

## Käthe Kollwitz on the Revolution (1918-19)

### Abstract

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On November 9, 1918, from a balcony of Germany's parliament building in the heart of Berlin, Philipp Scheidemann, a member of the SPD's executive committee, declared the country a republic and announced that the Kaiser had abdicated. Several months of excitement, frenzied political activity, anxious uncertainty, and occasional violence ensued as forces across the political spectrum vied with one another for the authority to shape a new German state and society.

The artist Käthe Kollwitz experienced these events, and helped to shape them, as a resident of Berlin. Her diary entries describe historic events, but they also reveal how she and her politically engaged circle of family and friends debated which parties to support, what information to believe, and what type of future they wished for Germany.

As a mother who had lost one of her two children in the war, Kollwitz had become a committed pacifist, and she actively supported the *Bund Neues Vaterland*, an antiwar organization that had reemerged in October 1918. Kollwitz also had a long history of supporting Socialism, and she used her art to expose societal problems and press for change.

Like many Germans who called themselves Socialists prior to the war, however, Kollwitz found herself in 1918 confronting a frayed Socialist movement and having to decide which of the three strands she wished to support. The largest strand, represented by Scheidemann and the future president of the Weimar Republic, Friedrich Ebert, was sometimes referred to as the Majority Social Democratic Party, or simply the Social Democratic Party (MSPD or SPD, in its German acronyms). This party saw gradual reform, rather than revolution, as the best means of achieving a better society, and its moderate, center-left positions enabled it to remain the largest political party in every German parliament until 1932. The smallest strand—initially, at least—was the group of revolutionary Socialists who oriented around Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, known initially as the Spartacus League and building itself into the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) by 1919. This strand advocated immediate and radical change, by force, if necessary, along the lines of what the Bolsheviks were undertaking in Russia at the time. Between these two strands, the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) sought to tread a more radical path than the SPD, while eschewing the violence and anti-democratic tendencies of the Spartacists. It steadily waned in support and influence during the early years of the Republic.

Kollwitz wrestles in many of her entries with the question of which of these three strands best reflects her beliefs. She expresses glowing admiration for all three at various points and crushing disappointment in them at other times. Kollwitz seemed most heartened in those moments when it appeared possible that two or all three of the strands might come back together, as on November 11, 1918, when the MSPD and USPD jointly formed a provisional government and, fleetingly, on May 1, 1919, when she hoped to see a unified celebration of International Workers' Day (and was sorely disappointed).

We also see in these entries an intense engagement with the issues of the day. Kollwitz attends meetings organized by political parties of all stripes, from the Spartacus League to the centrist German Democratic Party (DDP) to the far-right German Nationalists (DNVP). She also read newspapers from across the left of the political spectrum, although she favored the SPD newspaper *Vorwärts*, at least when revolutionary fighting did not impede its publication.

Along with the observations about wider historical events, Kollwitz's diary gives insights into a very individual and daily experience of this period. Kollwitz criticizes herself for not taking a stronger political

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stand and for merely repeating what others have said. She records mild resignation, rather than excitement, when she finally casts her votes in the election for a German National Assembly and then, one week later, for a Prussian state legislature—despite the fact that she and other women were voting in Germany for the first time ever. Kollwitz regularly describes what she has observed in the street cars; she bemoans the sight of wounded veterans playing hurdy-gurdies in order to earn some change; she comments on the wild rumors that coursed through Berlin during periods of street fighting; and she wrote down what her friends were thinking. In particular, Kollwitz’s friend Stan, whose full name was Constance Harding-Krayl, features prominently, since Stan worked as a freelance reporter for British newspapers in 1918-19 and regularly plunged into the thick of many key events during this period.

Finally, six of the last entries here refer to the spring 1919 events that historians sometimes call the “March Battles” (*Märzkämpfe*). These two weeks of strikes and street-fighting grew out of Communist protests against the perceived repressiveness of the SPD-led government. The government, for its part, justified its actions as preserving law, order, and its democratically elected authority. Rumors circulated wildly throughout this conflict, as Kollwitz makes clear, and the resulting atmosphere of exaggerated fear led to a great deal of bloodshed, especially in Berlin’s working-class neighborhoods, which included the vicinity of the Kollwitz apartment. By the time the fighting subsided in the middle of March, around 1,000 people had lost their lives.

## Source

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Saturday, November 9, 1918

Today it is true. Around midday, after 1 o’clock, I came through the Tiergarten to the Brandenburg Gate, where the abdication leaflets had just been distributed. A demonstration marched out of the gate. I joined in. An old invalid joined the procession and shouted: “Ebert is Chancellor! - spread the word!” A crowd gathered in front of the Reichstag. Scheidemann proclaimed the Republic from a window. Then a soldier spoke from the ramp, confused and excited. Next to him a sailor and a worker. Then a young officer stepped up, shook the soldier’s hand, addressed the crowd, said that four years of war had not been as bad as the battle against prejudice and outdated thinking. He waved his cap and shouted: “Hail free Germany!”

Then back to the Linden. The truck crowded with sailors and soldiers. Red flags. Behind the Brandenburg Gate I saw the guards leaving. Then I joined the swarm to Wilhelmstraße and then a bit further on.<sup>[1]</sup>

I saw soldiers tearing off their cockades and throwing them on the ground, laughing.

It really is like that. You experience it and can’t quite grasp it.

I always have to think of Peter. I think if he were alive, he would join in. He too would tear off his cockade. But he’s not alive and the last time I saw him and [he] looked the most beautiful, he had the cap with the cockade on and his face was shining. I can’t imagine him any other way.

The workers’ marches that passed through the city in the morning carried signs that read: “Brothers! Don’t shoot!” – But it is said that shots were fired near the War Ministry.

[...]

Sunday, November 10, 1918

[...]

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I came from Reichstagsplatz, where the Bund für Vaterland had convened.[2] Various men, and a woman, spoke at the Bismarck monument. Was it Stöcker?[3] She spoke well. In the middle of a speech, first a few shots were heard, then a whole rattle. The thousands scattered. They gathered again, then there were shots again. It went on like this three times. The last time a proper cannonade. The firing came from the big houses to the left of the Reichstag and from the corner house on Dorotheenstrasse. I was with Stan.[4] We always ran away and then came back. Then we went home in a roundabout way because some areas were closed off due to possible shelling. Met Lily Zadek.[5] Talked to her about the fact that the leaders of revolutions were almost always Jews. In Russia it's Jews, too.

All night from Saturday to Sunday there is said to have been shooting on Unter den Linden, in Friedrichstrasse and at the Marstall. Officers loyal to the king kept machine guns hidden there and employed youth guards. They fled through underground passages when soldiers searched the houses.

[...]

Monday, November 11, 1918

An agreement has been reached between the majority socialists [SPD] and independents [USPD]. Thank God!

Furthermore, publication of the terrible armistice conditions. We can only hope that peace will bring better conditions.

Karl[6] is so positive in his belief in revolution that it makes me feel positive, too.

*B.Z. am Mittag* reports on [German Secretary for Foreign Affairs Wilhelm] Solf's appeal to Wilson to soften the terrible terms of the armistice.

[...]

The emperor and crown prince are said to have fled to Holland. Hindenburg is said to have stayed and placed himself under the command of the Soldiers' Council to prevent chaos as far as possible. Bravo, old Hindenburg!

*Vorwärts* writes: "The last shot in the world war has been fired. Who is the last casualty?"

Appeal by the German socialists to neutral foreign countries to mitigate the armistice conditions.

[...]

Thursday, November 14, 1918

Once again in the studio. Difficult to get there. Trains excessively full. Masses of soldiers. In the crowd stands an old woman with a box. In it she has a cat that got scared and fled into her house during the heavy shooting. Now she goes to the countryside and takes the cat in the box with her. People laugh and look happy.

In the evening I went to a Spartacus meeting with Karl. Depressing impression. Came home in a bad mood.

[...]

Saturday, November 16, 1918

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Today's meeting of the elites<sup>[7]</sup>: Rathenau, Hauptmann, Einstein, etc. I was invited but didn't go. I have the reputation of having a wise political understanding and yet I am struggling to form an opinion, mostly repeating what Karl says. Quite a ridiculous situation. I think [Gottfried] Keller wrote something about that.

Suggestion by a painter to greet the returning soldiers. He is right. I'll write a few words and bring them to *Vorwärts*. Stampfer and Schiskowski.

[Friedrich Stampfer was the editor-in-chief of *Vorwärts*, and John Schiskowski was the editor of its feuilleton page. The letter, published on November 17, 1918, in the 1. supplement, read:]

[...]

“To all Berliners!

The soldiers are coming home these days! When they left, they were decorated with flowers and escorted by a cheering crowd. Now that they are returning after a full four years of fighting, suffering and bloodshed, not a hand is raised in welcome.

The soldiers must have dreamed of a different return and are truly worthy of a different reception.

Let the people know when the trains arrive so that those who are finally returning home, the long-awaited ones, are received as they deserve. And we want to decorate the stations with red flags and garlands!

In the name and on behalf of many,  
Käthe Kollwitz”<sup>[8]</sup>

[...]

Saturday, November 23, 1918

[Kollwitz's only surviving child Hans had only just returned from the front on Wednesday evening, November 20, and they already have begun attending political meetings together:]

[...]

Saturday morning Hans, I, and Stan at the front-line soldiers' meeting where Liebknecht is speaking. Very upsetting for Hans. For me too. Liebknecht speaks hastily, eagerly, with stubborn gestures. Very skillful. Very provocative. A Marc Anton speech. Katzenstein,<sup>[9]</sup> who wants to speak for the government socialists, is shouted down.

[...]

Stan was at the assembly of soldiers on leave and deserters. Liebknecht is said to have given a very good speech. The deserters – 26 in number – went up onto the podium one after the other, just like in the Salvation Army, and told the audience when and how they deserted. There was thunderous applause.

It made Hans sick to his stomach.

The city is decorated for the returning soldiers. We talked about the flag for a long time. Today, on Sunday, Hans and I will hang it out. The *German* general black, white and red flag. The dear German flag. At its top fly long red republican pennants and the green fir wreath is the sign of welcome. — Peter and Julius.<sup>[10]</sup> And all of you who will never come home.

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December 6, 1918

[...]

Walther Rathenau's open letter to Colonel House.<sup>[11]</sup> Is it inspired or does it come from his own initiative? Is Rathenau really that desperate (talking about not surviving the collapse of Germany for long) or is he politically exaggerating his despondency in order to have an effect on Colonel House? And is this really the state of Germany? It's still hard to believe.

The terrible division now! North and South Germany are falling apart, West Germany is breaking away from the whole and is occupied by the Entente. Famine and cold in German Austria. The same threatens us in a few months. The Social Democrats split into three parts, the bourgeois liberals and conservatives demand a national assembly, which is not due to meet until February. Until then, we have the Entente in the country for a long time. The Entente has declared that it will only agree to a peace settlement with a non-Soviet government and we that wouldn't get food before then either. True chaos. And you live from day to day as if you were still safe. The war must have taught people how to face even terrible events with such a lack of concern. 4 years of war makes you thick-skinned.

December 8, 1918

[...]

Just now I say to myself [that] if I had to choose between the dictatorship of Ebert and the dictatorship of Liebknecht, I would certainly choose Ebert.<sup>[12]</sup> But suddenly it occurs to me what the actual revolutionaries have achieved. Without this constant pressure from the left, we would not have had a revolution, we would not have thrown off all militarism. The majority party would not have saved us from that. It only ever wanted to evolve. And the consistent ones, the independents, the Spartacus people are once again the pioneers. They are *always pushing forward*, whatever the situation. Even if it's nonsense, even if it destroys Germany. They will now have to be gagged so we can end this chaos and there exists a certain right to do so. The moderates will probably win. I myself would wish it. But we must not forget that those who are to be gagged are the real revolutionary ferment, without whom we would have had no revolution at all. That they are *brave* people who expose themselves to machine guns without a second thought, that they are *starving*, disenfranchised people who have always come up short. That they are above all people who, had they had the power in the past which they have today, would have prevented the war. In short, they are the people of the revolutionary principle to which they adhere unwaveringly. Of course they are factually wrong. In fact, you have to go along with the majority socialists. Unless you don't give a damn about the complete collapse of Germany.

[...]

December 22, 1918

Hans has been in town and talks about the demonstration of the war cripples. A big long procession, partly in cars. They carried placards reading: "We don't want mercy, we want justice! Where is the Ludendorff donation?"<sup>[13]</sup> I would have loved to see the procession. It is terribly shameful for the victims and for the spectators that people are demonstratively showing the damage to their bodies. I think to myself that this is only possible in a demonstration that seems violently angry. Otherwise it's horrible. – I've already seen two young, war-blind soldiers with an organ grinder. One is standing at the stock exchange train station. He has put his cap on the organ grinder to collect the money and is twiddling his left arm. You have to think of *Simplicissimus*, which many years ago published a picture of an 1870s invalid spinning the organ grinder and singing: "For what I am and what I have, I thank you, my fatherland!"

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So it was the same story again this time, and yet at the beginning of the war it was said that the organ grinder would never be seen on the streets again.

December 24, 1918

Christmas! And there is cannon fire in the city.

From 8-11 a.m. the [Hohenzollern] castle and stables are shelled with gas grenades and machine guns. Dead and wounded. At midday it is said that the sailors have surrendered. But the outcome is probably more a victory for the sailors than for the Ebert government.

Towards evening I go there with Hans. Stables, castle badly damaged. Excited groups stand together.

[...]

New Year's Eve 1918 [December 31, 1918]

[...]

*This year has ended the war.*

There is no peace yet. Peace will probably be very bad. But there is no more war. You could say that's why we have civil war. No, despite all the bad things, it hasn't come that far yet.

1918 ended the war and brought the revolution. The terrible, increasingly unbearable pressure of war is gone and it is easier to breathe again. No one believed that we would immediately have good times, but the narrow shaft in which we were stuck, in which we could not move, has been broken through, we see light and breathe air.

[...]

Monday, January 6, 1919

No newspapers except *Freiheit* and *Rote Fahne*<sup>[14]</sup> In special issues, majority socialists call for street demonstrations. Karl is there. Me too for a while. Crowded streets, agitated. Karl comes home, says the government has no weapons, all have been confiscated. Now, at 5 o'clock in the afternoon Georg Stern telephones that Noske<sup>[15]</sup> has been made city commander. Cannon shots can be heard, but still rather sporadically. Hans is in the city.

Tuesday, January 7, 1919

Cannon fire yesterday evening until late at night. Karl went into town. The shots came from a barracks in Köpenickerstraße.

A yawning void in front of the castle. Finds an old man selling the newspaper *Freiheit* [freedom]. Says quietly to Karl: "It was better under the emperor." Then he shouts loudly again: "Freiheit! Freiheit!"

Went to work in the studio. Back through the city because the trains were shut down. Crowds of excited people everywhere. At Alexanderplatz I saw a crowd of about 100 armed workers, some miserable, worn-out soldiers among them. The men were lean, gloomy, determined. Then adolescents.

Haase<sup>[16]</sup> has made attempts at mediation, but these are said to be unsuccessful.

Yesterday it was certainly believed that this situation could no longer drag on, that one way or another it would have to be decided, and today it is exactly the same.

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In the evening Hans wonders out loud: “Should I let myself be recruited for the government troops?” I ask him if he means with a weapon? He says yes.

Thursday, January 9, 1919

The shooting continues.

The electric light fails. The water supply is to be blocked because the waterworks are on strike. We have filled the whole tub.

In the evening Karl brings home the news that an independent has told him that on the following day there will be a large demonstration of workers of all 3 factions[17] for unification. Possibly over the heads of the leaders, if they cannot be brought to an agreement.

Hans comes back from the student assembly. Doesn't talk much about it, but it seems that he hasn't decided to volunteer – at least not yet. The socialist students have stayed away. The university is to remain closed until the end of all unrest, so that those who volunteer are not at a disadvantage again.

In the evening Karl, Hans and I sit down to read Kropotkin's[18] *French Revolution*. Bloch on the phone. Karl talks to him on the phone for 1 ½ hours.

Wednesday, January 15, 1919

The railroad workers are on strike today. Against Ebert-Scheidemann[19]. At the same time the subway train workers are striking for wage reasons. Laborious journey to the studio. Moabit cordoned off. The bridges guarded by soldiers with hand grenades. Searched for weapons.

Clear counter-revolutionary current. Circus Busch: Hoetzsch, Traub. Black-white-red flag is unveiled, „Heil Dir im Siegerkranz“ and „Deutschland, Deutschland [über alles]!“[20]

[...]

*Freedom* reports atrocious treatment of the captured Spartacists.

January 16, 1919

Outrageous and despicable murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. [21]

January 19, 1919

Sunday. Election day. Voted for the first time. Was with Karl. Hans was in the military hospital in the morning, then went alone later. He also voted for the first time.[22]

Had been looking forward to this day so much and now that it's here, once again indecision and a half-hearted feeling. Voted for the majority socialists. Not for the person Scheidemann, who was at the top of the list. But for the principle of majority socialism. My feeling is that I lean more to the left, but I can't vote for the Independents [USPD], if only because Eichhorn is nominated as a candidate.

Yesterday evening I met with Helene Stöcker, [Georg Friedrich] Nicolai, a lawyer at [Carl] Einstein's, to found a league for human rights.[23] Protest against the crude military dictatorship and the murder of the leaders. [...]

Saturday, January 25, 1919

Karl Liebknecht is buried today and with him 38 others who were shot. I was allowed to make a sketch of

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him and went to the morgue early. He was laid out in the mortuary next to the other coffins. Red flowers were placed around his bullet-riddled forehead, his face proud, his mouth slightly open and painfully contorted. A somewhat puzzled expression on his face. His hands laid side by side in his lap, a few red flowers on his white shirt. There were several other people there who were strangers to me. Karl, Hans, and Stan had come along. Stan was also drawing. I then went home with the drawings and tried to make a better composite drawing.

Lise has been in the city to follow the procession. The entire inner city was cordoned off. The huge demonstration procession led from the inner streets – White Guards everywhere – via Moabit to Bülowplatz. From there it was supposed to go on to Friedrichshain. Lise didn't go any further. From Friedrichshain the procession followed the coffins.

How petty and wrong all these measures are. If Berlin – a large part of Berlin – wants to bury its fallen, this is not a revolutionary matter. Even between battles there are hours of ceasefire to bury the dead. It is unworthy and provocative to militarily harass Liebkecht's followers while they are accompanying his body to the grave. And it is a sign of the government's weakness that it has to tolerate this.

While we were still in the morgue, an old proletarian woman came in. She asked if she could see the body again. What a lot of emotion follows these coffins. Stan says she is now sometimes approached by people from the Spartacus group. The other day a young woman grabbed her hand: "Do you remember how we stormed the *Vorwärts* offices?" A scattered community, says Stan. A scattered community in hiding, fleeing.

Karl saw the whole procession. Staggering in its massiveness and the uniform expression.

Stan was in the churchyard. They are buried in a mass grave. An empty coffin for Rosa Luxemburg next to Liebkecht. [Luise] Zietz, [Adolf] Hoffmann, [Paul] Levi, [Rudolf] Breitscheid spoke. What agony this whole public affair caused Liebkecht's wife! She fainted.

A crowd around the grave. One pushed the other away, squabbling over places.[\[24\]](#)

January 27, 1919

[...]

Yesterday I voted for the Prussian parliament together with Karl. Years of fighting against the bad old electoral system and now that we have a completely liberal one, voting is dull.

March 4, 1919

General strike here in Berlin too. The demands are political in nature and relate above all to recognition of the workers' and soldiers' councils. In addition, the release of all political prisoners, including Radek.[\[25\]](#) Conversion of the military courts into civilian courts.

The following are not on strike: doctors, pharmacies, electricity, waterworks, food.

Looting starts as soon as the strike begins. In our neighborhood three stores were looted. A sight today in Danziger Straße: a large crowd in front of a looted jewelry store. Opposite, at the bench, a young soldier in his field gray uniform is playing the organ grinder. One of his arms is broken and he keeps shaking his head convulsively, his long blond hair flying around. It suddenly flashed through my mind how miserable and sad things are in Germany.

Tonight, the goldsmith Neumann downstairs[\[26\]](#) was burgled and robbed. The Neumanns are running around the house wailing, pulling all the bells. Hans comes, phones the police station. They can't send

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anyone, only four soldiers were there. They come, but they seem to be unarmed and they arrive too late. Shooting in the meantime, cries for help. That same night there is still a lot of shooting, there seems to have been a lot of looting. And a few hours later, the looted goods are dumped in Weinmeisterstraße. The police don't dare go there anymore.

March 15, 1919

The unrest is now over, but the state of siege and martial law have not yet been lifted. The officially certified horror stories about Spartacist atrocities in Lichtenberg have for the most part been exposed as lies. They have achieved their purpose, the establishment of martial law.

[...]

## NOTES

[1] See Kollwitz's charcoal sketch "Revolution 1918."

[2] Bund Neues Vaterland, a large pacifist organization.

[3] Helene Stöcker was a prominent feminist and pacifist.

[4] Kollwitz's friend Constance "Stan" Harding-Krayl

[5] Zadek was active in one of Berlin's leading Jewish community education centers

[6] Kollwitz's husband.

[7] This referred to a "Council of Intellectual Workers," an analog of the Workers-and-Soldiers Councils that were spreading across the country at the time to reorganize German society along socialist lines.

[8] Letter reprinted on p. 844, ed.

[9] Simon Katzenstein.

[10] Julius Hoyer, a friend of the family.

[11] Edward Mandell House was an American diplomat who helped draft Wilson's 14-point program and conceive of the League of Nations; he later led the U.S. delegation at the Versailles Peace Conference. Rathenau had written an open letter to him, published in *Vorwärts* on December 7. He was known as "Colonel House," although he possessed that rank only as an honorary title.

[12] Friedrich Ebert represented the center-left majority Social Democrats, and Karl Liebknecht represented the radical-left Spartacists, who oriented themselves closer to the Bolsheviks.

[13] Erich Ludendorff was Germany's de facto wartime leader from 1916 to 1918 and a main contributor to the longevity of the bloodshed.

[14] Both of them far-left newspapers because revolutionaries had seized Berlin's publishing presses.

[15] Gustav Noske was the SPD defense minister, who took incredibly forceful action against the revolutionaries.

[16] Hugo Haase was a USPD politician who co-chaired Germany's first provisional government, along with Ebert, after the November 9 revolution.

[17] i.e. SPD, USPD, and KPD/Spartacists.

[18] Peter Kropotkin, a Russian anarchist and writer, first published his history of the French Revolution in 1893.

[19] i.e. against the provisional government at the time, led solely by the center-left SPD.

[20] Otto Hoetzsch and Gottfried Traub were both far-right politicians of the DNVP; the black-white-red flag was the former Imperial German one; and both the song titles were mainstays of the far right.

[21] Communist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered on January 15, 1919, by far-right officers of the Freikorps.

[22] The election for a National Assembly to draft a new German constitution allowed women to

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vote for the first time.

[23] The pacifist organization Bund neues Vaterland only officially renamed itself the Deutsche Liga für Menschenrechte in 1922.

[24] See Kollwitz's woodcut *memorial sheet for Karl Liebknecht* (1919).

[25] Communist revolutionary Karl Radek.

[26] The Kollwitz's downstairs neighbor.

Source: Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz. East Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag, 1989, pp. 378–88, 390–93, 395–404, 406,409–12, 417, 419–421, 844.

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