Conclusion: The Darkness of History

What is left of Richard Müller? Politically, there is no doubt that he was one of the most influential figures in the German labour movement between 1916 and 1921. But the fact that he is now almost completely unknown to the general public is a result of the nature and circumstances of his achievements as well as failures. Unlike Karl Liebknecht, Müller never became a legend on the left. Liebknecht was a man of big gestures, a risk-taker, a voluntarist, and revolutionary romantic. For him there was never anything but the forward march, the frontal assault; retreat was not an option. He died like he lived: in the thick of the movement, at the forefront of an uprising, and under fire from the counter-revolution. Hundreds of thousands of people attended his funeral procession and his grave remains an important place of pilgrimage for the left today.

But there were no dramatic gestures or great gambits in Müller’s career, nor did it end theatrically amid gunfire in a revolutionary tragedy, with a massive funeral procession forming the closing scene. He had emerged from the working class to become its leader. Such origins made him mindful of the limits of working-class endurance and he was never a risk-taker. The one occasion he ventured a big gesture – declaring that a national assembly would convene in revolutionary Germany ‘only over my dead body’1 at the general assembly of the Berlin worker’s councils on 19 November 1918 – he earned the ignominy of a derisive nickname, Leichenmüller (Corpse-Müller), that would pursue him to the end of his days. His withdrawal from the political stage came with a slow loss of political influence, a development that had started with the weakening of the Executive Council in late 1918. At some point, Richard Müller simply disappeared, leaving few traces of the rest of his life. Having emerged out of obscurity, he disappeared again into the darkness.

But like Liebknecht, with his grand gestures and tragic-heroic funeral, Müller also departed in a fitting way. Throughout his life, Müller had been absorbed with organisational work, work that was undone over and over again by the course of events. His was truly the fate of Sisyphus and in its face, even his remarkable persistence petered out and the dogged worker of the revolution was forgotten. The steep ups and downs of Müller’s political life were bound up with his being that very unusual thing in the European working-class movement: a working-class leader who rose through the institutions of the working-

1 Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, pp. 154 and 184.
class movement to assume leadership of it at a critical moment in history. Both Müller and Liebknecht failed along with their Revolution, which was crushed by violence and ruined by its own weaknesses and inconsistency. Both fought that verdict of history with all their strength as committed revolutionaries. Each failed in his characteristic way – one as a martyr, the other in oblivion.

Richard Müller had started his political career at the very bottom, as an orphan and a destitute apprentice who rose to become a union representative, chairman of the DMV agitation committee, and spokesman for all Berlin's lathe operators. Throughout his political life, Müller's finger remained on the political pulse of the working class and his revolutionary ardour was always attuned to the extent of its political ambition and the limits of its endurance. Detailed union work would characterise his career and his political modus operandi. Everything had to be organised and Richard Müller was good at that: that was why he rose to his positions of leadership. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards, a model for the combination of secrecy and mass influence, were also a product of his organisational talent. They too combined radicalism and pragmatism. Like their leader, the Stewards also refused to expose themselves to unnecessary danger, but when the time was right and everything was at stake, they struck without fear of personal consequences, consequences which could be considerable for these workers and their families. Many of the workers who were actively against the war did not live to see the German Revolution. They were conscripted into the army and lost their lives amid barbed wire and machine gun fire in some grey no man's land in Flanders or outside Verdun. Richard Müller was also threatened with that fate more than once and the unconditional support of his comrades was no small factor in his multiple escapes from military service.

While he may not have been a risk-taker, Richard Müller was able to take courageous action when necessary. It was not easy for him during the Great War to oppose the pro-war position of the union that was his political home. Many unionists preferred to put a good face on things and avoid the issue because pro-war union officials were released from military service starting in 1916. Breaking with accustomed practice was also not easy for Müller. He hesitated and wavered over and over, but not due to fear. Rather the hesitation and wavering arose from loyalty to the organisation. He wanted neither to betray nor abandon the Metalworkers Union where he had spent so much of his life. The union was his home, where his friends were. It was also his political identity. Despite, or maybe precisely because of, this extremely strong bond, when the time came, he opted to give up the form so as to better advance the spirit by building up the Stewards as a parallel working-class organisation. This and his later work for a communist unionism and the Red International