage point in Spa, Belgium, that the German front-line troops he had observed passing through the town looked surprisingly fit, well-equipped, and disciplined. “It would appear that that reports of disorder and demoralization among German troops has applied only to second-line troops, which were sent to the rear early in the present withdrawal.” The Germans looked “full of fight,” and Rhodes observed that the German wagons were decorated with evergreens and German flags. The march looked more like a “triumphal return” rather than the retreat of a defeated army. Rhodes was so disturbed by the appearance of the German units that he recommended the Allies be ready for “active mobile operations.”⁴³⁸

Even in its last days, the old Imperial Army was capable of putting on a good parade.

As the *Westheer* approached the German frontier, the chain of command did its best to reinforce discipline and morale with a barrage of “command messages.” One division commander told his men to men to be proud of what they had accomplished in their “defensive war” and that only “the premature collapse of our coalition partners” forced a cease-fire on Germany. Maintain the old-fashioned discipline and trust the leaders who had taken them through so many battles, he said. “Thus shall our Field

⁴³⁷ First Division, AEF, Intelligence Summaries, Vol. IV, “Report on the Retirement of the German troops through Gravenmacher [Luxembourg], November 12 to November 22.” A subsequent report on November 28 said, “German troops have displayed good discipline and order . . . The troops are giving the impression of being unbeaten and ready to fight again, on command of their officers, who are in full control. The soldiers are not throwing away their arms.” An earlier report, on November 19, made the interesting observation that the Prussian units seemed to be marching in perfect order while the Bavarians appeared “very unmilitary and poorly disciplined.”

⁴³⁸ Rhodes to Pershing, *AEF*, X, 148.

Marshal Hindenburg bring us home in good fashion.”⁴³⁹ On November 16, a letter of instructions for the officers of the V Reserve Corps suggested the unique responsibility the front-line troops might have for the morale of the homeland (while indicating that the idea that the German army was “undefeated in the field” was already being fostered):

We are nearing the border.

Unfortunately, we must reckon with the possibility of increased demoralizing influences on the morale of the troops. On the other hand, the appearance that the troops present may be of decisive influence for the morale of the homeland.

I request that leaders of all ranks impress the following factors on the troops. We have unable to win the war because of the overwhelming superiority of our enemies; we have every justification to be proud that for over 4 years we have defended against a world of enemies and prevented the entry of the enemy into our Fatherland.

The dignified and earnest bearing of the troops should banish the despondency of the homeland; the farmers and middle class at home should see that an undefeated army returns in proud and unbowed bearing.⁴⁴⁰

There were other more ominous messages. One army headquarters warned:

Reports have been submitted that a large number of Spartacists (anarchistic groups who desire to inflame civil war in Germany) have been sent to the Field Army for the purposes of spreading propaganda. It is urgently important the effects of these people be kept away from the army. The instructions issued to date from the Reich leadership and the OHL on the preservation of discipline and order in the army are to be followed to the letter. Individuals that act against that [discipline and order] are, where necessary, to be resisted with armed force.

The order indicated that some units arriving in the homeland had allowed themselves to be disarmed. “It is dishonorable behavior to give up one’s weapons without resistance.”⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ BA-MA, PH 8 I/511 213th Inf. Div., Ia #43/X: Message from the division commander (General Hammerstein, dated November 16, 1918.

⁴⁴⁰ BA-MA: PH 8 I/511 Gruppe Soden (VR Corps) Instructions #39097, dated November 16, 1918.

⁴⁴¹ BA MA: PH 8 I/511, 213th Div. Order # Ia 54/XI, dated November 22, 1918, (“Armeebefehle”)

Every drama needs a villain and the characterization of the Spartacists as inflammatory anarchists represented a blatant attempt by the chain of command to build prejudices among front-line troops before they made their first contact with the revolutionaries of the homeland.⁴⁴² Spartacus would be the bogeyman.

In part, the sense of urgency in these messages was shaped by signs that the bonds that held the army together were starting to come apart. Lewinsohn remembered the days of late November as ones of frantic activity as his soldiers' council performed a balancing act between encouraging revolutionary fervor and emphasizing the requirement for discipline and order. He found himself traveling from one unit to another, in one place encouraging soldiers not to overthrow their officers, in another place clearing a supply dump of plunderers. He was forced to intervene between, on one hand, soldiers wearing red ribbons that mimicked the Iron Cross decorations and, on the other, veterans who felt the symbols of their sacrifice and bravery were being mocked. This last crisis caused the Fourth Army council to ban the wearing of red decorations, and issue the proclamation designed to please both factions. "If you want to carry a red flag as a symbol of the freedom we have won, let it flutter happily in the breeze. If you want to carry the black-white-red flag, the banner under which you successfully resisted a world of enemies, let it continue to wave in honor."⁴⁴³

Such Solomonic solutions helped keep the army together, but Lewinsohn was forced to concede that the conditions of the retreat brought out "the worst elements" in the army. His soldiers' council cooperated with the officer chain of command to post guards at key train stations and supply depots, and supported threats of court martial and

⁴⁴² To a certain extent, it may also represent the political naiveté of an officers unable to distinguish between different types of socialists.

⁴⁴³ Lewinsohn, 31.

summary execution for those who threatened the army's food supply.⁴⁴⁴ The chain of command reminded their units that those *Drückeberger* who commandeered "wild transport" on their own endangered all of their comrades.⁴⁴⁵ General Hans von Winterfeldt, the German representative to the Armistice Commission, was unable to contradict Allied reports that some German troops were guilty of pillage on their way through Belgium. This lawless behavior, he explained, was due to the unreasonable pace imposed on the German army by Allied Armistice conditions.⁴⁴⁶ Winterfeldt was making excuses, but his rationalizations had more than a little basis in fact. The harried troops that crossed the German frontier in late November still looked and acted like an army, but for how much longer?

The Rhineland

German soldiers expressed an overwhelming relief and joy as they crossed the frontier into Germany in late November. They had reached the Fatherland. Instead of resentful glares from a hostile populace, the front-line soldiers received the welcome of their countrymen. Nevertheless, those responsible for bringing the army home, the front-line soldiers' councils and unit commanders, soon found they had traded one set of problems for another. The supply situation remained bleak and the head of the new Demobilization Office in Berlin, Lieutenant Colonel Koeth, asked the OHL to remind the homecoming troops that severe shortages existed inside Germany. As the troops were quartered in towns and villages on their way east, they should not expect that the locals would be able to provide much in the way of food and fuel. The *Westheer* would have to

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁴⁵ BA-MA,; PH 8 I/511 213th Inf. Div. Order Ia #66/XI, dated November 27, 1918 ("Abschriften aus Arme- und Gruppebefehlen")

⁴⁴⁶ Rhodes to Pershing, msg of December 6, *AEF*, X, 238.

rely on its own resources.⁴⁴⁷ The number of available roads grew smaller as the army drew closer to the very limited number of crossing sites over the Rhine. As the army moved east it encountered workers and soldiers' councils with a political agenda that was far more militant than the ephemeral councils of the *Etappe*. In the Rhineland and the Rhine crossing sites, the army first met the Spartacus League and its allies. In places like Dusseldorf, Cologne, and Aachen, the army confronted councils that feared and despised the army's chain of command and were dedicated to undermining it. In the Rhineland, the army also found that the call of home and kin trumped duty and camaraderie. Soldiers with homes on the west bank of the Rhine began to abandon the army. Nor was there relief from the Allied pursuit. Those who fell behind still risked capture and an indefinite period of imprisonment by the Allies.

The High Command sought relief from the Allies timetable as exhaustion and overcrowding on the roads made it difficult to meet the schedule for withdrawal. On November 18, General Winterfeldt protested to General Nudant, the French representative, that, since the German army was clearly unable to resume hostilities, there was no reason to continue the killing pace imposed on the German troops marching east. The Armistice Commission referred the request to Foch, who denied it. Winterfeldt tried again on November 21 and was again denied.⁴⁴⁸

To meet the Allied demands, the troops with the furthest to go averaged up to thirty kilometers a day, even after rest days were cut from the march schedule, and even though they left dead horses and abandoned equipment in their wake. The pace of the march bore especially heavy on the men of the *Landsturm* and *Landwehr* battalions,

⁴⁴⁷ BA-R: R 1501/112400, Telegram from the Demobilization Office to the OHL, dated November 21, 1918.

⁴⁴⁸ Volkmann, 77.

many of whom were over forty years old. The soldiers' councils asked for rail transport to get the older men home, but the transport was just not available. The older men would have to march with the rest of the army.⁴⁴⁹ The result was a prodigious performance made possible by fear of capture, but also, increasingly, by the excitement of reaching home. The men increasingly expressed joy at the prospect of being with loved ones for Christmas.⁴⁵⁰

Their spirits were also buoyed by the welcome of their countrymen. According to one account, every little village in the Rhineland was decorated with flags and patriotic garlands, as local authorities offered speeches and farmers offered food.⁴⁵¹ Herbert Sulzbach wrote, “. . . as we marched through [Münstereifel] they pelted us with flowers and decorated our horses. This is what you would imagine the victorious march through the Brandenburg Gate to have been like, but these good people gave us fresh courage and confidence. We've got another 28 kilometers to Bonn!”⁴⁵²

However, Lewinsohn's account suggests that not every place was prepared for such a welcome. The march route of his Fourth Army took it through Aachen, and Lewinsohn traveled ahead of the main column to secure the army's supply sources. In Aachen, he found a disturbing apathy among the citizenry along with a very hostile workers' and soldiers' council. The Fourth Army Soldiers' Council sent the following press release to the Aachen newspapers, “. . . it is your principal duty to greet the combatants who are undefeated in four years of fighting. The German soldier will be

⁴⁴⁹ Lewinsohn, 56. Lewinsohn recorded that his council made a special effort to put the blame for the difficulty of the march on the Allies. 57.

⁴⁵⁰ *Rückführung*, 16.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid*, 16-17.

⁴⁵² Sulzbach, 253. One imagines that part of the joyous response from the inhabitants of the Rhineland was prompted by relief to find the Field Army was not in the same condition as the first wave of returnees from the front who had been deserters and unruly support troops making their way home on their own. See for example, “Die Demobilisierung der Westfront,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, November 19, 1918.

deeply hurt if, during their entry into Germany, you show you are alienated from them in your hearts.”⁴⁵³ Lewinsohn reported that the burgers were roused from their lethargy and gave the Fourth Army a gracious welcome.⁴⁵⁴

More often, the celebrations were spontaneous. Years later, the same conservative critics who argued the stab-in-the-back legend would accuse the German people of treating the returning soldiers in a shameful manner. This view does not square with contemporary accounts from both the Right and Left. Local authorities across Germany made enormous efforts to make the homecoming of the front-line soldier a festive one.⁴⁵⁵

As the army crossed the frontier into Germany, such a greeting would have been especially gratifying to the soldiers who lived in the Rhineland. They were truly home, but their situation presented a special problem to the army chain of command which was willing to release them as soon as it could be arranged.⁴⁵⁶ The terms of the Armistice had made no provision for men to be discharged on the west bank of the Rhine (despite the assurances Captain Römpler had offered the men of the 115th Division); Germans found in uniform were to be captured. The commission decided to allow German soldiers to remain in the Rhineland if they discarded their uniforms and could prove they had been properly discharged. Yet, that too, presented a problem. General Winterfeldt protested that a shortage of clothing meant that soldier might have only his uniform to wear.

⁴⁵³ Lewinsohn, 33. One notes that, here again, a Social Democrat used the idea of the army being “undefeated in the field,” feeding the idea of a “stab-in-the back.”

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, 34. One of the reasons that Aachen may have been less forthcoming in its welcome to the Field Army was privation. The effects of the blockade had fallen much heavier on the cities than the countryside.

⁴⁵⁵ See the discussion in Richard Bessel, *Die Heimkehr der Soldaten: Das Bild der Frontsoldaten in der Oeffentlichkeit der Weimarer Republik*,” in *Keiner fuehlt sich hier mehr als Mensch: Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkriegs*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irina Renz, (Essen: Schriften der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, 1993), 221-3.

⁴⁵⁶ BA-MA PH 8 I/511 Gruppe Soden (V Res. Corps) Ia, Ib #3919, “Annex to the OHL order regarding the discharge of military personnel with homes in the areas to be evacuated” Dated November 19, 1918.

Beyond that, a proper discharge was likely to be impossible because, 1) the muster rolls were packed in the army's heavy baggage and thus, unavailable, 2) the hasty nature of the withdrawal made normal administrative procedures impossible, and 3) local soldiers' councils were already intervening to discharge individuals and, occasionally, whole units, on their own authority.⁴⁵⁷ Winterfeldt's last point highlights the new challenge the army faced as it marched into the homeland. While the officers and front-line councils believed order and discipline were essential to the success of the return march, the local workers' and soldiers' councils believed the goals of the revolution would be best served by dismantling the old army as rapidly as possible.⁴⁵⁸ Though the OHL relayed an order from the cabinet that stipulated at the local level that the pre-revolutionary authorities would be the ones with whom the Field Army would cooperate, the local councils were determined to assert their role in the new order.⁴⁵⁹ Collisions were inevitable.

Senior officers felt the special enmity of the revolutionary councils. On November 20, General von Schulenberg moved the headquarters of Army Group B to Königswinter, a picturesque town on the east bank of the Rhine near Bonn. As he traveled through the Rhineland, the general found an atmosphere of calm and order until he reached Bonn. On entering the city, he encountered a representative of a local soldiers' council, a uniformed "sixteen-year old hooligan" who leveled a rifle at him. Schulenberg recalled the feelings he had experienced when he had crossed the Rhine four and a half years as

⁴⁵⁷ Winterfeldt to General Nudant, *AEF*, X, 226-7.

⁴⁵⁸ See, for example: BA-R: 43/2485, Report from Dep. IX Corps, #281/12, dated November 23, 1918. A major in this homeland garrison headquarters warned the government that Spartacist sailors in his district threatened orderly demobilization and support of the returning front-line troops.

⁴⁵⁹ BA-MA: PH 8 I/511 Fifth Army Order, Ia #899, dated November 18, 1918.

the war began. To be greeted in such a fashion when returning, he wrote, was “unimaginable.”⁴⁶⁰

In the units where officers still were a dominant force, the collision took the forms of spontaneous acts of violence against local revolutionaries. An army doctor later recalled watching “the soldiers of an artillery unit tear down a banner bearing the proclamation, ‘Welcome to the German Socialist Republic.’ Workers who threatened the unit commander were driven away at gunpoint.”⁴⁶¹ Lewinsohn wrote that the units who were last to be pulled out of the line were most likely to be hostile to the appearance of lawlessness in the homeland.⁴⁶² In a message to the War Ministry on November 25, the OHL explained that such attacks on revolutionary symbols were due to the demands of the return march and the difficulty of communication between headquarters and units. There had been insufficient time to “educate” the front-line troops on the new conditions in the Fatherland. The *Frontruppen* needed to have it explained to them that a red armband did not mean Bolshevism, but rather “the success of the two socialist parties in the life of the state” and the symbol of local security forces.⁴⁶³

As the army closed on the Rhine, unit headquarters began to bombard the OHL with reports complaining of the depredations of the local councils. On November 19, Army Group A complained that a large numbers of trucks intended for transfer to the Allies had, instead, been confiscated by soldiers’ councils from the Home Army. Elsewhere, field army truck drivers were offered discharge papers if they would leave

⁴⁶⁰ BA-MA: N58/1, Nachlass Schulenberg, “Erlebnisse,” 244-245.

⁴⁶¹ Stephen Westman, *Surgeon with the Kaiser’s Army*, (London: 1968), 179.

⁴⁶² Lewinsohn, 30.

⁴⁶³ BA-R: R43/2500/5, Transcript of message to the War Ministry, telephoned from the OHL, # I f 107249, dated November 25, 1918. On the other hand, the OHL said, the Field Army would avoid such symbols since they had too often been used as the cover for plunder.

their trucks behind.⁴⁶⁴ Army Group C complained that it had lost trucks, fuel, and radios to the local *Soldatenräte*.⁴⁶⁵ In some cases, members of the local councils may have used the symbols of revolution to mask extortion and petty thievery, but in others, it was clear that many of the workers' and soldiers' councils along the Rhine and beyond were conducting a low-key, decentralized insurgency against the Field Army.⁴⁶⁶

Together with their officers and front-line troops they represented, the Field Army's soldiers' councils also found themselves in conflict with these insurgent councils inside Germany. In a message addressed to the "workers' and soldiers' councils of the homeland" on November 21, the OHL council made an early appeal to the homeland councils to, "Show our comrades that the new Fatherland knows how to honor their deeds and recognize their great suffering." They reassured the councils of the homeland garrisons that the troops of the Field Army stood solidly behind the new Ebert-Haase coalition government. They also used compliments to placate the anxiety felt by the homeland garrisons: "Comrades and Workers! We of the Field Army thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your liberating acts in the homeland." This message also pointedly stated that the Field Army wanted a voice in the creation of the new Fatherland and that those who would undermine democracy would be resisted.⁴⁶⁷ Despite this appeal to solidarity, when the headquarters of the Fourth Army displaced to Krefeld, Lewinsohn and his comrades were forced to negotiate with a sailors' council that

⁴⁶⁴ BA-R: R43/2500'5, Transcript of Giebel telephone call from the OHL, dated November 29, 1918.

⁴⁶⁵ BA-MA: PH 8 I/511, Fifth Army order; Ia #5170, dated November 17, 1918.

⁴⁶⁶ In Berlin, *Die Rote Fahne* demanded that Hindenburg and all counter revolutionary officers be arrested, that the Supreme Headquarters be moved to Berlin, and the government stop the movement into Germany of any front-line troops led by their officers. *Die Rote Fahne*, "Aufputschung der Frontsoldaten," edition of December 4, 1918.

⁴⁶⁷ BA-MA: PH 3/19 Flyer, issued by the Soldiers' Council of the OHL; "To the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of the Homeland," dated November 21, 1918.

demanded the army disarm itself and turn its weapons over to the sailors.⁴⁶⁸ In Aachen, a Spartacist council accused the Fourth Army Soldiers' Council of being monarchist agents of counterrevolution. The story was picked up by the national newspaper, *Vorwärts*, which carried an article stating that the army commander, Sixt von Arnim, had reasserted control over the army and the council with the aim of crushing the revolution.⁴⁶⁹ The front-line council was forced to defend itself from this attack from the left. It sent a message to the capital that protested, "In Berlin, the rumor is being circulated that the Fourth Army is taking up the battle against the revolution. If one understands revolution to mean the dictatorship of the minority [a code name for Bolshevism], this rumor is aligned with the facts." The message continued by restating the army's support for the Ebert government.⁴⁷⁰ The OHL council had to respond to similar attacks by denouncing rumors it was a mere tool of the High Command. It launched a printed counterattack against the leftist-oriented Executive Committee of the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, denying that it had any authority over the councils of the army

By late November, the front-line soldiers' councils found themselves squeezed between the radicalized councils of the homeland and a renewed effort by the army's officers to assert control over both their own units and the dissident garrisons within Germany. As his troops crossed the border, the First Army commander, General Eberhard, declared the area between the frontier and the Rhine to be an "operational area." "I order all civil and military authorities to support me in the establishment of calm and order." He went on to demand the subordination of the local workers and

⁴⁶⁸ Lewinsohn, 43.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 40.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, 41.

soldiers' councils and the suppression of red flags and insignias.⁴⁷¹ Similar orders were promulgated in the Seventh and Seventeenth Armies.⁴⁷²

In councils at every level, and particularly in the OHL council, a storm of protest rose up against these orders. Pressure from the government prompted the OHL to relieve Eberhard and a number of other commanders. During the same period, tensions began to grow between OHL staff and the OHL Soldiers' Council.⁴⁷³ On November 22, the council demanded the right to elect officers and intense negotiations were needed before this demand was withdrawn. By November 28, the High Command, in turn, banned the flying of red flags in the *Frontheer*. The council and the government protested, though a few days later the cabinet declared that if front-line councils chose to ban red flags in their units, in the interest of "freedom of belief" they were free to do so.⁴⁷⁴ The battle over symbols continued as the amicable working relationship between staff and council began to go sour.

"Drang nach Hause"

In late November and the first days of December, 1918, the *Westheer's* long columns crossed the Rhine on bridges at Dusseldorf, Cologne, Coblenz and a handful of other sites. Of all phases of the army's return, the Rhine-crossing required the most intricate planning. Some of the army's columns were close to one hundred miles long

⁴⁷¹ "Das Kommandeur der Ersten Armee gegen die Arbeiter und Soldatenräte," *BT*, 25 November, 1918.

⁴⁷² Report of U.S. Military Attaché in the Hague to the Intelligence Section of the AEF, December 8, 1918, *AEF*, X, 257-258.

⁴⁷³ On November 18, an "officers only" message went out from Army Group C. It referred to a proclamation made by the OHL Soldiers' Council and told officers that such messages accomplished little and should be suppressed. It would only confuse the troops as to who was really in charge. Within the army group, the trustees' councils should not serve as a "parallel government" (*Nebenregierung*) as the OHL council was attempting to do. Instead, the trustees should concern themselves with raising troop morale. BA-MA: PH 8 I/511; Ia #954; Transcript from Army Group Gallwitz /"C" (for officers only), dated November 18, 1918.

⁴⁷⁴ BA-R: 43/2500/4; Telegram from the Cabinet to the OHL, dated November 30, 1918, and follow-up telegram dated December 9, 1918.

and a traffic snarl in a major city like Cologne could hold up military and civilian movement for days. Units had to adhere strictly to the crossing schedule because there was little opportunity to send adjustments and corrections up and down the overcrowded roads. General staff officers set up control points at every major crossing site to ensure the steady flow of military columns and to arrange opportunities for civilian traffic to interject itself into gaps in the endless *feldgrau* columns. At other locations, engineer units set up temporary pontoon bridges to supplement the fixed bridge sites.⁴⁷⁵

Those who observed the Rhine crossing were impressed by the high morale of the returning front-line units. The motto of the troops was “*Parole Heimat*,” (Watchword-Home), and a reporter from the *Berliner Tageblatt* wrote that a real “Christmas spirit” was palpable among the troops. Wagons and trucks were so heavily decorated with greens that the army appeared to be a forest on the move. The reporter reassured his readers that the front-line army was not a bunch of desperadoes bent on robbery and plunder. Instead, soldiers seem to yield obedience to officers gladly, seeing it as a necessity for reaching their goal, home. However, the reporter wrote, no one should be deluded into thinking the army was ready to take up the fight against the Allies again. The soldiers he interviewed were unified in their resentment of Prussian militarism. “Underneath the joy of homecoming, the men were bitter about giving their best efforts in a losing cause,” he asserted.⁴⁷⁶

The Allies were clearly worried that the Germans might take up arms again and sent observers to keep a close watch on the retreating army. To this end, they interrogated members of the local population on what they had seen of troop conduct and

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, 17-20.

⁴⁷⁶ “Die Heimkehrenden,” *BT*, December 1, 1918.

morale. Often, such interviews suggested the sharp division between front and rear. The Intelligence Officer of the AEF's Third Corps recorded this statement from a Peter

Knopp of Freilingen:

Most of the German troops that marched through this village during their retirement observed good order. Few orders were given by the officers, and these were respected by the men. I noticed however, that the officers appeared to be more intimate with the enlisted men than had previously been the habit. There were no demonstrations of a revolutionary character. I saw no red flags.⁴⁷⁷

Another:

Mr. Holgkämper served as Feldwebel with the Clothing Depot at COBLENZ. During the withdrawal of the S.O.S troops numerous uniforms were forcibly taken from the depot. He claims that none of the real soldiers, meaning the active line troops, were mutinous. He attributes the splendid execution of the withdrawal of the German armies in some measure to the influence which these soldiers had over the younger and less experienced men.

The former supply sergeant added that he believed that the returning front-line troops were Germany's best guarantee for future peace and order.⁴⁷⁸

Still another interview with a local villager suggested that not all Rhinelanders were glad to see the retreating troops:

Mr. Grimm stated that German officers who had been quartered at POLCH [on the west bank of the Rhine near Coblenz] complained about their cool reception while there. Instead of being received with admiration, they were looked upon as part of a beaten army, partially to be blamed for the occupation of German soil by the enemy. These officers did not consider themselves beaten and were surprised and annoyed at the attitude of the people.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁷ NARA: RG 120/5895/ Third Army Corps G2 Report# 29, dated December 14-15, 1918.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, Report # 30, dated December 15-16, 1918.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

The Allied monitoring teams also took careful notes on the order of battle and strengths of the retreating units.⁴⁸⁰ On November 27 and 28, for example, at Montabaur, twelve miles northwest of the Rhine crossing site at Coblenz, AEF officers recorded the passage of the following formations:

Unit	Officers	Men	Horses
Telephone Det. 16 th Corps	1	38	26
Town Major Det., 8 th Res. Corps		7	8
Balloon Plt. 2	5	60	28
Balloon Plt. 93	6	89	24
Zeppelin Staff 44	3	40	12
A.A. Bty 581	3	100	41
A.A. Bty 757	4	72	75
Anti Tank Grp, "Wild Grp."		23	
A.A. Grp. 12	4	30	8
A.A. Searchlight Sect. 743		17	17
Entlade Cmd. "Hempel" [?]	10	105	-
Field Artillery Battery 13	2	40	-
127 th Inf. Regt. Staff and 3 rd Bn.	20	470	95
Trench Mtr. Co., 127 th I.R.	4	140	35
Part of the 476. Inf. Regt.	10	137	58
Field Hospital 208	6	60	40
3 rd Bn. 476 I.R.	15	500	90
Trench Mtr. Co., 476 th Inf. Regt.	4	137	40
503 rd Field Hospital	8	63	-
General Staff, 16 th Corps	35	200	160
Column No. 1387, 406 F.A.R.	-	60	50
Trains of the 1 st Bav. Inf. Div.	6	250	-
Telephone Sta. 1165	1	13	6
Telephone Det.	1	18	-
1 st Sqdn, 2 nd Regt., Gds Dragoons	6	78	100
Quartermaster Dept., 242 nd Inf. Div.	2	19	-
Army Corps Signal Command 616	1	25	-
Kolonne [Transport] 5/406	-	60	-
" 6/406	12	230	-
" 4/406	-	80	-

⁴⁸⁰The Allies were anxious that the Germans observe the conditions of the Armistice and had posted observers along the march routes to monitor the progress of the *Frontheer's* return to Germany.⁴⁸⁰ The observers from the US Third Army, detailed for occupation duty within the Reich, were interested in the composition, morale, and destination of the units crossing the river, as well as plans for demobilization. To this end they attempted to record the designation and strength of every unit that crossed in the area that was to become the American sector. Their reports are especially useful since they are not biased by the Germany's internal political discord.

Tradesman's Co. 145	2	74	-
“ 146	2	111	-
“ 147	4	67	-
Listening Sect, (16 th Corps)	2	13	- ⁴⁸¹

Examining this and similar reports from late November and early December allows some interesting observations about the condition of the army. Not surprisingly, the infantry units were badly under strength. Typically, U.S. observers saw infantry battalions marching by with four hundred to five hundred men, and sometimes much less.⁴⁸² Second, the bulk of the support units on the road were the kind of units found at division level and below (anti-aircraft batteries, signal units, field hospitals, etc.). However, the presence of transport columns, town major detachments, tradesman's companies, and army-level school troops indicate that not all of the army's rear area units evaporated in the aftermath of the revolution.⁴⁸³ Officer memoirs and official histories may be exaggerating in their description of the vanishing *Etappe*. The large number of support formations helps to explain how the *Westheer* numbered over three million when the rifle strength at the front was a million or less. Third, the presence of Bavarian troops moving northwest from Coblenz, on the middle Rhine, at the end of November, suggests what a circuitous route some units had to take before arriving at their ultimate destination. Units moved east from wherever the Armistice found them and had to continue east within their assigned sectors until reaching the east bank of the Rhine

⁴⁸¹ NARA: RG 120/5895, US First Inf. Div. Report # 104, dated December 16, 1918.

⁴⁸² The 2nd Battalion of the 9th Grenadiers, for example, counted 17 officers and one hundred men; the entire 17th Infantry Regiment marched by with 19 officers and five hundred men.

⁴⁸³ Other reports include veterinary hospitals, labor battalions, slaughterhouse units, *Landsturm* garrisons, salvage detachments, field bakery columns and other units typically associated with service support functions.

allowed them to move directly homeward. Finally, one is struck by the vast number of horses needed to move an army of the First World War.⁴⁸⁴

The variety of units listed in such reports also demonstrated the complexity of the army's movement and the necessity for careful organization. Once across, the movement plan called for units to continue on to assembly areas in the interior of the country, well beyond the designated Allied occupation areas on the east bank. The Field Army's destination was the *Einladezone*, the "embarkation area," where units would be marshaled for rail and foot movement to home bases and demobilization sites.⁴⁸⁵ Units stationed east of the Elbe would have priority on the available rail transport while units with less than two hundred miles from their point of demobilization would be authorized to continue on foot.⁴⁸⁶

For the most part, both the general staff and the Ebert government were gratified by the orderly conduct exhibited during the Rhine crossing. Neither party, however, could be pleased about the growing hostility of the Spartacists and the revolutionary councils. In places like Cologne, the OHL was forced to intervene to prevent open combat between front-line units and the city's workers and soldiers' council.⁴⁸⁷ Lewinsohn accused the Spartacists from the Home Army councils of seeking to hasten the dissolution of the army by spreading rumors that the OHL was withholding trains from the mission of bringing soldiers home, as well as planting false reports that the

⁴⁸⁴ NARA: RG 120/Box 5895; Third US Army Intelligence Summaries (incl. III Corps, 1st Inf. Div, 89th Inf. Div.)

⁴⁸⁵ The plan called for the bulk of the one hundred and eighty divisions Western Army to wait in the *Einladezone* for rail transport east while thirty-seven divisions hailing from the western regions of Germany march themselves home. *Rückfuehrung*,

⁴⁸⁶ BA-MA: PH 8 I/511 213th Inf. Div. Order, Ia/Demob. #2/XI, regarding Troop Transport, dated 22 November, 1918.

⁴⁸⁷ "Die rote Fahne und die Offiziere," *BT*, November 29, 1918. Leeb reports a dangerous confrontation in Dusseldorf, as well, 158.

Allies had marched into Westphalia and were taking as prisoners those soldiers who were too slow to move out of their path.⁴⁸⁸ In another instance, the 5th Bavarian Division reported that, as it marched through the Ruhr, local councils sought to undermine the unit by offering the troops free railway tickets home.⁴⁸⁹

In another instance, the Spartacists used intimidation to achieve their objectives. As Fritz Nagel prepared to take his anti-aircraft battery over the Rhine, “Dirty and sloppy-looking revolutionary soldiers wearing red arm bands stopped us and refused to let us across the bridge. They feared our cannons as well as the thought that our whole outfit would join the counter-revolutionary army rumored to be forming beyond the Rhine. . . .” Nagel was indifferent to the fate of the guns since they would have to be turned over to the Allies anyway, so he receipted them over to the revolutionaries at the bridge. The battery’s vehicles were parked on the west end of the bridge and the battery proceeded on foot. “. . . I shook hands with every man and dismissed them with instructions to get home the best way they could. That was the end of the war for me.”⁴⁹⁰

Other incidents ended less amicably. As Colonel Reinhard rode across the Rhine as the head of his 4th Foot Guards, he was insulted by a group of sailors in the back of a truck. Angered Reinhard rode up to the truck and tried to pull the red sash off of one of the most belligerent sailors, who fell off the truck. The other sailors backed away except for one who came after the colonel with a knife. The company of guardsmen following

⁴⁸⁸ Lewinsohn, 61-63.

⁴⁸⁹ Lipp, 169. The OHL received a report that the *Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat* of Darmstadt had held up two soldiers from a support unit of the IX Corps and extorted 6,500 marks from one of the men before they would release the two.

⁴⁹⁰ Nagel, 161. Another officer recalled, “Severe violations of discipline [during the march] were entirely isolated and could regularly be explained by some alcoholic excess. Nevertheless, it was characteristic enough that here, for the first time, I witnessed a soldier trying to strip an officer of his shoulder straps. A resounding slap in the face, accompanied by a jovial remark, brought the intoxicated man back to reason and produced great hilarity among the soldiers who stood about. With this the incident was closed.” Account in the *Deutsche Kriegszeitung* quoted in Fried, *Guilt*, 54.

Reinhard overwhelmed the two sailors, beat them, and left them for the next company, which threw them into the Rhine. Reinhard's account does not say whether the sailors drowned or not.⁴⁹¹

Between them, Nagel's and Reinhard's experiences suggest the wide range of responses--surprise, resignation, disgust, anger, and, sometimes, violence--as the front encountered the revolution.

Bad Ems

In an effort to strengthen their hand against revolutionary influences and discontent within the army and the nation, the OHL began to use selective discharge policies. As a first priority, the army offered early release to Alsatians and others who lived close to the western frontier. The army also made early release of national and local civil service officers and policemen.⁴⁹² Groener also sent handpicked officers out to units to act as "inoculation agents" (*Serumspritzer*). Their job was to "immunize" the troops against revolutionary influences by denouncing the Spartacists and speaking in support of the Ebert government.⁴⁹³

Groener also hoped to steer the Soldiers' Councils in a direction that would lessen their influence on the army, while using them to support the Ebert government. With this end in mind, he supported the summoning of the First Congress of Front-line Soldiers' Councils on December 1 and 2. Groener hoped the congress would call for the disarming of all the civil population, the dissolution of the Soldiers' Councils, and the immediate

⁴⁹¹ Reinhard, *Wehen*, 34-5. Reinhard recalled that when he encountered the raw recruits from the homeland garrisons that, initially, they would fail to salute him. He began to initiate the salutes. At first, the embarrassed recruits pretended not to see him. "Eventually", he wrote, "they understood what was required of them." 54.

⁴⁹² Dieter Dreetz, "Rückführung des Westheeres und Novemberrevolution," *Zeitschrift fuer Militärgeschichte* (DDR), 1968, 586.

⁴⁹³ Groener, 472-3. Groener conceded the *Serumspritzer* had little influence on the soldiers' desire to get home.

summoning of a National Assembly. He also wanted the front-line council to denounce the troublesome *Vollzugrat* in Berlin.

Groener would have been encouraged by the dominance of the Majority Socialists among those who attended the congress. Of the 51 delegates whose party affiliations are known, 33 were MSPD, 9 USPD, and 9 came from various middle-class parties. Of the fifty-nine whose social position was recorded, we have the following break-out: 25 MSPD party or union officials, 19 intellectuals (teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc.) 6 artisans, 5 senior civil servants, one professional officer, one factory worker and only two genuine “workers” (one was a type-setter, the other a cigar maker).⁴⁹⁴

Despite the party affiliations of those in attendance, Groener’s plan misfired. Although the membership of the 326-member congress voted its support of the Ebert government, it also asserted the councils’ authority over issues of rations, quarters, leave, punishments and soldier grievances. Emil Barth, the most radical member of the cabinet, attended, leading the USPD delegation to the congress, and convincing the members of the Executive Committee to assert that discipline within the army must be based on comradely friendship. He also encouraged the attendees to demand more power for their own Field Army councils though, in doing so, Barth undercut the guidelines his own cabinet had set for council authority in the Field on November 12.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹⁴ Roland Grau, “Zur Rolle der Soldatenraete der Fronttruppen in der Novemberrevolution,” *Zeitschrift fuer Militaergeschichte* (GDR), 7, 1968, 552. Why the Majority Socialists were able to achieve such a numerical dominance is difficult to say, but one is inclined to believe that many of the men holding more revolutionary views had absented themselves from the front-line units prior to the events of November, 1918. The *Vossische Zeitung* reported that few red ornaments were seen; the overwhelming choice for decorations were the Reich’s colors--black, white, and red—and the Landesfarben, the colors of the individual states. VZT, “Die Tagung der Frontsoldaten,” December 2, 1918.

⁴⁹⁵ Description of Bad Ems from Groener, 470, Grau, 556, Volkmann, 81, and Lewinsohn, 37-8 and BA-R: R43/2500/5, p. 50; Transcript of Giebel call to Ebert, dated December 9, 1918.

For the moderate soldiers' councils of the Field Army, the congress had a mixed result. On the positive side, the congress reaffirmed the power of the councils. However, according to Lewinsohn, it was at Bad Ems that the front-line councils first became aware of the deep split in the government. It was clear, he wrote later, that the danger was now exclusively on the left. The monarchist threat had passed.⁴⁹⁶

Across the Rhine

Bad Ems was a clear setback for Groener. If he had hoped to turn the councils against the radical wing of the government, he had failed. But Groener was not moving only on the political front. As the army moved across the Rhine, he gave permission to selected officers of proven discernment to make personal visits to the units on the march. The purpose of the visits was to determine which divisions were “the best, the most reliable, and most usable.”⁴⁹⁷ The ultimate goal was to select up to ten divisions and move them by rail to assembly areas encircling Berlin where they would come under a special new command designated to execute a secret “Berlin Operation.” The result, by the first week of December, was that nine divisions were en route to the area around Berlin.

However, these were not the only divisions the OHL had earmarked for special duty. The High Command had selected twenty divisions to serve as a *Grenzschutz*, a border security force for the west bank of the Rhine. The mission of the security forces would be to block further unauthorized advances by Allied forces while cooperating with authorized agents of the Armistice. However, morale in the chosen units plummeted as

⁴⁹⁶ Lewinsohn, 38.

⁴⁹⁷ Albrecht von. Thaer, Albrecht, *Generalstabdienst an der Front und in der O.H.L.: Aus Briefen und Tagesbuchaufzeichnungen, 1915-1919*, ed. Siegfried Kaehler, (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1958), 472-3. Von Thaer was one of the most aggressively monarchist officers on the OHL staff and one of the officers (along with Groener's adjutant and Major von Schleicher) charged with finding the most reliable units.

the men felt they had been unfairly asked to be last in the demobilization queue. The soldiers felt their comrades who reached home ahead of them would snatch the remaining employment, leaving nothing for the men of the *Grenzschutz*. The commander of the 15th Bavarian Division, assigned to border duty, received this warning on December 3:

The Soldiers Council of the 15th Bavarian Infantry Division which has the trust of the overwhelming majority of the soldiers of the division, protests the assumption of the border security mission for even the shortest period of time. Should the efforts of the division command to lead the division home as swiftly and expeditiously as possible continue to be unsuccessful; the division's Soldiers' Council will decline further work and leave to the commander the responsibility for the disorder and mass desertion that would follow as a direct result.⁴⁹⁸

The division commander was compelled to inform his corps headquarters that his unit could not accept the mission without the risk of the men leaving en masse, taking their junior officers with them. Incidents like this forced Groener to concede that the idea of a border force composed from former elements of the *Westheer* was “an illusion.”⁴⁹⁹ The army would have to rely on small, highly paid volunteer units to take over the mission intended for the twenty front-line divisions.⁵⁰⁰

The difficulty the OHL faced in creating a *Grenzschutz* indicated the problem the rest of the Field Army was experiencing as it crossed the Rhine—disintegration.

Lewinsohn confessed that all through the march, the disciplined formations had been accompanied by a swarm of stragglers and deserters. Their number had grown daily as the army approached the homeland. The Soldiers' Councils set up control points at the border in order to gather up these wayward soldiers, and reinforced the struggle against

⁴⁹⁸ Lipp, 168.

⁴⁹⁹ Groener, 472.

⁵⁰⁰ Discussion of the *Grenzschutz* problem in *Rückführung*, 21.

dissolution by ensuring rations went to units, not individuals.⁵⁰¹ This system had an initial, positive effective in keeping men with their units, but once the army had crossed the Rhine, such control measures had less and less impact.

In some respects, the army accelerated the disintegration through its own demobilization policies. The demobilization plan called for men from the classes 1896-1899 to remain with the colors in order to form the nucleus of a peacetime army. The army planned to give rail priority to the older men of the classes of 1895 and earlier who would go home for immediate discharge, while the younger men waited to move with other divisions with later departure dates. Naturally, splitting up a unit along age lines undermined the scarce remaining cohesion among the front-line formations.⁵⁰²

Yet the most powerful force pulling the army apart was not the army's own policies, or even the activities of the Spartacists. Trumping all was the individual soldier's urgent desire to get home. On the east bank of the Rhine, beyond the threat of Allied capture or Belgian *francs-tireurs*, the old cohesion gave way to overwhelming homesickness. In one instance, a battalion of infantry marching homeward decided the commander had taken a wrong turn and might be intentionally leading them away from their home province. They broke ranks, smashed their rifles against trees and headed homeward, taking only their blankets and their rations.⁵⁰³ Groener wrote that he knew of regiments in which the men had resolved together, as they came out of the trenches, to deal a deathblow to the revolution. However, when these same men reached approached their home station, all the combative intentions were forgotten and the influence of the officers was lost. The driving impulse for virtually every individual was to be discharged

⁵⁰¹ Lewinsohn, 18.

⁵⁰² Dreetz, 588.

⁵⁰³ *AEF*, XI, 29.

as soon as possible.⁵⁰⁴ By early December, the *Westheer* estimated that as many as one million of its 3.2 million remaining troops had left their units to head home on their own.⁵⁰⁵ On December 18, Colonel Reinhardt, the army's representative reported to the Demobilization Office, “. . . the breakdown of discipline which resulted from the domestic upheaval meant that the desire to return home could no longer contained . . . upon reaching the Reich they are too influenced by the raw urge to return home.”⁵⁰⁶

On December 5, Groener sent the cabinet an update on the progress of the *Frontheer*'s return to the homeland. The news was both good and bad. On the positive side of the ledger, thirty divisions had already reached their destinations. In the north, fifty-eight divisions had closed on assembly areas in the north, a further fifty-nine were assembling around Paderborn, Kassel, and Wetzlar, thirty more had proceeded past Frankfurt am Main, and another thirty-one were further south. He indicated the units in the south might be home for Christmas; those in the north would take longer. In this respect, the maintenance situation of the German railway system was deteriorating. Still, the marching performance of the troops had been outstanding, with the thoughts of the men being “ruled by a single thought, we should be home by Christmas.” With that in mind, Groener asked the government to expedite the distribution of newspapers that included the message that it was not so important to be home by Christmas when the available railway assets were either being turned over to the Allies or were urgently needed to bring food and coal to German cities. For the units that would be last to reach their home stations, the general asked the government to reassure the men that there

⁵⁰⁴ Groener, 472-3.

⁵⁰⁵ Report to the *Reich*'s Demobilization Office. Bessel, *Germany After the First World War*, 74.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 75.

would still be jobs waiting. Finally, the general asked the government to impose controls on the vast numbers of men making unauthorized use of the rail system.⁵⁰⁷

The first three phases of the army's return; the evacuation of the occupied territories, traversing the Rhineland, and the crossing of the Rhine River barrier had gone better, perhaps, than the government and the High Command could have expected. However, the last phase, the army's movement to its home stations, saw the plan start to unravel. As Groener's nine hand-picked divisions gathered around Berlin, the rest of the Field Army was beginning to disappear.

The *Frontschwein*'s Dilemma: Part IV

The behavior of German front-line troops during the return from the Western Front seems to offer a validation of Leonard Smith's ideas about soldier behavior. Smith found that, in the last years of the Great War, veteran French troops offered obedience only to the extent they believed the risk was proportionate to chances a given act would succeed. The same "negotiated balance-of-power equation" can be seen (though under significantly different circumstances) among the German veterans who remained with their units after the armistice. They offered obedience to the chain of command as long that obedience served the purpose of bringing them home.⁵⁰⁸

From the Armistice to the arrival in assembly areas on the eastern side of the Rhine, the behavior of the *Frontruppen* remained distinctly different from the rest of the German army. The six response factors that made the decisions of the front-line troops distinct were dynamic in their relative importance and their interrelationship. Thus, for example, isolation was a fundamental aspect of the soldier's outlook when he began the

⁵⁰⁷ BA-R: R43/2500/4; Telephone call from Groener to Ebert, transcript dated December 5, 1918.

⁵⁰⁸ Leonard Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division in World War I*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

march to the east. By the time he had crossed the Rhine, he was subjected both to political agitation and the irresistible pull of home. Isolation was no longer a major factor. Again, the six response factors allow one to frame most of the reasons why the *Frontheer* behaved differently from the rest of the army during this period.

Exhaustion: The demands of the march meant that physical exhaustion continued to play a role in the limited attention soldiers could generate for political matters. However, the emotional exhaustion, the dull apathy that characterized front-line soldiers exposed too long to danger and privation clearly began to lift as the army approached the Fatherland. Officers could no longer expect their men to obey out of inertia, especially if there seemed to be a delay in moving toward home.

Isolation: As suggested above, this was a dominant feature of the front-line soldier in the immediate aftermath of the revolution and the march through the occupied territories. Like emotional exhaustion, much of this condition lifted as the army crossed the German frontier.

Alienation: As the incidents cited above show, the combat troops continued to resent the troops in the rear area and the homeland who had avoided service in the trenches. If anything, that resentment increased as the *Frontruppen* came into contact with the *Etappenschweine*. The result, in some cases, was violence. On the other hand, any feelings of hostility toward the civilian population must certainly have been ameliorated by the hearty welcome the front-line troops received as they marched into Germany,

Selection: The chain of command picked the infantry divisions to shepherd the smaller support formations across the Rhine. Thus, once again, the front-line units were called on to take up a special burden. Self-selection as a distinguishing characteristic of the men

who marched across the Rhine bridges probably changed little between the Armistice and the arrival at the embarkation areas east of the Rhine. Troops chose to stay with their units as long as these were heading homeward. At the same time, the troops in these units felt no shame in accepting a victor's welcome from the German populace as the army moved into the interior of the homeland. The homeland thought their endurance and sacrifice made them heroes; they accepted the role.

Cohesion: These bonds continued to work their magic as the army moved through Belgium, France, and the Rhineland. The joyous welcome of German civilians could only reinforce unit *esprit* and cohesion. However, the farther the army moved east, the more it encountered that most powerful solvent of the bonds of cohesion: home and family.

Management: The officer chain of command, the front-line councils, and the government worked together effectively to convince the troops that it was in their best interest to support the government, obey the chain of command, and despise those forces that opposed the Ebert-Haase coalition. At the same time, by portraying the *Drückeberger* and out-of-control *Etappe* as threats to the army's supply, the officers were able to increase the alienation of the *Frontheer* toward those in the army's rear areas. However, over time it became clear that the "command message" absolutely failed to convince the troops there were other priorities besides getting home.

The *Westheer*'s long, difficult march from the Western Front was made possible by professional skill, unusual cooperation, and individual and group motivation. The professional skill was provided by the army's planning staffs carrying on the standard of technical proficiency established by the 19th century *Kriegsakademie* and the Elder

Moltke. The unusual cooperation was offered at the highest level by the mutual understanding achieved by the soldier, Groener and the party leader, Ebert. It was taken up at every subordinate level by the unit commanders of the army and the soldiers' councils established within their units. Though most officer memoirs and official histories tend to downplay the role of the front-line councils as intermediaries between chain of command and the rank and file, accounts like Lewinsohn's convince one that the councils played a key role in getting the army over the Rhine. Finally, the success occurred because the hard-marching combat veterans were motivated at first by the fear of Allied capture and then by the irresistible desire to go home.

To describe the return march as an orderly operation runs against the grain of some interpretations of the last days of the Imperial Army. Wilhelm Deist, justifiably respected as one of the foremost historians of the period, argued that, at the end of the war, the German High Command had little influence over the troops⁵⁰⁹ He wrote that due to desertion, passive resistance, and mutiny, "the military command had therefore lost control of its irreplaceable instrument."⁵¹⁰ Richard Bessel has picked up Deist's the argument and extends it to the post-war period by arguing that the army's advanced stage of disintegration had the happy, but unanticipated, effect of easing the army's demobilization.⁵¹¹ If one follows the arguments made by Deist and Bessel, the conclusion might be that there was no massive, organized return of units back to Germany. As a result, one might miss the political significance of the fact that most of the army returned as units, not individuals. While Deist and Bessel capture important truths

⁵⁰⁹ One major problem with this argument is that it ignores the heavy casualties the Allied armies suffered up through the last days of the war. Armies "on strike" do not inflict heavy losses on their enemies.

⁵¹⁰ Deist, 205.

⁵¹¹ Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 90.

about the condition of the German Army of late 1918, the character of the Field Army's return to Germany suggests that they overstate the army's state of dissolution prior to crossing the Rhine.

For Ebert and his Majority Socialist allies, the army's return from the Western Front was a victory. By bringing its sons and fathers home, the new republic had fulfilled its first obligation to the German nation. Those who criticize Ebert's alliance with the OHL overlook this obligation. The march across the Rhine had been a victory for the old officer corps as well. They had done an admirable job in accomplishing a difficult mission. As the army crossed the Rhine, Groener and the army's senior leaders could, for a brief time, nourish the hope that there remained a core of reliable formation to allow a blow against the radical revolutionaries.

The Spartacists observed what happened at the Rhine bridges and feared the *Westheer's* appearance in the German interior meant mortal danger to the revolution. On December 2, *Die Rote Fahne* warned its readers: "At the head of a powerful army under the black-white-red flag, with exemplary discipline and an artificially created hatred of 'Bolshevism' come generals, warmongers, and those devoted to the Hohenzollerns, from the west into the interior of Germany. . . Above all, their hope is the solid cadres of the returning front-line troops."⁵¹² The revolutionary Left was well aware that it had no military force that could challenge such "cadres."

Though the parades through the Rhine cities gave the OHL hope and radical Left nightmares, it was all an illusion. On the west bank of the Rhine, the Field Army began to dissolve.

⁵¹² *Die Rote Fahne* (Berlin), "Rüstung der Revolution," December 2, 1918

Nevertheless, had the army arrived at the German frontier as an armed mob, losing thousands of stragglers to Allied captivity as it marched, militarism's apologists would have had a far more difficult job in arguing the stab-in-the-back theory. By marching in good order across the Rhine in late November, and then sending nine complete divisions through the Brandenburg Gate in mid-December, the *Westheer* helped to foster the illusion that the army was "undefeated in the field." This was, perhaps, the unhappiest legacy of the return march. Wilhelm Deist was correct in suggesting an advanced state of disintegration in the army at the war's end, and Richard Bessel accurately depicts the last stages of the demobilization as a free-for-all. However, their descriptions ignores an important period of around three or four weeks in which the army held itself together for one final march.

In early December, Germany waited the return of the front-line troops with different emotions; anticipation, joy, and dread. Years later, the writer Ernst von Salomon recalled the impact of seeing the first front-line unit, the 213th Infantry Division, pass through a German town. A young cadet at the time, he was stunned by what he saw:

Oh, God how they looked, how these men looked! What was it that approached? These emaciated, unmoving faces under the steel helmet, these thin ranks, these tattered, dusty uniforms! They marched, step by step, and around them a seemingly endless emptiness. It was if they carried a spell of dangerous force, as if a secret power, invisible to those outside, drove them. They still carried, bundled in a dancing wisp of visions, the chaos of thundering battles in their brain, just as they carried the mud and dust of the rutted fields on their uniforms. Indeed, they marched as if they were the emissaries of death, of horror, the deadliest, loneliest, iciest cold.

In that moment, he realized that he had no idea who these men were or what they had been through. They were not of the same world as the crowd that watched them. "And you thought after all that, that the Front would be one with you, you

citizens? You thought after all, the Front would be as liberal as you, so reasonable, so full of a forgiving, understanding *Bonhomie?!'*"⁵¹³ How such men would fulfill the expectations of those who witnessed their return remained to be seen.

⁵¹³ Ernst von Salomon, *Die Geächteten*. (Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1962), 25. The book is an autobiographical novel of von Salomon's experience as a *Freikorps* fighter and his subsequent involvement in the murder of Walter Rathenau.

Chapter Six

The Last Parade: Demobilization and the German Army's March on Berlin, December 1918

Homeland

On November 23, 1918, cheering crowds lined the streets of Cologne to greet the elite⁵¹⁴ German *Jaeger* Division as it marched through the city in step with the music of its regimental bands. The impression left with observers markedly differed from the one von Salomon had recorded with the passage of the 213th Infantry Division. With scarcely controlled enthusiasm, the *Kölnische Zeitung* described the arrival of the *Jägers* as “Unbroken, undefeated, protectors of the homeland from without and protectors of the homeland within. The steadiness and order and strict discipline that lives in us, that is what one sees in these soldiers again. . . . In parade step, as if on the drill field, that is the way the battalions went by.” The article went on to report that the units carried the black-white-red imperial flag, the Prussian flag, and their own green *Jäger* banner, each decorated with flowers and wreaths. The author concluded that the homecoming of the soldiers was reminiscent of the glory days of 1914.⁵¹⁵ The *Kölnische Zeitung* wrote for an audience shaken by Germany’s defeat and the revolutionary upheaval that accompanied it. Dismayed by the collapse of the old regime, many Germans cast about for something strong, familiar, and reassuring. The arrival of the *Westheer*, marching in good order, often displaying the symbols of the old order, brought hope to those most

⁵¹⁴ The division included a number of guards regiments to include the Guards Rifles, the Guards *Jägers*, and Guards Dragoons.

⁵¹⁵ Quoted in the *Vossische Zeitung*, November 27, 1918, “Der deutsche Rückmarsch: Der Einzug der Jägerdivision in Köln.”

shaken by the events of November 1918. To them, the front-line troops represented the old German army, the “real” German army.

The report of the *Jäger* parade in Cologne would also be especially gratifying to the Berliners who read the *Vossische Zeitung*, which reprinted the description of the *Jaeger* parade in its November 27 edition. The *Vossische Zeitung* was a prominent, liberal newspaper printed in the capital and, because the *Jäger* Division included units raised in the area around Berlin, many of the newspaper’s readers were friends and family of the units marching through Cologne. These Berliners were grateful for the Rhineland’s generous reception of the *Jaegers* and looked forward to matching that celebration when the division reached Berlin.

When the *Jaegers* did reach Berlin, two and a half weeks later, they were part of a small army made up of the best units from the old *Kaiserheer*. Their entry into the capital was the occasion for carefully prepared ceremonial greeting that featured the crowds, flags, garlands, and speeches from leaders of the old army as well as the new republic. No one could fault the Berliners for the warmth of their welcome. However, the entry of veteran combat troops into the German capital, December 10-21, had the potential to be much more than a festive event. As planned by the *Oberheeresleitung*, the OHL, the arrival of the veterans of the Western Front would mean an end to revolutionary unrest in Germany and a decisive suppression of “Bolshevik” extremism. That the parades did not evolve into such a political *coup de main* is, on one hand, a story of high-level political maneuvering, intrigue, and manipulation of popular opinion. On the other, however, the “Berlin Operation” is the story of how the *Frontschweine* once

again confounded the expectations of both those who led them on the Right and those that feared them on the Left.

If the footsore *Jägers* crossing the Rhine in late November were grateful for the reception they received, the joy of homecoming was tempered with a certain level of anxious uncertainty. They found themselves returning to a nation hungry, impoverished, and divided. The old imperial regime was gone but no one was certain what would finally take its place. The end of the war had brought peace and momentous political change, but it had left Germans with more questions about the future than answers. Would Germany remain a single Reich or would it spin off into its component states? Kurt Eisner's government in Munich, for example, already styled itself the "Free State of Bavaria." If Germany remained a unitary state, would it include the ethnic Germans of the old Austrian empire? Where would the boundaries of the new Germany be marked? On the eastern frontier, the Poles and Czechs seemed to have designs on chunks of the old Reich, as did the Danes in the north, and the Belgians and French to the west. What would the Allies demand of Germany in terms of a peace settlement? It did not bode well that the Allies had imposed strict conditions for the Armistice and continued the "hunger blockade" afterwards. Finally, assuming Germany remained one state, what kind of state would it be? Would it be a parliamentary democracy, a Soviet republic, or something else?

These were the questions faced by Germany's new leaders, many of them unknown to the soldiers of the front-line army. Most likely, they had heard of Friedrich Ebert, the chancellor of the new government, but they were unlikely to be familiar with some of the other members of the coalition cabinet, Otto Landsberg or Emil Barth, for

example. They would have been even less familiar with the leaders of the Executive Council (*Vollzugsrat*) of Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, even though it claimed the authority to speak for all the councils in post-revolutionary Germany. If they were aware of this Executive Council, they would have been perplexed by its power-sharing relationship with Ebert's cabinet, a relationship superficially similar to the two-headed arrangement existing after the February Revolution in Russia where Kerensky's Provisional Government had shared power with the Petrograd Soviet. Once again, though dominated in membership by Majority Socialists, the *Vollzugsrat* was more stridently revolutionary in its platform than the cabinet.⁵¹⁶ The tense and ill-defined relationship developed in mid-November became even less comfortable in the first weeks of December.⁵¹⁷ At the same time, real power remained diffused among the many local workers' and soldiers' councils.

On the far left of the political spectrum, outside the centers of governmental power, was the *Spartakusbund* (Spartacus League). Formed from members of the left-wing of the Independent Socialists, the Spartacists believed the revolution was unfinished and openly sympathized with the Bolsheviks of Soviet Russia.⁵¹⁸ In the weeks that followed the downfall of the old regime, the Spartacists' most conspicuous leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, accused the Ebert government of compromising the revolution by leaving the old elites in positions of power in industry, the government ministries, and, especially, the army. In late 1918, the number of Liebknecht and

⁵¹⁶ The *Vollzugsrat's* chairman, Richard Müller and his confederate, Bruno Molkenbuhr, were considered especially radical in their views.

⁵¹⁷ See, for example, *Ursachen und Folgen*, Document 544, Vereinbarung zwischen dem Rat der Volksbeauftragten und dem Vollzugsrat des Berliner Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte vom 22. November 1918, pp. 18-19, and Document 553, Bekanntmachung des Rates der Volksbeauftragten und des Vollzugsrates der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte vom 9. Dezember 1918, pp. 33.

⁵¹⁸ The Spartacists would not constitute a separate political party until December 30, 1918 when they joined the left wing of the Independent Socialist to found the German Communist Party.

Luxemburgs' followers was small but was growing in numbers and energy in the major cities of Germany. Historians would later judge that Liebknecht and Luxemburg were neither as cunning nor ruthless as Lenin, but in the weeks after November 9 [Is the fiery rhetoric of the two Spartacist leaders terrified the German middle-class and the army leadership, who feared that Liebknecht and his followers were plotting a Bolshevik-style Red terror.

By the beginning of December, the differences between Ebert's government and the Spartacists were so irreconcilable that, to many Germans, an armed showdown seemed inevitable. While various militias and security forces were arming themselves across Germany, the key battleground would almost certainly be the capital of the Reich. In Berlin, the Ebert government looked to the city commandant, Otto Wels, a former paperhanger, to organize a *Republikanische Soldatenwehr* of several thousand volunteers.⁵¹⁹ Ostensibly augmenting the *Soldatenwehr* in the mission of protecting the provisional government was the *Volksmarinedivision*, the Peoples' Naval Division. In the first days of the revolution, this curious formation had originally been formed from sailors who volunteered to serve as guard forces around the key government buildings of the capital. By mid-December, as more sailors from the fleet bases on the North Sea made their way to Berlin, its numbers grew to between fifteen hundred and two thousand sailors. Elsewhere, the *Ersatz* battalions of the Berlin Garrison could be counted on for large numbers, but very questionable cohesion and military effectiveness.⁵²⁰ The Police

⁵¹⁹ Colonel van den Bergh of the War Ministry judged this formation to be of questionable value. It was led by men elected by the rank and file, and many of its approximately 10,000 members had signed on because of the high daily salary. Van den Bergh, diary entry of 9 December. See also *Quellen*, II/2, Document 8: "Brief des Oberleutnant Knoerzer über die Bildung von Sicherheitsverbänden und die Haltung der Regierung, Dezember 6 1918," 23-24; and Böhm, diary entry of November 28, 91..

⁵²⁰ Ibid, van den Bergh called them "nervous, suspicious, cowardly, more desirous of talking than shooting . . .", 56.

Commissioner, Emil Eichorn, had his own armed group, the *Sicherheitswehr* (Security Force) whose members reflected his Independent Socialist views. Arrayed on the side of the Spartacists were a variety of workers' militias formed on the model of the Soviet Red Guards, and the *Rote Soldatenbund*, the Red Soldiers' League. These groups were poorly armed but, when the Berlin garrison collapsed in the first days of the revolution, large stocks of weapons and ammunition fell into their hands.⁵²¹

Across the Reich

Just as the revolutionary days of early and mid November had given way to a new and uneasy power relationships in Berlin, similar adaptations were being made in the other towns and cities of Germany. In some areas, the new workers' and soldiers' councils were aggressive in asserting their new power. In other places, the councils worked out relatively amicable working relationships with the representatives of the old regime. No matter what the local balance of power between old and new authorities in a given area of the homeland, that balance would be altered in late November and through December with the return of the front-line troops.

This was certainly the case with the elite Bavarian *Leib* Regiment which returned to the homeland after a difficult retreat from the Balkan Front. When it arrived in the homeland, it found the former Wittelsbach kingdom transformed into the "Peoples' State of Bavaria," led by the Independent Socialist, Kurt Eisner. The First Battalion of the regiment marched into Munich on November 26 to a reception that mixed cheers and catcalls and a welcome speech from the chairman of Munich's Soldiers' Council. The

⁵²¹ The OHL estimated that up to thirty thousand weapons had fallen into the hands of the "leftist elements of the population." Oberkommando des Heeres, *Die Wirren in der Reichshauptstadt und im nordlichen Deutschland, 1918-1920*, from the series, *Darstellungen aus den Nachkriegskämpfen deutscher Truppen und Freikorps* (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1940), 21.

Third Battalion arrived two days later, marching in perfect order, led by the regimental commander, Colonel Ritter von Epp, who rejected a welcoming speech by any council members and, instead, ordered his troops to pass before him in review at their barrack in the *Türken Caserne*. The local soldiers' councils attempted to block the review but not until the bulk of the regiment had completed its march. The next day, the Second Battalion followed the first two battalions into the city. A few days later, the middle class of the city sponsored a greeting ceremony for the regiment at the *Hoftheater*. Eisner's government had promised not to disturb the festivities; however, during the ceremony, the USPD leader, Gustav Landauer, demanded an opportunity to speak to the troops. He proceeded to orate with what an eyewitness called a "fervent fanaticism, and, to the dismay of the burghers who sponsored the event, many of the troops were visibly moved by Landauer's revolutionary rhetoric. When he left, the eyewitness noted, ". . . they were no longer the same troops." Yet, despite Landauer's impressive performance, the Left remained anxious about the activities of the regiment to the point that, in order to quell rumors of a right wing *putsch*, von Epp was compelled to create a tentative pact with the city commandant to uphold peace and order.⁵²²

In Munster, a garrison town in Westphalia, the soldiers' council held less power. There, the return of the 13th Infantry Regiment on December 8 received a more unalloyed reception. The citizens of Munster gave the "Thirteeners" [*Dreizehner*] a heroes' welcome as they marched through the city. As the regiment arrived at the *Prinzipalmarkt* in the center of the city, they found it decorated with the black-white-red flags of the old

⁵²²Account of Leib Regiment's return from *Revolution und Räterepublik in München 1918/19 in Augenzeugenberichten*, ed. Gerhard Schmolze, (Düsseldorf: Karl Rauch Verlag, 1969), 153-154; and Wolfgang Zorn, *Bayerns Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert: Von der Monarchie zum Bundesland*, (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1986), 154-157. Von Epp would later become a famous *Freikorps* leader and the first *Statthalter* of Bavaria's first National Socialist government.

empire. The reception seemed proof that the populace put more faith in the front-line troops than the lightly regarded *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service), or the VIIth Corps General Soldiers' Council which exercised revolutionary authority for the district. With the agreement of Munster's mayor and the approval of many of much of the citizenry, the 13th Infantry Regiment took over security duties inside the city. The balance of power had shifted and, later in December and January, the General Soldiers' Council watched almost helplessly as the citizens and the corps commander began recruiting *Freikorps* units in and around Munster.⁵²³

In Bremen, a large port city with a strong labor movement and a naval garrison, the revolution had taken a more radical turn. The local councils rejected the Ebert's government's plans for a National Assembly, and would, in January 1919, declare the establishment of the "Socialist Republic of Bremen." The first major front-line unit to return to the city was the 213th Reserve Infantry Regiment. Though the local workers' and soldiers' council anticipated its arrival with considerable anxiety, the unit's entry into the city on December 11 went initially without incident. The chairman of the local *Räte*, Bernhard Ecks, greeted the troops by praising the new republic; Burgermeister Hildebrand led a cheer for the Fatherland, and the regimental commander, Major Kuttner, expressed the wish for a happy future. All seemed well as the unit moved to its caserne. However, the day after, fearing a counter-revolutionary conspiracy, the local revolutionaries arrested several officers and bourgeois leaders, but released them the next day.

⁵²³ Franz-Josef Jacobi (with Thomas Küster), *Geschichte der Stadt Munster*, Vol. 2, (Munster: Aschendorff, 1993), 223-227.

The situation became far more earnest with the arrival of the 75th Infantry Regiment (1st Hanseatic), otherwise known as the “Bremen” Regiment. The 75th was late returning to Bremen due to an assignment guarding stores in the vicinity of Bonn and it did not arrive on the outskirts of the city until December 28 and 29. Having discharged many of its oldest members, the regiment was down to six hundred men, many of whom had the same proletarian background as the Bremen revolutionaries. Nevertheless, the unit’s arrival put a sort of panic into the Independents and Spartacists of Bremen who called for the creation of a Red Guard several thousand strong to serve as an armed counterweight to the *Frontruppen*. As arms were distributed among the garrison troops, sailors, and workers, the officers of the 75th met with members of the city’s middle class and, with them, demanded the restoration of the old city government and the authority to return to casernes within the city. Though tensions ran high, the two sides were able to craft a temporary arrangement that allowed the 75th to take up some of the security duties within the city and to send representatives to the Bremen Worker’s and Soldiers’ Council. It appeared that violence had been avoided and, on New Years’ Day, the commander of “Bremen” Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Hagedorn, led his troops into a city where they were greeted by a crowd counted in the tens of thousands.

Yet the city’s soldier council had decided it could not allow an armed force of front-line troops inside the city. As the 75th approached its barracks after the parade, it was confronted by workers and soldiers manning machine guns in windows and on trucks, led by the head of the Soldiers’ Council, Bernhard Ecks. Ecks refused to speak with the officers and, instead, stood by a machine gun and told the men of the 75th that they were the victims of their officers’ chicanery. They should lay down their weapons,

he said, declare their support for the revolution, and go home. Both the officers of the regiment and the representatives of the regiment's soldiers' council protested the violation of the agreement that had allowed the unit to march into the city. After tense negotiations, a compromise was reached. The 75th would give up its weapons to be stored under a guard maintained by its own troops as well as representatives of the revolutionary councils. Later, Ecks justified breaking the agreement on the frivolous pretext that the reception of the front-line troops had featured the singing of the old *Deutschlandslied*. Armed conflict had been temporarily avoided, but, as the city's historian, Herbert Schwarzwaldler observed, "All of these events, bringing Bremen to the brink of civil war, increased the hate and mistrust on both sides."⁵²⁴

Armed conflict was not avoided in the East Prussian town of Allenstein. In part, this may have been because some front-line troops did not arrive from the Western Front until late in December when the Christmas crisis and the impending national election had exacerbated between the revolutionary councils and provisional government. The

Frankfurter Zeitung reported :

On the morning of the 30th, the Artillery Regiment stationed in Allenstein was to march into the town with banners flying, accompanied by representatives of the Workmens' and Soldiers' Council. The troops refused to do this and tore up and burned the red banners. The Workmens' and Soldiers' Council then called out other troops and after repeating their order to march into the town with red banners flying , opened fire with machine guns and rifles on the artillery regiment. Two officers were killed and a large number of officers and men wounded.⁵²⁵

Alenstein was the extreme case. Violence between the homeland councils and the troops returning home from the front was not the norm during December 1918 and, by January,

⁵²⁴ Quote and description of events in Bremen from Herbert Schwarzwaldler, *Geschichte der Freien Hansestadt Bremen*, Vol. III, *Bremen in der Weimarer Republik (1918-1933)*, (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1983.

⁵²⁵ *Frankfurter Zeitung* quoted in First Division AEF, G2 Report No. 123, January 4, 1919.

most of the front-line units had dissolved. But, there was a sequel. Later that same year both Bremen and Munich would be scene of bloody fighting between the *Freikorps* and the Left, while incidents like the one in Allenstein served to inspire the vengeful ruthlessness of the front-line volunteers who fought for the government during the civil war.

Demobilization

The situation in Munich, Munster, Bremen, and Allenstein were examples of the troubled political situation that greeted the field gray masses making their way back to the interior of the homeland. Overwhelmingly, the MSPD-dominated soldiers' councils within the Field Army had declared themselves in favor of the Ebert government.⁵²⁶ However, the complexities of the issues being debated in Berlin—socialization of industry, the scheduling of a national assembly, and the organization of a federal state—held relatively little interest for the front-line soldiers. They were interested primarily in schedules, schedules for trains heading east and schedules for the discharge of personnel.

The creation of these schedules was the business of the OHL, the *Oberheeresleitung*, headed by Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Wilhelm Groener, and the War Ministry under General Heinrich Scheuch.⁵²⁷ However, in a curious analogy to the bifurcated civilian government, both the OHL and the War Ministry claimed authority over the troop units returning to Germany. According to the Siege Law of 1851, upon mobilization, the Prussian War Ministry exercised national-level authority over forces in the homeland. Curiously, however, it did not exercise

⁵²⁶ *Vossische Zeitung* on Bad Ems, "Schluß der Frontsoldaten-Tagung." December 3, 1918.

⁵²⁷ The Prussian War Ministry, to be precise. The other federal states had their own war ministries, but the Prussian ministry had national authority. Scheuch (1864-1946) had served as War Minister since October 9, 1918. Ernst van den Bergh, *Aus den Geburtsstunden der Weimarer Republik: Das Tagebuch des Obersten Ernst van den Bergh*, ed. Wolfram Wette. (Dusseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1991), (fn. 21), 32. .

direct authority over the deputy corps commanders,⁵²⁸ who controlled the twenty-four military districts within the Reich after the corps commander took his troops to war. So, for example, in 1914, when the commander of the III Corps, recruited in the area around Berlin (Brandenburg), deployed his troops to his mobilization assembly areas, his deputy assumed control over the garrisons and replacement units in the III Corps Military District. The deputy corps commander also received sweeping powers over civil affairs within the district, often to the great exasperation of the civilian bureaucracy. Since the deputy corps commanders did not report to the War Ministry, each was free to interpret his responsibility for “public safety” as he saw fit. It was a genuinely dysfunctional system.⁵²⁹

On November 15, the *Vollzugsrat* of Berlin Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils had proclaimed that the Prussian War Ministry under Scheuch would be a single military authority to control the military and its demobilization. He would have authority over the OHL, the deputy corps commanders, and all other army headquarters.⁵³⁰ For the revolutionary government this move served two useful purposes: 1) it rationalized the glaring inefficiencies of the decentralized wartime system, and, perhaps more importantly, 2) put the military’s single senior authority in Berlin where it could be closely monitored and controlled. On the face of it, this was a sensible move.

However, Groener and the officers of the Field Army had performed a minor miracle in bringing the *Westheer* home, and they saw no reason to disrupt a chain of command that seemed to be reasserting the army’s order and discipline. Even more

⁵²⁸ Except in Bavaria, where the deputy corps commanders reported to the Bavarian War Ministry.

⁵²⁹ Description of the Siege Law system taken from Gerald Feldman, *Army Industry and Labor in Germany, 1914-1918*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) 31-33.

⁵³⁰ BA-R: R43/2482, f.1. Executive Council Proclamation of November 15, 1918, 15.

importantly, at their head was the powerfully symbolic figure of Hindenburg.⁵³¹ Thus, to the dismay of the War Ministry, the OHL, after displacing the headquarters from Spa to the Wilhelmshöhe castle outside Kassel in mid-November,⁵³² continued to give orders to the units of the Field Army both in the East and West even while these units moved deep into Germany. As a result, in the first months after the armistice, the relationship between the OHL and the *Kriegsministerium* was, like the relationship of *Vollzugsrat* and Ebert's cabinet, tense and ill defined.

The strained relationship was illustrated by a meeting between Colonel van den Bergh of the War Ministry and Colonel Heye, Chief of the Operations Section of the OHL.⁵³³ Van den Bergh's diary entry does not indicate the date of the meeting but does recall the topic: what courses of action were available for maintaining internal order? Heye said the OHL's favored alternative was the employment of "reliable" troops taken from the units returning from the front. Van den Bergh denounced the proposal and warned, "The troops will melt like butter in the sun once they have spent any time in the homeland, and they would fail when they are exposed to the influence of the big city." Instead, van den Bergh recommended the deactivation of the old army's active and *ersatz* battalions to be replaced as rapidly as possible by a well-paid, republican people's force (*Volkswehr*). Such an organization, he argued, would be based on legal grounds and could serve as the transition to a future *Reichswehr*.⁵³⁴

The two men's views could not be reconciled. Van den Bergh had experienced what the revolution looked like on the streets of Berlin, and he had worked in a War

⁵³¹ Wolfgang Elben, *Das Problem der Kontinuität in der deutschen Revolution, 1918-1919*. (Düsseldorf, Droste Verlag, 1965), 142.

⁵³² Thae'r's diary describes the move of 13-14 November as "fairly dramatic." In a number of instances, revolutionary roadblocks seemed ready to open fire on the OHL staff as it moved east into Germany. 273.

⁵³³ Recall that Heye had been the director of the *Armeeparlament* of November 9.

⁵³⁴ Van den Bergh, diary entry of December 25, 1918, 65.

Ministry that often seemed besieged by hostile elements. In his view, Heye's proposals reflected hopeless naiveté. For Heye, the *Westheer* was the best hope of restoring order in Germany. As representative of the front-line troops, Heye was confident that he knew what the veterans of the Western Front could do. What is more, he and the other members of the *Westheer* felt the weakness of the army's leadership in the homeland had contributed to the debacle of November 9. The front-line troops would have to make things right.⁵³⁵

Heye's outlook also reflected the fact that the march across the Rhine had relieved much of the depression that had settled on the OHL staff in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. Groener and his subordinates believed the conduct of the troops gave reason for guarded optimism about the army's future. Yet, if their achievement in bringing the army back to Germany had restored some of their confidence, the OHL staff had little opportunity for celebration. In the first days of December, the headquarters of the Field Army faced a number of urgent and daunting missions. They included planning and executing the demobilization of the *Frontheer*, bringing troops home from the East, establishing frontier defense in the east and west, building a cadre and framework for a future army, and restoring peace and order in the homeland.

Demobilization, in particular, demanded immediate attention. When the war ended, there were some eight million men waiting to be released into a resource-starved economy struggling to transition from a war footing to peacetime production. The German government had been considering the problems of demobilization since 1917, but planning had been predicated on the assumption of German victory. The relatively sudden collapse of the Wilhelmine regime meant the War Ministry needed a new plan in

⁵³⁵ Ibid, van den Bergh complained of the OHL's attitude of "infallibility." 64-65.

a hurry, and the Field Army needed to use every available device to hold soldiers within their units until a plan was in place.

To that end, the one soldier with the greatest remaining moral authority in the army, Field Marshal von Hindenburg, had made this appeal to the front-line troops near the end of November:

Soldiers, you that have held out loyally more than four years in the land of the enemy, think of this, how infinitely important it is for the army and the homeland that the return of the armies and the discharge of its units be carried out in full peace and order. The numerous difficulties that accompany the homecoming of such a massive force can only be overcome if every individual among you remains faithfully at this post until the hour of discharge from the ranks of army comes. You, that in battle so often subordinated yourself to the well being of others, do not forget now, that the homeland needs your sacrifice in these last hours.⁵³⁶

Hindenburg went to promise the men that, except for the year groups 1896-1899, men would be released as rapidly as possible. He cautioned them to be patient with the shortage of rail transportation and warned them not to be “seduced” into leaving their units ahead of schedule.⁵³⁷

As so often happened in the weeks after November, the proclamations of Hindenburg and the OHL reflected the view that the front-line soldiers were a body set apart from the rest of the army. The front-line soldiers, through their sacrifice, had demonstrated soldierly virtues that could not be expected from the rest of the army. To the German officer corps represented by Hindenburg, these were the virtues on which a successful demobilization could be based.

The broad outlines of army’s planned demobilization became 1) a reduction in strength to approximately pre-war levels with the rank and file drawn from the 1896-

⁵³⁶ *Vossische Zeitung*, 29 November 1918, “Hindenburg an das Feldheer.”

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*

1899 year groups; 2), the discharge of older men in a phased program controlled by their units from their peacetime casernes; the oldest year groups released first,⁵³⁸ 3) the designation of selected units for duty on the eastern and western frontiers, 4) rapid conduct of all aspects of demobilization.⁵³⁹

On the surface the plan was sensible, but it was fatally flawed. As it turned out, only the last objective was achieved.⁵⁴⁰ The youngest year groups had been called to the colors during the last months of a lost war; they had no desire to serve the discredited army and no desire to be the last ones searching for a job in an uncertain labor market.⁵⁴¹ The older men were impatient to get home and tended to believe that waiting for a discharge order in an overcrowded caserne, perhaps a considerable distance from home and family (and, possibly, work), was a fool's errand. Thus, young and old soldiers left of their own initiative by the hundreds of thousands, not waiting for the discharge papers,

⁵³⁸ Priority was also to be given to railway workers, miners, social services workers, and those employed in food processing. Alfred Doblin, *Sieger und Besiegte: Eine wahre Geschichte*, (New York: Aurora Verlag, 1946), 15.

⁵³⁹ Description of the demobilization plan from Richard Bessel, *Germany After the First World War*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 77. For officers the plan was different. Active (pre-war) officers would remain on duty; if their unit was inactivated they would be assigned other, temporary duties. Wartime officers, if not in key positions, were to be discharged immediately. Berthold and Neef, Document 61: "Verfügung des Kriegsministeriums vom 19. November 1918," 200.

⁵⁴⁰ Some of the success of the demobilization was serendipitous circumstance. Instead of returning to Germany at the same time, geography, command and control, and politics caused the different elements of the Field Army to return over an extended period of time. Thus, while the *Westheer* had largely closed into the homeland by December 1918, the forces in Poland, northern Russian, and the Balkans by January 1919, the forces in the Kiev Army Group by February and March, 1919. Some unfortunate German detachments in the Caucasus did not reach Germany until July 1919. *Die Schlachten und Gefechten des Grossen Krieges, 1914: Quellenwerk nach den amtliches Bezeichnungen*. Collected by the Great General Staff, (Berlin: Verlag von Hermann Sack, 1919), 412-419.

⁵⁴¹ This was a special worry of the troops on the Eastern Front where disorder, political wrangling, and transport difficulties delayed the return of the *Ostheer*. The OHL asked the government to reassure the men in the east that they would not be disadvantaged in the hunt for work. BA-R: R 43/2500/5, Transcript of Giebel call to Ebert, dated December 3, 1918, 37. Groener suggested that the government set up committees in every town and city with the sole purpose of ensuring that returning soldiers get a fair opportunity for work. This was a great source of concern to the front-line troops. BA-R: R 43/2500/5, Transcript of call from Groener to Ebert, dated December 5, 1918. 42.

50-mark stipend, and a free suit of clothes offered to men who left on schedule.⁵⁴² In other cases, the OHL bowed to the pressures from army group and army headquarters and some divisions scheduled for rail movement were, instead, allowed to continue their foot march east. In other cases, if a unit's march route took it near the home of one of the older soldiers, he was discharged on the spot instead of continuing on to the designated demobilization area (*Demobort*). The pressure to let the men go was enormous. Groener wrote later, "To be discharged as soon as possible was the desire of every individual. The pull of hearth and home overcame patriotic feelings. Many divisions could scarcely wait until they were loaded on to trains."⁵⁴³ When a courier from the OHL visited the headquarters of Army Group D, a staff officer there told him that the enlisted staff had announced, "If you don't let us go before Christmas, then we'll walk away from the telephone and let the officers operate it themselves."⁵⁴⁴ Concessions by the OHL only seemed to confuse the situation as (to paraphrase the Elder Moltke) counter-order followed order, which was followed, in turn, by disorder.⁵⁴⁵

Given these circumstances, by the end of 1918, the army found it had neither enough men to reach pre-war strength levels nor enough complete units to perform border security missions.

⁵⁴² BA-R: R43/2482, Demobilization Instructions from the Executive Council, dated November 23, 1918, 33.

⁵⁴³ Groener, *Lebenserrinerungen*, 473. Groener, who had made a name for himself before the war as the General Staff's railroad expert, observed that the rail situation was especially difficult due to the vast quantities of rolling stock turned over to the Allies as a result of the Armistice agreement. .

⁵⁴⁴ BA-MA: N46/130 Nachlass Groener, Letter of General Staff Officer Queis, Ia doc. 117751, dated August 4, 1919

⁵⁴⁵ Allied observers were also befuddled. One AEF Intelligence summary reported, "Conflicting reports are being received regarding the number of men to be retained. A discharged railroad employee says that he knows positively that only the classes of 1918 and 1919 are to be retained. The original intention of the higher authorities had been to retain the classes of 1916-1917-1918-1919, but this had been changed." NARA: RG 120/5895, Third Army G2 Summary of Intelligence, No. 25, dated December 11, 1918.

The numbers tell the story. On December 17, the Demobilization Office of the War Ministry reported that 300-400,000 men had already been discharged.⁵⁴⁶ Two weeks later, the same office indicated that, of the approximately three million men of the *Westheer*, only 300,000 remained, along with 200,000 ill-used horses. By the end of January 1919, the eight million man army of November 1918 was down to one million. Of just over three million troops in the *Westheer*, an estimated one million departed the army without an official discharge.⁵⁴⁷ Within six weeks after the armistice, the once powerful army of the German Reich was melting away faster than the various staffs could update their strength reports.⁵⁴⁸ On the last day of 1918, an order by the government announcing the army and navy would be in a state of “demobilization” (*demobil*) effective January 10, 1919, merely recognized an existing condition.⁵⁴⁹

In some places, the local authorities had been able to conduct mass discharges in fairly orderly fashion, in other places they lost control and, in still others, the activities of the local councils undermined efforts to bring order to the process. The district commander in the X Corps District (Braunschweig), for example, complained that the local council had ignored all of the orders from the government and the War Ministry, had arbitrarily dissolved all units and discharged all officers. There was no chance for an

⁵⁴⁶ This does not include the approximately one million men of the *Etappe* who abandoned their units to return home during the first days of the revolution.

⁵⁴⁷ Deutsche Historische Museum, Exhibit Item Do2/72/1054, “Maueranschlag mit einem Telegramm der Regierung an die OHL zur Aufrechterhaltung der Disziplin.”

⁵⁴⁸ Bessel, 79. Richard Bessel, a British historian who has done the most extensive modern research on Germany’s military and economic demobilization concludes “. . . the German army in late 1918 [was] capable only of doing precisely what the overwhelming mass of soldiers wanted it to do.”

⁵⁴⁹ BA-R: R 43/2485/f “Demobilization and *Landsturm* Dissolution Order,” dated December 31, 1918, 153.

orderly demobilization and the corps headquarters had ended up sending soldiers from Braunschweig to process their discharges.⁵⁵⁰

Afterwards, Groener would have to defend himself against charges from the Right that the OHL had been responsible for allowing the old army to disintegrate. Against these charges, Groener responded that, for the bulk of the army, the pressure from below gave the Supreme Headquarters no options. Some units had troops disperse on their own. In other cases, the south German states demanded the return of their soldiers even when this created north-south traffic that disrupted the generally east to west movement of the Field Army.

With a heavy heart and under the pressure of the Front [original underlined], because of the general urge to get home (*Drang nach Hause*), the OHL authorized part of the divisions to go to their demobilization stations by foot march, and, with agreement with the K.M. [*Kriegsministerium*], to expedite the return of the oldest year groups. However, these measures made little improvement. The urge to get home was always general.⁵⁵¹

In other words, Groener and his staff had been forced to give way to the “front.” Here, once again, the front-line troops imposed their will on events and confounded the expectations of the army’s senior leadership and the government.

For the OHL, the army’s disintegration made accomplishment of its other missions problematic. Groener wrote: “In the first days after 9/10 November, we in the OHL had considered the dream that we would have enough reliable troops to build a Border Defense Force on the Rhine. This hope proved itself false.” In frustration he resorted to uncharacteristic hyperbole, writing that troops that had marched home in

⁵⁵⁰ BA-R: R 43/2485/f, “Telegram from Hanover,” from *Generalkommando X* to the War Ministry, dated December 1, 1918, 133.

⁵⁵¹ BA-MA: N 46/130, Nachlass Groener, Groener memorandum on demobilization, Ia document, 117757, dated May 30, 1919.

perfect order remained under the control of their officers unit the precise moment they reached the Rhine and encountered the “revolutionary atmosphere.”⁵⁵²

Even as it was losing control of demobilization, the German army had to deal with the other problems pressing on and outside the frontier of the Reich. Bringing the soldiers home from the Eastern Front was, in particular, an operation that presented a myriad of complex and politically sensitive issues. On the Baltic coast German troops were organizing themselves into volunteer units to fight the Bolsheviks.⁵⁵³ In the Ukraine, German units were finding it difficult to extricate themselves from the fighting between the Reds, Whites, and the Ukrainian nationalists. Field Marshal von Mackensen, meanwhile, was making a difficult retreat through Hungary with the German detachments from the Macedonian front. On the Silesian frontier, the new Polish state was fomenting insurrection among the ethnic Poles around Posen while making common cause with the most revolutionary local councils.

Finding troops for the eastern frontier proved put the OHL in a special quandary. It had deployed a number of units from the *Westheer* to the Silesian border, but these, too, suffered the dissolution experienced by the remainder of the army.⁵⁵⁴ Nor could the high command call on units returning to Germany from inside Poland. The German garrisons of Warsaw, Lodz, and other Polish cities had largely overthrown their officer

⁵⁵² Groener, 472.

⁵⁵³ This inspired enormous outrage on the Left..

⁵⁵⁴ In a message to the troops of the 234th Division, slated for assignment on the eastern border, the chain of command warned, “Since the 234th Division has been assigned to garrison the border and must remain there for approximately a half of the year, I hope the cohesion that has existed among the front-line troops up to now will remain in the future. We are now coming into an area where the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils hold power.” *Ursachen und Folgen*, Doc. 747, p.500.

chains of command and, in many cases, turned their weapons and equipment over to Pilsudski's forces as the price for transport back to Germany.⁵⁵⁵

Lacking the reliable troops to handle the security missions along the eastern frontier, the army would eventually turn to a new expedient, volunteer formations, otherwise known as *Freikorps*. The leaders in the German government began to plan for such units even before the revolution, but the rapidly decaying condition of the army in the weeks after the armistice added immediacy to such considerations.⁵⁵⁶ In the event, however, it was the initiative of men like General Maercker, commander of the 214th Division, that led to the more or less spontaneous creation of the earliest such volunteer units.⁵⁵⁷ With relatively little oversight from the OHL, these new formations began to form along the Polish border and outside Berlin.⁵⁵⁸

“Peace and Order”

To Groener and his staff, however, these problems were trumped by the importance of maintaining order within the Reich. The danger that weighed on every officer's mind was the frightening example of what had happened to Russia where a moderate revolutionary government had been overturned by frightening political extremists, the Bolsheviks. The Russian example, no doubt, served to inspire the pact between Groener and Ebert on November 10. The secret agreement between the First Quartermaster General and the Chancellor had been solidified by Hindenburg's public declaration of support for the Majority Socialist government on November 10: “It may be disseminated, that the OHL, with Reich Chancellor Ebert, until now the leader of the

⁵⁵⁵ Volkmann, *Marxismus*, 263-264. See also, Kluge, pp. 97-101.

⁵⁵⁶ Schüddekopf, Document 15, p. 48.

⁵⁵⁷ See the bitter denunciation of the OHL's failure by a “front-line” general in General von Maercker's personal account, *Vom Kaiserheer zur Reichswehr*. (Leipzig: Verlag von K. F. Koehler), 40-41.

⁵⁵⁸ Schüddekopf, 42.

moderate Social Democratic Party, desire to proceed together to prevent the spread of terroristic Bolshevism in Germany.”⁵⁵⁹ Germany’s military leaders saw Ebert’s government as the best hope for “saving what could be saved” of the army and the nation.⁵⁶⁰

Along with backing Ebert, the army leadership also chose to support the key goal of the Majority Socialists, the convention of a National Assembly. To this end, on November 19, the OHL called on the chain of command of the *Westheer* to promulgate a pro-government message from the Soldiers’ Council of the OHL. It began:

To all Soldiers’ Councils of the Field Army!
Comrades!

Through negotiations we have had with the representatives of the Soldiers’ Councils of the Field Army, a total agreement on goals has resulted. All want to strengthen the current revolutionary government of Ebert-Haase and greet with joy the early convention of a National Assembly, summoned with the cooperation of the members of the Field Army, which will allow the further construction of our new Reich. We refuse to have our victory over the former dictators to be misused to create a new dictatorship, which would lead to Russian conditions.⁵⁶¹

In this regard, the senior officers of the old army found themselves in harmony with the expressed political positions of the soldiers’ councils within the front line units. As the conference at Bad Ems had shown, these councils were dominated by Majority Socialists. However, support of a National Assembly hardly signaled the transformation of the old army’s senior leaders into advocates of social equality and representative democracy. Instead, men like Groener viewed a National Assembly as the best way to

⁵⁵⁹ Berthold and Neef, Document 21: “Befehl Hindenburgs an das deutsche Feldheer vom 10. November 1918,” 150-151.

⁵⁶⁰ On November 17, Groener wrote his wife: “What the future will bring, who knows? The Field Marshal and I want to support Ebert, who I view as a straightforward, honorable and upstanding character, as long as the cart doesn’t slide too far to the left.” Quoted in Dorothea Groener-Geyer, *General Groener: Soldat und Staatsmann*. (Frankfurt am Main: Societäts Verlag, 1955), 117.

⁵⁶¹ Berthold and Neef, Document 60: “Aufruf des Soldatenrates bei der OHL an die Soldatenräte des Feldheeres vom 19. November 1918,” 198.

supplant the power of the soldiers' and workers' councils as well as the best means for allowing the conservative elements of German society to reassert themselves in national politics.⁵⁶²

Supporting Ebert and his policies required the officers to overcome considerable cognitive dissonance. The old Prussian, Hindenburg, would be a diehard monarchist until he died; Groener, the more pragmatic Wurttemburger, had been a monarchist as well, at least until the events of November 9 forced him to choose between his warlord and the army. The OHL staff and virtually all of the army's senior leaders were profoundly conservative and hostile to socialism as a political force. Yet, in the days after the Kaiser's abdication, they had chosen to work in support of Ebert's government. Marxist historians have long insisted that these men were dead set on strangling the young revolution in its cradle, but this seems to overlook the fact that Groener, with Hindenburg standing behind him, probably played the decisive role in persuading Wilhelm II to abdicate. Beyond that, the German army's leaders knew, with a final peace treaty still unsigned, the Entente would not tolerate a Hohenzollern restoration or a military dictatorship. What the officers did want was a strong government acceptable to the populace but led decisively by a man who would protect the nation from extremism and assure the army of an "appropriate" role in the new Germany of the post-war era. Hindenburg, Groener, and their subordinates seemed to believe that Ebert fit this description as well as any man could. The army's senior officers held a simplistic understanding of the political struggles going on inside the homeland; they tended to see

⁵⁶² Groener-Geyer, Groener's 17 November letter to his wife, 117. See also Thaer, diary entry of 15 November. Thaer wrote that once peace and order were restored, a conservatively oriented republic was possible and that it was Groener's hope that the middle-class parties would unite to restore the necessary counterweight to the socialists. 269.

the Independent Socialists in Ebert's cabinet as a dangerous obstacle to vigorous action and the *Vollzugsrat* as close partner to the dangerous Spartacists.⁵⁶³ Thus, the officer corps was willing put the front-line troops, the only forces they still controlled, at the service of former saddle-maker and union leader.

Still, if the army's bayonets were needed to strengthen the Ebert government, they would need to be collected and deployed at the decisive political point, Berlin. And, though the army seemed to be melting away, the OHL was not as ready to abandon the hope that some part of old army might still be employed for that purpose. Given the condition of the *Heimatheer* and the troops in the East, that part would necessarily have to come from among the *Frontruppen* arriving in Germany from the Western Front. In a confidential message of November 16, entitled "Guidelines for Influence on the Troops," Groener wrote, "The government depends on the authorities within the federal states, which, however, have almost exclusively surrendered their power to more or less radical *A- and S- Räte*. These councils are, for most part, incapable of performing their duties." Groener went on to say that the army had told the Ebert government that they would only recognize the established authorities and would allow the local workers' and soldiers' councils an advisory role. "Whether the government is in the position to restore the old authorities is doubtful. They have, above all, no power source (*Machtfaktor*) behind them," he affirmed. Thus, the orderly return of the front-line units had an importance for Germany's future that went beyond the care and recognition of the troops.

The new government needs a power source on which it can support itself and provide the necessary prestige to resist against all pressures. Only a cohesive, well-ordered, returning Field Army can give the present

⁵⁶³ Rakenius offers a persuasive analysis of the OHL's political "estimate of the situation." 125-126 and 139.

government the power and prestige to be secure against the putsches of terrorists.

Thus, the cohesive return of the Field Army has taken on a meaning far beyond military affairs; it preserves us from dangerous upheavals [to the nation].⁵⁶⁴

Such a message appealed to subordinate leaders to perceive the combat veterans under their command as the single best remaining hope for Germany's future.

However, the forces of dissolution threatened the "cohesive, well-ordered" force that Groener saw as so critical. The question for the OHL was whether or not sufficient "reliable" troops could be assembled for a show of force that would either cow the Spartacists, or, if necessary, conduct a combat operation to suppress the government's enemies. It appeared to be a race between the army's impending dissolution and the inevitable showdown between the "Bolsheviks" and the Ebert government.⁵⁶⁵

The showdown might come sooner rather than later. A National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils was scheduled in Berlin for December 16-21 and the army leadership feared the congress would strengthen the council movement at the expense of the government. The OHL had already had an unhappy experience with the assembly of front-line councils at Bad Ems and feared extremists would hijack the National Congress to their end. Thus, the execution of the march into the capital was given an extra urgency and new deadline: December 16.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Berthold and Neef, Document 54: "Richtlinien für die Einwirkung auf die Truppe," 187-190.

⁵⁶⁵ In an important but mysterious letter from either Groener or Schleicher to an unknown confidant ("Lieber Freund"), the author wrote that, at that moment (December 1), the morale and discipline of the troops was good. "They will do all that the government orders. Only one danger exists: the troops are diverted to go home to see parents, wife, and child. The greater, on one hand, the authority of the officers is maintained—those now at the front retain their full status—and the faster, on the other hand, the troops employed [for operations in Berlin] may be relieved by national security troops formed from good elements of the Field Army, the less is this danger. . . . In my opinion, it all comes down to this, that the government decisively and cleverly uses the days of the entry [of the troops into the capital] to strengthen its position and create order." BA-MA: N 42/11 Nachlass Schleicher, "Lieber Freund" letter, dated December 1, 1918.

⁵⁶⁶ Könnemann, 1593.

The OHL Makes a Plan

Good staff officers pride themselves on anticipating requirements and the army began planning for an operation in support of the Provisional Government shortly after the army started on its return march to the homeland. In fact, two plans were developed. In Berlin, a Colonel von Haeften, a general staff officer of uncertain portfolio, and a Dr. Simons, a minister in the Reichs Chancellory, together conceived an ambitious plan to restore peace and order. They proposed to Ebert, the War Ministry, and the OHL that the military be used to enact the total overthrow of the workers' and soldiers' councils and the establishment of Ebert as a provisional Reich President invested with dictatorial power. Ebert gave the idea mixed reviews. The War Minister, Scheuch, thought the project has interesting prospects but refused to direct the action. For its part, the OHL, represented by Colonel Heye, believed the War Ministry was the key to such an ambitious and politically charged operation, and when Scheuch opted out, so did Heye and the OHL.⁵⁶⁷

The OHL had a plan of its own. As originally conceived within the staff, around ten handpicked divisions would be assembled around Berlin and, when the appropriate signal was given, these divisions would march into the capital and disarm the enemies of the government, if necessary by armed force. Groener may or may not have been an enthusiastic participant in the conception of the plan,⁵⁶⁸ but already by mid-November he was ready to dispatch three of his most trusted subordinates, his own adjutant, Colonel Tieschowitz, his political advisor, Major Kurt von Schleicher, and Colonel von Thaer, to

⁵⁶⁷ Description of the "Haeften Option" from Rakenius, 134-135. Berthold and Neef, Document 120: "Oberst von Haeften uber Vorbereitung der Konterrevolution anlässlich des Truppeneinzugs in Berlin in Dezember 1918 (Auszug)" 293-296.

⁵⁶⁸ Rakenius believes he was initially skeptical, 134.

pick the units that might be used.⁵⁶⁹ As the *Westheer* streamed across the Rhine, these three officers moved from command post to command post, in and around the endless field gray columns, to find commanders willing to certify their men were ready for what was eventually called the “Berlin Operation.”

As a result of their travels, Groener’s agents identified nine divisions for the special mission. Not surprisingly, almost all were Guard units originally stationed and headquartered in the III Corps area around Berlin.⁵⁷⁰ The choice had an additional benefit: along with their presumed steadfastness, the deployment of Guard units near their home station was unlikely to raise as much suspicion as would be the case with units from other parts of Germany.⁵⁷¹

If the chosen units might be initially uncertain of what was intended for them, the nature of their mission was spelled out by a secret order issued by Army Group B on November 16. The order instructed subordinate armies that units chosen should be staffed by as many active officers as possible, should be outfitted with plentiful ammunition and “close-combat weapons,” and should have their machine gun companies fully manned. Unreliable elements, the order stated, should be separated “inconspicuously” and exchanged for more reliable men during the deployment. The cover story would be that certain active divisions were to be maintained and these units

⁵⁶⁹ Description of the original concept from Thaer, p. 273.

⁵⁷⁰ Later, the Soldiers’ Council of the OHL would complain to the government that the officers had chosen the troops to enter Berlin with consultation with the council. It was clear, the council asserted, that the officers had picked regiments where the councils were weak and the officers strong. BA-R: R 43/2500/4 Eduard Weckerle, “Für eine republikanische Volkswehr,” dated January 4, 1919, 69.

⁵⁷¹ The deputy corps commander for the Guards was headquartered in Berlin. There is some indication that the OHL sought to reinforce the first nine divisions with others. See for example, BA-R: 43/2485, Telegram from the OHL to the Reich Leadership, dated December 13, 1918. #5815. In this message, Groener asks permission to bring the 4th Infantry Division, on its way home to Pomerania, through Berlin. The message suggests a route through Berlin would not take the unit too far off its path to its demobilization area.

required weapons and ammunition to guard against plunderers and other dangerous elements cast up by the uncertain political situation.⁵⁷²

Before planning could go too far, the operation needed a commander. Since the War Minister, Scheuch, had shown no enthusiasm for such a *coup de main*, the OHL was an obvious choice to direct the operation. According to time-honored military principles of command and control, the logical move would have been to transfer the headquarters to Berlin where close liaison could be maintained with the unit commanders, the War Ministry, and Ebert. However, Groener felt uneasy about the project's chances for success. The course of the demobilization had given him ample cause for worry about the steadiness of the troops. Ebert, he feared, might lack the "ruthless will and extreme boldness" required to move decisively against his enemies. Moreover, if the operation miscarried, Liebknecht and his followers might be emboldened to launch their own coup. In such a contingency, the OHL would need freedom of action that a headquarters in the capital would not offer. Finally, Hindenburg's name still carried enormous weight with the German people and it would be foolish to associate the field marshal with a failure.⁵⁷³

Weighing these considerations, Groener decided that it would be best to separate the OHL from the operation both in physical distance and in function.⁵⁷⁴ His solution to the command problem was to creation of a special headquarters. He chose as its commander an experienced and trustworthy commander, General von Lequis and assigned a trusted officer from his own headquarters, Major von Harbou, to serve as

⁵⁷² Berthold and Neef, Document 53: "Befehl—streng geheim—des Oberkommandos der 11. Armee auf Weisung der Heeresgruppe B vom 16. November 1918," 186.

⁵⁷³ Rakenius, 136.

⁵⁷⁴ Groener's decision-making process and quote from Erwin Könnemann, "Der Truppeneinmarsch am 10. Dezember in Berlin: Neue Dokumente zur Novemberrevolution." *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte* (GDR) (16), 1968, 1597. See also, Ekkehart Guth, *Die Loyalitätskonflikt des deutschen Offizierskorps in der Revolution, 1918-1920*. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1985), 64-65.

Lequis' chief of staff. As the divisions arrived at their initial assembly areas north, south, and west of Berlin, *Generalkommando (General Command)* Lequis would assume command of them and direct their subsequent entry into the capital.⁵⁷⁵

On December 1, Groener and his staff met with von Lequis to establish the objectives and time-line for execution of the new command's mission. The goals they set were ambitious:

December 10: The Guard Cavalry Rifle Division would be the first unit to enter the city. Pro-government forces would occupy key government buildings and the Ebert government would issue an announcement of welcome. The *Jäger* Division and the 1st Guard Division would remain in reserve outside the city.

December 11: The German *Jäger* Division would enter the city; the 1st Guards Division would march into Potsdam. The populace would surrender all weapons and the government would issue proclamation stating that those found in possession of weapons without the proper authorization (*Waffenschein*) would be shot (as would those who had assumed official positions without legal basis). Deserters and sailors would be given ten days to report to the appropriate unit headquarters. Reliable forces would begin sweeps through certain areas⁵⁷⁶ of the capital.

December 12: The 4th Guards Division arrives. The government would begin certification of those claiming to be unemployed or need of special relief.

December 13: The 5th Guards Division arrives. The government promulgates an order throughout the entire Reich directing that the authority and symbols (rank insignia, decorations, side arms, required salutes, etc.) of the old officer corps would be restored.

⁵⁷⁵ Rakenius, 136.

⁵⁷⁶ One assumes here that this meant the working class districts like Wedding and Prenzlauer Berg.

The legal civil authorities and troops would reassert control over their regular functions. The army would announce direct all replacement (*Ersatz*) units of the Home Army would be immediately disbanded.⁵⁷⁷

December 14th: Elements of the 1st Guards Division would march into the city.

December 15th and after: Forces in the city would be reinforced by the 3rd Guard Division followed on subsequent days by the 5th and 37th Infantry Divisions;⁵⁷⁸ the 4th Guards Division would redeploy to Spandau. All military installations would be seized and the units which were not part of the Berlin garrison would begin evacuation of the city. The “exit strategy,” once order had been restored, envisioned the eventual relief of Lequis’ troops by a newly formed “National Guard.”⁵⁷⁹

The plan reflected the army’s view of what was required to restore order. At the same time, it also suggested the officer corps’ resentment of those who had avoided service at the front: cowardly deserters, rebellious young replacements, malingering workers, and the “storm birds” of the revolution, the mutinous sailors. Within days of the arrival of the first guards battalion, the only people carrying weapons in the capital would be front line veterans and a limited number of trusted allies. The Berlin operation would, with a single, swift blow, restore the army’s monopoly on armed power within the Reich.

The plan was clearly provocative and Groener understood that, unless sanctioned by Ebert, the populace would almost certainly view it as a counter revolutionary putsch.

⁵⁷⁷ The staggered issuance of the various proclamations corresponds to the ideas in the “Lieber Freund” letter (see fn. 40) in which the author wrote: “It would be a mistake for the government to issue all its demands and orders on the first few days.” BA-MA: N 42/11 Nachlass Schleicher, “Lieber Freund” letter, dated December 1, 1918, 3.

⁵⁷⁸ BA-R: 43/2385, Telegram from Groener to the Reich leadership, #5055/18, dated December 10, 1918. Groener asked for the 5th and the 37th in this message. Their march through Berlin was justified as allowing more troops to enjoy the welcome of the capital.

⁵⁷⁹ Details of the plan taken from Berthold and Neef, Document 113: “Aktionsprogramm der Generalkommandos Lequis für den Einmarsch der Felddivisionen in Berlin,” 282-283.

Thus, on November 26, and again on December 2, Major von Harbou traveled to Berlin with the mission of briefing Ebert and gaining his support.⁵⁸⁰ Ebert's reaction was less than enthusiastic.⁵⁸¹ He and his Majority Socialist colleagues were already besieged by accusations from the Independents and Spartacists that they had failed to secure the achievements of the revolution.⁵⁸² The operation envisioned by the OHL was likely to appear a proof positive that Ebert had sold out the revolution to the militarists and monopoly capitalists.

Ebert's position was a difficult one. While he did not veto the plan, its obvious dangers led him to shy away from responsibility for it. He wanted assurances that there would be no bloodshed, something the army leadership was loath to provide.⁵⁸³ Harbou, in turn cautioned Ebert that there was little time for indecision. He warned that the guardsmen and other soldiers who would march into the city, for all their elite status, could remain there for only a brief period. "The desire of people to return home is great, and with that in mind, one expects that, despite all [our] strenuous exhortations, the Field Army will succumb to the influence of radical elements."⁵⁸⁴ He told Ebert the units selected for the mission were, "the last element of power available to the High Command.

⁵⁸⁰ Harbou had made an earlier liaison visit to Berlin in late November that may have been Ebert's first exposure to the idea of such an operation. Rakenius, 136-137. Könnemann, on the other hand, believes the concept had been part of the original Ebert-Groener Pact, (1593). This seems unlikely and no evidence is presented.

⁵⁸¹ At the 1925 "Stab-in-the-Back" Trial, Groener testified that Ebert was in full agreement. Berthold and Neef, Document 191: "Kreuzverhör W. Groeners im Dolstochprozeß (Auszug)," 434-440.

⁵⁸² On November 20, for example, the Independent Socialist on the Council of Peoples' Delegates had called for Hindenburg's removal. Ebert had fended off this demand by asserting that Hindenburg had given his word of honor in support of the government and that the demobilization depended on maintaining continuity in key positions. Berthold and Neef, Document 62: "Aufzeichnungen Friedrich Eberts über die Sitzung des Rates der Volksbeauftragten am 20. November 1918" (Auszug), 201.

⁵⁸³ Volkmann suggested that Ebert would have preferred the military hand him a *fait accompli* rather than to have been made an accomplice, *Revolution über Deutschland*, 125

⁵⁸⁴ Harbou's notes quoted in Rakenius, 140.

If they are not used decisively, the inevitable battle with the radicals will be much more difficult.”⁵⁸⁵

The warning to Ebert was an admission by the army leadership that their confidence in the steadiness of the front-line soldiers was fading; the men who had fought so doggedly in France and Belgium were now a very thin reed upon which to base military operations inside the Fatherland. The officer corps might prepare the rank and file with “strenuous exhortations,”⁵⁸⁶ but increasingly they feared van den Bergh’s prediction would come true and that the men of Guard Corps would--like the rest of the army--melt like “butter in the sun.”

Preparation, Crisis, and Controversy

With the OHL holding the affair at arm’s length and the absence of Ebert and Scheuch’s wholehearted support, the Berlin operation began to look more and more like an ill-favored stepchild. To make matters worse, two events conspired to shake the unsteady foundations of the plan. The first was an abortive *putsch* attempt by pro-Ebert forces on December 6, the second was the Left’s sudden discovery of Lequis’ forces in the days just prior to the army’s march on Berlin. Together, the two events threw the Independent Socialists and Spartacists into a panic and their reaction served to fundamentally change the nature of the operation.

⁵⁸⁵ Harbou quoted in Volkmann, 125.

⁵⁸⁶ The OHL Soldiers’ Council accused the officer of disseminating a flyer under Hindenburg’s name at the end of November, that, if authentic, made a brazen appeal to the alienation of the front-line troops: “The Independents and Spartacus people want their class dominance, which they achieved without the Field Army’s concurrence, to become an enduring institution, again without the concurrence of the Field Army. To a large extent, the homeland workers’ and soldiers’ councils follow them, but they are composed of young fellows that earned lots of money at home, while the Field Army, under constant mortal danger and the greatest sacrifices of body and soul, stood before the enemy.” BA-R: R 43/2500/4, Eduard Weckerle “Für eine republikanische Volkswehr,” dated January 4, 1919, 71.

The putsch attempt of December 6 caught both the army and Ebert by surprise. Mass Spartacist demonstrations, Liebknecht's threats of armed revolutionary action, along with the *Vollzugsrat's* bitter denunciation of the Council of Peoples' Delegates had aroused fears among pro-government elements in the capital and prodded them to action. Believing a showdown inevitable, two conservative officials in the Foreign Office had conspired with moderate Socialist soldiers in the Berlin garrison to solidify the government's position. They planned to arrest the *Vollzugsrat* and call on Ebert to assume a presidency that held dictatorial powers.

The results of their plot were both ludicrous and tragic. On the afternoon of the 6th, during a meeting of the *Vollzugsrat*, a crowd of soldiers led by a Sergeant Fischer broke into the *Abgeordnetenhaus* (House of Delegates) with the intent of arresting the members of the council. As fortune would have it, a member of Ebert's cabinet, Emil Barth, was present. Using some well-chosen words, Barth rebuffed the intruders and turned the *putschist* soldiers against their leaders. Thus, one arm of the plot had miscarried. Nearly simultaneously, another crowd of soldiers, led by a Sergeant Spiro, appeared before the Chancellery and called for Ebert to come forth and accept their offer of the presidency. Ebert appeared, offered some calming words and told the men that he could not accept such a position without consulting the other members of the government. Dismayed, Spiro's men dispersed; the other arm of the plot had misfired. The whole affair might have blown over except that a crowd of Spartacist supporters, many from the "League of Former Deserters," had marched on the government quarter the same afternoon. They were blocked by a detail from the Berlin garrison's Guard Fusiliers who either panicked when confronted by an angry mob or were fired on by

provocateurs. At any event, the *ersatz* guardsmen responded with a volley of machine gun fire that left fourteen dead.⁵⁸⁷

The radical Left exploded with predictable fury. The next morning, *Die Rote Fahne* announced that counter-revolution was on the march and called on the proletarians of Berlin to respond with strikes and demonstrations. “Workers! Soldiers! Comrades! 14 corpses lie on the pavement of Berlin. Unarmed, peaceful soldiers were shot down in a cowardly act of assassination!” The paper described the incident as the result of agitation by Ebert and Wels, the city commandant, among the Berlin garrison. Their aim, declared the Spartacist paper, was the creation of a true White Guard.⁵⁸⁸

In the aftermath of the affair, Ebert’s position in the government came under increased attack. At a combined meeting of the Council of Delegates and the *Vollzugsrat* on December 7, the *Vollzugsrat* accused Ebert of working in league with the old elites, and, late in the tumultuous session, the combined bodies considered a demand that Ebert leave the government. This led to an interesting caution by a member of the *Vollzugsrat*, identified only as Councilman Pörschmann: “The troops believe that the *Vollzugsrat* stands against the government and is a front for the Spartacus Group.” At that point an unidentified voice in the audience protested, “I lodge a protest for the Eastern Front!” Pörschmann responded, “In any case, that is the view of the Western Front.” After Pörschmann’s assertion had been confirmed by Chairman (Private) Bruno Molkenbuhr, Pörschmann added, “It comes as a result of press reports. We come now to the

⁵⁸⁷ Summary of the December 6 putsch from the *Vossische Zeitung*, December 7, 1918 and Volkman, 123-124. According to Captain Gustav Böhm, an adjutant in the War Ministry, the responsibility for the little massacre fell on the shoulders of Eichorn, the Police President, who had failed to advise the garrison forces of the Spartacist demonstration scheduled for that day. Gustav Böhm, *Adjutant in Preussischen Kriegsministerium, Juni 1918 bis Oktober 1919: Aufzeichnungen des Hauptmanns Gustav Böhm*. Edited by Heinz Hürten and Georg Meyer, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1977), diary entry of December 6, 1918, 94. Other accounts of the affair list the number of dead at sixteen.

⁵⁸⁸ *Rote Fahne*, December 7, 1918.

dissension [between us and the front-line soldiers], because we are all scoundrels (*Lumpen*), according to the other opinion.” After a response from Chairman Müller decrying the discordant nature of the meeting, the combined session closed by voting down the proposal for Ebert’s removal.⁵⁸⁹

Pröschmann’s pronouncement may or may not have had a sobering effect on the conclusion of the meeting. It is difficult to tell. What his comments do show is that those to the left of Ebert’s government knew they were held in low esteem by the troops marching toward Berlin. If they acted rashly, there might yet be a reckoning. The “Western Front,” as the councilman called it, was casting a long shadow over the political scene in Berlin.⁵⁹⁰

The OHL was already moving the “Western Front” closer to the capital; on the day of the putsch, Lequis’ headquarters arrived in Berlin. Though both Lequis’ and Groener’s staff had been caught by surprise by the events of December 6,⁵⁹¹ the next crisis was more predictable. In the week prior to December 10, the scheduled date of the first unit’s entry into Berlin, the Spartacists and Independent Socialists became aware of the deployment of masses of troops around Berlin. Lequis headquarters had tried to be discreet. Instead of billeting the units in garrison installations where their presence would be conspicuous, the arriving troops were quartered in private dwellings and villages away from the larger towns. However, the sudden appearance of tens of thousands of well-armed guardsmen in the environs of the capital could not be hidden for long,⁵⁹² even had

⁵⁸⁹ Berthold and Neef, Document 103: “Gemeinsame Sitzung des Rates des Volkbeauftragten und des Vollzuges der Berliner Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte am 7. Dezember 1918” (Auszug), 264-265.

⁵⁹⁰ This meeting also included a brief reference to “three divisions” ready to move into the capital. 262.

⁵⁹¹ Rakenius, 141.

⁵⁹² Von Thaeer’s diary entry of December 9 describes a regiment, the Pasewalk Cuirassiers, being misrouted to their home station instead of their assigned assembly area near Potsdam due to a misunderstanding by

every unit been discreet about its arrival. Some weren't. The workers' and soldiers' councils around the capital bombarded the War Ministry with anxious questions about arriving guard units and complaints that, in places, the guardsmen had pulled down red flags and overthrown local soldiers' councils and replaced them with "front representatives."⁵⁹³ Months after the end of the war, the old resentments, front versus rear, were being played out in the towns and casernes around Berlin.

Perhaps sensing that Ebert was wavering in the face of the Left's pressure, Hindenburg dispatched a note to him on December 8. It was a remarkable document. The proud old field marshal opened his letter to the former saddle maker with courteous and flattering tones. "If I address these following lines to you, I do this because it has been reported to me that you are also a loyal German man who loves your Fatherland above all without regard to your personal opinions and desires, as I have also had to do in order to rise to the need of the Fatherland." The letter went on to remind Ebert of the new government's promise to restore order and Hindenburg's own commitment to bringing the army home successfully. The field marshal complained that, while the officer corps had faithfully discharged their duties during and after the war, they had been subjected to endless abuse from revolutionary councils. Hindenburg deplored the way the workers' and soldiers' councils had hijacked supply convoys, confiscated rations, and used monetary incentives to lure men away from their units before proper discharge.

And then:

It is obvious that we can only emerge from our current circumstances if the government has at its disposal an agency that had the ability to give unfailing validity to its orders and the existing laws. Given

the local railroad commandant. The army found it difficult to correct the mistake because, to do so would reveal the nature of the deployment. 280.

⁵⁹³ Böhm, diary entry of December 8, 1918.

the current situation, this agency can only be the army and, indeed, an army in which the sharpest discipline reigns. Discipline stands and falls on the authority of the leader and the separation of the army from politics.

Hindenburg went on to ask Ebert to make public proclamation that the existing command authority remained in place in the army. The soldiers' councils must "disappear:" only trustees' councils with limited authority could be tolerated. Having stated that the army needed to be separated from politics, Hindenburg then proceeded to tell Ebert that the mood of the army (and "other circles of society") reflected an urgent desire for a National Assembly at the earliest possible moment. He closed by telling Ebert, "In your hands lie the destiny of the German people." Then he pledged the continued support of the "entire army."⁵⁹⁴

In retrospect, the note appears to be an effort by the army leadership to steel Ebert for the coming crisis while ensuring that Ebert supported the existing chain of command. Hindenburg's reminder that the government had the support of the "entire army" seems more than a little ironic. Just a week into December, the headquarters of the Field Army had no control of the homeland garrisons, little control over the troops returning from the East, and its grip on the remaining troops of the *Westheer* was becoming uncertain indeed. What Hindenburg could promise was almost exclusively limited to the guardsmen and other troops assembling under Lequis' command.

⁵⁹⁴ BA-MA: N 42/11, Nachlass Schleicher, Supreme Headquarters Msg. # 11780, Hindenburg to Ebert, dated December 8, 1918, 8.

Confrontation at Nikolasee⁵⁹⁵

One of the units exciting the anger and fear of the Left was the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division. (*Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen Division*; GKSD). According to the timetable the OHL had created for the “Berlin-Operation,” on December 10, it was to be the first of Lequis’ units to march into Berlin. The division had transformed earlier in the year from an elite mounted formation to front-line infantry and, in the final campaigns of the war, it had seen combat on the Western Front as part of the First Army.⁵⁹⁶ After the armistice, it had crossed the Rhine near Coblenz where AEF observers noted its passage.⁵⁹⁷

The commander of the division was a well-respected officer, General von Hoffmann, however, by the end of the war, the general was exhausted and suffering from a heart ailment. The real guiding spirit of the division was its energetic chief of staff, Captain Waldemar Pabst.⁵⁹⁸ In his unpublished memoirs, Pabst recalled that, as the unit marched back from the front and crossed the Rhine, he became more and more concerned for Germany’s future. His mistrust of the army’s senior leadership was increased when he encountered a lieutenant colonel from the staff of the First Army headquarters riding around with a red pennant on his automobile, and a driver wearing a red armband. With considerable disgust, Pabst observed that the lieutenant colonel, once a fancy-uniformed member of the Kaiser’s entourage, was now portraying himself as an agent of the

⁵⁹⁵ The descriptions of the events at Nikolasee come from Pabst’s papers. BA-MA: PH 620/2 “Transcript of the Memoirs of Major Waldemar Pabst and His Post War Experiences as Ia and Chief of Staff of the GKSD.”

⁵⁹⁶ Allied intelligence had rated it as “second-class.” *251 Divisions*. In his narrative of his trip to Spa on November 9, Colonel Reinhard claimed that the outer cordon of security around the Supreme Headquarters was provided by the GKSD. This seems very possible, but, to date, impossible to corroborate.

⁵⁹⁷ See, for example, NARA: RG 120/5895, III Corps Intelligence Summary, dated December 16, 1918.

⁵⁹⁸ He later recalled, “We wanted, above all to march together with social democracy in order to throttle our mutual enemy, Spartacism. If that went well, then we wanted to lay before our former allies [Ebert and the Majority Socialists] a bill for November 1918 to be settled with them.” Könnemann, 1593.

revolution (Pabst's attitude was, conditioned, no doubt, by the "front's" hostile attitude toward the staff). Meanwhile, Rhinelanders had greeted the unit with cries of, "March to Berlin and set things right!"⁵⁹⁹ As the unit pressed deeper into Germany, incidents between the GKSD and local soldiers' councils inspired Pabst to create a special "Division Staff Squadron" made up of the most battle-tested NCOs and the most reliable men. When the division was challenged by militant members of a local council, the appearance of Pabst's special squadron and its hardened veterans was usually enough to get the "Reds" to back down.⁶⁰⁰ Pabst recalled with considerable satisfaction that, with the exception of a single incident, no obstruction by the local councils lasted more than half an hour.⁶⁰¹

Within days of crossing the Rhine, the GKSD was summoned to load up on trains headed east to Berlin. The actual load-out was done in an atmosphere of secrecy and the troops began to share rumors and anxious questions. Pabst had the chain of command tell the men not to worry. There would be no meaningful resistance in "Red Berlin," and if there was, it would come from the hordes of contemptible *Heimkrieger* ("homeland warriors"). Meanwhile, the covert nature of the movement confused the *Reichsbahn*, which, at first, attempted to off-load the division in the center of the capital. When this error was corrected, the first train finally arrived in a drizzling rain at the railway station at Nikolasee, a suburb on Berlin's southwest frontier near the famous Wannsee.

In some respects, what happened next encapsulated all the bitterest divisions within Germany's post-war military. At the *bahnhof* at Nikolasee, Pabst and his advance

⁵⁹⁹ Pabst, 4-5.

⁶⁰⁰ Von Schulenberg recorded that a number of such detachments, "reliable" volunteers under trusted officers, were formed across the army as it returned to the homeland. One cover for such units was that they were being formed for possible employment on the Polish frontier. Schulenberg suggested that they often became the nuclei for the earliest *Freikorps*. BA-MA: N 58/1, Nachlass Schulenberg, 245.

⁶⁰¹ Pabst, 6.

party encountered a “reception committee”: eight hundred revolutionary soldiers and sailors dressed in wet, dirty uniforms, with red armbands, hands in their pockets, and rifles slung muzzle down “in the Russian fashion.” They were led by the omnipresent Emil Barth, the same USPD cabinet member who had challenged the OHL at Bad Ems. Pabst dismounted to meet Barth who identified himself as a member of the ruling cabinet and addressed the captain with the announcement, “The men behind me are representatives of various soldiers’ and executive councils active in Berlin, such as the Soldiers’ Council of Deserters. We have the intention of receiving the arriving troops, to greet them, and to clarify to them the meaning and purpose of our revolution. To this end, I want a list from you of the component units of the division and their quarters so that I may meet with them tomorrow.”

If Barth had the object of inspiring Pabst’s indignation, he could scarcely have done a better job. Pabst told the USPD delegate that he did not recognize a member of the cabinet as his superior in military affairs and he did not consider such a rag-tag mob as much of a reception committee. Further, he said, he knew Barth as one of the leaders of the January 1918 strike that had left the troops at the front short of ammunition. What is more, to be “greeted” by representatives of the “Deserters’ Council” was a personal insult. “We completely denounce the idea of our people being greeted by such people.”

Pabst told Barth that, as a representative of the government, he might visit the division headquarters the next day in order to ensure the guardsmen were being properly taken care of. He should bring no more than three people with him. With those brusque instructions, the captain broke off the discussion in order to supervise the posting the members of his Division Security Squadron with machine guns and other security to

ensure there was no fraternization between the guardsmen and the representatives of the councils. Barth and his colleagues had no choice but to return to the capital.

Unlike officers in other units, Pabst was not going to be satisfied to watch his unit evaporate with the approach of the Christmas holiday. He despised what he had found in the homeland and saw his division as a weapon to overturn the worst of what had happened to Germany. In short, he was going to prepare for a showdown against the revolution. With that in mind, he sealed off the division's new quarters with barbed wire and sentries. He had good reason, for shortly after the arrival of the lead elements of the GKSD, its barracks were swarmed by curious onlookers as well as "provocateurs." Against this last group, he took it upon himself to create two groups to conduct a division-level propaganda campaign. One group was made up of old veterans, men from *Stammansschaften*, whom he detailed to combat revolutionary agitation within the division. The other group had a more offensive orientation. He enlisted the services of a Jewish lawyer to lead the group with the mission of spreading an anti-Spartacist message among the population. These were unusual initiative for the chief of staff of an infantry division but, as Pabst wrote later, "Civil war imposed a variety of unfamiliar tasks."⁶⁰²

Within the next several days, as the date for the GKSD's march into Berlin approached, the Scheuch summoned Pabst to the War Ministry. It was a meeting that would highlight, once again, the clash of sensibilities between front and rear. The captain knew enough about conditions inside the capital to know that, were he to appear alone in an officer's uniform, he risked not only a beating but also the loss of his sidearm, his shoulder straps, and his decorations. To prevent this, he drove into Berlin with an entourage that included three staff officers in his own car and an automobile full of

⁶⁰² Ibid, Pabst's preparations described, 14.

heavily armed members of his Division Staff Squadron in a second. Thus, when Pabst arrived at Scheuch's office, the War Minister was astounded to find him in full field uniform. (Scheuch and his staff had all taken to wearing civilian attire in order to avoid harassment.) In the presence of an unknown witness, Pabst told Scheuch that he had been shocked at the appearance of "government troops" as he traveled through the city, and that it was readily apparent that if even a handful of resolute soldiers had been willing to risk their lives on November 9, the revolution could have been snuffed out with relative ease. At this point, Scheuch pulled Pabst aside and asked him how he could speak in such a fashion in the presence of the head of the Soldiers' Council of the War Ministry. Pabst recounted that, at this point, he threw discipline to the wind and told the general that he was appalled that the Prussian War Minister conducted business under the scrutiny of a former underling. One imagines that such comments were deeply humiliating to Scheuch, while Pabst left even more disgusted with the army's leadership.⁶⁰³

Armed or Unarmed?

Meanwhile, though Liebknecht's followers had no formal intelligence service, they hardly needed one to realize that guards units were closing in on Berlin. From the cities west of Berlin, the word had spread from local Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and newspaper accounts that the elite regiments of the old *Kaiserreich* were weeks and then days away. On December 2, the Spartacist press warned their readers, "From the west into Germany, at the head of a powerful army under black-white-red flags, with exemplary discipline and artificially created hate against 'Bolshevism,' come generals

⁶⁰³ Ibid; Meeting at *Kriegsministerium* described, 17-18.

who share the blame for the war, who are co-conspirators with the Hohenzollerns.”⁶⁰⁴

The report went to say this counter-revolutionary host was destroying revolutionary symbols, shooting down those who distributed revolutionary literature, disarming revolutionary militias, and firing on revolutionary elements in the populace. Three days later *Die Rote Fahne* announced the arrival of advance elements of the Guard Corps, a signal detachment led by six officers on horseback. Here, the paper suggested, was clear evidence of the approaching counter-revolution.⁶⁰⁵

On December 9, three days after the aborted *putsch* in Berlin had raised tensions to a new level, *Die Rote Fahne* abandoned the use of complete sentences to announce the arrival of the main body of Lequis’ forces.

Achtung! Berlin is Surrounded!

During the last hours before going to press, this paper received news of monstrous importance. It had been confirmed that troops under *Generalkommando Lequis* have concentrated around Berlin. Guard troops and [troops] from other parts of Germany, Silesians, Erfurters, Padeborners. The troops are loyal to the monarchy (*konigstreuen*), the officers refuse any statements, deny any access to their troops. They are assigned to deploy into Berlin to establish peace and order, support the Ebert-Haase government, and to suppress the Spartacists.

They are abundantly supplied with ammunition. The artillery with full limbers and ammunition columns. The machine guns with 30,000 rounds.⁶⁰⁶

While the Spartacists were provoking anger and alarm outside the government, Ebert and his military supporters were finding it difficult to reassure the Independents in the Council of Peoples’ Delegates and the *Vollzugsrat* that Lequis’ forces did not represent imminent counter-revolution. On the morning of Sunday, December 8, a reserve lieutenant Heine, the head of the Potsdam Soldiers’ Council, had reported to the

⁶⁰⁴ *Die Rote Fahne*, “Rüstung der Revolution,” December 2, 1918.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid*, December 5, 1918.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid*, “Achtung! Berlin Umzingelt!” December 9, 1918.

Soldiers' Council of Greater Berlin that armed units were assembling between Potsdam and the capital. None of these units, he said, had soldiers' councils and they had removed any red flags flying in their assembly areas.⁶⁰⁷ Later that day, Barth returned to the headquarters of the GKSD and demanded that Pabst call off the march into the capital or, if he did march, it should leave its weapons behind. Predictably Pabst refused, telling Barth that such a decision was up to General Lequis or Chancellor Ebert. For his part, he said, he thought it would be foolish for a unit of twelve to fourteen thousand men to march inside a city of several millions gripped by a "revolutionary fever."⁶⁰⁸ Finally, on the afternoon of the same day, a deputation of ten members from the *Vollzugsrat* descended on Ebert and demanded clarification of the plan for the troops assembled around Berlin. Ebert responded that the troops in question were gathering for a ceremonial greeting by the populace. Their demobilization would follow immediately. Unconvinced, the delegation made a counter-proposal,⁶⁰⁹ suggesting that the entry of the front-line units be either called off or be subject to strict limitations: 1) the units would carry no live ammunition, 2) that their arrival be delayed by one day in order for representatives of the socialist parties to "enlighten" the troops, 3) that only units from Berlin be allowed in the city (the sole exception being a "*Bundesbataillon*" made up of

⁶⁰⁷ Könnemann, 1595. When von Harbou heard of this he ordered the lieutenant arrested. (1596) Scheuch claimed authority over the matter since Heine belonged to a garrison unit; however, the War Minister failed to sign an arrest order, a failure which exacerbated the ill will between the OHL and the War Ministry. Harbou later wrote that he was later able to use indirect means to get Heine removed. Könnemann, Document 4: "Notizen Major Harbous." 1608. See also Oehme, 90. Oehme reports these events as happening on December 9, but this is certainly an error. His work is a memoir rather than a diary. Böhm's diary has them on December 8.

⁶⁰⁸ BA-MA: PH 620/2 Nachlass Pabst, 22-23.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid, 1596.

men from the other federal states of the Reich), 4) the units be accompanied by workers' deputations and other associations.⁶¹⁰

Late that evening Ebert met with the War Minister, Scheuch, and Lequis' chief of staff, von Harbou, and called on the army to accept the demands offered by the members of the *Vollzugsrat*. Scheuch offered no opposition. He believed the councils' demand could not be refused. In the aftermath of December 6, the War Minister had become discouraged about the prospects of the "Berlin Operation." He was also resentful of the OHL's control of the operation and at one point had insisted that Lequis clear all political questions through him instead of talking directly to the government. He was reported as saying, "the OHL just doesn't know how things are in Berlin."⁶¹¹

As a representative of both the OHL and General Lequis, von Harbou was alarmed as he saw the prospects of a successful action being wrecked by Ebert's desire for compromise and Scheuch's waffling. Under these circumstances an armed operation to strengthen the government against its enemies was becoming impossible. After an angry exchange with the War Minister, the major asked for time to inform the OHL of the conditions of the compromise and to see if they wanted to proceed with the planned entry.⁶¹²

Groener received Harbou's update shortly before midnight on December 8, and took the news, along with his own anger and dismay, to Hindenburg. For Hindenburg, Groener, and their subordinates, the news seemed confirmation that Ebert no longer had

⁶¹⁰ *Vollzugsrat* demands from Böhm, diary entry of December 8, 100-101. In one meeting, the Independent Socialist Ledebour accused the army of inventing the name "Lequis" as a code word. "And then, this mysterious, often-spoken name Lequis. Lequis is French, a certain person. Who is this certain person?" Scheuch replied that, behind the name, there is a well fed, completely tangible, general of engineers. (Böhm, diary entry of December 8, 100.)

⁶¹¹ Rakenius, Scheuch quote, 143.

⁶¹² *Ibid.* See also Böhm, diary entry of December 8,

real executive authority and that Scheuch's ministry had little to say about the course of events. In the black-and-white political outlook of the Field Army's senior leaders, it seemed clear the *Vollzugsrat* now had the upper hand.⁶¹³ Officers within the OHL staff pressed Groener to go to Berlin and take over the operation himself. However, after consideration, Groener decided against such a move. Hindenburg agreed, having said that, if the OHL moved to Berlin, “. . . it has the appearance of compelling a kind of military dictatorship. For that, it is not yet the time. Such a dictatorship must remain a last resort after all else has failed.”⁶¹⁴

The next day, December 9, Groener responded to what he called the “watering down”⁶¹⁵ of the Berlin operation two ways. The first was to telephone Lequis at 10:20 a.m. with instructions to proceed: “It is the intent of the Field Marshal that Lieutenant General Lequis act on his own initiative, if need be, refusing all contradictory instructions from government agencies or military authorities, including the War Ministry.” Second, Groener drafted a strongly-worded telegram to Ebert, refusing the terms of the compromise.

Groener's instructions to Lequis were extraordinary. They suggested that a clean break between the OHL and the War Ministry was possible, and, more remarkably they indicated that the Field Army's senior leadership believed the front-line troops would be willing to act contrary to the instructions of the Ebert government. This would certainly baffle the troops who had read the protestations of support for the Council of Peoples'

⁶¹³ Ibid. 143-144. See also Könnemann, 1596-1597.

⁶¹⁴ Hindenburg quote from E. O. Volkmann, *Revolution Über Deutschland*. (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1930), 128. Thær's diary entry of December 10 reflects the frustration of the OHL staff. He wrote that he asked Groener why the OHL did not give the order to march itself. Depressed, Groener replied, “You know yourself that we have no more to say, the order would also not reach to Berlin.” Thær ended his diary entry: “If Ludendorff was in Groener's place, it would be implemented immediately.”281.

⁶¹⁵ Guth, 66-67.

Delegates from their own unit councils as well as the OHL itself. These instructions were likely to baffle Lequis as well.

Meanwhile, Groener's telegram to Ebert represented the OHL's defiant bid to prepare Ebert for difficult decisions required if the "Berlin Operation" was to be a success. It was also one of the final times the army high command would invoke the honor of the front-line troops to achieve the political aims of the senior leadership. To the first demand, withholding ammunition from the troops, Groener wrote that the purpose was to make the troops "defenseless against the Spartacus people and the Liebknecht followers." To the second limitation, delaying the march by a day, to December 11, to allow the *Vollzugsrat* to "enlighten" the troops, Groener answered that the *Vollzugsrat* had revealed itself as the "tool" of the Spartacists. The march would not be delayed and the only emissaries sent to visit the troops were ones approved by Ebert and accompanied by Harbou. The third demand limited the entry into the capital to troops stationed in Berlin. Groener called this an "insult to the entire field army." The fourth demand called for workers' delegations to accompany the troops. Groener: "In the field army there are members of every vocational class; in a state of equality no exception can be made for workers." Besides, he said, such an escort would be an additional affront to the troops. The men who had been at the front were capable of maintaining order and discipline for themselves. The message concluded by deploring the apparent power of the *Vollzugsrat* and asking Ebert if he was ready to fight the "tyranny of the Spartacists and Liebknechtites" as he had promised. In Hindenburg's name, Groener

called on Ebert to join the field marshal in leading the troops against the enemies of the state.⁶¹⁶

What influence Groener's telegram had is difficult to say. What is known is that, during a cabinet meeting on December 9, the key players in the German capital reached agreement on the final shape of the Lequis' operation. The army got the parade it wanted but not the coup it had planned. In a session attended by Ebert and four of the remaining five delegates,⁶¹⁷ Harbou and Scheuch,⁶¹⁸ the details of the next day's march were hammered out. The cabinet set aside the demands of the *Vollzugsrat* and allowed the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division to enter the city with its weapons and ammunition (only armored cars and machine guns were to be excluded).⁶¹⁹ Ebert and *Oberbürgermeister* Wermuth would greet the troops and address them at the Pariser Platz. Barth, the fieriest of the Independents in the cabinet, raised objections, but faced a united front among the three Majority Socialist members and only limited support from Haase, the one other Independent present.⁶²⁰

The meeting did lead to one symbolic concession to the Left's anxieties that counter-revolution was impending. Ebert proposed that some thirty-five thousand of the first troops to enter Berlin take an oath of support to the government. Thus, at seven o'clock that evening, before a life-size portrait of the departed Kaiser inside the Steglitz

⁶¹⁶ Könnemann, Document 2: "Telegramm-Entwurf Groeners." 1603-1604.

⁶¹⁷ Dittmann, the Independent, was not present. Böhm, diary entry of December 9. 101.

⁶¹⁸ A variety of sources (Volkman, Oehme, Könnemann) suggest Schleicher was also present and did a masterful job of swaying the argument. He is reported to have said, "A soldier coming from the front without ammunition is, indeed, no soldier." (Könnemann, 1597) Rakenius and Kluge indicate he was not there.

⁶¹⁹ The *Vollzugsrat* continued to demand that the number of troops allowed in Berlin be limited to those who were garrisoned there in peacetime. BA-R: R 43/2485/f, "Decision of the Executive Council," dated December 10, 1918, 115.

⁶²⁰ Barth had apparently been convinced by Pabst that there was no counter revolutionary intent to the upcoming arrival of Lequis' command. Könnemann, 1593.

*Rathaus*⁶²¹, the War Minister and four of the Peoples' Delegates, Scheidemann, Haase, Dittmann and Ebert, stood behind General Lequis as he administered an oath of allegiance to representatives of the Guard Cavalry Rifle Division and the *Jaeger* Division:

We swear in our own names and, at the same time, the units we represent, to employ our entire strength for the single German republic and its provisional government, the Council of Peoples' Delegates.⁶²²

Captain Böhm recorded in his diary that relatively few members of the two units were present and that, in the whole, the ceremony made “an impression of little impact.”⁶²³

That same evening, one of his colleagues in the War Ministry, Colonel van den Bergh, offered a pessimistic prediction. “Tomorrow (10.12) is the ceremonial entry of the first front-line troops and now a new phase will begin. I am convinced that these so-called “reliable” troops will fraternize everywhere with the other troops and the population as soon as they exposed for some time to their influences. And that will be something else again.”⁶²⁴

The Guards Return

By every account, December 10 was a damp, overcast, and gloomy day. Nevertheless, the morning edition of the *Vossische Zeitung* called on Berliners to give the troops arriving that day an appropriately warm welcome. With them, the newspaper suggested, marched the hopes for Germany's future.

The troops from Berlin are coming home. In another way than we had thought years ago, they will come through the Brandenburg Gate. However, the welcome that the homeland offers could not be more heart felt if Germany had emerged from the gloom of war more successfully.

⁶²¹ Steglitz lies in the southwest (and more middle-class) section of Berlin.

⁶²² *Vossische Zeitung*, “Im Steglitzer Rathaus.” December 10. (Lequis' oath left Scheuch fuming because he had arranged with the cabinet that the oath would be only “to the existing government, not to a “single German republic.”) Rakenius, fn.

⁶²³ Böhm, diary entry of December 9.

⁶²⁴ Van den Bergh, diary entry of December 9.

They were not defeated. As upright, heroic men, they come back to a land they defended with their blood and their lives. . . .

There was more. The paper suggested these men represented the hope for Germany's future. "Because of the blooming strength that flows back into the homeland, our eyes and senses are shown that, out of unspeakable horrors, the body of our people will emerge alive . . . From these men we want to learn how to endure terrible things and then keep [one's] head up." Germany's enemies would not see her grovel. Instead, they would see quiet and forward-looking pride embodied in the front-line soldiers who would tramp down the capital's avenues that day.⁶²⁵

Early that morning, after a demanding march from the suburbs, the troops began assembling in the Heidelberger Platz in the southwestern quarter of the city.⁶²⁶ The appearance of these veteran soldiers offered enormous symbolic significance. Their wagons and horses were covered with fir branches and the flag bearers carried the black-white-red standard of the old empire as well as the flags of the empire's constituent states. They were dressed in full combat array, with steel helmets painted in camouflage colors, and full ammunition pouches. There were eighty thousand rounds of ammunition available for each machine gun. Some of their wagons carried pictures of Hindenburg as well as other nobility. These, it must have seemed to spectators, were elite combat troops untouched by the revolution.

At 11:10 a.m. after the commander of the Guard Cuirassiers offered the men a brief address, the lead battalions stepped off from the march's start point, the Schmargendorf Railway Station. At the head of the procession was the division commander, General Hoffmann, and his staff, followed by Guard Machine Gun

⁶²⁵ *Vossische Zeitung*, "Grüß und den Heimkehrenden." Morning edition, December 10, 1918.

⁶²⁶ BA-MA: PH 620/2 Nachlass Pabst, 24.

Detachment I, the Guard Cuirassier Regiment, the Life Guard Cuirassiers, and then dragoons, uhlans, and *jaeger* cavalry, all dismounted; these historic old cavalry units had fought in the last year of the war as infantry. Only the officers were on horseback. Every regiment was led by its regimental band and they played the famous old marches, “*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,*” and “*Heil dir im Siegerkranz.*”

Berliners lined the streets in vast crowds and they cheered the soldiers as they passed. The trees were filled with boys and the roofs and windows were full of spectators. On the *Unter den Linden* alone, an estimated eighty to one hundred thousand people thronged the street. As the soldiers passed, people pressed cigars, cigarettes and other little gifts into their hands or decorated the men and vehicles with bouquets. They heaped garlands on the wagons.

There were dissonant notes as well. Such was the crush of onlookers that authorities reported that twenty-five people required medical assistance. Amid the hurrahs, one still heard the sound of organ-grinders, some of whom were amputees or the *Nervenkrank* (psychiatric cases) from the front. Reporters noticed older couples, standing silently in tears, evidently the parents of men who were not returning. Finally, if any of the spectators were familiar with military organization, they would have noticed that the marching battalions were remarkably small. The Guard Cuirassier Regiment for example, was already very depleted. It had taken heavy losses in its last battle near Reims on November 4 where it had been reduced to two officers and forty-eight men.

Thus, though it was reinforced by some of the lightly wounded, it still needed augmentation from a hussar regiment in order to make a march unit of respectable size.⁶²⁷

Spartacus was present, too. Reporters noticed red flags among the forest of imperial standards. Spartacist agents walked along side the marching units handing the men flyers that called on the front-line troops to purge the officers from their soldiers' councils.

By noon, the authorities attempted to clear the Pariser Platz next to the Brandenburg Gate and the welcoming party assembled on the reviewing stand. Along with the mayor and assorted officials were members of the cabinet as well as representatives of the *Vollzugsrat*. General Lequis was present, wearing a steel helmet and his *Pour le Mérité*. Crowd control was being provided by the *Soldatenwehr* which did not seem capable of opening a path for the troops. A senior lieutenant of the Guards Dragoons rode through the crowd to tell Ebert that the division commander did not want to take his unit into such confusion. Ebert replied, "*Herr Offizier*, I must give my speech."⁶²⁸ Eventually the troops did arrive, passing through the Brandenburg Gate around one o'clock, as a special unit around greeted them, the *Bundesbataillon* (Federal Battalion) which included a company each of Bavarians, Saxons, Badenese, and Wurttembergers.⁶²⁹ Once the troops were assembled, around one-thirty, Ebert began to speak:

Comrades, welcome in the German republic, heart-felt welcome in the homeland that you have longed for, whose anxious worries hovered

⁶²⁷ In addition, some of the men from the oldest year groups had been discharged and others who had volunteered for border defense units and other duties had also been released. Finally, the division had left behind security details to watch the remainder of the unit's equipment and horses. OKH, *Wirren*, 33.

⁶²⁸ Confusion noted in Reinhard, *Wehen*, 41-43. Reinhard also claimed that part of Ebert's speech was interrupted by the arrival of a marching band.

⁶²⁹ All details of the parade from the *Vossische Zeitung*, evening edition, December 10, 1918 and *Neue Preussische Zeitung*, December 11, 1918, except where noted.

constantly around you. In this moment that we greet you on native soil, our first thoughts are offered to our precious dead. Oh, so many will never return.⁶³⁰ Hundreds of thousands rest in quiet graves in the land of the enemy, other hundreds of thousands had to return before the end of the fight, mangled and maimed by enemy fire.

Ebert thanked the men for their sacrifices and their defense of the homeland, noting that mere words could not express the Fatherland's gratitude. Then he spoke words that would haunt the Weimar Republic for the remainder of its short existence:

“Comrades, companions, citizens

Your sacrifice and deeds are without equal.

No enemy has conquered you.”

Ebert explained this last statement by asserting that Germany had only given way after the weight of the enemy's men and material made further combat pointless. Nevertheless, he offered, it was a measure of their heroic resistance that they had kept the enemy and the effects of war off of the soil of the Fatherland. Ebert then reminded the men that they were returning to a Germany that was vastly different than the one they had left and assured the front-line soldiers of their special significance in this new Germany. “On you, above all, rests the hope of German freedom. You are the strongest bearers of the German future.” They especially, he said, should appreciate the transformation of the homeland since it was they that had suffered the most under the former unjust regime. He finished by regretting that the nation had no rich rewards to offer them, but rather the hard job of building the new republic. “Now, Germany's unity lies in your hands!” There

⁶³⁰ Ebert himself had lost two sons in the war.

was great work, he promised, to be done in building the free “Peoples’ State of Germany.”⁶³¹

Another greeting followed Ebert’s speech, this one from the *Oberbürgermeister* of Berlin. Then the troops marched away, to pass in review in front of their own division commander near the Opera House, and proceeded to their respective unit casernes.

The conduct and reception of the parade of December 10 was significant on several levels. It served as a symbol of Germany’s difficult transition from empire to republic. Those most unnerved by the revolution may have been reassured by the appearance of the old flags and portraits of Hindenburg, but the Brandenburg Gate had been decorated with a banner that read “Peace and Liberty” along with the black-red-orange republican flag that had first appeared in the Revolution of 1848-1849.⁶³² The entire event was a curious mix of new and old symbols.

The thanks of a grateful nation were apparent both in Ebert’s words and the outpouring of welcome from the Berliners. No one doubted that the emotions of the crowd were genuine. The previous four years had been hard for all Germans, but the *Frontschweine* had certainly made the greatest sacrifices. Later during the inter-war years, right-wing revisionists would claim that an ungrateful people had treated the returning army in shameful fashion. Certainly, the revolutionaries roughed up individual officers and ripped off their shoulder straps, but, from the border of the Reich to the

⁶³¹ *Vossische Zeitung*, evening edition, “Eberts Rede an die Truppen,” December 10, 1918.

⁶³² Manuela Achilles, *Reforming the Reich: Democratic Symbols and Rituals in Weimar Germany*, doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 2005. . The first chapter of Achilles’ dissertation is a perceptive analysis of the clash of competing symbols on December 10, 1918.

streets of Berlin, contemporary accounts describe a generous and genuine welcome to the front-line soldiers.⁶³³

In Ebert's words to the *Frontruppen* one also senses a feeling of guilt and regret, perhaps, that Germany had asked so much of these men and had so little to give in return. Feelings of guilt also may have been mixed with anxiety. If these front-line soldiers, with their wreath-covered machine guns and *Minenwerfer*, felt the nation had cheated them, if the German people were indifferent to their achievements and their suffering, these Western Front veterans might be capable of a dangerously violent reaction.⁶³⁴ Such feelings may help to explain why Ebert chose to tell them that they were "unconquered." Ebert had explained in unmistakable terms that Germany's defeat was the result of the overwhelming power of foreign enemies. Nevertheless, the apparent admission by a socialist politician that Germany had been "undefeated in the field" would later prove useful for right-wing extremists eager to support their "Stab-in-the-Back" claims.⁶³⁵

But Ebert's words also served as an invitation for the *Frontschweine* to integrate themselves into the new German society, one that had "shaken off the old regime that lay like a curse on our actions." At the front, the sacrifices had marked them as men of special character, devotion and strength, virtues that would be needed in building a nation that was "sovereign of its own fate." He told them that, "Work is the religion of

⁶³³ See Richard Bessel. "Die Heimkehr der Soldaten: Das Bild der Frontsoldaten in der Öffentlichkeit der Weimarer Republik" in Gerhard Hirschfeld and; Gerd Krumeich, Irina eds. *"Keiner fühlt sich hier mehr als Mensch ...". Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Schriften der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte N.F. 1), Essen 1993.

⁶³⁴The MSPD's newspaper, *Vorwärts*, wrote. "The Brandenburg Gate through which the troops are marching, proclaims peace and freedom; and the faces underneath steel helmets bear visages of reserved gravity . . . The returning men know what they have left out there; and the misery, the (Harm) in the countenance of so many who quietly wave their handkerchiefs, they understand as well." Quote from "Der Einzug der Truppen, December 11, 1918, quoted in Achilles, 61.

⁶³⁵ Ibid, 64.

socialism,” and that there would be a place for the former warriors in the noble work of creating the new Germany.⁶³⁶

Whether the guardsmen in the parade formations were cheered or not by these words or any of those spoken at the Pariser Platz may be questioned. Soldiers rarely have much use for fancy speeches; they had been on the march for several hours and rations were waiting in the Moabit Caserne.

As a show of force in support of the Ebert government, the parade was a resounding success.⁶³⁷ Eyewitness accounts stress the appearance of heavy machine guns and artillery batteries within the marching units. The well-ordered formations of the combat-hardened veterans were a powerful contrast to the various rag-tag armed groups that had threatened the peace of the capital. Significantly, the Spartacists risked no counter-demonstrations in the presence of the well-armed guardsmen. The revolutionary sailors in the city displayed their contempt for the guards by carrying their rifles muzzle down and looking away as the *Frontruppen* marched by.⁶³⁸ The Spartacist press registered its dismay in print: “What was planned and prepared for was clearly stamped in the character of the entry of the bourgeoisie-demonstration . . . the violent crushing of

⁶³⁶ The ideas of this paragraph are taken from Achilles, 65.

⁶³⁷ An AEF intelligence report culled this analysis from the Berlin press: “The people of BERLIN appear to be much relieved by the return of the Guards. The performances of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacus Group, with its irresponsible adherents of the Bolshevik type, have caused apprehension among the citizens. . . the fact that on the day before the expiration of the armistice the delegates of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils will meet in BERLIN for their National Convention causes disquiet. This assemblage may be a signal for the Spartacus Group to start new disturbances. The Guard [s] regiments[s] are, apparently, perfectly in hand and have shown no sympathy for the red flag or for terrorizing from any quarter.” NARA: RG 120/5895, Third Army G2 Report No. 25, dated December 11, 1918.

⁶³⁸ Alfred Döblin, *Sieger und Besiegte: Eine wahre Geschichte*, (New York: Aurora Verlag, 1946), 23.

the Berlin proletariat, the workers' and soldiers' councils, and their proletarian storm troops, the Spartacists."⁶³⁹

However, if the parade of December 10 was part of an operation to secure the government against its enemies, then it was only a very tentative, if successful, first step. The troops kept their weapons and ammunition, surely, but the government had not authorized their use except in self-defense. Most of Lequis' command was outside the city or en route, while Berlin remained an armed camp of potentially hostile forces. If the middle class had been reassured, in the working class districts, the Spartacists were distributing weapons and denouncing the parade. In western Berlin, the crowds had been welcoming; there was considerably less enthusiasm for the parade in the working class districts in the northern and eastern sections of the city.⁶⁴⁰

The success of the day's parade did not seem to reduce the tension between the Moderates and the extreme Left. That same day, the *Vollzugsrat* had made another demand that the newly arrived troops be disarmed. They also demanded the right to give their own welcome to the troops when the parade arrived at the Pariser Platz.⁶⁴¹ That night, over glasses of beer, Scheuch and his staff met with Lequis and commanders from several of the guards regiments to discuss the situation. The junior officers present, the men closest to the troops, stressed that time was running out. The rank and file, they warned, could be relied upon for only a few more days. The government needed to act immediately to limit the power of the *Vollzugsrat*. Scheuch, however, was pessimistic

⁶³⁹ *Die Rote Fahne*, "Die Gegendemonstration der Bourgeoisie." December 11, 1918. However, *Die Rote Fahne* also noted that individual soldiers seemed unsettled by the ceremony and that their contact with the revolutionary air (*Volksmilieu*) of Berlin had begun.

⁶⁴⁰ OKH, Wirren, 32

⁶⁴¹ On the 13th, as Molkenbuhr of the *Vollzugsrat* mounted the stage to address the 5th Guards Division, Lequis had the band strike up a loud march which drowned out Molkenbuhr's speech. Böhm, diary entry of December 13, 1918, 105-106.

about the government's willingness to strike and that night, in frustration, he resolved to submit his resignation.⁶⁴²

The parades continued over succeeding days with the last unit, the First Guards Reserve Division, entering the city on December 22. The weather remained dreary and the crowds grew thinner after the initial procession, but the Berliners still offered each successive unit a hearty welcome. The leaders of the government took turns addressing the men at the Pariser Platz--Scheidemann spoke on the eleventh, Haase on the twelfth, for example-- while Lequis attended each ceremony. The battle of symbols continued. On December 12, the 1st Guards Division reported to Lequis' headquarters that they had come to an understanding with local soldiers' councils on the display of red flags during their march into the city. On one hand, the division prohibited its soldiers from tearing down red flags outside their own casernes. On the other, they asked the councils to take down the flags flying on the bridges along the unit's parade route. Recent events had shown that, in the presence of such symbols, the chain of command might lose control of "hotheads" among the guardsmen. "In the interest of peace and order, it is not practicable, on the day of the entry-march, that red flags be hoisted on the long bridges. They are too easily taken the wrong way."⁶⁴³

Less amicable incidents also occurred. At one point, the *Vollzugsrat* forcibly detained an officer from the staff of the German *Jaeger* Division for several hours after he refused to allow his troops to carry red cockades and flags. On December 15, the 4th Foot Guards returned to their barracks at the Moabit caserne, they were greeted by a jeering crowd of sailors, prisoners released from the Moabit prison, and young conscripts

⁶⁴² Böhm, diary entry of December 10, 1918, 102.

⁶⁴³ BA-R: 43/2486, "Report of the 1st Guard Infantry Division to *Generalkommando* Lequis," dated December 12, 1918.

from their own replacement battalion. Under the leadership of the fiery Colonel Reinhard, the guardsmen overthrew the soldiers' council of their replacement battalion and evicted all of the *ersatz* battalion's personnel from the Moabit caserne. Open warfare between the front-line troops and the garrison seemed imminent and Lequis alerted other guard units for possible intervention.⁶⁴⁴ On December 20, the successor to the *Vollzugsrat*, the Central Council (*Zentralrat*) of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, attempted unsuccessfully to disarm one of the Life Guard *Cuirassier* regiments.⁶⁴⁵

As additional divisions moved into the capital, the OHL did not abandon the hope of achieving the operation's original objectives. Scheuch, even though awaiting a replacement, played a central role in thwarting their intentions. As War Minister, he retained command authority over the *Ersatz* battalions that still occupied the casernes within the city and he refused to disband or disarm these units, to dissolve their soldiers' councils or to incorporate the *Ersatz* units into Lequis' field formations. Moreover, he gave no support to the OHL's desire to round up the deserters in the city or to "clean the undesirable elements" out of the barracks by evicting recently discharged men who remained in the casernes.⁶⁴⁶ Instead, on December 13, Scheuch had gone so far as to order that the divisions parading through Berlin would "without exception" be

⁶⁴⁴ Incident described in Wilhelm Reinhard, *4th Garderegiment zu Fuß*, 398, and Kluge 241

⁶⁴⁵ Incidents from OKH, *Wirren*. 32-33.

⁶⁴⁶ Scheuch's resistance described in Kluge, 238; Scheuch had more than two strikes against him. In addition to the OHL's strong criticism of his policies, he faced constant attacks from the *Vollzugsrat* who harassed and arrested members of his staff (See Berthold and Neef, Document 118: "Brief des Kriegsministers von Scheuch an den Rat der Volkbeauftragten vom Dezember 10. 1918," 290-292 and BA-R: R 43/2485/f, Exchange of notes between the Executive Council and the War Ministry on measures to disarm Lequis' command, dated December 10, 1918, 117.). He faced a rebellious cabal of key subordinates within his own ministry. Finally, he was a Catholic Alsatian who had been denounced through army for his failure to defend the capital on November 9. See Liberal historians, like Kluge, see him as one of the few senior army officers truly willing to work within the republican framework. See especially, footnotes 173 and 177, pp. 443-4.

demobilized in the same way as the remainder of the army. The order required Lequis to make regular reports to the War Ministry on the progress of his units' demobilization.⁶⁴⁷

The antipathy between Scheuch and the OHL certainly had elements of a classic bureaucratic turf battle. Yet one can read more into it. Groener's headquarters and the other leaders of the front-line divisions continued to represent themselves as the leaders of the "true" soldiers. In their eyes, Scheuch was responsible for the mutinous riff-raff that had made such a mess of the homeland. The War Minister, for his part, had to resent the haughty and politically naïve attitudes of the Field Army and must have seen himself as protecting the units of the Home Army (*Heimatheer*) from the arrogant, bullying tactics of the *Frontruppen*. The resentments that existed between Front and *Etappe* throughout the war were finding their way back into the homeland during the peace.

On December 12, Ebert met with Scheuch, Lequis and several of the regimental commanders, again, over beers. As recounted by Colonel William Reinhard, commander of the Fourth Regiment of Foot Guards, some very harsh words were exchanged. Reinhard had protested to Ebert that the demobilization was leaving the country defenseless; the release of the older year groups had to stop. Ebert and his trusted assistant, Undersecretary Baake, replied that once the discharge order had been given it could not be rescinded. Angry, Reinhard answered that nothing could be accomplished with the younger year groups in the *Ersatz* battalions; they had been poisoned by the revolution. Baake angrily scolded the regimental commander for using such a tone of voice with the Cabinet. "The officer corps belongs in Golgotha; then everything will be

⁶⁴⁷ The order was countersigned by Ebert's assistant Baake, BA-R: R 43/2485, War Ministry proclamation dated December 13, 1918, 126. On the 14th, the government issued its order on prohibiting the possession of weapons by unauthorized personnel. Instead of "shot on sight," as the OHL had hoped for, the order prescribed a 100,000 mark fine or up to five year's imprisonment for unauthorized possession of weapons. BA-R: R 43/2485/f, Decree on the Return of Weapons and War Materials in the Possession of the Reich, dated December 14, 1918, 119.

better.” Reinhard (again, according to his own account) was undismayed, saying that the Social Democrats wanted to “destroy us.” Ebert attempted to calm the situation until Reinhard demanded that the government issue an immediate order that, after forty-eight hours, anyone found with a weapon would be summarily shot. With that remark, both Ebert and Baake became agitated. The meeting concluded with the Cabinet voting to impose a fine on those carrying unauthorized weapons. Ebert rejected Reinhard’s warning that Liebknecht would launch an uprising as soon as the older year-groups were discharged.⁶⁴⁸

Frustrated by Scheuch’s opposition and Ebert’s vacillation, Groener and his staff watched the window of opportunity slipping away. On December 16, less than a week after the arrival of the first units, the National Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils would open in Berlin and this event had the potential to push matters well to the left. Just over a week after that was Christmas. Those of Lequis’ guardsmen eligible for discharge, and, likely, many who were not eligible, would be clamoring for their immediate release. Thus, several days after the beginning of the *Einzug* (entry), Groener sent his political advisor, Major von Schleicher, to Berlin in order to press Ebert to decisive action.⁶⁴⁹

Lewinsohn’s Ordeal

Despite Schleicher’s best efforts, Ebert did not budge and the National Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils opened as scheduled. History was to record that the deliberations of this body were relatively conservative. The Majority Socialists held an

⁶⁴⁸ Berthold and Neef, Document 117: “Besprechung zwischen Ebert und Oberst Reinhard am 10. Dezember 1918,” 288-291. Berthold and Neef show this meeting on December 10, but again, Bohm’s diary suggests a flawed chronology, and places this heated exchange on December 12.

⁶⁴⁹ Thaer, diary entry of December 16 and 18, 1918, 281-282.

overwhelming majority⁶⁵⁰ and neither Liebknecht nor Luxemburg had been voted a seat in the congress. Among the key outcomes of the congress was support for the election of a National Assembly on January 19, 1919, and the creation of a national-level Central Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils (*Zentralrat*) for the "parliamentary supervision" of Council of Peoples' Delegates. To Ebert's satisfaction, the *Zentralrat* was dominated by the MSPD.

Despite its domination by "moderate" socialists, the congress served to emphasize the lingering suspicion the homeland councils held for the *Frontruppen* and their representatives. This was reflected in the reception the congress gave Ludwig Lewinsohn during the congress' Fifth Session on December 18. Lewinsohn, as a former MSPD party official and the head of the Fourth Army's Soldiers' Council, proposed to address the representatives on the political views of the front-line troops. One recalls from the previous chapter that Lewinsohn had worked closely with the officer chain of command to ensure the successful return of the troops of the Fourth Army. As an NCO on an army staff, Lewinsohn was hardly a true *Frontschwein*, yet, at the congress, he stepped forward to speak for the men who were returning from the trenches.

Those present were unwilling to hear what he had to say. According to the transcript kept for that day, virtually every significant assertion made by Lewinsohn was challenged by catcalls, ridicule, and condemnation. He had opened defensively:

Lewinsohn: "Comrades and Colleagues, I speak in the name of the comrades of the Western Front. We are soldiers' councils that are frequently slandered because you do

⁶⁵⁰ Along with civilian party members present, the representatives from the *Westheer* and units from the East were overwhelmingly MSPD in sympathy. Jörg Berlin, Document 168: "Bericht des Delegierten Thomas über den Rätekongress in der Sitzung des 21er Rates Wilhelmshaven vom 3. 1. 1919 (Auszüge)," 222-225.

not know what we have done, because you have heard only rumors, and because you have received flyers you do not understand.” He continued by reporting that at the time of the Armistice, conditions behind the front were chaotic, with widespread plunder and disorder. It was the job of “true revolutionary elements” to protect the honor of the revolution by bringing things under control. They had left the officers who were technical experts in place because no one in the councils pretended to have the expertise gained from years of training in staff schools. He attempted to justify this cooperation with Fourth Army’s officers by asking the audience, “Does anyone here feel himself capable of undertaking the demobilization of a division or a corps? If he does, he can come to me with his address; tomorrow I’ll put him at the head of a corps.”

Response: “Do you have that power?”

Lewinsohn: “Yes, we at the front have this power.”

Response: “But you don’t!”

Lewinsohn reminded the audience that the Allies had made it clear that they would not negotiate with soldiers’ councils. If the congress sought a complete overthrow of the highest level of the army’s leadership, they would put the continuing conduct of the Armistice negotiations in jeopardy.

Response: “Then we’ll still have you!” (Laughter)

Lewinsohn asked the audience to tone down their language and allow him to speak.

Lewinsohn: (seeking to verify his revolutionary *bona fides*): “We have expressed ourselves in terms of a socialist republic, and our flyers have been available for your review.”

Response: “We have seen from your flyers what kind of fellow you are!”

Lewinsohn: “You have to remember that Berlin is not alone in the world. The front-line troops and the troop units waiting to be demobilized do not think exactly like you do. That’s because they know that the danger exists, should their leaders suddenly be deposed, that the demobilization will not go smoothly.” He went on the counterattack: “For four weeks you have called out to us: counter-revolution. You constantly say: counter-revolution. Where is it then?”

Response: “There it stands!” (Great laughter)

Lewinsohn: “If a counter-revolution was possible, it would have happened long ago.”

Response: (Objections)

Lewinsohn repeated that he wanted to work with the homeland councils and that he agreed with most of their proposals. However, the councils had misrepresented the situation in the Field Army by constantly painting the officers in the darkest terms. “We had to work with these officers day and night, because we could not accomplish this work [the army’s return] ourselves. (Shouts) At this point, Lewinsohn was pressed to resort to his nominal status as a *Frontsoldat*. “We have lain [together] in the trenches.” He continued, “Today, the Supreme Headquarters has [informed us] through its liaison officer with the Soldiers’ Council of the Supreme Headquarters, that the Central Council of Soldiers’ of the Front has declared that not a single officer is thinking of counter-revolutionary things.” (Laughter). “That is because they know that not a single unit would operate in this direction.”⁶⁵¹

Had Lewinsohn hoped that the congress would be an expression of solidarity among the councils, front and rear, he had been rudely disabused of that idea.

⁶⁵¹ Lewinsohn’s address from BA-R: R43/2487. f.1 Record of the 5th and 6th Sessions, The General Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils, December 18, 1918, 43-47.

Dittmann, the USPD cabinet member, also spoke that day and was pressed to defend the government against accusations that it had not done enough to prevent counter-revolution. The cabinet was aware, he said, that the old reactionary spirit was still alive within the officer corps, and that there were units in the Field Army that remained “unenlightened” by the necessary revolutionary instruction. However, events had shown that the troops could almost never be manipulated into acting in a counter-revolutionary fashion. Nevertheless, the government remained vigilant. Dittmann offered that, in cases in which an officer in the *Westheer* had promulgated a policy that forbade red flags or acted in a similar counter-revolutionary fashion, the cabinet had intervened and, in some cases, had an officer relieved. (Catcall: “But von Mudra is still there!”)⁶⁵² Furthermore, Dittmann explained, complaints about Lequis should take into account that the government was aware of his command and had summoned the general to the Chancellery in order to have him offer assurances that no counter-revolutionary activities were contemplated.⁶⁵³

The attacks on Lewinsohn and Dittmann indicated how deeply the Left feared the front-line units as a force that had been turned against the revolution. However, for the army’s senior leaders, the most significant outcome of the congress was the passage of the so-called “Hamburg Points”⁶⁵⁴ on December 18, 1918. These were measures designed to secure the revolution by democratizing authority relationships within the military. The seven points included: the elimination of all badges of rank, decorations, or badges of nobility; assumption by the soldiers’ councils of all responsibility for

⁶⁵² Bruno von Mudra was an army commander who had been aggressively hostile to the homeland councils. He was eventually relieved for his “counter-revolutionary activities.” (along with von der Marwitz, von Eberhardt, and Friedrich Sixt von Arnim). *Dittmann*, Rojahn, 245.

⁶⁵³ BA-R: R43/2487, Transcript of Dittmann’s remarks, dated December 18, 1918, 95-101.

⁶⁵⁴ So-called after an MSPD delegate, Lamp’l, from Hamburg. Guth, 82.

discipline; the election of officers; the abolition of the standing military forces, and the accelerated creation of a peoples' army (*Volkswehr*).⁶⁵⁵ Ebert knew that Groener would see this measure as a betrayal of their "pact," and attempted to have this measure held in abeyance by adding an "eighth point," which kept the first seven from going into effect until all details had been worked out. In this, he failed.⁶⁵⁶

Groener and the rest of the officer corps did, indeed, feel betrayed.⁶⁵⁷ The adoption of the Hamburg Points meant the end of what remained of the old officer corps. The First Quartermaster General decided to attack the dangerous measure head on. On December 19, a telegram went out to subordinate commands under Hindenburg's name to which began, "I do not recognize the resolution regarding military affairs adopted by the Central Committee of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils on 12. 18. 18, in particular the status of officers and NCOs." The message asserted that such a drastic revision of the existing military structure could only be accomplished through the actions of a National Assembly representing the entire German people. The army, it stated, remained loyal to the Ebert government but that it would await further instructions.⁶⁵⁸

Groener sent the cabinet a letter of protest which warned the government that adoption of the Hamburg Points would destroy the necessary relations between officers and men, jeopardize the execution of demobilization, threaten the execution of the measures required by the armistice, undermine the convention of the National Assembly,

⁶⁵⁵ Point summarized from Jörg Berlin: "Document 171: "Der Kongress der AuSR Deutschlands entscheidet am 18.12, 1918 über die Kommandogewalt (die sog. 7 "Hamburger Punkte")," 229-230.

⁶⁵⁶ Ebert's efforts and the debate within the congress described in Guth. 79-92.

⁶⁵⁷ See, for example, Thaer, diary entry of December 19, 1918, 283.

⁶⁵⁸ BA-MA: N 46/130, telegram transcript, "The Position of the Army Supreme Command," dated December 19, 1918. According to Volkmann, Groener told Ebert that same day that he was coming to Berlin, but that it was his fixed opinion as well as that of the field marshal that the "entire OHL stand or falls on this question."147.

and risk anarchy across Germany. Groener had the entire staff at Wilhelmhöhe sign the letter and then he boarded a train for Berlin.⁶⁵⁹

On the afternoon of the next day, he and Admiral von Mann of the *Kriegsmarine* went before a combined meeting of the cabinet and *Zentralrat* to contest the Hamburg Points.⁶⁶⁰ In the stormy debate that followed, Groener threatened the collective resignation of the entire officer corps and the collapse of order in discipline in the army. The Hamburg Points, he said, had been inspired by the abuses of authority by junior officers in recruit depots in the homeland. The entire officer corps need not be punished for the mistakes of a few (left unsaid, but evidently he was referring to a handful of bad apples in the rear). Meanwhile, implementation the resolutions would be disastrous. But not so much the *Westfront*, he said. Relations between officers and men were so sound that, “For the *Frontruppen* [the Hamburg points] would make no great impression.” It was the rabble of the home army that needed to accept the symbols of officer authority as symbols of the power of the state.⁶⁶¹

This was the old army playing its last card, and the anti-militarists blinked. The Independents cried treason,⁶⁶² but Ebert was able to reintroduce the “eighth point” which delayed the implementation of the new policies until detailed instructions could be drafted and gained agreement that, in their final form, the policies would not apply to the

⁶⁵⁹ In the case of the Hamburg Points, at least, Groener and Scheuch of one mind. BA-R: R 43/2482, Scheuch note to Ebert, dated December 19, 1918.

⁶⁶⁰ A number of accounts emphasize that Groener and Schleicher walked down Leipzigerstrasse to the Reichs Chancellory in full uniform, complete with decorations and side arms, in what appeared to be an open provocation to the anti-militarists in the capital. As they approached the Chancellory building a small crowd gathered to harass them, but when a soldier tried to block the officers’ path, he was arrested by plainclothes policemen (Volkman, 149). An account from the Left insists that the two officers were never in danger because such policemen had been stationed in advance all along the route.

⁶⁶¹ Berthold and Neef, Document 139: “Gemeinsame Sitzung des Rates der Volksbeauftragten mit dem Zentralrat am 20. Dezember 1918,

⁶⁶² See Schuddekopf, Document 10: “Besprechung in Berlin zwischen Groener-Schleicher, Rat der Volksbeauftragten und Zentralrat am 20. 12. 1918., 38.

Field Army. For one of the last times in post-war Germany, the front-line troops were set apart from the rest of the army (though Groener wanted the delay to apply to the entire army) and used as pawns in the chess match between the army and its critics. The socialists envisioned the armed forces of the new Germany would be based on democratic principles and enlightened bonds between soldier and leader, free of the trappings of the *ancien regime* but, for the time being, the old traditions and authority relationships would remain in place for the men returning from the front.⁶⁶³

If the front-line officers retained their traditional authority, as Christmas approached they were running out of men on whom they might employ that authority. With this in mind, on December 18, Lequis and Schleicher had made a final appeal to Ebert to allow his troops enact the key element of the OHL's plan for securing the government and the capital, the disarming (*Entwaffnung*) of the populace. Ebert was unwilling to take this bold step. In the highly charged political atmosphere of the German capital, he only would settle for a less inflammatory move. The cabinet would give the authority for disarming the Berlin populace to Scheuch's War Ministry. This variation to the plan would make the City Commandant, Wels, and his less-than-formidable *Soldatenwehr* responsible for implementing the measure. The penalty for unauthorized possession of weapons would not be, as the army wanted, immediate execution, but rather a fine.⁶⁶⁴ Ebert's compromise inspired an angry Lequis to comment

⁶⁶³ Marxist and more leftist accounts insist Groener's threat of mass resignation was a bluff. The *Große Hauptquartier* was not likely to take itself out of business at this critical juncture. (See, for example, Könnemann, 1598 and Kluge, 253-260. However, how far could Ebert risk the withdrawal of the OHL's support of his government?

⁶⁶⁴ Thaer wrote that the Spartacists would laugh at this, diary entry of December 18, 1918, 282.

to Colonel Reinhard, “[Now] The Social Democrats will eat the filth [*Dreck*] that they have made.”⁶⁶⁵

Ebert’s halfway measure was the final nail in the coffin of the “Berlin-Operation.” The War Ministry had neither the will nor the means to disarm the various militias and security forces around the city. Nor did Ebert have any desire to press the issue. Finally, neither the OHL nor Lequis were willing to act without the sponsorship of the new republic’s civilian leaders. Thus, a week before Christmas, the OHL’s cherished coup was a dead letter. The guards regiments remained in their barracks and continued to discharge the men eligible for release.

The Frontschwein’s Dilemma, Part VI

The six response factors that shaped the decisions of the front-line soldiers in the days just before and shortly after the Armistice obviously played a different role in December as the *Frontheer* returned to Germany and the Supreme Headquarters attempted to use the army’s most reliable remnants to shape the political situation. Once again, some factors played a greater role than before, some much less.

Exhaustion had much less influence. For the average soldier, the nearness of home brought new energy. The exhaustion that came from weeks in the trenches and weeks on the march was largely forgotten. Indeed, one might argue that the soldiers who took off for home on foot suffered from an excess of energy. On the other hand, the rapid dissolution of the old army suggested a sort of moral exhaustion within the officer corps. Holding a unit together during December 1918 required officers of extraordinary zeal, energy, and insight; Pabst was the conspicuous example, and there seemed to be few like him.

⁶⁶⁵ Lequis’ reaction from Könnemann, 1599.

Isolation, too, was no longer a factor for the great majority of the homecoming troops. As the returning regiments arrived in the cities and towns of Germany, they were subjected to the same agitation and temptations that had undermined the Home Army in the days before the revolution. If anything, the previous isolation of the front-line troops made them more vulnerable to exaggerated political claims. As for the Berlin Operation, Lequis initially kept his troops in the suburbs to shield them from revolutionary rabble-rousing. However, the agitators were persistent and there was little the chain of command could do once the units entered the capital.

Alienation, however, remained a significant factor. One finds the evidence in the myriad incidents between *Frontruppen* and the homeland councils. The veterans of the trenches continued, in many cases, to look on the *Heimkrieger* as cowardly shirkers. However, such attitudes would dissipate with time. The famous author, Alfred Döblin, observed that in many instances when the front-line troops arrived at their home station, they would thrash the members of the homeland council.⁶⁶⁶ Within days, however, these same soldiers were wearing red armbands and disobeying their officers. Nevertheless, one imagines that it was fairly simple for the Left to interpret the resentments of the front-line troops as an indication of reactionary manipulation by the officer corps. When the front-line troops began tearing down red flags in Allenstein, the answer for the fearful revolutionaries, in that instance, was to open up with machine gun fire.

Selection played a conspicuous role both in the accelerated dissolution of the army in December 1918 and the course of the Berlin-Operation. On one hand, by attempting to demobilize the older year groups ahead of the restive younger classes, the army removed the steadying influence of the *Stammansschaften* and ensured that, when the younger

⁶⁶⁶ Döblin, 14.

troops clamored for immediate discharge, there were no “old sweats” on hand to steady them. At the same time, it was the OHL’s secret selection process that determined which units deployed around Berlin in early December. Lequis’ divisions were among the best fighting division in the old *Kaiserheer*. They were also capable of putting on an impressive show when called on to march in ordered ranks through the streets of the capital. Yet, because they were divisions recruited from Prussia, many of the guardsmen had home and family nearby. The OHL’s cleverness in hiding the Berlin Operation by choosing troops with demobilization stations near Berlin would return to undermine to that operation. Even Pabst conceded that, in the days that followed their parade through Berlin, the troops of the GKSD began to ask, “Why should we lie about here in Berlin. Our families need us at home!”⁶⁶⁷ No easy reply was forthcoming.

Cohesion, expressed as *esprit d’ corps* and loyalty to comrades and leaders, was and still is the foundation of best military units. However, it stood little chance when matched against the *Drang nach Hause*. Appeals to a unit’s glorious fighting record, the brotherhood of the trenches, or the affection inspired by a highly regarded leader could do relatively little to brake the army’s dissolution. Indeed, front-line soldiers were likely to exhibit the highest degree of solidarity when confronted with an impediment to the earliest possible return to home and family. Recall the example of the 15th Bavarian Division which threatened mass desertion when tasked with border security duty.⁶⁶⁸

Management of soldier perceptions, like the power of cohesion, operated with limited effectiveness as the Field Army penetrated into the interior of Germany. When the chain of command cited the depredations of *Drückeberger* and homeland councils in attacking

⁶⁶⁷ Nachlass Pabst, 34.

⁶⁶⁸ Lipp, 168.

the army's supply line, this could serve to build hostility to the revolution among soldiers marching through Belgium or the Rhineland. These claims carried less weight in Brandenburg or Bavaria. Similarly, west of the Rhine, the army staffs could distribute flyers warning of the danger of Bolshevism and convince the front-line soldiers that the nation was in danger. However, when units reached their home districts where they were greeted by cheering citizens, such propaganda carried little weight. The government might assure soldiers that there would be work waiting for every returning veteran, but, for a man cooling his heels in a caserne, waiting for the processing of his discharge papers, trusting such promises must certainly have seemed a risky proposition.

From Coup to Parade

On December 10, Colonel von Thaeer had written in his diary, "Now, in a great circle surrounding Berlin, stand nine good divisions, fully equipped and battle ready, in any event, only 150,000 men, [but] with the will to shoot in order to restore order in the land."⁶⁶⁹ Less than two weeks later, *Generalkommando* Lequis would be unable to muster a full-strength brigade to march to the support of the Ebert government.⁶⁷⁰ The front-line divisions had, indeed, melted "like butter in the sun." What began as a decisive military strike to solidify the Ebert government evolved, in the first ten days of December into a parade and, in the ten days following, the disintegration of the Guard Corps.

In his memoirs, Groener attributed the failure of the "Berlin-Operation" to a lack of will. Ebert and Scheuch had not done their part, which was to provide the political "top cover" for the operation as well as the necessary command and control of all the pro-government elements in the capital. Ebert had not "risen to the occasion" and had not

⁶⁶⁹ Thaeer, diary entry of December 10, 1918. 280.

⁶⁷⁰ Groener estimated between 1800 and 2000 men were available on December 23. Groener's testimony in the *Dolstochprozess* paraphrased in Groener-Geyer, 197.

seen the urgency for acting before Lequis' command evaporated. In the process, Groener wrote, the cabinet leader had shown a dismaying lack of insight into soldier behavior.⁶⁷¹ And Scheuch, even as he prepared to depart his key position, proved pessimistic of the operation's prospects, jealous of the authority of those who planned it, and obstructive of the essential political measures that were the preconditions for success.

Certainly, divided councils between Ebert, Scheuch, Groener, and Lequis were decisive in the operation's failure. However, Spartacus deserved some credit as well. On one hand, the Spartacists had not met the entry of the Guard Corps with overt violence. The front-line soldiers arriving in Berlin had been told that the government was in grave peril, but this was not apparent as the troops marched among cheering crowds. There seemed to be no Bolshevik Red Terror lurking on every street corner, as the guardsmen had been led to believe. On the other hand, Liebknecht's followers continued to agitate among the troops, and, for the homesick and war-weary soldiers so close to home, Spartacist encouragements to leave the ranks must have found a receptive audience.⁶⁷²

In the final analysis, however, the operation failed because the *Frontschweine* wanted to go home. The entire OHL scheme was based on the very risky assumption that the leadership of the Guard Corps, at the regiment, battalion, and company level, could hold their units together for a period of days once they had brought those units so close to home. This, in turn, assumed that the junior leaders in the combat units had both the will and the courage to resist the "*Drang nach Hause*." These all proved very poor assumptions, indeed, and were, perhaps, the general staff's last demonstration of

⁶⁷¹ Groener,

⁶⁷² Könnemann, 1599. In a report to Lequis' headquarters of the 1st Guard Division had reported that the persistence of Spartacist agitation was such that, "When they are removed from one place, shortly thereafter, they begin again somewhere else." BA-R: R 43/2494/11. Ia Msg. # 20, *Generalkommando* Lequis to the Reich Leadership on Report from the 1st Guard Division, dated December 11, 1918, 28.

Frontfremdheit. For most of the men returning from the Western Front, neither clever leadership, persuasive propaganda, nor the centripetal pull of comradeship, was going to keep them in crowded casernes while their families were celebrating Christmas nearby. The officers responsible for planning and directing the operation were not completely unaware of their soldiers' desires, but, they underestimated how strong the desires to go home would be. Groener again: "The pull of being home for Christmas proved itself stronger than military discipline."⁶⁷³

Had the operation succeeded, the army might have proven itself the mainstay of the Ebert government. However, this assumes that the front-line units that marched into Berlin would be willing to use armed force against the anti-government forces. In light of the events to follow, the "Bloody Christmas" crisis of December 23-24, this also seems a poor assumption. Throughout the first three weeks of December, the OHL had resisted efforts to liquidate the old military authority in favor of more democratic military system. The general staff officers at Wilhelmshöhe had used the technical demands of redeployment and demobilization of the "Western Front" to assert their irreplaceable status. They had used the prospect of a military operation against the government's enemies in Berlin to maintain the influence they had regained after the shock of November 9. However, as Christmas approached, their hole card, the "Western Front," had largely merged with the "Home Front." The army leaders had lost their last and strongest weapon and the Ebert government, apparently, its strongest military support. In their newly weakened condition, both the OHL and the Cabinet would face the coming Christmas holiday with considerable foreboding. It promised to be a season of anxiety.

⁶⁷³ Groener, 474-475. Könnemann, an East German historian, made the notable concession that Christmas probably had a greater solvent effect on Lequis' divisions than did appeals to proletarian solidarity.1599.

Chapter Seven

THE LAST BATTLE: “Bloody Christmas,” December 24, 1918

Ignorant Armies (Berlin: December, 1918)

As the last of the front-line divisions returned to their casernes, Germany's threadbare capital looked forward to its first peacetime Christmas in four years. For many families this was an occasion for rejoicing as sons, fathers, and husbands came home for the first time in years. The joyful reception they had given the guard divisions during the previous weeks had shown that Berliners still remembered how to celebrate. Berliners also had reason to wonder what the holiday would bring. Six weeks after the old regime had been swept away, a series of unsettling events reminded the citizens of the capital that Germany's political future remained uncertain. The end of the Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils on December 20 had left the ruling coalition in turmoil. The Independent Socialist members of the government and the radical Berlin soldiers' and workers' councils, bitter over their political defeat, threatened to abandon their share of the governing coalition. On the 21st, crowds of Berlin workers responded to Spartacist agitation and took to the streets to commemorate the burial of those killed in the violence of December 6. Their numbers and their slogans were an ominous rebuke to the government. Then, on the 22nd, the last of Lequis' divisions marched through the streets of Berlin. An eyewitness, Count Harry Kessler, recorded the event in his diary:

. . . [A]nother home-coming division, steel-helmeted and flower-bedecked . . . was marching down *Unter den Linden*. But at the corner of Wilhelmstrasse, it was awaited by a crowd of war-wounded, shaking their crutches in the air or carrying placards: 'Not Charity, but Justice' and 'Throw out the Guilty who have reduced us to Misery and Poverty.' The

procession, obviously mounted by Liebknecht, moved forward in the path of the division, jostled the troops, got in their way, broke in among the ranks. It was a distressing incident which visibly affected the soldiers. Their faces were taut and the atmosphere tense. The onlookers were just as upset, but remained quiet.⁶⁷⁴

If the Spartacists had organized the demonstration, they deserved credit for a shrewd act of political theater. The presence of crippled men ruined the celebration of heroic units and Imperial symbols. It reminded the crowd what monarchy and militarism had cost the German people. Indeed, the returning troops had received welcome speeches by Ebert and others that suggested the front-line soldiers, because of their ordeal in the trenches, had a unique moral authority in the new Germany. Only the dead, the oratory claimed, had made a greater sacrifice. But then there was the messy business of the war-wounded. These crippled men would not be so readily integrated into the noble ranks of the German working class. Their missing limbs and eyes testified to a level of sacrifice between the honored dead and the parading guardsmen being welcomed home.

The enemies of the Ebert government were not restricting themselves to political theater. Spartacist supporters spent the latter days of December distributing weapons among the most radicalized factory workers in the capital and Berlin was full of rumors of Soviet agents, Soviet money, and Soviet agitation.⁶⁷⁵ Tension was building in the capital. Average Berliners could only hope that the bloody showdown that seemed so likely might be deferred until after the holiday season. In this hope, they were to be disappointed. The long-anticipated outbreak of violence came on Christmas Eve, 1918.

The German Left remembered it as "*Blutweihnachten*," Bloody Christmas.

⁶⁷⁴ Harry Kessler, *Berlin in Lights: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*, translated and edited by Charles Kessler, (New York: Grove Press, 2000); diary entry of December 22, 1918, 39.

⁶⁷⁵ BA-R, R 43/2494/k. This entire series of documents shows that through December, the government operated under the fear of Spartacist uprising supported by active Soviet money, agitation, and arms.

The battle of December 24, 1918, was one of the most curious in German military history. The causes of the fighting on Christmas Eve reflected the uneasy compromises and complex political arrangements of revolutionary Germany. By the same token, the opposing sides in the battle highlighted the uncertain allegiances of the new republic's various armed groups. On one side of the fighting was a coalition socialist government divided against itself (Moderates versus Independents). As another incongruity, the seat of government had a city commandant, Otto Wels, who had little or no control over the "military" formations in the capital. The army defending the new government, an army once the most powerful in the world, was wasting away. What remained of that army was also divided against itself (officer corps versus Soldiers' Councils; field army versus homeland garrisons) and its senior leaders, in the OHL and *Kriegsministerium*, held the political ideals of their civilian masters in contempt. Increasingly, the colonels and generals despised the government's unwillingness to move decisively against its opponents.

On Christmas Eve, the sworn enemy of the government was, paradoxically, one of the first units called upon to defend the revolutionary regime. The unit in question, the *Volksmarinedivision*, was led by a sailor and an army deserter who, between them, had only marginal control over their own subordinates. These subordinates, in turn, held political allegiances ranging from indifference to solid Majority Socialist to pure Spartacist. It was a unit originally formed to provide security and order in the capital. Over time, it had become, in the eyes of many Berliners, the city's chief source of insecurity and disorder.

The causes and course of the fighting were unusual, as well. The actual combat on December 24 resulted from an operation approved and launched by one part of the coalition government—the Majority Socialists--without the knowledge or consent of its partners, the Independent Socialists. To make matters worse, the operation was executed by a chain of military headquarters—the OHL, Lequis' command, and an elite guard division-- that were not inclined to obey either side of the ruling coalition. Thus, the battle that took place on Christmas Eve around the Imperial Palace and the former Imperial stables embodied all the contradictions and confusion of the postwar Reich. “Bloody Christmas” revealed to the world the inability of the government to protect itself against its enemies as well as its inability to control its own armed protectors. It also demonstrated the dilemmas faced by every returning front-line soldier. In the power struggles taking place across his homeland, how should he respond and where did his own allegiance lie?

The battle was far from inevitable. The Christmas Eve fighting resulted from a series of unlikely errors, oversights, and misunderstandings. It might be described as a comedy of errors, if not for the corpses lying in the courtyard of the Marstall building at the end of the day. The showdown started with an argument about door keys on the day before Christmas Eve. In the words of the Captain Waldemar Pabst, the staff officer responsible for planning the attack that followed: “So it came to pass, that right on the day the Savior of Mankind was offered, led by the words ‘Peace on Earth,’ the war of citizen against citizen of the same nation began.”⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷⁶ BA-MA, PH 620/2; *Nachlass Pabst, Niederschrift der Erinnerungen von Major Waldemar Pabst und seine Nachkriegserlebnisse als Ia and Stabschef der Garde-Kav-(Schü) Division*, 41.

On paper, the Ebert-Haase government and the Council of Peoples' Delegates was far from defenseless. Pledged to defend the government was the Commandant's *Republikanische Soldatenwehr* (Republican Soldier Security Force), perhaps ten thousand strong, the Police President's *Sicherheitwehr* (Security Force), numerous replacement battalions of the Berlin garrison, the *Studentenwehr* (Student Security Force), Suppe's force of active duty guard NCO's, a number of local vigilante groups, the *Volksmarinedivision*, and finally the battle-tested veterans of the Guard Corps itself. However, as we have seen, none of these groups truly offered the hope of reliable military efficiency and loyalty. The *Soldatenwehr* was made up of ill-led volunteers, many of whom served only for the generous pay.⁶⁷⁷ The *Sicherheitswehr*, led by the Independent Police President, Emil Eichhorn, was increasingly pro-Spartacist. Other formations, were relatively new, ad hoc, and untested. The recently arrived Guard Corps was wasting away so rapidly that no one could predict its strength by Christmas. Meanwhile, the chief characteristics of the garrison replacement battalions were the youth of their members and their appalling lack of discipline;⁶⁷⁸ some had declared allegiance to the Ebert government, some not.⁶⁷⁹

Then there was the *Volksmarinedivision* (VMD; the Peoples' Naval Division), conspicuous for its politically and militarily critical role of securing the main government buildings in the heart of Berlin. Because the VMD played such a central role in the turmoil and bloodshed of late December 1918, and because it fought the last remnants of

⁶⁷⁷ Van den Bergh, The author describes the *Soldatenwehr* troops as mercenaries without officers; "no leadership and no heroes." Diary entry of December 25, 1918, 64-5. They were organized into twelve, and later, fifteen "depots," each of four companies and approximately one thousand men. See *Wirren*, 15-16.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid, Van den Bergh's contemptuous assessment was that the best men have gone home and what remains are "adventurers" who enjoy agitation and seek to avoid demobilization. Their chain of command ran through the headquarters of the III Corps and the Guard Corps to the War Ministry.

⁶⁷⁹ Though heavily biased against the Left, the most comprehensive review of the various armed groups in Berlin in December 1918 is found in *Wirren*, 11-20.

the old Field Army, the division's origins, composition and allegiances are worth examining. Similarly, the events that put it in conflict with the front-line soldiers of General von Lequis deserve attention, even though such a review is complicated by the controversies that surround the VMD's history.⁶⁸⁰

The *Volksmarinedivision* (Berlin: November 10-mid-December, 1918)

Among the units pledged to support the revolution, the VMD had a certain pride of place. It had been the first unit within Berlin to be specifically created to secure the new revolutionary government. On November 10, the day after the collapse of the Imperial regime, sniping, looting, incendiary agitation, and various other manifestations of lawlessness left the center of the capital anxious and unsettled. Such lawlessness had made the function of the newly formed Ebert-Haase cabinet as well as the government ministries nearly impossible. At this point a petty officer named Paul Wieczorek appeared at the *Reichs* Chancellery and offered the services of his comrades in a naval aviation unit stationed nearby. Impressed by the man's earnest sincerity, the War Minister, General Scheuch, teamed Wieczorek with his own deputy, Colonel Walther Reinhardt and, together, the two men cooperated to build a two hundred-man guard force

⁶⁸⁰ In East German historiography, for example, the VMD were heroes of the November revolution, consistently and devoutly dedicated to combating the forces of reaction. The division was formed to defend against the forces of counter-revolution. See, for example, Kurt Wrobel, *Die Volksmarinedivision*. (Berlin (East): Verlag des Ministeriums für Nationale Verteidigung, 1957, and Paul Freyer, *Sturmvoegel: Rote Matrosen 1918/1919*. (Berlin (East): Militärverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1975). They became the "useable past" of the German socialist state and, in their honor, the East German navy was named the "*Volksmarine*" and a number of vessels were named after the division's leaders. (See Douglas Peifer, "Commemoration of Mutiny, Rebellion, and Resistance in Postwar Germany: Public Memory and the Formation of 'Memory Beacons.'" *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 65, No. 4, Oct. 2001, 1013-1052. In the accounts of those who opposed them, they were shiftless vandals who had fallen under the influence of genuinely dangerous radicals (See Wels statement in BA-R, R43/2508/e, p. 5, Berlin Commandant Report to the Cabinet, dated December 17, 1918). One of division's first leaders, Graf von Metternich, described his men as an "organized band of robbers." (Volkman, 133). The National Socialist account in *Wirren* (18-19) suggests the unit evolved into a uniformed protection racket. As to origins, Reinhardt's diary contradicts the East German account by claiming the unit's original function was to avoid a coup from the Left. ("Aus dem Nachlass des Generals Walther Reinhardt," by Fritz Ernst, *Welt als Geschichte*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 1958, 46-47, 46)

for the key government facilities⁶⁸¹ near the *Reichs* Chancellery. The new unit installed itself in the Marstall building, the former Imperial stables and, over the next several days, its orderly behavior and appearance served to calm things in the center of the capital.⁶⁸²

Encouraged by this, the government sought to expand the formation, and the City Commandant, Otto Wels, asked the Kiel Soldiers' Council for an additional two thousand "reliable" sailors. At the time, a railway strike impeded traffic from Kiel to Berlin. Thus, on November 13, six hundred sailors from Cuxhaven instead of Kiel reinforced the original members of the naval guard force.⁶⁸³ Together with the original guard unit, these men became the nucleus of what would be called the "Peoples' Naval Division."⁶⁸⁴ As other sailors joined the unit its numbers swelled and, by November 13, 1918, the division counted fifteen hundred members, many of whom were stokers and machinists from Berlin and its environs.⁶⁸⁵ It organized itself into three detachments, each quartered in different areas of the city center.⁶⁸⁶

Over the next several weeks the division continued to grow. Enlistment in the *Volksmarinedivision* entitled one to lodging, rations, regular pay, the right to bear arms, and an identity card that read: "Employed on the Missions of the Ebert and Haase

⁶⁸¹ Over time these would include the *Reichsbank*, key rail stations, museums, cafés and hotels known for political activity, newspaper offices, as well as the Austro-Hungarian Embassy. BA-R, R43/2408/f, *Volksmarinedivision* Strength Report Submitted to the City Commandant, December 18, 1918.

⁶⁸² Description of the original guard force from Reinhardt's account is found in Ernst, 46-47. See also, *Wirren*, 17. By housing them in the Marstall instead of a local caserne, the government hoped to insulate them from the poisonous influence of the army replacement battalions.

⁶⁸³ Gustav Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp, Zur Geschichte der deutsche Revolution*. (Berlin: Verlag für Politik und Wirtschaft, 1920), 48.

⁶⁸⁴ Creation of the original guard force from Reinhardt's account found in "Aus dem Nachlass des Generals Walther Reinhardt," by Fritz Ernst, *Welt als Geschichte*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 1958, 46-47.

⁶⁸⁵ Kurt Wrobel, *Volksmarinedivision*, 37-38 and Bogdan Krieger, *Das Berliner Schloß in den Revolutionstagen 1918: Erinnerungen und Eindrücke*. (Leipzig, Konkordia Verlag, 1922), 17.

⁶⁸⁶ Detachment I was the largest and it along with the division headquarters was in the Marstall. It took responsibility for the Chancellery, the Reichsbank, and other buildings nearby. The smaller Detachment II was quartered in the Representative House where the *Vollzugsrat* held its meetings. Detachment III, also smaller than I, was billeted in the exposition hall of the *Lehrter Bahnhof* where it served as a sort of reserve for the rest of the division. Freyer, 177.

government.”⁶⁸⁷ Not surprisingly for a city crowded with unemployed men, these privileges drew new recruits to the division in large numbers so that, by the end of November, it counted 3200 members.⁶⁸⁸ With the enlarged membership, the character of the division changed. Many of the new men were not sailors, most were politically unsophisticated or even hostile to the government, and more than a few were, as even Marxist sources have conceded, were “undesirable elements.”⁶⁸⁹

The character of the leadership changed as well. Wiczorek was murdered just a few days after the division formed.⁶⁹⁰ A sailor with an Independent seat in *Vollzugsrat*, Otto Tost, succeeded him. Tost was succeeded, in turn, by a nobleman with ostensible socialist sympathies, Graf von Metternich.⁶⁹¹ Metternich, implicated in the December 6 putsch, left Berlin, and the division’s leadership changed again.⁶⁹² By the middle of December, the division’s Soldiers’ Council was led by Wiczorek’s sailor friend, Fritz Radtke, serving as commander, with a demoted former army lieutenant and deserter, Heinrich Dorrenbach, as the chief of agitation and press relations.⁶⁹³ Dorrenbach, in particular, was deeply committed to pulling the division farther to the left.⁶⁹⁴ While

⁶⁸⁷ German Historical Museum, Berlin. Exhibit Item Do 81/58, “Ausweis eines Angehörigen des Volksmarinedivision, Berlin 1918” *Volksmarinedivision* Identification Card #154 (Seaman Heinger).

⁶⁸⁸ Noske, 65. When Noske visited the Marstall after Christmas he found that most of the sailors he talked to were men who had not been able to find work.

⁶⁸⁹ Wrobel, *Volksmarinedivision*,

⁶⁹⁰ Marxist sources claim a reactionary naval officer named Brettschneider shot Wiczorek while trying to wrest control of the division from its revolutionary leadership (See, for example, Wrobel, *Volksmarinedivision*, 33). Colonel Reinhardt, on the other hand, wrote that it was Wiczorek’s efforts to prevent the “radicalization” of the division that cost him his life. (Ernst, 47).

⁶⁹¹ Metternich had been an official in the Foreign Office and Marxist historiography considered him a government mole inserted into the division to monitor its political reliability. Wrobel, *Sieg*, 31. See also, *Wirren*, 18. The National Socialist account of his activities found nothing to reproach.

⁶⁹² Before he fled, Metternich warned Ebert that the VMD was becoming increasingly unreliable and should be disbanded. Hansjoachim Koch, *Der deutsche Bürgerkrieg: Eine Geschichte der deutschen und österreichischen Freikorps, 1918-1923*. (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1978), 44-45.

⁶⁹³ Freyer, *Sturmvogel*, 183.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 162-3.

making common cause with the radicalized Supreme Sailors' Council of Berlin (*Obermarinerat*⁶⁹⁵) and the Eichhorn's *Sicherheitswehr*, and by his association with Spartacist leader Karl Liebknecht, he demonstrated an increasing hostility to the moderate elements of the government.⁶⁹⁶ It would be unfair and incorrect to characterize all of the members of the *Volksmarinedivision* as Spartacists. Nevertheless, the MSPD members in the government viewed the unit as a hostile force and a potential enemy in any future trial of strength between the government and its opponents on the Left. The Moderates began to look for ways to move the division out of Berlin.

The VMD's leaders were aware of the government's hostility. Identifying with the leftist opposition had its risks. Thus, when Lequis' troops began arriving on the outskirts of Berlin in early December, a shudder of anxiety went through the ranks of the VMD. If the guardsmen truly represented the counter-revolution, as the sailors feared, then the sailors who prided themselves as being the vanguard of the revolution were their obvious adversaries.⁶⁹⁷ Though well-armed and numerous, the seamen could have had few illusions about their ability to stand against veterans of the Western Front. Nevertheless, Dorrenbach and the other leaders of the division considered armed resistance to Lequis' forces as the first guards formations moved into the city on December 10. Good judgment prevailed, however, and the sailors contented themselves with a heightened status of alert and a sullen indifference to the parades that followed.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁵ It was also known as the Council of 53 (*53er Ausschuss*).

⁶⁹⁶ Volkmann, *Revolution*, 134.

⁶⁹⁷ Because of their role in the events of November, 1918, Rosa Luxemburg called the sailors the "storm birds of the revolution."

⁶⁹⁸ Bogdan Krieger, *Das Berliner Schloß in den Revolutionstagen 1918: Erinnerungen und Eindrücke*. (Leipzig, Konkordia Verlag, 1922), 31. At least one source suggests that Lequis considered acting on his own initiative to suppress the *Volksmarinedivision* but reconsidered when his subordinate commanders advised him that their troops would be unwilling to go into action against such an enemy unless the order

The guardsmen returned the disdain, starting with the first guards unit to arrive, the *Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen-Division* (GKSD), Guards Cavalry Rifle Division. The political instruction organized by their chief of staff, Captain Pabst, was reflected in a note sent by the division Trustees Council to the national Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils on December 18. Along with rejecting the Hamburg Points and calling for a greater voice for the front-line troops in the ongoing congress, the Guards made a direct attack on the sailors' role as the "lay-about darlings" of the revolution:

The service of the *Volksmarinedivision* for the revolution is recognized. However, it cannot be accepted that it is constituted as a special organization for the public safety of Berlin. We demand that it be demobilized and in-activated in the same way as the Field Army's troop units. As those in the army, those in the navy should get on to their [civilian] work. The troops of Berlin will view the further employment of the sailors in Berlin with suspicion.⁶⁹⁹

The Growing Crisis (December 13-21, 1918)

Perhaps inevitably, the activities of the VMD brought it into conflict with the City Commandant, the Majority Socialist, Otto Wels, who was the man responsible for public order within the capital. In the first place, Wels had to consider political provocations. On December 18, a deputation of soldiers and sailors led by Dorrenbach interrupted the proceedings of the national Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils to demand that real soldiers' councils be created within Lequis' command, that all command authority in the army be turned over to the councils, and that a halt be made to all efforts to get the VMD⁷⁰⁰ to evacuate the city. This was disturbing enough, but, along with the ideological

came from Ebert. See Volkmann, *Revolution*, 134. The sailors' reaction to the parades taken from Döblin, *Sieger*, 23.

⁶⁹⁹ Berthold/Neef, Document 134: "Stellungnahme der Vertrauensräte der Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen-Division vom. 18. Dezember 1918, 318-319.

⁷⁰⁰ Kurt Wrobel, *Der Sieg der Arbeit und Matrosen im Dezember 1918*, (Berlin (East): Bezirksleitung der SED Gross-Berlin, Abteilung Agitation/Propaganda, 1958), 39-40.

differences Wels had with the unit's leaders, the commandant could not ignore reports that criminal elements within the division were involved with armed robbery and extortion in the train stations in the city center.⁷⁰¹ Neither could he overlook the strength reports submitted by the sailors that seemed to exaggerate their numbers in order to draw excess pay.⁷⁰² To make matters worse, army officials complained the sailors had extorted 300,000 marks and thousands of uniform items from the commissariat of the Guards Corps. Most alarming were the reports that the sailors, having driven plunderers from the Imperial Palace in mid-November,⁷⁰³ were now either allowing or directly participating in plunder themselves. The Finance Ministry sent Wels a memorandum claiming that one million marks of public treasure had been pilfered and that another twenty million was at risk if the sailors were allowed to remain in the Palace.⁷⁰⁴

In these circumstances, Wels decided that the continued presence of a hostile and unreliable unit like the *Volksmarinedivision* in the center of the capital was intolerable.⁷⁰⁵ In order to bring the sailors under control he developed a plan that included 1) a dramatic reduction in the size of the *Volksmarinedivision*, down to six hundred men (preferably "reliable Social Democrats") 2) the sailors' evacuation of the Palace, and 3) incorporation of the unit into Wels' own *Soldatenwehr*. After gaining Ebert's approval, Wels met to discuss the plan with the division's representatives as well as members of the Berlin Sailors' Central Council on December 13. The sailors were predictably outraged by the

⁷⁰¹ BA-R, R 43/2508/f; Berlin Commandant Report to the Cabinet 231/12, dated December 21, 1918.

⁷⁰² BA-R, R 43/2508/f Strength Report of the *Volksmarinedivision*, dated December 15, 1918. The report claimed the division had a strength of 3250 men, of whom only 1450 were immediately available due to shortages of provisions and pay.

⁷⁰³ Krieger, 17.

⁷⁰⁴ BA-R, R 43/2508/f Berlin Commandant Report to the Cabinet, dated December 17, 1918.

⁷⁰⁵ BA-R, R43/2508/f, p. 5. Berlin Commandant Report to the Cabinet, dated December 17, 1918. "The current situation is untenable, threatens the national property, the security of Berlin, and damages the reputation of the government in the worst way."

accusations of larceny and were loath to abandon their own plans to increase the size of the *Volksmarinedivision* to a five thousand man force independent of the navy. Nevertheless, by the end of the negotiations, they had agreed that, after receiving 125,000 marks⁷⁰⁶, they would have leave the Palace by December 15, and then trim their numbers to six hundred hand-picked men to be incorporated into the *Soldatenwehr*.⁷⁰⁷ However, after Wels paid the 125,000 marks, the sailors did not fulfill their side of the agreement. The VMD failed to leave the palace by the original deadline or a subsequent one set by Wels for December 17. Predictably, hostility between the sailors and the commandant mounted. An angry Wels asked the Cabinet to intervene and, on December 21, the six delegates signed an order that they hoped would mollify both sides. The order called for an additional eighty thousand marks to be paid to the VMD after they had given Wels the keys to the Palace.⁷⁰⁸

That same day, December 21, Wels authorized pay for every unit in the Berlin garrison except for the *Volksmarinedivision*.⁷⁰⁹ For many sailors, given their ongoing feud with the City Commandant, the accusations leveled against the seamen by the conservative press, the lingering threat of Lequis' guardsmen, and the approach of Christmas in a time of hunger and need, this was a final provocation.

The Government Held Hostage (Berlin: Monday, December 23, 1918)

The ill will between Wels and the *Volksmarinedivision* added to the heavy tension in Berlin. On the morning of December 23, the Council of Peoples' Delegates met to

⁷⁰⁶ Some accounts see this money and the 80,000 mark "Christmas bonus" as little more than a bribe to get the unruly sailors to cooperate. See Richard Watt, *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Versailles and the German Revolution*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 231.

⁷⁰⁷ BA-R, R43/2508/f, p. 5. Berlin Commandant Report to the Cabinet dated December 17, 1918, p. 6.

⁷⁰⁸ BA-R 43/2508/f, p. 14, Cabinet Resolution, dated December 21, 1918.

⁷⁰⁹ Wrobel, *Sieg* 44. The troops of the garrison received their pay in cash in ten-day increments. Also, on December 21, the two Ministers of Finance, Hugo Simon (USPD) and Albert Sudekum (MSPD), sent the government another memorandum deploring the plundering of the Palace. (*Quellen* 6/II, p. 18, fn. 2).

consider, among other things, a proposal to move the government to a new location, preferably one that offered a calmer atmosphere and fewer interruptions. Ebert opened with the warning: “Colleagues, it can go on no more. Even the strongest nerves can hold out no longer.” Ebert proposed Weimar or Rudolstadt; Barth, representing the Left, challenged the idea. As if to underline Ebert’s point, around mid-day, a Chancellery official announced that a delegation of sailors led by Otto Tost⁷¹⁰ had entered the Chancellery and demanded a hearing by the cabinet.⁷¹¹ The delegates agreed to speak with Tost and his comrades and a period of negotiation followed in which the members of the cabinet reminded the sailors of the protocol of December 13. The sailors hotly disputed the terms of the protocol, claiming that Wels had misrepresented the agreement. Eventually, the two sides reached a new agreement that stipulated again that the sailors were to evacuate the Palace, turn over the keys, and receive their eighty thousand marks. The government would allow them to continue to guard the building. As a further concession the delegates promised that sailors discharged from the division might be given an opportunity to join the *Soldatenwehr*.⁷¹²

The sailors came back two hours later, around four o’clock in the afternoon. This time, Heinrich Dorrenbach, their most militant leader, was in charge. He brought with him a big box containing, he said, the Palace keys. The cabinet meeting had broken up, so the sailors sought out the delegate most likely to give them a favorable hearing, the

⁷¹⁰ Tost was a member of the *Obermarinerat*, the Supreme Naval Council, which, nominally at least, exerted command authority over the VMD.

⁷¹¹ Meeting described in *Quellen*, 6/II, Document 63: “Emil Barth uber die Kabinettsitzung am Samstag, 21.12. 1918. vorm.” 15.

⁷¹² Agreement described in *Quellen*, 6/II, Document 65: “Emil Barth uber die Auseinandersetzung zwischen den Matrosenvertretern und dem Rat der Volksbeauftragten am Montag, 23.12.1918, mittags.” 18-20.

outspoken left-wing Independent, Emil Barth.⁷¹³ Dorrenbach produced the keys and demanded the money due them. As the sailors stood by, Barth called Wels, reported the delivery of the keys and told Wels to pay the VMD the money that was due them. Wels refused. Ebert, not Barth, he said, had jurisdiction over military matters. Lacking an order from Ebert, Wels would only accept the delivery of the keys to his own office in the *Kommandantur* building. Frustrated, Barth offered to take responsibility for releasing the funds. Wels again declined and Barth, in exasperation, dismissed the sailors, telling them they needed to find Ebert. Taking the keys with him, Dorrenbach and his followers stormed out of their audience with Barth to seek the Chancellor.⁷¹⁴

Unfortunately, the sailors did not find Ebert in his office. For Dorrenbach, convinced he was being played as a fool, this was the last straw. Ebert and his colleague, Landsberg, were close by, just fifty steps away, taking a late lunch in Landsberg's personal quarters in the Chancellery.⁷¹⁵ However, Dorrenbach was in no mood to hunt for Ebert.⁷¹⁶ After he left the Chancellery, Dorrenbach sent word to the sailors at the guard posts around the building to close the gates, deny entry and egress from the building, and to seize the telephone control station in order to block telephone traffic. It was obviously a desperate act, and its object was unclear. Dorrenbach might have been seeking to paralyze any government reaction while he marched on the *Kommandantur* or he might just have been acting out of pique. Either way, the *Volksmarinedivision* was going to shut down the government until they got their money.

⁷¹³ The sailors sought out Barth by arrangement made after a phone consultation with another Independent delegate, Haase. (*Quellen*, 6/II, Document 77, p. 84-86.)

⁷¹⁴ *Quellen*, 6/II, Document 66: "Emil Barth über seine Intervention bei Otto Wels am Montag, 23.12.1918, nachm.," 20-21. See also, a defense of Wels' behavior in Eduard Bernstein, *Die deutsche Revolution, 1918/1919. Geschichte der Entstehung und ersten Arbeitsperiode der deutschen Republik*. (Berlin: Verlag Gesellschaft und Erziehung, 1921), 153-154.

⁷¹⁵ Bernstein, 155.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid*, 155.

While Ebert was at lunch, a porter informed him that sailors had blocked the entrances to the Chancellery. Before long Ebert realized that he and the other delegates present, Landsberg and Barth, were being held captive in the Chancellery by their own guard force, the detail of sailors provided by the VMD. Though denied access to regular phone service, Ebert still had use of his secret line to the OHL. This was the line he had used to make the famous call of November 10, the call which had initiated the famously controversial Ebert-Groener Pact. Now, a month and a half later, Ebert used the line to make another call, this time requesting that the OHL prepare a rescue operation.

In doing so, the chancellor set a tragic sequence of events in motion. On the other end of the line, Major Schleicher answered, reassured Ebert that the army would act promptly, informed Groener of the emergency, and alerted Lequis' headquarters to prepare for action.⁷¹⁷ This was the call the OHL had long been waiting for. Though Ebert wanted to avoid bloodshed, the army leadership saw the new crisis as an opportunity to strike a decisive blow against the government's enemies.⁷¹⁸

Meanwhile, Dorrenbach had gone to settle affairs with Wels. Dorrenbach took with him a strong force of sailors reinforced by elements of *Sicherheitswehr*. He had also posted sailors to checkpoints around the Government Quarter. Wels was waiting, for he had gotten word of the Dorrenbach's little coup from a message smuggled out of the Chancellery.⁷¹⁹ He had alerted his own *Soldatenwehr*, but that had produced limited

⁷¹⁷ Lequis had apparently received first notification from the War Ministry which also had a secret direct line to the Reichs Chancellery. Walter Oehme, *Damals in der Reichskanzlei: Erinnerungen aus den Jahren 1918/1919*, (Berlin (East): Kongress Verlag, 1958), 193.

⁷¹⁸ Volkmann, *Revolution*. 155.

⁷¹⁹ Bernstein refers to passageways between the various government buildings. 157. Oehme, an eyewitness, wrote that the sailors were not aware that one could go from the Chancellery to the Foreign Office without going through the Chancellery gates. Oehme, 193.

immediate results.⁷²⁰ Thus, when Dorrenbach arrived to demand his money, Wels had little room to negotiate.

At this point, another one of a series of mishaps occurred to propel the crisis along to its unhappy conclusion. The facts are in dispute, but it appears that a truck from the city garrison, unaware of the unfolding events, had driven by a sailor checkpoint on the *Unter den Linden*. The sailors had attempted to gain the driver's attention by firing shots in the air. Hearing the shots and believing that an attack on the *Kommandantur* was under way, an armored car crewed by the *Soldatenwehr* responded with a burst of machine gun fire. The fusillade killed a sailor and a man from the *Sicherheitswehr* and wounded several others.⁷²¹

Now the sailors were truly enraged. They blamed Wels for the death of their comrades and descended on the Commandant's headquarters. Wels, justifiably alarmed, made a quick call for help to Lequis's headquarters and then attempted to defuse the situation by offering to pay them the eighty thousand marks. Dorrenbach and his men would not be appeased. They made prisoners of Wels, his adjutant, Lieutenant Anton Fischer, and the superintendent of the *Kommandantur*, Dr. Brongard⁷²² and hauled them

⁷²⁰ BA-R R43/2508/f. An anonymous report in the "*Volksmarine*" file suggests that the sailors may have cut some kind of deal with their counterparts in the *Soldatenwehr*. This might help to explain the lackluster performance of the *Soldatenwehr* the next day. However, Bernstein's account suggests a fairly energetic response by the *Soldatenwehr* and the Berlin garrison. 157-158.

⁷²¹ Bernstein, 159. Wrobel, *Sieg*, 45. In Wrobel's version, the sailor who was killed, a popular sailor named Perlewitz, had approached the armored car for the purpose of discerning which faction it belonged to. The crew took him and his comrades under fire at a range of ten meters. BA-R R43/2508/f, transcript of phone call from *Kommandantur*, dated December 23, 1918. In this description of the incident, the sailors said the shots came from the small force of guard troops stationed at the University building nearby. The soldiers denied this, claiming that the wild firing had also wounded one of their own men.

⁷²² Fischer was allegedly a lieutenant in the reserve. A former monk and theology instructor, his military credentials were suspect. What makes him one of the most curious of the characters in the events described is that he was considered treacherous and contemptible by both Right (Wilhelm Reinhard, *1918-1919: Die Wehen der Republik*, (Berlin: Brunnen Verlag, 1933), 56) and Left (Wrobel, *Sieg*, 37). Dr. Bongard was a civil service employee charged with the administration of the Commandant's office (*Quellen*, 6/I, Document 14, p.68, fn. 23.)

away to the division headquarters in the Marstall. The sailors roughed up Wels and told him and the other two prisoners they would be given summary judgment and then put before a firing squad.⁷²³

The Decision to Attack: (Monday night and Tuesday morning, December 23-24, 1918)

The approach of nightfall found Chancellor Ebert in an unenviable situation. His own guard force was holding him captive in his Chancellery. To add to his troubles, around 7:00 PM, the Chancellor had learned the VMD had taken his City Commandant and staff prisoner and threatened them with execution.⁷²⁴ Elsewhere, the rebellious sailors held key positions throughout the government buildings in the center of the city. Dorrenbach and Eichhorn's men seemed to be masters of the situation. Any remedy to the crisis, short of surrender, would seem to demand bloodshed between countrymen, something, to this point, Ebert had desperately sought to avoid.

The army believed it had a solution to Ebert's dilemma and was moving to the government's assistance from a variety of directions. Shortly after receiving the alert message from the OHL, Lequis had ordered the small elements of the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division manning guard posts within the capital to reinforce the guard force at the University. They should prepare to "clean out" the Chancellery.⁷²⁵ The rest of Lequis' command was on the move, as well. Along with the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division, the 1st Guards Reserve Division, newly arrived in the capital, would move with all speed to secure the *Kommandantur* and the Chancellery. These two divisions, along with

⁷²³ BA-R, R43/2508/f, Transcript of Fischer's oral report of the events of December 23-24, undated; and Bernstein, 160.

⁷²⁴ *Quellen* 6/II, Document 77: Ebert's statement in "Gemeinsame Sitzung von Kabinett und Zentralrat;" 28.12. 1918. pp. 80.

⁷²⁵ *Wirren*, 34-35. On the morning of the 23rd, a force of seven hundred guardsmen, eight heavy machine guns, and four artillery pieces was available at University. However, at mid-day, without verifying the order with Lequis' headquarters, the Commandant's staff ordered this force to return to Potsdam. The authors suspected a conspiracy with the sailors.

additional elements of the 5th and 37th Infantry Divisions, would report their available strength and prepare for action. Nor was that the only action taken. That evening, without telling the Cabinet, Scheuch put the Berlin garrison, the *Soldatenwehr*⁷²⁶ and other available forces around Berlin under Lequis' command.⁷²⁷ From that point on, the Field Army would be fully in charge of any operations organized against the VMD.

For Ebert, Lequis' relief forces posed a problem. The appearance of armed front-line veterans in the middle of the capital had the potential to exacerbate the situation. To many Berliners, the guardsmen returned from the Western Front represented the potential for counter-revolution; their parades had been the living symbol of all the revolution was supposed to have overthrown. To add injury to insult, the guards were coming from Potsdam, the spiritual home of Hohenzollern militarism. There was, perhaps, an alternative to calling on the front-line units. At one point in the afternoon or evening, the Soldiers' Council of Potsdam called Ebert and offered him the service of three thousand garrison troops. He declined the help. Garrison troops led by a soldiers' council might have had a favorable political effect on the tense situation, but their military effectiveness and ability to respond in a timely manner was certainly suspect.⁷²⁸ Along with offering assistance, the leader of the Potsdam council had also warned Barth that the Guards Corps was on the move and Ebert had to mollify the Independent Socialist delegates with

⁷²⁶ Around 7:00 PM a representative of the *Soldatenwehr* reported to Ebert that they had watched Wels' arrest but, lacking orders, they had taken no action. They sought guidance from Ebert who told them to stand by because he hoped for a peaceful solution to the crisis. *Quellen*, 6/II, Document 77, p. 80.

⁷²⁷ BA-R, R43/2508/f, Transcript of phone call from the War Ministry, dated 10:20 PM, December 23, 1918. Lequis' guidance from Scheuch: "It must be asked constantly, what orders has General Lequis given and is Mr. Ebert informed of what Mr. von Lequis has ordered." In the same order, Lequis appointed a Colonel Schwerk to replace Wels as the acting City Commandant.

⁷²⁸ Kluge, 263. Kluge claims that Ebert could not accept this help for fear it would undermine his alibi of the government's "defenselessness" as the basis for calling out the Guard Corps. Perhaps, but one wonders if the Potsdam Soldiers' Council could have assembled and moved three thousand garrison soldiers on short notice on the day before Christmas Eve.

the promise that the *Frontruppen* would be withdrawn.⁷²⁹ This was a promise that Ebert would not and probably could not keep.

Still, the Chancellor tried to avoid a fight. When the first small group of guardsmen arrived at the Chancellery and the sailors closed the Chancellery gates and announced that they had no intention of withdrawing, Ebert personally intervened.⁷³⁰ During the early evening, he also attempted to negotiate Wels' release with a three-man deputation of sailors though he found the sailors agitated and difficult to deal with. Thus, when Ebert told them that they had no right to put conditions on the release of their hostage, one of the sailors told him, "Might makes right." When Ebert finally convinced them they would get their money, the sailors indicated a willingness to evacuate the Palace and release Wels; however, this understanding led to no immediate results.⁷³¹

Around 8:00 PM, the more pro-government forces arrived and appeared ready to strike. They were two hundred well-armed and determined-looking Guards Uhlans under the command of a Colonel Tschirschky.⁷³² Armed with fixed bayonets, several pieces of artillery, and a strong complement of machine guns, the Guards Uhlans seemed ready to make short work of the sailors around the Chancellery.⁷³³ Harry Kessler described the scene:

As I passed down the Unter den Linden, I met a unit in steel helmets. Big, handsome fellows, it was some moments before I recognized the Third Battalion of Uhlan Guards, my own regiment. Some young officers explained that Ebert had just now sent for them. While we were speaking other soldiers in half-tattered uniforms and civilians surged around the troops and pestered them. Our men ignored the newcomers.

⁷²⁹ Volkmann, *Revolution*, 156.

⁷³⁰ BA-R, R43/2508/f, p. 25-6. Chancellery report of December 23, 1918.

⁷³¹ *Quellen*, 6/II, Document 77; 81.

⁷³² They were reinforced by several dozen men from the 1st Guard Reserve Division. *Wirren*.

⁷³³ Description of the guards from the *Vossische Zeitung*, "Die Garde rückt an!" December 24, 1918, late edition.

Kessler had served with the same unit earlier in the war and he hoped the government planned to use his old comrades to remedy the situation in the capital. “If the Government possesses any vigor of mind, it will take advantage of the situation to evacuate, by force if need be, the marine division which has gone completely extremist.”⁷³⁴ His description of the encounter suggests two important insights: 1) the front-line troops marching into Berlin were aware they were marching to the aid of the provisional government, and 2) the appearance of guardsmen, even at night, was likely to attract a crowd ready to harangue them

The army’s senior leaders shared Kessler’s desires for decisive action. Ebert insisted, however, that the soldiers at the scene allow the *Volksmarinedivision* a chance to withdraw and Tschirschky and his staff went into the Chancellery to negotiate. Dorrenbach had also arrived at the Chancellery, this time to protest the deployment of the guards troops. An hour-long negotiation ensued. At the end of the session, Emil Barth came out from the Chancellery with the intention of addressing the soldiers and sailors waiting nervously outside. He began by demanding the guardsmen unfix their bayonets. A major replied that only the officer who had given the order could countermand it. Rebuffed, Barth began an address designed to “enlighten” the combatants and help them understand their revolutionary responsibilities. Some of the soldiers jeered and others called Ebert to come forth. Barth reminded them that Ebert was just one of six delegates in the cabinet, but the soldiers persisted and Ebert once again came forth.⁷³⁵ The chancellors told the soldiers that the government had been held captive by its own guard

⁷³⁴ Kessler diary entry, December 23, 1918, 40.

⁷³⁵ Description of the incident taken from the VZT, “Die Garde rückt an!” December 24, 1918, late edition. Barth later claimed he feared he was going to be beaten by the angry soldiers. (*Quellen* 6/II, Document 77, p. 92.)

force, that the sailors had finally agreed to withdraw, that both sides should pull back and leave the area. Ebert then offered them a message that, he hoped, would defuse the situation:

I ask you to do everything you can to avoid bloodshed. We have spilled so much blood in this war that it would simply be madness to bring about still more bloodshed; for that certainly no one would want to take the responsibility. Withdraw to your quarters, I guarantee it, that the sailors will pull back.⁷³⁶

Ebert's intervention must have been heart-felt. He had lost two sons in the war himself and his brief address seemed clearly intended to appeal to the feelings of front-line veterans. It seemed to work. With some grumbling on both sides, the sailors and soldiers withdrew in opposite directions, leaving the Chancellery devoid of protection.⁷³⁷

Bloodshed had been averted.

At this point, a harried and tired Ebert turned his attention to the even larger units on their way to the scene, the main body of guardsmen from Potsdam. At 10:30 PM, the Chancellery prepared this message: "The Reich government issues the order to all troops of the Potsdam garrison marching en route to Berlin to stop their approach and to return to their quarters in Potsdam."⁷³⁸ This prompted an immediate phone call from Major von Harbou. The tone and substance of his message indicates that Lequis' headquarters had already received word that the first formation troops sent to rescue the Cabinet, the Guards Uhlans, had been sent home. Instead of the thanks of a grateful government, Lequis' troops were being told they were not needed. Even worse, Ebert's intervention had deflected the decisive blow the officer corps believed was so urgently needed to

⁷³⁶ BA-R, R43/2508/f, p. 36. "Ebert's Speech to the Soldiers, 23.12. 1918"

⁷³⁷ Böhm recorded that a guard detail from the 5th Infantry Division appeared shortly after midnight. Böhm. Diary entry of December 23, 1918. 115.

⁷³⁸ BA-R, R43/2508/f, p. 37. "Reich Government Order, dated December 23, 1918, "10:30."

neutralize the government's enemies. To Harbou and his officer comrades, it seemed another such opportunity might not present itself before the last homesick *Frontschwein* abandoned the ranks. Thus, without realizing it, Ebert had crossed a final line in the patience of the officers. The Chancellery transcript of Harbou's call reads:

Major von Harbou informs: The Potsdam regiments cannot be turned back because one cannot expect that they will turn around at night. The troops would be completely ruined through such a march.

There are 500 men underway from Steglitz with a battery for the protection of the Reich Chancellery and the War Ministry. Harbou requests that, under all circumstances, these troops be allowed to remain at the Chancellery and the War Ministry. A new march would utterly ruin them. The troops currently withdrawn [the Guards Uhlans] are angry with the government and can no longer be used to protect the government. The government can expect nothing more from these troops because the government has refused [their] protection.⁷³⁹

Harbou's message was significant in several respects. In the first paragraph, the chief of staff of *Generalkommando* Lequis declined to obey an order from the government. For a major, even a general staff major, to rebuff an order from a chancellor marks this as a notable milestone in the storied road of German militarism. In the second paragraph, Harbou offered Ebert a thinly veiled rebuke for bringing about the "ruin" of the Guards Uhlans, an elite unit and one of the few remaining useful formations. However, the chief significance of the message is Harbou's use of front-line morale to coerce his civilian masters. His warning to Ebert: turn the Potsdam regiments around tonight and they will not be there for you when you need them. Soldier morale was too fragile for you to be playing games of "cry wolf."

⁷³⁹ BA-R, R43/2508/f, p. 38. "Telephone Message from Major von Harbou am 12.23; 10:30" Barth claimed that, earlier in the day, he had spoken with Harbou who, most likely attempting to deceive Barth, had expressed disgust at the idea of fratricidal bloodshed. "It is madness when one must shoot at his own brother." (*Quellen* 6/II, Document 77, p. 93.)

In that moment, Harbou was reprising a theme that Groener, Hindenburg and other senior officers had been using since even before the Kaiser's abdication. Unable to call on the authority of the monarchy, the officers had chosen to play at the level of the socialists by invoking the moral authority of the common soldier, the proletarian in the trenches. The recurring message: Let us, the army leadership, do what we need to do or you will anger, disappoint, and betray the front-line soldiers.

Harbou was not the only officer to remonstrate with Ebert during that long night. Groener also took his turn to remind the chancellor that he risked losing the support of the troops (as well as the OHL). The general's diary entry for the 23rd reads:

Ebert asks the OHL for help. Troops force way into Reichs Chancellery; Ebert forbids them from shooting and wants the Reichs Chancellery to be cleared of sailors as well as soldiers. Telephonically I advised Ebert that in that manner our troops are corrupted and demanded of him that he must allow us to protect him. Otherwise we could no longer go along with him . . . Major v. Harbou was directed to proceed against the sailors.⁷⁴⁰

Seven years later, Groener recalled the conversation.

I talked with Mr. Ebert and said that we must make use of our limited strength. If you are captured and then freed, the troops who freed you must have the chance to deal with their opponents according to wartime or martial law. If it [Ebert's caution in the face of anti-government action] happens like this again, I will go with you no longer, because then you ruin the troops.⁷⁴¹

Thus was the Chancellor of the German Reich told, first by a major, then again by a general, that the government's orders could not be obeyed and that Ebert's desire to avoid bloodshed was having an adverse effect on the steadiness of the government's troops.

Having narrowly avoided a *Schiesserei* [shooting incident] that same evening, Ebert had the military telling him he must accept the army's aggressive intervention. Groener had

⁷⁴⁰ BA-MA, *Nachlass Groener*, 46/25, diary entry of December 23 (translation of handwriting assisted by text in Kluge, fn. 277, p. 451).

⁷⁴¹ Groener's testimony in the 1925 *Dolchstoßprozess* quoted in Wrobel, *Sieg*, 46-47).

concluded with a not-too-veiled threat to abandon the “union” he and Ebert had enjoyed since November 10.

Given time to reflect during that anxious and interminable night, the Chancellor might have found some bitter irony in his situation. Less than a week before as the Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils had closed, Ebert had defended the prerogatives of the officer corps and especially their command authority (*Kommandogewalt*). Now they were challenging *his* command authority. Nevertheless, according to Groener’s testimony in the *Dolchstoß* (Stab-in-the-Back) trial of 1925, Ebert gave his go-ahead for an operation to suppress the VMD. Groener recalled, “Then I asked for his consent that, on December 24, the sailors in the Palace and the Marstall would be attacked by our troops. Ebert gave this consent”⁷⁴²

The harried chancellor had little time to consider his troubled relationship with the army leadership. A more immediate issue demanded Ebert’s attention, the fate of his personal friend, Otto Wels.⁷⁴³ Wels was spending the night of December 23-24, bruised and fearing for his life, in a coal storage cellar in the basement of the Marstall. Through the late evening and into the early morning, Ebert, Landsberg, and Scheidemann, the three Majority Socialist delegates, along with Scheuch, the Minister of War, kept vigil as Chancellery officials made a series of phone calls to the Marstall to check on Wels’ condition and the prospect of his release. There was a heartening report around midnight, when the sailors released their other two captives, Fischer and Brongard, but Wels remained a prisoner. Then, at two in the morning, Radtke, the commander of the VMD, called the Chancellery with chilling news, news that showed that command authority was

⁷⁴² Rakenius, 150. Quote from Wrobel, *Sieg*, 47.

⁷⁴³ Wels was a friend of all three of the MSPD cabinet delegates. Böhm, diary entry of December 23, 1918, 114.

as uncertain among the sailors as it was in the provisional government. Radtke reported that he was no longer the master of the situation and he could not vouch for Wels' safety. In fact, he said, his own life was in jeopardy because he had attempted to intercede on Wels' behalf.⁷⁴⁴ Any deal to rescue Wels was off.⁷⁴⁵

For Ebert, exhausted from a day of crisis and negotiation, there seemed to be no more options. Together with the other two MSPD delegates, he gave Scheuch the authority to do whatever was necessary to rescue Wels.⁷⁴⁶ Then, at two thirty in the morning, Ebert, Landsberg and Scheidemann went to bed.

As it turned out, the order Ebert gave the Minister of War was relatively meaningless. In the first place, during the previous evening the Minister of War had transferred authority over all troops in Berlin to Lequis. Though Scheuch passed Ebert's order to Lequis,⁷⁴⁷ this did not change the preparations already under way. In the second, before Scheuch could take any action, the VMD had released Wels. During the course of the night, the sailors grew increasingly anxious about reports of guards units deploying into the city. As the most militant members of the Marstall's garrison went home for the evening, other, more prudent sailors saw an opportunity to find an intermediary, ideally one with appropriate revolutionary credentials. To this end, they sent a car to the Steglitz home of Georg Ledebour, the well-known Independent leader in the Berlin *Vollzugsrat*. Ledebour agreed to act as a mediator and around 3:00 a.m., he had secured Wels'

⁷⁴⁴ According to Fischer, Radtke claimed that, at that point, the danger to Wels came not from the sailors but from Eichhorn's *Sicherheitswehr*. Meanwhile, the militant Dorrenbach had been rendered *hors de combat* by a rifle butt to the head delivered during a scuffle an undisclosed adversary. Anton Fischer, *Die Revolutionskommandantur Berlin*, (Berlin: Selbstverlag der Verfasser, 1922). 44-45.

⁷⁴⁵ *Quellen*, 6/II, Ebert's statement in Document 77, p. 82.

⁷⁴⁶ *Quellen*, 6/II, Document 77, p. 82. In the days after the crisis, Ebert was harried by the Independents in the coalition and the leftist press for not consulting with the three Independent delegates and not placing limits on Scheuch's action. In the truest spirit of Monday morning quarterbacking, they maintained Ebert should have forbidden the use of artillery in any rescue operation.

⁷⁴⁷ Böhm, diary entry of December 23, 1918, 115.

release,⁷⁴⁸ though Wels, exhausted by his ordeal (and, perhaps, uncertain of his captor's intentions), asked to remain at the Marstall until daylight.⁷⁴⁹

With the Chancellery cleared of sailors, Wels and his colleagues released, the VMD ready to evacuate the Palace, it seemed that all that remained to defuse the crisis was for the government to call off its troops. Before going to negotiate with the sailors, Ledebour had gone to the Chancellery to announce Wels' anticipated release. Unfortunately, he could not find Ebert.⁷⁵⁰ It was one more mishap in a series of unhappy occurrences.

Yet, even had Ledebour found Ebert, there was no guarantee that the chancellor could stave off the events that followed. Backed by the OHL and presented with the provocation the army had long desired, Lequis was determined to act.

The general's analysis of the situation and the instructions he had received had led him to identify five related missions that his troops must accomplish. First, they must ensure the government was not held captive again. This meant securing the Chancellery, the *Kommandantur*, the *Reichstag*, the War Ministry and other major government buildings in the city center. Second, they must liberate "Comrade" Wels. Third, they needed to capture the Palace and the Marstall. Fourth, they must disarm the

⁷⁴⁸ BA-MA, N23/1 *Nachlass* Scheuch, Oehme, *Freiheit* (USPD newspaper) article, "Hinter den Kulissen" by Walter Oehme, December 27, 1919, morning edition.

⁷⁴⁹ Fischer, 46-47.

⁷⁵⁰ BA-MA, N23/1 *Nachlass* Scheuch, Oehme, *Freiheit* (USPD newspaper) article, "Hinter den Kulissen" by Walter Oehme, December 27, 1919, morning edition. Oehme, who was present at the Chancellery, claims that Ebert deliberately avoided Ledebour, telling his secretary to relay to Ledebour that he, the chancellor, had left for the evening when Ebert was actually in his Chancellery apartment. In Oehme's account, Ebert was clearing the way for Lequis to take action, but this interpretation hardly squares with Ebert's peacemaking efforts to that point. Oehme, *Damals in der Reichskanzlei*, 57.

Volksmarinedivision and, finally, fifth, they must arrange to get the sailors out of the city.⁷⁵¹ It was a daunting array of tasks

In Lequis' view, if they were to be accomplished, there was little time to waste. He feared if he did not act quickly, then the VMD might be reinforced by thousands of armed workers and even perhaps, by their naval comrades from outside the capital. Thus, having been alerted for action in the afternoon of December 23, Lequis resolved to attack the sailors' stronghold early the next morning. Such an attack might have the advantage of surprise and would limit any attempts by anti-government forces to send aid to the sailors.⁷⁵² Perhaps more important, an attack conducted at the earliest possible moment gave the cabinet little opportunity to reconsider or arrange a peaceful settlement. Yet to attack on Christmas Eve morning involved considerable risk. There would be little time to gather troops and heavy weapons for the operation. The haste involved also ensured that the command and control arrangements would be makeshift at best.⁷⁵³

Given the time constraints and the depleted condition of Lequis' divisions, the attackers could not count on an overwhelming weight of numbers in the upcoming battle. Lequis and his staff estimated that twelve hundred front-line fighters would be available, which meant the government troops might be outnumbered by the VMD, which had, by some estimates, as many as two thousand sailors in the Palace and Marstall. Moreover, to reach a total of twelve hundred men, Lequis would have to call on a variety of different units including, along with the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division, elements of the 1st Guards Reserve Division as well as the 5th and 37th Infantry Divisions. Added to his meager

⁷⁵¹ Nachlass Pabst, 38.

⁷⁵² *Wirren*, 37-38. The army believed the Spartacists had the capability to muster thousands of armed workers.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid*, 38, See, also, *Wirren*, 37-38.

manpower total, Lequis relied upon four and a half batteries of medium and light artillery (105 millimeter and 77 millimeter). These, if used effectively, would give the attackers a decisive firepower advantage. In his estimation, this advantage along with veteran fighting prowess of the available infantry might be enough to carry out the mission successfully.⁷⁵⁴

Lequis assigned tactical command of the attack on the VMD to the *Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen-Division*, (GKSD; Guards Cavalry Rifle Division) with its well-respected commander, General Hoffmann, and energetic chief of staff, Captain Pabst. It was a logical choice. Alone of the Guards divisions that had marched into Berlin during the previous weeks, the GKSD had combated the agitation of the Left with its own indoctrination campaign and, alone of the Guards divisions, it had held a considerable number of its troops to their posts as Christmas approached. Moreover, the division had engaged its troops in a training program that included street fighting and house-to-house searches.⁷⁵⁵ Even though it was the first of the guards divisions to march into the capital it remained, on Christmas Eve, the unit best prepared to carry out the missions originally envisioned in Groener's "Berlin Operation."⁷⁵⁶

Yet even the GKSD was able to collect only a fraction of its combat power for a strike against the rebellious sailors. Despite the division's best efforts to maintain its strength, many guardsmen had accepted their discharges and gone home. Many more had been granted Christmas leave. Lack of transportation meant the division would be unable to assemble the entire division by the time of the anticipated attack and many of

⁷⁵⁴ Order of battle information taken from *Wirren*, 38-39.

⁷⁵⁵ BA-MA, PH 620/2; Nachlass Pabst, , 28.

⁷⁵⁶ This was the judgment not only of Pabst, but also General von Lüttwitz who later replaced Lequis (Lüttwitz, 18), General von Maercker, the famous *Freikorps* commander (Maercker, 63), as well as the General Staff's official historian (*Wirren*, 36).

the troops would have to make a foot march from the outskirts to the center of Berlin.⁷⁵⁷ Thus, for the main effort of the operation, Lequis' order put elements of the other three divisions under the command of Hoffmann's cavalry division. It was a hastily gathered "pick-up team" and this fact was certain to make control of the operation more difficult. Even more unsettling to Hofmann and Pabst was the operation's reliance on the *Soldatenwehr*. Because of the limited number of front-line soldiers available for the attack, the *Soldatenwehr* received the critical task of sealing off the battle area from outside forces. However, the guards officers had little faith in the reliability of part-time soldiers. Adding to their worries was the fact that Wels' men were a late addition to the operation and the front-line commanders had little time to integrate them into the tactical planning.⁷⁵⁸

After receiving a warning order to prepare for the mission, Pabst recommended a delay. After weighing the difficulties involved, he told Lequis that the proposed attack should be delayed by two or three days. The additional time, he suggested, could be used for more thorough preparation and also to bring in the heavier guns needed to storm the massive buildings held by the sailors. Lequis refused. It was clear, Pabst later recalled, that political considerations outweighed military planning factors.⁷⁵⁹ After Lequis's staff had completed the operations order Pabst repeated his reservations; Lequis again refused a delay.

⁷⁵⁷ According to Pabst, most of the division's motor transport had been left on the west side of the Rhine to satisfy the armistice conditions or had been confiscated by homeland soldiers' councils. Pabst, 38-39.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid. 40.

Pabst was not the only staff officer with reservations. Around three in the morning, Scheuch's adjutant, Captain Böhm, called Lequis' headquarters from the War Ministry. He spoke with Major von Harbou:

I advised him once again of the difficulties of street fighting in Berlin. One must have stronger forces for a street fight in Berlin because one must secure the rear in all directions. The *Generalkommando Lequis* indeed could not have enough units for tomorrow's battle. Major v. Harbou closed his discussion with me with the words: 'You can rely on it, the show will go well.'⁷⁶⁰ (*"Sie können sich darauf verlassen, der Film klappt."*)

Events would find that Böhm's concerns were remarkably prescient.

Through the early morning hours of Christmas Eve, elements of the GKSD and the units assigned to support it arrived by train and by foot in the center of Berlin. By the light of street lamps, they took up positions around the Palace and the Marstall. Others moved to secure key buildings. Some arrived very late; a battery of the 1st Guards Reserve Field Artillery Regiment, for example, did not reach its assigned station at the General Staff building until 7:00 AM. Other units suffered misadventures. A half-battery size unit of the 5th Infantry Division on the way to the Ministry of War encountered a group of sailors. The sailors disarmed the artillerymen, released them, and took the captured artillery pieces back to the Palace.⁷⁶¹ Incidents like this served notice that there would little chance to surprise the sailors in the morning.

Such incidents must also have been unsettling to the Lequis' men. Official histories rarely comment on the mood of the troops going into an operation, especially when morale is less than perfect. Nevertheless, the general staff historian of the postwar fighting in Berlin felt compelled to note that, on the

⁷⁶⁰ Böhm, diary entry of December 23, 1918, 116.

⁷⁶¹ VZT, late edition of December 24, 1918, "Spartakus greift an."

eve of the operation, the men were resolute. However, because it was Christmas Eve, and because of the disturbing events of the previous day (Ebert's efforts to make peace between the soldiers and sailors), the limited number of troops available, and the prospect of fighting with their countrymen, their mood was "reserved," (*zurückhaltend*).⁷⁶²

The GKSD staff had set up their command post in the University building, just a few blocks from the Palace, and worked through the night to gather the units assigned to the operation. As daybreak approached Hoffmann and Pabst issued final instructions⁷⁶³ and took stock of the units available. The results were distressing. Instead of twelve hundred men they had planned for, only eight hundred had arrived. Instead of four and a half batteries of artillery, only one and a half was on hand, six guns total.⁷⁶⁴ The original planning estimates of men and guns available suggested the operation would be difficult. With the totals available at dawn, perhaps it was impossible. The weakness of the GKSD's little task force prompted Pabst to make one final appeal for delay to Lequis' staff. With the appeal he added a request that his concerns be passed on to the OHL.⁷⁶⁵

Pabst's efforts were in vain. For Lequis' and his superiors in Wilhelmshöhe, the time for reservations had passed. The operation was "on." As the sun came up on an icy Christmas Eve, a newspaper reporter found the *Unter den Linden* looking like "a major army encampment," full of soldiers "armed for storm operations" (*sturmmässig ausgerüstet*) with steel helmets, fixed bayonets, and grenades hanging from their belts.⁷⁶⁶

⁷⁶² *Wirren*, 40.

⁷⁶³ Pabst attempted to find keys for the massive doors of the Palace and the Marstall. The Marstall keys, normally kept at the *Kommandantur* were missing. The guardsmen found keys to the Palace but discovered, under fire, they did not fit. *Wirren*, 40.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

⁷⁶⁵ *Nachlass Pabst*, 43.

⁷⁶⁶ VZT, "Die Straße Unter den Linden," late edition of December 24, 1918.

The dawn also illuminated the fields of fire for guns of the 3rd Guards Field Artillery Regiment. Their shells would announce the last operation of the old army and the first battle of the German Civil War.

The Assault (Berlin: Tuesday morning, December 24, 1918)

For the *Volksmarine* sentinels on duty in the Palace and the Marstall, sunrise showed their worst fears had been realized. The “Potsdamers” had surrounded the two buildings and the front-line veterans were clearly preparing for combat. The sailors would have to do their best to prepare a defense. At that point, it is difficult to say how many men the VMD had available to defend their stronghold. According to the division’s strength returns, Detachment I, billeted in the Marstall, had eleven hundred men.⁷⁶⁷ However, many and probably most of these men spent the night at their homes around Berlin. Others had been granted Christmas leave. The usual VMD guard force was thirty men in the palace and eighty in the Marstall where, a week before, the sailors had decided to concentrate their forces.⁷⁶⁸ Added to this guard force, then, were any additional men who had spent the night at the Palace and Marstall.⁷⁶⁹ Thus, the sailors probably could not match the GKSD’s numbers. Neither could they match their opponent’s artillery,⁷⁷⁰ though the defenders were well equipped with machine guns.⁷⁷¹

⁷⁶⁷ BA-R, R43/2508/f, *Volksmarine* Strength Report of December 12, 1918.

⁷⁶⁸ Wrobel, *Sieg*, 43.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 47. Wrobel claims that many sailors felt it was safe to leave their posts because Ebert had promised that the events of December 23 would be followed by further negotiations.

⁷⁷⁰ Some accounts indicate the sailors were able to put a single artillery piece into action

⁷⁷¹ According to Gustav Noske, the MSPD politician who represented the government at Kiel, the VMD had sent a call for reinforcements to the ports in the north. Noske wrote that, thanks to his efforts, the sailors at Kiel and other naval bases remained supporters of the government. Gustav Noske, *Von Kiel bis Kapp: Zur Geschichte der deutschen Revolution*. (Berlin: Verlag für Politik und Wirtschaft, 1920), 54. Wilhelm Reinhard, the commander of the 4th Foot Guards wrote that sailors showed up outside his unit’s caserne in Moabit. They sought to incite the younger soldiers to march to the aid of the VMD, 54. He

Before fighting began, the guardsmen offered the sailors an ultimatum. At approximately 7:50 AM, a delegation of five soldiers led by a lieutenant left the *Kronprinzenpalais* (Crown Prince Palace),⁷⁷² walked the several blocks to the Marstall, which they approached under a white flag of truce. They were met by *Volksmarinedivision* sentries who escorted them to representatives of the division's Soldiers' Council. The lieutenant gave this message to the council:

We demand the complete surrender of the sailors, whose justified demands will be [then] directly fulfilled. Within ten minutes all sailors within in the Marstall and the Palace should assemble unarmed in the *Schlossplatz* [between the Marstall and Palace]. We give ten minutes time for consideration. If, after this period, the white flag is not shown, we will take the Palace and Marstall under fire from artillery.⁷⁷³

The soldier's delegation departed under escort. They and the rest of the GKSD waited ten minutes, watching for a white flag from the Marstall.

It never appeared. Whether or not the sailors were even able to respond to an ultimatum, especially with so little time to consider the terms, is a point open to debate.

⁷⁷⁴ Some accounts suggest that none of the VMD's leaders were available that morning, that they had spent the night elsewhere. Thus, the watch force on duty may have felt they lacked the authority to make a decision for surrender or resistance.⁷⁷⁵

drove them away at gunpoint. Wilhelm Reinhard, *1918-1919: Die Wehen der Republik*, (Berlin: Brunnen Verlag, 1933), 53-54.

⁷⁷² The *Kronprinzenpalais* was also being used as a command center.

⁷⁷³ VZT, "Die Straße Unter den Linden," late edition of December 24, 1918.

⁷⁷⁴ Lequis later justified the limited time given to the sailors by asserting that the ultimatum was merely the extension of talks with the government that had been going on for hours, ". . . the 10 minutes was merely the last deadline at the end of the entire night." (*Quellen*, 6/II, fn. 9, p. 133)

⁷⁷⁵ Fischer, 46. This contradicts Wrobel's account that claims that Dorrenbach was present to receive the ultimatum and, later, was the soul of the division's defense. However, this version contradicts Fischer's assertion that Dorrenbach was temporarily out of action. Oehme records that Captain Pabst, resplendent in shiny, knee-high boots, had arrived at the Chancellery before dawn to inform the Cabinet that the GKSD would give the sailors an interval of only ten minutes to consider the guards' ultimatums, a visit that made the MSPD delegates complicit in the harsh terms of the ultimatum. Oehme, *Reichskanzlei*, 207-208.

Whether defiant or indecisive, the sailors gave no sign of being ready to capitulate. Just after 8:00 AM, the army's guns opened fire on the VMD's positions in the two buildings. The artillerymen initially directed the heaviest weight of fire against the Palace, the attacker's first objective. According to an eyewitness, the first round hit between windows on the first floor and knocked out a machine gun position. Subsequent rounds did considerable damage to the columns façade of the building, and the balcony of the building where the Kaiser had announced war in 1914.⁷⁷⁶ The small garrison of sailors in the Palace returned fire with at least five machine guns but after ten minutes of artillery preparation, the guards judged that they could launch their assault party, two hundred men from the 1st and 3rd Guards Uhlans. Their initial assault was so successful that, by 8:10, the Palace had been cleared. Those sailors who were not casualties or taken prisoner escaped through an underground passage to the Marstall.⁷⁷⁷

At this point, it appeared that the VMD would be a short morning's work for the soldiers, most of whom had seen far more intense combat on the Western Front. Unfortunately for the attackers, however, the sturdy Marstall, with a larger garrison, proved a much more difficult assignment. Attempts to rush the building met heavy machine gun fire. Artillery fire directed at the different sides of the building had only a limited effect and could not penetrate its massive doors. A storming party armed with axes also failed to clear a way. Finally, the guardsmen decided to rely on the time-tested siege technique; they repositioned their artillery so that they might concentrate all their

⁷⁷⁶ VZT, "Die Strasse Unter den Linden," late edition of December 24, 1918. Fischer late took the guardsmen to task for shelling the northern end of the palace, where there were clear fields of fire, instead of the less accessible south side where the VMD had its offices and guard post (Fischer, 46). It is often the case that soldiers do what they can rather than what they should.

⁷⁷⁷ Description of the battle for the Palace from *Wirren*, 40 and VZT, "Die Straße Unter den Linden." late edition of December 24, 1918.

fire on a single point. This, they hoped, would create a breach adequate to allow the passage of an assault force.⁷⁷⁸

Against this prolonged bombardment, the resistance of the sailors began to flag. Despite the superficial damage to the building's exterior, inside the defenders were taking casualties. By 10:00, the sailors in the Marstall apparently had had enough.⁷⁷⁹ The guardsmen outside saw a white flag appear in one of the windows. At first, the attackers suspected a ruse designed to draw them closer into range. However, when a small party of sailors appeared at one of the doors, the soldiers ceased firing. The GKSD then sent its own negotiating party to meet the sailors, a soldier with a white flag on the end of his bayonet followed by a vehicle carrying Colonel Tschirschky and his adjutant.⁷⁸⁰ The vehicle stopped outside the building and the officers went inside and, after a brief interval, they reappeared with a group of sailors.⁷⁸¹

The defenders had asked for terms and the two sides agreed to a twenty minute cease-fire. Tschirschky took the sailor representatives with him to the University where the final terms of the surrender would be negotiated. Unarmed sailors began coming out of the Marstall, first as individuals, then in groups. Otto Wels emerged, a free man, though somewhat worse for his night as a guest of the VMD. A detail of guardsmen entered the building to secure the weapons left behind while the artillery teams began to

⁷⁷⁸ Wirren, 41.

⁷⁷⁹ In Wrobel's version, a courier in a small boat had come down the Spree River on the east side of the Marstall, braving the fire of the attackers, in order to deliver the news that forces were on the way to relieve the sailors. A temporary cease-fire was necessary in order to prevent machine gun fire from the Marstall from striking their allies outside. Thus, the apparent surrender was actually a clever ploy by the sailors. (Wrobel, *Sieg*, 54.). The general staff history gave the time of the white flag as 9:10 but this conflicts with every other contemporary account and seems a mistake.

⁷⁸⁰ Tschirschky, who commanded a cavalry brigade in the GKSD, was the tactical commander of the assault.

⁷⁸¹ Description of Marstall action from *Wirren*, 41, and VZT, late edition of December 24, 1918. Die Strasse Unter den Linden" and "Eine Gefechtspause."

limber their guns. All that remained, it seemed, was to clean up the mess.⁷⁸² The GKSD liaison officer at the Chancellery took this brief report: “Marstall is occupied by us, the sailors have accepted all of our demands, delivered up [their] weapons, Wels is free.”⁷⁸³

The Debacle (Berlin: Tuesday, Christmas Eve, December 24, 1918)

Just a few minutes later, another report announced a dramatically different situation:

Report [of a] captain of the General Staff: The sailors have broken the settlement [,] refused to surrender weapons, the population is at hand in great number, taken positions against [or around] the sailors, military appears too weak to push them back, need reinforcements or Ebert should come and speak to the people.⁷⁸⁴

What happened next has been described in a number of conflicting ways. What is certain is that suddenly a vast crowd approached the rear of the GKSD positions from all directions; the Spree Canal, Kaiserstrasse, Alexanderplatz, and Unter den Linden.⁷⁸⁵ Just as the guardsmen began to relax in their machine gun posts, artillery crews, and storm groups, the throng pressed around them, haranguing them, disarming them, and, in some instances, beating them and shooting them. Among the crowd were women and children who, according to some accounts, led the columns and challenged the soldiers to fire on them. Some in the crowd were armed, most were not. The crowd included members of the VMD who had spent the night at home. Others present included the sailors’ allies, the *Sicherheitswehr*, while still others were members of the *Soldatenwehr* who had gone

⁷⁸² Ibid.

⁷⁸³ BA-R, R43/2408/f, p. 45. “Eine Meldung des Verbindungsoffizieres der Garde-Schützen Division,” dated December 24, 1918. Entry for 11:05 AM. This message is missing from Wrobel’s account which claims the sailors’ never considered surrender. The real reason for the cease-fire, quoting a sailor at the scene, was to protect the women and children who lived in the Marstall, p. 57.

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid, entry for 11:10 AM. Again, if Ebert had a taste for irony, he might have observed that, the day after the army had demanded that they be allowed to rescue him, they were, that morning, asking *him* to rescue *them*.

⁷⁸⁵ Dominique Venner, *Soldner Ohne Sold: Die Deutsche Freikorps, 1918-1923*, (Berlin: Paul Neff Verlag, 1974, 43.

over to the side of the sailors.⁷⁸⁶ Most were workers and workers' families. The general staff history estimated their total number at one hundred thousand.⁷⁸⁷

As soon as the guns had opened fire on the Palace and Marstall, representatives of the various groups hostile to the Ebert government—conspicuously Eichhorn's *Sicherheitswehr*, along with the Spartacist League, the *Volksmarine* Division, the left wing of the USPD—began to circulate through the working class districts, sounding the alarm. "The monarchist counter-revolution has begun!" "Come to the Palace to defend the revolution!" Although the sympathies of Berlin's working class were divided between MSPD, ISPD, and the Spartacus League, the battle cry of counter-revolution was sufficient to mobilize them to empty neighborhoods and factories by the thousands. By 10:00, they were pressing against the barricades established by the *Soldatenwehr* to isolate the battle area. In the presence of the vast crowd that harangued and cajoled them, the *Soldatenwehr* wavered in some places, in others joined the crowd, and it appears that the only thing that prevented the great mass of people from pushing directly toward the Palace and Marstall was the sound of cannon and machine gun fire. When the firing ceased, they could not be restrained.⁷⁸⁸ The GKSD committed its small reserve to reinforce the barricades, but it was no use.⁷⁸⁹

Once again, the ubiquitous Harry Kessler was an eyewitness, this time to the scene in the square between the Palace and the Marstall:

Sailors with machine-guns stood at the windows [of the Marstall], which were battered to pieces. The square was black with people. They were

⁷⁸⁶ The official history notes that only Suppe's volunteer detachment of active NCO's maintained their barrier. *Wirren*, 41.

⁷⁸⁷ Description of the crowd taken from several sources, to include, *Wirren*, 41. Freyer, 191. Volkmann, *Revolution*, 160-161, and VZT, "Eine Gefechtspause," late edition of December 24, 1918.

⁷⁸⁸ Böhm, diary entry of December 24, 1918, 116-117. Wrobel's account includes half a dozen eyewitness accounts of those summoned to the support of the *Volksmarinedivision*, pp. 54-58.

⁷⁸⁹ *Wirren*, 41.

waiting for something, though without knowing what—whether a battle, a mass meeting, perhaps Liebknecht’s appearance—just waiting and unafraid because for thousands curiosity outvied fear. At the same time these bystanders formed the best bulwark of defense for the mutinous sailors. Until these spectators were dispersed or pushed back, the Government troops would be unable to renew their attack.

As he watched, a unit of guards artillery arrived on the scene.

. . . [It was] at once surrounded by a seething mob yelling insults, which revealed that many here were on Liebknecht’s side. A sergeant, wearing a red-black-gold armband, climbed on a limber and made a speech audible right across the square. A parley is going on, he announced, and brothers should not shoot and kill each other. It worked, mainly, because of the calm way he spoke. The troop [of artillery] was let through and drove off.⁷⁹⁰

As Kessler’s account suggested, the objective of the bewildered guardsmen had to change. Where moments before, they had sought to finish clearing two buildings of rebellious sailors, by noon, the issue became withdrawal. In the presence of a vast and hostile crowd, could the GKSD extricate itself from the scene? With difficulty, the soldiers were able to withdraw their artillery pieces⁷⁹¹ but elsewhere the crowds seized machine guns and roughed up officers who attempted to regain control.⁷⁹² The *Sicherheitswehr* arrested several officers caught in the maelstrom. After the crowd had jostled them and pulled off their shoulder straps and ribbons, the officers were taken as captives to the Police Presidium.⁷⁹³ The troops that had entered the Marstall were in an especially vulnerable position and made their way to safety with difficulty.

⁷⁹⁰ Kessler, diary entry of December 24, 1918, 41.

⁷⁹¹ A point the general staff history insists on. *Wirren*, 41. As a point of honor, the GKSD felt compelled to stress the recovery of the guns in the press several days later. VZT, December 27, 1918, “Eine Erklärung der Garde-Kavallerie.”

⁷⁹² VZT, late edition of December 24, 1918, “Eine Gefechtspause.”

⁷⁹³ *Wirren*, 43.

Seeing the shifting course of events, the sailors' representatives had broken off negotiations and renounced their capitulation. The VMD withdrew the white flags and resumed their defensive positions around the Marstall. Soon it became clear that they had no more to fear from "the Potsdamers."

The members of the Cabinet responded to the events around the Marstall in different ways. The three MSPD delegates, Ebert, Landsberg, and Scheidemann, monitored the action from the Chancellery. Barth was awakened by the sound of cannon fire. Excitable and energetic as always, he went first to the War Ministry where he demanded that Scheuch tell him who had ordered the guards to bombard the VMD. Scheuch replied, probably in truth, that he did not know. Barth then proceeded to the headquarters of the GKSD where Pabst told him that the operation had been launched on the orders of the government. Outraged, Barth demanded an immediate cease-fire. Pabst declined. Barth then went to his office in the Chancellery where he called Harbou and again demanded a cease-fire. Harbou explained to the angry delegate that only Ebert could issue such an order. Predictably, Barth rushed out of his office to find the Chancellor. By the time he had found the three delegates from the MSPD, the guardsmen were in trouble. In response to Barth's indignant demand for answers, Ebert professed that he had no idea who had given approval but that he was very willing to call the War Ministry and order an end to the unhappy affair.⁷⁹⁴ The last two delegates, the Independents Haase and Dittmann, arrived shortly thereafter to

⁷⁹⁴ Description of Barth's circuit taken from *Nachlass Pabst*, 46-47, Volkmann, *Revolution*, 160-161, and *Quellen 6/II*, Document 70, "Emil Barth und Wilhelm Dittmann über die Kabinettsitzung am Dienstag, 24.12 1918, vorm."pp. 30-31.

mediate between Barth's furious indignation and Ebert's dismay and embarrassment.⁷⁹⁵

By early afternoon, matters began to sort themselves out. The crowds began to thin as people went home to celebrate Christmas. The GKSD, though shaken, had withdrawn in good order. The general staff history later claimed that at this point they were ready to rejoin the fight, but this seems unlikely.⁷⁹⁶ At two o'clock in the afternoon, the troops were assembled and marched out of the city.⁷⁹⁷ A newspaper reporter wrote that the soldiers offered a good impression, but that their position was difficult because, "They don't know where they actually stand."⁷⁹⁸

Not so their opponents. The defenders of the Marstall, initially stunned by their unlikely victory, celebrated and waxed belligerent. One sailor told a reporter from the *Vossische Zeitung*, "There is no question of negotiation. Ledebour was turned down by Ebert yesterday. The Potsdamers must be shot down."⁷⁹⁹ Another reporter from the MSPD's newspaper, *Vorwärts*, described the scene in the center of Berlin

Around 12:00 I saw approximately 200 armed civilians in march column enter the Marstall, the entire area around the Marstall including the Königstrasse up to the City Hall is occupied by the sailors' supporters armed with machine guns. The sailors and their allies demand that the Ebert-Haase government step down immediately⁸⁰⁰

To avoid further bloodshed, the two sides needed a new settlement, but the commander of the GKSD, General Hofmann, was unwilling to parley with the sailors.

Representatives of the government intervened to arrange a meeting for the purposes of

⁷⁹⁵ Volkmann, 162.

⁷⁹⁶ *Wirren*,

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

⁷⁹⁸ VZT, "Spartakus greift ein," late edition of December 24, 1918

⁷⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

⁸⁰⁰ *Vorwärts*, edition of December 24, 1918; quoted in Wrobel, *Sieg*, 59.

negotiating a settlement. Thus General Hoffmann and Captain Pabst met at the university that afternoon with members of the Central Council (*Zentralrat*) the Supreme Naval Council (*Obermarinerat*), the Executive Council (*Vollzugsrat*), leaders of the *Volksmarinedivision*, and the Berlin Soldier's Councils. Together, they came to an agreement that salvaged far more from the situation than the government could have hoped for, given the circumstances. Its conditions:

1. The *Volksmarinedivision* would evacuate the Palace in accordance with the original agreement of December 18.
2. The *Volksmarinedivision* would be incorporated into the *Soldatenwehr* and subordinated to the City Commandant. The final form of the incorporation would be worked out later.
3. The sailors promised in the future to never again take action against the government. Disagreements would always be subject to negotiations.

-The division from *Generalkommando Lequis* [GKSD] will withdraw immediately.

-The state of alert would be lifted for the garrison and the *Volksmarinedivision*.

-Commandant Wels is immediately released.⁸⁰¹

As the representatives of the various bodies put their signatures on this document and departed, they must have wondered how long this temporary peace would last.

Meanwhile, the soldiers and sailors counted their losses. The general staff history recorded that the battle cost the GKSD two men dead, and ten wounded, versus a loss of fifty-six dead by their enemies.⁸⁰² In cabinet deliberations during the days following, the number of sailors counted as slain ranged from seven to seventy. East German historians reversed the ratio of losses given by the general staff by asserting that the sailors had lost a half dozen killed versus fifty-six killed in action among the guardsmen. Here, as in so many aspects of these events, the truth is elusive. One is inclined to believe the lower

⁸⁰¹ Agreement paraphrased from BA-R, R43/2508/f, p. 31. Cease-fire agreement of December 25, 1918.

⁸⁰² *Wirren*, p. 43.fn.1).

figures for both sides. Notably, for the GKSD their losses are accounted for by rank and by unit in the official history, and as for the sailors, their public funeral for the VMD's dead, attended by thousands on December 29, saw the burial only seven of their men.⁸⁰³

In terms of the forces engaged on each side (a battalion or less), the losses incurred and the duration of the action, the battle of December 24 was a minor affair. By Western Front standards, the scale of the fighting would have made the fighting around the Palace and the Marstall, at most, a minor trench raid, barely worth mentioning in dispatches. However, unlike the thousands of small skirmishes in the trenches, the battle between the guards and the sailors had the entire German nation as an audience. Thus, the events of Christmas Eve would have vast significance for the course of the Germany's political development and the onset of civil war.

The Consequences (Berlin: December 25, 1918 to January 1, 1919)

For the Ebert government, there was no way to put a cheerful interpretation on the situation. The events of Christmas Eve had been a disaster. The majority of the working population of Berlin, whatever their political persuasion, put the blame for the attack on the Majority Socialists. Through the next week, the Independents in the Cabinet, Haase, Dittmann, and especially Barth, grilled Ebert and his Majority Socialist colleagues on the events of December 23-24.⁸⁰⁴ The Independent delegates pressed their advantage by demanding that the Majority Socialist Central Council provide answers to seven pointed questions about the government's behavior, including the decision to call in the troops on December 23, the approval of the ten-minute ultimatum on December 24, and the

⁸⁰³ *Die Rote Fahne*, "Der Bestattung der sieben Matrosen," edition of December 30, 1918.

⁸⁰⁴ *Quellen*, 6/II, Document 79, "Die Fragen der USPD-Volksbeauftragten an den Zentralrat

implementation of the Hamburg Points.⁸⁰⁵ The Spartacist leaders who, up to then, had played a relatively minor role in events, also moved to take full advantage of the government's discomfiture. With a renewed militancy, Liebknecht called for mass demonstrations to protest the attack on the VMD. Christmas Day saw several thousands marching through falling snow to denounce Ebert, Landsberg, and Scheidemann as "bloodhounds."⁸⁰⁶ Liebknecht told the crowd that their class enemies were still far from defeated, and called for the creation of a Red Guard to protect the revolution.⁸⁰⁷

These political attacks were worrisome but Ebert and his colleagues feared worse. On one hand, the government's main buildings were virtually unguarded, on the other; the Spartacists were sure to be emboldened by the course of events. With this in mind, on the night of the 24th, Groener asked Ebert what he planned to do. For the moment the government no longer had reliable troops at hand. Ebert replied ruefully that he would spend the night with friends and leave the Chancellery in the care of the porter. When the Spartacists showed up, he said, they would find an empty building.⁸⁰⁸ In truth, on the evening of Christmas Eve, the government held a special train at the Anhalter *Bahnhof* (train station) in the event the government needed to make a hasty evacuation.⁸⁰⁹ For much of the week immediately following Christmas, the Majority Socialist delegates kept a low profile, staying in private dwellings outside the center of the city and sometimes meeting in secret locations.⁸¹⁰ Meanwhile, their enemies tested their own growing strength. Several hundred Spartacist supporters had broken off from the Christmas

⁸⁰⁵ BA-MA, *Nachlass Scheuch*, N23/1, p.67. *Die Freiheit*, "Die Fragen unsrer Genossen,." edition of December 29, 1918.

⁸⁰⁶ Wrobel, *Sieg*, 61-62.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁸ Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 476.

⁸⁰⁹ Böhm, diary entry of December 24, 1918, 117-118.

⁸¹⁰ BA-MA, *Nachlass Scheuch*, N23/1, *Freiheit*, "Hinter der Kulissen," by Walter Oehme; edition of December 27, 1919.

demonstration and seized the *Vorwärts* building. The guard force at the newspaper offices, forbidden to use their weapons, offered no resistance.⁸¹¹

For the officer corps, the events of December 24 were much worse than a defeat; they represented a humiliation. The Ebert government had called for help and the Field Army had sent the best of what it had left, only to see those troops dispersed by a mob of civilians. If the anticipated Spartacist coup was finally launched, the army seemed powerless to combat it. On that afternoon of Christmas Eve, Major von Harbou sent the OHL a depressing assessment. “. . . the troops of *Generalkommando Lequis* are no longer capable of active operations. There exist only the remnants of combat-ready units with which to occupy the main buildings [of the government.]. . . With the means used thus far, I see no way to support and defend the government.” An entire army, he said, would be needed to remedy the situation. Perhaps gratuitously he added, “The result of today’s clash could become politically catastrophic for the government.”⁸¹² That evening Groener entered this blunt and concise assessment of the entire “Berlin-Operation” in his diary, “The entry operation (*Einzug*) is finished.”⁸¹³

The bad news from Berlin stunned the officer corps, and, in the immediate aftermath of the debacle there was a measure of despair within the OHL staff. At a meeting of department chiefs, officers spoke of dissolving the headquarters so that they could go home to defend their families against the impending anarchy.⁸¹⁴ Schleicher offered a strong rebuttal to this defeatism, reminding the staff that events in Berlin served to gain time for the creation of volunteer units. If the army surrendered now, they would

⁸¹¹ VZT, “Ein neuer Putsch,” December 26, 1918.

⁸¹² Volkman, 163.

⁸¹³ BA-MA, *Nachlass Groener*, 46/25, diary entry of December 24, 1918.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid*, 163-164.

be leaving Germany to a grim fate. Groener, though depressed himself, backed Schleicher's position.⁸¹⁵ The next day he and Schleicher set the example for mandatory gaiety by dancing with the female stenographers at the OHL's Christmas party. Later, when recalling those days, Groener wrote that one had to have faith that the solid nucleus of the army would endure.⁸¹⁶

The War Ministry staff was much closer to the danger and, therefore, found faith difficult to maintain. On Christmas Day, Colonel van den Bergh wrote that the danger of a leftist putsch was growing: "Since yesterday, 12.24, the danger of a Liebknecht-Ledebour government has risen to an extreme. But Liebknecht will want to let the matter mature. When the Field Army is dissolved, he will move more surely."⁸¹⁷ The colonel condemned the OHL and Lequis' lack of political awareness for the failure that resulted. His boss, General von Scheuch, was equally distressed with the failures of the Field Army but found military incompetence to be the chief failing. When Major von Harbou appeared at the War Ministry the day after the battle, Scheuch rebuked a man he already disliked, stating:

The events of yesterday present themselves as a three-part defeat, first as a defeat of the troops on the street, second as defeat of the military's relationship to the government and, third, as a defeat for the government's relationship with the people. The trust of the government in the military has been severely shaken. The troops deployed are temporarily no longer effective. It gives the impression that *Generalkommando Lequis* busied itself too much in political matters and too little in military preparations.⁸¹⁸

Harbou was not the only one to feel Scheuch's ire. When the Chief of the Chancellery, Curt Baake, asked the War Minister why the military had failed so badly on Christmas

⁸¹⁵ Thaer, diary entry of January 2, 1919, 287.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid, 283-4 and Groener, *Erinnerungen*, 475.

⁸¹⁷ Van den Bergh, diary entry of December 25, 1918, 66-67.

⁸¹⁸ Böhm, diary entry of December 25, 1918, 118-119.

Eve, Scheuch replied, “Because they [the government] have sawn the timbers of my house, my officer corps, to pieces.”⁸¹⁹

This would not be Scheuch’s only grievance against the Cabinet. In the aftermath of “bloody Christmas” he found himself one of the scapegoats of the affair. The MSPD delegates claimed that they had never given him a “blank check” to seek Wels’ rescue. Scheuch, they claimed, had organized the attack on the sailors on his own initiative. What followed was an acrimonious exchange between the War Minister and his political masters in government meeting rooms and in the Berlin press.⁸²⁰ As it was, Scheuch had been waiting for the government to find a successor since mid-December. At the end of the year, when the Cabinet settled on Colonel Reinhardt of the Demobilization Branch, Scheuch departed, a bitter man.⁸²¹

Plenty of blame was thrown around and much of it fell on Lequis. Lequis sought to justify himself but, although the general had been an instructor at the *Kriegsakademie*, he unfortunately had taken no courses in media relations. The day after the battle he proceeded to throw gasoline on the fire of public outrage. The December 25 edition of the *Vossische Zeitung* carried an interview with the general that proved enormously embarrassing to both the government and the high command. Lequis told his interviewer that he had come to Berlin with the purpose of supporting the government and maintaining peace and order at any price. Thus, by announcing that he led a full-fledged military operation, Lequis directly contradicted Ebert’s assertion two weeks earlier that Lequis’ command served only as an administrative headquarters charged with the sole

⁸¹⁹ Ibid, 119.

⁸²⁰ BA-MA, Nachlass Scheuch, N23/1, p. 67. *Die Freiheit*, “Hinter die Kulissen,” edition of December 29, 1919.

⁸²¹ For his feelings on the treatment of the officer corps, see Berthold/Neef, Document 128, “Abschiedsgesuch des Kriegministers Scheuch vom 15. Dezember 1918,” 307-309.

purpose of arranging the Guards Corps' homecoming. As the interview continued, the general showed no awareness of the niceties of coalition politics by suggesting that the chancellor played an active role in the guards' deployment to Berlin. "All soldiers had but one thought, as I did, to help the government. For them, Ebert was the man who represented the government." Lequis then proceeded to recite the pre-conditions for Groener's secret "Berlin Operation."

When I came here, I found a situation that was immediately recognizable as difficult and demanded the most rapid action. Certain preparations for the establishment of a strong governmental power were indeed ordered here but not fully executed. For that, I understood, was the disarming of all those not authorized to carry a weapon. The necessary laws were negotiated but still not executed. [Here he refers, among other things, to the decision to have Wels instead of Lequis disarm the city and the failure to enforce the measures needed to control deserters and sailors away from their stations] . . . My soldiers were filled, as I told you with pride and joy a week ago, with the best possible spirit.

Lequis complained that if his troops had moved against the enemies of the government ten days sooner, then the desired outcome would have been achieved. By waiting, the pull of home and family along with the effect of Spartacist agitation served to weaken his force. With this assertion, Lequis put the blame for the defeat of Christmas squarely on those above him, the government and the OHL. Finally, he offered the opinion that, in order to preserve peace and order and strengthen the government, a greater deployment of troops might be necessary. Such a view was guaranteed to excite the Left.⁸²²

In an effort at damage control, Scheuch promptly relieved Lequis and dissolved his command, while Groener sent Harbou, a former member of the OHL staff, on four weeks leave. Another order placed Lequis' troops, or what remained of them, under

⁸²² VZT, "Generalleutenant Lequis über die Lage," interview with Erich von Salzmänn, December 25, 1918. Böhm wrote in his diary that Lequis' indiscreet remarks left the government "badly compromised." Entry of December 25, 1918. 119-120.

General Walther von Lüttwitz, the commander of the III Corps district around Berlin.⁸²³

There were other casualties. Two days after Christmas, Otto Wels announced his nerves could no longer endure the work of City Commandant.⁸²⁴

Several blocks away from Wels' office the officers taken prisoner by the *Sicherheitswehr* spent Christmas making their way back to their units. In the immediate aftermath of the fighting, members of Eichhorn's unit and sympathizers had stood the officers against a wall and leveled their rifles at them. Other members of the *Sicherheitswehr* had prevailed on their comrades to spare the prisoners. Ultimately, Eichhorn arranged for the officers' release after they had promised to take no part in further fighting. The officers finally left the Police Presidium under the cover of darkness, dressed in civilian clothes.⁸²⁵ It was hardly a proud moment in the history of the Prussian Guards.

The remainder of the GSKD's *Frontkämpfer* spent Christmas in their barracks between Potsdam and Berlin. According to some accounts, some had left the ranks in disgust after Ebert's mediation on the night of the 23rd; others after the fiasco on Christmas Eve.⁸²⁶ The Cabinet sent them a message intended to encourage them after the fiasco they had experienced. "The government thanks the troops for their loyal conduct and expects that you will maintain such loyalty in the future."⁸²⁷ The official history, reporting through the lens of National Socialism, recorded that the rank and file of the GKSD was disdainful of the message and disgusted with the government. Restoring the morale of these men would require very special handling. But in Waldemar Pabst, they

⁸²³ *Wirren*, 44.

⁸²⁴ Fischer, 48.

⁸²⁵ *Wirren*, 43.

⁸²⁶ Groener-Geyer, 126. *Wirren*, 43-44.

⁸²⁷ *Wirren*, 43.

had a chief of staff whose insights into soldier morale and motivation would enable the division to reincarnate itself.

Preparing the Army for Civil War (Wilhelmshöhe, December 26, 1918)

Nothing inspires change in a military organization like embarrassment. The day after Christmas Groener brought his staff and a number of trusted front-line commanders together to review recent events and decide what must be done to restore the army's ability to defend the government and preserve the officer corps. It was a sober session in which the First Quartermaster General and his subordinates worked together to see what could be rescued from the wreckage of the old army that might be useful in preparing for the likelihood of civil war.

Schleicher, the political officer, opened with a review of the army's relationship with the government. He reminded the other officers that their chief adversaries in the Cabinet were Haase and Barth. For the time being, he indicated, the Hamburg Points had been blocked. Ebert had played a role and the army needed to support him without giving the appearance of counter-revolutionary activity. Groener interrupted Schleicher's brief to reinforce the point. The officer corps, he said, must be very circumspect in its behavior. Imprudent acts by "individual hotheads" must cease. Circumspection must be balanced with an effort to counteract the effect of socialist propaganda on the army's politically immature rank and file.

Schleicher continued, turning the discussion to the recent events in Berlin. Using the understatement preferred by staff officers, he described the Christmas Eve fighting as a "rebuff" to the government. The Independents and Liebknecht have been strengthened. Groener, predictably, had much to say on this topic. Some of those listening may have

been surprised to hear him say that the GKSD was “well-prepared for the mission.” He explained: “They were instructed by a variety of speakers, including politicians in civilian attire . . . a truly intensive enlightenment (*Aufklärung*).” The attentive officers realized that Groener was saying that the old methods of preparing troops for battle were no longer sufficient. Political preparation was as important to the army’s future operations as military preparation. Even though the GKSD had failed to neutralize the sailors, Pabst’s training methods in the GKSD were a model for the rest of the army.

Groener went on to offer his overview of the entire “Berlin-Operation” including its unhappy end on Christmas Eve.

For Ebert, the overall current situation in Berlin has deteriorated. The troop deployment, which Ebert approved, did not have the desired success. Jealousy between Lequis and the War Ministry played a role. Ebert would have greeted a genuine success but is reluctant to take responsibility for the necessary instructions. So it is with most politicians. Military leaders must act on their own responsibility.

Here Groener offered his fellow officers the stern reality of civil-military relations in the post-revolutionary republic. Commanders could not wait for unambiguous guidance from the politicians. Moreover, new circumstances meant careful planning was even more important than in conventional military operations. The Christmas Eve battle illustrated the point.

The attack on the Palace and the Marstall was not sufficiently prepared. Such operations should be preceded by a warning order that allows preparation to proceed until the details have been determined. Traffic barriers are very important. Negotiations must be refused. They offered Ledebour⁸²⁸ the opportunity to assemble masses of people including women and children. The troops were unprepared for this. They did not know how to perform police functions.

⁸²⁸ Here Groener was ill informed. Eichhorn, not Ledebour, was the key man in organizing the crowds that came to the Palace on Christmas Eve.

Groener also commented on the performance of the local commander, “The situation has been made worse by a foolish interview by Lequis. *Generalkommando Lequis* is dissolved.”

Schleicher turned the agenda to the situation in the capital. Government troops still held the key buildings. Meanwhile, he said, volunteer formations are assembling outside Berlin in Wannsee, Döberitz, and Zossen. The GKSD was in reasonably good shape and their morale has been restored “due to the well-conceived instruction of the General Staff Officer Pape [*sic*: Pabst].”

Here, again, the GKSD and the captain who was its guiding force were held up to the army as the example of what was needed. Schleicher’s mention of it showed how much the OHL considered it a key to the situation in Berlin. Almost one hundred and eighty divisions had crossed the Rhine in the previous six weeks, but now the Field Army’s attention was focused on this single division on the outskirts of the capital, a unit so badly used just two days before. The focus, that is, until, the new volunteer formations were ready.

If anyone missed the point, Schleicher proceeded to describe what the army would have to look like for the trials ahead. Leaders could no longer be chosen by old conventions; rank, class, and seniority would have to give way to leadership, energy, and political awareness. Because ideology shaped the battlefield, commanders had to be men who had the trust of their men, the braid on their shoulders was no longer enough. For example, he said, a lieutenant was leading the 3rd Guards Regiment. The Guards Fusilier Regiment was being led by a sergeant-lieutenant [a wartime reserve rank] and active officers were serving under him. By the same token, trustee councils were no longer a

nuisance designed to satisfy the demands of a republican regime. As a conduit for improved internal communication, the councils had become an essential element in every unit, a prerequisite for preserving discipline and building trust between officers and men.⁸²⁹

By highlighting the GKSD's methods and describing the new leadership principles the army required, Schleicher had previewed many of the most conspicuous features of the formations that would carry the burden of fighting the civil war, the *Freikorps*. He also offered them the simple political goal that should guide the exercise of commanders' personal initiative in the uncertain situations that would follow: defend the National Assembly. With national elections scheduled for January 19, 1919, the High Command saw the convention of a National Assembly as the single greatest hope for reigning in the Left and restoring the conservative elements of German society.

Schleicher introduced a variety of other political considerations. Almost all related to two central conclusions one could have drawn from the course of the presentation: 1) the officer corps was going to be deeply involved in political matters and 2) in the existing period of national peril the army was going to look much different than the old *Kaiserheer*.⁸³⁰ The meeting signaled the recognition that the old army was gone.

New Men

⁸²⁹ Other necessary measures included establishing "model" units and cleaning the riff-raff out of casernes. Troublesome soldiers' councils should be shut down and many commands had found that an investigation of misappropriation of government property is frequently useful to this end.

⁸³⁰ Among other things, he discussed the propaganda campaign against Spartacus and for Ebert. On the government's initiative to create a republican *Volkswehr* (Peoples' Guard), he said the OHL would make a show of studying the problem while stalling for time. He reemphasized the political instruction in the GKSD as an example for the army. The meeting considered the new Officers' League and Groener gave guidance on the nature of officers' political involvement. The description of this meeting is taken from Quellen, 2/II, Document 12: "Aufzeichnung über eine Besprechung der Obersten Heeresleitung mit Chef der Stabe und Frontoffizieren," December 26, 1918, 31-38.

The last days of December were anxious ones for the Chancellor and the First Quartermaster General. Yet even while they were bracing themselves for a Spartacist coup, political and military events were reshaping the balance of power in Germany. One of most important occurred in the Cabinet itself. On December 28, 1918, the three Independent Socialist delegates, Haase, Dittmann, and Barth, left the government. In the final session, the three Independents blasted the Majority Socialists for failing to rein in the old forces of German militarism and blamed them, Ebert and his two MSPD colleagues, for the “bloodbath” of December 24.⁸³¹ The uneasy coalition of November 10 was dead.

The Cabinet moved swiftly to replace them with two new delegates from their own party. They gave Rudolf Wissell a portfolio that included social and economic issues. The critical choice, however, was the other man selected. He was Gustav Noske, and he took over responsibility for military matters. Along with a distinguished record of party activity, Noske was well known for his drive and competence and he took special pride in his ability to work with common soldiers and sailors as well as generals and admirals. Sent to the tumultuous port of Kiel during the November naval mutinies, he had earned a national reputation by reestablishing order and maintaining the naval garrisons solidly in the MSPD camp.⁸³² Ebert called for his advice after the Christmas Eve fiasco and Noske traveled to the capital on December 27. Speaking bluntly, he told

⁸³¹ *Quellen* 6/II, Document 81: “Antwort der USPD-Volksbeauftragten auf die Erklärung des Zentralrats. 28/29.12.1918 nachts,” 137-138.

⁸³² On Christmas Eve, when the *Volksmarinedivision* sent a call for help to Kiel. Noske offered, instead, several thousand sailors ready to fight for the Ebert government. Noske, 54.

Ebert that the entire nation was disgusted with the state of affairs in Berlin. The provisional government must be ready to deal forcefully with its enemies.⁸³³

Noske's was not the only new face in a key position. The government appointed Wilhelm Reinhard, the dynamic commander of the 4th Foot Guards, to replace Wels as City Commandant. Wels' adjutant, Lieutenant Fischer, challenged the appointment, having himself been acclaimed by the Soldiers' Councils of Berlin as the new commandant. These same councils, not unexpectedly, rejected Reinhard's appointment. The colonel found a pragmatic solution to the problem. Though utterly contemptuous of Fischer, he allowed the glib and ambitious former monk to act as the front man for the Commandant's Headquarters while he worked behind the scenes to prepare the pro-government troops in Berlin for civil war.⁸³⁴ In doing so, Reinhard worked closely with General Walther von Lüttwitz, Lequis' replacement, and Colonel Walther Reinhardt, Scheuch's successor in the War Ministry, both of whom proved to be capable men.⁸³⁵

Though the key people in Wilhelmshöhe had not changed, there was a clear shift in the function of the OHL as well. Throughout the period after November 9, the socialist government had endured the continued existence of the Field Army headquarters because Groener and his staff had portrayed themselves as having an essential apolitical role in administration and logistics. They provided the military-technical expertise necessary to ensure the accomplishment of several critical post-war tasks: the return of front-line forces to the homeland, execution of the terms of the armistice, demobilization,

⁸³³ Noske, ?

⁸³⁴ Reinhard, *Wehen*, 55-58.

⁸³⁵ William Mulligan, *The Creation of the Modern German Army: General Walther Reinhardt and the Weimar Republic, 1914-1930*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 44-58. Reinhardt's appointment resulted in a curious situation. Reinhardt, a Wurttemburger was the chief of the Prussian Ministry of War while Groener, also a Wurttemburger, was, under Hindenburg, the head of the Prussian-dominated general staff.

and the establishment of frontier security forces. In the wake of the Christmas Eve, the OHL took on the role as senior operational headquarters for the defense of the provisional government from its internal enemies.⁸³⁶

The battles around the Palace and Marstall served to bring new people into key places in the government. Their energy dispelled some of the gloom. Nevertheless, for the OHL and its civilian masters, the unpleasant fact remained that, for the time being, they could call on barely one and fifty reliable troops in the capital of the *Reich*. Groener would remember this as the most difficult time of the post-war period.⁸³⁷

On December 31, Count Kessler recorded in his diary, “The last day of this dreadful year. 1918 is likely to remain the most frightful date in German history.”⁸³⁸

The *Frontschwein*'s Dilemma, Part VII

This chapter has considered the response of the German army's front-line soldiers to a variety of bewildering political events occurring between October and the end of December 1918: Ludendorff's peace request, the Kaiser's abdication, the revolution in German, the return to the homeland, demobilization, and the final homecoming parades. The previous chapters have examined the response of *Frontkämpfer* in the entire *Westheer*, or, in the case of the abdication and the Berlin operation, a number of carefully selected units, usually over a period of days and weeks.

The crisis of Christmas Eve, 1918, however, allows one to consider what was, essentially, the experience of one unique unit--the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division-- during a time interval of less than forty-eight hours. First, a fairly self-evident point: the poor front-line veteran caught in the maelstrom of hostile Berliners on the morning of

⁸³⁶ The changing role of the OHL considered in Rakenius, 154, and Kluge, 265.

⁸³⁷ Groener's testimony in the Stab-in-the-Back trial cited in Wrobel, *Sieg*, 60.

⁸³⁸ Kessler, diary entry of December 31, 1918, 47.

Christmas Eve found himself in a very unique situation. The day before he had been one of the few remaining soldiers in the barracks, as many of his comrades would have already discharged or put on leave. Second, unexpectedly alerted, he had marched from the fringes of a great city to its very center where, with little time for explanation, he was asked to take part in a battle, not against Spartacists, as he might have expected, but against the former heroes of the November revolution, the sailors from Kiel and Cuxhaven. Then he may have found himself in a tactically untenable situation, under attack by the troops detailed to protect his back. Alternatively, the guardsman was pushed around, had his weapons torn from his hands, as he was being accused by civilians of being a tool of the monarchists and a traitor to the revolution. For him to rejoin the battle meant clearing fields of fire which might have meant shooting women and children, something he would not do. Whatever he expected from the Christmas Eve action, this was not it. No men could have been more bewildered than the front-line soldiers on the *Schlossplatz* that morning.

The interrelated factors that shaped the front-line soldiers' behavior are relevant for this compressed case study. Again, they include physical and emotional *exhaustion*, *selection*, both by the soldiers themselves and their chain of command, *alienation* from those who had not shared the front-line experience; *isolation* from revolutionary influences; *cohesion* of the soldiers' units, and finally, *management* of the soldiers' outlook by his leaders.

Exhaustion: Many of the soldiers involved in the GKSD's attack on Christmas Eve had been alerted in the afternoon or evening of December 23. As Pabst related, many had to conduct a long foot march to reach the scene of the battle. Some did not arrive until just

before the Palace's bombardment got under way. How this affected their response to the arrival of thousands of civilians around their positions is difficult to say. However, footsore and sleep-deprived, the guardsmen and their leaders were unlikely to have the mental agility to cope effectively with the unexpected: the arrival of tens of thousands of civilians.

Selection: The front-line troops of the GKSD were very purposefully selected to suppress the *Volksmarine* division. Ebert had given the rescue mission to the front-line troops even though he was offered an alternative, three thousand men from the Potsdam soldiers' councils. At that point, thanks to Pabst's energetic indoctrination, Lequis' headquarters saw the GKSD as the most reliable force available for a very difficult mission. Of the nine divisions selected for the "Berlin-Operation," the GKSD was the only one in which the unit leadership had aggressively sought to keep the unit intact. How the division decided who received Christmas leave and who stayed in the barracks is not clear; whether the men were available because of devotion to duty or because they had no other place to go is impossible to say. The GKSD was reinforced by elements of the 1st Guards Reserve Division, while the 5th and 37th Divisions contributed troops to the mission of securing key government buildings nearby. The reason Lequis chose these units is obvious. They were the most recently arrived divisions. The artillery that supported the assault on the Palace and the Marstall had arrived only the day before the crisis began. Thus, the 1st Guards Reserve Division would have had little time to hemorrhage strength to discharges and desertion. On the other hand, they would have had practically no time to orient themselves to the puzzling political situation in the capital. The 5th and 37th

were also recent arrivals and were units recruited outside of the Berlin area.⁸³⁹ Their men were unlikely to have friends and relatives in the mob that swarmed over the government troops on Christmas Eve. However, they must have been puzzled and disappointed at being so far from home during the holiday.

Alienation: The note the Trustee Council of the GKSD sent to the Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils on December 18 suggests the guardsmen were jealous of the sailors' special status. One imagines the troops of the GKSD may also have been aware of the *Volksmarinedivision's* growing reputation as a public nuisance. Anecdotal evidence suggests the soldiers resented the sailors for their limited exposure to combat and their relatively civilized living conditions. An example: at two o'clock on the afternoon, front-line soldiers from 12th Infantry Regiment and the 3rd Pioneer Battalion guarded the entrances to the Chancellery. A crowd of two hundred gathered outside the building and, led by a civilian and a sailor, they began to harangue the soldiers. One of the soldiers raised an objection. The sailors in Berlin have nothing to complain about, he said. In comparison to the *Frontruppen*, they have always had it better.⁸⁴⁰ There was no love lost between front-line soldiers and revolutionary sailors⁸⁴¹ and this would be reflected in the *Freikorps* treatment of sailor prisoners in the fighting of the next year. Nor did those who had stayed with their units in the last months of the war sympathize with deserters and the *Volksmarinedivision* was led by one of the best-known deserters in post-war Germany. On the other hand, the alienation felt by combat troops towards the

⁸³⁹ BA-R, Telegram from Groener to the RL (Reichsleitung) #55/18, dtd. 10 Dec 1918. The 5th was stationed in Brandenburg but recruited from elsewhere in Prussia. The 37th was drawn originally from East Prussia (though it had drawn replacements from across the empire, to include Alsace-Lorraine). Allied intelligence had rated both divisions highly but both had been badly depleted in the fall of 1918. (*History of Two-Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions*)

⁸⁴⁰ VZT, "Nach der Schlacht," late edition of December 24, 1918.

⁸⁴¹ Wrobel, the East German historian, concedes that many of the sailors who attempted political agitation among the guards got a "thrashing" for their efforts. Wrobel, *Sieg*, 38.

home front was most likely significantly reduced. By late December, the guardsmen and their fellow soldiers had been in the homeland for several weeks. This meant they had a growing awareness that privation was the central feature of civilian life in late 1918. The appeals made by the Berliners who pressed around them on the morning of Christmas Eve were likely to have had a stronger effect than they might have just after the Armistice when the homeland seemed so remote to the *Frontschweine*.

Isolation: In their barracks outside the city, the men of the GKSD were less accessible to the kind of agitation that undermined the other units of Lequis' command. Contrast their situation with that of Reinhard's 4th Foot Guards quartered in Moabit Caserne in the middle of downtown Berlin. In Moabit, the troops would have been unable to avoid daily contact with the most radicalized urban population in Germany. Couple the advantages of the GKSD's geographical location with Pabst's active effort to limit access to his men, and it becomes easier to understand why the GKSD was intact while the other divisions of Lequis' command arriving in Berlin after them were not.

Cohesion: Over four and a half years, attrition had gnawed away at the cohesion of every unit in the German army. By late 1918, no unit had very many of its original members left. However, the GKSD had only been formed as a rifle division in January of the war's last year. It had seen heavy fighting on the Western Front since then, but the limited duration of that fighting may have allowed the survival of a solid nucleus of long-service men.⁸⁴² Beyond that, the GKSD was composed of some of the most elite cavalry units in the old army. Regiments like the Guards Uhlans and the Guards Cuirassiers possessed the tradition and elite status that might sustain a unit in difficult times.

⁸⁴² 251 Divisions.

Management: The activities of the GKSD's leadership, specifically Captain Pabst, was what truly set the division apart from the other combat units around Berlin. Pabst was one of the few officers who realized that the army had to ready itself for an ideological struggle. His creation of defensive and offensive indoctrination cells showed his awareness that the front-swine's old deference to rank, flag, and Kaiser would not hold the unit together under the new and confusing circumstances of post-revolutionary Germany. As we have seen, his efforts were later held up to the rest of the army as an example by the OHL staff. Yet Pabst knew the limitations of his troops as well, and this explains his objections to Lequis' staff regarding the over hasty preparation of the Christmas Eve operation. One can be sure that the guardsmen had little understanding of the chain of events that had led to the falling out between the government and the *Volksmarinedivision*. Nor could they have been completely aware of what was behind the decision to use force against the sailors. In this respect, the OHL and Lequis had failed to set the conditions for success. This failure was based on their unwillingness to acknowledge what a fragile instrument the remaining front-line units had become.

Taken together, these factors shaped the behavior of the several hundred guardsmen assembled to fight the government's enemies in the center of Berlin. Cohesion, selection, and skillful management, in particular, brought them to the battlefield and sustained them through the siege that, briefly at least, produced the surrender of the *Volksmarinedivision*. Then, the troops of the GKSD were confronted by a totally unexpected situation, the arrival of tens of thousands of civilians. The inadequate preparation of the operation had placed them in an untenable situation and no advantages in *esprit*, elite status, or bold leadership could have completely rescued them

from the disruptive effect of the onslaught of Berlin's workers. One might describe their situation as the ultimate manifestation of isolation. Revolutionary influences were not only present they were actively tugging on the soldiers' weapons. Thus, the GKSD failed, as would have any unit in the old army. What is really remarkable is that the troops rescued their guns, and retreated in some semblance of order. That Major von Schleicher was able to describe the division's morale, two days later, as "restored" is also remarkable and suggests the centripetal power of the GKSD's cohesion and the effectiveness of its key leaders. It also begins to explain why the GKSD would reappear as an effective fighting force a few short weeks later. In January 1919, the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division returned to the streets of Berlin strengthened and more resolute. When these hardened veterans came back, they began to establish the GKSD's reputation as one of the most murderous of the *Freikorps*.

Chapter Eight

CONCLUSION: THE “FRONT” AND THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Epilogue: Spartacus Week and the Rise of the *Freikorps*

The new year, 1919, was less than a week old when the Spartacists finally moved against the government.⁸⁴³ On January 4, hundreds of thousands of workers filled the streets of Berlin to protest the government’s attempt to dismiss USPD leader Emil Eichhorn from his post as Police President of Berlin. Emboldened by the size and militancy of the crowds, leaders of the left wing of the USPD, the new Communist party, and the powerful Revolutionary Shop Stewards gathered to announce a general strike, the overthrow of the provisional government, and the cancellation of the national elections. Beyond these measures, the council had no plan to consolidate power nor could it coax either the Berlin garrison or the People’s Naval Division to throw their support behind the uprising. While their leaders deliberated over what to do next, Spartacist supporters seized the newspaper quarter, provisions depots, post offices and several railway stations. By January 6, they were ready to storm the last remaining bastions of governmental support in the capital, the Reich Chancellery and the Moabit caserne.

During the crisis days of December and early January the new commandant of Berlin, Colonel Wilhelm Reinhard, had maintained the dwindling remnants of his Fourth Foot Guards in Moabit caserne as a sort of pro-government island surrounded by the

⁸⁴³ For the purposes of this summary of events, they will be referred to as Spartacists following contemporary usage though technically 1) the Spartacus League had been absorbed into the Communist party and 2) the most militant leaders of the uprising were probably the Revolutionary Shop Stewards (*Obleute*) rather than the leaders of any political party.

“sea” of revolutionary Berlin. Using men who remained with the regiment as well as those who answered his urgent recall order, the colonel was able to cobble together a small unit of volunteers, three hundred strong.⁸⁴⁴ Together with a similar-sized battalion of guards NCOs led by Sergeant Suppe, he had formed “Volunteer Regiment Reinhard.”

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When the Spartacists attacked, Reinhard and his allies were prepared, though just barely. At Moabit Caserne, the guardsmen used an artillery piece firing blank ammunition to stop an assault and machine gun fire to disperse it. At the Reichs Chancellery, Suppe’s men fired on a storming party attempting to break down the gate, leaving some sixty of the attackers killed or wounded. Despite this initial success, Reinhard’s forces were too weak to do anything but hold their positions, but, in subsequent days, they were reinforced by a variety of makeshift volunteer formations. With a combined strength of around 2500 men, Reinhard’s command was strong enough to overcome most of the resistance of the insurrectionists and retake the key buildings within the capital.

On the same day as the first protest march, January 4, the government’s new Defense Minister, Gustav Noske had accompanied Ebert on a visit to Zossen, the army training area outside Berlin. At Zossen, the two politicians observed one of the new volunteer formations, General von Maercker’s *Landesjäger*, march past the reviewing party in well-ordered formations.⁸⁴⁶ Impressed by the appearance of these “real soldiers,” Noske slapped Ebert on the shoulder and said, “You can relax; now it will all work out all

⁸⁴⁴ In order to distinguish it from the regiment’s demobilized ersatz battalions, he named his little battalion, the “Mobile Fourth Foot Guards.”

⁸⁴⁵ Wilhelm Reinhard, *Das 4. Garde-Regiment zu Fuss*, (Berlin: Gerhard Stalling, 1924) 398-399.

⁸⁴⁶ Von Maercker had been the commander of the 214th Division and he built his *Freikorps* on the remnants of the division.

right.”⁸⁴⁷ Noske waited a week to ensure the new volunteer units were ready and then, on January 11, he led them into the capital. The headquarters staff for the newly-arrived troops was provided by the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division, making its second entry into Berlin in just over a month. The march route took the troops from the southwest suburbs of the city into the center of the city where, just over three weeks before, the division had been greeted by cheering crowds. This time, the sidewalks were almost empty and the troops moved with weapons ready (though, by that point Reinhard’s men had crushed most of the resistance in the city). Noske’s newly-arrived units served as a show of force, an intimidating demonstration that the government had the power to defend itself against all threats from the Left.

The Spartacus Week was a bloody defeat for the Left and an ominous debut for the *Freikorps*. For the volunteer units in the capital and elsewhere in Germany, the fighting in Berlin in January 1919 was just the first of a series of campaigns that eventually ranged from Latvia to the Ruhr. Though the *Freikorps* movement was made up of disparate element and campaigned against a variety of enemies, the battles of Spartacus Week reflected two of the most significant features of all *Freikorps* operations. One was the *Freikorps*’ overwhelming tactical superiority over its enemies; superiority based on the combat experience of its leaders and the extensive use of heavy weapons—mortars, flamethrowers, field guns, and even tanks—against all types of resistance. The other feature was a vindictive ruthlessness that resulted in a series of atrocities during the course of the German Civil War.⁸⁴⁸ The most famous example came on January 15,

⁸⁴⁷ Georg Maercker, *Vom Kaiserheer zur Reichswehr* (Leipzig, K.R. Koehler, 1921), 64.

⁸⁴⁸ A volunteer in *Freikorps* von Epp wrote in a letter, “If I were to write you everything, you would say I was telling you lies. No pardon is given. We shoot even the wounded. The enthusiasm is great almost unbelievable. Our battalion has had two deaths, the Reds 200-300. All who fall into our hands get the rifle

when the Guards Cavalry Rifle Division took its revenge for *Blutweihnachten* with the brutal murder of the two Spartacist leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.⁸⁴⁹

In many respects, the fighting methods and ruthless behavior of the *Freikorps* were direct legacies of the Western Front experience. Because the *Freikorps* leaders were veterans of the *Materialschlacht*, they were prepared to make the best use of the storm troop tactics and heavy weapons employed on the Great War's battlefields. Beyond that, after experiencing combat of unprecedented violence, many had been convinced that they had been betrayed by a part of German society that deserved no quarter. Though this study is chiefly concerned with the immediate impact of front-line troops on the events of November and December, no discussion of the *Frontheer's* legacy can ignore the role of the *Freikorps* in making the German Civil War a bitter memory for much of German society.

The memoirs of *Freikorps* fighters make much of the spirit of the volunteer formations. However, the *Freikorps* had nothing that might be described as a unified political outlook or a positive political program. What linked these men together were the things they were opposed to and what they resented. A far from exhaustive list might include: disorder, socialists, the Treaty of Versailles, deserters, mutinous sailors, Bolshevism, the Allied powers, democratic politics, profiteers, and bourgeois culture. The *Freikorps* officers were men who would never reconcile themselves to the events of November 9 and November 11, 1918. In an attempt to characterize this negative world

butt and then are dispatched with a shot . . . We were much more humane against the French in the war." Fried, 192. An after-action review by the staff of the GKSD in March 1919 advised officers to never negotiate with the enemy. Reflecting the lessons of the Christmas Eve battle, it wrote that the only acceptable outcome was immediate surrender or the final destruction of the opposing force. BA-MA, PH 8/V/28, GKSD Memo. Ia #223, "Experiences from the Street Fighting in Berlin," dated March 31, 1919.⁸⁴⁹ Forty-three years later, in an interview with *Der Spiegel*(XVI, April 18, 1962), Waldemar Pabst claimed he had received the tacit approval of Ebert and Noske for the murders.

view, the German historian, Otto-Ernst Schüddekopf called this disparate grab bag of animosities, “Prussian nihilism.”⁸⁵⁰ Though, ostensibly, they fought for the republic and took an oath of allegiance to it, they almost always fought under the colors of the old *Kaiserreich*, and supplemented it by wearing symbols like oak leaves, as well as more ominous totems, such as death’s heads, and swastikas.

The diversity and independence of the different volunteer units helps to explain why exact figures for the number of *Freikorpskämpfer* are not available.⁸⁵¹ At their peak strength, they probably counted between 150,000 and 400,000 men with many of those counted in the latter figure coming from transitory, local security formations. How many were combat veterans is difficult to say and a point to be kept in mind is that the vast majority of front-line soldiers went home after their discharge. Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that the front-line veterans gave the *Freikorps* their essential character.

They were not the young republic’s military of choice. The *Freikorps* had their legal basis in a government order of December 12, 1918, which authorized the raising of volunteer formations for the purpose of border defense and internal security.⁸⁵² Though the provisional government envisioned the eventual establishment of a republican *Volkswehr* (People’s Army) with a heavy representation of proletarian volunteers, such volunteers were never recruited in significant numbers. Generally, those working class

⁸⁵⁰ Schüddekopf, 45. “What do we believe in? you ask. Nothing besides action. Nothing besides the possibility of action. . . .Our job is to attack, not to govern.” Von Salomon quoted in Waite, 269.

⁸⁵¹ Soldiers joined the *Freikorps* for a variety of reasons. Some were recruited to serve on the Silesian frontier where they fought the Poles; some, like the infamous Iron Division, were attracted by offers of land in the Baltic states in return for service against the Bolsheviks, still others, like von Maercker’s *Landesjägerkorps* and the Erhardt Brigade, were involved in extended campaigns against the Communists across the breadth of Germany. At least one, the *Regiment Reichstag*, was recruiting by the MSPD and had a genuine republican character. Many others were transitory formations, *Bürgerwehr* and the like, dedicated to local security missions.

⁸⁵² Berthold and Neef, Doc. 124: “Gesetz zur Bildung einer freiwilligen Volkswehr vom 12. Dezember 1918,” 302-303.

men with army experience wanted no more of it, and those younger men who had not yet served were even less inclined to submit themselves to military service.⁸⁵³ Instead, the several dozen *Freikorps* created across Germany in 1918 and 1919 were led by front-line officers, built on the framework of Imperial Army combat units, and manned by other elements of society, such as the lower middle class and peasantry.⁸⁵⁴ Unemployed white collar workers as well as university students and cadets, in particular, were significantly over represented in the ranks of the volunteer formations. However, the most important elements in the *Freikorps* ranks, in numbers and influence, were the NCOs and reserve officers with front-line experience. These were men who had gained an element of status in the old, class-conscious army, a status that transcended class origins, and most of them saw no way to retain that social promotion in postwar Germany. The army's officer corps had, for example, expanded to 270,000 men by the end of the war, and there was no place for this horde of wartime officers in the peacetime army.⁸⁵⁵ If the *Freikorps* traced their lineage to the Western Front, it was chiefly through such men.

By the same token, if the six response factors used thus far have served to explain the unique behavior of the front-line troops in their response to defeat and revolution; they may also be constructively applied to analyzing the choice made by those combat veterans who joined the *Freikorps*. In several instances, one finds paradoxical results. Physical *exhaustion* and the moral exhaustion that accompanied war-weariness, for example, do not explain the appeal of the volunteer units to *Frontruppen*; however, one

⁸⁵³ For the efforts to build the *Volkswehr*, see Kluge, 325-341.

⁸⁵⁴ Yet, the class origin of the volunteers is not as significant as it might first appear because the *Freikorps* tended to reject class as a form of identity.

⁸⁵⁵ Social composition of the *Freikorps* from Hansjoachim W. Koch, *Der deutsche Bürgerkrieg: Eine Geschichte der deutschen und österreichischen Freikorps, 1918-1923* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1978), 61-64. A postwar survey of Bavarian reserve officers found that almost a quarter served in the *Freikorps*. Waite, 48.

suspects that, after several weeks of recuperation at home, many soldiers found fatigue replaced by restlessness and a desire to act. For others, a sort of inertia may have prevailed, especially for those who found it difficult to reintegrate themselves into society. As one *Freikorps* leader wrote, “War had become their trade and they did not exert themselves to find another.”⁸⁵⁶ Similarly, *isolation* no longer played the same role because the returned soldiers could see conditions inside the homeland with their own eyes. However, the yearning for home and family was replaced, for some, by the day-to-day exposure to the poverty, hunger, political unrest and economic uncertainty of postwar Germany. Paradoxically, because this was not the homeland they had dreamed of, immersion in society rather than isolation from it may have prodded some *Frontschweine* to action. And this point leads the analysis to next factor, *alienation*. If *Freikorps* memoirs have a common thread it is this profound sense of estrangement from the homeland. In the eyes of many returning veterans, the *Etappenschweine* seemed to rule the “new” Germany and the red flags of the homeland soldiers’ councils seemed a taunt rather than an inspiration. The sailors who had avoided any real fighting were the darlings of the revolution while the workers excused from front-line service had first crack at the best jobs and had lined their pockets with bloated wages. If the *bürgerschaft* of a soldier’s home town had offered a festive greeting, others were less willing to honor the sacrifices of a Western Front veteran. For young men who had grown up in the trenches, postwar society seemed a place where the camaraderie of the front was replaced

⁸⁵⁶ Manfred von Killinger quoted in Dominique Venner, *Soldner ohne Sold: Die deutsche Freikorps, 1919-1923*, trans (to German) Alfred Baumgartner (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1974), 57. For those soldiers who remembered the sheer physical suffering and debilitation that accompanied service in the trenches, *Freikorps* service was something quite different. There were no extended tours in the mud of the trenches or unendurable periods of enemy shell fire. Instead, the *Freikorps* fighters could expect hot food, good pay, and a roof overhead most nights.

by selfish individualism. And, if war had been the defining experience of one's life (as it had been for Adolf Hitler), the pettiness of day-to-day living in German society might seem nearly unbearable. Though the unhappy ending of the war was not a central issue to many common soldiers, it was a source of burning resentment for many young officers who wanted to revenge themselves on the "November criminals."⁸⁵⁷ Such attitudes were reflected in the atrocities committed by the *Freikorps* and an open hostility to the republic which culminated in the Kapp Putsch of 1920.

The alienation felt by the volunteers led, in turn, to *selection*, specifically self-selection, which was obviously the salient feature of *Freikorps* membership. Hostility to the republic and postwar society were mixed the other motivations that led volunteers enlist. These ranged from genuine patriotism to the need for a steady wage, or even the criminal desire to exploit opportunities for violence and plunder. Self-selection and the ubiquity of alienation served to enhance cohesion. The *cohesion* that had characterized front-line units was strengthened by the fact that all *Freikorps* men were volunteers, many had front-line experience, and that, frequently, much of society looked upon them as outlaws. In the *Freikorps*, the disoriented front-line veteran found "comradeship, understanding, economic security, and a continuation of the military life he had learned to love."⁸⁵⁸ Finally, when Maercker and Reinhard encouraged the establishment of trustees among the rank and file of their units, it suggested that the front-line officers had learned hard lessons about soldier *management*.⁸⁵⁹ The distance between officers and men was significantly compressed in the *Freikorps*. Some have attributed this to the

⁸⁵⁷ In a diary entry of January 1919, a Captain Berthold, a fighter pilot with a *Pour le Meritè* and fifty-five victories wrote, "I will never forget the days of outrage, lies and barbarity . . . They remain an indelible stain on the history of Germany. . . How I hate the [revolutionary] rabble." Venner, 56.

⁸⁵⁸ Waite, 42.

⁸⁵⁹ Reinhard, *Wehen*, 61.

familiar spirit within the elite storm troop formations carried over to the volunteer formations.⁸⁶⁰ However, throughout the army of 1918, the experience of the trenches had produced a leveling effect; officer-soldier relationships had been renegotiated both in the last years of the war and the march back to the homeland. The old *Kadavergehorsam* would not work in the *Freikorps*. Instead, leaders sought to motivate their men by claiming theirs was a noble cause and that, by crushing the Bolsheviks they were saving Germany from a terrible fate.⁸⁶¹

The *Freikorps* were the front-line soldiers' immediate legacy to the Weimar Republic. The volunteers preserved the Majority Socialist government that most of them despised, while their operations left a record of brutality that poisoned the political atmosphere of the Weimar Republic. The memory of the violence between 1919 and 1923 contributed to an irreconcilable divide between the two wings of German Left that persisted until both the Social Democrats and the Communists were finally crushed by the Nazis ten years later.

Beyond the immediate impact of the *Freikorps*, a number of longer term legacies were also significant and served to reinforce the multitude of factors that ultimately undermined the Weimar Republic. This study has chiefly concerned itself with the way choices made by front-line veterans affected the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the last seven or eight weeks of 1918. A consideration of after effects that carried into the late Twenties and early Thirties-- the glorification of the wartime experience by those like Ernst Jünger and the polarization of German politics by paramilitary organizations like the *Stahlhelm* are examples—lies beyond the scope of this study. These have been

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid, 69-71.

⁸⁶¹ Maercker, 58. They also made appeal to the spirit of the *Freikorps* of 1813.

popular topics investigated by others at great length. A recent history of the Third Reich by Richard Evans offered a representative interpretation. While conceding that most soldiers went home to a normal life at the end of the war, he wrote, “Yet in the end, ex-soldiers and their resentments did play a crucial part in fostering a climate of violence and discontent after the war was over and the shock of adjusting to peacetime pushed many to the far right.”⁸⁶² This “climate of violence and discontent” was built on deceptions like the Stab-in-the-Back legend and the perception of society’s ingratitude toward the *Frontkämpfer*.⁸⁶³ It was a climate that allowed the roots of National Socialism to prosper.

Conclusion

By concentrating on the behavior of German front-line soldiers during the period of last months of 1918, this study has attempted to shed some light on a relatively neglected aspect of the famously “incomplete” German revolution. Illustrated histories of the November Revolution typically feature pictures of triumphant-looking soldiers and sailors marching with red flags or driving through the Brandenburg Gate on commandeered vehicles. Such pictures seem to offer dramatic evidence that the revolution carried the day on the bayonets of the German military. This study argues there was another side to the story. The narrative offered here is based on the premise that the million or more front-line soldiers in the trenches had an important but somewhat overlooked role in determining the course of the revolution’s earliest stages, in preserving the political influence of the officer corps, creating at least one long-term myth, that of

⁸⁶² Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 69.

⁸⁶³ The famous S.A. leader Ernst Röhm wrote, “The goal of my politics is to obtain by fighting for the German frontline soldier the share in leadership due him and also to ensure that the ideal and spirit of the front line prevails in politics.” *Geschichte eines Hochverrätters* quoted in Eleanor Hancock, “Ernst Rohm and the Experience of World War I” in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 60, No. 1. Jan. 1996, 39-60.

the “Stab-in-the-Back,” and, through the *Freikorps*, contributing to the antagonisms that seriously weakened the Weimar Republic.

The final days of the First World War found the German army on the Western Front pressed to the limits of its endurance. Though soldier morale was shaken by the beginning of Armistice negotiations, the *Frontheer* did not collapse before revolution on the Home Front had swept away the old monarchy. At the same time, the downfall of the old regime was not assured, however, until the Kaiser discovered that the Field Army was not going to rally to his defense. Though these events left the old elites dismayed and depressed, they discovered that at least one part of the army remained under the control of its officers: the troops on the Western Front. The front-line troops initially rejected revolutionary behavior in favor of obedience and cooperation with the chain of command. During the weeks that followed they provided Groener his essential bargaining chip in negotiating the survival of the old officer corps. As the Field Army marched back to Germany in good order, it served to rebuild the confidence of the officer corps and terrify those who believed that counter-revolution was possible. However, when the OHL and War Ministry attempted to build a new army on the framework of these hard-marching formations, the troops again confounded expectations by turning the demobilization from an orderly process into something that resembled a stampede toward home and family. For a time, *Drang nach Hause*, not discipline, became the order of the day.

The Supreme Headquarters sifted through the wreckage of the Field Army to find nine divisions that could enter the German capital, secure the Ebert government, and cow the “Bolshevists.” The assembly of Lequis’ command and their impressive parades

through the center of Berlin suggested these might be achievable goals. However, as cabinet, OHL, and War Ministry squabbled, the front-line units of Lequis' command melted away. By Christmastime, only a handful of combat troops were available to answer the government's plea for help. Manipulated by their officers and hectoring by a massive crowd, these troops failed to defeat the government's enemies. As the remnant of the old army marched out of the city on Christmas Eve, 1918, Ebert's government and the OHL were forced to seek a new basis of military power. Their choices seemed limited to only one: the *Freikorps*.

Throughout November and December 1918, the decisions of Germany's political and military leaders were shaped significantly by the actions of the *Frontschweine*. So, for example, after the army had crossed the Rhine, had the returning troops submitted themselves to the demobilization plan; had they reported for duty to guard Germany's frontiers; or volunteered in large numbers to stay with units detailed for internal security, the Ebert government would have had different options.

By this point, the front-line troops had already betrayed the expectations of one political authority, the Kaiser. Had the troops selected by the OHL during November 7-9, -- units like the 2nd Guards Division, or the Naumburger *Jägers*—followed their orders, they might have given Wilhelm a thin reed on which to grasp and, thus, temporarily prevented his early abdication. With this the unlikely alternative outcome might have been the early onset of civil war. The front-line troops' choice not to fight their countrymen made the sweeping initial success of the revolution possible.

After the abdication, one of the most important roles played by the *Frontheer* in the short term was to justify the continued authority of the officer corps. The revolution

had seen German militarism at its most demoralized and inept in the hapless response of the Home Army to the November uprising. However, the subsequent weeks showed that the agents of German militarism still possessed strong survival instincts. The technical requirements involved in holding the Field Army together, bringing it home and demobilizing it allowed the officer corps to demand a continued role in postwar Germany.⁸⁶⁴ The officers fulfilled the first parts of the assignment by bringing the army back over the Rhine intact. By the time they had lost most of their control of demobilization, the Ebert government needed their services in the impending test of strength with the Spartacists.

Perhaps equally important was the role of front-line soldiers establishing a minimum level of plausibility for the “Stab-in-the-Back” story. Had the *Westheer* collapsed before the revolution overcame the homeland; had the front-line troops overthrown their officers in the immediate aftermath of the revolution; had the units of the old army not appeared in well-ordered formations at the Rhine bridges and the boulevards of German cities, the legend was likely to have been stillborn. There would have been no greeting from the Chancellor Ebert at the Brandenburg Gate telling the front-line troops that they had returned from the field “undefeated.” The tragic consequence of the *Frontheer*’s response to the revolution was that it allowed the lie to take root in the German popular imagination.

Of the consequences described above, only the refusal of front-line troops to rally to the Kaiser was an outcome with positive results. The civil war was averted or, at least, delayed. The remaining outcomes, the failure of demobilization to produce an alternative

⁸⁶⁴ Ironically, though one of the Allied war aims had been the suppression of German militarism, the harsh nature of the Entente’s initial Armistice conditions served to push Ebert into Groener’s arms.

to the *Freikorps*, the continued role of the anti-republican officer corps at the head of the army, and the impetus given the *Dolchstosslegende*, all would contribute to the sickness of Germany's interwar political culture. Add to that, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the *Freikorps*' character as vicious, illegitimate off-spring of the *Frontheer*, and the consequences of what front-line soldiers chose to do between November and December 1918 must be judged as critically important as well as tragically unfortunate.

Through the period considered, the behavior of front-line soldiers frequently perplexed both the officers who led them and the government that sought their support, as well as the revolutionaries who saw them as enemies. Along with describing the role of front-line soldiers in the revolution, this study has attempted to look past this perplexity to analyze why the soldiers made the choices they did. The interdependent reasons for the behavior of the *Frontschweine* have been placed under the categories of *exhaustion*, (both physical and moral); *isolation* (from revolutionary influences); *alienation* (from those who had not shared the "front" experience); *selection* (by the chain of command and through their own choices); *cohesion* (with comrades, leaders and unit); and the *management* (of perceptions by the military hierarchy). The role of each factor was clearly dynamic during the period considered. Thus, if one wished to choose the reason why soldiers were initially indifferent to news of the revolution in the homeland, *exhaustion* and *isolation* seem the key factors. By the time the troops reached their demobilization stations, the collapse of *cohesion* and the failure of the army's attempts at *management* of the rank and file's expectations appear as the most conspicuous factors in explaining soldier behavior. Finally, by the time the veteran found in the position to consider joining the *Freikorps*, *alienation* from postwar society along with prospect of

regaining the social benefits (camaraderie, a strong leader figure, etc.) provided by *cohesion* were, arguably, the two central motivating factors.

Along with illuminating the early history of the Weimar Republic, the role of the front-line troops in the revolution of 1918 may offer insights that go beyond German experience. In particular, this story may allow military historians and political scientists to generalize some tentative lessons about the way military function and organization determines soldier behavior during a time of revolution. In a curious way, the experience of the German Imperial Army paralleled two other imperial armies of the First War, the forces of the Tsar and the Habsburgs. Most accounts of the Russian army's collapse in 1917 describe a process that worked from rear to front, and, in late 1918, the Austro-Hungarian units on the Italian Front continued to hold the positions well after the empire had fragmented in national sub-elements. Another parallel is provided by the Imperial German Navy. German naval officers testified that, for the most part, the crews of torpedo boats, destroyers, and U-boats, the vessels seeing regular combat service, did not readily join the mutiny that swept through the crews of capital ships that had remained in dock for months. One imagines, for example, that the close quarters and dangerous missions of a U-boat resulted in a cohesion (and insulation) resistant to mutiny, while the bored battleship crews had time for obsessive resentment of the cigars and schnapps available in the officers' mess. In every one of these cases proximity to combat seemed to condition the political behavior of First World War soldiers. Paradoxically, those with the most to gain from revolution were the least likely to foment or join it.

One might also draw conclusions about what is currently described as "conflict termination." This study had argued that the *Westheer's* dogged resistance in the last

days of the war and its orderly retreat back to Germany gave credence to the Stab-in-the-Back Legend. For a nation (and an officer corps) in denial about its military defeat, the parades of December seemed to justify a suspension of disbelief. What if the Coldstream Guards had marched through the Brandenburg Gate instead of the Prussian Guards, or *poilus* and doughboys had swaggered down the boulevards of Munich instead of the *Leib Regiment*? What if the German army had been required to surrender all of its arms before marching home? What if the Entente had established an Occupation Headquarters in Berlin with oversight authority over national affairs (instead of the handful of observers who dodged machine gun fire during Spartacus Week)? If, as Clausewitz defined it, war is an act of violence for the purpose of making the enemy submit to our will, then a successful outcome must include the clear message that submission is justified. In this respect, the Allied victory was incomplete. The war had ended with the German army intact and, with only a significant exception near the Swiss border, holding a front line well beyond the Reich's frontiers. Only a small fraction of Germans had to endure Allied occupation. The Guards Corps' impressive parades through Berlin in mid-December meant those who were disinclined to accept the Germany's defeat seemed to have their skepticism confirmed.⁸⁶⁵

Front-line veterans and their experience as a group left a tragic inheritance for the Weimar Republic. There were tragic outcomes for individuals, too. Through the last weeks of 1918 two men, Wilhelm Groener and Friedrich Ebert had worked together in an attempt to manipulate the front-line troops to their own ends, Ebert to sustain the provisional government and Groener to preserve the officer corps. Their efforts would

⁸⁶⁵ Those who argue that the US invaded Iraq in 2003 with insufficient force point to the fact that many Iraqi towns did not see US troops until weeks after Baghdad had fallen. Much of the Iraqi population did not have an immediate confrontation with defeat.

result in accusations of treason against both. Conservatives like Schulenberg and Bauer labeled Groener a traitor to the monarchy for his support of the republic in its time of crisis, while Ebert was accused of betraying the revolution by the Left and of betraying the Kaiser by the Right. When the Stab-in-Back Trial of 1925 found Ebert found guilty of treason for his activities during the munitions strike of 1918, he was crushed by the verdict. He died that same year, and many have argued that his efforts to defend himself caused him to ignore the peritonitis which eventually killed him. As one of the republic's last Ministers of Defense, Groener did what he could to limit Nazi influence within the *Reichswehr*. He was forced to resign in 1932, betrayed largely though the efforts of his former political officer, Kurt von Schleicher. He died in May 1939 while the most famous *Frontschwein*, Adolf Hitler, prepared to take Germany into the Second World War.⁸⁶⁶

Hundreds of thousands of men (including Hitler) were affected by the terrible experience of the Western Front. From that experience, veterans carried away reservoirs of both massive bitterness and powerful camaraderie. Von Salomon saw a more extreme version of that bitterness and camaraderie in the veterans who joined the *Freikorps*, "The front was their home, was the Fatherland, and was the nation. And no one spoke of it. No one believed in words, they believed in each other. The war compelled them, the war ruled them, the war would not let them go, they would never go home, they would never belong completely to us."⁸⁶⁷

⁸⁶⁶ On September 1, 1939, Hitler announced, "I have put on my old soldier's coat, and I will not take it off until we achieve victory . . . My whole life has been nothing but one long struggle, and there is one word I never learned to know, that is 'capitulate.' November 1918 will never be repeated in the history of Germany."

⁸⁶⁷ Von Salomon quoted in Koch, 55.

The same bitterness and camaraderie were captured in a scene from *The Road Back Home*, Erich Maria Remarque's sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. A few days after the war's end, a platoon of front-line infantry arrives by train at their hometown. Shortly after they disembark, their wounded platoon leader is set upon by a crowd of revolutionary soldiers intent on removing his shoulder straps and other badges of rank. The platoon deploys in combat formation with rifles and grenades at the ready, prepared to defend their lieutenant. They have no political agenda, nor any love for officers in general, but they are ready to fight for someone who shared their experience in trenches.

A one-armed veteran steps from among the mob and mediates. His words defuse the situation and the crowd begins to disperse. The one-armed man comes forward. "I was there too, Mate," he blurts out. "I know what is what, as well as you do. Here . . ." he shows his stump excitedly. "Twentieth Infantry Division, Verdun." The platoon accepts his intervention, and moves on. As they depart, the one-armed man salutes the lieutenant. Remarque observes, "He is saluting not a uniform, not the war; he is saluting his mates from the Front."⁸⁶⁸ They are men set apart.

⁸⁶⁸ *The Road Back Home*, Remarque, 65-67.

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