

Labour Movements and Strikes, Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Germany)

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Summary

The First World War and the subsequent years saw a plethora of strikes, protests and competing social movements. The war blocked established channels of communication between workers and their organizations. Locally rooted shop floor and consumption-based collective aid movements filled this representational gap. As of 1916/17, these urban social movements became overtly political and translocally interconnected, and also competed with established workers' organizations. In the revolution and until 1920/21, they reclaimed urban space, tried to re-establish the unity of the working class (sometimes integrating transnational impulses), and aimed at establishing locally based models of order. In a setting where, until 1920, the state's monopoly of physical force was contested, they became involved in sometimes violent confrontations with the representatives of a nation state-based understanding of political and social order.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Localization and Collective Action during the First World War](#)
- [3 Collective Action during the First Phase of the Revolution \(October – December 1918\)](#)
 - [3.1 Translocal Networks of a Peaceful Transition](#)
- [4 Collective Action during the Second Phase of the Revolution \(Late 1918 – Spring 1919\)](#)
 - [4.1 Urban Social Movements in Times of Civil War](#)
- [5 Collective Action during the Third Phase of the Revolution \(May 1919 – April 1920\)](#)
 - [5.1 Political Radicalization and the Demise of Urban Social Movements](#)
- [6 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

The First World War and the subsequent years saw a plethora of strikes, protests and competing social movements.¹ A brief glance at the research literature already evokes three questions: Who protested, with which patterns of collective action did they protest, and how

was all this related to the revolution of 1918/19? Researching these questions entails many challenges. Scholarly interest in labour history has declined since the late 1980s, while research on the [revolution](#) had its heyday in the 1970s. Most of these studies focus either on the war or on the post-war phase and only address strikes or consumer protests.² These publications worked with the distinction between the collective actions of unskilled labourers versus those of the skilled, which was strongly criticized by labour historians of the early 1990s.³ Another problem is how to categorize the countless strikes and consumer protests which in Europe created a unique “insurgency of 1917-20” or, in a global perspective, a “great phase of upheaval” between roughly 1916 and 1923.⁴ The term *Massenbewegungen* (mass movements), widespread in German-language research, is too closely related to a mass-psychological understanding of collective action. It might not only give the impression that these movements were shaped by actions of irrational masses, but also imply that these collective actions were something like an exception to the predetermined route to trade union organization and non-violent strikes. In this article, I will use the term “social movement” instead.⁵

Localization and Collective Action during the First World War

The collective action and social movements discussed in this article were strongly influenced by the war. But what is exactly meant by this? The war mobilized German society both from the top down and from the bottom up, but also triggered unexpected consequences. From 1916/17 on, nation-wide efforts and sacrifices for the war had to face the rising importance of local settings and localized patterns of collective aid (localization).

What all patterns of localization had to face was the changing profile of [governmental](#) action and of its perception. Governmental actors tried to [mobilize the economy](#) and society for the war effort. As the state’s responsibilities grew, people during the war realized how deeply the state had become involved in the regulation of society and how greatly it had failed to secure a decent nutrition standard for the populace as a whole. Deficiencies in the supply of food and other essential goods led to a shortage economy (*Mangelökonomie*) shaped by the black market.⁶ Since the [food crisis](#) of 1916/17, many Germans had begun to lose faith in the government’s abilities to secure the quality and the equal distribution of food.⁷ This insight spawned networks for collective and individual aid. Moreover, the participation in the war had fuelled a “revolution of rising expectations”⁸, as it was expected that fighting and suffering for the state should be rewarded by reforms.

With the mobilization for war, [Germany](#) (except Bavaria) was formally transformed into a network of decentralised local military regimes. Under the Prussian Law of Siege from 4 June 1851, the fifty-seven Deputy Commanding Generals acted as agents of [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) until the October reforms of 1918.⁹ As soon as protests occurred, the local generals intervened and tried to handle these collective actions by repression or, sometimes, by negotiation. Very often, local solutions had to be found for local problems.

During the war, industrial relations changed dramatically. German trade unions announced that they would not strike during wartime. The unions became integrated into the organisation of the war and found themselves caught between governmental expectations and those of the rank and file. Social democratic and Christian unions both underwent multiple crises, ranging from a loss of trust among workers to the decline of membership figures (membership in social democratic unions dropped from 1.5 million in 1914 to 900,000 in 1916).¹⁰ Especially in the war industries, the number of female workers rose sharply in the early phase of the war. In the iron and steel and chemical industries, the number of women workers rose by 160 and 234 percent respectively between July 1914 and July 1915. The overall percentage of employed women, however, did not expand that much, as many of these women had left jobs in other sectors.¹¹ The Auxiliary Service Law (*Gesetz über den vaterländischen Hilfsdienst*) from 5 December 1916 did not solve the war-induced shop floor and participative problems. Though it led to official recognition of trade unions as bargaining partners and established obligatory workers' committees and arbitration committees, it also curtailed workers' possibilities to move to a company that paid higher wages.

Despite the possibility of changing jobs as a way for workers to cope with war-induced social problems, as of 1916 strikes became more frequent, though they were mostly confined to war industries. The available, though unreliable, statistics suggest a rising number of strikes, from 137 in 1915 to 240 in 1916, 561 in 1917, and 531 in 1918. While in 1915, a mere 14,000 strikers were registered in Germany, by 1917, this number had risen to roughly 670,000, and to 21 million in 1919. The truce ([Burgfrieden](#)) aimed at formally pacifying social relations had, by 1916 at the latest, failed to lead to social harmony.¹² In most war-industrial sectors, the tension between employers and employees grew, as wage rises were only granted as temporary cost-of-living bonuses (*Teuerungszulage*).

Collective action took on the character of localized collective aid measures, which were more and more often articulated outside the channels of established nation-wide trade unions. Since the truce blocked communication between the unions and the working class, collective action in local settings and local solutions gained importance. We can see this tendency in the growing power of the local Deputy Commanding Generals for managing bargaining

procedures. In many war industries like iron and steel, mining and dock labour, the *Arbeitsgruppe* (team) on the shop floor and/or the factory served as a basic unit for the representation of workers' interests. After 1916/17, local [labour](#) delegates – who often had years of experiences as trade union members and could draw on traditions of rank-and-file democracy – articulated workers' interests more on the shop floor level than in trade union meetings. As no other relevant formal organizations existed, the increased membership in trade unions (the social democratic unions swelled from 1.3 million in 1917 to 2.9 million in 1918) can be interpreted as an expression of this newly found self-consciousness among the working class.¹³ What had become visible in the British case could also be observed in Germany: At the local level, collective power was strong, but it could not be directly translated into national bargaining power.¹⁴

Consumer protests also reflect the influences of processes of localization. As nearly no other channels were available for publicly communicating consumer problems, the tight social networks in working-class neighbourhoods, mostly run by women and young men, served as nodes of mobilization. The queues in front of the shops became especially important as loci of micro-mobilization. It was here, among the waiting women, where news and rumors were communicated and spontaneous collective actions were discussed. In Berlin and other big cities, such consumer protests erupted in February and in October 1915, each involving several thousand protestors.¹⁵ The food crisis of the “turnip winter” of 1916/17 brought a second wave of consumer action. While the collective actors of earlier protests had largely stayed in their local neighbourhoods, they now moved to or gathered in front of town halls, articulating their demands and putting pressure on political elites. Via the press and police reports, they urged the imperial government to intervene in the food crisis, thus demonstrating the limits of the state in solving these problems.

After 1916/17, consumer protests and strikes transcended local boundaries, interlinking with each other as the problems of the war economy became ever more obvious. Often influenced by news of the [revolution in Russia](#), collective action became overtly political. Thus, the social movements of shop floor and consumer activism could fill the gap of translocal representation of workers' demands – a gap the established formal labour organisations could not bridge. These informal organizing processes strengthened the importance of local groups, ranging from the newly established Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD, *Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*), to the group which was later called the Revolutionary Shop Stewards (*Revolutionäre Obleute*). Strikes after 1916/17 explicitly addressed domestic issues. In January 1918, one million workers took part in a strike for peace. Most of the strikers who became politically radicalized were workers from the war industries.¹⁶ Some of them concluded that, as the state was unable to deliver the

goods, it should intensify its efforts to end the war or, as they then put it: "The best way to secure food distribution for the working class would be immediate peace without any annexations."¹⁷ What emerged was a complex translocal social movement which became an important player in the domestic setting¹⁸, although the German military [offensives of spring 1918](#) overruled this critical mood for some months.

Collective Action during the First Phase of the Revolution (October - December 1918)

Translocal Networks of a Peaceful Transition

Although there was no widespread collapse of military order, or even a far-reaching concealed military strike (*Verdeckter Militärstreik*) in summer 1918, what became apparent was an erosion of discipline and of the fighting spirit among soldiers, to which the [Spanish influenza](#) pandemic further contributed. In late October 1918, seamen in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel, among them many workers, were not willing to risk their lives in a final battle against the Royal Navy. As these workers did not only live on board the war vessels, but were also in contact with the workers of these cities, we should interpret what is normally called a "[mutiny](#)" as a social movement. This movement finally paved the way for the revolution, which, in three phases, stretched from November 1918 until spring 1920. The soldiers' and workers' council movements which spread all over Germany integrated consumer and shop floor-based activities and contributed further to a translocal network of collective aid organizations. Both movements aimed at securing order by organizing food supply, economic production and distribution, and [demobilisation](#) through co-operation with [civil and military administrations](#). These transformations were not driven by young radicals, but by many born-and-raised social democratic activists. In this setting of competing social movements, established parties and trade unions were, until 1919/20, only some players among many.

Collective Action during the Second Phase of the Revolution (Late 1918 - Spring 1919)

Urban Social Movements in Times of Civil War

In the post war-period, the number of strikes skyrocketed from 3,682 in 1919 and 3,693 in 1920, to 4,093 in 1921 and 4,348 in 1922, dropping to 1,878 in 1923. In 1919, a total of roughly 34 million work days were lost through strikes, the highest number ever recorded in German strike statistics. Membership figures of social democratic unions rose and stayed between 7 and 8 million from 1919 to 1922. The quota of workers organized in social democratic trade unions rose from 18 percent (1918) to over 50 percent (1920-22).¹⁹ With

these numbers, however, we gain only a very tentative impression of the exceptional level of social mobilization expressed through a broad spectrum of competing social movements. The key problem, not only for forging the new republic, but also for handling protest and social movements, was that, until 1920, the monopoly on physical force was fiercely contested.²⁰ As no widely accepted armed institution existed and fear of Bolshevism was widespread, controlling social movements threatened to lead to an escalation of violence and to situations of near-civil war.²¹ This, in turn, prompted the radicalization of some of these social movements, especially in industrial regions and cities.

From spring 1919 until March 1920, factory and shop floor-based strikes and social movements became an important mode for articulating workers' issues.²² In February/March 1919, collective shop floor actions mobilized many workers in Berlin (there was a general strike in early March) and in other big cities and industrial regions. In the Ruhr area, 400,000 miners were called up to strike in April 1919. The complex social movements of 1919/20 that organized these collective actions are often labeled "the council movement," which is, however, still a very vague term.²³

This plethora of social movements was much more than a revolt of the unskilled, as has been claimed by some scholars. These movements not only integrated work and consumption-related issues, but were also explicitly urban social movements. They reclaimed urban space for a public democracy (*Versammlungsdemokratie*).²⁴ As has been discussed in relation to Hamburg, the key features of this public democracy were conventions of informal discussion groups on the streets and in squares near waterfront working-class precincts. The immediate objective of these discussion clubs was to gain and defend their right to the streets. This was understood as the right to unrestricted and uninhibited mobility on streets and public squares, the right to discuss in the open any topics of their choice, and to organize public protests to this end. Small groups-based urban social movements and public democracy also took important cues from shop floor-based actions.

A striking similarity of many of these social movements of urban workers and consumers was the establishment of a local order, understood as a practical measure, but also as a utopia for organizing the neighbourhood and the shop floor. This order was less about abstract and nationwide social transformations and much more about transforming the micro-contexts of everyday surroundings, although these local changes could indirectly lead to broader social changes. This unique localized understanding of politics was different from the homogeneity-oriented, nation-state based, centralized understanding of politics represented by the ruling elites.²⁵ In the Ruhr area of early 1919, socialization was the motto of the day. The rank and

file, which pressed hard towards collective action, held a pragmatic view of socialization: In contrast to many officials of the SPD, USPD and KPD, they did not understand it as a thorough transformation of the whole industry. Rather, the miners aimed at locally and regionally safeguarding their income, their working and overtime conditions, and their supply situation. Such a local order was not a paradise of peace and social harmony; during protests, anti-Semitic sentiments were voiced, non-local residents were harassed and stigmatized, and women were relegated to work at home.²⁶

These localized social movements were organized parallel to the established trade unions. Although the free trade unions had gained many new members after the war, many of them maintained a somewhat distant and pragmatic relationship to these institutions, accompanied by a lack of trust in its leading personnel and war policies. Many workers were disappointed in a revolution which had brought the eight-hour day and other social-political improvements, but not the far-reaching changes they had hoped for. Moreover, the existing trade unions were not willing to integrate shop floor-oriented patterns of organization and collective action into their policy. They saw shop floor-based delegates as being uncontrollable, sometimes even endangering the existence of the established patterns of craft unionism.

Another important aim of the localized urban social movements in early 1919 was to re-establish the unity of the working class. The workplace and the factory, with their solidarity-based *Arbeitsgruppen*, helped to bolster these unifying tendencies, the strong syndicalist and unionist (*unionistische*) impulses and organizations are a typical expression of this situation.²⁷ In these years, syndicalism and *Unionismus* were not primarily an expression of a coherent ideological world view. Rather, they were a product of localized and consciously performed collective action, shaped by the interaction of working and living conditions and their interpretation. Experiences with rank-and-file democracy in German trade union history and pre-war strikes were also influential.²⁸ The rise of syndicalism and of *Unionismus* were supported by frustrations over trade union policy (in war and revolution). Transnational transfers often came from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), whether through activists who came back from the [United States](#) or [Latin America](#), or through IWW newspapers.

Collective Action during the Third Phase of the Revolution (May 1919 – April 1920)

Political Radicalization and the Demise of Urban Social Movements

The social and cultural history of collective action of the third phase of the revolution is much

less well studied than in the other periods.²⁹ What can be seen, however, is that after the council republics (in Bremen and Munich) had been violently destroyed, mainly by the *Freikorps*, political radicalization intensified. The urban social movements (among them the council movement) increasingly developed ideas of the class struggle. But even then, collective action dominated over sophisticated theoretical elaboration. These social movements still remained localized, with only very limited translocal or transregional co-operation and communications. In 1920, they more frequently addressed problems rooted in the political arena. This engagement in the realm of nation-wide politics is mirrored in the demonstrations against the factory council law (approximately 100,000 protestors) in Berlin in January 1920, in the Ruhr area with the battle for the six-hour shift, and finally in the bloody confrontations of the *Kapp-Putsch* in March 1920. The general strike against the *Kapp-Putsch* and the subsequent civil war in the Ruhr area, where the *Freikorps* and Red Ruhr Army clashed, marked the end of the last phase of revolution.

The demise of the urban social movements and their focus on public democracy came in 1921. The worsening labour market and economic conditions, individualization stimulated by inflation, *paramilitary* and police repression, the re-consolidation of the social democratic milieu, along with the establishment of a new communist milieu, were all contributing factors. In Hamburg, the unsuccessful communist uprising in October 1923 dealt the final blow. Moreover, in times of inflation, the established trade unions regained importance, as only they were entitled to participate in collective negotiations.

Inflation, rising prices and unemployment, however, still fueled collective aid movements, especially in times of hyperinflation (1922/23).³⁰ Ad hoc market commissions were established, markets were plundered, and collectively enforced fixings of market prices became nearly routine. At the same time, workers struck for reduced food prices.³¹ In 1922, the Communist Party (KPD) tried to organize such protests with price control committees, thus drawing collective consumer movements into the German labour movement's internal political battles. These efforts revitalized the urban social movements. In this phase, however, its members acted more as trade union representatives than as members of the revived urban social movements. When the Republic was stabilized in 1924, these social movements had nearly completely disappeared. It was, however, only a matter of a few years before a new, and this time much more severe and politically threatening, competition between street-based social movements took shape.

Conclusion

The interpretation of the war and immediate post-war years through the lenses of primarily

urban-based localized social movements and their translocal interaction could lead us to understand this period as shaped by competition among social movements, in which the pre-war working-class organizations were still important players, but far from the only ones. This contestation of representation has, until now, too often been overlooked. The study of the interaction of consumption- and workplace-based collective action and the related patterns of local order can contribute to a fuller understanding of the contested foundations of the Weimar Republic. This perspective can also caution us against easily equating shop floor militancy with radicalism in the party political arena.

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Notes

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2. See on strikes: Haimson, Leopold H. / Sapelli, Giulio (eds.): Strikes, social conflict, and the First World War. An international perspective, Milan 1992; on consumer protest, Davis, Belinda J.: Home fires burning. Food, politics, and everyday life in World War I Berlin, Chapel Hill 2000; Daniel, Ute: Arbeiterfrauen in der Kriegsgesellschaft. Beruf, Familie und Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg, Göttingen 1989; and as integrative studies, Hartewig, Karin: Das unberechenbare Jahrzehnt. Bergarbeiter und ihre Familien im Ruhrgebiet 1914-1924, Munich 1993; Wrigley, Chris (ed.): Challenges of labour. Central and Western Europe, 1917-1920, London et al. 1993; Cronin, James E. / Sirianni, Carmen (eds.): Work, community, and power. The experience of labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925, Philadelphia 1983. [↑](#)
3. Cf. Lucas, Erhard: Zwei Formen von Radikalismus in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, Frankfurt am Main 1976; Nolan, Mary: Social democracy and society. Working-class radicalism in Düsseldorf, 1890-1920, Cambridge 1981; Weinhauer, Klaus: Alltag und Arbeitskampf im Hamburger Hafen. Sozialgeschichte der Hamburger Hafenarbeiter von 1914-1933, Paderborn et al. 1994; Welskopp, Thomas: Arbeit und Macht im Hüttenwerk. Arbeits- und industrielle Beziehungen in der deutschen und amerikanischen Eisen- und Stahlindustrie von den 1860er bis zu den 1930er Jahren, Bonn 1994. [↑](#)
4. Cronin, James E.: Labor insurgency and class formation. Comparative perspectives on the crisis of 1917-1920 in Europe, in: Cronin / Sirianni (eds.): Work 1983, pp. 20-48, p. 21; Darwin, John: After Tamerlane. The rise and fall of global empires, 1400-2000, London 2008, p. 402. [↑](#)

5. Feldman, Gerald D. / Kolb, Eberhard / Rürup, Reinhard: Die Massenbewegungen der Arbeiterschaft in Deutschland am Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges (1917-1920), in: Politische Vierteljahresschrift 13/1 (1972), pp. 84-105; Boll, Friedhelm: Massenbewegungen in Niedersachsen 1906-1920. Eine sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu den unterschiedlichen Entwicklungstypen Braunschweig und Hannover, Bonn 1981. In my understanding, a social movement is a form of "collective self-organization for the attainment of social recognition and the assertion of rights or existential interests hitherto denied to a group or category of people." Social movements are "based on an experience of difference from the political society and involve forms of reflexivity, engage actors in the active interpretation of the present and imagination of the future" (Fuchs, Martin / Linkenbach, Antje: Social Movements, in: Das, Veena (ed.): The Oxford India companion to sociology and social anthropology, Oxford et al. 2003, pp. 1524-1563. p. 1525. ↑
6. Leonhard, Jörn: Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs, Munich et al. 2014, p. 378. ↑
7. Davis, Home fires 2000, p. 110. ↑
8. Leonhard, Büchse 2014, p. 706. ↑
9. Ibid., p. 207. ↑
10. Petzina, Dietmar / Abelshauser, Werner / Faust, Anselm: Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch III. Materialien zur Statistik des Deutschen Reiches 1914-1948, Munich 1978, p. 111. ↑
11. Bieber, Gewerkschaften vol. 1, 1981, p. 203; Daniel, Arbeiterfrauen 1989, p. 259-260. ↑
12. Tenfelde, Klaus / Volkmann, Heinrich (eds.): Streik. Zur Geschichte des Arbeitskampfes in Deutschland während der Industrialisierung, Munich 1981, p. 304. ↑
13. Müller, Dirk H.: Gewerkschaftliche Arbeiterausschüsse und Arbeiterräte in der Berliner Kriegsindustrie 1914-1918, in: Mai, Gunther (ed.): Arbeiterschaft in Deutschland 1914-1918. Studien zu Arbeitskampf und Arbeitsmarkt im Ersten Weltkrieg, Düsseldorf 1985, pp. 155-178. Chickering, Roger: Freiburg im Ersten Weltkrieg. Totaler Krieg und städtischer Alltag 1914-1918, Paderborn et al. 2009, p. 141.; Petzina / Abelshauser / Faust, Arbeitsbuch 1978, p. 111. ↑
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15. Davis, Home fires 2000, p. 84f.; Daniel, Arbeiterfrauen 1989, pp. 241-249. ↑
16. Kocka, Jürgen: Klassengesellschaft im Krieg. Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914-1918, Göttingen 1978, p. 48; Krumeich, Gerd: Januarstreiks, in: Hirschfeld, Gerhard / Krumeich, Gerd / Renz, Irina (eds.): Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg, Paderborn 2009, pp.

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17. Quoted in Bieber, Hans-Joachim: Die Entwicklung der Arbeitsbeziehungen auf den Hamburger Großwerften zwischen Hilfsdienstgesetz und Betriebsrätegesetz (1916-1920), in: Mai, Arbeiterschaft 1985, pp. 77-153, p. 121. [↑](#)
18. Feldman et al., Massenbewegungen 1972, p. 94. [↑](#)
19. In 1918, 1919 and 1923, many strikes were not recorded. See: Tenfelde / Volkmann, Streik 1981, p. 304; Petzina / Abelshauser / Faust, Arbeitsbuch 1978, p. 111; Schönhoven, Reformismus, 1989, p. 268. [↑](#)
20. See Peter Leßmann-Faust: Die preußische Schutzpolizei in der Weimarer Republik. Streifendienst und Straßenkampf, Frankfurt am Main 2012. [↑](#)
21. Kluge, Ulrich: Die deutsche Revolution 1918-1919. Staat, Politik und Gesellschaft zwischen Weltkrieg und Kapp-Putsch, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p. 94. [↑](#)
22. Ibid., pp. 107-129. [↑](#)
23. Weipert, Axel: Die Zweite Revolution. Rätebewegung in Berlin 1919/1920, Berlin 2015. [↑](#)
24. See for the following: Weinbauer, Klaus: Protest, kollektive Gewalt und Polizei in Hamburg zwischen Versammlungsdemokratie und staatlicher Sicherheit ca. 1890-1933, in: Lenger, Friedrich (ed.): Kollektive Gewalt in der Stadt. Europa 1890-1939, Munich 2013, pp. 69-102. [↑](#)
25. See Kluge, Revolution 1985, pp. 91-100. [↑](#)
26. See Weinbauer, Protest 2013; and for Munich, Geyer, Martin H.: Verkehrte Welt. Revolution, Inflation und Moderne, München 1914-1924, Göttingen 1998. [↑](#)
27. See Weinbauer, Alltag 1994, pp. 197-203; 222-233; Welskopp, Arbeit 1994, pp. 560-589; 628-652. For the transnational aspects, see Bantman, Constance / Altena, Bert (eds.): Reassessing the transnational turn. Scales of analysis in anarchist and syndicalist studies, New York 2015. [↑](#)
28. See Müller, Gewerkschaften 1985; Hartewig, Jahrzehnt 1993. [↑](#)
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31. See Hartewig, Jahrzehnt 1993, pp. 226-240; and Peterson, Communism 1993, p. 142f. [↑](#)

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[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Trade unions](#)

[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Wages](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Food and nutrition](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Institutions](#) > [Governments](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Political and social movements](#) > [Labour movements](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Political ideologies](#) > [Communism, socialism](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Resistance and revolutions](#) > [Revolutions](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Resistance and revolutions](#) > [Strikes, political](#)

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Rationing and shortages](#)

[Society](#) > [Social conflict](#) > [Strikes, society](#)

[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Population, urban](#)

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[Warfare and the military](#) > [Wars after war](#) > [Civil wars](#)

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