

# The first world war increased rather than narrowed germany's political divisions

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In 1914, as the First World War began, many would argue that the conflict had narrowed political divisions in Germany as all political parties were united, with the common aim of winning the Great War. However, despite this initial unification, as the war progressed, it proceeded to politically polarise Germany as different political perspectives emerged, desiring many contrasting things, the major contrast being between left wing groups that wanted the war to end, and right wing groups which wanted to continue with the war until Germany had won.

Therefore, by 1918, the First World War had very much increased rather than narrowed political division in Germany. Initially, the war narrowed political divisions because as the war had begun, Germany went into a system of Burgfrieden, summoned by Kaiser Wilhelm II. This was a political truce, agreed to by all of the major German political parties, to put their politics aside and unite to support the war effort. As part of this truce, all power was transferred from the Reichstag and given to the Bundesrat.

Eventually this would develop into the 'silent dictatorship' of Hindenburg and Ludendorff who effectively became the most powerful men in Germany as all political and military decisions came from them. Although there were slight constraints on their powers, from August 1916, they decided on the strategy of the war and how Germany should proceed and their views superseded the contrasting ideas of Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg.

It is clear that this system of Burgfrieden, where political standpoints had been thrown aside, would have narrowed political divisions as it seriously reduced the amount of opposition to the war that might have been expected

from different groups such as the SPD. It could also be argued that this semi-dictatorship of Hindenburg and Ludendorff would also have narrowed political division as these two people would have all political control and stop diverse political debate, allowing for decisions to be made quickly.

However, as all resources were put into ensuring territorial gain and military measures, this did attract some opposition. The conformity of the SPD and workers unions was key to the limited opposition that the war faced in German politics. The SPD believed it was their patriotic duty to support the government in war and also feared the repression that they may face if they openly opposed the war. A small number of party members did speak out against the war. In August 1914, fourteen of the 110 socialists in the Reichstag argued against the war but they were lone voices that did not provoke widespread opposition.

A small number of thinkers (such as Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg) also argued that revolution was the only way to achieve peace. However this belief had limited impact, as these thinkers spent most of the war in prison. This limited opposition voice was fundamental to the narrowing of political division at the start of the war. However, as the war progressed, opposition grew and this would go on to dramatically widen political divisions. When political divisions were beginning to widen in 1917, there was potential for political reform which could have once more unified different political opinions.

People had begun to lose confidence in the war effort and in reform and consequently, opposition looked likely to grow. Chancellor Bethmann-

Hollweg persuaded the Kaiser to give hope of reform. In the Easter Offer, the Kaiser promised an end to Prussia's three class voting system and to reform the Bundesrat once the war was over. This promise of more democratic reform could have potentially quelled any opposition feeling that was emerging amongst the German people. Unfortunately for the Kaiser, it did little to convince those in and outside the Reichstag who felt that it was time to negotiate peace without victory.

The Kaiser's failed attempt to quell opposition highlights how political divisions were widening as people no longer accepted a definitive answer from the Kaiser. German politics had undergone such polarisation that uniformity no longer seemed a possibility. However, despite Burgfrieden's initial success in narrowing political divisions at the start of the war, as the war progressed, greater political divisions emerged, even amongst different political parties. For example, divisions emerged within the SPD.

Although leaders of the party continued to support the war, a breakaway party, the USPD, wanted the war to come to an end, they were one of a number of parties who began to feel that the best solution would be to negotiate 'peace without victory' as it was becoming apparent that victory was not a likely possibility. The USPD was a breakaway party formed by a number of party members that had been dismissed for disagreeing with party decisions on war credits. However, despite this, by 1918, the USPD had the substantial support of 100,000 members.

Additionally, peace groups in the Reichstag voted in favour of a peace resolution that promoted peace without annexing any land or triumphing in

the war as the majority of the Reichstag seemed to agree that after the failure of Ludendorff's final major offensive, a time had come to initiate peace without victory rather than wait for victorious peace. Especially as the Allies had superiority in men and materials and had not yet utilised America's full potential. It became clear that with such a strong opposition, it would be very difficult to emerge from the war victorious.

This feeling that 'peace without victory' should be negotiated was supported by peace groups such as the Peace League for Freedom created by Pope Benedict XV. This left wing group aimed to promote peace and bring about the end of the war. Despite the creation of such groups, new political groups had also emerged in favour of the war. The right wing pressure group, The German Fatherland Party wanted to instil nationalistic pride, with a belief that they could still win the war, keen for Germany's continued participation in the conflict.

This pressure group was supported by leading military figures such as Admiral von Tirpitz and Ludendorff, and by the end of 1917, the party had one million supporters. This highlights how all sides of the political spectrum seemed to have substantial support and highlights how divided Germany had become politically. It is therefore clear that despite the initial unity that was brought about by Burgfrieden, political divisions had widened dramatically by the end of the war. International actions also provoked discontent within Germany. The involvement of the USA in the war led to certain groups opposing the war.

It now seemed near-impossible for Germany to win the war as there was an extra major power against them. Additionally, it could be argued that the Russian Revolution could have inspired new political thought. It provided inspiration for the discontented as they may have understood the potential that industrial action can have and realised that their voices could be heard to spark some serious political change. This is another factor that widened political division in Germany as people now understood the fact that they did not have to conform to the government's ruling.

Nearer the end of the war, in the years 1917 and 1918, there were increasing strikes within Germany with growing social discontent. In early 1918, 500, 000 people were on strike for five days and although protests were quashed by the authorities, resentment continued with strikers wanted an end to the war, democratic rights and more food as people were being rationed through a war economy and the Turnip Winter of 1916-17 had led to rising levels of malnutrition and starvation. Growing opposition also stemmed from the huge losses suffered in the war.

Of 13.2 million German soldiers, there were 6.2 million casualties with 2.05 million killed. As people began to realise that Germany may not win the war, they began to question the sacrifice of the millions that had died and this provoked increasing resentment and opposition. This growing popular opposition is another example of how Germany was becoming increasingly divided over domestic issues provoked by the war and also the war itself as increasingly more people wanted it to end.

Overall, although things looked promising in 1914, when the Kaiser had initiated Burgfrieden and all political parties had agreed to put their political differences aside, this did not succeed in narrowing political divisions. As the war continued, Germany underwent political polarisation with an increasingly aggrieved population and a contrast in political parties as left wing groups demanded an immediate end to the war and right wing groups wanted to continue until Germany were victorious.

The First World War, despite initially creating political unity, increased political divisions in Germany dramatically, rather than narrowing them. It did so to such an extent that soon after the end of the war, Germany underwent dramatic political reform, rapidly going through a period of constitutional monarchy before developing into a parliamentary democracy seeing the Kaiser exiled to the Netherlands. The narrowing of political division that Wilhelm had achieved at the start of the war, had clearly failed.