

THE GERMAN REICHSTAG, KARL LIEBKNECHT AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE DURING WORLD WAR I¹

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Abstract

It is a side effect of all wars that objective reporting on events relevant to the war is prevented by state censorship. Propaganda takes the place of truth - as was the case in Germany during World War I. How was it still possible for the German public to learn about the Armenian Genocide? In German and Armenian historiography, this merit is attributed to Pastor Johannes Lepsius. But a few months before Lepsius published his enlightening book, the Social Democratic member of the Reichstag Karl Liebknecht had already pointed out the mass murders of Armenians in the Reichstag on 11 January 1916. He was the only one of 397 members of parliament to publicise this crime against humanity. The SPD's central organ "Vorwärts" printed the Reichstag debates so that hundreds of thousands of Germans could read them. This courageous action by Karl Liebknecht has not yet been adequately recognized.

Keywords: *Armenian Genocide, Scrutiny in Germany, German Reichstag, Karl Liebknecht.*

General introduction

As is well known, the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Bulgaria were among the allies of the two central European empires of Germany and Austria-Hungary during World War I. Numerous German diplomats, military officers, senior officials and politicians were informed about the Armenian Genocide, which began on 24 April 1915 with the arrest of several hundred intellectuals in Constantinople.² But what did the German parliament and the German public know

¹ This essay is an expanded and annotated written version of a lecture I gave on 3 October 2024 at the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide memorial in Yerevan.

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² This is not the place to provide a detailed overview of the extensive literature on the Armenian Genocide; reference shall be made only to the following general works and the bibliographical

about this genocide and to what extent? This article examines the possibilities and limitations of press reporting in the German Reich under martial law and the treatment of the Armenian Question in the Reichstag in Berlin. It sheds light on the central role played by Social Democrat Member of Parliament Karl Liebknecht in bringing this crime against humanity to public attention.

I.

To begin with, it is necessary to provide some explanations about the German Reichstag in Berlin. The parliament of the German Empire met in the same building that houses the German Bundestag today, if one disregards the damages caused by the Reichstag fire on the night of 27-28 February 1933, the bombings of World War II and the intensive reconstruction of the 1960s.³ Not only the dome, but also the interior of the building looks entirely different today. The plenary chamber has been modernized, and also the interior of the building bears no resemblance to the original assembly hall, which was completed in 1894. The electoral system of the German Empire was comparatively modern for its time: all German men over the age of 25 – excluding certain groups such as active-duty soldiers – had the right to vote. Women only gained the right to vote and stand for election during the November Revolution of 1918. Elections to the Reichstag were based on a pure majority voting system, similar to that used in the United Kingdom today. The country was divided into 397 constituencies, each represented by a single Member of Parliament. In the 1912 Reichstag elections, the last before the outbreak of World War I, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) won the most seats, 110 out of 397. The next largest parliamentary groups were the Centre Party (Zentrum), the party representing German Catholics, with 91 seats and the National Liberal Party (Nationalliberale Partei, NLP) with 45 MPs. The SPD is the only political party from the German Empire that still exists today; it produced four Bundeskanzler: Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, Gerhard Schröder, and recently, Olaf Scholz.

II.

One of the 110 Social Democratic deputies elected in 1912 was Karl Liebknecht, whose biography will be briefly outlined below.⁴ Born in the city of

references they contain for further reading: Wolfgang Gust: *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern. Die Tragödie des ältesten Christenvolks der Welt*, München/Wien 1993; Rolf Hosfeld: *Die Operation Nemesis. Die Türkei, Deutschland und der Völkermord an den Armeniern*, Köln 2005; Hans-Lukas Kieser/Elmar Plozza (Ed.): *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern, die Türkei und Europa*, Zürich 2006; Raymond H. Kévorkian: *The Armenian Genocide. A complete History*, London/New York 2011.

³ Michael. S. Cullen: *Der Reichstag. Im Spannungsfeld deutscher Geschichte*, 2. vollständig überarbeitete Auflage, Berlin 2004; ders.: *Der Reichstag – Symbol deutscher Geschichte*, Berlin 2014; Norman Foster/David Jenkins (Hrsg.): *Der neue Reichstag. Deutsche Bearbeitung von Jochen Gaile*, Mannheim 2000.

⁴ For the biography of Karl Liebknecht, see: Heinz Wohlgemuth: *Karl Liebknecht. Eine Biographie*, Berlin 1973; Helmut Trotnow: *Karl Liebknecht – eine politische Biographie*, Köln 1980; Annelies Laschitzka: *Karl Liebknecht. Eine Biographie in Dokumenten*, Berlin 1982.

Leipzig in 1871, Liebknecht shared his birth year with two other key figures of the German social democracy: Rosa Luxemburg, the important theoretician of the left wing of the party, and Friedrich Ebert, who would later become Reich President. He belonged to the so-called second generation of Social Democratic politicians in Germany, though exceptional in one regard: his father Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900) had already been a Social Democrat and was one of the founding fathers of the Social Democratic Party in the 1860s and 1870s. Alongside August Bebel (1840–1913), Wilhelm Liebknecht was one of the party's most influential leaders until his death, playing a central role in the development of the German Labour movement. His son Karl grew up in a materially and intellectually privileged home. He was able to complete his A-levels, study law, earn a doctorate in his subject and eventually become a lawyer. Karl Liebknecht was one of the few academically trained members within the SPD at the time; most of the party's parliamentarians were craftsmen. Liebknecht was elected to the Reichstag for the first time in 1912 and also held a seat in the Prussian Parliament, which likewise convened in Berlin, where the state parliament of the German capital meets today.

Following the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, the Reichstag was required to approve new war credits regularly. In the first vote on 4 August 1914, the SPD parliamentary group in the Reichstag, including Karl Liebknecht, voted unanimously in favour of approving the loans. However, at a prior internal group meeting Liebknecht and thirteen other MPs had voted against them, but ultimately bowed to the will of the majority. On 2 December 1914, Liebknecht became the first SPD deputy to publicly vote against the war credits in the Reichstag. But he was not alone. In the third vote on loans on 20 March 1915, both Liebknecht and fellow MP Otto Rühle publicly voted "No." Over the course of 1915, the minority within the SPD parliamentary group that rejected the war credits grew ever larger. In early February 1915, the authorities conscripted Liebknecht into military service – an attempt to silence the outspoken Social Democrat and remove him from the political stage. Nevertheless, Liebknecht was still able to attend sessions of both the Reichstag and the Prussian House of Representatives.

III.

On 11 January 1916, Karl Liebknecht submitted three questions to the Reichstag, the first of which addressed the situation of the Armenian:

"Is the Reich Chancellor aware that during the present war in the allied Turkish empire the Armenian population has been driven from their homes by the hundreds of thousands and massacred? What steps has the Reich Chancellor taken with the allied Turkish government to bring about the necessary atonement, to ensure humane conditions for the remaining Armenian population in Turkey and to prevent the repetition of similar atrocities?"⁵

⁵ Stenographische Berichte der Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags, 13. Legislaturperiode, 26. Sitzung vom 11. Januar 1916, S. 512f.

The enquiry was answered by the director of the political department of the Foreign Office, the Imperial Envoy Wilhelm von Stumm (1869-1935), a descendant of the Saarland coal and steel dynasty Stumm: "The Chancellor is aware that some time ago, prompted by the seditious activities of our opponents, the Turkish government resettled the Armenian population of certain parts of the Turkish Empire and assigned them new places of residence. Because of certain repercussions of this measure, an exchange of ideas is taking place between the German and Turkish governments. Further details cannot be given."

Karl Liebknecht did not want to put up with these diplomatic empty phrases and asked for the right to supplement his question. According to the official Reichstag transcript, the plenary responded with a reaction that seems wholly inappropriate given the subject matter: "Hilarity".

Liebknecht added: "Is the Chancellor aware that Professor Lepsius spoke of the extermination of the Turkish Armenians". At this point, the speaker was cut off by the left-liberal Reichstag President Johannes Kaempf (1842–1918). It is noteworthy that Karl Liebknecht uses the phrase "Prof. Lepsius spoke", rather than the words "wrote" or "claimed". This choice of words suggests that there was a personal meeting and conversation between Johannes Lepsius and Karl Liebknecht – unfortunately such a meeting could not yet be proven.⁶ In one of the first "Spartacus Letters" published by the radical left wing around Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg on 27 January 1916, his parliamentary intervention in the Reichstag was classified as follows:

"The Turkish government has carried out a terrible massacre among the Armenians; the whole world knows about it – and the whole world blames Germany because German officers are in command of the government in Constantinople. Only in Germany is nothing known because the press is gagged. Pointing out these outrages was a merit."⁷

IV.

However, the significance of Karl Liebknecht's enquiry can only be fully understood, when contextualized within the specific media landscape of 1916, or more generally, that of the wartime years 1914 to 1918. First of all, newspapers and magazines were the only existing mass media in the German Empire. Cinema was still in its infancy and radio would not be introduced until 1923. The density of newspapers and magazines was much greater back then than it is today; and the majority of newspapers had a decidedly political viewpoint. For the Social Democratic Party, it was therefore of great importance to inform their members, supporters and voters about the political, economic and social situation in Germany from their own ideological perspective. On the eve of the First World War, the

⁶ According to information provided by the Johannes Lepsius House in Potsdam on 17 December 2024, there is no evidence of a meeting between Liebknecht and Lepsius.

⁷ Karl Liebknecht: *Gesammelte Reden und Schriften*, Band VIII August 1914 bis April 1916, Berlin (Ost) 1982, S. 462.

SPD alone owned 91 daily newspapers and 65 party-owned printing presses. In addition, there were the non-daily newspapers, magazines and trade union journals.⁸

All newspapers in Germany, but first and foremost the press of the labour movement, came under close scrutiny following the outbreak of war in August 1914. Under the state of siege and a regime of censorship, truthful reporting on the course of the war was virtually impossible for four and a quarter years; defeats suffered by Germany and its allies were glossed over, war crimes were hushed up, propaganda and information were often mixed up in a way that was barely comprehensible to the ordinary newspaper reader. The sword of Damocles of imprisonment constantly hung over critical journalists and publicists, and critical newspapers were frequently banned. The “*Leipziger Volkszeitung*”, for example, was banned from 19 June until 1 July 1915 following the publication of the appeal for peace ‘The order of the day’ by the three SPD politicians Eduard Bernstein, Hugo Haase and Karl Kautsky. Similarly, the central organ “*Vorwärts*”, which had published the SPD party executive's appeal ‘Social Democracy and Peace’ on 23 June, was not allowed to appear from 26 June to 1 July.⁹

The heavily restricted freedom of the press in Germany did not mean that nothing at all was read about the Armenian Genocide in the German and especially the Social Democratic press in 1915. On 8 December 1915, for example, the SPD's central organ and daily newspaper “*Vorwärts*” published the complete text of a speech that Pope Benedict XV (1854–1922) had given a few days earlier at a consistory of cardinals in Rome: In it, the Pope denounced the war as unprecedented butchery and at the same time regretted the lack of consequences of all previous peace efforts, including his own: “Despite the enormous destruction that has accumulated in the course of 16 months, despite the fact that the desire for peace lives in hearts, despite the fact that so many families are pleading for peace with tears, despite the fact that we have taken all means suitable to somehow hasten peace and appease discord, we nevertheless see this disastrous war raging with fury on sea and land. On the other hand, the unfortunate Armenia is threatened with the last complete ruin.”¹⁰

Just as Benedict XV's statements were reported but not commented on, it was also possible to print statements by foreign politicians, even Germany's opponents of the war. For example, an article in the “*Vorwärts*” of 8 October 1915 reported on the “Armenian debate in the English House of Lords”.¹¹ The article stated that the number of victims was 800,000 at the time but commented that the figure was

⁸ Gerhard Eisfeld/Kurt Koszyk: *Die Presse der deutschen Sozialdemokratie. Eine Bibliographie*, Bonn 2. Auflage 1980; Dieter Fricke: *Die sozialistische Presse 1869 bis 1917*, in: *Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung 1869 bis 1917* (Bd. 1), Berlin (Ost) 1987, p. 495–660.

⁹ Franz Osterroth/Dieter Schuster: *Chronik der deutschen Sozialdemokratie*, Bd. 1: *Bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkriegs*, Bonn 2. Auflage 1975, p. 171f.

¹⁰ „*Vorwärts*“ Nr. 338 from 8 December 1915 („Eine Ansprache des Papstes“).

¹¹ „*Vorwärts*“ Nr. 278 from 8 October 1915 („Armenierdebatte im englischen Oberhause“).

“hardly credible”. This means that the article considered the number of victims to be too high. Although “there was no German complicity in the murders, Germany was partly responsible as its influence in Constantinople was undeniable.” A member of the House of Lords demanded that the reports of the British consuls be communicated to the whole world; “in one district the population had been completely exterminated.” How might a contemporary reader of the “Vorwärts” reacted to the figures in this article? Would they think it was true, dismiss them as war propaganda, or see a mixture of both?

That the reader of 1915 considered it to be war propaganda is even the most likely variant, as such articles, which only reflected the one-sided Turkish point of view, can also be found in the ‘Vorwärts’. For example, on July 17, 1915, the SPD’s central organ printed a report entitled “The Armenians against Turkey” about the resistance of the Armenians against their expulsion and murder in the town of Charki Karahissis, known today as Sebinkarahisar.¹² The article justifies the actions of the imperial government of the Ottoman Empire, speaking of the “removal of the Armenians from their farms”, and claims that Armenians entrenched in the city’s citadel responded “to the fatherly and conciliatory advice of the local authorities with gunfire and bombs,” whereupon the resistance was broken with gunfire on the citadel. It continues: “In order to avoid this unpleasantness and to prevent the repetition of events in which not only the guilty but also the innocent and peaceful population suffers regrettable damage, the imperial government had to take certain preventive and restrictive measures against the revolutionary Armenians.” Rarely have the terms “expulsion” and “murder” been so thoroughly euphemized as in this article. However, that said, there are no articles in the “Vorwärts” like the one in the conservative ‘Deutsche Tageszeitung’ on 19 December 1915, which talks about the “Armenian hype” (“Armenierrummel”) or “Armenian atrocity hype”. It also states that the Armenians had deliberately provoked the Turkish reprisals in order to bring about Britain’s intervention in favour of the Armenians.¹³ The author of this article, with the initials E. R., standing for Ernst Graf zu Reventlow (1862–1943), would go on to become an ardent National Socialist in the years that followed.

V.

To cite one final but telling example that illustrates the climate in which Karl Liebknecht sided with the Armenians: On 14 December 1915, just four weeks before Karl Liebknecht’s action in the parliament, the “Vorwärts” published a leading article with the headline “The English defeat in Mesopotamia,” which also contained a whole paragraph about the Armenians. The Armenians had been “incited” by the English and Russians against “Turkish rule”: “A very well calculated plan, which seemed to offer a certain guarantee of success, because for

¹² „Vorwärts“ Nr. 195 from 17 July 1915 („Die Armenier gegen die Türkei“).

¹³ „Deutsche Tageszeitung“ Nr. 636 from 19 December 1915 („Das Wesen der ‚armenischen Greuel‘“).

years the Turkish Armenians have been stirred up against the Turks by Russian-Armenian emissaries, and this agitation cannot be denied a certain success, although the Armenians living on the other side of the Turkish-Russian border are by no means treated better by the Russian government. In addition, there are all kinds of religious and economic differences between the Armenians and the neighboring Kurds. The Armenians, an Iranian tribe strongly mixed with Semitic and Turkmen elements [this definition is absolutely incorrect], are Christians and mostly followers of the Gregorian Church: the Kurds, on the other hand, an equestrian and pastoral people of Indo-European descent, are Mohammedans; for the most part, like the Ottomans, they belong to the Sunni faith, for the smallest part to the Shiite faith, like the Persians. And the economic contrasts are even sharper. The Armenians, who have a higher cultural status than the Kurds, are farmers, craftsmen, and, above all, traders.”

This is followed by a statement about the Armenians, echoing typical anti-Semitic stereotypes that also appeared in right-wing extremist circles in Germany: “There is no more cunning, more haggling and at the same time more unscrupulous trading people than the Armenians, who not only trade in their own country, but can also be found in all the inner marketplaces of Anatolia and the Anatolian and Syrian coastal towns as buyers, middlemen, money-grubbers, etc., and of whom a Syrian proverb claims that one grated Armenian trader is more cunning than seven Syrian-Jewish traders. In Kurdistan, too, the Armenians are in complete control of trade. What the Kurd needs, he buys from the Armenian, what he gains in livestock products, he sells to him - and is usually thoroughly cheated by the clever Armenian trader. In revenge, the stronger, rougher Kurds occasionally attack Armenian settlements, plunder them and massacre a number of Armenians.”¹⁴

So much for the author with the initials H. C., who is probably none other than Heinrich Cunow (1862–1936). Cunow was a journalist for the “Vorwärts” and the most important theoretical journal of the German social democracy, “Die Neue Zeit” (“The New Time”), whose editorship he took over after the ousting of the famous theorist Karl Kautsky (1854–1938). Cunow was the leading Marxist theorist of the SPD *after* Kautsky. He belonged to the so-called “Lensch-Cunow-Hänisch” group, i.e., originally representatives of the left wing of the party who had moved to the far right under the impact of the outbreak of war in 1914.¹⁵ Of course, Heinrich Cunow had never been to Armenia, but his clearly racist remarks were based on a well-known source, either a passage from the second volume of the novel ‘Im Reich des Silbernen Löwen’ (‘In the Empire of the Silver Lion’) published in 1898 by the widely read adventure writer Karl May (1842–1912), or, more likely, a passage from the book ‘Asia’ by Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919)

¹⁴ „Vorwärts“ Nr. 344 from 14 December 1915 („Die englische Niederlage in Mesopotamien“).

¹⁵ Robert Sigel: Die Lensch-Cunow-Haenisch-Gruppe, Eine Studie zum rechten Flügel der SPD im Ersten Weltkrieg, Berlin 1976.

from 1899.¹⁶ A Protestant pastor and left-liberal politician, Naumann, after World War II became the namesake of the Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation, the party foundation of the Free Democratic Party (FDP). Naumann had accompanied the German Emperor Wilhelm II on his trip to the Orient in 1898 and caused quite a stir with a reported statement by a German craftsman in Constantinople, in which a numerical ratio between Greeks, Jews and Armenians was also constructed to the disadvantage of the Armenians, and in which Naumann expressed his sympathy for the Hamid massacres in the 1890s.

VI.

As we have seen, the mass murder of Armenians – although the term ‘genocide’ was not yet used at the time – was certainly mentioned in the press: At times, dismissed as a propaganda lie by the opponents of the war, and at other times acknowledged as a fact, because it was absolutely impossible to discredit the Pope as a member of the Entente. Given that the topic was certainly covered in the press, it is worth asking how often the words Armenia or Armenians appear in the Reichstag debates of 1915, 1916, and 1917. If you want to trust the information from the excellent search engine of the digitized protocols of the German Reichstag, the answer is: exactly twice. Once, the national-liberal deputy Ernst Bassermann (1854–1917) mentions the advance of Turkish troops in Armenia without establishing a connection with our topic,¹⁷ and once Karl Liebknecht on that very 11 January 1916.

In the “Vorwärts” a different version of these sentences of Liebknecht is reproduced than in the Reichstag protocol. In the Social Democratic Central organ, this longer version appears: “Is the Reich Chancellor aware that Professor Lepsius spoke of the extermination of the Turkish Armenians **and that the German government is being held responsible for these atrocities by the Christian population of Turkey?**”¹⁸ I am sure that this version is correct. How did the “Vorwärts” get hold of this longer version? Since the supplementary question was asked spontaneously by Karl Liebknecht, there are only two possibilities: either by Liebknecht himself or a journalist from the “Vorwärts” who followed the debate from the public gallery of the Reichstag and took notes. Why did the “Vorwärts” print this long passage? The editors sympathized with the party minority that rejected the war credits and thus also with Karl Liebknecht. Why is this longer version not mentioned in the protocol of the Reichstag? Quite simply: the last session printed in volume no. 306 is that of 16 March 1916. The stenographed

¹⁶ Friedrich Naumann: „Asia“. Athen, Konstantinopel, Baalbek, Damaskus, Nazaret, Jerusalem, Kairo, Neapel, Berlin-Schöneberg 1899; cf. Hans-Walter Schmuhl: Friedrich Naumann und die Armenische Frage. Die deutsche Öffentlichkeit und die Verfolgung der Armenier vor 1915, in: Hans-Lukas Kieser/Dominik J. Schaller (Hrsg.): Der Völkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah, Zürich 2002, S. 503–516.

¹⁷ Stenographische Berichte der Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags, 13. Legislaturperiode, 60. Sitzung vom 6. Juni 1916, p. 1526 (Bassermann talks about the Armenians).

¹⁸ „Vorwärts“ Nr. 11 from 12 January 1916 („Reichstag“).

transcripts of the Reichstag speeches had to be typed up and revised, which certainly took several weeks. This protocol did not appear in its printed form until summer or autumn 1916. It was not politically opportune to refer to German responsibility for the Armenian Genocide; moreover, Karl Liebknecht had already been arrested and sent to prison at that time.

At the subsequent SPD parliamentary faction meeting on 12 January 1916, Karl Liebknecht was stripped of all the rights of a parliamentary group member, from which he drew the consequences and resigned his membership in the faction. In this tumultuous meeting, the topic of Armenia played no role at all, but the criticism was sparked by the fact that Liebknecht had not discussed his three questions with the parliamentary faction beforehand and had therefore acted on his own authority.¹⁹ Liebknecht had also broken a taboo with the other two questions, which should not be forgotten here, by asking about the harassment of the civilian population of the occupied territories by the German occupying power, particularly in Belgium. On the other hand, he had demanded information about the extent of the restrictions on freedom imposed by the state of siege and the extent of the punishments imposed in this context.²⁰ After Karl Liebknecht had protested in Berlin on Labor Day, 1 May 1916, with the words “Down with the war! Down with the government!”, he was arrested and sentenced to four years and one month in prison for ‘war treason’ in August 1916. Incidentally, no one was tried for “peace treason.”

VII.

What were Karl Liebknecht’s motives for his actions, for his solidarity with the Armenians? Certainly, there was also a desire for provocation based on his not entirely simple character, which should be neglected here, but first and foremost, there was a deeply humanitarian, humanistic attitude. In his war diary, Eduard David (1863–1930), the leader of the right wing of the SPD and an expert on foreign policy, suggests an alternative way of reacting to the information provided by Johannes Lepsius, the great enlightener on the Armenian Genocide.

Johannes Lepsius and Eduard David met on April 30, 1915. In his diary, David wrote: “Meeting with Professor Lepsius, who seems to be more of a scholar than a politician.”²¹ This entry can be translated: A scholar can act according to moral principles, a politician cannot (always). After Liebknecht’s request on 11 January 1916, David noted: “Parliamentary group meeting. The Liebknecht case. New questions. His defense: Pathology of ‘consequence’.” On 18 January 1916, David noted: “Result of the Reichstag meeting. Haase and Hoch [two leaders of the left

¹⁹ Die Reichstagsfraktion der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1898 bis 1918, Second volume, edited by Erich Matthias and Eberhard Pikart, Düsseldorf 1966, p. 153–155.

²⁰ Stenographische Berichte der Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags, 13. Legislaturperiode, 26. Sitzung vom 11. Januar 1916, p. 513.

²¹ Das Kriegstagebuch des Reichstagsabgeordneten Eduard David 1914 bis 1918, edited by Susanne Miller in conjunction with Erich Matthias, Düsseldorf 1966, p. 123.

wing], out of the parliamentary party leadership!!! Liebknecht out of the parliamentary faction!!! Good beginnings, but now further emphatic objective work on the path to a reasonable policy.”²² We all know that the division of the workers’ movement in Germany was and is rather detrimental to the breakthrough of reason in politics, and that a politician, who always acts consistently is seen as a pathological case, is probably more likely to be accused today in reverse, namely as a pathology of inconsistency or arbitrariness.

VIII.

The next time the Armenians were mentioned in a plenary session of the Reichstag was two years and two and a half months later in the spring of 1918, during the ratification of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Russia, the defeated wartime opponent. One of the provisions of the dictated peace of Brest-Litovsk requested that the territories of Ardahan, Kars and Batum, which Russia had conquered in 1877/1878 during the Russo-Turkish War, be returned to Turkey. In the Reichstag, two speakers from the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), founded in 1917, Hugo Haase (1863–1919) and Georg Ledebour (1850–1947), explicitly warned against these provisions of the treaty, which handed over a majority Armenian population to the regime of the Young Turks.²³ The two majority Social Democratic speakers Philipp Scheidemann and Eduard David did not say a word about the Armenians. The USPD rejected the treaty, while the majority Social Democrats abstained from voting. Hugo Haase spoke at the 145th session on 22 March 1918:

“One of the worst parts of the Russian treaty is that which refers to the territories now claimed by Turkey: Batum, Kars, Ardahan. [...] The right to self-determination of the peoples living there is thereby disregarded. We are all aware that if the peoples hold a free vote, they will not consider joining Turkey: certainly not the Armenians, but also not the others, who are by no means edified by the Turkish regime.

This provision is all the sadder as we have every reason to be very careful that no more Armenians are annexed to Turkey. I am not basing my assessment of the Armenian Question on documents from neutral foreign countries. The cries for help that have come to us from the German side cannot go unheeded in our country. I recall the appeals of the chairman of the German Orient Mission and the German-Armenian Society, Dr. Johann[es] Lepsius, I recall the appeal of the German teachers in Turkey and especially the heart-rending descriptions of the senior teacher [Martin] Niepage. According to all the news, and the observations made by the German teachers in particular, Lepsius describes the fate of the Armenians in Turkey in such a way that at least one third of all those who were deported perished during transportation. The men were systematically separated

²² Ibid., p. 152 und 154.

²³ Stenographische Berichte der Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags, 13. Legislaturperiode, 145. Sitzung vom 22. März 1918, p. 4536–4569. (Haase p. 4540ff., Ledebour p. 4559ff.).

from their relatives at the beginning of the deportation and killed on the way, the boys were either islamized or killed. Girls and women have had to endure terrible things. Mass slaughter, kidnappings, violent Islamization, hunger and the superhuman efforts and deprivations have turned the giant caravans into a miserable pile of half-naked, sick, dying women, children and old people who found nothing to live for when they reached their destination.” [...] And we are supposed to take responsibility for the fact that areas with an Armenian population are played into the hands of the Turks? We will never, ever take responsibility for such a step.”²⁴

Gustav Stresemann, the national-liberal party leader at the time, was the only speaker who did not come from the ranks of the USPD, who addressed the Armenian question, but in a euphemistic manner: “Insofar as events have taken place in this respect which could have prompted the German Reich to intervene for humanitarian reasons, this friendly and urgent influence on our Turkish allies has been exerted at all times. [...] Objectively, one should point out the extraordinarily difficult military situation in which Turkey found itself due to the behaviour of the Armenians in the border districts in the first months of this world war and that it was only due to these circumstances that it was able to resort to those means which later gave rise to complaints.”²⁵ The 1926 Nobel Peace Prize winner is simply repeating the empty phrases with which Mr von Stumm had already responded to Karl Liebkecht’s inquiry in January 1916.

IX.

How can Karl Liebkecht’s behaviour be assessed from the vantage point of almost 110 years later, alongside the standpoints of the other members of the Reichstag, especially the other Social Democrats? What general conclusions can be drawn from Germany’s behaviour towards the Armenian Genocide? Why did all the other Members of Parliament remain silent? The most prevailing reason: because the Ottoman Empire was an important ally of the German Reich and human rights had to take second place to military and economic interests. For the majority of political actors at the time, Germany’s unwavering loyalty to Turkey – it’s so called *Nibelungentreue* was a sober weighing up of interests beyond all moral and humanistic criteria: Turkey was to be kept in line as an ally. As Friedrich Naumann had already stated in 1899: “Turkey may be constituted as it likes if it can only keep its head above water for a little while longer.”²⁶ This quote, too, has a certain timelessness that extends to the current debates of our day.

Incidentally, we experience this day in, day out: the plea for human rights rarely goes beyond mere lip service. Human rights are used as a weapon against states that we want to harm, while we graciously ignore or sweep under the carpet even

²⁴ Stenographische Berichte der Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags, 13. Legislaturperiode, 145. Sitzung vom 22. März 1918, p. 4543.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 4545.

²⁶ Cf. Naumann, Asia [cf. Footnote 16], p. 148.

massive human rights violations against friendly states. This does not contribute to the credibility of the West as a global political player – on the contrary.

Another timeless reason for the silence in 1915/16 is what I see as a completely inexplicable lack of interest, and in some cases even contempt, in Germany and in the so-called Western community of values as a whole towards the ancient Middle Eastern churches. Friedrich Naumann had already written in 1899 that the churches of the Near and Middle East were “a calcified, dusty, impoverished, dried-up Christianity, as arid as a stony wadi without water.”²⁷ After visiting a small Christian church in the Orient, Naumann came to the conclusion: “Isn’t Muhammadanism in some ways closer to us than the lower forms of Christianity? [...] What would it matter to us if this small church were a small mosque?”²⁸ Well, after 1915, hundreds of Armenian churches and monasteries were converted into mosques or destroyed altogether, as were Greek Orthodox churches in the northern part of Cyprus after 1974, as were Armenian churches in Azerbaijan after 1991, as have Christian churches in Iraq and Syria since the West’s attempt to bring about regime change there. What does all this mean: an immeasurable and irretrievable loss of cultural assets. After the German government’s decision to send German soldiers to Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, the then German defense minister justified it with the words: “German freedom is being defended in the Hindu Kush!”²⁹ One could say with much more justification: “The Christian West is being defended in Armenia!”

Another conclusion to be drawn from the events of 1915/16 is that a failure to intervene in favour of persecuted people can serve as a blueprint for future criminals. Hitler regarded the Armenian Genocide as a prime example of the short moral memory of the international community. With the question “Who is still talking about the extermination of the Armenians today?”, he brushed aside concerns about the planned ruthless warfare shortly before the start of the Polish campaign on 22 August 1939.³⁰

In January 1916, Karl Liebknecht was the only member of the Reichstag to raise the issue of the Armenian Genocide before the German nation at the time of the events and to stand by the Armenian people whose existence was threatened. He made this crime against humanity public. This happened a few months *before* Johannes Lepsius had 20,000 copies of his book “Bericht über die Lage des Armenischen Volkes in der Türkei” (“Report on the Situation of the Armenian People in Turkey”) printed and distributed to multipliers. None of the multipliers,

²⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 109.

²⁹ From a government statement by Defence Minister Peter Struck on 11 March 2004; the quote is often cited with the term “freedom”, but the original reads: ‘Our security is not only, but also defended in the Hindu Kush.’ <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/regierungserklaerung-des-bundesministers-fuer-verteidigung-dr-peter-struck--792688>.

³⁰ Cf. Norman Domeier: Weltherrschaft und Völkermorden. Die „Lochner-Version“ der Hitler-Rede vom 22. August 1939 als Schlüsseldokument nationalsozialistischer Weltanschauung, in: Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 70 (2022), p. 542–567, here p. 564.

and certainly no Reichstag member, would have found the time to read a 300-page book in the tense situation of World War I. On 7 August 1916, the report was banned by the censors and the remaining copies were destroyed. The “Vorwärts” still had several hundred thousand subscribers and perhaps more than a million readers in 1916. The more newspapers in the archives will be digitized, the easier it will be to research whether other publications also reported on Karl Liebknecht’s intervention. A notable example is the central organ of the Social Democratic Party in Switzerland; the Zurich-based newspaper “Volksrecht” also printed the longer version of his statement in the Reichstag.³¹ Karl Liebknecht made the Armenian Genocide public a few months earlier than Johannes Lepsius who tried to influence the German society with his book and his statement reached a much wider audience in terms of numbers.³²

After his release from prison in October 1918, Karl Liebknecht sided with the so-called Spartacus League, from which the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) emerged on 1 January 1919. Together with Rosa Luxemburg, he instigated the Spartacus Uprising in January 1919, which was intended to prevent the election to the German National Assembly. I consider this uprising to be a major historical mistake but rarely has anyone paid for such a mistake like Karl Liebknecht. On 15 January 1919, he was arrested and murdered by right-wing extremist soldiers. He was only 48 years old. Perhaps Liebknecht would have realized his mistake and returned to Social Democracy? There are other politicians who acted in this way like the chairman of the Communist Party Paul Levi (1883–1930), who became a member of the SPD again in 1922. Perhaps he would not have become a communist if he had not been thrown into prison in 1916 for exercising his right to freedom of expression? None of this is known. But there is no doubt that he was still a Social Democrat when he showed solidarity with the Armenians. This solidarity deserves every possible recognition.

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This recognition could also manifest itself in the Republic of Armenia commemorating Karl Liebknecht; Armenia does not need any suggestions from Germany or a German historian as far as the form of commemorative culture is concerned. However, it would be a very noble gesture to dedicate one of the beautiful stamps of the Armenian postal service to Karl Liebknecht; perhaps he could also be honored with a commemorative plaque on the memorial wall in the Genocide memorial Tsitsernakaberd. But to say it again: the Armenian politics of remembrance is a matter for the Armenians alone. The parties in Germany today that see themselves in the tradition of the worker’s movement, can look back with pride and satisfaction on this unprecedented act of solidarity by a Social

³¹ “Volksrecht” Nr. 11 from 14 January 1916 (“Liebknechts Anfragen”).

³² On October 5, 1915, Johannes Lepsius had already held a press conference in Berlin about the massacres of the Armenians and criticized the Reich government, which was reported on the sidelines in the press.

Democratic member of parliament. Karl Liebknecht's actions can also serve as a benchmark for all democrats in our increasingly difficult times and as a guide to courage and moral courage.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.