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Religious Politics in the German Revolution: Secularism and Socialist Opposition 1914 to 1923

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Abstract

This article shows the significant role played by religious politics in the German Revolution of 1918. It examines first how the secularist subculture within German socialism contributed to the formation of wartime opposition that led to the 1917 split of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). It then follows the actions of secularists during the revolution itself, beginning with the attempts of one of Germany's most prominent secularists, Adolph Hoffmann, to force through a radical program of secularization upon assuming a key position in the revolutionary government of 1918. It traces the politics of religion in the writing of the Weimar Constitution before taking up the relationship of secularism to the “pure” council movement, which emerged in the years from 1919 to 1922 as an alternative both to parliamentary democracy and Bolshevik party rule.

Keywords: German Revolution; secularism; First World War; pacifism; council movement; USPD

The German Revolution is conventionally dated 1918–1919 and covers the period between the nearly bloodless transition from monarchy to republic in November 1918 and the suppression of attempts to establish a “dictatorship of the proletariat” through urban insurrection in the winter and spring of 1919. Yet, this “November Revolution” was anchored in a longer period of revolutionary turmoil, which began with socialist agitation against the First World War and continued in sporadic attempts by left-wing insurgents to seize power that largely subsided by 1922. Historical interpretations of the revolution have focused on the choices made by the three rival parties that emerged from the schism of German Social Democracy in 1917—the Majority Social Democratic Party (MSPD), the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), and the small Spartacist League or, as it became known after January 1919, the Communist Party (KPD). During the Cold War, historians sympathetic to the KPD and USPD argued that the decision taken in January 1919 by the MSPD Chancellor Friedrich Ebert to turn the guns of the military against the revolutionaries had been a betrayal of Marxism. Historians closer to the West German SPD, by contrast, saw it as an unfortunate but necessary deed, committed by those who had shouldered “the burden of power” and sacrificed elements of the socialist project in order to secure parliamentary democracy.¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of West German historians offered a third interpretation, when they argued that the revolution had been “incomplete” because it failed to rigorously eliminate the vestiges of the old regime, thereby weakening Weimar democracy.²

¹ Susanne Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1918–1920* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1978); Heinrich August Winkler, *Klassenkampf oder Koalitionspolitik? Grundentscheidungen sozialdemokratischer Politik: 1919–1925* (Heidelberg: Stiftung Reichspräsident-Friedrich-Ebert-Gedenkstätte, 1992), 6.

² See the summary in Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19 in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

The recent centenary brought renewed attention to the German Revolution, yet most studies have remained attached to question of whether Ebert's option for parliamentary rule and suppression of revolution was a success that led to democracy³ or a failure that paved the way for the National Socialist dictatorship.⁴ Some studies have sought to break out of the interpretative fetters imposed by this question, by focusing instead on the roles of gender, violence, transnational flows, or revolutionary narratives.⁵ Yet, the topic of religion has been conspicuously absent. This omission is surprising given that antireligious violence has come to the fore of recent scholarship on modern revolutions.⁶ In a comparative analysis, Julio de la Cueva found that in Mexico, Russia, and Spain, there was a widespread expectation that revolution would bring a settling of accounts with the state churches, such that a female Republican could chide an antifascist committee for its lack of resolve during the Spanish Civil War: "Well, what does revolution mean? Didn't we agree that we had to kill all of [the priests]?"⁷

The lack of scholarly attention to religion in the German Revolution is furthermore surprising, given the many statements made by leading church officials at the time, who clearly identified antireligious forces behind the revolution. Writing in January 1919, liberal theologian Ernst Troeltsch observed that although "the church and religion question" had been thrust into the center of debate, it "had long been threatening with subterranean rumbling," and hence "it is completely understandable that this wind is also blowing along in the storm unleashed by the revolution in this most dire hour of the Empire."⁸ Munich Cardinal Faulhaber famously told the 1922 national gathering of Catholics (*Katholikentag*) that the November Revolution bore "the mark of Cain" and the Protestant *Church Yearbook* wrote that it had been carried by "a flood of hatred for religion, which been previously been held in check, bubbling in the dark depths" and that "one of its first goals was to remove the influence of the church in national life."⁹ Indeed, one of the few revolutionary acts of the socialist government of Prussia in November 1918 was to decree the abrupt and radical secularization of the schools and public life. This led to an immediate and successful church counter-offensive; the measures were rescinded by January 1919.

In order to make the case that religion was a significant factor in the German Revolution, this article moves beyond the most prevalent explanations of the anticlericalism present in European socialism. Some scholars have portrayed this as part and parcel of the political

³ Robert Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Alex Burkhardt, "Forgotten, Not Forgiven? New German-Language Works on the 1918/1919 German Revolution," *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2018).

⁴ See also works cited in Ulrich Wyrwa, "1918/19. Markstein der deutschen Demokratie. Neuerscheinungen zum 100. Jahrestag der Revolution," *Neue Politische Literatur* 66, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 3–35.

⁵ See the review of recent scholarship in Benjamin Ziemann, "The Missing Comedy and the Problem of Emplotment: New Perspectives on the German Revolution 1918/19," in *Living the German Revolution*, ed. Christopher Dillon et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶ Daniel Schönflug and Martin Schulze Wessel, eds., *Redefining the Sacred: Religion in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 2012); Enrique Sanabria, *Republicanism and Anticlerical Nationalism in Spain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Matthew Butler, ed., *Faith and Impiety in Revolutionary Mexico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Peter van der Veer, "Smash Temples, Burn Books: Comparing Secularist Projects in India and China," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 270–81.

⁷ Quoted in Julio de la Cueva, "Violent Culture Wars: Religion and Revolution in Mexico, Russia and Spain in the Interwar Period," *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 3 (2018): 521–22.

⁸ Ernst Troeltsch, "Der Religionsunterricht und die Trennung von Staat und Kirchen," in *Revolution und Kirche: Zur Neuordnung des Kirchenwesens im deutschen Volkstaat*, ed. Friedrich Thimme and Ernst Rolffs (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1919), 301–25, esp. 301.

⁹ Michael Faulhaber, "Eröffnungsansprache von Kardinal Michael v. Faulhaber, 27. August 1922," in *Katholikentag München 1922* (Wurzberg, 1923), 4; Johannes Schneider, "Kirchliche Zeitlage," *Kirchliches Jahrbuch 1919* (printed in 1920), 321, 322.

culture of the European left.¹⁰ Others have traced a philosophical genealogy going back to Karl Marx's naming of religion as a spiritual narcotic that numbed the poor's suffering in a world of feudal and capitalist exploitation,¹¹ while still others have argued that socialism, and particularly its Bolshevik variant, was a secular or political religion that produced anti-religious violence out of its own millenarian drive.¹² Some have attributed anticlericalism to the culture of working-class radicals, whose antagonism to local priests developed in the intimate local settings of authoritarian societies, while still others have interpreted antireligious violence as a pragmatic choice of revolutionaries faced with church support of their political enemies.¹³

Without denying the possible relevance of such factors, this article pursues a more direct explanation of the religious component of the German Revolution, namely the presence in the socialist ranks of a clearly defined secularist subculture, sustained by organizations and popular science educators, who preached a positive faith in a humanistic-materialistic worldview that existed alongside and intermingled with Marxist convictions. I have previously traced the origins of this culture to the Free Religious movement that emerged among Protestant and Catholic rationalist dissenters during the period of social ferment leading up to the revolution of 1848. During the 1850s, the Free Religious Congregations maintained the basic structures of churches, but many abandoned Christianity in favor of a belief in the monistic unity of spirit and matter in a purely immanent reality. Secularism gained in associational diversity with the spread of the Freethought movement in the 1880s and the founding of a German Monist League in 1906 under the leadership of biologist Ernst Haeckel. What united all of these organizations was the effort to eradicate church influence in public life while at the same time promoting secularist alternatives to the component parts of religion, that is, community formation, ethical instruction of the youth, and a totalizing system of faith grounded in a natural-scientific, monistic *Weltanschauung*. The apparent paradox of a secularist religion was not so paradoxical when viewed from the standpoint of what was still a confessional "Christian state." Because many legal rights and privileges were granted only to the acknowledged Christian confessions, secularist communities, just like Jewish congregations, presented themselves as confessions in waiting while at the same time lobbying for an end to such privileges.¹⁴ Although some of the intellectuals and discourses associated with naturalistic monism contributed to the development of the *völkisch* movement of the twentieth century, the associations of secularism consistently tracked left, due in part to confessional discrimination by the monarchic state against dissidence.¹⁵

Secularist agitation and popular scientific instruction have often been interpreted as key vectors for liberal control over the lower-middle and working classes.¹⁶ From the 1880s onward, however, a discrete socialist secularist movement emerged. Socialists took control

¹⁰ René Rémond, "Special Issue: Anticlericalism," *European Studies Review* 13 (1983): 121–26; Lisa Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus in Europa. Öffentlichkeit und Säkularisierung in Frankreich, Spanien und Deutschland (1848–1914)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

¹¹ Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space: How Soviet Atheism Was Born, Lived and Died* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 10–14.

¹² Hans Maier, "Political Religion: A Concept and Its Limitations," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 1 (2007): 5–16; Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹³ See discussion in de la Cueva, "Violent Culture Wars"; Julio de la Cueva and Feliciano Montero, eds., *La secularización conflictiva: España (1898–1931)* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2007).

¹⁴ Jews and dissidents could generally not obtain high state office nor could their clergy solemnize official acts, such as marriage. Todd H. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Helmut Zander, "Sozialdarwinistische Rassentheorien aus dem okkulten Untergrund des Kaiserreichs," in *Handbuch zur 'Völkischen Bewegung' 1871–1918* (Munich: Saur, 1996), 224–51; Stefanie v. Schnurbein and Justus Ulbricht, *Völkische Religion und Krisen der Moderne: Entwürfe "arteigener" Glaubenssysteme seit der Jahrhundertwende* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).

¹⁶ Gangolf Hübinger, "Die monistische Bewegung. Sozialingenieure und Kulturprediger," in *Kultur und Kulturwissenschaften um 1900* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997), 246–59; Andreas Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung im 19.*

of Germany's largest single secularist organization, the Berlin Free Religious Congregation in 1887, and when a congregation formed in the growing industrial center of Ludwigshafen in 1891, almost the entire local SPD leadership became members.¹⁷ In 1908, socialist freethinkers broke away from the liberal-dominated German Freethought League and formed the Central Association of Proletarian Freethinkers. Yet, the socialists who participated in these secularist associations played an ambiguous role in the prewar SPD. On the one hand, their intellectual capital and anticlerical performances gave them cachet among the socialist rank-and-file and enabled them to make quick careers in the SPD. On the other hand, despite their success, these socialist secularists were a continual irritant in the party and were frequently reprimanded by the top party brass. Their repeated attacks on the state churches contradicted the party's policy of religious neutrality; "religion to be made a private matter" had been a central plank of the Social Democratic Party platform since 1875.¹⁸

In a forthcoming study, I examine the long-term impact on German history of the distinctive political-social subculture that formed through the interaction of socialism and secularism, which I am calling "red secularism."¹⁹ This article explores how socialist secularists contributed to the denouement of the German Revolution. It first examines their role in the development of the opposition to the war effort and the 1917 division of the Social Democratic Party. Then it turns to the role of red secularism in the revolution itself, beginning with the attempts of one of Germany's most prominent Free Religious socialists, Adolph Hoffmann, to force through a radical program of secularization upon assuming a key position in the revolutionary government of 1918. It traces the place of religion in the writing of the Weimar Constitution before taking up the relationship of secularism to the council movement which emerged in the years from 1919 to 1922 as an alternative both to parliamentary democracy and Bolshevik party rule.²⁰ All of these developments reveal that red secularists exerted their greatest influence over the revolution from a particular political location in the socialist spectrum, namely the left wing of the USPD.

This article offers three arguments to explain why secularists gathered in the revolutionary opposition and what impact their secularism had on the political projects developed there. First, Germany's secularist culture was borne of and structured by a system of unequal confessional rights that privileged the Christian churches. Because the inequalities embedded within the confessional system were not resolved by the war, nor indeed by the Weimar Constitution of 1919, they provided a continual incitement to action by secularist dissidents facing discrimination. Second, through their Freethought associations and the Free Religious Congregations, secularists operated within a sizable network of intellectuals and activists in the socialist parties, which during the wartime suppression of political dissent proved critical to the development of oppositional structures. These associations continued to lodge secularist demands during the revolution. Third, secularism provided a reservoir of narratives and convictions that flowed into the revolutionary imaginary, beginning with pacifism during the war. During the revolution that followed, the visions of communitarian politics long fostered within red secularism infused the theory of the "pure" council system.

Jahrhundert: Bürgerliche Kultur, naturwissenschaftliche Bildung und die deutsche Öffentlichkeit, 1848-1914 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998).

¹⁷ Peter Bahn, *Deutschkatholiken und Freireligiöse. Geschichte und Kultur einer religiös-weltanschaulichen Dissidentengruppe dargestellt am Beispiel der Pfalz* (Mainz: Gesellschaft für Volkskunde in Rheinland-Pfalz, 1991), 210-11.

¹⁸ Sebastian Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vor der religiösen Frage 1863-1890* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

¹⁹ Todd H. Weir, *Red Secularism: Socialism and Secularist Culture in Germany 1890 to 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

²⁰ Ralf Hoffrogge, "Richard Müller, Ernst Däumig and the 'Pure' Council System," in *The German Revolution and Political Theory*, ed. Gaard Kets and James Muldoon (Cham: Springer International, 2019), 199-214; Marcel van der Linden, "On Council Communism," *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 4 (December 1, 2004): 27-50.

Secularism and the Emergence of the USPD

Historians agree that the rancorous division of the SPD in 1916, which was formalized with the founding of the USPD in April 1917, was a watershed moment in the run-up to the revolution. Generally, this schism is explained by rising anti-war sentiment and the prioritization of class struggle over national unity by the party left. Yet, the Catholic Center Party's flagship paper *Germania* observed at the time that religion was also dividing party mainstream and left opposition:

All the personalities in the Social Democratic Party, who enthusiastically contributed to Freethought propaganda, church-leaving movement, etc., now stand in the camp of the [opposition, T.W.], i.e., Adolf Hoffmann, Vogtherr, Ledebour. It thus appears that the spirits of the party can divide on this issue as well: here stand the neutrals, there the declared atheists and opponents of religion.

Germany's leading socialist secularist newspaper *Der Atheist* concurred that freethinkers should not expect to achieve their aims with the Majority Socialists, "but we hope that the oppositional direction in the party will take a different stance on this matter and not play hide-and-seek with it, as has been common practice in the party till now."²¹ This exchange indicates that both freethinkers and their church opponents identified the USPD as the party of the secularists, a fact that they connected to earlier party debates over the church-leaving [Kirchenaustritt] campaign. This campaign of the years 1906 to 1914 was the most high-profile anticlerical action of Wilhelmine Germany. Assuming that it will be unfamiliar to many readers, I describe it briefly here, also because it introduces many of the *dramatis personae* of this article. The campaign came in two waves. The first was led by socialists and had originated in the Berlin Free Religious Congregation, which since the 1890s had agitated publicly for Berliners to leave the churches in order to raise pressure on the state to grant the children of dissidents the right to an alternative to confessional religious instruction in school. The congregation had been dominated by socialists since the late 1880s, and a number of members used it as a springboard into leadership positions in the SPD, including future Reichstag deputies Georg Ledebour and Fritz Kunert, as well as labor organizers and women's rights activists Ida Altmann, Ottilie Baader, and Agnes Wabnitz.²² The leading role in the church-leaving campaign was played by city councilors and future Landtag and Reichstag deputies Adolph Hoffmann and Ewald Vogtherr, who linked their struggle for dissidents' rights to the "general strike" debate in the SPD, calling church exit a "mass strike against the church."²³

The second wave came in 1911, when leaders of the Monist League set up the *Komitee Konfessionslos* (Committee of the Confessionless). The Monist League saw itself as a nationalist, elitist, and liberal organization, and its only socialist member of note was newspaper editor and Reichstag deputy Heinrich Peus. In 1912, the "liberal" monists and "socialist" Free Religionists joined forces in a campaign that peaked in October 1913, when across the city six open-air rallies took place simultaneously, each featuring a socialist and a "bourgeois" liberal speaker. At the largest, in the Hasenheide park, the future cofounder of the Communist Party Karl Liebknecht took the stage with Nobel prize laureate chemist and president of the Monist League Wilhelm Ostwald to jointly address a crowd of several thousand. The conservative press increasingly portrayed this as a political tactic of the socialist left, but, in fact, with the possible exception of Liebknecht, every one of the other socialist speakers was a member of a secularist organization.

²¹ *Der Atheist*, March 18, 1917.

²² Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, chap. 4.

²³ Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, "Sozialdemokratie und 'praktische' Religionskritik. Das Beispiel der Kirchenaustrittsbewegung 1878–1914," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 22 (1982): 263–98; Katharina Neef, "Politicizing a (Non) Religious Act: The Secularist Church Exit Propaganda of the Komitee Konfessionslos (1908–1914)," in *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s*, ed. Carolin Kosuch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 297–330.

Although the campaign registered 11,063 annual church exits at the height of the first wave and 12,572 at the height of the second, this was only a small portion of Berlin's 2 million inhabitants. Yet, the action rattled the authorities, for, as a national-liberal paper noted, "It is obvious that a church with which the masses can play must lose respect."²⁴ With growing conservative and clerical mobilization against the campaign, the SPD executive committee passed a resolution by cochair Friedrich Ebert in December 1913, which distanced the party from the agitation.²⁵ An officer of the Prussian police reported, "This water blast from above has noticeably cooled down the excited temperaments. Even Adolf Hoffmann has acted less provocatively since then."²⁶ Despite this resolution, the church-leaving campaign spread in early 1914 outside of Berlin, to Saxony and the Rhineland, where a third group of secularists, the Central Association of Proletarian Freethinkers, became increasingly active. With approximately 6,000 members nationally, this association was led by Bernard Menke of Dresden and Theodor Fricke in Hamburg, and had a mouthpiece in the Nuremberg paper *Der Atheist*, published by Konrad Beisswanger. Saxony was a hotbed of secularist socialist activity, and a prominent role was played by the party's leading "wandering teachers," Otto Rühle in Dresden and the couple, Hermann and Käte Duncker in Leipzig, who lectured annually to many thousands of workers. In Bavaria, agitation over the rights of Free Religious dissidents between 1912 and 1914 was a key issue that broke the longtime political cooperation between the Catholic Center Party and the reformist SPD leadership.²⁷

The declaration of war on August 4, 1914 brought the church-leaving campaign to a sudden end. In early September 1914, the chairman of the Ethical Culture Society asked Wilhelm Ostwald to return a manuscript related to their secularist campaigns with the explanation that, even if it escaped military censorship, it was unlikely to find buyers. He intended to lay this text *ad acta*, and jokingly added "After all, one must also do something for one's literary archive!"²⁸ Given that the church-leaving campaign became a political dead letter and did not restart during the war, one might be tempted to explain the appearance of its socialist leaders in the ranks of the USPD four years later as a continuation in a new context of the antagonistic relationship they had developed prior to 1914 to the party leadership. Yet, I want to argue that the religious motivations behind the church-leaving campaign continued to inform their response to the war. In other words, the prewar plans and concerns of secularists did not stay in the desk drawer for long. According to the adage of historian Jacob Burckhardt, "When two crises intersect, the stronger temporarily [*momentan*] carves its way through the weaker,"²⁹ the point being that the disappearance of the weaker crisis is generally only momentary. The confessional antagonisms that had informed the church-leaving movement quickly reemerged, but now in a new framework created nearly overnight by the larger crisis of the war.

Confessional Politics during the War

The new political framework was set by Kaiser Wilhelm II in a speech given August 1, in which he called for a new and lasting national unity. This soon became known as the "fortress peace" or *Burgfrieden*:

Should it now come to a battle, then there will be no more political parties. I, too, was attacked by the one or the other party. That was in peace time. I forgive you now from

²⁴ "Der Vorwärts und die Austrittsbewegung," *Tägliche Rundschau* (November 26, 1908).

²⁵ *Protokoll der Partei-Ausschuß-Sitzung vom 19. und 20. Dezember 1913*, Berlin 1913, 17–18.

²⁶ Dieter Fricke and Rudolf Knaack, eds., *Dokumente aus geheimen Archiven. Übersichten der Berliner politischen Polizei über die allgemeine Lage der sozialdemokratischen und anarchistischen Bewegung 1878–1913* (Berlin: BWV, 2004), 557.

²⁷ Willy Albrecht, *Landtag und Regierung in Bayern am Vorabend der Revolution von 1918* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1968), 66–73.

²⁸ Penzig to Ostwald, September 9, 1914, Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften, Ostwald Archive, no. 2272.

²⁹ Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1943), 128.

the depths of my heart. I no longer recognize any parties or any confessions; today we are all German brothers and only German brothers.³⁰

A core pillar of the *Burgfrieden* was thus the expectation that there would be a lessening if not an elimination of the confessional conflicts that had long plagued Germany. Many secularists gripped by the “August experience” understood the kaiser’s words as an offer to them as well. Weeks into the war, the socialist lawyer Hermann Heimerich petitioned unsuccessfully to postpone the recently issued ban on Free Religious teaching in Bavaria until after the war with “reference to the well-known phrase of the Kaiser that he no longer recognizes parties and confessions, but only Germans.”³¹ In the Prussian Diet, deputy Adolph Hoffmann accused the Spandau State Munitions Plant of violating the *Burgfrieden* when it told a Free Religious worker that he had been refused work because the factory “would not tolerate confessionless workers, because people who believe in nothing are capable of anything.”³²

The many liberal secularists and a handful of socialist secularists who supported the war expected their demonstrations of patriotism to be rewarded by a lifting of discrimination. Late in 1916 Heinrich Peus gave a speech in the Reichstag demanding that dissidents be granted the right to become army officers.³³ The Ministry of War rejected this petition with an argument that had long been used to exclude Jews and secularists from the officer corps. Affiliation with a recognized religious creed, the Ministry argued, “was of indispensable significance for the educational influence of the officer on the rank and file,” particularly regarding the military oath.³⁴ In practice, administration of the oath was often a point at which dissidents were singled out for abuse, such as occurred at the mustering of the young monist Carl von Ossietzky, who went on to become the most famous antifascist journalist of the Weimar Republic. His wife later recounted the scene:

First the Catholics had to take the oath on the flag, then the recruits of the Protestant faith. Carl did not step forward with the one or the other. He was a Freethinker. He waited to see what the major would do with him and the other likeminded. Then came the command “Freethinkers, atheists, sectarians, godless—step forward!” Carl was the only one who stepped forward. The major regarded him from head to toe with a withering look—how could a recruit not recognize the official churches: “You godless swine, the oath also applies to you!”³⁵

Despite continued discrimination, the secularists did not give up seeking recognition, and in May 1918, the Berlin monist Dr. Eckold tried to portray monism as a legitimate religion with a positive creed: “Under religion we understand a reverent awe of a godhead or equivalent power [*Machtfaktor*],” which in the case of monism was not the Christian God, but “the trinity of ‘ethics,’ morality and reason.” The avantgarde literary journal *Die Aktion* snidely characterized the logic of this new piety:

Oh please, please, dear state, do us the favor and be so kind as to recognize us as a “religious society.” We promise to always be very good. If we can’t believe in the Christian

³⁰ “The Kaiser Speaks from the Balcony of the Royal Palace,” GHI Documents, vol. 5, August 1, 1914 (https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=815).

³¹ Hermann Heimerich, “Das Verbot des freireligiösen Unterrichts in Bayern,” *Das Freie Wort*, vol. 14, no. 15/16, November 1914, 418–20.

³² *Berliner Tageblatt*, no. 441, August 31, 1914.

³³ *Kreuzzeitung*, no. 39, January 22, 1916; Heinrich Peus, *Antimilitarist und Offizier* (Leipzig: Unesma, 1916).

³⁴ “Dissidenten können nicht Offiziere werden,” *Privatweg*, 1916, 8.

³⁵ Maud von Ossietzky, *Maud von Ossietzky erzählt: Ein Lebensbild* (Berlin: Buchverlag Der Morgen, 1966), 47–48.

God, because Haeckel forbade that, then we want to believe in you and always obey your laws. Then you'll be so kind and allow us to become officers, won't you?³⁶

This satire made clear that the war only reinforced the confessional discrimination of the imperial state. For socialist secularists this was a bitter pill to swallow. Although some supported the war effort, alongside Peus also union organizer Ida Altmann and revisionist Henriette Fürth, most red secularists did not and they justified their opposition to war with their opposition to ongoing discrimination. Adolph Hoffmann used his seat in the Prussian Diet to skillfully and humorously make political hay out of the issue, when in March 1916 the National Liberals reopened debate on petitions to release dissident children from obligatory religious instruction in state schools. As the bitterest opponent of the deconfessionalization of the schools, the Center Party argued that reopening this debate would disturb the *Burgfrieden* and should thus be postponed until after the war. In response, Adolph Hoffmann asked how the Center Party could call the dissident question a disturbance of the confessional peace and yet not say the same of the “*Judenstatistik*,” referring to the recent military census of Jewish participation in the war.³⁷ He demanded a new national school law that would free schools “of all particularistic slag” and create a single nondenominational school. “One people, one school, that corresponds to the present time,” he concluded.

When the Prussian Diet resumed debate on religious instruction in November 1917, the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia had just occurred. In response to Protestant minister Gottfried Traub, an erstwhile ally of the secularists who had recently left the Progressive Party and joined the reactionary and *völkisch* Vaterlandspartei, Hoffmann argued that instead of Luther's catechism, the schools should be teaching the recent peace declaration of the new Russian government. Traub retorted that Hoffmann should try to write his own catechism, a jab at Hoffmann's lack of formal education.³⁸ Little did he suspect that Hoffmann would soon undertake just such a book. The Free Religious Congregation commissioned Ernst Däumig to write a *Free People's Catechism*, which Hoffmann published in a self-reported edition of 100,000.³⁹ Possession of the booklet was considered treasonous, as was revealed by an incident that Hoffmann recounted in the Prussian Diet in July 1918. A twenty-three-year-old toolmaker had been reading Däumig's book in a café in the suburban town of Pankow, when a soldier asked if he might have a copy. After the toolmaker agreed to provide the book, he was arrested for fifteen days and then deported to the front for distributing revolutionary tracts “suited to compromise the military power of the German Reich during the current war.”⁴⁰

Secularist Organizations and Growing Opposition to the War

The historical literature generally cites the following milestones on the path to the formation of the USPD: opposition to war in the Reichstag, international solidarity efforts between socialist radicals, and acts of resistance to party domination of the press and organizations. If we revisit these milestones, it becomes clear that secularists active in the church-leaving movement played an oversized role. The first socialist Reichstag delegate to break party discipline over the war was a former teacher of the Berlin Free Religious Congregation, Fritz Kunert, who abstained from voting on the first round of war credits on August 4,

³⁶ G. Lehmann, “Der Monistenbund—eine Religionsgemeinschaft?” *Die Aktion*, vol. 8, no. 29/30 (July 27, 1918): 373–75.

³⁷ *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Preußischen Hauses der Abgeordneten*, Session of November 17, 1916, 2382. See also documents in Geheimes Staatsarchiv (GStA), HA I, Rep. 77, Abt., 1, Tit. 416, Nr. 52.

³⁸ *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 16, 1917.

³⁹ Adolph Hoffmann, *Adolph “Hoffmann's Erzählungen”: Gesammelte ernste und heitere Erinnerungen aus sozialistengesetzlicher Zeit* (Berlin: self-published, o.d.), 90–91.

⁴⁰ *Mitteilungsblatt des Verbandes der sozialdemokratischen Wahlvereine Berlins und Umgegend*, 1. Beilage, no. 15, July 19, 1918.

1914.⁴¹ That same day Ernst Däumig, future member of the same Free Religious Congregation, was one of the editors of *Vorwärts* who issued a declaration against the war credits. The first two deputies to vote against the war credits were likewise freethinker Otto Rühle and anticlerical activist Karl Liebknecht. They formed a revolutionary “International Group,” which transformed first into the Spartacist League and then the Communist Party. A second, larger group stepped into opposition on March 24, 1916, when party cochair Hugo Haase delivered an antiwar speech in the Reichstag and eighteen delegates voted against the war credits. This group joined together in the Socialist Working Group (*Sozialistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* [SAG]) and formed the nucleus for the later USPD. The SAG gained control of the Berlin SPD executive, and Adolph Hoffmann was elected its new chairman in 1916. Two of the four signers of an oppositional declaration in 1917 had secularist backgrounds: Ledebour and Vogtherr. Kunert, Hoffmann, Menke, and Fricke also became active in the opposition. The SAG differed from the Spartacists in its reluctance to split the party and endanger its organization.⁴² Thus, when Adolph Hoffmann and George Ledebour attended the antiwar Zimmerwald conference in Switzerland in December 1915, they joined French comrades in denouncing the *Burgfrieden* policies of their respective parties, but were unwilling to banish socialists who still supported the war from the International Group, a move demanded by Bolsheviks, such as Vladimir Lenin, and Spartacists, such as Rosa Luxemburg.⁴³

If confessional discrimination provided one explanation for the oversized role of these prominent red secularists in the formation of the USPD, a second lies in their access to the autonomous secularist organizations at a time in which the majority party suppressed oppositional agitation.⁴⁴ The press of the Proletarian Freethinkers provided a site for the expression of alternative viewpoints not allowed in the party press. In August 1914, nationally circulated *Der Atheist* immediately cast a shadow over the war, lamenting that with it “our Freethought movement, the bourgeois as well as the proletarian, has been almost completely annihilated.” In October 1914, freethinker Arthur Wolf reported that socialists were confronting the question of “Who bore the guilt for the war?” Chauvinists, who “decades ago would have shoved all guilt for our social malaise in the shoes of the Jews, have now found a scapegoat in England.”⁴⁵ *Der Atheist* reported in December on a debate over the German atrocities in occupied Belgium that had taken place in the Dresden chapter of the Proletarian Freethinkers. Bernard Menke concluded that Germany bore the “main guilt” for the war and declared that because those deputies who voted for the war credits had betrayed the people and the International Group, they were “no longer Social Democrats.”⁴⁶

Red secularists could take a lead in the early formation of party opposition because their organizations were semi-immune from party and police control. A retrospective account found that the opposition forces in Dresden that eventually formed the local USPD first

⁴¹ Eugen Prager, *Geschichte der USPD. Entstehung und Entwicklung der Unabhängigen Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands*, 2nd ed. (Glashuetten bei Taunus: Auvermann, 1970 [1922]), 25–26. See also Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt/Main: Propyläen, 1973), 692. On Kunert’s abstention, see his comments in “Eine Feststellung,” *Der Kampf*, vol. 9, no. 2 (February 1916), 79.

⁴² David Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: The History of the Independent Social Democratic Party 1917–1922* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 69.

⁴³ Francis L. Carsten, *War against War: British and German Radical Movements during the First World War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 39, 85–86; Angelica Balabanoff, *Die Zimmerwalder Bewegung 1914–1919* (Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld, 1928), 14.

⁴⁴ In 1914, there were 6,115 Proletarian Freethinkers and approximately 3,000 to 4,000 members of the largely socialist Berlin Free Religious Congregation. Some of the other Free Religious Congregations (circa 18,000 nationally) were also largely socialist. Max Henning, *Handbuch der freigeistigen Bewegung Deutschlands, Österreichs und der Schweiz (Jahrbuch des Weimarer Kartells 1914)* (Frankfurt/Main: Neuer Frankfurter Verlag, 1914).

⁴⁵ Arthur Wolf, “Chauvinismus, eine geistige Volkskrankheit,” *Der Atheist*, November 1, 1914.

⁴⁶ *Der Atheist*, December 13, 1914.

gathered in the local chapter of the Proletarian Freethinkers, in part because it could mask its activities as cultural. Already in January 1915, the chapter hosted a secret meeting with three dozen selected members to hear Otto Rühle describe the heated arguments over the war credits among the socialist Reichstag deputies. So tight was the connection made in Dresden that for police “The word Freethinker was somewhat equivalent with war resister and political criminal.”⁴⁷ Freethinkers and other secularists were also prominent in the development of the party opposition in Berlin, Leipzig, and Gelsenkirchen.⁴⁸ One of the main regional newspapers controlled by the SAG, the *Newsletter of the Association of Social-Democratic Electoral Committees of Berlin and Environs*, was published by Adolph Hoffmann and carried weekly announcements for the Free Religious Congregation and secularist-dominated Workers’ Education School (*Arbeiterbildungsschule*).⁴⁹ A study of the socialist movement in Frankfurt am Main found that freethinkers were a particular “site of infection” in the party. Already in November 1915, the Frankfurt-based Youth Section of the Proletarian Freethinkers became the coordinating body for the antiwar opposition within the Young Workers (*Arbeiterjugend*), after it had been driven out of the official youth group by leading party officers.⁵⁰ The opposition transformed the newsletter of Youth Freethinkers into a mouthpiece for its struggle against the “dictatorial” practices of the party leadership.⁵¹

Freethinkers also played a prominent role in the party opposition in Bavaria, where the SPD had long been dominated by reformists who got along well with their Catholic counterparts. The freethinker and anarchist Josef Sontheimer became a key figure in the oppositional circle that formed around the ethical socialist Kurt Eisner, who became the Prime Minister of the Bavarian Socialist Republic in 1918. Both later fell victim to the counterrevolution; Eisner was assassinated in February 1919 and Sontheimer was executed by the Freikorps *Oberland* less than three months later. In Nuremberg, where all local party bosses stayed loyal to the party mainstream, the outsider Konrad Beisswanger used his prominence as editor in chief of *Der Atheist* to organize the party opposition. Similarly, in the Bavarian town of Kempten, the future USPD coalesced around the chairman of the local freethought organization.⁵² On a national level, the three best-known leaders of Proletarian Freethinkers—Menke, Beisswanger, and Fricke—spent time in jail for oppositional activities.⁵³ Given such evidence, there is little reason to question the retrospective account of a delegate at their conference in 1919, who recalled “that the proletarian Freethought organizations consistently offered energetic resistance to the war madness.”⁵⁴

Pacifism and Secularism

This article turns now to the political culture of secularism, its ideas and imaginary, as a third factor that helps explain its contribution to the formation of the revolutionary left and the USPD. During the war, this contribution was most clearly articulated in pacifism.

⁴⁷ Ernst Lorenz, *5 Jahre Dresdner USP* (Dresden: Genossenschafts-Druckerei, 1922), 6.

⁴⁸ Stefan Goch, *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterbewegung im Ruhrgebiet: Eine Untersuchung am Beispiel Gelsenkirchen* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1990), 164.

⁴⁹ The speakers of weekly lecture series at the worker’s school in January 1918 were Fritz Kunert, Käthe Dunker, Emil Eichhorn, Eduard Bernstein, Mathilde Wurm, and Ernst Däumig. *Mitteilungsblatt des Verbandes der sozialdemokratischen Wahlvereins Berlins und Umgegend*, no. 31, January 6, 1918.

⁵⁰ Judit Pàkh, *Frankfurter Arbeiterbewegung in Dokumenten 1832–1933* (Frankfurt/Main: Bund, 1994), 697; Volker Depkat, *Lebenswenden und Zeitenwenden: Deutsche Politiker und die Erfahrungen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 444.

⁵¹ *Mitteilungsblatt der Jugendsektion des Zentralverbandes proletarischer Freidenker* (Ortsgruppe: Frankfurt/Main), nos. 2–12, November 15, 1915, to April 15, 1916.

⁵² Bernward Anton, “Die Spaltung der bayerischen Sozialdemokratie im Ersten Weltkrieg und die Entstehung der USPD; Vorgeschichte—Verlauf—Ursachen” (PhD diss., University of Augsburg, 2015), 899.

⁵³ See Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung und organisierte Religionskritik: Proletarische Freidenkerverbände in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 125–30.

⁵⁴ “Rheinisch-westfälische Freidenker-Konferenz,” *Der Atheist*, November 2, 1919.

As historian Roger Chickering noted, the first German peace organization began as a project of the Königsberg Free Religious Congregation in 1850, and since then the German peace movement remained closely intertwined with secularist associations.⁵⁵ In the early twentieth century, the Monist League embraced pacifism as one of its chief areas of activity. Yet this prewar support of pacifism was no guarantee of wartime attitudes. Several of the best-known monists, such as Ernst Haeckel and Wilhelm Ostwald, turned to patriotic supporters of the war; but, as they did so, they felt compelled to leave the Monist League because many local chapters remained bastions of pacifism. The Berlin monists formed the core of the best known antiwar organization, the Association New Fatherland (*Bund Neues Vaterland* [BNV]), which was founded in November 1914.⁵⁶ In July 1916, the Ministry of War began to solicit information from regional governments on pacifist activities among monists and freethinkers.⁵⁷ In the final days of the war, the BNV moved closer to support of revolution, and on November 8, 1918, at a meeting in the home of monist, sexologist, and homosexual rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld, the BNV decided to put the organization onto a “socialist foundation.”⁵⁸ Several leading “bourgeois” secularists, such as Kurt Löwenstein and Paul and Maria Krische, entered the USPD at this time and took up influential positions in the budding educational and cultural institutions of the party.

Socialist secularists connected the pacifist imaginary to anticlericalism, as they articulated the moral argument against the war effort. In early 1916, for example, Adolph Hoffmann was making a principled argument for separation of church and state in the Prussian Diet, when he switched gears and began to pillory church involvement in the war effort by reading from *In the Name of God—Forward!* (*Im Namen Gottes—Durch!*), a booklet sent to soldiers at the front by a military chaplain. The parenthetical comments in the stenographic report register the emotional response of the delegates:

There it states: “It is not our fault, *if in the bloody work of war, we also have to do the work of the executioner.* (Listen to that! among the Social Democrats.) The cold iron has been placed in the hand of the soldier, *he should use it without shame, he should run the bayonet between the ribs of the enemy,* (Listen to that! among the Social Democrats) *he should smash his rifle on their skulls . . . , that is his holy duty, that is his service to God* [Gottesdienst!]” (Raucous cries of “Listen! Listen!” and “Boo” among the Social Democrats.) You must certainly protest against this! . . . Is this Christian? Is this religious? (Introjection from right: “Yes!” Dep. Liebknecht “you’re still smiling?”—commotion to the right. Dep. Ströbel: “You would drive Christ from the Temple!” Introjection from right: “Go to England!”)⁵⁹

Hoffmann cited the opinion of the liberal Protestant theologian Martin Rade that war and true Christianity were mutually exclusive and concluded therefore that “this attitude of the military chaplain is . . . assuredly a consequence of the financial dependence of the church on the state.” Upon hearing this, deputies from the liberal, conservative, and Center parties left the chamber calling out, “Outrageous, disgusting, cowardly, scandal.” Hoffmann ended his speech by repeating the slogan that had twice gotten him called to order by the president of the Diet before 1914: “War is a mockery of God, Christianity, and all human culture!”⁶⁰

Hoffmann’s speech and the reaction to it show how the juxtaposition of the pacifist core of the Christian message and the reality of war could puncture the moral sensibilities of the

⁵⁵ Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War: The Peace Movement and German Society, 1892–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 40–45.

⁵⁶ Dieter Fricke, *Deutsche Demokraten: Die nichtproletarischen demokratischen Kräfte in der deutschen Geschichte 1830 bis 1945* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1981), 152–61.

⁵⁷ Munich Police Command to Royal Bavarian War Ministry, July 11, 1916. Staatsarchiv Munich, Pol. Dir. M. 5112.

⁵⁸ Fricke, *Deutsche Demokraten*, 193.

⁵⁹ *Vorwärts*, no. 75, March 16, 1916.

⁶⁰ *Vorwärts*, no. 75, March 16, 1916.

Burgfrieden. Hoffmann's speeches were so critical that his fellow socialist deputy Konrad Haenisch stated publicly that he preferred the company of the liberal deputies.⁶¹ Following Hoffman's criticism of a fellow socialist deputy on January 19, 1917, the five SPD deputies loyal to the party majority voted to exclude the four SAG members from their parliamentary faction, a step that the Reichstag members had taken three days earlier. The division of the SPD was formalized in April 1917 with the founding of a new party, the USPD. The larger rump party retained control of most of the party apparatus, newspapers, and organizations, and became known as the Majority or MSPD.

If the party split allowed secularists to articulate their viewpoints more clearly in the USPD, some leaders of the MSPD greeted the schism as an opportunity to purge the party of its anticlericalism and seek cooperation with Christian parties. A Catholic Church observer noted with pleasure the anti-Marxist and antiseccularist comments made by Wilhelm Kolb, the leader of Badenese social democrats, in November 1917.⁶² Kolb castigated socialist radicals, those "epigones of Marx" whose intransigent and dogmatic belief in the theory of revolution had been hindering socialism's transition "from a political sect to a political party." It made them blind to the fact that a socialization of the economy was taking place through the very state they opposed. By ending its rejection of the state and voting for the war credits, the SPD had actually moved closer to its goal because now the "state must approach socialism, whether it wants to or not." It also opened up the party to a new politics of culture. Without compromising on the socialist commitment to separation of church and state, Kolb stated that the party could now recognize the positive contribution of religion and break with the tradition that understood "the pseudo-Enlightenment [*Aufklärer*] of Freethought as a quasi-integral part of socialist worldview."⁶³

Secularists in the Revolution

The second half of this article analyzes the role of red secularism in the events of the revolution itself. At the start of the revolution, between November 1918 and January 1919, several secularist leaders were catapulted into positions of governing power (fig. 1). One reason for this was their strategic position in the revolutionary events that led up to unexpected collapse of the government on November 9. In January 1918, 183,000 workers went on strike at 299 Berlin factories, in what was the most serious challenge to government authority during the war. The strike was led by a group called the Revolutionary Stewards (*revolutionäre Obleute*), who had formed as an opposition to the official trade unions and their support of the war effort. The Revolutionary Stewards held both the USPD and the Spartacists at arm's length, the former for being too cautious, the latter for being too reckless. According to historian Ralf Hoffrogge, Ernst Däumig was the only outsider and intellectual allowed into their leadership. When the metal turner Richard Müller was arrested and sent to the front following the January strike of 1918, Däumig became the group's de facto leader.⁶⁴ When police disbanded the strike leadership, a secret council formed under Vogtherr, Hoffmann, Kunert, and Josef Herzfeld and met in the Reichstag to avoid arrest.⁶⁵

When the authority of the elected parliaments and the monarchy suddenly collapsed in early November, the workers' and soldiers' councils asserted themselves as the new basis of

⁶¹ *Vorwärts*, no. 103, April 13, 1916.

⁶² Wilhelm Kolb, "Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie," *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, November 1917, 241–50. Quoted extensively by the Domdekan in Mainz Joseph Selbst, "Zeitlage und kirchliches Leben im Kriegsjahr 1917/18," *Kirchliches Handbuch für das katholische Deutschland 1917/1918*.

⁶³ Selbst, "Zeitlage und kirchliches Leben im Kriegsjahr 1917/18," 245, 247.

⁶⁴ Ralf Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 57.

⁶⁵ Among the USPD politicians mentioned in police reports of February 1918, alongside current and former secularists Vogtherr, Kunert, Ledebour, and Hoffmann, there were also the politicians without secularist affiliations: Hugo Haase, Fritz Zubeil, Emanuel Wurm, and Josef Herzfeld. See Ingo Materna and Hans-Joachim Schreckenbach, eds., *Dokumente aus geheimen Archiven: Band 4: 1914–1918, Berichte des Berliner Polizeipräsidenten zur Stimmung und Lage der Bevölkerung in Berlin 1914–1918* (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus, 1987), 253–59.



Figure 1. Free Religious leaders of the USPD. Left to right: Adolph Hoffmann, Ewald Vogtherr, Fritz Kunert, Ernst Däumig. Source: Archiv der sozialen Demokratie Bonn, A030692, A030692, A036604.

popular legitimacy and the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Greater Berlin (*Vollzugsrat des Arbeiter- und Soldatenrates Groß-Berlin*) became the most important council in the nation. With Richard Müller as its chairman, and Ledebour and later Däumig as members of the Executive Council, the Revolutionary Stewards and the USPD had a strong hand and were able to forge a power-sharing agreement with the MSPD on November 10, whereby the Majority and the Independent Socialist Parties agreed to colead all the ministries in the state of Prussia.⁶⁶ As a consequence, Adolph Hoffmann was appointed to colead the Ministry of Education for Prussia and Vogtherr was appointed a liaison to the navy. However, although political power was to be shared, the monopoly of violence was not. In December 1918, Ebert secured a secret agreement with the military to suppress revolutionary excesses, which would prove crucial for the unfolding of events in January 1919.

Adolph Hoffmann as Co-Minister of Culture in Prussia

Given that religious matters were a prerogative of state governments and Prussia was the largest state, the Prussian Ministry of Education was the single most important office in Germany for determining the fate of the churches. Not surprisingly, upon his appointment, Hoffmann immediately announced his intention to dismantle all aspects of confessional discrimination and church privilege and power by revolutionary fiat:

The old fortresses of arbitrary violence have fallen. Now it is time to create new space for a new edifice, a house in which the entire people feel at home. Thus, first of all, away

⁶⁶ Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution*, 123.

with all the barriers and hindrances in our public institutions that are left over from centuries of reaction; away with the remnants of the antiquated views and ideas that have allowed the spirit of narrowness and darkness, the worship of brutal power, and the celebration of militarism and bureaucracy to run wild in people's heads.

The ministry's first step would be to liberate the schools from every "paternalism," "falsification of history," and "confessional influence." The schools were to be separated from the churches and the churches "liberated from the state, but also from their state subsidies." This announcement was followed by a flurry of decrees. On November 15, Hoffmann announced the equal rights of dissident children. Two weeks later he ended school prayer, removed religion as a school exam subject, and ordered the consistories to eliminate prayers for the king and the royal house from church services.⁶⁷

These measures prompted an immediate outcry from Catholic and Protestant Church leaders. On November 19, the Catholic Bishop of Cologne von Hartmann denied their legality; without the legitimacy of an elected legislative body, this separation was simply an "act of arbitrary violence." According to the Vice President of the Protestant Higher Church Council (EOK), the events in Prussia would decide "whether the masses of our people want to live under the blessings of the church or sink into paganism."⁶⁸ Both churches mobilized their faithful against Hoffmann. The Protestant Church circulated a petition to retain religious instruction in schools, which received 7 million signatures by January 1919. The Catholic regions of Rhineland and Silesia threatened to withdraw from Prussia and form independent states. The Catholic *Kölnischer Volkszeitung* wove fears of Bolshevism together with antisemitism, when it wrote that through Hoffmann's Ministerial Director Alexander Furtran, a Jewish monist of Russian origins, the Ministry of Culture would soon place "Catholics and Protestants in the state of Prussia under the Russian whip." Furtran was summarily executed a little over a year later by government troops for leading a USPD defense organization and was eulogized by the Monist League as a hero who had turned from monist worldview to revolution because, as Furtran himself had written, "a conviction only has value and effect if it is backed by action."⁶⁹

Tremendous strains quickly developed in the Prussian Ministry of Culture, not over the goal but over the means of achieving the separation of church and state. Hoffmann wanted to rule by revolutionary right ("*kraft der Revolution*") whereas Haenisch wanted decisions to be provisional, awaiting later democratic legitimization. Hoffmann desired the elimination of the Wilhelmine bureaucrats, while Haenisch was convinced that the machinery of the state would stop if this course were pursued. Hoffmann wanted to use state power to generate support for the new regime through public propaganda that would deliver "enlightenment to the masses in the countryside via a comprehensive campaign."⁷⁰ Haenisch, still infused with the spirit of wartime nationalism, wanted to create national solidarity within the *Volksgemeinschaft* to stand up to external threats to Germany's territorial integrity.⁷¹

From late November onward, Haenisch campaigned publicly against Hoffmann's decrees and opposed any "shallow priest-eating, pseudo-enlightenment and iconoclasm." This open

⁶⁷ Ludwig Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1996), 241; Gottfried Mehnert, *Evangelische Kirche und Politik 1917–1919. Die politischen Strömungen im deutschen Protestantismus von der Julikrise 1917 bis zum Herbst 1919* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1959), 106–15.

⁶⁸ Von Hartmann quotation in Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*, 5; "Für unsere Kirche," *Flugblätter aus der Schicksalsstunde der preußischen Landeskirche*, no. 1 (n.d.), in Archiv des Diakonischen Werkes Berlin (ADW), CA 8661, 116; Mehnert, *Evangelische Kirche und Politik 1917–1919*, 108.

⁶⁹ *Kölnische Volkszeitung* article of December 2, quoted in "Wirrwarr im Kultusministerium?" *Deutsch-Evangelische Korrespondenz*, vol. 17, no. 49, December 5, 1918; *Monatsblätter* of the Berlin DMB, vol. 8, no. 3 (April 1920).

⁷⁰ Adolph Hoffmann, "Unter den Linden 4," in *Die Revolution. Unabhängiges Jahrbuch für Politik und proletarische Kultur* (Berlin: 1920), 185.

⁷¹ Konrad Haenisch, "Kulturpolitische Programmgedanken," in *Auf der Schwelle der neuen Zeit. Kundgebung der Humboldt-Hochschule (Berliner Volkshochschule) am Sonnabend, den 1. Februar 1919* (Berlin: Wedekind, 1919), 17–27.

rift between the two fed into the growing strains in the coalition government, which led the MSPD to make use of its ultimate authority. On December 12 and 13, 1918, leaders of the eight Prussian Protestant churches met with officials loyal to Haenisch, who assured them that the Ministry of Culture would back away from Hoffmann's decrees to avert a *Kulturkampf*. In a letter of December 31, 1918, Haenisch informed Hoffmann that he was reversing their earlier decrees, which were driving Catholic workers back into the Center Party fold and costing both socialist parties "hundreds of thousands of votes." Haenisch concluded that "going forward only one of us can carry out the leadership of the Ministry of Culture" and that in the interest of "socialism and the fatherland, I would find it desirable that you go."⁷² This assertion reflected the decisive tipping of the balance between the USPD and the SPD in late December 1918. At the Reich Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils that met between December 16 and 20 in Berlin, this "highest organ of the revolution" decided that future power would rest in the democratically elected National Assembly. Without hope of continuing the revolution within the government, Hoffmann followed the other USPD ministers and resigned from the governing coalition with the MSPD. Haenisch issued the government's new position on January 9, which was to leave open the question of the future relationship of church and state until after the democratic elections to the National Assembly, which were set for January 19.

Hoffmann's initiatives had contradictory effects. They prompted the Center Party to run its campaign for the National Assembly as an antisocialist, antisecularist defense of Catholic worldview. At the same time, the threat posed by radical secularism pushed party moderates to seek collaboration with the MSPD. Matthias Erzberger, the central figure behind the Center Party's ongoing cooperation with the MSPD and German Democratic Party (DDP) since 1917, made quick parliamentary elections a condition of his agreeing to enter Ebert's government and take the unenviable position of Armistice Commissioner in November 1918. Erzberger reported to papal nuncio and future pope Eugenio Pacelli in February 1919 of the "good results" obtained by this decision, which had allowed the Center Party to stave off the obligatory separation of church and state and prevent the MSPD from introducing the "confessionless" public school:

These two successes must be esteemed all the more since a further political development to the Left must be anticipated in the near future before we can expect the inevitable return to the Right. Great injury to the Church can be prevented by the Center [Party] in this present period of maximum danger. If Church-State separation were once put into effect, it would be almost impossible to return to the earlier condition.⁷³

Joint opposition to the radical secularism of the first months of the revolution opened some common ground between Catholics and Protestants. The Catholic politician and professor of economics Martin Faßbender invoked Hoffmann to argue for Protestant membership in the Center Party: "Hand on your heart: What are all the controversies between Christian religious communities since the Reformation . . . in comparison to the chasm that separates us from—Adolf Hoffmann?"⁷⁴ Yet, despite such ecumenical overtures, the existential danger posed by the revolution led the churches and their political allies to respond with calls for confessional loyalty. Thus, historian Rudolf Morsey called Hoffmann, somewhat ironically, "the savior of the Center."⁷⁵

⁷² Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*, 7; Haenisch to Hoffmann, December 31, 1918, International Institute for Social History Amsterdam (IISG), Zentralrat, B-21, 8–10; Adolph Hoffmann, "Eine Rechtfertigung," *Der Atheist*, January 19, 1919.

⁷³ Klaus Epstein, *Matthias Erzberger and the Dilemma of German Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 286, 288–89.

⁷⁴ Martin Faßbender, *Revolution und Kultur. Ein Aufruf zum Kampf um die Christlichen Lebensideale*. 6. Jan. 1919, vol. 6, Flugschriften der Deutschen Zentrumspartei (1919).

⁷⁵ Rudolf Morsey, *Die Deutsche Zentrumspartei: 1917–1923* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966), 110–42.

By the same token, Hoffmann also aided the formation of a party of the Protestant right. Fighting his decrees provided a justification for church officials to openly support the formation in late 1918 of the German National People's Party (DNVP), which became the political home of most high-ranking Protestant clergymen.⁷⁶ Like the Center Party, the DNVP portrayed its campaign for the National Assembly elections as a confessional struggle against the anticlerical "Kulturkampf" triggered by the revolutionary government.⁷⁷ Despite assurances Haenisch gave that he would not single-handedly implement secularization, politically minded clergymen sought to portray Hoffmann as the embodiment of the MSPD policies as well.⁷⁸

The USPD had emerged from the party split with few newspapers and a weak party structure, which contributed to its poor showing in the January 19 elections. It obtained only 22 delegates, in comparison with the 165 elected for the MSPD. Together the socialist parties did not have a majority of the 423 delegates in the new National Assembly. The MSPD could have ruled alone with the DDP (75 delegates) with whom it shared points of agreement in education and church policy. Because of the enormous tasks facing the new government, however, the SPD sought to include the Center Party.

Secularism and the Weimar Constitution

With the defeat of Hoffmann and the USPD, control over the restructuring of Germany's confessional system passed into the hands of the MSPD and its allies. Already before the formation of the new government in February 1919, compromises on religious matters had made their way into the draft constitution being written by the left-liberal professor of law Hugo Preuss on behalf of the Council of People's Deputies. Because Preuss declined to give clear direction on school secularization in order to avoid sparking lengthy debates on worldview issues, the USPD-controlled *Leipziger Volkszeitung* warned of a "complete victory of the clerics."⁷⁹ Over a period of six months, the subcommittee responsible for educational and religious matters hammered out the articles of the constitution governing the confessional order, arriving at compromises that made no one entirely happy, but reflected some of each coalition party's program. Shortly before ratification, the DDP left the government in protest over the terms of the Versailles Treaty, and the Center Party used its increased power to extract additional concessions out of the SPD.

When Carl Schmitt later characterized the Weimar Constitution as a "dilatatory formal compromise" composed of contradictory contents, he named religious differences between the leading parties as a chief cause.⁸⁰ Indeed, on several crucial issues, such as the confessional organization of the school system, the constitutional assembly simply pushed ultimate regulation into the future. Ulrich Stutz famously called it a "limping" separation of church and state because, although it declared "there exists no state church" and guaranteed individual freedom of conscience, the churches sought and obtained a continuity of the key privileges they had enjoyed hitherto, though now with new legal justification. The churches were declared "corporations of public law" and continued to receive state-collected church taxes from all registered church members. Language demanding a "unified school" was removed from earlier drafts of the constitution and the rights of parents to determine the religious nature of the schools was inserted. The confessionalized school system was retained pending a future school law, which was never passed due to the polarization of the political fronts and the weakening of the left in the ensuing years.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*, 119; Helge Matthiesen, *Greifswald in Vorpommern. Konservatives Milieu im Kaiserreich* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2000).

⁷⁷ Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*, 555.

⁷⁸ Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*, 114.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*, 239.

⁸⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 85.

⁸¹ Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*, xi; Siegfried Weichlein, "Von der Staatskirche zur religiösen Kultur. Die Entstehung des Begriffs der 'Körperschaft öffentlichen Rechts' mit Blick auf

Although the new constitution guaranteed the freedom of dissident children from religious instruction, it did not guarantee them the right to an alternative. For most German states, only the former state churches retained the right to provide such instruction. However, the secularist organizations were integrated into the confessional order in a new way. In a subcommittee meeting, the leading left-liberal Friedrich Naumann stated that the churches should not be principally privileged over “associations with cultural aims or associations that are concerned with questions of worldview, even if they are Monists or Freethinkers.” In response, the MSPD delegation proposed an amendment to open the status of corporation of public law to associations that pursued “the collective cultivation of a worldview.”⁸² Crucially, however, worldview associations would have to petition for this status and provide evidence that they had a steady membership and stable constitution to guarantee their continuity. This meant that the de facto exclusion of secularists from confessional privileges was maintained, but was offset by the de jure right to rectify this exclusion in the future. Here, as with the schools, the dilatory nature of the compromise worked in the interest of the churches. When the largest secularist organizations later requested the status of corporations of public law, their petitions were usually rejected.⁸³ Thus, it may be concluded that the Weimar Constitution represented a compromise that satisfied none, but guaranteed the survival of key structures of the Wilhelmine confessional system. By adapting the confessional system to the new democratic order, the constitution pointed the way forward to the church-state arrangement of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, but for the duration of the Weimar Republic, it provided the casus belli for ongoing socialist-secularist agitation.

When the final version of the constitution was presented to the entire National Assembly in July 1919, Fritz Kunert rejected the compromise in the name of the USPD. He demanded “no baksheesh, no fat tips from the state in the form of subventions, salaries” for the churches, and concluded by calling for the “confiscation” of church property. Historian Ludwig Richter has argued that such pronouncements on religious policy were largely propagandistic efforts to profile the USPD as the truly socialist party.⁸⁴ However, this interpretation is not plausible given the strong secularist streak in the party. The USPD position on the new constitution coincided with that of *Der Atheist*, which lamented that “a tragicomedy has been played out in the Weimar National Theater, in which the German people and human progress have been the victims. . . . On questions regarding school and church, the Center [Party] was victorious down the line, thanks to its red friends [in the MSPD, T.W.]” *Der Atheist* praised the USPD, “which stood entirely alone with its petition for a separation of church and state.”⁸⁵ There is wide anecdotal evidence to back the claim that the USPD was the party most identified with the advancement of secularist aims. A Christian teachers’ organization concluded that the party’s “animosity toward religion” had motivated it to issue three resolutions to the Reichstag to secularize the schools in 1921.⁸⁶ Police reported in Bremen in 1921 that freethought propaganda was being distributed in USPD meetings.⁸⁷ In Berlin, the Free Religious Congregation published its announcements in the USPD papers *Freiheit*, *Der Sozialist*, and *Arbeiter-Rat* and jointly conducted its *Jugendweihe*, or secular youth confirmation ceremony, with the party in 1920. Most of the congregation’s leadership was active in the USPD.

die Kirchenartikel der Weimarer Reichsverfassung,” in *Baupläne der sichtbaren Kirche. Sprachliche Konzepte religiöser Vergemeinschaftung in Europa*, ed. Lucian Hölscher (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 90–116.

⁸² Florian Bohusch, “Verfassungsrechtliche Grundlagen der Glaubensfreiheit. Religionsverfassungsrecht in den deutschen Verfassungsberatungen seit 1848” (PhD diss., University of Constance, 2002), 169–70.

⁸³ *Drucksachen des Preußischen Landtages*, 3. Wahlperiode, 1. Tagung 1928/30, no. 4178.

⁸⁴ Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*, 540, 71.

⁸⁵ “Die schwarz-rot-goldene Reaktion,” *Der Atheist*, July 27, 1919.

⁸⁶ *Schule und Erziehung*, vol 9. no. 4, April 1921, 27.

⁸⁷ Police captain to Reichs Commissar of Public Order, January 13, 1922, Staatsarchiv Bremen, FS 2181.

Following the disappointment over the constitution, USPD and secularists frequently joined forces in street actions to try to force through secularization policies. In the Rhineland and Saxony, a *Kulturkampf* raged in the first years of the republic. In Gelsenkirchen in November 1920, the local USPD and freethought association supported a school strike by pupils to force the creation of a secular school, while the leader of the local MSPD initially opposed it.⁸⁸ The church-leaving movement reignited in the spring of 1919, which yielded far more desertions from the churches than had the prewar campaign.⁸⁹ According to the *Kirchliches Jahrbuch*, the agitation was not driven by the liberal secularist organizations as it had been in 1913, nor was the MSPD involved. Rather, the greatest propaganda was being made in *Der Atheist*, *Rote Fahne* (KPD), and *Die Freiheit* (USPD). Indeed, the highest rates of church-leaving between 1919 and 1922 occurred in the cities and regions that showed the highest electoral support for the USPD, such as in Saxony, the Ruhr area, and Berlin.⁹⁰ Church politics developed into a key point of distinction between the rival parties. The most powerful leader of the USPD in Saxony, Richard Lipinski, authored a pamphlet with the emphatic title *Leave the Church (Heraus aus der Kirche)* in 1919, whereas MSPD leader and longtime editor in chief of *Vorwärts*, Friedrich Stampfer, reprinted his 1905 *Religion Is a Private Matter (Religion ist Privatsache)*.⁹¹ In preparation for the 1921 Görlitz congress of the MSPD, leading intellectuals advocated for a break with socialism's anticlerical legacy and obligatory connection to the worldview of secularism.⁹²

Secularism and the Revolutionary Council Movement

In the first six months of 1919, Ebert's government unleashed the Freikorps to suppress the insurrectionary efforts by communists and USPD radicals in the Ruhr, Leipzig, Halle, and Berlin. This, and the smashing of the Bavarian Council Republic in May, deepened the hostility between MSPD and USPD. At a conference of Proletarian Freethinkers of Rhineland Westphalia in October 1919, delegates from the town of Remscheid proposed the following amendment to the organizational statutes: "Members of the Majority Social Democracy are to be excluded." The petition was not passed, but it indicates the mood in socialist secularist circles, as echoed in the speeches given that day. One speaker was the liberal monist turned socialist culture expert Kurt Löwenstein, who stated that November 9, 1918 had marked not the beginning of revolution, but simply a collapse of the old order. The revolution had yet to take place.⁹³ Another speaker told delegates that the chief task of the moment was the "continuation of the revolution, which has to be based on the foundation of the council system and the dictatorship of the proletariat."

The "council system" of the USPD was an original model of revolutionary direct democracy that gained many adherents between 1919 and 1921. It has attracted the attention of a dedicated following among specialists over the years,⁹⁴ but most historians give it short shrift as a passing interlude between the power sharing government of November 1918

⁸⁸ Goch, *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterbewegung im Ruhrgebiet*, 338–39.

⁸⁹ Freie Jugend in one Berlin district agreed to launch "a great church-leaving propaganda." See *Mitteilungsblatt der Freien Jugend von Groß-Berlin*, vol. 3, no. 2, April 1, 1919.

⁹⁰ Schneider, "Kirchliche Zeitlage," 302–420, esp. 335. The correlation of high percentages of USPD votes and with regions of significant church-leaving is taken from: Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution*, 448–50; Lucian Hölscher, ed., *Datenatlas zur religiösen Geographie im protestantischen Deutschland. Von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001).

⁹¹ Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution*, 464; Richard Lipinski, *Heraus aus der Kirche: Ein Beitrag zum Kirchenaustritt nebst Gesetz und Verordnung vom 4. August 1919*, 1919.

⁹² See contributions to *Das Programm der Sozialdemokratie: Vorschläge für seine Erneuerung* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1920).

⁹³ "Rheinisch-westfälische Freidenker-Konferenz," *Der Atheist*, November 2, 1919.

⁹⁴ Hoffrogge, "Richard Müller, Ernst Däumig and the 'Pure' Council System"; James Muldoon, "The Birth of Council Communism," in *The German Revolution and Political Theory*, ed. Gaard Kets and James Muldoon (Cham: Springer, 2019), 339–60.

and the violent efforts to overthrow the government by Lenin's allies in the KPD. This interpretation occludes the fact that the USPD was the principal force of revolutionary action in Germany up until the merger of its left wing with the much smaller KPD in October 1920.⁹⁵ A further reason for the neglect of the council system was that its political opponents as well as later historians considered its model of direct democracy politically unworkable and its advocates naive if not irrational.⁹⁶ One obvious explanation of this apparent irrationality, namely that it was inspired by religious motivations, has been hinted at by some historians but never explored.⁹⁷ Yet, in the summer of 1919, Viktor Stern, a German-speaking Czech-Jewish schoolteacher and prewar monist, proposed that the councils embodied a religious idea, "which like a magic formula promises salvation in every direction. . . . Faith in the council system is nearly a new religion of the German proletariat. Even its most bitter enemy must today bow to this [expression of] mass will."⁹⁸ The connection between secularism and the council movement is suggested by the fact that several of its leading theorists were past or future organized secularists, including, alongside Stern, Georg Ledebour, Ernst Däumig, and Max Sievers. Other contributors, such as Curt Geyer and Max Adler, were strongly influenced by monism and were culturally close to the secularist movement.

Two recent studies of the German Revolution have opened up a useful discussion of revolutionary imaginaries. Kathleen Canning proposed that historians examine how the German Revolution was reflected in the meaning-making activities of everyday gendered individuals and cultural producers, while Moritz Föllmer drew attention to the presence or lack of "scripts" provided by past revolutions and by political ideologies.⁹⁹ But while Canning emphasized the revolution as a radical rupture that prompted new imaginaries and Föllmer argued that the revolution refused to follow past scripts, I propose instead to place the council theory within a long-term imaginary tradition that had been cultivated within German secularism.

In his classic study of the "great schism" of German social democracy, historian Carl Schorske placed the origins of council idea in "the traditional ultra-democratism of the German left."¹⁰⁰ Yet, this ultrademocratism that erupted in the revolution of 1848 was closely tied to Free Religion. Whereas most delegates in the liberal-dominated parliament that gathered in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt am Main in 1848 were willing to compromise with monarchy and the old order, the democratic associations claimed sole authority in the name of the people. Many of the key democratic leaders of these associations were Free Religious activists, such as Gustav Struve, whom historian Friedrich Wilhelm Graf considered the chief theorist of direct democracy.¹⁰¹ These personal and structural connections between Free Religion and radical democracy survived the 1848 revolution. To delve more deeply into the role of the secularist imaginary in the council system, I will link these earlier movements to the actions and writings of Ernst Däumig, who was not only the leading German theorist of the council system, but as cochairman of the USPD and member of the

⁹⁵ Ziemann, "The Missing Comedy and the Problem of Emplotment."

⁹⁶ Karl Korsch, "Wandlungen des Problems der politischen Arbeiterräte in Deutschland," March 1921, in *Karl Korsch: Politische Texte* (Cologne: Europäische Verlagsgesellschaft, 1974), 22–32; Dieter Engelmann, "Rätekonzeptionelle Vorstellungen während der deutschen Novemberrevolution," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 1983, no. 6 (1983): 804; Susanne Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 130, 353.

⁹⁷ On Däumig's "millenarian" motivations and unspecified "religious" nature, see David Morgan, "Ernst Däumig and the German Revolution of 1918," *Central European History* 15, no. 4 (1982): 304, 329.

⁹⁸ Quotation in Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 352.

⁹⁹ Kathleen Canning, "Gender and the Imaginary of Revolution in Germany," in *In Search of Revolution: Germany and Its European Context, 1916–1923*, ed. Klaus Weinhauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn (Berlin: Transcript, 2015), 109; Moritz Föllmer, "The Unscripted Revolution: Male Subjectivities in Germany, 1918–1919," *Past & Present* 240, no. 1 (August 1, 2018): 183.

¹⁰⁰ Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905–1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 326.

¹⁰¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Die Politisierung des religiösen Bewußtseins. Die bürgerlichen Religionsparteien im deutschen Vormärz. Das Beispiel des Deutschkatholizismus* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1978), 132.

Reichstag also its most powerful champion. Throughout the period of revolution, he also sat in the board of the Berlin Free Religious Congregation and gave regular lectures there. In 1917 and 1918, he published *Journeys through Church History (Wanderungen durch die Kirchengeschichte)*, an ambitious history of religion from the origins of Christianity in Greek and Jewish thought up to the present, as well as the aforementioned *Free People's Catechism*.¹⁰² Reading these writings on religion against the proposals for the council system that he set forth in keynote speeches to party congresses, pamphlets, and in his journal *Arbeiter-Rat* (Workers' Council) can open a window onto the historical relevance of this dimension of the secularist imaginary for the German Revolution.

Däumig's "pure council system" contrasted clearly with the Soviet model. In the USPD Party Congress in March 1919, Däumig stated his principle support of the council system, "as we now find it established in the constitution of the Russian Soviet Republic," but made the differences clear. Whereas the Bolsheviks used their strictly disciplined, hierarchical, and centralized party as a leading force within the democratic councils, in Däumig's model the councils not only replaced parliament. They were ultimately superior to socialist parties and the state itself. In stating that the councils and not the parties should lead the revolution, Däumig acknowledged that he was making a "heretical comment" that would dismay listeners of all the rival socialist parties.¹⁰³

Whereas the MSPD saw parliament and the Bolsheviks saw the party as the representative of the people or the revolution, Däumig wanted to do away with representation. For him, the councils *were* the people and revolution. The revolution "had created its own organs with elementary force," and these councils were not merely "proletarian-socialist combat formations (*Kampfgebilde*)" that would fade away once they had eliminated the "authoritarian state (*Obrigkeitsstaat*), even if it has a republican facade." The councils were to replace the state as a "self-administering collective body (*Gemeinwesen*)."¹⁰⁴ Using another biological metaphor, Däumig described the council-system as a living organism in which the central organs are "continually controlled by cells of elected bodies in factories and professions [that are] active at all times and distributed across the entire country." Completing the system was a supreme council of representatives of the regional councils that was to be a "control instance" but not an executive.¹⁰⁵

In May 1919, Lenin blasted this "pure council system" as being fully removed from the exigencies of class war: "Those philistine gentlemen headed by Däumig are probably dreaming of a revolution (that is, if any idea of revolution ever enters their heads) in which the masses will all rise at once, fully organized."¹⁰⁶ While Däumig left hard-nosed politicians scratching their heads, his plans were fully in keeping with core elements of secularist political thought.

The first core element of the secularist imaginary was the belief that social transformation would occur through the formation of advanced spiritual communities, such as the Free Religious Congregations. Thus, the botanist Nees von Esenbeck went to the revolutionary Prussian Parliament of 1848 as a Free Religious "missionary," and Theodor Hofferichter called the congregations a "nursery for the principles of democracy."¹⁰⁷ In 1887, sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who later cofounded a German branch of the secularist Ethical Culture

¹⁰² Ernst Däumig, *Wanderungen durch die Kirchengeschichte* (Berlin: A. Hoffmanns, 1925); Ernst Däumig, *Freier Volkskatechismus. Ein Wegweiser zur echten Nächstenliebe und freien Menschenwürde* (Berlin: A. Hoffmanns, n.d. [1918]).

¹⁰³ Ernst Däumig, *Das Rätesystem: Reden auf dem Parteitage der U.S.P.D. am 4. und 5. März 1919* (Berlin: Der Arbeiter-Rat, 1919), 3.

¹⁰⁴ Ernst Däumig, "Der Rätegedanke und seine Verwirklichung," in *Die Revolution. Unabhängiges Jahrbuch für Politik und proletarische Kultur* (Berlin: Freiheit, 1920), 84.

¹⁰⁵ Däumig, *Das Rätesystem*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ V. I. Lenin, "The Heroes of the Berne International," *Lenin's Collected Works*, vol. 29 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1972), 392–401.

¹⁰⁷ *Christkatholisches Ressourcen-Blatt*, vol. 1, no. 42, 1849, 171–72; Hofferichter quoted in Graf, *Die Politisierung des religiösen Bewußtseins*, 271.

Society, argued that Germany stood at a crossroads caused by spiritual alienation of secularized modernity. The challenge, according to Tönnies, was to build a new culture of community (*Gemeinschaft*) in time to correct the inevitable turn to socialism, for once “the multitude achieved consciousness” and strode from “class consciousness to class struggle,” it would “destroy society and the state, which it wants to transform.” Growing “a new culture underneath the declining one,”¹⁰⁸ was essentially what secularists sought to achieve through their reform projects, such as garden cities, consumer and production cooperatives, and “people’s houses.” These were conceived of as islands of community that would slowly penetrate and transform the society. Georg Ledebour expressed something similar when he hoped that the revolutionary workers’ councils would develop into rural communes reminiscent of Charles Fourier’s phalansteries.¹⁰⁹

The second element of the secularist imaginary was the centrality of overcoming the spiritual and psychological shackles of authoritarianism. At the Second Council Congress in April 1919, Däumig stated that the KPD was leading the workers rather than educating them to become self-governing and accused the MSPD of having succumbed to the lure of ruling through what was still, in his eyes, an authoritarian state.¹¹⁰ Both of these methods failed to overcome the psychological weakness of the German proletariat, which resulted from its lack of education and autonomy:

We are still suffering from the spirit of military subservience and passive obedience, our heritage from the past centuries. This spirit cannot be killed by more electoral struggles, by election tracts passed out among the masses every two or three years. It can only be destroyed by a sincere and powerful effort to maintain the German people in a condition of permanent political activity. This cannot be realized outside of the [council] system.¹¹¹

This psychological diagnosis of political consciousness tied into Däumig’s criticism of religion. In the preface to his book *Journeys through Church History*, he blamed the alliance of “state, church and school” for drilling ignorance and obedience into the population. When the time for war arrived, the military had been able to mobilize the Lutheran creed “let every soul be subject unto the higher powers” that lay dormant in every former schoolchild, so that “we, who consider ourselves spiritually free, witness with horror the uncanny power that medieval beliefs still exercise in our ‘enlightened’ age.”¹¹² Thirty years earlier, Free Religionist Bruno Wille had similarly turned the sectarian struggle against the church hierarchy into a critique of the growing authoritarianism and bureaucratization of the SPD. He had accused the party leadership of falling for the lure of electoral politics and turning the workers into “herd animals” and “members of the mass.”¹¹³

The centrality of overcoming alienation to Däumig’s thought is also reflected in his belief that the success of the revolution depended on erasing the distinction between intellectuals and workers, a third element of the secularist imaginary. According to Däumig, the Germans had to avoid the “enormous mistake” of the Bolsheviks, which had been to seek support “exclusively from the calloused fist” of the workers: “From the start we want to strive for an understanding between head and hand workers and build our council system on this dual foundation.”¹¹⁴ The task of intellectuals was to help workers overcome the educational

¹⁰⁸ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie* (Berlin: K. Curtius, 1926), 246–47.

¹⁰⁹ Engelmann, “Rätekonzeptionelle Vorstellungen während der deutschen Novemberrevolution,” 804–6.

¹¹⁰ Däumig, *Das Räteystem*, 15.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Julius Martov, *The State and the Socialist Revolution* (New York: International Review, 1938), 27.

¹¹² Däumig, *Wanderungen durch die Kirchengeschichte*, 7.

¹¹³ Police Report of August 10, 1890, Landesarchiv Berlin, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030, Tit. 95, no. 15050, 414.

¹¹⁴ Ernst Däumig, *Der Aufbau Deutschlands und das Räteystem: Korreferat und Schlußwort auf dem 2. Rätekongreß in Berlin (8.–14. April 1919)* (Berlin: Der Arbeiter-Rat, 1919), 13.

and psychological barriers that stood in the way of their self-mastery. He claimed that in Berlin the council leadership had identified one hundred promising young workers, who, once educated, would replace the old socialist leaders not merely as individuals, but more importantly as a type. Whereas the old functionaries, who were either parliamentarians or union leaders, had become alienated from the masses, the new leaders would be “inside the pulsing life” of the revolution, part of its organically evolving being. Bruno Wille had similarly claimed in October 1890 that “one hundred spiritually independent individuals are incomparably more valuable for the progress of humanity than one hundred times one hundred well-disciplined, blindly faithful, party-philistine Social Democrats.”¹¹⁵

In spring 1919, Däumig announced in the name of the Executive Council the founding of a “Free Higher-Learning Community (*Hochschulgemeinde*) for Proletarians,” named thus because it would entail the partial “life together of learners and teachers with all the fruits of a school founded on non-authoritarian and joyful cooperation.” It would not provide “bookish knowledge” or vague general education, but practical and political knowledge and “training of the spirit” with the aim of helping young proletarians take an active part in the socialization of the economy, which would be achieved not through decrees, but through the struggle of the workers in the councils.¹¹⁶ Däumig’s views were echoed by other council theorists with secularist affinities. Kurt Eisner saw in the council a “school of democracy,” out of which “personalities arise to take up political and economic” tasks,¹¹⁷ while Austrian Max Adler stressed the primacy of consciousness rather than party control for maintaining the integrity of the councils. Like Däumig, he proposed that the right to vote not be tied to a narrow definition of working-class membership as it was in Soviet Russia, but rather “on a confession of socialism.”¹¹⁸

The notion that history is determined by the parallel development of idealistic communities constantly under threat from the powers of authority, bureaucracy, and alienation describes not just Däumig’s understanding of politics, but also of religion. In *Journeys through Church History*, he argued that religion developed along two parallel and antithetical tracks: the first in intellectual culture, the second in the institution of the church. Culture is driven forward by the progressive evolution of consciousness toward a higher humanism; however, these achievements are coopted by the church, which “in continual adaptation to the conditions of the time developed itself into an organization of domination” by state and clerical elites.¹¹⁹ In the dialectic of spiritual advance and dogmatic calcification, Däumig points to the key role played by heretics in advancing the spirit and simultaneously building the bridge to political action. Heretical movements are “decidedly revolutionary uprisings in religious garb.”¹²⁰ The end of this dialectic is not the elimination of religion, but the conquering of “the fortress of the church, in order to set something more perfect in its place.”¹²¹ Thus social revolution and anticlerical struggle flow together. Only backed by social revolution can the champions of the modern, free worldview create the more perfect “religion of humanity” described in Däumig’s *Free People’s Catechism*. The catechism closes with “our confession of faith,” which combines natural scientific monism and democratic humanism: “I believe that I am and remain a link in the unending chain of humanity . . . I believe that it is my obligation to love my fellow men, to support them in need and danger and to contribute to making humanity freer and happier.”¹²²

Däumig saw religious and political heresies as interchangeable expressions of the same emancipatory spirit that was threatened by the same institutional manipulations. Thus, he

¹¹⁵ *Magazin für Litteratur*, vol. 59, no. 2, October 18, 1890.

¹¹⁶ Däumig, “Freie Hochschulgemeinde für Proletarier,” *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, vol. 1, no. 15, 1919.

¹¹⁷ Engelmann, “Rätekonzeptionelle Vorstellungen während der deutschen Novemberrevolution,” 804–6.

¹¹⁸ Max Adler, *Demokratie und Räteystem* (Vienna: Ignaz Brand, 1919), 31–32.

¹¹⁹ Däumig, *Wanderungen durch die Kirchengeschichte*, 6.

¹²⁰ Däumig, *Wanderungen durch die Kirchengeschichte*, 81.

¹²¹ Däumig, *Wanderungen durch die Kirchengeschichte*, 5.

¹²² Däumig, *Freier Volkskatechismus*, 4, 31.

compared the contemporary socialist movement to Christianity before it was coopted by the Roman state, but concluded that “in the speed of its spread, modern socialism far exceeds Christianity.”¹²³ It is reasonable to conclude that he understood socialist revolution and the particular form of the councils as the culmination not only of the Marxist history of class struggle, but also of the progressive history of religion and secularism.

The Final Act of the Revolution

By the summer of 1920, Däumig’s hopes that his council system could provide a correction to the Bolshevik model of revolution had faltered. With the successive collapse of the council governments in Bavaria and Hungary, Russia appeared to be the sole remaining beacon of world revolution. In July 1920, Däumig traveled to Russia to attend the Second Congress of the Communist International in order to negotiate terms of cooperation. In front of the congress, the chairman of the Comintern, Grigory Zinoviev, criticized Däumig for failing to understand that communists must “lead the way for the working class, and not to wait until we are dragged forward.” The USPD was then presented with the Twenty-One Conditions for membership in the Communist International (Comintern),¹²⁴ which would have required its Bolshevization. This Moscow ultimatum effectively split the party in two, as shown by the cover of the satirical magazine *Ulk* (fig. 2). At the regional congress of the Saxon USPD in September, Däumig took on Rudolf Hilferding, Arthur Crispian, and others who opposed the union of USPD and KPD. He argued that the Germans would have to choose sides in a possible future war between France and Russia, which would result in a “struggle of worldviews.”¹²⁵ Hilferding and Crispian, reportedly identified the German supporters of the Comintern, such as Däumig, not as Leninist hardliners, but rather as “revolutionary romantics” given to “utopian, syndicalist and anarchist tendencies.”¹²⁶

The differences could not be reconciled, and in December 1920 the left wing of the USPD fused with the KPD. KPD leader Paul Levi and Däumig became cochairs of the United Communist Party of Germany (VKPD). This was a momentous historical event, as it lifted the KPD from being a disparate sect with only 1,700 members in the summer of 1920 to a party with 52,000 members. Yet conflicts with the Comintern led membership to drop precipitously to 26,000 by August 1921. Däumig was one of the first casualties: he and Levi resigned in February 1921 over Comintern plans to precipitate the violent and disastrous “March Action” in Germany.¹²⁷ On October 1, Däumig and Hoffmann announced the formation of the Communist Working Collective (*Kommunistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* [KAG]), a new faction dominated by secularist socialists. In addition to Däumig and Hoffmann, its executive committee included Max Sievers, the future chairman of Germany’s largest Freethought association.¹²⁸ Otto Braß, the future chairman of the Berlin Free Religious Congregation, later joined the KAG. Although the KAG had hoped to serve as the basis for a new revolutionary party, just as the SAG had done for the USPD in 1917, it proved to be a dead end. As an ironic finale, which shows the continued relevance of secularist structures in supporting inner-party dissent, one of the last meetings of the KAG—at which the decision was made to rejoin the USPD—was held in the Free Religious meeting hall in Berlin in March 1922. In July, Däumig died as result of a heart attack suffered on the floor of the Reichstag.

¹²³ Däumig, *Wanderungen durch die Kirchengeschichte*, 45.

¹²⁴ Däumig speech on July 30, 1920. Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International (<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch07.htm>).

¹²⁵ Jesko Vogel, *Der sozialdemokratische Partebezirk Leipzig in der Weimarer Republik: Sachsens demokratische Tradition*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Kovac, 2006), 227.

¹²⁶ Max Sievers, “Der Parteitag in Halle,” *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, vol. 2, no. 43/44.

¹²⁷ Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten, *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktionen der KPD 1921* (Frankfurt/Main and New York: Campus, 1986), 445–47; Morgan, “Ernst Däumig and the German Revolution of 1918,” 323–28.

¹²⁸ *Mitteilungsblatt der kommunistischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, ed. Däumig and Hoffmann, vol. 1, no. 4, October 19, 1921.

powerlessness.¹³⁰ By contrast, when the MSPD assumed “the burden of power” and compromised its ideals to work with its political opponents; it became a responsible, pragmatic pillar of democracy. This argument fits in with the overarching narrative employed by many members of the generation of West German social historians to which Miller belonged, who described the normal path of social democracy as one of disenchantment, in which the SPD successively pruned off its utopian offshoots, until finally in the Bad Godesberg program of 1959, it definitively repudiated secularist *Weltanschauung* and obligatory Marxism.

This article has offered another explanation of some of the utopian content of the USPD and the revolution more broadly. Rather than seeing it purely as an expression of Marxism or socialist culture, this article has examined the impact of red secularism. Weeks into the war, socialist secularists were protesting that the *Burgfrieden* had not led to full integration of religious dissidents in the national community, and this confessional discrimination spurred their antiwar opposition in the SPD. Secularist networks and press organizations gave them a necessary measure of autonomy to build a leadership position in the inner-party opposition and later the revolution. This allowed such figures as Ernst Däumig and Adolph Hoffmann to pick up the reins of revolutionary power and seek to take control of the state itself in 1918 and 1919. However, their leadership did not merely result from their strategic positions in moments of revolutionary contingency. Both men were charismatic leaders, who spoke on behalf of reform ideals and political projects that had been cultivated in the secularist movement for decades before the war. Hoffmann effectively linked his pacifism to religious criticism, whereby his secular worldview appeared as both the negation of clerical hypocrisy and as a higher fulfillment of some of the humanistic sentiments expressed in the “Sermon on the Mount.” Hoffmann’s attempted elimination of the public power of the churches was quickly foiled. However, the episode galvanized the Christian parties and helped cement the political alliance of MSPD, Center Party, and DDP, who forged the “limping” separation of church and state in the new constitution. The survival of key elements of the prewar confessional system meant that red secularism retained its political relevance and set the stage for “culture wars” throughout the Weimar Republic.¹³¹

Däumig’s writings and actions opened another window on the relationship of secularism to revolution. Religious and political dissidence coincided in his revolutionary theory and in his political choices. The “pure” council system, which he defended for a time against Lenin, offered German socialists a novel form of revolutionary organization that expressed a communitarian imaginary that had been expounded by prior generations of radical secularists. Through the councils, he believed workers would gain moral autonomy and consciousness of the monist humanism that he saw as the telos of religious and political history. Following the collapse of the council movement and the disastrous putschism of the United Communist Party in 1921, most socialist secularists returned to the SPD and red secularism returned to what it had been before 1914, a dissenting movement within German social democracy.

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¹³⁰ Miller, *Die Bürde der Macht*, 130, 353.

¹³¹ Todd Weir, “A European Culture War in the Twentieth Century? Anti-Catholicism and Anti-Bolshevism between Moscow, Berlin, and the Vatican 1922 to 1933,” *Journal of Religious History* 39, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 280–306; Todd Weir, “The Christian Front Against Godlessness: Anti-Secularism and the Demise of the Weimar Republic, 1928–1933,” *Past & Present* 229, no. 1 (November 2015): 201–38.

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