CHAPTER 3

Young Radicals

March 1920

These revolutions involved the organized as well as unorganized masses of workers, which created their own and new form of organization for action and control in the spontaneously-arising workers’ and soldier’s councils.¹

As Mattick’s involvement in the radical left escalated, so did the violence that surrounded him. What the left had anticipated and feared—that Majority Social Democratic encouragement of the Freikorps would result in a militaristic coup—came to pass. Several armed divisions overthrew the socialist-led coalition government in the so-named Kapp Putsch, titled after one of its ringleaders.² Although few military units knew of the plans in advance, most declared their neutrality by claiming that ‘troops do not fire on other troops’. The government was left without a means to defend itself, and it fled Berlin.

The Majority Social Democrats announced a general strike against the military takeover, an appeal that met with an instantaneous and widespread response not unlike the outpouring of activity that occurred in November 1918. As word of the strike circulated through Berlin, activists travelled from factory to factory, calling on employees to demonstrate. At Siemens, the machines ceased suddenly, and the factory complex emptied. Matters in Berlin were quite confused, and no one understood fully what was happening. Mattick witnessed one odd scene after another. In some places, the police fought against the putschists, but elsewhere it was protestors against police and putschists alike.

Twelve million employees joined the strike, including civil servants who had been restricted from unionisation previously but who now emerged as determined supporters of the democratic system. It was an impressive show of force, and it immediately brought the country to a standstill. In Berlin, the public transportation system ground to a halt, as did the gas, water, and electric systems. The putschists were left powerless, both figuratively and literally.

² The Freikorps were incorporated into a much smaller armed force, in line with the stipulations of the Versailles Peace Treaty.
That the Communist Party (KPD) at first refused to support the strike, confirmed the criticisms of the radical leftists, whose own response was an all-embracing enthusiasm. Most important to the radicals was that the working class was once again in motion. They did not agree with the political ends that the strike was meant to achieve—the defence of the parliamentary system—but the widespread participation of the working class reopened all sorts of opportunities that might lead to a new revolutionary wave. The rump Communist Party, on the other hand, focused on its enmity towards the Social Democrats and hesitated to lend support. The status of the party, not the activities of the working class, guided its response. Only when the extent of popular backing for the strike became clear, including support from its own rank and file, did the party reverse its stance.

The putschists occupied a large housing complex in Charlottenburg, near where the Matticks lived. Soldiers with machine guns were set in the windows in order to keep at bay the crowds that assembled nearby. Small groups made repeated attempts to storm the complex, but each time they were met by gunshots from the soldiers. Every so often the soldiers lobbed a hand grenade, attempting to scatter the demonstrators even more. As the crowds grew in size and intensity, it became difficult for those in front to avoid injury. People were pushed inadvertently into the line of fire. Nearby windows, doorways, and storefronts had been shut tight and locked to prevent looting, but this also prevented escape.

One scene disturbed Mattick greatly. A demonstrator strode into the middle of the street, picked up a gun, and aimed it at the complex, only to be shot dead. Mattick found it hard to understand why anyone would be so reckless. Why run into the street when it was obvious that the soldiers had a clear shot and would not hesitate to fire? If nothing else, it showed Mattick the ineffectiveness of individual acts of resistance, no matter how morally compelling they might be.3

Already by the fourth day of the coup, the putschists began a negotiated retreat, with a safe return to their barracks guaranteed by the government they had just overthrown.4 As the soldiers loaded guns and equipment onto trucks, the police stood guard. Posters warned looters to stay clear, a virtual invitation in the eyes of Mattick and his youth group friends. Hoping that weapons might have been left behind, they snuck into the complex that evening. They were arrested almost immediately. At the police barracks, they and others were lined up against the six-foot brick wall that formed the outer perimeter, hands

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4 On the second day of the general strike—the putsch began on Saturday, the general strike on Monday.