

Arnold Brecht on Matthias Erzberger's Libel Suit against Karl Helfferich in 1920 (Retrospective Account, 1966)

Abstract

After Germany's defeat in 1918, former Vice Chancellor Karl Helfferich agitated vehemently against Matthias Erzberger, whom he called the "destroyer of the Reich" [*Reichsverderber*]. Helfferich portrayed Erzberger as a corrupt politician, and on account of Erzberger's role in the conclusion of the Peace Resolution of 1917, the signing of the Armistice in 1918, and the acceptance of the Versailles Treaty in 1919, Helfferich practically held him personally responsible for the consequences of the German defeat. Like the country's military leaders, Helfferich propagated a version of the "stab-in-the-back" legend [*Dolchstoßlegende*] to deflect attention from his own role in the defeat – since, as Undersecretary of the Reich Treasury (1915–16), he had chosen to finance the war with war bonds (thereby neglecting war taxes); and this, together with the proliferation of paper money during the war, encouraged inflation and created a serious burden for the Weimar Republic.

Erzberger raised suit against Helfferich, who, after a trial in Berlin (January 19–March 12, 1920), was sentenced only to a fine of 300 Marks. Insofar as the court (which was anything but impartial) ascribed validity to some of Helfferich's counter-accusations, he actually emerged from the trial as the moral victor in the eyes of the public. Afterwards, Erzberger resigned from his position as Reich Minister of Finance and tried to repair his reputation. On August 26, 1921, he was assassinated by nationalist extremists. The slogan, "Away with Erzberger" [*Fort mit Erzberger*] made Helfferich, for all intents and purposes, the spiritual instigator of the attack. The political right openly celebrated the murder, and cynically portrayed Erzberger as having been responsible for his own fate.

Source

In January 1920, Erzberger brought libel action against Helfferich, last Imperial Secretary of the Interior, now a German-Nationalist member of the Reichstag. Helfferich had in a series of articles in the conservative paper *Kreuzzeitung* under the heading "Erzberger Get Out"—they were also published in booklet form—directed serious personal accusations against Erzberger. They ended in the following provoking words:

"This is Herr Erzberger, who is charged on all sides with intentional deceits, not twice or three times, but ten and twenty times; who has to submit to the reproach that he dishonestly mixed political activities with personal financial interests; who does not answer all these accusations by bringing legal action, but shirks, and like a menaced cuttle-fish darkens the water, in order to escape. [...]"

"This is Herr Erzberger, whose name appears rightly at the bottom of the miserable armistice agreement!"

"This is Herr Erzberger, who helped the Entente during the armistice to gag us financially, who steered our merchant fleet into the harbors of the Entente!"

"This is Herr Erzberger, who led us to Versailles, who made it clear to the enemy during the peace negotiations that he was prepared to sign this disgraceful, servile peace treaty (*Schand- und Knechtschaftsfrieden*) unconditionally, who, therefore, has the surrender of the Kaiser and other German men on his conscience, but who knew how to shirk signing the treaty in recognition of his work!"

"This is Herr Erzberger, whose name will nevertheless always be connected irrevocably with Germany's

misery and Germany's disgrace!

“This is Herr Erzberger who, if not finally stopped, will lead the German nation [...] to total destruction.

“There is, therefore, only one salvation for the German people. The country must be filled everywhere with the irresistible cry: ‘Away with Erzberger!’ (*Fort mit Erzberger!*)”

Source: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884–1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 177.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Aus nächster Nähe, Lebenserinnerungen 1884–1927*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966, pp. 298–99. [Original Source: Karl Helfferich, *Fort mit Erzberger*. Berlin: Scherl 1919, pp. 81–83.]

Recommended Citation: Arnold Brecht on Matthias Erzberger's Libel Suit against Karl Helfferich in 1920 (Retrospective Account, 1966), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-3831>> [March 16, 2026].