

Reporting on Revolution in Germany at the End of the Great War

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Throughout the Great War, information on the home front was highly censored. This was not exclusive to any country as each fighting power wanted to ensure public opinion was on their side in this first experience of total war. In this new total war, civilians endured hardships throughout, and in Germany, these hardships included rationing and food shortages beginning as early as 1915. Propaganda and politically backed newspapers distilled information to keep negative opinions at bay. Reporting between the powers in the war was also incredibly different. The information available to those in the Allied Powers, for example, London and New York, was entirely different from that available in the Central Powers, namely Berlin. End of war events as well as the abdication of the Kaiser were covered very differently in the newspapers of these three cities and, the omission of information in Germany led to an incredible shock for the German people, pushing them to revolution.

In the summer of 1918, the Allied Powers had begun their Grand Offensive against Germany and regained significant territory by late summer and early autumn. It was clear that the Central Powers were struggling, and offensive plans took advantage of both the additional manpower and supplies of the Allied Powers.¹ Though the situation seemed bleak for Germany, reports in the Social Democratic Newspaper the *Berliner Tageblatt* did not relay this to the home front. On the fifth of November, just six days before the end of the war, the front-page article details an English breakthrough attempt on German lines that had failed. The article uses extensive imagery and paints a heroic narrative of the German front-line soldiers fighting through the night and managing to hold their ground. This information paints a much more hopeful scene for civilians at home and gives no mention of the German high command has already sent out peace-feelers to gain an understanding of what Germany's options were or the peace agreements already taken by

¹ Mark Phelan, "How the Central Powers were Defeated, July-November 1918," *History Ireland* 26, no. 6 (2018): 24-27.

many of Germany's allies.² On the very next page, readers are back to their day-to-day reporting with an article discussing a recent concert in Berlin, again, allowing them to remain steadfast in their support.

Reporting in the New York and London seems to be more informative on the situation in Germany. On the same day in New York, readers were given an article detailing the pressure within the country to oust the Kaiser. The article comes across as relatively unbiased in its frequent use of direct quotes from various German newspapers reporting on the question of abdication. The topic was allowed for open debate throughout Germany, with civilians encouraged to discuss the topic as well as express complaints. The article directly mentions the censorship of newspapers by the German military with reports being published from von Hindenburg explaining to the German people that with their continued support, the people can defeat the Allied powers and be victorious. It condemns individuals throughout Berlin allegedly handing out pamphlets with the object being to "incite soldiers to disobey military commands." Lastly, there is mention of the economic crisis taking hold of the country with the banks circulating significantly more notes than at the start of the war and mass hoarding.³ With this, reporting in Germany, as covered in New York, gives the impression of lacking information. Omission of the facts of the war and continued rallying of the people behind military leaders who already see the end.

In London on this same day, a similar article is published discussing the potential abdication of the Kaiser. The article reports on general attitudes throughout Germany and again gives the feeling of being relatively unbiased as it uses primarily sources from various German newspapers similar to what was seen in the *New York Times*. Interestingly, reports received were much in support of the Kaiser and a newspaper out of Köln even asks why else the Kaiser would still be in Germany if not for his love of the country as disappearing into exile would be much easier for him. We also see hopeful messages in a speech from the Kaiser himself calling for reform and a new order which "must correspond to the new times." The Kaiser praises the home front and specifically the workers that would bring Germany out of this time of war and

² "Der neue englische Durchbruchversuch gescheitert," *Berliner Tageblatt* November 5, 1918.

³ "Strong Pressure to Oust Kaiser," *The New York Times* November 5, 1918.

back to peace and prosperity⁴. The reporting in both New York and London provides a clearer picture of what was happening in Germany, addressing the most important question of the day while German newspapers continued to disillusion the people. Hopeful messages appear in a speech from the Kaiser himself calling for reform and a new order which “must correspond to the new times.” The Kaiser praised the home front and specifically claimed workers would bring Germany out of this time of war and back to peace and prosperity.⁵ The reporting in both New York and London provided a clearer picture of what was happening in Germany, addressing the most important question of the day while German newspapers continued to mislead the people.

Beginning two days later on the seventh of November, newspapers in Berlin began to cover unrest in the country. One article discusses peace talks between German and the United States and called that President Wilson’s Fourteen Points be used as a model for the peace Germany was seeking. These Fourteen Points were incredibly optimistic, written by the American president in a country that had only just recently entered the war in relation to the rest of the European powers, not to mention the war not being fought on American soil. The terms of this peace were much more lenient to Germany than the remaining Allied Powers would want to be. The article calls on the people and claims “to stop the bloodshed is Germany’s duty.” There is mention of the riots that have begun throughout the country with condemnation from the government, telling the German people to stand together and to stand strong as their future is also in their hands.⁶ Down to the end of the war, the people of Germany were assured that as long as they remained steadfast in their support of their leaders and the war there would be peace through victory. The German people were given information to keep them hopeful and supportive of the war, and lead to believe that deviation from this could cost Germany her victory.⁷

⁴ “Abdication Question,” *The London Times* November 5, 1918.

⁵ “Abdication Question,” *The London Times* November 5, 1918.

⁶ “Warnung des Reichskanzlers vor Unruhen,” *Berliner Tageblatt* November 7, 1918.

⁷ David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda and Total War, 1914-1918: The Sins of Omission* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

The following day in New York reporting was much different with a much larger focus on the revolts and uprisings throughout Germany. Initial reports of navy revolts in Schleswig with soldiers citing “scant food, bad treatment by their officers, and exasperation caused by the collapse of Germany” as their reasoning. The article reports that revolts began on the third of November again, without any mention in the earlier article out of Berlin.⁸ These uprisings began out of the very rigid and hierarchical structure of the Imperial Navy. As the war was beginning to end and peace was in sight, naval officers would not accept the defeat of Germany. As a last stand these officers wanted to take the German fleet to confront the English, a plan that inevitably meant certain death. Rebellion against this plan of action, sailors came together and mutinied, taking control of ships and refusing to follow military commands until peace had been finalized. With this potential peace on the horizon, soldiers more than ever before, were no longer willing to risk their lives for the Fatherland. On the same day, the *New York Times* published a second article explaining that revolt had also started appearing in Hamburg. Workers were stopping all work and rioting. Some of these events were becoming violent and mention of similar events occurring throughout the rest of the country. There is also notice of Schleswig and the takeover of the airdrome in the north of the city, meaning not only the navy but air forces were coming together to put an end to this war.⁹

These revolts were not the first Germany had seen, with major riots in the navy a year prior. In August 1917, sailors tried to mutiny over their conditions but were stopped by additional armed forces. Order was re-established but only by using violence and executing many soldiers.¹⁰ With unrest and revolt beginning again and spreading quickly throughout the country, again, the German High Command were still attempting to make peace. To make this happen, foreign minister Paul von Hintze along with the Kaiser began to discuss reform and changes to make within the German government as mentioned in the earlier

⁸ “Navy Revolt Spreads; Schleswig is Seized,” *The New York Times* November 7, 1918.

⁹ “Hamburg Strike a ‘Revolt,’” *The New York Times* November 8, 1918.

¹⁰ William A. Pelz, *A People’s History of Modern Europe; War Leads to Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

speech given by the Kaiser. Promises to embrace democracy were made in hope that this would make the country more favorable to the freedom loving Americans. Though attempts were made to increase democracy, they were weak and done with the primary purpose of achieving a peace deal with the American government, meaning that for the people revolting in Germany, these promised changes seemed remote.¹¹

In the following days, the potential and then finalized abdication of the Kaiser was thoroughly discussed within the newspapers. With the revolts and uprising throughout Germany, the military was deemed no longer reliable or under full military control and the country at the brink of Civil War. Initially decisions were made to once again send troops and commanders into the areas of revolt to regain military control and allow for the Kaiser to remain in power, but this was not undertaken.¹² Instead, military officials were tasked with gathering the general feelings of soldiers and asking whether or not they would fight for the Kaiser against a revolution. The verdict was resounding and clear that the men no longer were willing to risk their lives for the Kaiser. It was at this point that abdication was decided, initially allowing the Kaiser to remain King of Prussia. This did not happen as the Kaiser was immediately asked to go to Holland as his safety within Germany could not be ensured.

Reporting of the abdication was on the front page in Berlin on the ninth of November. The people of Germany were assured that not only was the Kaiser abdicating the throne but that his son, the Crown Prince, would also give up any claims to it. There was news of a vote for the people to elect the new National Assembly as well as all of the German kingdoms that will be a part of this new German Republic.¹³ This shift in reporting was incredibly sudden. All but four days prior, the people of Germany were reading of the successful endeavors of the military and a sure and lasting peace to come with America. Although riots had been starting throughout the country, for many the turn of events was quite quick, and it was demoralizing.

¹¹ Reinhard Rurup, "Problems of the German Revolution 1918-19," *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 4 (October 1968): 109-135.

¹² "The Kaiser's Abdication and Flight," *Current History* 9, no. 2 (February 1919): 228-232.

¹³ "Abdankung des Kaisers," *Berliner Tageblatt* November 9, 1918.

For the press of the Allied Powers, articles discussing the abdication were the first with noticeable biases in the reporting. *The London Times* reported on the abdication of the Kaiser and his escape to Holland on the eleventh of November and explained that a new Imperial Chancellor was put in place to create a new government. They describe the vote for the National Assembly “by general suffrage” just as was reported in Berlin. There is discussion of the abdication of monarchs of all the royal houses throughout Germany and claims of significant decrease in German military strength.

At this point the Grand Offensive had taken back large amounts of land and the morale of the German troops was faltering. The German armistice was claimed to still be uncertain, but the papers do describe Austria-Hungary’s armistice. At the end of the war, Germany was the last Central Power standing, their allies having sued for peace weeks earlier. Lastly, the article covered a speech given by the Prime Minister to announce the abdication. English bias against Germany becomes much more obvious as it is stated “it was impossible to forget the reckless wantonness with which the rulers of Germany, with the full assent of their people, had permitted an atrocious crime against humanity.” These lines offer insight on the general feeling in Great Britain, as well as foreboding for Germany’s fate in the negotiations over the Treaty of Versailles¹⁴.

A day earlier on the tenth of November, similar reports appeared in the newspapers on the abdication of the Kaiser. One article mentions the Kaiser’s reluctance to leave the throne due to a “dynastic duty.” It notes that he was hesitant to leave his country in the hands of the Entente or the revolution that was just beginning. The Kaiser knew, as many of the German High Command did, the treaty for peace would not be kind to the Germans, and he had hoped to stop or at least work toward that. This article includes explicit bias in the reporting with claims that the Kaiser “had built up power, of which he made the wickedest use, and his ambitions, for himself and for Germany, [which] have wrought his ruin.” Throughout the week before the war, many of the articles were publishing first-hand accounts from

¹⁴ “Kaiser in Holland; Abdication and Flight,” *The London Times* November 11, 1918.

Germany. This included information from correspondents reporting from within Germany as well as direct excerpts from various newspapers, though here the tone shifts. The article mentions the armistice and claims there was no resolution at the time of publication; still by this point, sources were certain that defeat and surrender were inevitable.¹⁵

In the Great War of 1914 to 1918, those on the German home front experienced “Total War.” Through this new type of warfare, public opinion and support for the war was incredibly important and led to more widespread use of propaganda as well as manufactured articles, extolling German military feats. These articles did help keep the spirits of the people high throughout the war as intended. As the war took a turn for Germany, the home front was not prepared for how bad the aftermath of the war would be. As the soldier began the revolt that became revolution, leaders were reminded of the words of German poet and critic that “revolution from below is always due to the sins of omission from those above.” Overthrow of the old order began, and Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils were set up quickly to maintain public order, organize and distribute food supplies, and demobilize the military.

What the people really desired was an immediate end to the war. Recognition of Germany’s defeat caused wide discontent and it also demoralized officials which created the conditions allowing for the breakdown of authority necessary for the revolution to occur.¹⁰ The general feeling among soldiers was one that their leaders had lied to them, and they began to see themselves as pieces in the war machine as one French soldier stated at the end of the war that “they had lied, cynically saying we were fighting just for the triumph of Right and Justice, that they were not guided by ambition.” Similar feelings were shared by those at home, while soldiers lost their lives and those of their comrades, each of those men were significant to someone at home. Loss and pain were felt on both fronts of battle. As the revolution began, it was not organized or led by any one person, it was anonymous. Out of the shared pain inflicted on them by their country, the German people came together to try and create a world of peace where war was no longer

¹⁵ “The Kaiser Abdicates,” *The New York Times* November 10, 1918.

necessary. The revolution did not end until the summer of 1919 as the Treaty of Versailles was accepted and the new Weimar Republic was created. National Socialists would recast the history, manufacturing the “stab in the back” legend and vilifying those who took part in the November Revolution.

Total War not only meant increased hardships and danger for those on the home front but also censorship and propaganda. It was crucial for each fighting power to have public opinion on their side even if it meant creating misleading narratives to raise hopes. While the people of Germany were receiving hopeful information on the military strength of the Germans, those in the Allied Powers were receiving a more complete picture on the chaos within the country. As early as a week before the war, those in Berlin were reading of their heroic military while those in New York or London were reading of navy revolts taking hold throughout the country. This lack of knowledge at home did not prepare the German people for what was to come as the Allied Powers delivered the Treaty of Versailles and led to an incredible shock. Determined to prevent another similar situation, the people of Germany rose up together in attempt to create a new order dedicated to peace.

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