

August 1914 and the myth of general enthusiasm for war in the German working class

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Everyone is familiar with photos of the flag-waving crowds and jubilant soldiers that are supposed to have captured the people's universal enthusiasm for war in the first days of August 1914. This was a propaganda myth as recent scholarly publications and studies have exposed.

Today's media attempts to use televised images to create a widespread mood in favour of military operations in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Ukraine. In the same way, the press deliberately exploited the still relatively new technology of photography in the early 20th century to provide alleged proof of the general population's support of the German emperor's and imperial government's war policy. Berlin historian Oliver Janz writes in his book, *14—The Great War*, published late last year: "The thesis of the general enthusiasm for war in August 1914 is one of the major historical myths of the 20th century."

This was especially true of Germany, where right-wing circles—including Hitler's National Socialists—have repeatedly drawn attention to the "August experience." However, the assertion of the general enthusiasm for the war was a "result of selective perception on the part of opinion makers in the press, journalism and politics" in order to justify Germany's entry into the war.

Oliver Janz, whose book was released to accompany BBC Two's current eight-part "Great War Diaries" television series, presents two fundamental discoveries based on recent studies (e.g., by Wolfgang Kruse, *A World of Enemies*, 1997; Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany*, 2000; Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War*, Paris 2004; Lawrence Sondhaus, *World War One: The Global Revolution*, 2011).

First, there was massive opposition to the war in Germany, especially among workers, until just before the outbreak of hostilities and even in the days that followed. The rural population was generally against the mobilisation, mainly because farmers feared losing their harvest, which had just begun. The situation was similar in France, Britain, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Russia.

In all the belligerent countries, it was mainly the bourgeois and petty bourgeois layers and intellectuals who were responsible for the blind patriotism and war fervour of the day. The war volunteers, who are repeatedly cited as evidence of the rampant war fever, consisted predominantly of grammar school and university students from the middle class, who welcomed the war as an adventure and liberation from social constraints. However, their number in August was not approaching the two million mark, as previously claimed, but only about 185,000, according to recent estimates.

Secondly, without the consent and active participation of the political adjuncts of the Second International, particularly German social democracy and the trade unions, the imperialist governments would have been unable to mount their mobilisations as rapidly as they did.

The well-known photos of jubilation were taken in the last days before the war, when student unions and supporters of national civic associations gathered on central squares, especially in university towns, sang patriotic songs, roamed the cafés and held impromptu propaganda speeches welcoming the war. Had any onlookers ventured into the side streets, where the impoverished working class families lived, they would have encountered a very different spectacle—scenes of fear, despair and anger at the preparations for war.

Newspapers were full of exuberant reports about the events of August 1, the day of the general mobilisation, when some 50,000 war supporters gathered in Berlin and the Kaiser declared in a speech that he no longer knew of any political parties, only the German people. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* newspaper was deeply impressed and commented on the "sort of jubilant cheering that has probably never before been heard in Berlin." In the following days, the bourgeois press embarked on spreading the myth of national unity.

But even if the rally of August 1 was the largest patriotic gathering ever witnessed in the capital, it drew only a fraction of the people who had participated in an anti-war assembly of workers staged by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) four days earlier.

"In no country in July 1914 did more people take to the streets to protest against the war as they do in Germany," writes Oliver Janz. In the last week of July, the SPD had organised hundreds of anti-war meetings and demonstrations in Germany, involving approximately 750,000 people. In Berlin's Treptow Park alone, some 100,000-200,000 people assembled on July 28, a few days before the SPD's approval of the war credits. The huge crowds at these demonstrations were far greater than in previous social-democratic rallies, despite being usually held on working days and lacking a lengthy preparatory campaign.

"The war thus met with widespread opposition from the German workforce," states Oliver Janz, adding: "[B]ut the largest socialist party in the world failed to use this potential to exert enormous pressure on the administration of the Reich (empire). Instead, the party's leadership bowed down to a nationwide ban on demonstrations towards the end of July. Its followers were therefore no longer able to shape the prevailing image of the population to the extent that would have reflected the party's actual strength."

This clearly contradicts the self-justification, propagated most notably by social democratic politicians and historians and alleging that the SPD had adapted itself to the general patriotic mood of the population in 1914. Oliver Janz explicitly argues against such interpretations and writes: “The leaders of the socialist parties were ... in no way forced by their grassroots to support the war and make a truce with the bourgeoisie.”

On the contrary, it was the complete subordination of the SPD leadership to German imperialism that paralysed the working class and subordinated it to the war policies. On August 4, the SPD Reichstag (parliament) faction voted for the state’s procurement of war credits, just as the French socialists did the day before. The SPD struck a “truce” with the imperial government and renounced any fundamental criticism of government policy. When the Reichswehr (German imperial army) invaded Belgium and committed brutal crimes against the civilian population, a majority of the SPD parliamentary group refused to condemn the violation of Belgian neutrality.

Immediately after August 4, the SPD leadership shifted to the chauvinist course of fatherland defence, combining this with a smear campaign against Russia in their numerous broadsheets. Europe had to be liberated from the “stronghold of reaction,” tsarism—not by means of mass strikes and revolution as in 1905, but with the weapons of the capitalist state.

This was likewise seen as a struggle against “Russian barbarism, for the defence of German cultural heritage, in order to protect German women and children,” wrote socialist deputy Otto Braun in his diary on August 5. Or, he asked, are we supposed to sit back and watch as “hordes of drunken Russian Cossacks traipse through German halls, turn German women and children into martyrs, and tread German culture under foot?”

A group led by social democratic deputies Paul Lensch and Heinrich Cunow developed the view that opposing German and English fundamental principles were at the core of the conflict. The German state—with its strict military tradition, general education and conscription, universal suffrage and war economy—was said to correspond to a “socialised society,” whereas England stood for an unbridled liberal market economy. A victory for the German Reich over England would be tantamount to the overcoming of the “world bourgeois” by the “world proletariat.”

The social democratic trade union leaders, in particular, adopted this view and tried to integrate it into the bourgeois state. They welcomed the state-controlled war economy as “war socialism” and were accepted by the authorities taking on responsibilities in the economic field. In 1916, the Auxiliary Service Law codified the establishment of workers’ committees in factories, an initial form of the later co-determination bodies.

A particularly pernicious role in the August drive for war was played by numerous academics, philosophers, writers and artists, some of whom had professed radical opposition to bourgeois society prior to 1914. This was also the case in France and especially Italy, where large sections of the intellectual “avant-garde”—from the Futurists to D’Annunzio, the star of the fashionable aestheticism—called for the rejection of Italian neutrality and participation in the war. Benito Mussolini, a radical socialist of the time and future fascist leader, counted himself part of this movement, and was expelled from the Italian Socialist Party for his advocacy of war in November 1914.

Many artists and Expressionist writers in Germany welcomed the

war—for example, Franz Marc, August Macke, Max Beckmann, Richard Dehmel and Herwarth Walden, who edited the avant-garde *Sturm* magazine and composed a military march at the beginning of the war. Many volunteered. From August, a veritable spiritual mobilisation began, for which the term “ideas of 1914” was coined—in contrast to the “ideas of 1789” (i.e., liberty, equality, fraternity) of the French Revolution.

The infamous September “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three,” signed by 93 leading representatives of German culture and science, defended the German invasion of Belgium. The manifesto denied the atrocities suffered by Belgian civilians at the hands of the German military and condoned the destruction of parts of the old university town of Leuven, where the library with its irreplaceable medieval books and manuscripts was put to flame.

Distributed internationally, the text contained statements like: “Without German militarism, German culture would long since have been eradicated from the face of the earth,” and “The German Army and the German people are one.” Among the signatories of the manifesto were such well-known artists as Gerhart Hauptmann, Max Liebermann, Max Reinhardt, Richard Dehmel, Max Halbe, and also architect and Bauhaus precursor Bruno Paul, as well as famous scientists such as Max Planck, Wilhelm Röntgen and Ernst Haeckel.

The “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three” was followed on October 16 by a “Declaration of the University Teachers of the German Reich,” whose more than 4,000 signatories comprised almost the entire teaching staff of the German universities. The war propaganda was resisted by only a few eminent figures, such as Albert Einstein and professor of medicine Georg Friedrich Nicolai, who authored a counter-proclamation, the “Manifesto to the Europeans,” but could not publish it in Germany due to a lack of support from other academics.

“The German intellectuals’ uncritical attitude to their own political and military leadership severely damaged the international reputation of German science and culture,” laments Oliver Janz. He attributes this attitude to the “grave consciousness of crisis” and cultural pessimism that had obsessed intellectuals prior to 1914. Behind this mind-set, as Jan rightly observes, “was often an elitist repudiation of the masses and their demand for participation in social and political life, which threatened the privileged position of the bourgeois intelligentsia.”



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