

Women of Aktion: Putting revolutionary women centre stage

Context

I have a long-standing interest in writing women back into history as historical agents, showing that they had a major role in shaping events, even where they met with resistance, and where the measurable effects of their efforts were slow and modest. Women's political participation, achieved against huge difficulties, is often downplayed, overlooked and misinterpreted – and above all depoliticised.

What's the project?

The history of the First World War has been looked at from a gender perspective and a cultural history point of view, but that's not true of the Revolutions that affected Germany, Hungary, Austria and Switzerland in 1918. Many scholars either entirely ignore or explicitly deny the relevance of women's participation to an understanding of the revolution.

So far, there has been little interest in exploring the social and cultural aspects or the context in which the revolution took place, which is where women are more likely to be active. The role of women in the revolution has therefore been largely neglected in scholarship. Earlier this year, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation put together a bibliography of 321 publications about the revolution to date, of which only 21 (ca 6.85) are by or about women.

Yet even with all the barriers affecting political women in 1918, our research has found 256 women with official roles, such as membership of revolutionary councils and several first hand accounts by women, many of them active in politics, trades unions, anti-war and/or women's organisations which show us that women saw themselves as playing active, even leading roles in the revolutionary events and certainly not as onlookers to a male spectacle.

Our AHRC-funded project (PI: Ingrid Sharp, Project Coordinator: Corinne Painter) sets out to write women back into their own revolutionary history and ask:

- what were the possibilities for female participation in the revolution and for shaping the post-revolutionary order;
- what changes in our understanding of the revolution if we include women in the story and take them seriously as revolutionaries?

As well as research publications and papers, we have worked with the Bradford Peace Museum to create an exhibition *Ending War, Imagining Peace* that shows the end of the war from a German perspective. We have worked with Bradford-based theatre company Bent Architect, to develop a play, *Women of Aktion*, that opens in Leeds on October 3rd and then tours in England and Germany until November. Some of the women in our database left virtually no trace, others can be tracked via police reports and court records, membership of organisations, articles or correspondence, interviews, biographical sketches or memoirs: two of the women who play central roles in our drama wrote memoirs of their revolutionary experience in later life and this enabled us to take details of their first-hand accounts as a basis for their characters.

The play, *Women of Aktion*

The 1935 production of Ernst Toller's *Draw the Fires* (*Feuer aus den Kesseln*, 1930) by Joan Littlewood is at the heart of the narrative. Toller was an expressionist playwright who ended up

leading a revolutionary army against counter-revolutionary forces in Munich and spent five years in prison as a result. He worked closely with a number of the revolutionary women mentioned in the play – Hilde Kramer, Rahel Strauss, Lida Gustava Heymann and Anita Augspurg – who all mention him in their memoirs. Ernst Toller does not mention any of them, nor does *Draw the Fires* contain any revolutionary women. Of the four women who appear among a cast of around 40 men, one is a barmaid who is also a prostitute another is a sister who tries to persuade one of the sailors to save his own skin. There is also the mother of one of the executed sailors and a very brief appearance by a leading socialist female politician.

In his preface to the play in 1930, Toller claimed that the aim of his play was to capture the truth of the epoch, but with some dramatic licence; *Künstlerische Wahrheit muß sich mit der historischen decken, braucht ihr aber nicht in jeder Einzelheit zu gleichen.* (Toller 1930)

But for me, leaving out the revolutionary women entirely is an omission that needs correction, and we see that happening in *Women of Aktion*, as the women Toller has left out start clamouring to be let into the narrative and start telling their stories.

The play's focus is very much on how the revolution was carried by ordinary people who opposed the war. The fact that the characters are mainly women underlines this, as they were neither sailors nor soldiers, but they were revolutionaries all the same. The characters demonstrate the different ways of being revolutionary: from working in the trade union house, street fighting, carrying messages and guns and supporting the revolution ideologically. It also makes clear that the revolutionary context did not come from nowhere – the shortages of food, fuel and raw materials caused by the allied blockade and the needs of the army hit civilians hardest of all – and a lot of these were women. They queued for food in the freezing cold, kept the economy going, cared for their families and were at the heart of anti-war protests too. Some were radicalised by the war, others opposed the war and became revolutionaries because of longstanding political activism in the women's movement, the peace movement or in socialist politics.

The play quite literally aims to put these women's stories centre stage.

Commemoration

Writing women back into their own history of revolutionary engagement is especially important in the context of the centenary commemorations. The centenary offers us the opportunity to reassess the significance of the revolutionary events for today, and allows academic research to feed into public debate. The revolution is now being presented as the foundation and cornerstone of German democracy and this is certainly how it is being commemorated in Kiel, where the sailor's uprising was the spark that spread to civilians in the traditionally working class, socialist city and ignited the whole country. Leaving women out of this history makes them passive beneficiaries of a democratic history that they had no part in bringing about: if women played no part in the revolution it follows that they played no part in the democratic transformation of Germany.

This is deeply problematic: there is no need to over-claim women's revolutionary role, but to edit it out of history entirely leaves out half the story.

We feel that this matters 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 to be remembered.

For tour details see: bentarchitect.co.uk

For project details see: germanrevolution1918.leeds.ac.uk

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