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Dangerous visionaries and revolutionary transformations: Women's political cultures in the aftermath of war.

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The Weimar Republic has an important place in the history of Germany democracy, but a recognition of the strength of German women's political cultures and their role in shaping the post-war political landscape has been elusive. Women's experiences in the First World War and Weimar Republic have been extensively discussed, but often in ways that threaten to erase women's political agency. Moreover, the seismic shift signalled by women's suffrage has not been foregrounded in accounts of democratic history, and women's roles in the revolution of 1918 have been largely overlooked. Taking a gender historical approach, this article makes women's political cultures visible in two arenas important for an understanding of the post-war era: women's suffrage and women's revolutionary activism. While the focus is on the German national context, it is important to note that German women's organisations were embedded in international and transnational network organisations campaigning for women's social, professional and civic rights, and that their political cultures developed in dialogue with and awareness of what was happening elsewhere in the world.

Writing in 2010, historian Kathleen Canning explored the question 'why the turning point in German history at which women became citizens has served as such a dead end in German gender history'.¹

¹ 'Claiming Citizenship: Suffrage and Subjectivity in Weimar after the First World War', in *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s*, ed. by Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Brandt and Kristin McGuire (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 116-37 (p. 117). It is beyond the scope of this article to address the considerable scholarly interest in the Weimar New Woman, with its emphasis on representations of women's patterns of consumption, sexuality and fashion.

She concluded that much scholarship either focuses too much on women's representation in the National Assembly and Reichstag or draws too clear a line between women's pre-war, wartime and post-war experiences. Following Angelika Schaser's 2009 challenge to recurring stereotypes in suffrage historiography, there has been renewed scholarly interest in showing the continuities between pre- and post-war political cultures and the key importance of women's activism for an understanding of the period.² For example, two major feminist-led exhibitions in Frankfurt and Vienna showcasing new research into female suffrage in Austria and Germany have marked the centenary of women's enfranchisement in November 2018.³ However, as the editors of the feminist magazine *Ariadne*'s special issue reflected, '[e]in Gang durch die aktuellen Veröffentlichungen zur Weimarer Republik verdeutlicht, dass sich die Geschichte der ersten deutschen Demokratie anscheinend immer noch recht gut ohne Überlegungen zum Frauenwahlrecht und den [...] gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen in Sachen politischer und gesellschaftlicher Gleichberechtigung des weiblichen Geschlechts schreiben lässt'.⁴

This article seeks to explore Weimar political cultures in a way that recentres women's experience and counters the erasure of women's political contribution to what Julia Sneeringer has

² 'Zur Einführung des Frauenwahlrechts vor 90 Jahren am 12. November 1918', *Feministische Studien*, 27 (2009), 97-110; *Frauenwahlrecht: Demokratisierung der Demokratie in Deutschland und Europa*, ed. by Hedwig Richter and Kerstin Wolff (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2018).

³ Catalogues for these exhibitions are *Damenwahl: 100 Jahre Frauenwahlrecht*, ed. by Historisches Museum Frankfurt (Frankfurt a.M.: Societätsverlag, 2018) and '*Sie meinen es politisch!*: 100 Jahre Frauenwahlrecht in Österreich. Geschlechterdemokratie als gesellschaftspolitische Herausforderung', ed. by Blaustrumpf ahoi! (Vienna: Löcker, 2019). The Frankfurt exhibition was curated by Dorothee Lindemann in cooperation with Kerstin Wolff, while the Vienna exhibition was led by historians Birgitta Baader Zaar and Gabriella Hauch.

⁴ Sylvia Schraut and Laura Schibbe, 'Editorial', *Ariadne*, 73-74 (2018), 1-3 (p. 1).

characterised as ‘two political revolutions in Germany: the proclamation of the republic and the enfranchisement of women’.⁵ The focus will be on women whose political engagement pre-dated the war, who had been working, often for decades, towards a vision for a society transformed by gender, social and economic justice, and who saw in the revolutionary shifts of the post-war period a chance to realise their long-held feminist goals. The women discussed here will include progressive feminist and pacifist reformers such as Anita Augspurg, Lida Gustava Heymann and Helene Stöcker, socialist revolutionaries such as the Frankfurt trade unionist Toni Sender and the 18-year-old communist activist Hilde Kramer in Munich, but also nationally-minded leaders such as Gertrud Bäumer and Helene Lange, who after 1914 had continued to campaign for their political goals while organising women to support Germany’s war effort. These women were a transgressive minority in a socially and politically conservative national context that saw women as fundamentally fitted for domestic and emotional labour only, and opposed their entry into higher education, the professions and public life. The article will recapture these political women’s visions as well as outlining some of the obstacles they had to overcome, first in order to imagine and/or realise a life in which women could shape public events, and then to leave a lasting record of their activism. It is important to note at the outset that scholars of women’s and feminist history have access to the political cultures of women largely because of their own record-keeping, women’s organisations’ journals and newspapers, speeches and correspondence and a whole slew of political memoirs and biographies by and about women that began to appear in the mid-1920s.⁶ These sources will form the basis of this study.

⁵ Julia Sneeringer, *Winning Women’s Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 1.

⁶ As well as many articles in *Die Frau*, *Die Frauenbewegung*, *Die Frau im Staat* and other women’s journals, memoirs by several leading feminists and revolutionary women were published, for example in Schwetschke & Sohn’s series *Weibliches Schaffen und Wirken*.

In expanding the timeframe of both the suffrage campaigns and the revolution beyond the months of October/November 1918, this article will counter views of either events as a sudden shock, stressing instead the continuities between Weimar political cultures and earlier women's activism. It will argue for a broader understanding of what counts as political or revolutionary in order to make visible the full range of women's political cultures during their pre-war suffrage campaigns and anti-war agitation.⁷

Post-war opportunities for political transformation.

During the First World War, the effects of the allied blockade that prevented foodstuffs and raw materials reaching Germany were exacerbated by German wartime policies, leaving the civilian population hungry to the point of malnutrition, vulnerable to the diseases associated with poverty and exhaustion. It is calculated that between 500,000 and one million people died of hunger in Germany between 1914 and 1918, while deaths from tuberculosis rose by two thirds and deaths among women from pneumonia doubled. The influenza pandemic of 1918-19 killed 72,000 men and 102,000 women within Germany. 1918 saw the Germans defeated, humiliated and exposed to the mercies of Allied peacemakers in Paris, where they were denied a voice and even a presence.⁸ Many of their 2 million

⁷ More complex understandings of Weimar's political cultures are explored by scholars in *Beyond Glitter and Doom: The Contingency of the Weimar Republic*, ed. by Jochen Hung, Godela Weiss-Sussex and Geoff Wilkes (Munich: iudicium, 2012).

⁸ There is extensive literature on post-war German suffering, for example: Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984); Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Erika Kuhlman, *Reconstructing Patriarchy after the Great War: Women, Gender, and Postwar Reconciliation between Nations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth Century Germany*, ed. by Karen

war dead remained on enemy soil, the Allied blockade remained in force until the Treaty of Versailles was signed in June 1919, and the economy was in no state to offer adequate support to the 2.7 million soldiers returning wounded or suffering from war trauma, or the 500,000 war widows and two million orphans.⁹

To imagine the post-war landscape as nothing but misery and despair, however, would be to ignore something important: namely, that this period of revolutionary ferment brought lasting political changes, not least the collapse of the German empire and the extension of suffrage to women, and offered the possibility for transformative thinking that expressed itself in a multiplicity of visions for a post-war German society. Ernst Troeltsch's near-contemporaneous characterisation of the period of revolution and armistice as a 'Traumland', a liminal dream landscape in which radical visions of new worlds seemed eminently realisable is perhaps unsurprising given the seismic shifts, in which entrenched social hierarchies and powerful empires had been toppled.¹⁰ In March 1919, the author Heinrich Mann claimed in his eulogy for Munich's assassinated revolutionary leader, Kurt Eisner, that '[d]ie hundert Tage der Regierung Eisner haben mehr Ideen, mehr Freuden

Hagemann and Stephanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (London: Granta, 2003).

⁹ Figures from Renate Wurts, "'Krieg dem Kriege'—'Dienst am Vaterland': Frauenbewegung im Ersten Weltkrieg', in *Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung*, ed. by Florence Hervé (Cologne: Pappy-Rossa, 1998), pp. 84-114 (p. 88); Bessel, p. 39; and Erika Kuhlman, *Of Little Comfort: War Widows, Fallen Soldiers, and the Remaking of the Nation after the Great War* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Ernst Troeltsch, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Gangolf Hübinger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), XIV: *Spectator-Briefe und Berliner Briefe (1919-1922)*.

der Vernunft, mehr Belebung der Geister gebracht als die fünfzig Jahre vorher'.¹¹ These were the ideas and excitement that Volker Weidermann attempts to capture in his 2017 book *Träumer: Als die Dichter die Macht übernahmen*: in a revolution led by poets and writers like Ernst Toller, Kurt Eisner, Erich Mühsam and Gustav Landauer, chronicled and commentated by Oskar Maria Graf, Rainer Maria Rilke, Viktor Klemperer, and, albeit rather ambivalently, by Thomas Mann, everything seemed possible.¹² As this list reveals, Weidermann's account of a new political and social order is exclusively male, but the emphasis on the revolutionary period as a time of possibilities applies at least as much to the women who had spent decades developing their feminist programmes and priorities and envisioning a new society. To understand this period, we therefore need to take account of both the possibility of change and the dreams, goals and visions that motivated the activists at the time. Historian and journalist Hedwig Richter, writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, reminds us that the potential for political change was especially strong for women at that time: '[w]er gar einen Blick auf die Frauen wagt [...] kann die Aufbrüche und den Optimismus im Arbeitsleben, in der Bildungslandschaft und in den Familien schwerlich übersehen. Lässt sich tatsächlich ausblenden,

¹¹ Heinrich Mann, 'Gedenkrede für Kurt Eisner', 16 March 1919, reproduced on Literaturportal Bayern, 'Dichtung ist Revolution (6): Ermordung und Beerdigung Kurt Eisners', <<https://www.literaturportal-bayern.de/journal?task=lpbblog.default&id=1834>> [accessed 30 October 2019].

¹² Volker Weidermann, *Träumer: Als die Dichter die Macht übernahmen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2017). This male focus is also reflected in the exhibition 'Dichtung ist Revolution' in the Hildebrandhaus in Munich that ran from 9 November 2018 to 30 June 2019. See <<https://muenchen-ausstellungen.de/monacensia-im-hildebrandhaus-dichtung-ist-revolution/>> [accessed April 2020].

dass es doch auch ganz anders hätte kommen können?’¹³ Remembering that things could have been different is especially important in the case of Germany, where the events of the 1930s and 1940s can overshadow the entire post-war period, blinding us to other possible outcomes and dismissing the visions of revolutionary activists as no more than a prelude to an inevitable failure.¹⁴

Suffrage.

German women achieved suffrage in November 1918 in the context of a popular revolution which forced the Kaiser to abdicate and allowed the interim government to sue for peace. On 12 November the *Rat der Volksbeauftragten*, the National Council that had taken control on 9 November, announced universal suffrage for all German citizens over the age of 20, men and women alike, with no property or educational restrictions. Marie Stritt, President of the largest German suffrage organisation, the *Deutscher Verband für Frauenstimmrecht*, wrote excitedly in the January 1919 edition of the international women’s suffrage journal, *Jus Suffragii*:

[I]n the storm of the Revolution with one blow full citizen rights have fallen into our lap, not limited in any direction, with neither property nor education nor age limitations but including all without exceptions as universal, equal, secret and direct suffrage in Empire, state and municipality [...] It is a transformation without transition from absolute lack of all political rights to full citizen freedom such as has been granted to women in no other Suffrage state,

¹³ Hedwig Richter, ‘Ende Erster Weltkrieg 1918: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 October 2018 <<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/erster-weltkrieg-ende-deutschland-1.4155828>> [accessed 30 October 2019].

¹⁴ As well as in Canning’s worked cited above, this tendency is being countered in recent scholarship. See, for example, *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19*, ed. by Alexander Gallus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

something quite new, inconceivable, something like a miracle in which it is difficult to believe in the first instant even for those who have devoted their lives to working for it.¹⁵

The scope and timing of German women's enfranchisement compare favourably with other nations, including Britain, where only women over 30 were included in the Representation of the People Bill of February 1918, and with France, where women had to wait until 1944 for the right to vote.

During commemorations of the First World War centenary in 2018, the emphasis in terms of German women's history was mainly on suffrage and the elections to the National Assembly in January 1919, when women voted and entered parliament for the first time.¹⁶ Although the vote is obviously of enormous significance and represents a radical break with the past, it is important not to downplay the continuities. All too often, the achievement of suffrage is presented as a sudden event associated with war and revolution and often disassociated from the decades of activism aimed at carving out civic spheres of influence for women.¹⁷ Marie Stritt's characterisation of suffrage as something that has 'fallen into our lap' is echoed by SPD National Assembly delegate Marie Juchacz

¹⁵ Marie Stritt 'Victory for Woman Suffrage: German Women have got the Vote', *Jus Suffragii*, 13 (1919), 44-46 (p. 44).

¹⁶ This was certainly the case in much of the press coverage in November 2018 and in two major exhibitions at the Kiel Maritime Museum and Hamburg History Museum in 2018. Catalogues for these exhibitions are *Die Stunde der Matrosen: Kiel und die deutsche Revolution 1918*, ed. by Sonja Kinzler and Doris Tillmann (Darmstadt: Theiss 2018) and *Revolution! Revolution? Hamburg 1918/19*, ed. by Hans-Jörg Czech, Olaf Matthes and Ortwin Pelc (Kiel: Wachholtz, 2018).

¹⁷ Kerstin Wolff, 'Auch unsere Stimme zählt: Der Kampf der Frauenbewegung um das Wahlrecht in Deutschland', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 42 (2018) <<https://www.bpb.de/apuz/277331/auch-unsere-stimme-zaehlt-der-kampf-der-frauenbewegung-um-das-wahlrecht-in-deutschland>> [accessed 22 October 2019].

in the first speech in parliament in February 1919, in which she claimed it was the revolution that had brought suffrage to German women:

Meine Herren und Damen! (Heiterkeit) Es ist das erste Mal, daß in Deutschland die Frau als Freie und Gleiche im Parlament zum Volke sprechen darf, und ich möchte hier feststellen, und zwar ganz objektiv, daß es die Revolution gewesen ist, die auch in Deutschland die alten Vorurteile überwunden hat.¹⁸

Juchacz was clearly keen to deny the role of bourgeois feminists in winning the vote and claim the credit for this progressive policy for the socialist-led revolution. Stritt, too, had to acknowledge that women's votes had indeed been achieved only 'by force under the dictatorship of the proletariat [*sic*]' and not by the efforts of 'a small circle of organised Suffragists among the middle classes, in a hard struggle with no apparent prospects'.¹⁹ Yet the close association of female suffrage with war and revolution should not be allowed to obscure the effects of women's persistent campaigning for enfranchisement from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, despite the many legal and social barriers. Writing in 2018, Kirsten Wolff notes that although the all-male National Council made the decision to award women the vote as one of its first acts in government, they made it under

¹⁸ Reported in 'Die erste Parlamentsrede einer Frau in Deutschland', *Die Gleichheit*, 14 March 1919, 89-93.

¹⁹ I discuss the context in which German women were operating in 'Overcoming Inner Division: Post Suffrage Strategies in the Organised German Women's Movement', *Women's History Review*, 23 (2014), 347-54, although this article does fall into some of the German *Sonderweg* stereotypes noted by Schaser in 2009.

circumstances where women from all political backgrounds were demonstrating together in the streets and demanding their rights in the strongest terms.²⁰

Before 1914, there were laws in Germany against women's political activity, the most important being the Prussian Law of Association, in force from 1850 until 1908, that forbade women to be present at any meetings at which political topics might be discussed. This, along with local laws suppressing women's political activities, including the *Lex Otto* from 1850 that forbade women from editing political newspapers in some German states, prevented the main umbrella organisation for the German women's movement, the *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* (League of German Women's Associations, BDF) from openly campaigning for the vote, although they adopted suffrage as a key goal of the movement as early as 1902.²¹ Socialist women were further hampered by the anti-socialist laws in effect from 1875-1890 which, while not banning the party, outlawed socialist activism. Socialist women were also subject to more state scrutiny and the existing laws were more likely to be used against them. These barriers did not prevent women from being politically active – the German socialist women's movement was the world's strongest and most highly developed²² – and some women's activism was conducted in defiance of the laws or by exploiting the loopholes of

²⁰ Kerstin Wolff, 'Wir wollen die Wahl haben: Wie die Frauen im deutschen Kaiserreich für das politische Wahlrecht stritten', *Ariadne* (2018), 22-31 (p. 30).

²¹ See Kerstin Wolff, 'Noch einmal von vorn und neu erzählt: Die Geschichte des Kampfes um das Frauenwahlrecht in Deutschland', in Richter and Wolff, pp. 35-56.

²² See Werner Thönnessen, *Frauenemanzipation: Politik und Literatur der deutschen Sozialdemokratie zur Frauenbewegung 1863-1933* (Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969).

a non-unified legal system in Germany.²³ In order to fully understand women's political cultures, it is therefore necessary to take a broader view of what can be considered 'political', especially in the light of what Paula Baker has called the 'domestication of politics' in the 19th century, and look beyond an over-emphasis on achieving women's votes at a national level.²⁴ As Birgitta Bader-Zaar has pointed out, this national focus tends to obscure women's political cultures that were able to flourish at a local as well as an international level in the absence of the vote.²⁵

Historians differ in their assessment of the impact of female suffrage, many accusing the female parliamentarians of failing to make effective use of suffrage to achieve their aims. Claudia Koonz's analysis of women's Reichstag speeches shows that most women parliamentarians had the same priorities: in all parties, women's speeches were mainly in the area of social policy (28%), with very few interventions in foreign affairs or domestic policy (2%) and only women speakers addressed the welfare of women workers.²⁶ Women's presence in parliament dwindled after the first elections from 9.6% of delegates in 1919 to 5.7% by 1924,²⁷ and the small number of delegates have

²³ See Schaser 2009; Gisela Bock, 'Das politische Denken des Suffragismus: Deutschland um 1900 im internationalen Vergleich', in Gisela Bock, *Geschlechtergeschichte der Neuzeit: Ideen, Politik, Praxis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), pp. 168-203.

²⁴ Paula Baker, 'The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920', *American Historical Review*, 3 (1984), 620-47.

²⁵ Birgitta Bader-Zaar, 'Politische Rechte für Frauen vor der parlamentarischen Demokratisierung: Das kommunale und regionale Wahlrecht in Deutschland und Österreich im langen 19. Jahrhundert', in Richter and Wolff, pp. 77-98.

²⁶ Claudia Koonz, 'Conflicting Allegiances: Political Ideology and Women Legislators in Weimar Germany', *Signs*, 1 (1976), 663-83 (p. 682).

²⁷ Elizabeth Harvey, 'Failure of Feminism? Young Women and the Bourgeois Feminist Movement in Weimar Germany 1918-1933', *Journal of Central European History*, 28 (1995), 1-28 (p. 6).

been criticised for allowing themselves to be marginalised, relegated to social welfare rather than foreign affairs or economic strategy.

The criticism levelled at the Weimar women parliamentarians reveals a double standard in attributing political agency to women – their campaign to achieve suffrage is downplayed, while their scope for effecting change within the entrenched gender and class hierarchies of Weimar politics is exaggerated. This criticism often rests on an overemphasis of formal political structures at national level, where women were a minority, as well as on an overestimation of the power of the vote, either as a tool for political change or as a proxy for women’s political liberation. Moreover, it reinforces the view that the very issues that had been longstanding goals of the women’s movement – social care, health, education and training, welfare – are somehow of lesser political value than those areas – foreign policy, defence, the economy – strongly associated with men.

It is clear that key women within the BDF were very much aware of the limitations of suffrage in achieving their aims. For BDF leader, Helene Lange, the vote had changed little in terms of attitudes to women’s aims and interests: ‘Mit dem Stimmrecht bleibt schließlich doch im Grunde dasselbe zu tun wie vorher ohne das Stimmrecht’.²⁸ Lange warned against the naïve assumption that men would act outside their own gender and class interests and that women could afford to give up their separate interests. She believed it was strategically necessary to preserve a strong and separate female political culture to represent and support the interests of women. For Lange, realising the aims of the women’s movement depended on maintaining female solidarity – if all that women achieved was the right to vote, women would be ‘politically dead, even with the vote. [...] The most important aspect of women’s politics remains: the women’s movement’.²⁹

²⁸ Helene Lange, ‘Frauenstimmrecht und politischer Fraueneinfluss’, *Die Frau*, March 1920, 177-80 (p. 177).

²⁹ Lange, p. 177.

Lange's caution was shared by another key figure in the women's movement, Helene Stöcker, who in 1902 was a founding member of the first German women's suffrage organisation at national level, the *Deutscher Verein* (later *Verband*) *für Frauenstimmrecht*.³⁰ As well as a suffragist, Stöcker was a pioneering thinker in the arena of sexuality, advocating social renewal through a doctrine of love, whose primary focus during and after the war was on pacifist activism. She was a member of several peace societies, including the controversial *Bund Neues Vaterland*, which she co-founded in 1914, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Like many of the anti-war women, she saw her feminism and her pacifism as closely intertwined, believing that achieving political rights in an unstable, violent and unequal world would be an empty victory.³¹ Stöcker, who had studied under Lange, was much less committed than her teacher to the ideal of motherliness as an exclusive female quality, and was more open to the idea of men sharing positive human qualities than the separatist Heymann, whose ideas will be discussed below.³²

³⁰ This organisation was founded by Anita Augspurg, who, along with Stöcker and Heymann, went beyond the goal of a limited suffrage for women on the same basis as men, campaigning instead for universal suffrage without class or property qualifications. The organisation, led by Marie Stritt from 1911, belonged to the BDF as well as the International Women's Suffrage Alliance. For more detail, see Kerstin Wolff, 'Noch einmal von vorn und neu erzählt: Die Geschichte des Kampfes um das Frauenwahlrecht in Deutschland', in Richter and Wolff, pp. 35-56, especially pp. 47-53.

³¹ McGuire, pp. 141-142. See also Helene Stöcker, *Lebenserinnerungen: Die unvollendete Autobiografie einer frauenbewegten Pazifistin*, ed. by Reinhold Lütgemeier-Davin and Kerstin Wolff (Boehlau: Cologne, 2015).

³² Kristin McGuire, 'Feminist Politics beyond the Reichstag: Helene Stöcker and Visions of Reform', in Canning, Brandt and McGuire, pp. 138-52. McGuire rightly warns against categorising Stöcker as a maternalist, but underestimates the extent of Lange's critical self-awareness (p. 139).

Women's political cultures, then, go beyond suffrage and party politics and find expression in spheres often considered domestic, personal and private. What universal suffrage did achieve was radical and fundamental change to political cultures in Germany and across the world, challenging the assumption that democracy was a matter to be settled by wealthy, privileged men without the involvement or even scrutiny of women or the working classes. By 1919, women in 14 nations had gained or were gaining the vote, and even where the formal vote had not been granted, such as France, women could be politically active in international women's organisations and the League of Nations.

There is therefore a problem with the focus on suffrage in commemoration activities if it is taken to represent the entirety of women's political activism, especially if women's agency in campaigning for their political enfranchisement is erased. To attribute the achievement of suffrage to the revolution or to women's wartime service, or to the generosity of progressive men, and then to measure the success or failure of women's political intervention post-suffrage based on a narrow view of what constitute political issues is to ignore and overlook the energy and persistence of women's interventions in political debate, both before and during the war as well as in the Weimar years. If this story is not told, if the link between political agency and political gains is left unclear, the focus on suffrage can paradoxically serve to hide women's political activism and obscure their political visions.

Revolution.

The focus on suffrage in scholarship foregrounds those women who welcomed women's entry into party politics within a parliamentary democracy, but there is also a competing vision pursued by those politically engaged women who opposed the war and embraced the revolution as an opportunity for a fundamental transformation of German society. The characterisation of the vote as a gift of the revolution suggests a separation of suffrage as an outcome from women's political activism that is further compounded by the presentation of the revolution itself as an exclusively

masculine affair. Excluding women from the history of the revolution implies that they were beneficiaries of a struggle in which they had never engaged. According to this narrative, women owed their political enfranchisement – just as Germany owed its democratic transformation – to the far-sighted generosity of men. To prevent the erasure of women’s political cultures and to ensure that their activism remains visible, it is important to look more carefully at women’s political engagement with the revolution and their role in shaping the post-war world.³³

In 2016, Volker Stalman identified both gender and cultural history perspectives as research gaps in the historiography of the November Revolution,³⁴ and the male subject has certainly dominated: of the 321 relevant publications listed by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in 2018, only 21 (less than 7%) are by or about women. Even after the challenge of more than three decades of feminist and gender scholarship, historians continue to marginalise women’s accounts.³⁵ More recently, this has taken the form of tokenistic inclusion of women in publications and workshops, in which one 20-minute paper or a single chapter in an edited volume is expected to deal with all aspects of women’s revolutionary experience, while a differentiated account of the ‘male’

³³ Ideas expressed here were developed in collaboration with Matthew Stibbe and Corinne Painter at network workshops with Kathleen Canning, Clotilde Faas, Anna Hammerin, Veronika Helfert, Katharina Hermann, Tiina Litunen, Mary McAuliffe, Ali Ronan, Manca Renco, Judith Szapor and Jude Wright.

³⁴ Volker Stalman, ‘Die Wiederentdeckung der Revolution von 1918/19: Forschungsstand und Forschungsperspektiven’, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 64 (2016), 521-41.

³⁵ For studies of women’s revolutionary participation see Helga Grebing, *Frauen in der deutschen Revolution 1918/19* (Heidelberg: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1994); Anja Weberling, *Zwischen Räten und Parteien: Frauenbewegung in Deutschland 1918/19* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1994); Christiane Sternsdorf-Hauck, *Brotmarken und rote Fahnen: Frauen in der bayerischen Revolution und Räterepublik 1918/19* (Cologne: ISP, 1989).

experience, largely marked as ungendered, occupies the rest of the time and space.³⁶ Recent publications aimed at a general readership such as those by Wolfgang Niess and Joachim Käppner do include women, but within a framework that treats them as ancillary to the male role.³⁷

Since the 90th anniversary in 2008 there has been renewed interest in the German Revolution, and since 2010 a number of edited volumes have been published that include articles on women's involvement, beginning in a patchy way to introduce the biographies of some of the key women and to explore women's literary accounts.³⁸ However, there are also scholars who explicitly deny the relevance of gender to an understanding of revolution: in 2011, Weimar expert Benjamin Ziemann argued that 'when the revolution came in 1918, its gender was male', a claim he repeated forcefully in November 2018.³⁹ Generally, in the context of the centenary in 2018, there is little indication that

³⁶ See, for example, *Die vergessene Revolution*, ed. by Gallus, and *Zusammenbruch, Aufbruch, Abbruch? Die Novemberrevolution als Ereignis und Erinnerungsort*, ed. by Andreas Braune and Michael Dreyer (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 2019).

³⁷ Wolfgang Niess, *Die Revolution von 1918/19: Der wahre Beginn unserer Demokratie* (Berlin: Europa, 2017); Joachim Käppner, *1918 – Aufstand für die Freiheit: Die Revolution der Besonnenen* (Munich: Piper, 2017), pp. 357-77.

³⁸ See, for example, Heide Beutin, 'Novemberrevolution und Frauenbefreiung: Frauen und die Novemberrevolution', in *Das waren Wintermonate voller Arbeit, Hoffen und Glück: Die Novemberrevolution 1918 in Grundzügen*, ed. by Heidi Beutin, Wolfgang Beutin and Ralph Müller-Beck (Frankfurt a.M: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 119-37; *Die Frau greift in die Politik: Schriftstellerinnen in Opposition, Revolution und Widerstand*, ed. by Heidi Beutin and others (Frankfurt a.M: Peter Lang, 2010).

³⁹ Benjamin Ziemann, 'Germany 1914-1918: Total War as a Catalyst of Change', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*, ed. by Helmut Walser Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 378-98 (p. 378). Ziemann reinforced this position in his keynote for the conference

new questions are being asked that will do more than offer yet more evidence in support of existing interpretations.

Hedwig Richter dismisses the attempt to recover the history of women active during the revolution: ‘Natürlich ist es möglich, all jene Frauen aufzuspüren, die in den Revolutionen mitgewirkt haben – und man wird immer fündig werden. Doch lässt sich damit nicht bestreiten, dass gewalttätige Revolutionen vorrangig das Geschäft junger Männer ist.’⁴⁰ But this argument illustrates precisely the problem: as long as revolution is associated solely with just one element of it – violent resistance on barricades – then not only will women remain largely invisible, but so will many men, resulting in a distorted and incomplete understanding of revolution as a phenomenon. Challenging this perspective has the effect of making more varied male roles visible, too, and allows us to study revolutionary masculinities in a more differentiated way, as in Moritz Foellmer’s recent article revealing a multiplicity of revolutionary masculinities and roles.⁴¹ Centring women’s revolutionary participation broadens the definition of revolution so we look at the revolutionary context in which women played a key role – the strikes, food riots, demonstrations and expressions of anti-war feeling – that allowed the revolutionary spark to cross over from the small group of Kiel sailors to the mass population. It also redefines what is considered political: accepting women as revolutionaries allows

Living the German Revolution: Expectations, Experiences, Responses, German Historical Institute London, 18-20 October 2018.

⁴⁰ Hedwig Richter, ‘Demokratiegeschichte ohne Frauen? Ein Problemaufriss’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 42 (2018), p. 4 <<https://www.bpb.de/apuz/277329/demokratiegeschichte-ohne-frauen-ein-problemaufriss>> [accessed 13 July 2020].

⁴¹ Moritz Föllmer ‘The Unscripted Revolution: Male Subjectivities in Germany, 1918-1919’, *Past and Present*, 240 (2018), 161-92.

us to see that women's concerns such as bread and peace are indeed deeply political issues that go to the heart of anti-war politics.⁴²

Revolutionary women: visions of radical transformation.

First-hand accounts by female eyewitnesses show us that women saw themselves as playing active, even leading roles in the revolutionary events and certainly did not present themselves as onlookers to a male spectacle. For many socialist, pacifist or feminist women the revolution was regarded as a chance to realise long-term political or social goals. Women who had campaigned for peace during the war welcomed the revolution as it swept away the imperialist regime that they held responsible for the war and opened the way to a more peaceful democratic social order. Some women came to the revolution through their feminism or socialism and were driven by a vision of post-war Germany in which social, economic and gender justice could replace what they saw as the divisive masculinist or capitalist cultures that had led to war. The revolutionary context offered women a space to imagine a new kind of society in which women's political engagement could be transformative.

These were women for whom their revolutionary activism was part of a political trajectory encompassing engagement in local, national and international campaigns before and during the war and which continued throughout the Weimar Republic. Many of these same women went on to vigorously campaign for peace and social justice, many were internationalists who opposed the rise

⁴² This approach is in line with the theoretical framework set out by Canning for uncovering the realities of women's participation in the revolution using a longer time period and focusing on the revolutionary imaginary. Kathleen Canning, 'Gender and the Imaginary of Revolution in Germany', in *In Search of Revolution: Germany and its European Context, 1916-1923*, ed. by Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott and Kirsten Heinsohn (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), pp. 103-126; Kathleen Canning, 'Das Geschlecht der Revolution: Stimmrecht und Staatsbürgertum 1918/19', in Gallus, pp. 84-116.

of the far right and were forced into exile during the Third Reich. These women were sometimes extremely young, like Martha Riedl and Gertude Völcker in Kiel or Hilde Kramer in Munich, who were 15, 22 and 18 respectively in November 1918, but despite their youth, their revolutionary activism was embedded in and arose from prior political convictions and commitment to their chosen cause – they also had established female role models within the socialist movement (discussed below). The ‘women’s experience’ of the revolution was far from unitary: even within the group of politically engaged women who claimed participation in the revolution there were fundamental differences over the form of the new state, the limits to democracy and whether revolutionary violence could ever be justified, as well as about whether peace and class war trumped women’s concerns.

Socialist revolutionaries.

The best-known women in the Communist Party (KPD, founded in December 1918) were the influential theoretician Rosa Luxemburg, and the leader of the socialist women’s movement and editor of the socialist women’s journal *Die Gleichheit*, Clara Zetkin. Trade unionist Toni Sender, who belonged to the Independent Social Democrats (USPD, formed in 1917 by opponents to the SPD’s support for the war) until 1922, played a leading role in Frankfurt during the revolution.⁴³ Beyond these leading figures, women were sparsely represented in the formal revolutionary roles and fora, with only 5% of council representatives, dwindling to even lower figures in the higher echelons.⁴⁴ There were only two women among the 489 delegates at the Council Conference

⁴³ See Toni Sender, *Autobiographie einer deutschen Rebellin*, ed. by Gisela Brinker-Gabler (Frankfurt a.M: Fischer, 1981), p. 289.

⁴⁴ AHRC-Funded research by Ingrid Sharp and Corinne Painter has identified 256 women in formal revolutionary roles. The figure of 4-5% is confirmed by Axel Weipert, “Frauen für die Räte, Frauen

(*Rätekonferenz*) in December 1918, and one, Käthe Leu, began her speech pointedly with the address to the other delegate, Klara Noack, ‘lady and gentlemen’.⁴⁵ But women were vital in establishing the revolutionary context, playing a leading role in bread strikes and anti-war protests,⁴⁶ and if we look beyond formal roles there are many ordinary socialist women whose names are virtually unknown.

One example is Hilde Kramer, just 18 years old when the revolution began, but by her own account already a committed socialist: ‘ich war entschlossen, mein Leben dem Kampf für den Sozialismus zu widmen – das war mein Beruf, für den ich bereit war, mich ganz einzusetzen und schlimmstenfalls mein Leben zu opfern. Es war so einfach und klar.’⁴⁷ Kramer was at the centre of events in Munich, she was the signatory to a programmatic revolutionary flier of 30 November 1918 and, along with Erich Mühsam among others, a call to a mass demonstration of ‘revolutionary, internationally-minded communist workers and soldiers, men and women’.⁴⁸ In her fragmentary memoir, she recalls discussing strategy with revolutionary leaders such as Ernst Toller, Eugen Leviné, Erich Mühsam and Rosa Leviné-Meyer, and she was one of the few women who went to Berlin as a delegate of the German International Communist Group (IKD) in December 1918. She was arrested by the Eisner government in January 1919 and imprisoned again – more dangerously,

in die Räte’’: Konzepte und Praxen von Frauen in der Rätebewegung 1918-1920’, *Ariadne*, 73-74 (2018), 39-46.

⁴⁵ Weipert, p. 43.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of food strikes as political events, see Matthew Stibbe with Olga Shnyrova and Veronika Helfert, ‘Women and Socialist Revolution: 1917-23’ in *Women Activists between War and Peace Europe: 1918-1923*, ed. by Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 123-72.

⁴⁷ Hilde Kramer, *Rebellin in München, Moskau und Berlin 1900-1924*, ed. by Egon Günther and Thies Marsen (Berlin: BasisDruck, 2011), p. 134.

⁴⁸ Reproduced in Kramer, p. 155.

by the counter-revolutionary forces – in May 1919 for her role in the revolution, and many of her comrades were executed. She was tried for high treason in July 1919 and exiled from Bavaria in November that year.⁴⁹ Kramer continued her fight for social justice in Moscow and from 1937 in exile in Britain.

Another little-known revolutionary woman was the lifelong social democrat, Gertrud Völcker, who held an important role in the trade union at the heart of the revolution in Kiel, coordinating the process of demobilisation and providing an information hub for revolutionary fighters. She went on to have a career in local politics and social welfare policy. Before the war she had been a member of a radical socialist youth group she described as ‘self-conscious and revolutionary’.⁵⁰ Martha Riedl was another revolutionary woman active in Kiel. Only 15 in 1918, she was by her own account something of a rebel. She came from a staunchly socialist family and was already a convinced socialist herself. Her role in the revolution was more direct and extremely risky: as a young schoolgirl, she was able to move freely around the city without attracting suspicion and was able to carry messages between the different groups of revolutionary fighters across the city. She was also able to provide information herself through her connection with a young trainee officer who told her what he knew about the army’s plans to crush the revolution.⁵¹

Historical knowledge about these women is patchy, and little attention was paid to their stories until their later life. All three were prompted by significant milestones or a sense of mortality to record their lives – Völcker wrote her memoirs in 1974 to mark 50 years of public service in Kiel and in 1975 was already nearly 80 years old when she was interviewed as an eyewitness for a

⁴⁹ Kramer, pp. 213-22.

⁵⁰ Gertrud Völcker, *Erinnerungen: 50 Jahre Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* (Kiel: [n. pub], 1974), p. 21.

⁵¹ ‘Interview mit Martha Riedl, November 2005’ <<http://kurkuhl.de/docs/riedl.pdf>> [accessed 20.10.20]. The interview with local historian Klaus Kuhl itself took place on 10 March 1990.

television programme on the revolution.⁵² In 1978 she recorded the biographies of five of her close female associates and fellow socialists.⁵³ Riedl was interviewed in 1990 at the age of 87, just two years before her death in 1992, while Kramer began writing her memoirs when she became ill, only shortly before her death in 1974, and these writings were preserved by her son. In Kramer's case, her own memories can also be supplemented by personal letters held in police archives, as well as transcripts of her trials. She also became visible due to scholarly interest in the socialist milieu of the Kaetzler family, where Kramer was fostered and where she formed the political views that she adhered to for the rest of her life.⁵⁴ It is worth noting that if we were to depend on the writings of the men she worked closely with, we would have no record at all of Kramer's activities.⁵⁵

Anti-war feminists.

Pacifist feminists spent the war years organising transnationally against war and developing their vision for a post-war society based on social justice and democracy.⁵⁶ Major figures among the

⁵² 'Gertrud Völcker im Gespräch mit Karl-Reinhard Titzek und Tilmann Weiherich', 19.3.1975 <http://www.kurkuhl.de/docs/interview_voelcker.pdf> [accessed 13 July 2020]. The interviewers were more interested in Völcker as a witness to the revolution rather than as a participant.

⁵³ Gertrud Völcker, *Frauen als Mitkämpfer für eine bessere Welt* (Kiel: [n. pub], 1978).

⁵⁴ Documented in Kramer and Sternsdorf-Hauck.

⁵⁵ In his prison memoir *Eine Jugend in Deutschland* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1933), Ernst Toller does not name any of the women who supported him in his work or hid him from the authorities after the military defeat of May 1919, although he was closely linked to Kramer, who lived for a while with Erich Mühsam and his wife, Zensi (Kramer, p. 55), and to fellow revolutionaries Nelly Auerbach, Thekla Egl, Nanette Katzenstein and Marie Bertls (Sternsdorf-Hauck, pp. 20-21).

⁵⁶ For a discussion of anti-war women, see Heike Lischewski, *Morgenröte einer besseren Zeit: Die Frauenfriedensbewegung von 1892 bis 1932* (Munster: Agenda, 1995).

German pacifists were the lawyer Dr Anita Augspurg (1857-1943) and her partner Lida Gustava Heymann (1868-1943), active in Hamburg und Munich during the war and the revolution. Heymann and Augspurg had both been campaigning for liberal political causes since the 1890s, including against state regulation of prostitution and the double moral standard that accepted male licence while imposing the strictest standards of sexual purity on women, and for education and suffrage for women. During this time, they had been confronted with the realities of male rule over women and had formed a view that men were self-interested, willing to sacrifice women to their venal desires and capable of anything – except rational government. They saw women’s entry into politics as essential to prevent man-made disasters such as the First World War:

‘Der Weltkrieg hat bewiesen, daß der durch Gewalt aufgebaute und beherrschte Männerstaat auf der ganzen Linie versagt hat; der Beweis seiner Untauglichkeit wurde wohl noch nie anschaulicher erbracht. Das männliche Prinzip ist zersetzend und wird, wenn fortgeführt, die völlige Vernichtung der Menschheit herebeiführen’⁵⁷

Committed feminists, suffragists and internationalists, Heymann and Augspurg had campaigned against the war and as leading members of the new transnational organisation, WILPF, helped formulate the conditions necessary for a sustainable peace based on social and gender justice.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Lida Gustava Heymann, ‘Weiblicher Pazifismus’ (orig. 1917/22), in *Frauen gegen den Krieg*, ed. by Gisela Brinker-Gabler (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1980), pp. 65-70 (p. 65).

⁵⁸ These can be seen in The Hague resolutions of 1915, which identify women’s enfranchisement as ‘one of the strongest forces for the prevention of war’ (Article 9). Available from: https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WILPF_triennial_congress_1915.pdf [accessed 13 July 2020]. See also the Zurich resolutions of 1919, which include a demand for fair food distribution and international efforts to combat disease, as well as openness, democracy and self-

These women embraced the revolution, were determined – and felt entitled – to take a leading role and shape the new society along progressive, democratic lines. Their memoirs, written in exile in 1941, contain vivid recollections of the revolution in Hamburg and Munich:

Nun begann ein neues Leben! ... Das schwer lastende der Kriegsjahre war gewichen; beschwingt schritt man dahin, zukunftsfröh! ... Endlich konnten Frauen aus dem vollen schaffen. Frauenmitarbeit war auf allen politischen und sozialen Gebieten erwünscht. Wir traten für Frauenräte ein, die wir bei der Einstellung und bisherigen Entwicklung der Masse der deutschen Frauen als eines der wirksamsten Mittel erachteten, damit Frauen im vollen Bewusstsein ihrer besonderen Aufgabe und in selbständiger Betätigung – das politische Leben bereichernd – in den neuen Volksstaat hineinwüchsen.⁵⁹

As committed pacifists, they intervened in the revolution in the cause of non-violence. The one woman-led revolutionary tribunal they were able to set up in Munich refused to impose death penalties,⁶⁰ while the cross-party alliance of left-wing women (*Bund sozialistischer Frauen*) called for an end to all bloodshed, and sought to mediate between the warring parties to prevent

determination of populations, fair and equal access to trade, and the protection of the rights of minorities within nations. Available from: <https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WILPF_triennial_congress_1919.pdf> [accessed 13 July 2020]. For further discussion of the resolutions see Ingrid Sharp, ‘Feminist Peace Activism 1915-2010: Are We Nearly There Yet?’, *Peace and Change*, 38 (2013), 155-80.

⁵⁹ Lida Gustava Heymann and Anita Augspurg, *Erlebtes – Erschautes: Deutsche Frauen kämpfen für ihre Freiheit, Recht und Frieden 1850-1940*, ed. by Margit Twellmann (Meisenheim am Glan: Ulrike Helmer, 1972), pp. 178-79.

⁶⁰ Heymann and Augspurg, p. 189.

counterrevolutionary bloodshed in 1919.⁶¹ Founded in December 1918, the Bund was the first organisation to bring together left-leaning women from both the ‘bourgeois’ and socialist traditions, accepting as members anyone who ‘auf sozialistischem Boden steht –auch dann, wenn er keiner sozialdemokratischen Männerpartei angehört’.⁶²

Internationalism.

As Angelika Schaser’s 2009 analysis has shown, Germany is often presented by international scholars as an exceptional case in the suffrage story,⁶³ but it would be misleading to restrict our consideration of women’s political cultures to within Germany. In fact, international connections were extremely important, meaning that national suffrage groups were able to affiliate with and gain strength from international women’s organisations such as the International Council of Women (ICW, founded 1888), the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), founded in Berlin in 1904, and the Socialist Women’s International (SWI) founded in 1907. Anti-war women from combatant and non-combatant nations met at The Hague in 1915 and formed a third international group – the International Women’s Committee for Permanent Peace (IWCPP), renamed the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), at their Zurich Congress in 1919.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Sternsdorf-Hauck, pp. 19-24.

⁶² Heymann, January 1919, quoted in Sternsdorf-Hauck, p. 20.

⁶³ See also the introduction to Richter and Wolff, pp. 7-32.

⁶⁴ A great deal has been written about these congresses, for example: Annika Wilmers, *Pazifismus in der internationalen Frauenbewegung (1914-1920): Handlungsspielräume, politische Konzeptionen und gesellschaftliche Auseinandersetzungen* (Essen: Klartext, 2008); Jo Vellacott, ‘Feminism as if All People Mattered: Working to Remove the Causes of War, 1919-1929’, *Contemporary European History*, 10 (2001), 375-94; Catia Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion: Feminist Critical Methodology*

Isolated and oppressed within belligerent nations and falling foul of wartime censorship, these women worked together to develop a framework for a feminist peace based on internationalism, gender, economic and social justice, a core principle of which was equal political rights for men and women.

After the war, women's international organisations struggled with a number of factors that threatened to fragment the membership along national lines, including the failure to overcome the continuing war mentalities within former combatant and victim nations, the unstable conditions in the defeated nations and the split allegiances of feminists active in political parties that diluted their shared identity. Yet despite these barriers to cooperation, international organisations within what Glenda Sluga has called an 'imagined international community' offered women from defeated nations with less international influence or those who did not have suffrage in their own countries an opportunity to engage in political activity on an international stage.⁶⁵ A report on the first meeting of the IWSA in Geneva 1920 reflected optimism that 'women had come as a new force into the politics of the world. Through the Alliance they could be a humanitarian and internationalising force, and a great power for good.'⁶⁶ The WILPF met in Zurich in 1919 and presented a demonstrative unity between women of former enemy nations that contrasted starkly with the approach of the men negotiating peace in Paris.⁶⁷

in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶⁵ Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 11-44.

⁶⁶ Adele Schreiber and Margaret Mathieson, *International Alliance of Women: Journey Towards Freedom* (Copenhagen: International Alliance of Women, 1955), p. 30.

⁶⁷ Vellacott, p. 384.

The aim of the Zurich Congress was to comment on the terms of the peace treaty and work together to create conditions for a sustainable peace. The women had a copy of the draft terms of the Peace Treaty with Germany and the principles for the League of Nations and these were debated in detail before a response was agreed. Neither the terms of the Treaty nor the provisions for a League of Nations were viewed as effective instruments of peace: the women expressed their regret that ‘the covenant of the League [...] contains certain provisions that will stultify its growth, and omits others which are essential to world peace’.⁶⁸ Their suggestions included allowing defeated nations to join the League; requiring immediate disarmament and abolition of conscription in all nations as a condition of membership and the guarantee of minority rights as well as the right to self-determination of all nations, which would have effectively dismantled the empires of victorious nations. The key demand was for full political rights and social and economic equality for women.

Despite their criticisms of the League of Nations, the organisation became the focus of women’s international activities in the post-war period, marking a real departure in women’s international activity as they became embedded in the structures of international diplomacy for the first time. James McSpadden claims that ‘[i]n the wake of the First World War, the world of international diplomacy was in flux, and many countries used this freedom to bring new groups onto the global stage’.⁶⁹ It is to women’s credit that they were ready and willing to make the most of the changed landscape. The concession that all the offices of the League should be open to women was seized on by the feminists and they took full advantage of the new opportunities. Most of the international women’s organisations established a presence in Geneva with the aim of influencing world developments. They set out to lobby the League, influence its structure and ensure that women

⁶⁸ WILPF, *Congress of Zurich 1919: Report* (Geneva: WILPF, 1919), p. 243.

⁶⁹ James McSpadden, ‘Inventing Interwar Diplomacy: Why the Weimar Republic was represented by Socialists, Conservatives, and Women at the League of Nations’, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 65 (2019), 89-110, (p. 108).

were represented in its legislation. In particular, because of their commitment to creating conditions for sustainable peace, women of WILPF refused to restrict their interests to areas expected of women, commenting instead on all major League of Nations topics, in particular disarmament and international relations.

Women's work in and with the League of Nations helped to overcome the division between the private and public spheres and established that 'women's issues' could be an appropriate subject for international legislation, for example on violence against women, the question of married women's nationality, trafficking in women and education against militarism and for peace.⁷⁰ Even though women only represented a fraction of League of Nation officials and delegates, never rising above 1% in the 20 years of the League's operation, and only one woman ever led a department of the Secretariat, their involvement in an advisory capacity established international relations, disarmament, war and peace as key women's concerns and helped to normalise international political engagement by women at a time when this was still highly contested at national level.⁷¹

Conclusion.

What do these examples tell us about women's political cultures? Women's political cultures are not homogeneous, but diverse. They go beyond suffrage, party politics and revolution and have often been overlooked because of a narrow focus on more formal arenas of political leadership or on time periods and spaces where the extent of women's political agency is limited and where women are

⁷⁰ Sluga, p. 19.

⁷¹ On women and the League of Nations see Carol Miller, 'Geneva – the Key to Equality: Inter-War Feminism and the League of Nations', *Women's History Review*, 3 (1994), 219-45; Susan Pedersen, 'Back to the League of Nations: Review Essay', *American History Review*, 112 (2007), 1091-117; Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 210-22.

less likely to be found. Political women have had to fight every step of the way: not only have they had to strive for their right to education, economic independence, representation and bodily autonomy, but their areas of concern and their motivations have been dismissed as personal and domestic, lacking the scope and universality of the areas of politics defended as male. Where they have participated in political struggles, for example in suffrage and anti-war campaigns and revolutionary activism, they risk erasure from a historical narrative that takes the masculine experience as the definitive model. If we look at women's radical visions for a post-war world and their active engagement in trying to shape it, we can see the scope and ambition of women's political cultures within and beyond Germany and the variety of forms it took. It is also important to consider the 'imagined international community' within the international women's organisations and the League of Nations, which were a key arena for political activity on the international stage for women from defeated nations, such as Germany, or those who did not have suffrage in their own countries, such as France.

Writing women's political activism back into history and paying attention to women's political cultures is not just an addendum to the story: it changes it fundamentally. The centenary of the First World War and its aftermath 2014-19 has been an opportunity to broaden and shift the narrative, to move some stories from the margins to the centre and set the terms of the debate for the next decades, so the perspectives we include at this time are especially important. Recapturing the stories of the women in the Weimar Republic who campaigned for the vote, for peace, for social and gender justice is vital, as is recognising their diversity and divisions. Writing revolutionary women back into German history is important, too, because many of these women made considerable sacrifices to commit to their cause – some were killed in the fighting or were, like Rosa Luxemburg, executed for their activism; others, like Hilde Kramer, spent precarious lives running from persecution of one sort or another, and they deserve our notice. Remembering women's activism is also important for activism today as it creates a link with women's past that changes their relationship with today's political democracy in a narrative that stresses continuity rather than

breach. It gives women back their radical history, interrupting the narratives of suffrage as the reward for compliant patriotism and revolutionary gains made on behalf of grateful women by courageous and progressive men. Women's activist history reminds us that political gains have never been wrested from the powerful and privileged without vocal, organised pressure and collective action and that nothing has been won or defended without persistence, often over many decades. Centring women within the narrative of the struggle for democracy shifts the focus from arguments that seek to justify women's enfranchisement to the question: why were women denied the vote for so long? In the light of their intensive political engagement at local, national and international level over decades, during which increasing numbers and broader categories of men were enfranchised, how can this persistent refusal be explained? ⁷²

The struggle for equality is far from over, with women and girls disadvantaged globally in terms of education, reproductive choices, bodily integrity, health care and political representation as well as in pay, promotion, job security and pensions, inequalities exacerbated by elements such as race, class, religion and national context.⁷³ According to a UN report from November 2018, women and girls are still more likely to be victims of sexual violence, forced marriage, trafficking and are more likely than soldiers to die in wars.⁷⁴ They are disadvantaged in education and the workplace –

⁷² Richter, 'Demokratiegeschichte', p. 7.

⁷³ See the WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2018 [online]. Available from:

<http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf> [accessed 29 October 2019].

⁷⁴ See the UN Women Report into Gender Based Violence [online]. Available from:

<<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>>

[accessed 29 October 2019]. For present day conflicts see *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, ed. by Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen (London: Zed Books, 2001). Figures given on the UNWOMEN site 'Women and Armed Conflict' [online]. Available

in December 2018 the World Economic Forum calculated that the global gender pay gap would take 202 years to close.⁷⁵ It is clear that the need for women to tap into their revolutionary roots and fight for a better world has not gone away. Furthermore, the examples of the historical erasure of women's activism from the dominant historical narrative hold lessons for today's campaigners to claim and retain evidence of their own stories. Accounts of women's past political agency can be found by contemporary researchers largely because they wrote about their experiences – even in the teeth of public ignorance, lack of interest and persistent omission or distortion of their stories – and because archivists, libraries and campaigning groups as well as family members, friends and colleagues had the foresight to value these papers, to collect them and keep them safe.

from: <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/end-violence-against-women/2014/conflict>>

[accessed 29 October 2019].

⁷⁵ See Lijun Li, 'Picture This: Gap at a Glance', *Finance and Development*, 56 (2019)

<<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2019/03/global-gender-gap-report-infographic-wef-picture.htm>> [accessed 29 October 2019].