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Socialist Women and Revolutionary Violence, 1918–21

Veronika Helfert, Clotilde Faas, Tiina Lintunen and Mary McAuliffe

On 11 January 1919, towards the end of the Spartacist Uprising in Berlin, a group of men and women defended the so-called *Vorwärts*-Building, headquarters of the Social Democrat newspaper of the same name, against the counter-revolutionary *Freikorps*. Among them was Charlotte Steinbring,[1] a worker in the electronics company AEG in Henningsdorf. She was the last person still operating a machine-gun when she was disarmed and arrested in hand-to-hand combat.[2] Lotte Pulewka, a German socialist activist, described in 1958 how the former rebelled against the soldiers 'without fear and with fury in her eyes and mouth'.[3] Steinbring was a working mother of two, whose machine-gun antics attracted the attention of the leader of the conservative German National People's Party (DNVP), Count Westarp. Westarp was indeed later one of the main witnesses against her at the trial held in mid-1919 against Georg Ledebour arrested for his participation in the January uprising that saw the capture of the 'newspaper district', now in Kreuzberg, as well as the police headquarters.[4] Although three witnesses attested to her being in charge of a machine-gun, the version she gave to the judges was much more in line with the traditional female gender norms of the time.[5] She claimed not to have attacked government soldiers, but rather only to have tended to the Spartacists in the cellar of the building. Helene Behr, née Zirkel, also remembered the siege of the *Vorwärts*-Building in which she participated when she was only seventeen years old and the 'puzzled' look she received from the guard as she entered the building with the crowd. She was in charge of making and issuing passes so that the fighters could pass the guard posts easily and bear arms. It was only when her father, the Spartacist Max Zirkel, arrived that she was forced to return home.[6] In fact, Behr was the one who raised a red flag on the roof of the police headquarters on Berlin Alexanderplatz on 8 November 1918.[7] Even though Charlotte

Steinbring's and Helene Behr's actions in 1918–19 are among the better-known episodes of the German Revolution, they nevertheless stand out as exceptional – at least in popular accounts of the period.

Recent work on the violent aftermath of the First World War is still typically written with the male experience in mind, particularly when the violence is seen as political.[8] Only relatively few works on Germany and Austria published in the last years, for instance, reflect critically on the 'maleness' of earlier studies and incorporate gender historical perspectives.[9] In Ireland, while gender historians have published on the activities of socialist and revolutionary women for several decades now, newer aspects of women's experiences are still being researched and published. This is in spite of the fact that recent scholarship on war and gender emphasizes that everybody has a war experience, and that this experience is diverse, complex and manifold.[10] As we also note in Chapter 1 of this volume, women and children as victims of (gendered) wartime violence and of bodily violations as a consequence of food scarcity – in belligerent and in neutral countries – have long been a neglected aspect of First World War studies. Older publications still set the standard for narratives of revolutionary violence. In the Austrian case, for example, the studies of Gerhard Botz cast the political events of the November 1918 revolution as largely non-violent, thereby excluding social protests that occurred in the transformation phase like hunger riots in 1919–20, although they indeed ended in large numbers being injured or killed.[11] To exclude public protest in its diverse, sometimes seemingly unorganized forms, as well as the socio-economic demands of the masses, narrows the understanding of revolutionary social movements. It also misrepresents the character of some of those protest movements, as a number of the women participating in demonstrations were armed. This was the case, for instance, with the Germans Lucie Heimburger, Cläre Quast or Anna Erfurt, who carried pistols in their muffs.[12] Women as members of armed paramilitary groups also remain a marginalized topic. In Hungary during the period of the Councils' Republic, the participation of women in the Red Army was explicitly allowed, although the extent to which they joined the revolutionary armed forces remains unstudied.[13] In Finland, attention in the study of civil war history has for a long time been on men: only in the last two decades has research on women's participation, their histories as activists and not just passive bystanders, been published.[14] Research on women's participation in revolutionary movements in Ireland has seen a similar shift in focus in the last three decades. The official narrative has moved from simply seeing political and revolutionary women as passive auxiliaries of the male organizations, namely the Irish Volunteers during the 1916 Rising and

the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the War of Independence from 1919 to 1921, to seeing organized, political and militant women as central to the histories of the period.[15] The Decade of Centenaries in Ireland (2012–23) has led to a wealth of publications, including on socialist, militant and revolutionary women.[16]

Revolutionary women in violent times: four case studies

Women's actions in the revolutions presented here were characterized by their multiplicity. Based on a variety of sources we highlight the diverse activities of women socialists, including instances when they participated in violence themselves, when they engaged in non-violent actions in support of male fighting units, for instance through intelligence work, and when they became the target of counter-revolutionary and state violence. By using autobiographical writings, oral history interviews, political speeches and articles, police and court records, institutional material, pamphlets, photographs and press coverage, we aim to uncover the histories of revolutionary women. We are aware that different types of sources are accompanied by different sets of questions and therefore have to be interpreted accordingly. It is not only the memoirs that were written and preserved in the Socialist Unity Party (SED) archive in East Germany from the 1950s that must be subjected to the historical method of source criticism (see also Chapter 5 in this volume). From a gender-historical perspective, three things must be kept in mind when using sources in order not to reproduce the 'Narrative of a Soldiers' Revolution'[17] and what Brigitte Studer calls the 'gender-specific topography of relevance of the past'.[18] Firstly, women were often simply less visible than men in their revolutionary work, as they typically operated in areas that were less formalized and/or seemed less important. Secondly, the sources shed light on what actions or structural conditions appeared to contemporaries to be worthy of being labelled 'violence'. And thirdly, in the case of counter-revolutionary sources, misogyny (which was also present in the socialist camp) and anti-socialism must be taken into account, which either distort women and their political or militant activities into the monstrous or reduce them to the ridiculous. Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost refer to this process as a 'double movement' that either turned female violence into a taboo or stigmatized it.[19]

Although we mainly focus in this chapter on violence as a form of doing, aimed at harming people's bodily and mental health and their integrity, often

with the intent of furthering or preventing certain political causes, our underlying definition of violence goes beyond that limited understanding (including its nature as structural condition).[20] As outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, the experiences of wartime women workers included bodily harm caused by malnutrition, vulnerability to pathogens, lack of heating materials and increased risk of accidents in war industries, to name but a few. A gruesome accident in a munitions factory in Wöllersdorf near Vienna in September 1918 could also only have happened because of the war economy's disregard for life. To prevent the workers from starting their lunch break early, the gates of a large factory hall were kept locked. When a fire broke out, more than 400 female workers – 'soldiers of the hinterland'[21] as the Social Democrat Adelheid Popp, née Dwořak, called them – died, many of them young adults.[22]

Viewing revolutionary violence through a gender lens sheds light on spaces beyond formal politics and combat areas, and reveals gendered practices. Besides social protests or the effects of the supply crisis, especially in the empires of the Central Powers and Russia, it is sexualized violence that tends to be omitted from the major studies on political violence in the national contexts discussed in this chapter.[23] Such brutality ranged from physical assaults by men on women to symbolic practices of humiliation committed in places of institutionalized violence such as in prisons and internment camps or in the private sphere of households. Taking into account the presence of sexualized violence as a gendered weapon of revolutionary and (even more so) counter-revolutionary forces also helps to shed light on gendered spaces of revolution away from the combat zones of the post-war world. Feminist research in particular emphasizes the structural and symbolic aspects of violence, often based on the materialist or Marxist theoretical framework, which elaborates the relations of violence and power in capitalist society.[24] Moreover, in our exploration of the topic we take on board the concept of *Eigensinn*, theorized by Alf Lüdtke as 'wilfulness, a spontaneous self-will and a kind of self-affirmation' to combine one's own subjugation and personal dignity.[25] *Eigensinn* is not a direct resistance movement, but an attitude that allows the momentary creation of a space – both temporal and spatial – of one's own, and can help in reading various actions and interpreting them. Furthermore, violence is intrinsically linked to the emotions of those who commit it. Adding the emotional dimension to the political and economic ones allows us to reconsider the question of women's commitment to revolution in the years 1918–21.

In this chapter, we present texts of revolutionary violence authored by women socialists, explore re/presentations of revolutionary women in the (enemy)

press,[26] examine the gendered performance and spaces of violence, show violence deployed by the state as well as counter-revolutionary forces against revolutionary women, and discuss sexualized violence as part of the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary terror used against women. Each sub-section puts case studies from different national contexts in the foreground (Austria, Finland, Germany and Ireland). The political situations of the countries in 1918 and after differed substantially from each other. The case studies reveal the impact of the First World War, the influence of the Russian Revolutions in 1917 and the specific contexts of four empires – the Russian Tsarist Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, the British Empire and the German Kaiserreich. The revolutionary struggles and armed conflicts between 1918 and 1921 revolved around territorial and national independence, a democratic re/constitution of the state, and/or the building of a socialist society.

Finland is the case that was first and most directly affected by the impact of the Russian Revolutions. The Finnish civil war between the rebellious socialist Reds and the non-socialist Whites broke out in January 1918. There were several reasons for the war, both domestic and international. On the international level, the most important factors were the ongoing world war and the collapse of the Russian Empire, which had ruled Finland as a semi-autonomous Grand Duchy since 1809. The downfall of the Empire and the Bolshevik revolution enabled Finland to gain independence. However, it was in such political turbulence that civil war soon broke out.[27] The national turmoil had its roots in the previous year, 1917. Finland suffered from a severe shortage of food. That, combined with unemployment, made workers hungry and angry. Strikes, demonstrations and outbreaks of violence became more common, and working-class women were drawn into them as well. One key factor for the political unrest was the power vacuum that prevailed in the now independent, young country: there were no military or police forces to control the discontented and angry crowds. Both the workers and the owners established class-based local guards of their own during the strikes. From such local groups emerged the nationwide Red and White Guards, each with around 100,000 male soldiers. In addition, 2,600 female soldiers served on the Red side and roughly 10,000 women worked as auxiliaries to the Red forces. The Finnish civil war lasted for three and a half months, from late January to mid-May 1918, and ended in the defeat of the Reds. The war was short but brutal – 1 per cent of the whole Finnish population died due to the war.[28] Finland, which pioneered women's suffrage in Europe as discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume, is a notable case in our sample, with particularly strong integration of women into the fighting forces.

Similarly, the Irish case illustrates the diverse (organizational) forms of Irish women's participation in militant forms of socialism and feminism. The history of the Irish War of Independence (1919–21) reaches back into the nineteenth century, with phases of violent rebellion and constitutional campaigns for limited forms of self-government occurring with regularity, including campaigns for women's rights. Organizations such as the militant Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL, founded in 1908) and the women's trade union, the Irish Women Workers' Union (IWWU, founded in 1911) included activists who were driven by the ideologies of women's and workers' rights, although the Irish situation was also complicated by the impact of militant nationalism. Militant feminism and the labour movement were deeply entwined, and from 1913, 'many of the more radical nationalist feminists were also socialists'.[29] As historian Mary Cullen writes, when considering Irishwomen's engagement with nationalism and socialism, 'an implicit feminist awareness appears to have informed almost all of the developments even when the objectives were not explicitly feminist'.[30] Politically active women, particularly those who supported nationalism, became more militant from 1914. *Cumann na mBan* (the Council of Women) had positioned itself, at its foundation, as an auxiliary of the armed male militia, the Irish Volunteers (founded in 1913 to defend Home Rule), something which brought forth tensions between suffrage and nationalist female activists. Militant and socialist women's activities were further influenced and advanced by the egalitarian promises contained in the Proclamation of Independence in 1916, which was deliberately addressed to 'Irishmen and Irish Women' and guaranteed equal rights for all in the new Republic: 'The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens.'[31] It was this promise of equality which motivated many middle-class and working-class feminist and socialist women to participate in the fight for Irish freedom during the War of Independence, 1919–21, and on whom violence was visited during this period.

The early post-war years in Germany were characterized if not by civil war on the same level as Finland, Russia and Ireland, then at least by a prolonged period of political unrest, the local establishment of workers' councils and even short-lived councils' republics, and battles between paramilitaries and units of the newly formed *Reichswehr* (the German armed forces during the Weimar Republic). In the German Kaiserreich, as in Finland and the Habsburg Monarchy, the turmoil created by the First World War and the dire shortage of food led to mass strike waves in April 1917 and January 1918, with women

workers playing a prominent role.[32] In October 1918, sailors' mutinies broke out in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel, as was already the case throughout the Habsburg Monarchy in the course of the summer of 1918. The sailors were quickly supported by the local working population. Soldiers' and workers' councils soon spread to the rest of the country. The empire collapsed and on 9 November 1918, the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann announced the foundation of the Republic from the balcony of the Reichstag. While the Kaiserreich expired without bloodshed or a sudden surge of violence, the battle over the city palace (*Berliner Schloss*) on Christmas Eve 1918, and further street fighting in the early months of 1919, nearly put Berlin in a state of civil war. Indeed, the left-wing forces of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) and the newly formed Spartacists wanted to carry on with the revolution and called

Figure 3.1 Propaganda poster against the Munich Republic of Councils showing drunken revolutionaries indulging in orgiastic pleasures, 1919. Reproduced with permission of the Plakat- und Flugblattsammlung, Münchner Stadtbibliothek/ Monacensia.

for strikes and protests throughout the first half of 1919. In this troubled post-war context, the return home of thousands of armed soldiers led to further social instability and intense political unrest. Many of them joined the ranks of the Spartacists, who provided them with wages, shelter and food. Thus, most of the men arrested for revolutionary activities were demobilized soldiers or deserters. Nevertheless, male and female workers as well as housewives, (female) students and children were mobilized by calls shouted out in the working-class districts.[33]

In contrast to the civil war in Finland, the violent upheavals in the newly founded Weimar Republic or the Irish War of Independence, the situation in Austria looked rather peaceful. The transition from the Monarchy to the Republic was managed by the state council, composed of (male) representatives of all parties who had been elected to the *Reichsrat* (Imperial parliament) before the war. The territorial conflicts at the borders remained largely without bloodshed (with minor exceptions), and the same applied to revolutionary and counter-revolutionary activism in the Austrian interior. To some contemporaries, the creation of the Republic of (German) Austria might have looked like an afterthought, a reaction more to the dismantling of the old Empire, whose non-German nations declared independence one after the other at the end of October 1918. The Emperor abdicated and the Republic was proclaimed before thousands of people in front of the parliament in Vienna. On this day – 12 November 1918 – (communist) soldiers stormed the building, two people died and several were wounded. The offices of the conservative daily *Neue Freie Presse* were occupied by some 150 activists who printed issues of the communist newspaper *Weckruf*. This was not to be the last violent moment – in 1919, there were two more instances of unrest or attempted coups by the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) to establish a soviet republic. After workers' councils had already been founded during the January strike of 1918, in which probably half a million people in the Cisleithanian part of the Monarchy took part, they became relevant again in the first year after the war. Together with the soldiers' councils, they formed a parliament of the working class, and were only dissolved in 1924. In contrast, the tense political situation from the second half of the 1920s onwards led to increased violent clashes.[34] Despite its mostly peaceful character, the Austrian Revolution can serve as an instructive case for our discussions on the question of revolutionary violence and gender. Austrian socialist women, in their reflections on the implementation of a dictatorship of the proletariat, referred not only to Russia and Hungary, but also repeatedly to what happened in Germany and Finland – and to a lesser extent in Ireland. Some of them were

actively engaged in armed political conflicts in neighbouring countries, like a group of women from Linz who had participated in building the two councils' republics in Munich in April 1919.[35]

Discussing revolutionary violence

'No one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs', Hannah Arendt stated in 1970, during a period in which, in the face of worldwide social protest movements and a left activism that did not shy away from violence, the revolutions of fifty years earlier became topical.[36] And indeed, in the face of a four-year-long war that claimed millions of victims, the ongoing belligerent conflicts, and the disastrous consequences of the bloodshed for the lives of women, men and children, violence was a crucial factor for contemporaries in 1918 as well. We are interested in socialist women and their relationship to revolutionary violence in order to illustrate that it took on meaning in manifold ways. Physical and sexualized violence played an important role as a historical reality – whether for socialist women who were committed to the campaign against military violence as pacifists, or for female revolutionaries who understood the end of the Great War as the birth-moment of socialist societies. Sometimes they were drawn into the (civil) wars on their doorstep; and violence served as a means of empowerment and self-affirmation.[37] Violence implicitly and explicitly shaped socialist women's spheres of action and everyday life in 1918–21 – and many of them commented in their writings and memoirs on the role of violence in politics.

As we will show, socialist women's attitudes toward violence were less than uniform. In Finland, the Social Democratic women's movement was opposed to armed revolution. Their programme emphasized socio-political reforms and the extension of democracy by peaceful means. According to them, war was always a catastrophe for working-class women: they would lose their husbands and sons, the scarcity of food would get worse and the future would be filled with anxiety and worry. This had been seen throughout Europe during the First World War. In Austria, women Social Democrats took a similar line. Not always banned by the censors, they continued to publish pacifist texts during the war: a call for peace would unite 'the women of all peoples . . . in their motherly spirit' (*in ihrer Mütterlichkeit*), it would turn into a 'battle cry against all warmongers',[38] their newspaper, the *Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung* (Women Workers' Paper), declared. In

autumn 1918, they called for peaceful demonstrations and a parliamentary path, because 'as long as socialism does not have the majority . . . we cannot force the others to recognise our colour as theirs as well'.[39] The pacifist stand – not uncontested in the context of their own belligerent states – was in line with the international socialist women's movement's opposition to war, as expressed at Bern in March 1915 (see Chapter 2), and with socialist women's campaigns in other countries such as Finland, where the Social Democratic women's movement arranged several anti-war demonstrations and published pro-peace articles in their newspapers.[40]

Notwithstanding this, women socialists in Finland were also strongly influenced by their Russian and German sisters. The leaders of the Finnish movement had close contacts to the Russian revolutionary Aleksandra Kollontai, who visited Finland several times prior to the Finnish civil war. Furthermore, Clara Zetkin was in contact with her Finnish colleague Hilja Pärssinen. Pärssinen was a member of the Finnish Parliament and a teacher, journalist and writer who was a linchpin in the labour movement. Kollontai encouraged Finns to join the revolution, but Pärssinen – although captivated by the spirit of internationalism and revolutionary uprising – never spoke in favour of an armed coup d'état.[41] True, after the Finnish Revolution started in January 1918 and turned into a civil war, the Social Democrat women's movement asked women to stand by their men. Nevertheless, they never encouraged women themselves to act as soldiers. Rather, they considered female combatants to be unnatural. According to the movement, women should act in the fields of nursing and maintenance and give only moral support to the armed forces.[42]

This was in contrast to communist women in Austria, who, admittedly, did not face a civil war in 1918. The call for revolutionary violence was justified, as Hilde Wertheim explained, by the fact that 'bourgeois' democracy itself is 'naked, brutal violence'.[43] She thus understood capitalist bourgeois relations as relations of economic violence, at times overt, at times veiled. In the newspaper supplement *Die revolutionäre Proletarierin* (The Revolutionary Proletarian Woman), women called for participation in violent struggles in favour of revolution and 'victory for humanity'. Even if violent confrontation should only be the last resort, communist-minded women were prepared to make this sacrifice. In doing so, women who 'as women would shy away from armed violence, need to replace their feminine sensibilities with class feelings'. To be revolutionaries, women workers must 'feel as proletarians'.[44] The opposite of bourgeois 'woman' in this case was therefore not simply 'man', but the proletarian revolutionary, a male-defined figure whose attributes women could also appropriate.[45] Or, as the

German theorist Bini Adamczak noted, the soviet 'New man [*Mensch*] was a universal drag king'.[46]

The events in Germany, Finland and Hungary were observed by all political camps in Austria and served as arguments for their own positions on possible military action. The left-wing Social Democrat Käthe Leichter, née Pick, for example, welcomed the establishment of workers' militias 'in view of the open arming of reaction in all places'.[47] Communists like Wertheim rejected the militias' defensive character. In her preface to an analysis of the Finnish civil war, published in German in 1920, she warned that the Finnish comrades had wanted to avoid the revolution with its battles and had only succeeded in being attacked unprepared:

> All this brought about the rapid victory of the counter-revolution, which now no longer asked for democracy and justice, but crowned its naked class rule with the bodies of the revolutionary fighters twitching in death.[48]

For left socialists and communists, support for political violence and civil war in the context of revolution was a way to participate on equal terms: 'A *tverdaia* revolutionary woman was tough, durable, and, if need be, merciless . . . She was an equal member of an egalitarian movement',[49] as Barbara Evans Clements has put it in her work on Russian women. Matthew Stibbe observed in his research on German socialists that the question of violent militancy in the struggle for a better society was for many communist women an opportunity to demonstrate their party affiliation and a means of distinguishing themselves from Social Democrats.[50]

For militant Irish women, the difference lay elsewhere. Many of them theorized and wrote about the need for militancy, and a small minority wrote about the need to fight to establish a socialist republic. One of the main female organizations through which women made a militant contribution to revolution was *Cumann na mBan*. It was founded in April 1914 as an organization for women who espoused a nationalist ideology, and who would be a support to the Irish Volunteers, established in November 1913. The women adopted a green uniform with a slouch hat and a badge depicting a rifle with the initials of the organization intertwined. Their militarism was evident from their uniform, rhetoric and training. Almost all 300 women (other than the few in the Irish Citizen Army, ICA) who participated in the 1916 Easter Rising were members of *Cumann na mBan*, while thousands more joined after the Rising and were then involved in the War of Independence, 1919–21. Because of the perceived adjunct role of *Cumann na mBan*, many radical and socialist women chose to join the

workers' militia, the ICA. This choice of ICA membership by the left-leaning middle-class women and younger radicalized working-class women reflects the combination of their political interests and their socialist activism through trade union politics. These women had been radicalized through involvement in militant suffrage activism and militant trade union activism particularly during 1913 when the Dublin lock-out strike occurred. This strike was met by violence on the part of the employers and the state, several strikers were killed, including one young female factory worker who died after being hit by a ricochet when workers protesting the use of 'scabs' (workers who broke the strike) were shot at. Despite their collaboration during the lock-out, tensions between the suffrage, socialist and militant nationalist women would remain throughout the revolutionary period – although by the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1919 friction between them was dissipating particularly as *Cumann na mBan* had altered the intent and tone of their manifesto in 1918 to one which was both militant and more avowedly feminist in intent. It pledged to 'follow the policy of the Republican Proclamation by seeing that women take up their proper position in the life of the nation'.[51]

With guns or kitchen knives in hand: women fighting for a different society

In August 1917, the Viennese illustrated magazine *Das interessante Blatt* published a report on revolutionary Russia and its war efforts in favour of the Entente. The author paid special attention to the women's battalion, a new fighting unit within the Russian armed forces. The paying public was also treated to two photographs: a caption drew special attention to the fact that the female recruits had their long hair cut. In addition to the practical aspect, the change from woman to soldier was thus also symbolically emphasized. But as the Finnish case in 1918 highlights, wearing men's breeches and short hair was also liberating, and young women were very proud of their outfits.

The newspaper of the Finnish Red Guards stated: 'Her new trouser suit looked pretty. It declared: I am free from old bourgeois skirts . . . I am a liberated woman of New Finland who does not take oppression anymore.'[52] Although the number of female soldiers and women deployed in armies in other functions was small, they occupied considerable space in the contemporary cultural representation of war and social disorder – as fearsome manifestations of the downfall of the known world, as symbols of sacrifice for the Socialist fatherland as well as bearers

Figure 3.2 Finnish Red female soldiers Tyyne Backman and Rauha Sinisalo, photographed in a studio on 20 April 1918. Rauha Sinisalo (on the right) was executed ten days later. Reproduced with permission of the Military Museum/Finnish Defence Forces.

of hope for a new age. In revolutionary Russia, women were involved in Red military organizations, for example, Rosaliya Samoilovna Salkind or Yevgeniya Bosch in Ukraine, both of whom had military leadership powers during the Russian civil war and Polish–Soviet war of 1917–21. As stated before, the Budapest Councils' Republic explicitly allowed women to join the Hungarian Red Army, but how many women made use of this right is unclear. In the emerging First Republic in Austria, the army played an important role in the deliberations of revolutionary actors – although women were not allowed to join the new *Volkswehr* (People's Defence Force). However, whether the paramilitary troops of the workers' councils made an exception is not known; there are only isolated references to women in the workers' armed forces (*Arbeiterwehren*).

Young women did take part, as in the case of Hanna Sturm, in skirmishes on the contested Austro-Hungarian border against White troops, as well as in demonstrations, some of which were bloodily repressed by the Austrian police. This can be seen time and again throughout the cases covered in our chapter. Women were involved in stirring up crowds, encouraging men to rebel and urging soldiers in front of the military barracks and workers in front of the factories to join the revolution.[53]

The cases discussed here show the extent to which women were mobilized for revolutionary movements and (civil) wars. They were involved in combat, in auxiliary forces, and in clandestine work. Historians encounter difficulties though, when researching the extent of their participation. As the example of Berlin Spartacist Charlotte Steinbring mentioned at the beginning of this chapter has shown, women often denied using or carrying weapons in order to receive a lighter sentence at court hearings and because of the misogynistic public attitudes. This is also documented in other instances, such as the Austrian *Schutzbund* uprising in February 1934.[54] In the case of the Spartacist Uprising, unlike men, women could not simply go to one of the Spartacist registration points scattered around the working-class neighbourhood to be registered and receive pay, ration cards, guns and food. Their commitment was rarely formally recorded and did not entitle them to any kind of financial benefit, as they were mainly described as volunteers. Paramilitary training for women was therefore often clandestine or poorly documented. The Berlin activist Cläre Quast nevertheless fought to be allowed to participate in the normally all-male shooting lessons at her local youth centre.[55] Little is known about the women involved in the fighting between revolutionary and government troops for control of the city, for instance, in January and March 1919 in the districts of Neukölln and Lichtenberg. The press rarely mentioned their presence beyond a few sentences, barring one or two exceptions, such as Steinbring.[56] They mostly only appear in the descriptions of attacks on food trucks supplying the city or the looting of shops, as they are the ones in charge of feeding their families.[57]

Also, the Finnish Red Guard did not seek to enlist women as combat soldiers. But girls and young women eager to fight for the Socialist Workers' Republic, who were not accepted in the auxiliaries, took matters into their own hands, and soon formed military troops of their own, which put the Red government under pressure to use the existing female companies for guard duties so that they could release more men for the front line. Later on, when the Reds were in retreat, women were also accepted for front-line duties and Red propaganda used these young women as role models. For once they were no longer seen as ridiculous

but as 'the biggest and the most sacred gift that the proletariat has given or ever could give for the cause'.[58] Given the small number of female soldiers – at the end of the civil war, out of 100,000 Red troops, only 2,600 were women according to historian Tuomas Hoppu – their contribution to the battles was minor. Nevertheless, they played an important role in inspiring men to fight until the end. The common view seemed to be that if women were willing to take part in battle, men could not desert the ranks.[59]

After the defeat of the Red Guard in the civil war, many of the women faced trial. The relevant court records, held in the Finnish National Archive, are a rich source, with ten to twenty pages of information on each defendant consisting of the interrogation record and statements of all parties. From this and from oral history and memoirs stored in the People's Archive, voices of the female soldiers were recorded highlighting their motivations to enlist. They often joined the troops at a very young age: 85 per cent of them were under twenty-four years old, and 400 of them were girls aged between thirteen and sixteen years only.[60] Some of them joined the Red Guard seeking adventure; some of them were led by their idealism. If they were single and childless, the decision seemed to have been easier – those with family duties stayed behind the front and worked as auxiliaries supplying the troops. Since the Red Guard had taken possession of the Bank of Finland it was able to pay good salaries, so working-class women could easily double their earnings by serving as cooks, nurses or cleaners. Thus, these jobs were wanted and there were more applicants than places to fill. Women who had been already active in the labour movement and had shown political commitment to the cause were given preference in recruitment. Therefore, the women enlisted as auxiliaries were somewhat older and often already loyal party members. Approximately 10,000 women worked in the service troops fulfilling those tasks that were seen as proper for a woman.[61] Women at arms in the socialist or republican forces can be found repeatedly in the first half of the twentieth century. Research on other conflicts, such as the Spanish civil war from 1936–39, shows that their integration did not occur without problems. On the one hand, despite all the proclaimed equality, the everyday war life of female soldiers at war was more difficult and on the other hand, even left-wing governments and socialist women did not always approve of deployment at the front.[62]

Those who were not fighting with weapons in hand could still be at the centre of revolutionary socialist organizations, as the German example shows. Women thus ran the kitchens and infirmaries that were put in place during long sieges like the ones in Berlin at the *Vorwärts* headquarters or at the Silesian railway

station in early 1919. They handed out pamphlets outside factories, wrote and carried messages around the city, stored guns in their apartments so that they could be given out later at the beginning of demonstrations[63] and brought food and ammunition when the conflict began to escalate.[64] Franz Beiersdorf, a sailor who joined the Spartacists in 1917, remembered in 1958 one of the women arrested with him, an ironing-woman who brought hot coffee to the men lined up at the machine-gun posts.[65]

Besides, women smuggled propaganda and ammunitions under their petticoats through the checkpoints between the different districts. The centrist *Vossische Zeitung* reported how women were sent to the Lichtenberg district of Berlin to track down the addresses of police officers so that the Spartacists could arrest them.[66] In Munich in May 1919, to give another example, women were the ones returning their husbands' or brothers' weapons to the authorities during the disarmament campaign after the crushing of the councils' republic. Unlike men who tried to give their rifles back, the women were less at risk of being immediately shot.[67] This inability of the authorities to consider women as revolutionary activists could allow many of them to go unnoticed. Clandestine activities of women disguised under the cloak of bourgeois gender relations like transporting weapons and inflammatory leaflets in baby carriages, opening their living rooms for secret meetings or acting as message carriers were a central part of illegal activities.

(Gendered) state violence against revolutionary women

But not all revolutionary socialist and feminist women could escape violence. In the Finnish civil war, for example, approximately sixty female combatants were killed in action. On some occasions, their corpses were violated by exposing their breasts and genitals. As a consequence of hate and revenge, some soldiers on both sides were killed after they had surrendered, among them also women. Tuomas Hoppu has identified 270 executed female combatants.[68] Yet it was not only women who served at arms who were subject to such treatment: female agitators and auxiliaries were also shot. Estimates of the total number of Red women killed are as high as 500, but as some of the corpses were disposed of secretly, the exact number is impossible to calculate. Prisoner-of-war camps proved to be especially dangerous for female detainees, some of whom were executed without trial. Court martials, where they were in operation, often sentenced women to death without fair legal proceedings. One of the worst

places for a Red woman was the POW camp in Lahti. Approximately 200 women were executed there.[69] Nevertheless, most female soldiers survived the war and its aftermath. Many of the women who had served as soldiers were conspicuous since they wore trousers and sometimes had short hair, which was considered deviant and reprehensible by the counter-revolutionary side. These outfits were a sign of rebellion, and women who rebelled against both the social and gender system were regarded as double traitors. After the defeat, these outfits caused trouble. Women were easy targets since they were so distinguishable due to their clothing and attracted attention wherever they went.

While female fighters, like their male comrades in arms, not only risked their lives in battle but also had to fear reprisals after defeat, they were also often doubly targeted because of their sex and their transgression of ascribed gender roles. Yet, as the court records from Germany reveal, some, but by no means all, women revolutionaries were also able to strategically appropriate bourgeois gender roles for themselves in order to evade conviction. A study of trials conducted against those arrested following the revolutionary events in Berlin and Munich in the earlier months of 1919 shows how traditional gender norms influenced the way female and male defendants were treated by the authorities. Men and women experienced state violence differently which led ultimately to unequal sentencing in court. If one were to trace the path of women in the German justice system, one would notice that many women arrested by the police or the military troops never made it to court. They were often not taken directly to the police headquarters, as would have been the case in peacetime. Instead, they were tried directly by government troops on the spot, without leaving any paper trail. It was also possible for women to be released before trial, as was the case with Anna Erfurt, a thirty-two-year-old worker who had been involved in the strike movement since the beginning of the war and who joined the revolution in November 1918. In her memoirs, Erfurt recounts how she narrowly escaped the firing squad. But that does not mean that women evaded punishment all together. Many of them experienced sexualized violence or were heavily beaten. Indeed, although the state of war was lifted on 12 November 1918 following the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II, this decision did not reflect the reality experienced by the population, which had to get used to living under siege, even though peace had just been declared. Armed groups had free rein to restore order and the soldiers and officers were able to exercise justice as they saw fit, often in a summary manner. From February 1919, the new President, Friedrich Ebert, could also declare a state of emergency and suspend certain legal protections in particular states or provinces.[70]

The trial of the merchant Heinrich Sklarz provides an instructive example of the aforementioned fact that women were sometimes released before being charged and of the gendered and sexualized violence they nevertheless could endure. Prisoners, especially women, were taken during the night to Heinrich Sklarz's office in the police headquarters at Berlin's Alexanderplatz and were offered release in exchange for sexual favours, as some women defendants stated in court. All one had to do, they explained, was to 'be a little obedient with the man upstairs in order get the biggest charge dropped with impunity'.[71]

Research from Finland shows a similar pattern: here, living conditions at the POW camps were disastrous, with approximately 80,000 people waiting for their trials. The shortage of food was severe, dirt and vermin tormented prisoners, and infectious diseases reached epidemic proportions. More than 13,000 people died. In these circumstances, some of the female prisoners found themselves forced to trade sexual favours for food. Men were more likely to be prosecuted than women, who mainly appeared in the records because they were arrested alongside men. Subsequently, women were not the main defendants in their own trials and were instead tried in large group cases where their names turn up at the end of a long list of male defendants. This in itself suggested a hierarchical ranking of crimes according to gender. In the trial proceedings, women were usually not considered to be politically active, even when they were party members. Their involvement was typically explained by the negative influence of a close male figure, often a husband, meaning that they were not held accountable for their actions. Mothers, in particular, were often released from custody so as not to break up the family unit. This was one of the main arguments in the letters from lawyers asking for the release of their female clients, although in fact most of the women arrested in 1918–19 were not mothers, but single persons aged seventeen to twenty-five.

Despite this, many women can be found in German court records, albeit in much smaller numbers than men. They had a different experience of the judicial process than men. The case of Ida Bauer is typical in this respect. Bauer was a twenty-two-year-old woman in 1918 and the wife of the merchant Ernst Bauer, secretary to Rudolf Egelhofer, Ernst Toller's predecessor as commandant of the Red Army. The Bauer couple was politically active: both worked for the military police of the Bavarian councils' republic and were tasked with arresting counter-revolutionaries, one by conducting spying missions in cafés and the other by detaining suspects. Understanding the role she had to play, Ida Bauer claimed during the trial that she was not political; she had only followed her husband out

of jealousy and to prevent him from seeing other women. Arrested at the same time, Ernst Bauer was accused of treason and sentenced to three and a half years' imprisonment, while his wife was only under indictment for assisting in a treasonous crime and was released. Ida Bauer had been as deeply involved politically as her husband; the only difference was that she had not carried a gun.[72] As an unarmed spy, she fitted the stereotype of female involvement by corresponding on the one hand to the stereotype of the false woman particularly suited to espionage and on the other hand to the woman who did not use physical violence, which was deemed unnatural.

This leniency towards female defendants also stems from the penal code of the time, which placed great importance on the intentionality of the crime. The defendants most at risk were those who were accused of being *Rädelsführer*, or rabble-rousing leaders. However, this accusation was not made against any of the women indicted in the eighty-four trials analysed. The male defendants all faced a list of charges that hardly changed from one to the other and that were centred on their conscious involvement in the overthrow of the government and their violent actions. In contrast, a constant in the accusations against women was the emphasis on their mere auxiliary role.

In Ireland too, the state authorities and the Crown Forces targeted militant women in a gendered manner – using both physical and sexualized violence, increasing in frequency and intensity as the war dragged on into 1920–21. Gemma Clark has stated that 'female republican sympathizers received humiliating, gendered punishments (such as haircutting) but nothing to match the violent retribution and "sexually charged torture" served on "politicized women" by paramilitaries in Central Europe in the same period'.[73] However, recent research has demonstrated that violence against women was widespread during the War of Independence, especially once the British authorities and the Crown Forces began to recognize the importance of militant women to the guerrilla war being waged by the IRA. They also recognized that political women were especially effective as creators and disseminators of anti-imperial, republican propaganda, in Ireland and further afield, in the UK, Europe and America. Some examples of the type of violence endured include an incident in County Kerry in 1920, when local schoolteacher and *Cumann na mBan* member Margaret Rohan was dragged out of her bed by the British Crown Forces and had her hair cropped as a punishment for her revolutionary activities. On the night of 18 September 1920, three *Cumann na mBan* women in Galway city were targeted when 'parties of men carrying revolvers and electric torches, wearing black and white masks, slouch hats and uniforms' visited the Madden, Broderick

and Turke homes' and attacked and forcibly cropped the hair of Misses Madden, Broderick and Turke.[74]

As this was a guerrilla war where the enemy could be anywhere and everywhere, the Crown Forces focused their attentions on communities and homes. Violent home invasions, often accompanied by physical gendered and sexual assaults on women and girls, were the norm. However, it is only in the last two decades that the complexities of women's participation in the revolutionary period are no longer victim to selective and gendered remembering; while there is much more to research, analysed and written, their contributions and experiences, and particularly their very obvious roles as combatants, and the violence and traumas they suffered because of this, are no longer denied, downplayed, overlooked or indeed simply forgotten.

Maire Comerford, a militant republican, who after the War of Independence broke out in 1919, travelled the country, organizing *Cumann na mBan* branches, carrying dispatches for the IRA's Fourth Northern Division, and reporting for

Figure 3.3 Still image of Irish woman May Connelly after she was punished by the Republicans for associations with the British Crown Forces, by having her hair forcibly cropped, 25 November 1920. Reproduced with permission of British Pathé.

the White Cross on Black and Tan atrocities, was often targeted by the British Crown Forces. When in Dublin she lived with and was secretary to nationalist activist Alice Stopford Green and helped organize and distribute republican propaganda. Their house was often raided – one particular description in her memoir demonstrates the violence that political women endured. In late March 1921, the house was again targeted, and as Comerford writes,

> I opened the door. I was pushed back against the wall. He forced his revolver into my mouth . . . my mouth was full of steel . . . After those first few minutes this turned into an ordinary raid by men searching for papers.[75]

Many of the women who had been feminist, socialist and/or republican activists prior to the outbreak of war were similarly targeted, while some IRA men struggled with their inability to protect 'their' women. As IRA leader Ernie O'Malley wrote about the Crown Forces' reprisals on family homes and on women, 'there was silence for a time as we watched, helpless . . . feeling cowardly and miserable'.[76] Lil Conlon, who had been a member of *Cumann na mBan* during the War of Independence, wrote in her memoir that by 1920,

> the going was tough on the female sex, they were unable to 'go on the run', so were constantly subjected to having their homes raided and precious possessions destroyed. To intensify the reign of terror, swoops were made at night, entries forced into their homes, and the women's hair cut off in a brutal fashion as well as suffering other indignities and insults.[77]

Another raid on the house of Dr Kathleen Lynn, a socialist and republican activist, was described in a newspaper report on 1 March 1920, where a 'half company of soldiers with glittering bayonets, and a dozen policemen' surrounded the house.[78] Kathleen Clarke and Kathleen McDonnell, both activists in *Cumann na mBan*, and well known, like Dr Lynn, to the Crown Forces, described 'houses occupied by women and children raided at night by armed men, the terror of the situation was underlined by the fact that the men were rude, insulting, threatening and undisciplined'.[79] Clarke described a terrifying raid by Crown Forces on her mother's home, conducted by 'seven men, all drunk . . . [and] one never knew what drunken men could do'.[80] These raids, the *Irish Bulletin* (the republican propaganda newspaper) noted were a 'source of sleeplessness, nervous breakdowns, and in the case of expectant mothers, produce grave results for mothers and children'.[81]

The propaganda effect of these constant raids and the terror experienced by civilians, especially women, became a major issue for the Crown Forces and the

British government. As early as March 1920 Erskine Childers, writer and republican activist, described, in the English *Daily Mail*, to a horrified public, the awful effects these raids or home invasions had on the occupants, especially the women. A raid on the house of Una Brennan, wife of Robert Brennan, a senior republican, and herself a feminist and republican, was entitled a 'Young Mother's ordeal'. One night, roused by the knocking on her door and 'running down in her nightdress', she was met with voices shouting, 'Damn you open the door or we'll smash it in.' Worse still, 'one soldier came in drunk and used foul language, and in spite of her entreaties to be allowed to her children she was kept apart under guard while the rooms are searched and the search is conducted with the roughness and insolence worthy of veritable Huns'.[82] This, he concluded, at the end of the description of the Brennan raid, is 'not a civilised war'.[83]

But, as the aforementioned Lil Conlon acknowledged, just as *Cumann na mBan* women were being targeted by the British Crown Forces, so too were other women targeted by Irish republicans. As part of the boycott against the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), 'people were encouraged not to socialise with them or even speak to them. Girls who consorted with them were warned off or punished by having their hair cut off'.[84] During 1920–21, both *Cumann na mBan* members and women targeted by the IRA began to experience the worst of the raids and reprisals when 'masked raiders could come to threaten, bully and burn out their homes'.[85] Descriptions in many archives detail the escalation and intensity of violence perpetrated on women in their domestic space. The home became then, not a safe space, but a battlefront, a site of gendered and sexualized violation and terror. This violation of the intimate, feminine, domestic space reflected, as Louise Ryan notes, 'the intensely political work which was going on inside many Irish homes' in this period.[86] The Irish revolutionary war was 'intimate', a conflict in which the 'British security forces and the IRA routinely violated private spaces'.[87] A balanced account requires 'acknowledgement [that] women . . . bore the brunt of the raids and interrogations . . . [and] that some of the most vital contributions to the independence movement took place away from the ambush site'.[88]

Sexualized violence

Historian Ville Kivimäki has stated that in warfare a woman's body is an object of man's self-image, desire and psychic discrepancy. A fighting woman does not fit into the traditional arrangement where a man is a protector and a woman

is protected. She is treated as an object of urges, abuse of power and sexualized violence.[89] Rape has been part of the conquerors' strategy for centuries, to humiliate the enemy on various levels. The first disgraced target is obviously the victim herself; the second object of humiliation is the men in the victim's family who were not able to protect her. The third and widest target is the defeated nation, as women often symbolize purity in the nationalist discourse.[90]

In Finland during the civil war, White propaganda described socialist women as sexually loose creatures without virtue. Due to this creation of 'otherness', some White soldiers saw Red women as whores who deserved neither protection nor respect. Quite the reverse: many Red women, especially soldiers, were raped and/or killed. The cases were hardly ever documented because the surviving victims did not trust the White authorities and did not want to make it official since a rape was a shameful taboo. Women dared not to reveal that they had lost their physical and moral integrity in a society that easily shifted the blame onto the victims. On the other hand, it was hardly in the interests of the perpetrator to document the deed either. However, knowledge of the rapes has been preserved in oral history instead.[91] In particular, stories of young women soldiers who were violated and killed after the fighting have been sustained within the labour movement. According to previous studies and known archival material there was sexual abuse in the POW camps after the Finnish civil war, even if it has not occurred systematically. On a few rare occasions women joined forces to launch a collective complaint after a guard had sexually harassed them. Sometimes they were believed, sometimes not. Nevertheless, in most cases women kept silent.[92]

The source problem is also reflected in the German example. While some women recounted sexual assaults in oral testimonies, the judicial and police sources remain vague or silent. As already mentioned in the previous subsection, contemporaries remembered assaults in prisons that happened in plain sight.[93] One of these testimonies is from the above-mentioned Franz Beiersdorf, who lived through the repression following the fighting in the Berlin district of Lichtenberg. In early March 1919, a general strike was declared, launching a bloody episode of street fighting between revolutionary forces and government troops in Berlin known as the 'March Days'.[94] Eventually, the revolutionaries were forced to retreat to the working-class district of Lichtenberg, which was subsequently reconquered, street by street, by the army. Once the district had been seized, the authorities turned their efforts to what was called in the newspapers the purge (*Säuberung*) of Lichtenberg, which meant the violent

inspection of houses at gunpoint in search of the weapons and Spartacist hideouts. Beiersdorf recalls how, following his arrest, officers, with the agreement of their superiors, lined up prisoners against a wall and interrogated them immediately after their arrest, killing some, leaving others alive and raping women before releasing them.

> The next prisoner was a woman. I knew her. She was a worker in the laundry shop in the Gürtelstrasse by the railway bridge. She often brought hot coffee to us at the machine guns . . . She was asked if she belonged to the Spartacus group. She said 'No . . . I am not in any party'. 'You're lying quite nastily', roared the young lieutenant . . . 'Turn around, there are still twenty of your fellow loyalists sitting there. To which of them did you bring the coffee?' The woman turned around. She was as pale as a sheet. Like all of us, she had been betrayed. She looked at us silently . . . The woman shook her head, her whole-body trembling, and said to the officers: 'I don't know any of these men'. 'That's what I thought, you red bitch, you are about to experience something'. The lieutenant bent down and whispered something in the lieutenant's ear. The mercenaries dragged the woman to the back of the dance hall . . . We heard the woman being whipped on the back. Then Godi (a friend of Beiersdorf who had been arrested with him) shouted in the officers' faces: 'You cowardly vermin . . . You can beat and rape women, you're a real riffraff . . .'. Four or five mercenaries attacked him and beat him.[95]

The officer's attitude here is one of revenge against a woman who, in his opinion, should not be among the combatants. The punishment he chose, the whipping and the rape, is intended to return the accused to her traditional position in the gender hierarchy. Women were subjected to sexualized and gendered violence, which aimed to re-establish the traditional and 'natural' paternal authority.[96]

In May 1921, the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland published the results of its research in Ireland on atrocities carried out by the British Crown forces. Statements were given by political women including veteran militant feminist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington who gave a statement to the Commission on the violence against women. While it detailed the horror of raids and reprisals on her home, her report included only one reference to an alleged rape, 'the rape of a girl in the presence of her father reported in Galway near Gort but not yet investigated fully'.[97] The Commission did report back that the sanctity of the home was often violated by the Crown Forces, and such was the terror of the population that 'in some places, those who were not "on the run", and the infirm and aged, the women and children, would appear to feel safer in the fields than in their homes'.[98]

However, Meg Connory, also of the militant feminist group, the IWFL, who reported on the assaults on women on behalf of the Irish White Cross Committee, wrote that 'women know that it is during curfew hours attempts of a sexual character have been made'. It was 'difficult to appreciate the effects which this continued strain is producing upon the health of women', but clearly many suffered from their nerves because of this.[99] Lil Conlon does distinguish in her writings between a woman having her 'hair cut off in a brutal fashion', during attacks on homes, and the fact that she might 'suffer other indignities and insults'.[100] It is through the euphemistic vagueness of other 'indignities and insults' that language may serve to obscure sexual assault in the sources. Lindsey Earner Byrne in her micro-study of sexualized violence during the Irish civil war (1922–23) notes that 'rape was a form of violence not easily accommodated in the script of the Irish revolution'.[101] However, deliberate gendered violence against women during the revolutionary period in Ireland can be uncovered, if we understand that, as Earner Byrne observed, the term 'outrage', and other terms such as 'insult' or 'indignity', were often used as euphemisms for both gendered and sexualized violence committed against women. Revisiting the use of language, the archives and other sources can and do re-balance the idea that gendered and sexualized violence was almost absent from the Irish revolutionary war and helps formulate a more nuanced and broader understanding of the trauma experiences of women and girls during this period. Something, that is also true of the other case studies.

The phantasma of the revolutionary women

As also noted in Chapter 1 of this volume, the German criminologist Hans von Hentig – who himself had been involved in the Bavarian councils' republic – published a misogynist essay, *The Revolutionary Woman*, in 1923. In it, he typified and pathologized women who became involved in the political upheavals of the post-war period and marched in the streets for their causes. He saw women above all as instigators: 'the insane woman places herself at the head of this leaping, overheated mass'.[102] The German press recounted stories of women participating in lynching, for instance:

> A captured soldier was . . . severely wounded by numerous stabs with pocket-knives. The scalp was hanging off his head in large shreds. A woman stabbed him in the neck with a knife so that the artery was torn open and the wounded man sank to the ground. He was now pushed aside like a log, but immediately a number of women threw themselves on him and trampled him. Another

> captured soldier was literally stripped naked, put on the street in this state and pelted with hand grenades until his body was torn to pieces.[103]

Many of Hentig's theses, influenced by crowd psychology based on Gustave Le Bon and Scipio Sighele, can be found in different ways in the publications that dealt with women revolutionaries in the post-war period. For instance, the Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer spoke of female revolutionary activists as 'morbidly excited women whose husbands had been languishing in war captivity for years'.[104] The main themes that were used, especially by the conservative press in the cases discussed in our chapter, can be summed up as follows: women revolutionaries were pathologized, sexualized and their political action depoliticized – regardless of the fact that activism that affects daily life was understood by radical women as being related to social problems (and problems with the way society and the state were organized), and thus political. The women who joined the revolutions lived in a symbolic world influenced by the gender norms of the time, which governed relations between men and women.[105] Press articles, postcards and election posters allow us a glimpse into what Kathleen Canning describes as a gendered 'ideology'.[106] The press created stereotypical figures of violent or abused women for political purposes to show the fundamentally negative nature and ignominy of the revolutionary movements. In the German case it is additionally noticeable that women remained anonymous and the adjectives 'revolutionary' (*revolutionär*) or 'spartacist' were rarely attributed to them. Being only described by their gender identity, they are referred to pejoratively as *Frauenswesen*, *weibliche Wesen* or *Frauenspersonen*. Nevertheless, what is striking about the following examples is that revolutionary women could be simultaneously defined by their gender identity and portrayed as unfeminine. Although women were not at all rare in armed struggles and revolutionary conflicts throughout the long nineteenth century,[107] they nevertheless transgressed the bourgeois gender order. The apparent sexualization and pathologization of revolutionary women in the press can thus be read as a means of restoring women to their places. For political participation in revolutionary events was not only often dangerous, but also self-empowering and liberating. The freedom to lead a life of independence and partnership was a goal many women socialists shared as part of their revolutionary efforts.

In Finland, the White war propaganda addressed against all Red women was harsh. The right-wing press represented revolutionary women as violent beasts, amoral man-eaters or ridiculous wannabe soldiers. The aim was to create boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. The construction of 'otherness' was important

Figure 3.4 Cartoon mocking Red female soldiers in the Finnish satirical paper *Nya Fyren*, no. 5–7 (1918).

because the enemy in the civil war was a fellow citizen, possibly even one's neighbour or relative. The propagandists used stereotypes to create boundaries between the 'acceptable' and the 'detestable'. This dichotomy increased a sense of solidarity among 'normals' and eased the exclusion of 'abnormals'.[108] In White newspapers, four stereotypes were used to represent Red women. Nurses were called 'Sisters of free love', implying that they were on the front solely in order to indulge in sexual excesses. Finnish women who dated Russian soldiers were 'Russian brides' and were seen as traitors to the nation's purity. Red mothers were labelled as 'sources of evil' since they had raised sons who became rebels. They were even accused of being culpable for the whole war as a Red woman was 'the exact opposite to everything that she as a mother and as a wife should be. Such a woman should not be allowed to raise her children'.[109] The female soldiers were called tigresses as they were considered to have lost contact with their femininity and humanity and turned into beasts as they grabbed rifles. Immorality, be it sexual or otherwise, was common to all four stereotypes. Untrue rumours were spread, for instance, that Red nurses killed White patients in hospitals,[110] and female soldiers were disgraceful cowards and traitors:

> During the last few days the assassinations have shown us what a woman is able to do if she is captivated by malignity. Many assassinations, many bullets shot from behind in archways can be explained only this way.[111]

In one outstandingly aggressive text, all Red women were described as dangerous she-wolves who should be killed in order to prevent the birth of new harmful wolf cubs. They were also considered equivalent to prostitutes who should be eliminated from society.[112] These stereotypes had severe consequences as they influenced attitudes toward imprisoned women after the end of the civil war. They were seen as unwomanly creatures who were not worthy of gallant male protection.[113]

In Germany, a reading of the politically conservative press gives further insight into the different aspects of the phantasma of the revolutionary woman, denying the political nature of feminine involvement. Spartacist women were described as amoral and sexually depraved. They are for example often referred to as prostitutes storing weapons in their homes and participating in looting. Districts under the control of the revolutionary side, like Berlin's Lichtenberg in March 1919, were described as being infested with 'nests' of Spartacists,[114] forming a veritable 'Bolshevik menagerie'.[115] The left-liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* carried a report on its front page on 19 January 1919 about 'the hustle and bustle of Spartacists [who] celebrated real orgies with women from the surrounding area. [It] was so bad that hardly anyone dared to leave the house afterwards.'[116] On the same day, the *Tägliche Rundschau* reported how five women were killed at the Silesian railway station[117] because they dared to 'resist to the advances of the Spartacists',[118] hence portraying revolutionaries as sexual predators.[119] These

Figure 3.5 'Wen wähle ich?' ('Who do I vote for?'). German propaganda poster, 1919, promoting the Majority Social Democrats while warning against the dangers of the Spartacist movement represented by a dishevelled and armed woman in the front row. Reproduced with permission of the Plakat- und Flugblattsammlung, Münchner Stadtbibliothek/Monacensia.

abuses were a way to justify the call to 'liberate and purify' the Spartacist-occupied districts of Prenzlauer Berg, Neukölln and Lichtenberg from the 'Bolshevik dictatorship'. The description of pro-revolutionary women in the mainstream Berlin press was characterized by a preoccupation with their youth and their sexuality. On 8 March 1919, the *Tägliche Rundschau* portrayed people collecting merchandise and carrying it away in handcarts to sell to the numerous traders in the area near Hackescher Markt as prostitutes and prematurely sexualized (*frühreif*) boys and girls. The term 'frühreif' refers here to a sexual precocity linked to unbridled instincts that are supposedly uncontrollable and that revolutionaries allegedly share.[120]

Another omnipresent theme in these newspaper articles was the thirst for blood and the figure of 'Red Rosa'. During the 1919 trial of Georg Ledebour, a USPD politician arrested for the part he played in the Spartacist Uprising, soldiers described being haunted by the figure of Rosa Luxemburg. The revolutionary women fighting were all seen as 'Rosas', in other words as vampiric figures who drank the blood of soldiers. The trial records for Georg Ledebour contains a reference to such a vampiric figure: 'a female person with a pale face, dark hair and black eyes' known as 'Rosa' as she was in a leadership position during the storming of the Wolff's Telegraphic Bureau by the Spartacists.[121] This omnipresence of Luxemburg in the press and judicial discourse went beyond the borders of Berlin and was also found in Munich (and also outside of Germany, as is shown in Chapter 5). There, the activist Elma Klingelhöfer, wife of Gustav, one of the leaders of the Red Army, was described in her trial as the 'Rosa of the South'.[122] On small loose sheets, torn from little rectangular notebooks, which were added to the proceedings of her trial, she spoke of her decision to interpose herself alongside a whole group of women including Hildegard Menzi and Teckla Egl between the government troops and those of the Red Army in order to stop the fighting, re-enacting the Roman legend of the Sabine women, who ended the war between Romans and Sabines by stepping between the combatants.[123]

The Austrian press was also fascinated by women revolutionaries. In Catholic and right-wing newspapers, radical left groups were defamed in an anti-Semitic and sexist manner, and female activists were labelled 'hysterical ladies'.[124] But one of the most common themes seems to be the sexualization of revolutionary women as a means of devaluing their political concerns as well as their progressive alliances and social policies. The satirical magazine *Die Muskete*, for example, ran several drawings between March and July 1919 in which communism was portrayed as the sensual-erotic pastime of bored bourgeois

ladies, and socialization – the taking of businesses into public ownership – as the moral equivalent of making all women sexually available. The personal lives of prominent women communists were discussed in the press. When Ruth Fischer, who had published a book entitled *Sexual Ethics of Communism* (*Sexualethik des Kommunismus*),[125] and advocated love freed from marriage, divorced her husband Paul Friedländer, the court case and her (alleged) promiscuity were extensively reported,[126] as well as her bourgeois upbringing and her German-Jewish family background.[127]

After the revolutions: closing remarks

The Social Democrat Hilja Pärssinen, a member of the Finnish Parliament since 1907, had to flee the country to Russia and then Estonia after the defeat of the

Figure 3.6 Cartoon '*Kommunismus*' in the Austrian satirical paper *Die Muskete*, 13 March 1919, equating the socialization of property with free sexuality and/or women with property.

socialist side in the civil war. After her forced return from Estonia to Finland, she was sentenced to twelve years in prison, but was released in 1923. When Pärssinen and other Finnish socialist women returned home after serving prison sentences, they faced a difficult socio-economic and political situation. In small rural communities, where everyone knew each other and where an elite sympathetic to the White side dominated the spiritual atmosphere of the village, life was probably harder than in the urban centres. In the cities, former Red women could hide among the masses. They could also rely more easily on networks of like-minded people, which helped them to endure the contempt that the White community exuded.[128] Negative attitudes became visible, for example, in job advertisements. Some of them directly stated that it was pointless for Reds to put themselves forward for the job in question, as the following example, from summer 1918, illustrates:

> A housemaid or a lady's maid is needed for work on a farm, preferably someone who has schooling in home economics (Reds and those with bastards need not apply). Answers should be sent to Perniö's post office and marked 'Housemaid'.[129]

There were so many unemployed that employers could afford to choose who they wanted to hire. Female unemployment doubled in 1918 compared to the previous year. If no jobs were available, working women had to seek municipal help or to rely on the goodwill of relatives or friends. After the war, the Reds were second-class citizens. The White widows were granted pensions but the Red widows were not entitled to such funds. Instead, they had to resort to poor relief, which was only a fraction of the amount of the pensions. In addition, those who relied on poor relief lost their voting rights. Red widows were offered unsolicited assistance in another form: they could place their children in foster homes. Most of the mothers were not ready to accept this help, as they did not want to give up their children, despite their dire financial situation. This may have been partly due to the lack of information on how children would be treated in an unfamiliar, alien White environment. The labour movement had also effectively disseminated the information that children in foster homes were educated to reject socialism in later life. Already during the war, Red mothers had been accused by the White propaganda writers of raising their children, especially their sons, in an atmosphere that nurtured socialism.[130] Even though the first year after the civil war brought with it much death, misery, unemployment and anger, the situation gradually eased after 1919. Even the anger gradually subsided into resentment and mutual distrust.

In Ireland, political women influenced by feminism, socialism and nationalism expected that a free and independent nation would guarantee them full and equal citizenship. However, for the new state the contribution of women would be most acceptable in the domestic sphere. The ideal Irishwoman was, above all, a wife and mother, the home and the hearth were to be her sphere of influence. Irishwomen's citizenship became 'rooted in their role in the family as wives and mothers … Motherhood thus became a central mechanism through which women … [were] incorporated into the modern political order.'[131] As motherhood within marriage and the home was the respectable and accepted feminine role, there were limited expectations and access to employment for women. The afterlives of many of the revolutionary women were impacted by poverty, trauma and marginalization. The politics of the new Irish Free State, founded in 1922, often revealed a real lack of acceptance of female participation in the public realm of politics and work. Public participation was seen as injurious both to women (it unsexed them) and to the political arena itself; it was felt by some that the presence of women brought a bitterness, hysteria and emotionalism which had no place in civilized, rational public (male) debate.[132] Many of the socialist and militant women rejected the Anglo-Irish treaty and new Irish Free State that it created. The attitude of the state to these anti-treaty militant women, its incarceration and mistreatment of hundreds of them during the civil war in 1922–3, and its construction of these women as dangerous 'die-hards', 'republican bitches', 'furies' and 'unmanageable, ungovernable' revolutionaries reflect what would be a deeply misogynistic attitude to women, generally, in the ensuing decades. Irish identity and Catholicism became enmeshed, with the state identifying itself as Catholic, governing a Catholic people and following Catholic social thinking and practices, and this state found the activities of women in the public realm problematic socially, culturally and politically.

One of the major sources for information about revolutionary women in Ireland are the military pension application files.[133] These reveal lives of quiet desperation, often denied support by male politicians who had been their comrades in the revolutionary struggle, making it 'difficult to avoid the conclusion that the female veteran was very much the poor relation among the old comrades of the Irish revolution'.[134] One example is Margaret Skinnider, a teacher, socialist, suffragist and militant nationalist, who was wounded in action in the 1916 Rising, fought in the War of Independence and civil war (on the anti-Treaty side, against the government), and was later a trade union activist with her teachers' union. When she first applied in 1925, she was denied her pension. While behind the scenes the government was determined that 'irregulars', those who had

Figure 3.7 Irish socialist and revolutionary Margaret Skinnider, 1915. Image courtesy of James Langton.

opposed the Treaty which led to the settling up of the Irish Free State, of which Skinnider was one, would not get pensions, it officially denied Skinnider the pension on the basis that 'the Army Pensions Act is only applicable to soldiers as generally understood in the masculine sense'.[135]

While many of the Irish revolutionary women did return to the domestic, marriage and motherhood, women like Skinnider continued to fight for women's and workers rights'. Skinnider, for example, was, by 1956, President of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the trade union for primary school teachers. One of her main campaigns throughout her career as a trade union activist was to get the marriage bar, under which any women working in teaching

had to give up her job on getting married, repealed – this happened in 1958. Others such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Kathleen Clarke or Kathleen Lynn campaigned against the gendered legislation passed between 1922 and 1936, which reaffirmed conservative views on women, traditional Catholic social thinking and the dominance of the discourse of domesticity for women.[136] Despite objections from feminists, the 1937 Constitution, containing articles which determined that the place of Irish women was in the home, was passed by popular vote. The social conservatism of the 1920s and 1930s found full force in the legislative actions against women, against the female worker, and in the constitutional definitions of women's life as within the home; this gendered ideology was to affect the lives of women and the position of the female worker in Ireland, legally and ideologically, until late into the twentieth century.

As we have been able to show with four very different national cases, women in Europe were very much present in the revolutionary movements and wars of the period 1918–21, participating in and finding themselves at the receiving end of revolutionary violence and the consequences of wars in multiple ways. Even though socialist women's attitudes toward violence were less than uniform, all cases showed that they were not only ready to take up arms and fight for a better future, but that by doing so some of them gained pride in their own role. Nevertheless, the cases also highlight the socio-economic conditions under which working women and men made their decisions to support revolutionary troops. All our cases make it clear that historical sources have to be read with analytical rigour, knowledge of codes and the toolbox of critical historical scholarship, in order to not adopt the 'gender-specific topography of relevance' identified and criticized by Brigitte Studer.[137] This is especially true for sexualized and gendered violence. As our case studies clearly demonstrate, revolutionary gender-based violence not only violated women's physical integrity, but also did not stop at the intimate sphere of their own households or the communities of neighbourly solidarity in their villages. The apparent sexualization and pathologization of revolutionary women in the press can thus be read as a means of restoring women to their places. For political participation in revolutionary events was not only often dangerous, but also self-empowering and liberating. The transgression of gender norms was countered in mainstream newspapers by the sexualization and pathologization of politically active women. This necessarily made the granting of female suffrage, where this took place, a less than whole-hearted victory for gender equality. Even so, many of the women discussed in this chapter remained committed to the socialist cause after 1921, as will also be demonstrated in Chapter 5 of this volume.