

War and revolution

Jeffrey Verhey

It is a war of such power and tension as the world has never seen. All our physical and intellectual powers have fused together in this war, are heightened to their limits. Natural powers have become weapons of defence and destruction. The war is not just being fought in the field. The press, trade, the complete economic and intellectual life is fighting; everything has become attack and defence. In the nations involved, all aspects of life are at war. War has become the total meaning and the only purpose ... We are no longer the same people we were at the beginning of the war, and we can no longer return to those we were, we must move forward. The outbreak of the war hit us like an earthquake, shook our very foundations and, as if by a flood, we are being carried away to new shores. We have no connection any more with who we were, with how we lived.¹

Johannes Müller, a Protestant pastor, wrote these lines in late 1914 in his capacity as editor of *Die Grünen Blätter* (*The Green Leaves*)—a religious magazine that sought to counsel churchgoers in their daily lives. Before the war, Müller had often commented, sometimes quite whimsically, on the dangers to civilization posed by modernity. In 1914, like many of his contemporaries, Müller embraced the war as a fascinating experience, as a great, historic epoch: life for all Germans would never be the same. Müller did not state—as most contemporaries did not—how people had changed, or what the future would bring. Indeed, in 1914 almost no one predicted what was to come or that they were witnessing the death of Imperial Germany at war.

The spirit of 1914: public opinion in July and August

Ironically, the war that contemporaries so correctly interpreted as ‘modernizing’ Germany began as the last war of the ‘long nineteenth century’. In August 1914, ‘Germany’ did not decide on war. The decision to go to war—or, more accurately, the decision to accept the risk of becoming involved in a European war by supporting the Austrian government in its campaign against Serbia with the infamous ‘blank cheque’—was made by a small cadre of decision-makers, all of whom had been personally appointed by Kaiser Wilhelm II. These men had no democratic legitimacy and were not in any way representative of German society. The Kaiser himself has been aptly described by the historian John Röhl as a vain, unpredictable man.² Wilhelm’s civilian statesmen deferred to military advice whenever questions of German security were being considered. Accordingly, in the July crisis of 1914 the most important decisions were made by the military with an almost complete disregard for political considerations.

Yet as Johannes Müller had noted, the First World War at the time was called a ‘people’s war’, and most Germans were aware of this from the very beginning. When on 23 July newspapers reported that Austria had issued Serbia an ultimatum, due to expire on Saturday, 25 July, at 6:00 p.m., the German people did not need to be reminded that, because Germany was allied with Austria and because Russia traditionally supported Serbia, Germany could become involved in a wider European conflagration. In the late afternoon of 25 July, vast

crowds of curious, nervous, excited people gathered in the larger German cities at the sites where they expected the news of the Serbian response first to be distributed—in city squares, in front of newspaper buildings, in downtown cafes. People gathered there because in 1914 special newspaper supplements ('extras') were the media that first informed them of their fate. After learning that Serbia had rejected the ultimatum, in Berlin and a few other large cities 'parades' of enthusiastic youths marched through the streets, singing patriotic songs. On 1 August, when 'extras' proclaimed that Germany was at war, many in the curious crowds who had been waiting tensely responded with hurrahs and patriotic songs. Yet most people went quietly home. In the first two weeks of the war, as the troops moved out and Germans said goodbye to their loved ones, public opinion remained tense. Only toward the end of August, as the news of German military successes led many to believe that the war would soon be won, did public opinion change significantly to resemble a nationwide patriotic festival.

Many contemporaries characterized these crowds as evidence of a Germany united in war enthusiasm. But there were significant regional and class differences in how Germans responded to the outbreak of the war. The largest enthusiastic crowds were found in the major cities, such as Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich. They were composed mainly of youths, especially university students. In the working-class districts of these cities—as, indeed, was also the case outside the larger cities and university towns—there was little evidence of enthusiasm, and none at all in rural areas. This was no nationwide 'war enthusiasm'. There did nevertheless arise a kind of national unity, which transcended class and regional differences, insofar as most Germans embraced a sense of national duty to preserve their fatherland in a war of defence. This sense was heightened by the realization that Germany stood a chance to win this war—a people's war—only if everybody stuck together. This shared recognition of a common fate, in which one's own wellbeing depended on the efforts of all other Germans, was in itself a profound change in political outlook. It is not surprising that many contemporaries hoped that this recognition would contribute to overcoming the deep internal divisions between the workers and the bourgeoisie, the city and the countryside, and the different religions—divisions that had characterized German political culture before the war. Some even hoped that in this 'spirit of 1914' German 'society' would become a German 'community'.

National unity in a defensive war found its most poignant expression in the German Social Democratic Party's decision to support the war. Before 1914 the SPD had been international, pacifist, and revolutionary (at least in its party programmes). In parliament the SPD had never voted for military appropriations; indeed, it had followed a policy of almost complete opposition to government policy on armaments, imperialism, and many other issues. In the last week of July, the SPD had staged massive anti-war demonstrations throughout Germany, which were larger than any of the enthusiastic crowds. Yet on 4 August 1914, in the sitting of the Reichstag convened to approve war expenditures, the Social Democratic Party voted in favour of the military appropriations. This day's sitting had been opened by the Kaiser with the phrase, 'I no longer acknowledge any parties, I recognize only Germans.'

Many contemporaries described the SPD's approval of war credits as the most amazing, unexpected result of the 'spirit of 1914'. This national unity became known as the *Burgfrieden*, or civic truce (literally, peace within the fortress). Yet the vote was less a break with the past than it was a public acknowledgement of longterm developments. Social Democrats did not

want Germany to lose the war: they feared the Russians, but they also hoped that what they called the ‘politics of 4 August’ was more than just a policy for the common defence of the fatherland. By rejecting internationalism, the socialists believed they could refute the government’s and the other parties’ charge that their party was nationally ‘unreliable’, which in turn would inspire the government to undertake a programme of internal reforms. In the words of one trade union official, the goal of the ‘politics of 4 August’ was

for the working classes to have the same access and the same right to work in government as all other Germans. We expect the end of all discrimination. We expect the recognition of the worker’s independent associations as the given representative of the working class in all aspects of economic and social life. And we expect the state to continue to build up and complete our social welfare legislation.³

Most of these goals would be realized.

Military developments

The military history of the war can be quickly told. The German military plan in 1914, a modification of the so-called Schlieffen Plan, was a bold gamble to avoid a two-front war by defeating the French in the west before the Russians could deploy in large numbers in the east. The war plan was an example of a dangerous German tendency to make decisions purely on the basis of military considerations. The Schlieffen Plan required that the German troops march through Belgium, thus invading a neutral country and ensuring that Germany was viewed as a brutal aggressor. The military simply brushed these issues aside.

At first, the plan went quite well. The German army rolled through Belgium, threatened Paris, and the French government fled to Bordeaux. However, when in the first half of September the French army turned back the Germans at the first Battle of the Marne, the Germans had the two-front war they had gambled so much to avoid. At the end of September 1914 the armies in the west had settled down into trenches. From the Flemish coast to the Swiss border, there was a continuous front of some 450 miles with up to 8 million soldiers engaged on both sides at any one time. The Western Front was essentially large-scale siege warfare—a grinding conflict of attrition with industrialized killing fields where the machine gun and reinforced trenches had made the defence immeasurably stronger than the offence. In a war of attrition, given the vast numerical, material, and economic superiority of the enemy, the German army would have to be very lucky not to lose.

Part of the reason German strategists and the German population failed to recognize their difficult situation after the Battle of the Marne was because the war in the east went well. In August and September 1914, at the battles of the Masurian Lakes and Tannenberg, the Germans destroyed one of the Russian armies. Germany’s army would continue to do well in the east for the duration of the war, although it was often required to come to the aid of its ally, Austria-Hungary. But the German Army Supreme Command’s main focus lay elsewhere, on the western front. Trained in the tradition of Karl von Clausewitz, who had taught that the destruction of the enemy’s army was the main goal in war, the Supreme Command sought the decisive battle in the west: in 1916 against France with the attack on Verdun, and in early 1917 against England with unrestricted submarine warfare. What is perhaps remarkable about these two campaigns is that although the tactics were military—the application of force—the strategy was

psychological. The Supreme Command did not actually believe Germany could annihilate the enemy's army; it hoped to weaken the enemy's morale such that the people would sue for peace. At Verdun Germany attacked France at a point the French could not afford to lose, forcing the French to enlist all their resources. The aim of General Erich von Falkenhayn, the head of the German Supreme Command, was to open 'the eyes of [the French] people to the fact that in a military sense they have nothing more to hope for'.⁴ His plan failed. German losses were as high as the French—together there were about 700,000 casualties—and only a few square miles of territory changed hands. When the German Supreme Command resumed unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917, they were gambling that the English people and the English economy could be starved into submission. But the German Navy did not have enough submarines to achieve this goal. The failure of this gamble meant that the United States, with its vast resources in men and material, joined Germany's enemies. By July 1918 the United States had one million men in Europe, with hundreds of thousands more arriving each month.

The failure at Verdun cost Falkenhayn his job. He was replaced in late 1916 with Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, the two leaders responsible for the victory of Tannenberg. Yet although the battles in the west in 1916 had shown that the Allies could out-produce the Germans in munitions, machinery, food, and men, Ludendorff and Hindenburg still believed that Germany could win. They therefore opposed all feelers for a negotiated peace. Like Falkenhayn, they did not really believe that the enemy's armies could be annihilated. But also like him they convinced themselves that the enemy would quit when he came to accept that the German army could not be defeated in the field and that the German home front would hold out.

The home front

The German home front was never really isolated from the fighting. German strategists concentrated on the domestic mobilization of material, including human material, and on the mobilization of what in Germany was known as 'nerves' or morale. The two, of course, were closely intertwined. Morale was a function not only of how well the war was going but also of the moral economy at home. The perception that German society was fair, that all hardships were equitably shared, that the community of war created in the 'spirit of 1914' was not being exploited by any influential individual or group—all this was an essential precondition for fighting this war. Accordingly, from the very beginning of the war, censors included 'harming the *Burgfrieden*' among the list of things to be censored: such 'negativism' allegedly endangered national security.

The degree of genuine social cohesion implied by the 'spirit of 1914' was tested immediately by the mobilization of the industrial and agricultural resources needed to supply a huge army of several million men. No one had expected a war of this scale, and stockpiles were quickly exhausted. Already in August 1914 Walther Rathenau, a future foreign minister in the Weimar Republic who was then president of the German General Electric Company (AEG), was able to persuade the government to establish a War Raw Materials Office within the War Ministry, under his direction. The agency intervened in the economy in order to steer

adequate supplies of raw materials to the companies involved in war work. As the war continued, ever more agencies were created, and government expenditure, which before the war had never been over 10 per cent of gross domestic product, had risen by 1918 to over 50 per cent of GDP. In a moment of need, market mechanisms were replaced with planning: the capitalistic economic order was set aside. Indeed, many contemporaries spoke of 'war socialism', although the German economy remained far from a command economy in the later Soviet style. German armies did not run out of munitions during the war. Yet the bureaucracy created was inefficient and inadequate. Thus Germany was not able to transcend the very real limits to its own resources—in either material or manpower.

These limits became clear in the Hindenburg Programme, an ambitious scheme proposed by the military in 1916. This programme aimed to double the production of munitions by forcing every possible member of the adult population to join the active workforce. Central planning would coordinate not only issues of supplies and investment of capital but also manpower. Because the trade unions opposed this infringement of workers' rights, the government was forced to make a number of compromises in its effort to get the Hindenburg Programme passed by the Reichstag. In the Auxiliary Service Law of December 1916, all male workers between 17 and 60 years of age were required to take up employment; they were severely restricted in their ability to quit work or to seek a different job. But the law also established 'local workers' committees and councils' (*Betriebsräte*) in factories. These were joint committees of labour and management in which the two sides could settle disputes over wages and conditions of employment.

The goals of the Hindenburg Programme were not met: there was simply too little additional labour or raw materials available to be mobilized. The law, however, provides an example of the broad modernization of Germany's political and economic institutions during the course of the war, furthering the development of a corporatist model of state and society. As the state expanded its role in the economy, new government ministries and powers were created and new laws were enacted. Many of these innovations, all designed to bolster the war effort, persist to this day (for example, in local workers' committees and councils). The war also brought a broad expansion of the welfare state, from family aid schemes to the paying of unemployment benefits. Yet the most important element in the modernization of Germany's economic and social structures was recognition of the right of the working classes to genuine representation. During the war, the government acknowledged the SPD and the trade unions as legitimate partners in order to be better able to manage labour. The working-class movement was able to realize its goal of establishing local workers' committees; it won the right to organize in war industries; and for the first time collective bargaining agreements became legally binding.

The idea that peace between the classes could be achieved in wartime Germany lay at the heart of the *Burgfrieden*. Yet changes in political and economic institutions were greater than in social attitudes. Middle-class citizens were still seldom seen in workingclass pubs. Nor were workers invited to mix with executives at social events. True, the war did break down some of the economic foundations of class consciousness. A rise of over 200 per cent in the cost-of-living index between 1914 and 1918 hurt those whose wages did not keep up with inflation, including civil servants and workers not employed in a war industry. Inflation also

lessened the value of the savings of the middle and upper classes—a trend that would continue and accelerate after the war. Nevertheless, class anxiety did not disappear. Quite the contrary. Those who previously had felt themselves to be stable members of the middle class, such as schoolteachers, saw their objective economic position erode and become more precarious; subjectively they perceived these developments as patently unfair.

The war reshuffled social relations in many other ways as well. A ‘people’s war’ spawned an unprecedented level of volunteerism in support of the troops. Middle-class women engaged in campaigns of nursing, welfare work, and social aid; in the process, many found their religious faith reinvigorated. Some middle-class women joined working-class women in the factories. (It is one of the myths of the war that the war forced all women to work. Instead, the war prompted women to be redeployed into war industries who had previously worked in other sectors, and only some middle-class women worked.) Gender roles were called into question by women working as streetcar conductors, postal workers, or factory hands. Yet it is unclear how much attitudes actually changed. The effects of the war on women, especially on their self-perception, are difficult to assess: those effects may have been more psychological than social. After the war, when the German army was demobilized, women who had been working in factories gave the returning men their jobs back, almost without opposition.

These were difficult strains, yet what tore most at the fabric of German society was the lack of food. Germany had been a net importer of food before 1914 (approximately 25 per cent of its consumption). The British blockade effectively cut Germany off from its imports. Added to this difficulty was a decline in the number of horses available on German farms (they had been taken by the military), and the loss of many able men. Accordingly, production decreased by as much as 30 per cent. As food became scarce, prices went up. Crop failures, such as the one that struck potato production in 1916, were calamitous. The government was in an impossible situation. As State Secretary of the Interior Clemens von Delbrück told a meeting of the Prussian state ministry on 25 October 1915, the government accepted responsibility for ‘providing the population with sufficient foodstuffs at reasonable prices’.⁵ To achieve this, the government set price controls. When the price controls led to irregularities in the market, the government realized the whole process would have to be controlled, and turned to rationing. Bread rationing began in March 1915; in October 1916 meat rationing was introduced. By the end of the war, virtually all foodstuffs were being rationed. The trouble was that, as the war progressed, rations inevitably declined. In peacetime, Germans had consumed a per capita average of about 380 grams of flour per day. Already in January 1915 the flour ration was down to 225 grams per day. In March 1917 the government decreased the ration to 170 grams (it would go up again when the harvest came in). Although the rations were miserable, often people were lucky to receive even these small amounts. Not only food was rationed; coal was, too. In the long and dismal German winters—and the winter of 1916–17 was especially hard on both counts—the lack of heating fuel turned misery to calamity for innumerable Germans. Although no Germans actually starved to death during the war, many were desperately hungry.

Such hardships could be sustained as long as a sense of justice prevailed. A sense of humour also helped. Postcards and humorists made fun of the term ‘substitute’ (*Ersatz*), which was used with increasing frequency to document the shrinking proportion of genuine nutrition and flavour to be found in German food and drink. Yet Germans lost their sense of humour when

they began to recognize that society's moral economy was no longer functioning properly. The presumption that all Germans were sharing the national burden equally was not being borne out by reality. When farmers held back their goods in order to sell them on the black market, and then when the state intervened to try to force them to bring their goods to market, tension increased between farmers, city dwellers, and government officials. When the state demonstrated its incapacity to control the black market—by the end of the war Germans were purchasing one-third of all food there—confidence in the government eroded. This loss of confidence was especially marked among lower-class families, who spent a large proportion of their income on food. As early as 1915 general dissatisfaction found expression in spontaneous food riots, often set off by working-class women who had been standing in line for hours on end. As the war continued, these spontaneous 'demonstrations' increased in size and number.

Underlying all the dissatisfaction, of course, was the war itself and the harsh reality of death. One of the most common experiences in family life during these years was bereavement. Even if they survived, enlisted troops had to put up with the arrogance of officers. Although there can be no doubt that in the thick of the fighting there arose a strong sense of solidarity which momentarily lowered social taboos, soldiers who had been schooled in the lessons of Social Democracy had their pre-war views of Wilhelmine society broadly confirmed in their personal relations with the officer class. Those interactions were often filled with tension and animosity, and the soldiers shared these experiences with their relatives. Thus the battlefield and the home front were intertwined: how could it be otherwise when about one-half of the German soldiers were married and when there was a constant traffic of soldiers embarking on or returning from furlough? Some soldiers even wrote home to ask their friends and relatives not to subscribe to war loans because this would only extend the war. In November 1917 about 10 per cent of the German troops transported from the eastern front to the west used the opportunity to desert. This has led the historian Wilhelm Deist to speak of a 'covert military strike' in 1918, estimating that in the last months of the war between 750,000 and one million soldiers avoided battle by faking illness.⁶ Nevertheless, despite the horror of war, the army remained largely reliable. Until the last two weeks of the war, there was no open mutiny as there had been, for example, in the French army. The physical reality of unparalleled death and destruction had a numbing effect, but it did not lead to open revolt.

Most contemporaries believed that a greater threat faced the German army: the danger of the home front collapsing. Although genuine pacifists were few and far between—there was little public opposition to the war—by 1916 discontent with the war was deep and widespread. If this discontent, and the sense of social injustice upon which it fed, could find a voice, if a new political grouping were to emerge to channel it, the situation could become very dangerous. By 1917 there were signs that things were moving in this direction. In April 1917 the Social Democratic Party split into two parties, one of which advocated continued support for the 'politics of 4 August', while the other offered complete, principled opposition to the war. In April 1917 the announcement of a reduction of the bread ration led to a strike in which 300,000 Berliners were involved. Massive anti-war strikes erupted throughout Germany in January 1918. Yet the antiwar Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) was unable to gain the upper hand. The leaders of the Majority Social Democrats (MSPD) successfully found

a way to portray themselves as the representative of the strikers, thus calming the situation. But if the discontent continued to grow, if the war continued much longer, the MSPD realized that it could be forced to give voice to the people's dissatisfaction with the existing order; in that case it would have to take on what it regarded as the unwelcome role of an oppositional, even 'revolutionary' party.

Given the importance of home-front morale, it is not surprising that already by late 1915 there were innumerable discussions within the government and among politically active citizens on how to improve it. One possible answer was put forward by a self-proclaimed 'war aims movement'. Members of radical nationalist organizations believed that vast territorial acquisitions were good for Germany; indeed, they believed that proclaiming the 'necessity' of vast territorial acquisitions would in itself improve morale. 'Establishing high goals', wrote the Pan-German publicist Manfred Kloss, 'awakens powers and makes a people capable of great accomplishments.'⁷ In September 1914, when Germany still seemed to be doing well, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg privately agreed to a 'September Programme' of annexations in both western and eastern Europe. However, in November 1914 Bethmann's government forbade any public discussion of war aims: he was worried that the Left would respond to the Pan-German challenge and that this debate would prove divisive. In the autumn of 1916, as morale declined and the Right clamoured for the government to provide a rallying cry for the nation, the government ended its ban on the discussion of war aims. The Right initiated a vast political campaign, even going so far as to found a new political party in September 1917. This was the German Fatherland Party, whose sole programme—or so its members claimed—was to ensure public support for Germany's territorial expansion. The Fatherland Party was founded in response to the Peace Resolution passed by the Reichstag in July 1917, which stated: 'The Reichstag strives for a peace of understanding and the permanent reconciliation of the peoples. With such a peace, forced acquisitions of territory and political, economic, or financial oppression are inconsistent.' The government had been correct: the topic was hotly debated. Members of the extreme Right had a very compelling argument on their side: the war could only be won with a superhuman effort by all Germans and (although they failed to mention this) with a great deal of luck. Yet the Right's interest in war aims was also a means to deflect the public's attention away from internal politics. The Fatherland Party and groups affiliated with it argued vehemently against any attempt to reform authoritarian principles or practice, to revise the constitution, or to diminish the military's privileged role in German society.

The other suggestion put forward by many on the Right was to establish a military dictatorship on a new, mass basis. After Ludendorff and Hindenburg assumed the leadership of the Supreme Command, there was a growing tendency on the part of the military leadership to dominate the formulation of civilian policy. Some historians have termed this a 'silent dictatorship'.⁸ Ludendorff and Hindenburg did remove officials and stop policies they disliked, especially political and social reforms. Yet Ludendorff could never quite bring himself to assume full political responsibility: he recognized that a military dictatorship was the end of the monarchical idea. Perhaps Ludendorff also recognized that, in a people's war, a dictatorship would have to be genuinely popular if the state were to operate effectively, and that the Right would be unable to achieve this.

The Left, by contrast, argued that morale on the home front could best be sustained through political and constitutional reforms. It is thus a mistake to say—as Allied propaganda did at the time—that this was a war to make the world safe for democracy. The processes of democratization had already made important advances in Germany long before 1914. Germany was a constitutional monarchy; members of its national parliament were elected according to a suffrage law which was as progressive as any in the world (more so than in England, for example); and the Reichstag had the right and the duty to approve taxes, expenditures, and laws. Yet there is also a good deal of truth in the assertion that specific aspects of Germany's political system, and German political culture in general, were undemocratic. Germany was aptly characterized during the war by Hugo Preuss and Max Weber as an authoritarian state (*Obrigkeitsstaat*): a state in which a rational, intelligent bureaucracy governs, unencumbered by the whims of an irrational, mass public opinion. If Germany was to become a stronger state, one that had a better chance of sustaining morale and thus of winning the war, then—still according to Preuss, Weber, and others—Germany *must* undertake meaningful constitutional reform: only a parliamentary regime could provide the necessary foundation and legitimacy to the idea of a people's war. In the words of a contributor to one of Munich's leading newspapers, 'the German people can no longer be ruled according to the system set up fifty years ago; the people's patriotism, tested in a time of need, demands a different system, one which upholds a closer community between the governing and the governed'.⁹

Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg tried to steer a course between retrenchment and reform with his 'policy of the diagonal'. To the political Right, Bethmann Hollweg offered the prospect of annexations; to the Left, he promised internal reforms, which he called a 'new orientation' of Prussian policy. In 1917, Bethmann Hollweg began to make more and more concessions to the Left in order to uphold internal unity. He did so most famously in the Easter Message of 1917, in which he had the Kaiser promise reform of Prussia's reviled three-class suffrage. Although the 'new orientation' was an attempt to reform an 'unpolitical' German state in ways that left most conservative privileges intact, many conservatives felt these reforms went too far. In 1917, intrigues led by Hindenburg and Ludendorff forced the Kaiser to replace Bethmann Hollweg as chancellor, first with Georg Michaelis and then with Georg von Hertling. Both of these men were weak politicians, and in the last year and a half of the war they were unable to put up much opposition to the military leadership. Although they were in charge of the civilian administration, they were scarcely in a position to challenge the military leaders when it came to the conduct of the war. As a result they were also unable to chart a political course premised on any more realistic assessment of Germany's predicament than the generals' stubborn insistence that total victory still lay within Germany's grasp.

Propaganda: giving meaning to the war

When wars are fought as bitterly over ideas as over territory, any account of the conflict cannot dismiss the importance of propaganda. After 1914, in all belligerent nations, few intellectuals remained 'above the fray' (to use Romain Rolland's famous phrase). In Germany, as in the other nations, intellectuals immediately put themselves at the service of their nation. As the historian Friedrich Meinecke noted in September 1914, 'from now on every one of us has to

regard himself as only a part of the great apparatus of the state, and if a weapon is not pressed directly into his hand, he has only the choice of finding the spot where he can help most quickly and most effectively to strengthen the morale and physical power of the nation'.¹⁰ Yet the 'ideas of 1914' were unimpressive. A war between peoples was widely interpreted as a war between cultures, even between civilizations. If the Russians were half-barbarians, if the French were superficial, nationalistic, atheistic, frivolous, and egotistical, if the English were individualistic, capitalistic, a 'land of shopkeepers', then Germans were heroes, whose spiritual values stood in opposition to the shallow commercialism of Western civilization. A few philosophers even went so far as to see in the ideas of 1914 the unfolding of a historical dialectic that stretched back to the ideas of 1789: finally, it was thought, German *Ordnung* would replace French liberty.

What was interesting and modern about German propaganda was not its content but its breadth. The years 1914–18 saw an explosion in the sheer amount of persuasion being doled out to the German public; some contemporaries even saw the war as the birth of propaganda. In the first months of the war, innumerable pamphlets were published, innumerable speeches were given; ministers preached the patriotic message from the pulpit every Sunday. The most important medium remained the newspaper. Most of the content was developed by private citizens, but because the state controlled and censored the news media, the state could put its own spin on the message. Schools were probably the most effective site for the dissemination of propaganda in the early years of the war. As one contemporary wrote, 'one reached the parents through the children—indeed, the children educated their parents. At no time have the schools had a greater influence at home than in the early period of the war. The children told others, very successfully, to do their patriotic duty.'¹¹

In 1915 the German government created a War Press Office with an unlimited budget. Its staff hung posters in waiting rooms, in restrooms, and on advertising billboards. They distributed pamphlets, books, and brochures to children at school or when people picked up their ration cards. They even printed slogans on matchboxes and on the toilet paper used in government buildings. Nor was the War Press Office the only government agency engaged in persuading Germans. One contemporary estimated that over sixty different government agencies were engaged in propaganda. The Central Bank, for example, conducted a massive propaganda campaign on behalf of the war bonds programme. A new government-run film company, BUFA, was founded in 1917; by 1918 it supplied over 50 per cent of the movies shown in German cinemas. (BUFA later become UFA, the German film company that produced the most famous German films of the 1920s.) Then, in July 1917, besides these existing organizations, the military launched yet another propaganda initiative, the so-called 'patriotic instruction' programme, which largely duplicated existing efforts. These organizational attempts to mobilize German morale were so widespread that in 1916, when government ministers asked each other what else could be done, the Prussian minister of culture responded that he did not believe anything more was possible.¹² By the end of the war, almost every aspect of public and private life had been touched by this 'battle' to win the hearts and minds of ordinary Germans.

It is not clear that these propaganda efforts were very effective. The most important idea

pushed by German propagandists was that Germany's determination to continue the struggle—the effort itself—would bring ultimate victory. Thus, if Germany could only 'hold out', it would win, and if it won it was sure to enjoy the fruits of its victory. By contrast, lack of will, failure to keep the faith, would bring immediate defeat, and defeat meant only ruin and destruction. Germany's propaganda machine continued to stay 'on message' until the end of the war: not a negotiated peace but a 'victorious peace' (*Siegfrieden*) would be the only acceptable outcome to the struggles and sacrifices already endured. The problem with this message was twofold. First, the claim that Germany was winning the war became more transparently false with each passing year. Second, the claim that whichever nation had more 'will' to win would in fact achieve victory was an insidious argument: it led people to believe that the power of faith alone would allow Germany to defeat the numerically and economically stronger enemy. Conversely, if Germany were to lose, its defeat would not be the consequence of any military or political inadequacy but could be ascribed instead to insufficiently patriotic elements at home.

Making peace, making revolution

In 1917, German newspapers reported nothing new on the western front. The war in the east was going much better. The first Russian Revolution in February 1917 raised hopes that Russia would soon pull out of the war. The second, Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 and the continuing disintegration of the Russian armies led to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in the spring of 1918, which moved German borders to the east. This in turn allowed the German Supreme Command to move troops from the eastern to the western front. The relative strength of the enemy in the west should have made the Supreme Command recognize that they would not be able to annihilate the enemy: the situation called for a negotiated peace. Yet the combination of military overconfidence and the public's unwillingness to recognize the true situation inspired the military leadership to attempt one last gamble. It was a big one: a great offensive in the west, designed to snatch victory from defeat before the Americans began to arrive in large numbers. In March 1918, Ludendorff's offensive (Operation Michael) began. As in August 1914, the offensive had initial success and, as in September 1914, it ultimately failed. On 15 July 1918, the Supreme Command called a halt to the offensive.

The Allies counterattacked three days later and never lost the initiative. On 8 August 1918 Allied armies broke through German lines. Although the German army was able to regroup, the military leadership, recognizing that the war was militarily lost, told the Kaiser in the night of 28–29 September 1918 that he must appeal to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson for peace, based on Wilson's famous Fourteen Points of January 1918. Falsely believing that this would lead to a better peace offer, the military also called for the creation of a parliamentary government. A decree to this effect was issued on 30 September and a new, 'democratic' government was formed on 3 October 1918 with Prince Max von Baden as chancellor. But the Allies refused to offer better terms. Hindenburg and Wilhelm Groener, who had replaced Ludendorff in the Supreme Command, therefore told the civilian leadership to accept unconditional surrender—the army could no longer fight. Finally, on 11 November 1918, at 11:00 a.m., it was truly all quiet on the western front. In later years, Ludendorff would claim

that the home front had stabbed the army in the back. Notwithstanding the predictions of most strategists, the truth was that the war had been lost by the German army in the field. The home front, although greatly strained, had not cracked; it had held out for as long as there seemed to be a chance of victory.

There was, however, one last episode to be played out, an episode which allowed many post-war observers to lend credence to the stab-in-the-back myth. On 28 October, German naval officers, without the government's knowledge, ordered the High Seas Fleet to sail out and seek battle. These desperate officers were aware that the Allies had promised to destroy the German Navy; some of them sought a romantic end to their careers, and a few even suggested that Kaiser Wilhelm might appropriately share their fate. But the sailors under their command refused to go along. About a thousand naval mutineers were arrested at Wilhelmshaven. But other soldiers and sailors who were concerned for the fate of their comrades rallied and took charge of the ships. By 5 November a red flag flew atop every ship in Kiel. As news of the events in Kiel spread, so did the revolution—to Hamburg and Lübeck, to Hanover, Cologne, Magdeburg, Braunschweig, Leipzig, Dresden, Munich, and finally, on 9 November, to Berlin. By this point, defeat on the battlefield convinced a war-weary and embittered civilian population that any further sacrifice was pointless. The military and police forces of Imperial Germany surrendered everywhere, virtually without resistance. In the late morning of 9 November, as masses of demonstrators marched through the streets of Berlin and as soldiers joined the movement, Max von Baden announced the Kaiser's abdication, although the Kaiser had not yet agreed to this. Prince Max also announced his own resignation and the appointment of the Social Democratic leader, Friedrich Ebert, as chancellor.

Germany's November Revolution was largely peaceful. It was not a planned campaign by revolutionaries, but an undertaking launched spontaneously by a population unwilling to press the deadly conflict a moment longer. Its legitimization came in the recognition that the old elites had proven themselves incapable of ruling. Theodor Wolff, editor of the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt*, wrote on 10 November that the authorities' admission of defeat fully surprised the German people: up to that point, they had believed overly optimistic official propaganda. When the people realized that they had been lied to, they did not just quit the war; their outrage at having been treated as unthinking subjects (*Untertanen*) of authoritarian, presumptuous leaders led them to reject a system that had failed to respect their basic dignity.¹³

But the revolution of 1918 was limited. Political institutions were transformed; yet social relations, the economy, and prevailing attitudes about national affairs were not genuinely revolutionized, at least not in the short run. There were no 'ideas of 1918'. Germany's November Revolution can therefore be best understood as the last act of a lost war rather than as a new beginning. The real irony was that the arguments for democracy that had been most often and most powerfully put forward during the war had been proven false by defeat in war. The writer Thomas Mann had declared in 1915 that 'those who today demand a democratic Germany ... raise this demand not for doctrinaire, theoretical reasons, but for completely practical ones: first so that Germany can live, and second so that she can live powerfully and masterfully'.¹⁴ But the war did not create popular support for the ideas of democracy and republicanism; what became the Weimar Republic was chosen during the revolutionary excitement of November 1918 because it was the form of government that divided Germans

least and because the Allies had promised to treat Germany better if it became a republic. Making the democratic idea genuinely popular was left up to the politicians who followed.

The legacy of the war

The legacy of the First World War hung heavy over the Weimar Republic. Germany had lost over 2 million killed and over 4.1 million wounded (out of a total population of about 65 million). Many soldiers who had been maimed became part of the street scene in every German city: disabled veterans to whom society had an obligation. Germany had spent the equivalent of approximately 40 billion dollars on the war, most of which had been borrowed from its own citizens. Almost all of these loans would never be repaid because the state went bankrupt in the hyper-inflation of 1923. In the Treaty of Versailles, grudgingly accepted by the German government in June 1919, Germany lost 13 per cent of its territory, including its colonies, and was required to pay 33 billion dollars as a war indemnity to the victors. These physical and monetary losses were enormous; but just as important were the psychological effects of the war. To many Germans, the war seemed to defy any attempt to specify its causes. It seemed to undo belief in a just and caring God. And it seemed to disprove the wisdom of bringing up a family responsibly, of saving for the future, indeed, of believing the future would be better than the present. A rationalist, optimistic, progressive philosophy, which had been so much a part of Imperial German society, lay in ruins.

The war had reshuffled the dominant norms and values of Germany's cultural and social traditions. It was a profound modernizer. The monarchical idea died a quiet death: it would not return with any strength during the Weimar Republic. The economic instabilities that afflicted Weimar Germany, the expanding role of the state, the new emotional investment in the nation rather than in one's home town—all this was a consequence of changes that began or accelerated during the war. Yet despite the war's modernizing effect, many Germans found it difficult to move forward. In the 1920s, the war haunted people's memories, though it did so in many divergent ways. 'Conservative revolutionaries' developed the idea of a *völkisch* dictatorship, and in doing so they looked back to (and kept alive) the stab-in-the-back legend. This had very dangerous implications, as the historian Michael Balfour has noted: 'by exaggerating the extent to which the German failure in 1918 had been due to a failure of will rather than to material inferiority, they encouraged the belief that greater willpower, derived from a more fervent conviction, would by itself be enough to produce a different result'.¹⁵ But this was not the only attempt to rewrite history. Of course the hopes of August 1914 had been unrealistic. That did not make them less real—as hopes, as a political programme. Many middle-class Germans who had embraced the 'spirit of 1914' would later succumb to the hollow ideal of the 'people's community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*) propagated by the Nazis. Among such Germans was Pastor Johannes Müller, whose reflections in 1914 were cited at the outset of this chapter. For Müller and for millions of his countrymen, the turn to Nazism in 1933 was made possible not only by the war itself but also by their unsuccessful attempt to understand its meaning and accept its legacy.