12 The First World War – The Primary Catastrophe of the Century

When on 1 August 1914 the authorities announced mobilization, the streets of Berlin and other cities quickly filled with jubilating crowds. Three days later the Reichstag unanimously endorsed the war credits, and Kaiser Wilhelm II said: 'I don't know parties any more, I only know Germans.' Millions of workers loyally followed the call to arms, and so did Poles and Danes. It looked as if, after decades of bitter strife, Germany was really united.

But the situation contained elements of deception: the patriotic demonstrations represented only a part of the population. Many people were deeply worried, and at the end of July hundreds of thousands had participated in Social Democratic demonstrations against the war, many of which ended in severe fights with the police. The anti-war demonstrators resigned themselves and left the streets to the war enthusiasts when war eventually broke out.

At the beginning of September 1914, on the Marne the German plans for a quick victory met with fiasco. For four years the Western Front became a continuous line of trenches, barbed wire and fortifications. Offensives moved the front only a few kilometres at the expense of ten thousands of lives. The British navy blocked Germany's overseas connections, food became scarce. In February 1915 rationing was introduced, and malnutrition and hunger spread.

By September 1916 the Prussian war ministry concluded internally 'that the greater part of the people are war-weary'. In Frankfurt (May 1917) there was hope of 'an honourable peace', 'but on the other hand one does not want to continue the war for exaggerated war aims. In particular the lower segments of the population, extending far into the middle classes, reject war aims of this kind.' But the government and the military leadership followed precisely those 'exaggerated war aims' which would have resulted in German domination over Europe. In public, however, the government only spoke about 'guarantees' and 'safety from further attacks'. The war dragged on.
In July 1917 the Social Democrats, the Zentrum and the Progressive Liberals in the Reichstag jointly passed a motion which called for a 'peace of understanding' without 'forced annexations': the longing for peace which the vast majority entertained began to gain political weight. The Reichstag resolution was ambiguously formulated, but its text (and the prospect of future democratic cooperation) alarmed the chauvinist minority sufficiently to multiply their propaganda efforts for a 'German peace'. They organized a mass party, the Vaterlandspartei, led by Admiral v. Tirpitz and the historian Dietrich Schäfer. In 1918 the party counted 1.25 million members, mostly recruited from the conservative and liberal milieux.

The war, by sending millions of young men into the trenches and spreading hunger at home, politicized German society in a gruesome way. No one could possibly avoid considering problems of 'high politics'. Political and social antagonisms had existed before, but now they had turned into a question of life and death. Most peasants at least had access to sufficient food, but they became the victims of urban aggression and often saw their fields plundered. Many traders and industrialists profited from the war, and the rich had few problems in finding an opulent diet. In July 1918 the military authorities in Magdeburg reported: 'In the poorer layers of the population an almost pernicious hatred against the rich and the so-called war-profiteers has accumulated, and it is to be hoped that it won't come to a dreadful explosion.'

Millions of war-weary workers and petty bourgeois began to see the Kaiser, the generals and the war-profiteers as the decisive barrier to peace. Strikes became frequent. In January 1918 about one million ammunition workers went on strike, demanding a peace without annexations and reparations, the release of political prisoners and an electoral reform in Prussia. Chauvinists attributed the decline of German morale to subversive elements; in their eyes socialist agitators had induced ammunition workers to strike. Older prejudices turned harsher. The Pan-German League agitated against a 'Jewish peace' and equated war-profiteers with Jews.

The war affected the four main milieux in different ways. The socialist milieu began to split. The incorporation of the SPD into the normal political game would have put the socialist milieu in any circumstances under pressure because integration and responsibility has always meant the loss of the utopian counter-culture. But in the concrete case the strain was multiplied because anti-militarism and anti-imperialism belonged to the cultural core of the socialist milieu, whereas the SPD's price for integration was