CHAPTER 3

Opposition to the Burgfrieden: 1914–18

The Great War divided the international labour movement in ways that were neither foreseen nor straightforward. Workers had to choose between preserving the strength of the organisations that they had laboriously built over generations and the slow realisation that this very strength was being abused to legitimise a global massacre. These difficulties were further compounded by massive war propaganda: as Müller’s example shows below, even a socialist worker had to struggle to emancipate himself from it. And under wartime censorship, propaganda was the only ‘information’ available. Splitting with their organisations did not even occur to workers who had been sceptical of or opposed to the war from the beginning: they continued to believe that only collective action would give them strength, including the strength to oppose the war – after all, that was what the labour movement had always been about. So organised workers did not leave the labour movement so much as begin to build opposition networks within it. This chapter tells the story of those that Richard Müller and his comrades in the DMV metal workers’ union built during the Burgfrieden, the political truce between the social democrats and the government that subordinated the German labour movement to the ‘national interests’ of the Reich when war broke out.1

‘The Great Betrayal’

The onset of the World War did not come as a surprise to the European labour movement. By the time Otto von Bismarck left office in 1890, the system of European alliances that the famous chancellor had so carefully devised was starting to crumble. Since the German Reich was established in 1871, Bismarck had used artful diplomacy to smooth over foreign policy conflicts between the established industrial powers, England and France, and the rapidly developing upstart Germany. He had always pursued balance between the powers to

1 ‘Burgfrieden’ – literally ‘peace inside the castle’, a metaphor in which the German nation was described as a medieval stronghold under siege, in which all inhabitants needed to cooperate against the enemy. References to the middle ages were typical for German propaganda during the First World War.
prevent the destruction of his handiwork by the British, French, or Russian empires.\(^2\)

The collapse of the Bismarckian system is often traced to the blustery, sometimes decidedly undiplomatic foreign policy of the young Kaiser Wilhelm II who, unlike his predecessor, did not delegate state affairs to a strong chancellor but took charge of them personally. In fact, the crisis had deeper roots than that: it could be traced to the decline of British-dominated free-trade capitalism, which had lost ground to a new structure of self-contained, competing power blocs.\(^3\) While these blocs initially competed for their share of the globe through diplomatic means and without resorting to war among themselves, as in the Berlin Conference of 1884, relations became increasingly tense around the turn of the century. The First Moroccan Crisis of 1905–6, the Second Moroccan Crisis of 1911, German support for Austria’s annexations in the Russian-dominated Balkans, as well as the controversy around the Baghdad Railway were all expressions of an expansionist Germany that was not averse to confrontation, something that the other imperial powers could scarcely tolerate. Germany was beginning to weigh on their spheres of influence and their markets.

The European labour movement understood this situation and said continually that it would not tolerate a world war. SPD founders Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel had vehemently opposed the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1 and Bebel, who was the head of the SPD until he died in 1913, established an anti-war stance as a constant in Social Democratic foreign policy. This approach was accepted internationally as well. The congress of the Second International in Basel in 1912 had signalled opposition to the looming war and urged international proletarian solidarity to counter it. As late as July 1914, the SPD’s main organ, *Vorwärts*, published an inflammatory lead article on its front page that ended with the appeal, ‘We don’t want war! Down with war! Long live the international brotherhood of nations!’\(^4\)

Almost all of Europe’s socialist parties reversed course in August 1914, however, and supported their respective countries’ entry into the war – each seeing it as a war of self-defence. In Germany, the constitutional monarchy was defending itself against Russian autocracy; in France, the Republic was defending itself against German reaction. Everyone was defending his homeland

---

\(^2\) For more on the German Empire’s foreign policy, see Ullrich 1997, 223–63 as well Rosenberg 1991a, especially Chapter 1.

\(^3\) See Arrighi 1994.

\(^4\) *Vorwärts*, July 25, 1914.