

# Betty Scholem on the Chaos of Revolution (January 1919)

## Abstract

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On December 28, 1918, the Independent Social Democratic Party [*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or USPD] pulled out of the Council of People's Representatives. On January 4, 1919, the remaining members of the Council ordered the dismissal of Berlin Police Chief Emil Eichhorn, a member of the USPD's left wing. The next day, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards [*Revolutionäre Obleute*] – who also belonged to the left wing of the USPD – responded with an uprising. They were joined by members of the newly founded German Communist Party [*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* or KPD]. Armed left-wing radicals occupied several newspaper offices and public buildings, and the “Revolution Committee” declared the Council of People's Representatives dissolved. Gustav Noske (SPD), commander-in-chief of government troops, deployed republican units and the right-wing Free Corps [*Freikorps*] to put down the uprising. The revolt, known as either the Spartacus uprising or the January uprising, ended on January 15, 1919. That same day, KPD leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered during the Free Corps' bloody reprisals against left-wing radicals.

During the uprising, Betty Scholem, the wife of well-to-do Berlin printer Arthur Scholem, wrote the following letters to her son Gerhard (later Gershom) Scholem, who would go on to become a famous scholar of Jewish mysticism. These letters illustrate the dismay that many members of the liberal, educated middle class felt toward the chaos and disruption spawned by the revolution.

## Source

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Berlin, January 7, 1919

My dear child,

At the moment I cannot come up with a longer letter, but at least I can get this postcard off to you. These days are turbulent beyond belief, with constant putsches and riots. Who knows what we have yet to go through. Machine-gun fire rattles while I write!! The Spartacus people have occupied all of the newspaper offices. Your father has just told me that a regiment of the Guards has gone over to their side. In the past few days, they've been agitating for a general strike. Yesterday our workers walked off the job at 10:00 a.m. in order to join in the street demonstrations. This morning they all showed up, and after half an hour their spokesman, a Spartan, again asked for a day off to demonstrate.

(January 9) The workers held a meeting after your father flatly turned them down, and the older and more rational ones, in particular those who had just returned from the front, well-nigh beat the life out of the Spartacus people. With a vote of everyone else against four (the four Spartacans in the shop), they decided against a further strike. I wrote the beginning of this letter on Tuesday afternoon. I had stayed home because I'd invited Richard and Fritz Pflaum for dinner, and wanted to show off the house all spruced up. Then suddenly the underground and the trams were shut down, and a terrible gun battle broke out on Wilhelm Strasse by the Brandenburg Gate, so that the Pflaums quite understandably feared coming. How were they to get to Grunewald and eventually return home?! [...]

On Monday, when I took a walk with Reinhold through Old Berlin to show him the Ephraim House, Nikolai Church, Kroegel, City Hall, Kloster Strasse, Marien Church, and so on, we kept coming across parades of people demonstrating. They marched in unison, of all things. And why not? They did so for the simple reason that they had all served in the military! [...]

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Kisses, Mum

Berlin, January 13, 1919

My dear child,

This past week has been incredible, bizarre beyond belief. It now seems that the Spartacans have been all but driven out. Their reign of terror was horrific. Our good old standard clock atop the Spittel Market took a bullet in the dial and heart. Two bullets flew through the shop of our local butcher, ripping a hole in his spleen—luckily the spleen sitting on his shop counter. On Saturday afternoon I went with Dr. Meyer (who wanted to watch the revolution; nothing I could say could keep him from it) down pitch-dark Wall Strasse until we arrived behind the colonnade on Leipzig Strasse. Everything was dark as coal; Leipzig Strasse was entirely hidden by the night; Beuth Strasse was blocked; Dönhoff Square echoed with the sound of shots; everywhere there were ghost-like groups of people. Well, we turned around at once and made our way back. In the evening *Vorwärts* was taken and the Spartacus people vacated the Mosse and Ullstein buildings. Yesterday afternoon we went to take a look at the *Vowärts* building. It looked awful. Shells had ripped through the building from the roof to the cellar. The neighboring buildings and those across the way also look terrible. [...]

Your father sends his greetings. He has no time to write. He and Reinhold work without interruption now—there is so much to do! Times are good for the printing business: handbills, proclamations, and placards follow each other in furious succession. [...]

Kisses, Mum

Source: Gershom Scholem, *A Life in Letters, 1914–1982*. Edited and translated by Anthony David Skinner. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 97–98.

Source of original German text: Betty Scholem and Gershom Scholem, *Mutter und Sohn im Briefwechsel: 1917–1946*. Edited by Itta Shedletzky with Thomas Sparr. Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1989, pp. 30–33.

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