

The STAB-IN-THE-BACK  
MYTH and the FALL of  
the WEIMAR REPUBLIC

A History in Documents  
and Visual Sources



Edited by GEORGE S. VASCIK and MARK R. SADLER

B L O O M S B U R Y

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*Edited by George S. Vascik  
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*For our mentors*

*Jay W. Baird*

*and*

*John Dolibois*

*For her tireless help and support*

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# PREFACE

The Stab-in-the-Back Myth—in its many manifestations—had a profound and pernicious impact on the course of Germany’s first democracy. Scholars reflecting on German history between 1919 and 1933 are unanimous that the demonization and search for scapegoats that grew out of Germany’s defeat in the First World War colored political debate and solidified anti-Republican sentiment among Germans inhabiting both the political Right and Left. Just as the centenary of the beginning of the Great War prompted a flood of reflection and debate on the origins of the war, so it can be expected that 2018 will bring renewed focus on the war’s end.

This reader is designed to place a tool in the hands of instructors seeking to lead students in a discussion of the Stab-in-the-Back. We have adopted a “choose it and use it” philosophy that affords instructors maximum flexibility. We have broken what were originally three sections into twelve easily assigned chapters. Each chapter begins with a contextualization of the documents. At the end of each documents section, we have included “sources for further reading” that can be used as a launch pad for research papers, analytical charts and tables where applicable, and document-based thought questions that can serve as the basis for reflective essays or group discussions. We have also designed a website (<http://www.dolchstosslegende.com>) to supplement (but not supplant) the use of this reader. In this way, we hope to expand the breadth of our offerings and create a venue for materials (especially visual) that could not fit within the word constraints of this volume.

Authors assembling a reader on the Stab-in-the-Back have a wealth of primary documents at their disposal, most in the German language, if one has the time and language skill to access them. First and foremost are the eight published volumes of documents created for the Subcommittee of the *Reichstag* to examine the causes of the collapse in 1918.<sup>1</sup> The Subcommittee held 104 formal hearings (most of them not open to the public) between 1919 and 1927, collected masses of documentation, took affidavits, solicited long depositions from leading experts with vastly differing political perspectives, and invited members of parliament to debate the value of the evidence. We read through the entire corpus, selected and translated extracts that we thought were particularly useful.

We were assisted in this effort by four sets of published documents selected by Ralph Haswell Lutz, for years the director of the Hoover Institution on

War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University.<sup>2</sup> *Collapse of the German Empire* contains excerpts from the officially authorized translation of the Subcommittee report. In some cases, most notably in Chapter 5, we have incorporated these translations into the text. Otherwise, we used *Collapse* to select documents from the German edition of the Subcommittee report, which we then translated ourselves.

We similarly used *The Fall of the German Empire* to lead us to contemporary German newspaper sources, which we then, unless otherwise indicated, translated from the original. This process took us to newspaper collections at the *Institut für Zeitungsforschung* Dortmund, the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin* and the Library of Congress. We also acquired numerous editions via interlibrary loan through Rentschler Library at Miami University.<sup>3</sup>

Although we have used the month-day-year system in our text, where a different format appeared in our documents we retained that out of fidelity to our sources. While we translated our German news sources into contemporary English, we have retained archaic forms (aero-plane, to-day) found in the English language sources. For these, we selected *The Times*, the *New York Times*, the *New York World*, the *Washington Evening Star*, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and several newspapers from the Midwestern German belt. We found this to be a special learning experience on the quality of contemporary sources. The reporting in *The Times* was uniformly detailed and entertaining. When students read these selections, they will immediately recognize that they are reading a quality paper that devoted considerable resources to following events in Germany. The *New York Times*, on the other hand, had clearly not emerged as the American “paper of record.” It frequently relied upon the Associated Press feed for its news coverage, only rarely dropping in a “special correspondent” to give their stories “local color.” Unlike the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, frequently published reports from correspondents of the Tribune News Service that were always insightful and clearly written by native German speakers. We also included articles extracted from county newspapers where large numbers of German-Americans lived. These newspapers frequently published articles transmitted across the United Press wire by Carl Groat, who later went on to edit the *Cincinnati Post* and play an important role in the Scripps newspaper chain.

Some instructors might be troubled by the relative absence of non-elite voices from this reader. This was intentional on our part. Recent translations from German of works by Bernd Ullrich and Benjamin Ziemann would make their inclusion redundant. We refer readers interested in this perspective to those works. Moreover, in the course of its investigation, the *Reichstag* Subcommittee collected a raft of letters and diaries from soldiers at the front. The Social Democratic Party, which collected similar material, opened their archives to the investigation. We will be posting these on our website as they become available and we have time to translate them.

We have also mounted other materials (such as documents relating to the infamous *Judenzählung*, the census of Jewish soldiers' service in the war), and speculative mini-chapters on our website (i.e., did Ludendorff suffer a nervous breakdown in September 1918) that have less documentation but are inherently interesting. Those interested in exploring the voluminous German-language literature are referred to the site as well.

## A note on our use of German terminology and capitalizations

We have used the German term *Dolchstoß* in the text interchangeably with Stab-in-the-Back and *Dolchstoßlegende* with Stab-in-the-Back Myth. We have retained the German symbol for “double s”—ß—because it is uniformly used in contemporary sources and the German language secondary literature. On our website URL we have dropped the “double s” in favor of *Dolchstoss* because of the difficulty students might experience if their web browser is not properly set to display German symbols.

We have attempted to follow the *Chicago Manual of Style* rules for capitalizations, using Collapse when referring specifically to the phenomenon the Germans universally referred to as the *Zusammenbruch*. We have capitalized Subcommittee throughout when referring to the 4th subcommittee of the *Reichstag* investigative committee on the causes and end of the war. When Nationalist is spelled with a capital “N” it refers to members specifically of the German National People's Party; when the word is used with a lowercase “n,” it refers to the broader bodies of nationalists.

Translating the words for prejudice toward and hatred of Jews poses a particular set of problems. Current English language usage suggests a preference for antisemitic over the previously ubiquitous anti-Semitic. When using the term, we use antisemitic as an adjective and Antisemitic as a proper noun. We have also most frequently translated the German word *völkisch* as antisemitic, although that term conveys a whole set of notions and its own distinct political style.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors divided their tasks as follows: both authors selected the documents used in this volume. Vascik wrote the text. He chose (and where necessary translated) the documents in Chapters 1–4, the second half of Chapters 6 and 7–11, chose the majority of the illustrations and created the tables and graphs. Sadler selected and translated the documents in Chapters 5 and the first half of Chapter 6. He chose Figures 10.1–10.4 and populated the ancillary website, which includes his translations of documents concerning Hitler’s experience of the Great War, the NSDAP and the *Dolchstoß*, and historians on the Stab-in-the-Back. Both authors collaborated on the bibliography.

Librarians and archivists at the *Institut für Zeitungsforschung* Dortmund, the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*, the University of Heidelberg Digital Collection, the Imperial War Museum (London), the Library of Congress, and the US National Archives provided invaluable support. Polly Whitaker, Hannah Radford, and Mark Shores at Rentschler Library, Miami University, deserve special mention for their assistance in tracking down and acquiring sources. Connie Webb was always eager to lend a hand in the reams of copying this project required.

We would like to thank the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University for permission to use *The Fall of the German Empire, 1914–1918* and *The Causes of the German Collapse in 1918: Sections of the Officially Authorized Report of the Commission of the German Constituent Assembly and of the German Reichstag, 1919*, both edited by Ralph Haswell Lutz. The scholars who read our proposal for Bloomsbury Publishing made numerous useful comments and recommendations. Richard Levy read the entire manuscript with great attention to detail and offered a plethora of suggestions that we have integrated into the text. Jay Baird provided encouragement throughout the project and read the final manuscript. Martin Burke read drafts and offered invaluable editorial advice. Our thanks as well to Rhodri Mogford, Emma Goode, and the staff of Bloomsbury Publishing for their support in this endeavor.

Lastly, we must thank Charlene C. York, who put aside her own work for six weeks to assist us during a critical phase of the project. She meticulously edited footnotes and bibliography, proofread the text, and helped secure permissions. Her superior organizational skills helped us bring this volume to a successful conclusion.

# Introduction

Since the origin of our discipline, historians have wondered why wars begin. From Herodotus's "*historia*" of how the Greeks and the Persians came into conflict to the contemporary debate over the origins of the First World War, we have tried to understand how the natural conflicts between nations and peoples escalate into war. No doubt this is because of the human toll that wars inevitably exact, a toll that seems to rise with each advance in technology. The ways that wars end is consequential as well. What price do the winners exact from the losers? Loss of sovereignty? The extinction of a people and culture? And what price do the victors pay in terms of their own future well-being? If it is rightfully said that the seeds of the next war are planted with the conclusion of the first, what does that say about the proper way to make peace?

One might argue that the way the Great War ended for Germany generated a disaster that was unprecedented in European history, not least because of the different ways that Germans came to understand their defeat. Press censorship had assured that during the war, civilians were unable to accurately assess the true situation; body counts were distorted, labor troubles and food shortages troubles—for the most part a phenomenon of the large cities—were minimized, and victory was near. Convinced by military propaganda that their country was fighting a defensive war and that the German army was victorious in the field, the majority of the German populace found the turn of events in October 1918 psychologically devastating. They had suffered physical deprivation and sacrificed loved ones in what all agreed was an unprecedented war effort. There had been political debates about war aims; strikes, bread riots, and rumblings of discontent for eighteen months, but still defeat came as a shock.

As the immediacy of the traumatic events of November 1918—January 1919 receded into memory, Germans of all political persuasions and faiths needed to create a personal narrative that could explain what they had witnessed. Their conclusions varied, as had their lived experience. For many, a sense of betrayal took root. At one extreme, supporters of the imperial regime who thought that the army and navy had been stabbed in the back by domestic traitors; at the other, Communists and Independent Social Democrats who believed that Friedrich Ebert and the Majority Social Democrats had betrayed the cause of proletarian revolution. Across society

in endless permutations, people came to wonder whether—as Hagen in Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* had stabbed Siegfried in the back—their own individual hopes had somehow been similarly betrayed.

Few people in February 1919 would have reflected back on the events of the preceding five months and not been able to find indicators, whether contained in letters from loved ones at the front, handbills covertly distributed on street corners and in factories or the disturbing news that a loved one had fallen on the field of battle. Fewer still could have been unaware of mutineers.<sup>1</sup> Units that had maintained discipline and marched in orderly fashion to the Rhine bridgeheads melted away as large numbers of front line troops did not even wait to be formally demobilized, a process complete with discharge letter, a last pay and a new suit of civilian clothes. Those trains that were not overloaded with returning wounded and ranks hanging from the side were piloted by the feared “red marine” mutineers, carrying revolution from the North Sea ports far inland and raising the red flag over innumerable city halls. Even in the sleepest parish rectories, young children feared the coming of the “fearsome Spartacists.”<sup>2</sup>

In his review of Boris Barth’s comprehensive work on Stab-in-the-Back Myths, Laird Easton quotes Claude Levi-Strauss that “The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction.”<sup>3</sup> For German nationalists who believed the military’s propaganda of a victorious army, it was difficult to comprehend how all the Fatherland’s sacrifice had come to naught. From seeds already planted during the political debates of 1917 and 1918 over strikes in the war industries and radical Socialist agitation against the war, the thought emerged that the German army must have been betrayed by enemies of the imperial regime and the “customary moral order.”<sup>4</sup> In its crudest form, one version of the nationalist Stab-in-the-Back Myth held that the “victorious” German army had been defeated, not by the Allies, but by treason on the Home Front.<sup>5</sup>

Within the Nationalist camp, however, there were a startling number of variations on the *Dolchstoß* theme. “Moderate” *Dolchstoß* proponents, such as Hermann von Kuhl (second in command of the 8th Army Corps and a respected military historian), believed that the German army could no longer win the war by late summer 1918—because of a combination of Allied manpower superiority and the “poisoning” of the army’s morale through revolutionary propaganda—but insisted that it could have withdrawn to a more defensible line where it might have forced the Allies to consider honorable terms to end the war.<sup>6</sup> According to the German Admiralty, the hitherto ineffective High Seas Fleet could have sailed forth and defeated the British navy in the Channel, winning the war, if ranks and Communist “red marines” in Kiel had not mutinied.<sup>7</sup> Nationalists, supporters of the imperial regime and Supreme Command generals like Erich Ludendorff blamed a range of politicians, union officials, and Jews to varying degrees at varying times to different audiences.<sup>8</sup> The most radical adherents of *Dolchstoß* Theory, led by pre-war Antisemites and the radical

right wing newspaper *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, blamed Jews and a Jewish conspiracy for Germany's defeat.<sup>9</sup>

What makes matters more complex was that there were a seemingly endless number of backs—not just nationalist—being stabbed. One might be tempted to dub this a phenomenon of “every man his *Dolchstoß*.” The most prominent alternative *Dolchstoß* laid the blame for the way that events unfolded in 1918/19 on the shoulders of Social Democratic leaders Friedrich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann, and Gustav Noske who, rather than support the autogenerated and authentic workers' and soldiers' councils as an alternative source of power to maintain the revolutionary regime, chose the path of parliamentary republicanism. In this interpretation, Ebert entered into a secret, sinister bargain with the forces of the Right (fragments of the old officer corps and newly created *Freikorps* units) to suppress first the red marines in December 1918 and then the Spartacists in January 1919.<sup>10</sup>

All told, the contested memory of the war's end had a profound impact on Weimar politics. It was a central issue in the “victory” of the “black-white-red” (anti-Republican) parties in the 1924 elections. It divided the German National People's Party and made its participation in either “Bourgeois” or “Grand Coalition” cabinets problematic. It tore apart the Social Democratic movement and ultimately strengthened the anti-Republican Communist party.<sup>11</sup>

Given the intensity of the Stab-in-the-Back debate between 1919 and 1933, and the use that the Nazis made of “their” version of the *Dolchstoß*, it is perhaps surprising that the concept largely disappeared after 1945, living on only in the apologetic memoirs of German generals seeking to explain why they failed to support the military resistance to Hitler and why they stood by the regime to the bitter end. The topic was clearly not a priority for the Marxist historians of the German Democratic Republic, nor did it seem to excite their bourgeois counterparts in the West, many of whom had survived the terrible “Brown Years” and wished to return to “pure” history. It was only in 1963 that simultaneous extended essays were published on the topic, one in the Federal Republic and the other in the GDR. Friedrich Freiherr Hiller von Gaertringen (historian and son-in-law of Weimar-era Nationalist politician Cuno von Westarp) published what was in retrospect an extremely balanced account of the origins of *Dolchstoß* theory, its permutations in the course of a generation and its impact on the Nazi-era German officer corps.<sup>12</sup> More frequently cited in English-language scholarship has been an intense intellectual excavation of the origins and uses of the *Dolchstoß* concept written by Joachim Petzold, a Marxist scholar at the Institute for History of the Academy of Science in (East) Berlin.<sup>13</sup>

There the discussion stood for a generation. The *Dolchstoßlegende* was a topic of instruction in the schools of both German states, as it is still in a unified Germany. The general contours of the contemporary popular consensus are clear. The German army had clearly lost the war by the fall of 1918 and could no longer continue. The loss and deprivation

brought about by the war gave rise to popular discontent (particularly in the cities and among factory workers) that was increasingly radicalized and revolutionary. The imperial government collapsed under the weight of Allied military pressure, American demands, and events that outpaced anyone's ability to control them. This consensus view—dramatized in “*Der Gewaltfrieden*,” a two-episode television documentary produced in 2010 by “*Bayerischer Rundfunk*,” is flexible enough to leave room for variation and emphasis.<sup>14</sup> Some prefer to focus on Ludendorff's actions, the Ebert-Groener Pact, or the insurrection of January 1919 without full reference to the context of those events.<sup>15</sup>

In the past twenty years, aspects of the events of 1918 and 1919 have been the subject of voluminous specialist and popular literatures. Of the breakdown on the army alone, Bernd Ullrich, Benjamin Ziemann, Wolfgang Kruse, John Horn, and Christopher Jahr have greatly expanded our scope of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> By 2000, sufficient scholarship had been generated that Gerd Krumeich, one of the most respected historians in the debate on the origins of the Great War, published a new overview of literature on the *Dolchstoß*.<sup>17</sup> Krumeich's essay appeared, interestingly enough, on the eve of a new era, when the Myth itself would once more become the topic of scholarly note. The year 2003 witnessed the publication of Boris Barth's professorial thesis (*Habilitationsschrift*) completed at the University of Constance and Rainer Sammet's dissertation at the University of Freiburg.<sup>18</sup> Barth's work is an incredibly dense 560 pages that has not found universal applause from English-language reviewers, but it is an important milestone in a revived consideration of the *Dolchstoß* question.<sup>19</sup> Barth has also published an essay that details the main points of this work.<sup>20</sup> Sammet is some ways breaks new ground through a detailed study of discussions of the Stab-in-the-Back through a multitude of national, regional, and local newspapers and posits that the issue fell from public notice after 1925.

In its contours, the estimation of the Stab-in-the-Back Myth in the English-speaking world is similar to the general German popular understanding. Several recent examples illustrate this. In *Weimar Germany. Promise and Tragedy*, Eric Weitz has written, “Avoiding public responsibility for its own actions, the military would quickly claim that Germany was robbed of its victory by traitors at home, the Social Democrats and Jews and even Catholics like Erzberger. The infamous legend, which would be used to stunning effect by Adolf Hitler, was launched even before the armistice had been signed.”<sup>21</sup> Richard Evans, in his widely read *The Coming of Nazi Germany*, asserts that

The harshness of the Armistice terms was thrown into sharp relief by the fact that many Germans refused to believe that their armed forces had actually been defeated. Very quickly, aided and abetted by senior army officers themselves, a fateful myth gained currency among large

sections of public opinion in the centre and on the right of the political spectrum .... [this myth held] that the army had been the victim of a “secret, planned, demagogic campaign” which had doomed all its heroic efforts to failure in the end.<sup>22</sup>

The importance of the Stab-in-the-Back Myth is not in dispute. Larry Eugene Jones calls the Stab-in-the-Back legend, “along with Germany’s defeat, the threat of Bolshevism ... and runaway inflation, a significant factor in a veritable explosion of anti-Semitism.”<sup>23</sup> For Richard Bessel, “The image of the demobilized hero of the trenches coming home to an unappreciative, disrespectful, scornful home-front formed an important element in the political vocabulary of the Weimar Republic, particularly on the Right.”<sup>24</sup>

While Anglo-American scholars agree that the *Dolchstoßlegende* played an important role in German memory of the Great War and the unraveling of the Weimar Republic, as late as five years ago one needed to refer to the German literature and possess a strong reading knowledge of that language to explore the specifics.<sup>25</sup> That too has changed with the new century. Jeffrey Verhey has written a field-changing book on the myth of the spirit of August, the surge of patriotic feeling the Germans were long thought to have experienced at the start of the Great War.<sup>26</sup> The scholarship of Belinda Davis, Scott Stephenson, and Thomas Weber has expanded their specific fields in new and innovative ways.<sup>27</sup> Nor has impact of the war on the intensification of antisemitism been overlooked, as books by Tim Grady, Peter Applebaum, and Brian Crim testify.<sup>28</sup>

This growing wave of specialist literature has sparked a series of English-language translations that should be very useful to undergraduates who do not have grounding in German. This is particularly the case in the work of Benjamin Ziemann, one the most prolific and innovative specialists in the field.<sup>29</sup> Ziemann’s collaboration with Bernd Ullrich in the publication of diaries and letters that German soldiers wrote home from the field should spark thoughtful work.<sup>30</sup> Students interested in the revolution also benefit from the translation of Pierre Broué’s Marxist analysis of the revolution, Ralf Hoffrogge’s biography of Revolutionary Shop Steward leader Richard Müller, and Gabriel Kuhn’s set of documents on the council movement.<sup>31</sup>

For the average American university student who is asked to research the *Dolchstoß* and follows the now current adage, “when in doubt, Google it out,” the pickings are scarce. If they search through several screens—past Wikipedia and assorted dross—they will find Harold Marcuse’s review of Barth’s *Dolchstoßlegenden*. Marcuse has created a colorful, interesting page that not only displays his review (and German-language reviews of the book) but also inserted footnotes, illustrations, Internet links, and a short bibliography of works on the Stab-in-the-Back. He also adds images of the posters that Rainer Sammet included in his dissertation. All in all, it is a good place to begin serious study.<sup>32</sup> He does not, however, take his readers to document collections. This a small quibble really when one considers

the innovative nature of the posting and Marcuse is to be commended for e-publishing such an important resource.

This reader has been written in such a way as to aid instructors and students needing access to the primary documents at the root of the *Dolchstoß* debate. We have translated chosen documents from German that we think are helpful and representative. Where English translations of our documents already existed, we have retranslated them to suit modern English usage. Throughout we have indicated where additional documents can be found and what secondary sources students might find useful in developing a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

In the first two chapters, we discuss Germany's inability to feed its own people in the course of the Great War and the impact that failure had on the war effort and civilian morale. Chapter 3 looks at growing labor unrest within the war economy. The focus of Chapter 4 is on the nationwide munitions workers strike that occurred in January 1918 on the eve of the last great German offensive. This strike would become an important event in the *Dolchstoß* narratives of both the nationalist right and the communist left. It was a particularly intense memory for Adolf Hitler, not only embittering him toward the betrayal at home, but also influenced his elaborate attempts to forestall a reoccurrence domestic unrest during the Third Reich. Chapter 5 presents a series of documents on the military collapse and Chapter 6 deals with the revolutionary events of November 1918–January 1919 that were at the center of later contestation.

The following five chapters explore the creation of the nationalist Myth. One of the foundation stones of the nationalist *Dolchstoßlegende* was that “an English general” was the first to recognize that the German army—undefeated in the field—was brought low by the collapse of the Home Front. We explore the origins of this lie and suggest how it might have taken root in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 focuses on a seminal moment in the creation of the *Dolchstoßlegende*: the testimony that Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg gave in November 1919 before the initial *Reichstag* Committee created to investigate the origins, conduct, and conclusion of the Great War. In his brief testimony, only days after the one year anniversary of the Armistice, the most respected man in Germany declared that the German army had been stabbed in the back, although he refused to name the guilty parties.

Subsequent to this botched initial phase when most of the leading figures in the imperial government were called to testify, the *Reichstag* parties decided that it would be best to set up four separate subcommittees to investigate the discrete issues involved. The fourth subcommittee was charged with investigating the military and internal causes of the Collapse. It met a total of 104 times, mostly in closed session, and only issued its final conclusions in November 1927. In Chapter 11, we have translated abridged versions of selected depositions, testimony, and the final reports.

We argue that by the time this authoritative report was issued, most minds were made up as to whether there was a Stab-in-the-Back, whose

back was stabbed and who did the stabbing. Central to the formation of the various *Dolchstoßlegenden* were two high-profile trials. In Chapter 9, we present documents from the defamation lawsuit brought by Friedrich Ebert, the president of the republic, against Erwin Rothardt, publisher of a minor antisemitic newspaper in Prussian Saxony. What began as a trial against Rothardt's libelous remarks was transformed into a circus orchestrated by Nationalist circles in which Ebert had to prove that he was not a traitor because he participated in the January 1918 strike of Berlin munitions workers. The decision of the county court the Ebert had legally committed treason, based on a tortured reading of the law and evidence that was certain to be overturned on appeal, was fodder for the Nationalist claims that the Social Democrats had betrayed the Fatherland. An unexpected consequence of the trial was that President Ebert, having delayed surgery for an appendicitis attack so as not to seem that he was seeking public sympathy, died of peritonitis six weeks after the verdict was announced.

Chapter 10 recounts a second infamous *Dolchstoß* trial that took place in Munich in the autumn of 1925. In the spring of 1924, Paul Nicholas Cossmann published two volumes of virulently nationalistic, antisemitic essays on the Stab-in-the-Back and continued thereafter to publicize them in his monthly *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*. When the editor of Munich's Social Democratic newspaper accused Cossmann of "historical falsification" (throwing in libelous references to Cossmann's Jewish heritage), Cossmann initiated legal action. The three-and-a-half week trial featured testimony from former German military figures (especially from the navy), Social Democratic participants in the events of 1918 and "experts" who had prepared depositions for the investigative Subcommittee. The highpoint of the trial was provided by the testimony of former general Wilhelm Groener, who revealed that Independent Socialist leader Hugo Haase promised that he would work against revolution and do his best to prevent strikes in the war industries. More significantly, Groener detailed his agreement with Friedrich Ebert to provide military support for the Council of People's Deputies if Ebert dismissed the Independent members of the Council and suppressed the Communists. This "Groener-Ebert Pact" was seen by advocates of the leftist *Dolchstoßlegende* as proof positive that Ebert "betrayed" the revolution. We conclude, in Chapter 12, with a discussion of the ways in which the memory of 1918 impacted the Weimar years. We contend that the issue faded into the background in the period of stabilization that followed 1925, only to resurface as a keystone of Nazi propaganda with the onset of the economic depression.



# 1

## The Food Problem

### Institutional context

The German Empire (*Reich*) was a federal union of twenty-seven states. The states represented a broad range of forms: kingdoms, principalities, grand duchies, duchies, and free cities. Each possessed its own laws, legislatures, and army, as well as its own internal system of administration. The states ceded control over foreign affairs, currency, and limited areas of lawmaking and taxation to the *Reich*, but retained broad powers over health, education, transportation, and agriculture. They also retained control of the most lucrative sources of tax revenue—such as the land tax—since prior to the First World War and the founding of the Weimar Republic; the *Reich* did not assess direct taxes. As we will see in the documents below, this system of dispersed control created problems for the central administration of scarce resources.

The most powerful state within this system was the Kingdom of Prussia, which accounted for two-thirds of both the Empire's land mass and its population and its greatest concentration of wealth and industrial production. The Prussian legislature was firmly under the control of the ruling classes as its members were elected by a weighted franchise that favored wealthy landed and business élites at the expense of the middle and lower classes. The inequity of this system would emerge as a major complaint of striking workers in Berlin in 1917.

At the imperial level, power was symbolized in the person of the Emperor (*Kaiser*), who was simultaneously King of Prussia. The Chancellor and the civilian government that he led were responsible only to the Emperor and did not require a parliamentary majority. Under the constitution created by Otto von Bismarck, federal legislative power was vested in two institutions—the *Bundesrat* (or council of state governments) and the Imperial Diet (the *Reichstag*). Each member state had a foreign minister who represented his state's interest in the *Bundesrat*, which initiated most federal legislation and validated all laws passed by the imperial legislature. Members of the *Reichstag* were elected by universal, adult (over 25 years

of age) male suffrage. It had very little power over the conduct of the war. *Reichstag* approval of “war credits” was necessary so that the government could finance the war and while it did hold hearings on aspect of the war effort (and on July 19, 1917, passed a resolution calling for a negotiated end to the war), it had next to no direct input over the conduct of the conflict and was mostly kept in the dark by both civilian and military authorities.

## The food problem

In January 1919, Germans went to the polls to elect a National Assembly charged with writing a constitution for the new republic that would replace the disintegrated imperial regime. Among the many tasks this constituent assembly undertook was determining the circumstances under which Germany went to war in 1914 and why the war effort and the imperial regime so spectacularly collapsed in November 1918. It set up a committee for this purpose, with a special Subcommittee charged with investigating the collapse. While the Subcommittee members and the experts from whom they heard testimony sharply disagreed on the causes of the military collapse, they were unanimous in defining the internal causes. The members shared the view that in August 1914, all Germans (save a handful of radical Social Democrats) were united in the defense of the Fatherland in the face of Russian aggression, a phenomenon contemporaries referred to as the “Spirit of August.” As part of this *Augusterlebnis*, the political parties agreed to suspend their disagreements for the duration and work in harmony to win the war, the so-called domestic truce or *Burgfrieden*.

Reflecting upon when and why this unity began to fracture, the Subcommittee was convinced that domestic unity began to fray when the government encountered difficulties supplying the civilian population with food. “Under the influence of war profiteering and serious abuses in the food supply,” the deputies agreed, “the idea of class antagonism and the will to class struggle rose once again among the working masses .... Discontent grew with the unexpectedly long duration of the war and through the massive loss of life and strength due to the [Allied] blockade.”<sup>1</sup>

Both the food problem and the blockade came as a surprise to German war planners on the General Staff. The famous Schlieffen Plan for fighting a war on two fronts was predicated on the concept of a short war. Consideration did not have to be taken of the impact of mass militarization on the labor force or on the supply of food necessary to sustain military and civilian needs. Nor did the planners imagine that, if hostilities lasted beyond the expected three months, the British navy would be able to enforce a blockade and deny Germany essential food imports from the United States and Argentina.