

# **“REVOLUTIONARY MASS PROPAGANDA”: THE GERMAN COMMUNIST PARTY, THE REICHSTAG ELECTION AND EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY STRUGGLE IN THE SUMMER OF 1932**

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## **I.**

Germany's Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD) was a major electoral force at the end of the Weimar Republic. Like its radical competitor, Adolf Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, NSDAP), the KPD thrived on the economic and social crises precipitated by the Great Depression. In September 1930, it became the third largest party in the Reichstag and in subsequent years its share of the vote rose steadily, from 10.6 percent in 1928 through 13.1 percent in 1930 to 16.9 percent at the end of 1932. With more than five million voters supporting it, the KPD contributed significantly to the demise of the republic.<sup>1</sup> The Communists' success at the polls and their noisy, violent activism on the streets contested democracy and fuelled fears of civil war. Moreover, the KPD targeted its agitation primarily against that bulwark of the republic, the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD). Reflecting on Weimar's collapse, the former SPD Prussian Minister

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<sup>1</sup> Statistisches Reichsamt, ed., *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich: 1933* (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1933), 539.

President, Otto Braun, cursed Communists for dividing the working classes by asserting, even in the face of Nazi peril, “The main enemy is Social Democracy!”<sup>2</sup>

Weimar’s elections have generated a large historiography but scant attention to the KPD. The focus has been almost exclusively on the Nazi Party. Sophisticated psephological research led by Jürgen Falter has analysed the NSDAP’s vote.<sup>3</sup> Imaginative multidisciplinary work on the period’s political propaganda has also centred on Hitler’s campaigning, seen as innovative and disruptive. Influentially, the historian Gerhard Paul characterized Nazism in his study of election propaganda as “an uprising of emotionally charged images and mythic-utopian symbols against the dry language of democracy and rational discourse.”<sup>4</sup> Detailed work on Communist agitation is limited to Sean McMeekin’s biography of “red” press baron Willi Münzenberg and a few shorter pieces on the KPD’s use of political symbols and *Agitprop* theatre.<sup>5</sup> Those historians, such as Corey Ross, who have touched on Communists’ appeals underscore their resemblance to Nazi propaganda: both were “unequivocally focused on

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<sup>2</sup> O. Braun, *Von Weimar zu Hitler* (New York: Europa, 1940), 406.

<sup>3</sup> W. Falter, *Hitlers Wähler: Die Anhänger der NSDAP 1924-1933*, new ed., (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> G. Paul, *Aufstand der Bilder: Die NS-Propaganda vor 1933* (Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz, 1992), 13.

<sup>5</sup> S. McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow’s Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). For symbolic politics, see G. Korff, “Rote Fahnen und geballte Faust,” in *Fahnen, Fäuste, Körper*, ed. D. Petzina (Essen: Klartext, 1986) and S. Simmons, “‘Hand to the Friend, Fist to the Foe’: The Struggle of Signs in the Weimar Republic,” *Journal of Design History* 13, no.4 (2000): 319-39. For *Agitprop*, see R. Bodek, “The Not-So-Golden Twenties: Everyday Life and Communist Agitprop in Weimar-Era Berlin,” *Journal of Social History* 30, no.1 (1996): 55-78; J. Piggott, “Playing the Police with the Agitprop Troupes of Weimar Germany,” *Theatre Survey* 64, no.2 (2023): 198-221.

hearts over minds.” Radicals used “strikingly similar” techniques to seize attention, and rational debate was sidelined as Weimar’s elections descended into a “war of symbols.”<sup>6</sup>

The KPD was not, however, like other Weimar parties. Whereas even the Nazis accepted and exploited the legitimacy of the ballot box as a path to power, the Communists’ end goal was revolution. The notion that elections had popular validity was castigated by their leaders as “parliamentary cretinism.”<sup>7</sup> For Communists, Weimar’s repeated voting was just a cynical ploy by “the bourgeoisie, monopoly capitalists and their henchmen ... to distract the masses.”<sup>8</sup> This was a fundamental difference, and this article explores for the first time how it influenced the KPD’s electioneering. The article focuses on the Reichstag election of July 31, 1932, a highpoint of the Communists’ “extra-parliamentary struggle” and a key step in Weimar’s demise. The Nazis became Germany’s largest party and the major anti-system parties—the KPD and its right-wing opponents, the Nazis and the *Deutschnationale Volkspartei*—together won a majority of seats, blocking any return to functioning parliamentary rule after two years of presidential cabinets. The KPD invested considerable resources and won nearly 15 percent of the vote.

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<sup>6</sup> C. Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 234-9.

<sup>7</sup> Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde [BArch]: SAPMO–RY1/852: Sekretariat, “Rundschreiben Nr.1,” Feb. 9, 1932, fo. 6.

<sup>8</sup> BArch: SAPMO–SgY30/739: Philipp Daub, memoir, fo. 36. See also, for a prominent example of such language, E. Thälmann, “Zu unserer Strategie und Taktik im Kampf gegen den Faschismus,” originally published in *Die Internationale*, June 1932, and reprinted in *Ernst Thälmann. Reden und Aufsätze zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, 4 vols. (Cologne: Rote Fahne, 1975), iv, 92, 100.

The KPD's contempt for what it called "parliamentary illusions" and its focus on the "extra-parliamentary mass struggle" make comprehensible the lack of research on its electioneering. Yet as agitating among Germany's working classes was central to the party, examination of how it utilized elections for this purpose can shed new light on its culture and organization. The most influential debate on the KPD concerns the extent of its "Stalinization" during the late 1920s. Hermann Weber, writing at the end of the 1960s, portrayed the late Weimar party as a centralized and monolithic organization under Soviet control, demanding discipline and total obedience from its activists. Three decades later, Klaus-Michael Mallmann disputed how far this totalizing project was in practice realized among the membership. His socio-political history emphasized rank-and-file Communists' local interests and agency, their links with Socialist neighbors and the limits of party control.<sup>9</sup> This article examines "Stalinization" through the key sphere of propaganda, showing that the party's centralizing instincts were strong, but stark financial weaknesses meant that, far from insisting on tight obedience, it relied very heavily on activists' goodwill. To achieve its ambitions, the party had no choice but vigorously to encourage initiative.

A new examination of Communist campaigning is also overdue for our understanding of late Weimar elections and, by extension, the collapse of Germany's first democracy. Recent literature, embodied best in Pamela Swett's path-breaking work, has embedded Communist

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<sup>9</sup> H. Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus: Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, 2 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969) and K.-M. Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996). The debate was expanded in A. Wirsching, "„Stalinisierung“ oder entideologisierte „Nischengesellschaft“? Alte Einsichten und neue Thesen zum Charakter der KPD in der Weimarer Republik," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 45, no.3 (1997): 449-66.

activists in their localities. For Swett, “political radicalism was foremost a local response to the erosion of norms and power structures in Berlin’s neighborhoods rather than the product of party control and ideology.” Elections are revealing, however, as the times at which local and political priorities most explicitly converged. The strong territorialization which Swett and, before her, Eve Rosenhaft, observed in political street fighting was on public display in election campaigns, when residents were urged, quite literally, to show their colours.<sup>10</sup> By the summer of 1932, the NSDAP, SPD and KPD had learned much from each other, and techniques to attract attention and assert local dominance had been copied and honed. Nonetheless, as this article argues, Communist propaganda appeals were distinctive. They projected the party’s revolutionary, insurgent ethos and its activists’ impoverishment, local loyalties and radicalism.

The power of political propaganda in the early 1930s was understood by contemporaries to lie in its potential, in the words of SPD campaign strategist Sergei Chakhotin, “to strive for a total encompassing of the human soul.”<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Paul observed that Nazi campaigning aimed at nothing less than “the visual and acoustic occupation of all human senses.”<sup>12</sup> The Communists were equally ambitious. Indeed, the sharp polarization so characteristic of Weimar society in the early 1930s might be argued not merely to have been a consequence of ideological division or violence but also reflective of the impact of manifestly different

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<sup>10</sup> P.E. Swett, *Neighbors and Enemies: The Culture of Radicalism in Berlin, 1929-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. 294 and 296. Also, E. Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence 1929-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> S. Tschachotin, “Die Technik der politischen Propaganda,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 38 (May 1932), 429. Cf. B. Diehl, “Sergei Chakhotin against the Swastika: Mass Psychology and Scientific Organization in the Iron Front’s Three Arrows Campaign,” *Central European History* 57, no.4 (2024): 479-98.

<sup>12</sup> Paul, *Aufstand*, 257.

sensory political appeals. This article pays particular attention to the KPD's use of sound; a medium which has received little notice compared with visual imagery in Weimar elections. Anthropological study of urban environments stresses sound's "crucial role ... in the perceptual and cognitive processes that determine the way that geographical and social spaces are mapped out and negotiated."<sup>13</sup> Through audio propaganda, Communists asserted their revolutionary elan, shocked, and claimed territory. Yet like the KPD itself, sound gave only an illusion of power; an ephemeral roar which filled a space but soon faded to nothingness.

## II.

The KPD's election strategy was set by its three-man Secretariat (*Politsekretariat*), headed by Ernst Thälmann. Behind it, with an absolute veto, loomed the Executive Committee of the Communist International in Moscow. The Secretariat's decisions were implemented by the Central Committee, a technocratic working staff divided into specialist sections for *Agitprop*, press service, literature distribution, rural matters, women and youth.<sup>14</sup> Despite high turnover among its functionaries, the Central Committee could draw on a large fund of experience in election campaigning. The KPD had sought inspiration from mass advertising since 1928, and archival evidence shows that it also systematically collected and analyzed feedback on its propaganda. Party District reports after the September 1930 Reichstag election, written in reply to a standardized questionnaire, detailed how the campaign had been organized, evaluated the quality of centrally supplied agitation material, outlined how best to reach out

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<sup>13</sup> A. Cowan and J. Steward (eds.), *The City and the Senses: Urban Culture Since 1500* (London: Routledge, 2007), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Weber, *Wandlung*, ii, 6-7.

to different classes, critiqued the party's appeal to women and praised the effectiveness of big rally campaigns.<sup>15</sup>

Tight centralized planning and coordination of election campaigns were the norm by mid-1932 for major political parties in Germany. However, for the KPD, unlike the NSDAP's *Reichspropagandaleitung* (Reich Propaganda Central Office) under Joseph Goebbels or the carefully managed SPD campaign in the summer of 1932 under scientist Sergei Chakhotin, centralization was not solely a matter of efficiency.<sup>16</sup> The "Stalinization" undergone by the party in the late 1920s had created a bureaucratic apparatus with totalitarian aspirations over its members and a clear and inflexible ideological stance. The Secretariat neither recognized the legitimacy of democratic elections nor, in striking contrast to all its major opponents, saw them as a route to power. Instead, it used Weimar's polls as measures of the party's progress in capturing Germany's working classes from its main rival, the SPD, and as catalysts for mobilizing them for what it saw as the all-important "extra-parliamentary mass struggle." As Thälmann explained that summer: "the more strongly that millions turn out for Communism, [...] the greater and more determined will be the masses' readiness for struggle outside of parliament in strikes and in the defense of their revolutionary party."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> BArch: SAPMO-RY1/18: fo. 160-3, 194-7 and 309-10: Reports analyzing the September 1930 Reichstag election campaign by the Magdeburg-Anhalt and Mecklenburg District leaderships and the analysis by Ottomar Geschke, "Erfahrungen und Lehren der Reichstagswahlen," Sept. 23, 1930. The practice was continued through the early 1930s: see the Secretariat's request for feedback from speakers at rural meetings during the Mecklenburg, Oldenburg and Hessen *Landtag* elections, June 9, 1932 in BArch: SAPMO-RY1/6: fo. 339. The KPD's use of mass-advertising techniques from 1928 is noted in E.D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 262-3.

<sup>16</sup> Paul, *Aufstand*, 70-9 and Diehl, "Sergei Chakhotin," 12-19.

<sup>17</sup> Thälmann, "Strategie und Taktik," 102.

The summer of 1932 saw Thälmann launch a new ambitious extra-parliamentary campaign, “Antifascist Action.” The KPD’s main newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne*, announced the initiative on May 26 as a “red front of unity” against “the worker murderers of the Hitler party.”<sup>18</sup> In actuality, the campaign’s main target was the SPD, whose leadership Comintern ideologues had long tarred as “social fascists” co-opted by the bourgeois state to divert the proletariat from class struggle and so maintain repression. Throughout that summer, the KPD sought to stir workers and urged them into so-called “Unity Committees”; supposedly spontaneous and grassroots worker councils independent of political affiliation but in fact under Communist control.<sup>19</sup> Just days after the campaign’s launch, Germany entered a new period of instability with the sudden appointment as Chancellor of arch-conservative Franz von Papen, who immediately cut social insurance for Germany’s six million unemployed. With tension at an all-time high, Papen’s decision on June 4 to dissolve the Reichstag was seized on by the KPD’s Secretariat to boost its extra-parliamentary struggle. With a poll scheduled for July 31, party functionaries were ordered to place the whole election campaign “in the service of Antifascist Action.”<sup>20</sup>

The Secretariat delegated much of the KPD’s election organization to the *Polleiter* (the leader), *Orgleiter* (his deputy and adjutant) and *Agitpropleiter* (responsible for ideological

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<sup>18</sup> “Antifaschiste Aktion! Aufruf des Zentralkomitees der KPD. An die deutsche Arbeiterklasse!,” *Die Rote Fahne*, May 26, 1932, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Landesarchiv [LA] Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: fo. 237: “Politisches Schulungsthema: I. Wie schaffen wir die rote Einheitsfront der Antifaschistischen Aktion?,” *Sonderbeilage des „Propagandist“*, July 1932, 4.

<sup>20</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/20: fo. 45-65: “Rundschreiben Nr. 11. Anweisungen des Sekretariats,” June 4, 1932.



training and propaganda) who headed the twenty-seven Party Districts covering Germany.<sup>21</sup> The few modern biographies of these functionaries tell us disappointingly little about their key propaganda activities.<sup>22</sup> However, they and their immediate subordinates were true believers in the Marxist cause and entirely dependent on the party for their livelihoods; though only the top district and sub-district leaders had party salaries, thousands more unpaid junior officials relied for their upkeep on employ in enterprises associated with the KPD.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the Secretariat kept tight control of their actions. Preparations were hasty: party districts were ordered to draw up plans for the Central Committee's scrutiny by June 13. All their activists were to be ready to campaign from June 27. The plans projected campaign costs and detailed how the key Antifascist Action strategy of *Einheitsfrontpolitik*—the unification of rank-and-file SPD members and other working classes behind the KPD—would be achieved in the specific demographic context of the district.<sup>24</sup>

The Secretariat set the ideological parameters of the campaign. Thälmann published a tract, which all functionaries were ordered to read, laying out the leadership's interpretation of the political situation and strategy. Winning over the working class with Antifascist Action, especially in the factories where proletarian power was centred, was the Communist

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<sup>21</sup> The tasks of these officials, replicated also at cell level, are outlined in Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz [GStPK], Berlin: I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 4043, Nr. 363: fo. 33: "Mitteilungen des Landeskriminalpolizeiamts (I) Berlin vom 1 Januar 1932, Nr. 1."

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, I.-S. Kowalczyk's otherwise excellent *Walter Ulbricht: Der deutsche Kommunist (1893-1945)* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Weber, *Wandlung*, i, 288-90. For ideological training, Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 234-5.

<sup>24</sup> BArch: SAPMO-RY1/23: fo. 229-35: "Plan des Bezirks Pommern zum Reichstagswahlkampf im Rahmen der Antifaschistischen Aktion."

priority.<sup>25</sup> The Secretariat also continued a practice, begun back in February when Thälmann had run for the Presidency, of issuing sporadic but detailed circulars containing instructions on the party line, slogans, and criticism of deviations or the misapplication of party ideology. Five such missives were sent during the summer campaign.<sup>26</sup> The Secretariat was able continuously to monitor party districts' actions through "Instructors," a small group of veteran propagandists dispersed across the districts. They were keystones in the KPD's election organization, supervising local branches and acting as instruments of control by submitting weekly reports to the district leadership and the KPD's Central Committee.<sup>27</sup>

The Secretariat strongly desired ideological conformity and united messaging in its activists' campaigning. Its main tool was the *Referentenmaterial* ("Material for Speakers"), a 60-page handbook, issued in early July. This set out all the information that a Communist propagandist should need to win over an audience. It opened with the KPD's first priority, Antifascist Action. Communist speakers were to tell audiences that though opponents claimed each time elections would bring a "decision," not the voting slip but only extra-parliamentary mobilization could defeat Fascism. On the economic crisis, they were equipped with emotive claims and statistics contrasting the Soviet Union's productivity with capitalist Germany's misery, bankruptcy and "suicide epidemic." Lines of attack were advanced against the Papen cabinet, the Nazis and the SPD, and the handbook also provided

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<sup>25</sup> See Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn: IRLAC000104: "Rundschreiben Nr. 14. Anweisungen des Sekretariats," July 14, 1932, 9, republished in an SPD political intelligence circular. The tract functionaries were ordered to read was Thälmann's "Zu unserer Strategie und Taktik" (see footnote 8).

<sup>26</sup> The Secretariat first begun issuing these circulars on Feb. 5, 1932. See BArch: SAPMO-RY1/852: fo. 4-12. Numbers 11-15 were issued during the summer 1932 Reichstag election.

<sup>27</sup> BArch: SAPMO-RY1/23: fo. 229-35. "Plan des Bezirks Pommern zum Reichstagswahlkampf im Rahmen der Antifaschistischen Aktion."

talking points to win over the female proletariat. The slogans to be used by speakers that summer aggressively stressed proletarian unity, the need for work and the looming threat from the right: “Antifascist Action smashes Fascism!”<sup>28</sup>

While the Secretariat formulated appeals and exercised oversight, there was nonetheless a limit to how far it could or wished to intervene. The KPD laboured under a constant financial shortfall. The Secretariat’s funds, including secret Comintern subventions that amounted to perhaps a third of party income, underpinned its authority but were never enough even for the basic needs of the district organizations.<sup>29</sup> Although since the onset of the Great Depression the party’s members had more than doubled to over 280,000, many were unemployed and unable to pay dues. Communist functionaries were constantly chasing debt. The leadership of the Ruhr District vented the general frustration in April 1932, complaining to its members: “Money–money–money! is being demanded by the national leadership but we have none because 50 of 130 local groups have still not settled accounts for February.”<sup>30</sup> The cost of fighting presidential and multiple *Landtag* elections during the first half of the year had financially exhausted the KPD. Subdistricts and local branches across Germany were heavily indebted, and Berlin’s police believed members to be seized by “deep depression.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> BArch: R3003/17752: “Referentenmaterial für die Antifaschistische Aktion und für die Reichstagswahlen 1932.”

<sup>29</sup> Weber, *Wandlung*, i, 308-11.

<sup>30</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21708: fo. 129: “Arbeitsplan für April 1932 des Kampfbundes gegen den Faschismus, Bezirksverbandsleitung Ruhrgebiet,” 5. Also, Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 143-5 and 246.

<sup>31</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: fo. 18: Police report, June 24, 1932. Also, Staatsarchiv [SA] Munich: LRA 219039: Police report “L. Nr. 111, Linksbewegung,” May 19, 1932.

The KPD did work energetically to lessen the shortfall: “Gather election munitions!” went the appeal, in the party’s typically militarized language, at the start of the summer campaign. Subdistricts were allocated high targets for fundraising. Dresden, for example, was told to collect 7,000 Marks. Targets were also set for recruiting members, including specifically women and factory workers, and subscribers to Communist newspapers.<sup>32</sup> District officials ordered local branches to organize “stormtroops” to collect donations and sell Antifascist Action stamps and posters. If they succeeded in selling all their quota, the branches were permitted to retain a higher proportion of the revenue. In North-western District, headquartered in Bremen, over-achievement was incentivized imaginatively (it is unclear how effectively) with copies of Secretariat member Hermann Remmele’s books exalting the Soviet Union. Groups which collected double their quota were, fittingly, rewarded with a copy of Marx’s *Das Kapital*.<sup>33</sup>

The Communists ran a campaign that, mediated by both party culture and straitened finances, was distinct from that of their Nazi rivals. Mass rallies, the defining spectacles of early 1930s politics, were certainly a feature of the KPD appeal. Thälmann drew a crowd of some 80,000 to Berlin’s Neukölln Stadium on July 28, 1932. Yet the impecunious party had no chance of matching the NSDAP’s heavily publicized *Deutschlandflug* (“Germany Flight”), which during the second half of that July took Hitler to rallies in fifty open-air venues, the largest of

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<sup>32</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/27: fo. 132-43 and 170-4: “Arbeitsplan zur Reichstagswahlkampagne des Unterbezirk Dresden” and “Arbeits-Plan Unterbezirk Riesa.”

<sup>33</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: fo. 208: “Und nun die Hauptsache! Schafft Pulver für den Wahlkampf!,” *Roter Nordwest*, June 1932, 13.

which, in Königsberg and Berlin, had audiences of 150,000 and 180,000 people.<sup>34</sup> The Communists instead favoured saturating communities with lots of smaller political meetings; a strategy the Nazis had also used effectively in past elections but which in the summer of 1932 they shifted away from in favour of their huge rallies, paramilitary marches and more relaxed “German evenings” with music and singing.<sup>35</sup> For the KPD, trying to build worker unity behind it, drawing together proletarians for discussion was indispensable, and subdistricts and branches were set targets. Chemnitz Subdistrict—just one of 143 KPD Party subdistricts—kept statistics giving a sense of their huge numbers. In six weeks, from June 15 to July 30, 1932, Chemnitz’s functionaries held 260 public meetings, as well as 60 meetings for the unemployed, 34 in factories, 20 for women and six “young worker” gatherings.<sup>36</sup>

Since public meetings were so core to the KPD’s campaign, it is highly revealing of the Secretariat’s limits in resources and power that it found impossible the challenge of satisfying party districts’ demands for speakers. The nationally famous leaders and Reichstag and Landtag members drew large crowds, and districts were uniformly disappointed with how few speakers they were sent and how little time these people had. When the lists were

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<sup>34</sup> “Unsere Freiheitsarmee wird das heutige System vernichten!,” *Die Rote Fahne*, July 29, 1932, 3. For the Nazis’ Königsberg and Berlin rallies during the “Germany Flight,” see *Völkischer Beobachter*, July 19, 1932, 1 and July 29, 1932, 1.

<sup>35</sup> The effectiveness of political meetings has been studied by D. Ohr, *Nationalsozialistische Propaganda und Weimarer Wahlen: Empirische Analysen zur Wirkung von NSDAP-Versammlungen* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997). For the Nazis’ shift away from meetings in the summer of 1932, see both J. Noakes, *The Nazi Party in Lower Saxony 1921-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 215 and Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Munich: MA 102138: “Halbmonatsbericht des Regierungs-Präsidium von Oberbayern,” August 5, 1932, 1.

<sup>36</sup> BArch: SAPMO-RY1/27: fo. 206: “Bericht des UB Chemnitz zur Durchführung der Reichstagswahl am 31. Juli 1932,” August 6, 1932, 12.

circulated at the end of June 1932, the leadership of the most important party district, Berlin-Brandenburg, complained. Despite being allocated sixteen senior Communist speakers, including Thälmann for the big Neukölln rally on July 28, the district leadership denigrated the line-up as “really very lean.”<sup>37</sup> For weaker districts like Upper Silesia, the allocation of central speakers was utterly inadequate. There, district leaders protested that they had been granted just three speakers for July, none of whom were women. “It must surely be self-evident,” the local party pleaded, “that at the very least both Upper Silesian [Reichstag] representatives be placed with us as speakers over several days for the election campaign.”<sup>38</sup>

Brightly coloured, eye-catching posters were another iconic feature of Weimar elections, and are similarly revealing of the Secretariat’s limitations. By its own count, the KPD’s Central Committee issued some three million posters for the July 31, 1932 election as well as forty-five million flyers, seven million copies of special election issues of newspapers and eight brochures with a combined print run of one and a half million.<sup>39</sup> Contemporary publicists insisted that posters were “irreplaceable, if one wishes to speak to the masses.”<sup>40</sup> Party

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<sup>37</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/48: fo. 13 and 17: ZK-Sekretariat to Bezirksleitung Berlin-Brandenburg, June 29, 1932 and reply, July 4, 1932. Weber, *Wandlung*, i, 284 notes that in 1929, Berlin-Brandenburg had 15.8 percent of the KPD’s members; by far the largest share of any party district (Halle-Merseburg came next with 9 percent).

<sup>38</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/48: fo. 56: Bezirksleitung Oberschlesien to ZK-Sekretariat, July 2, 1932.

<sup>39</sup> “45 Millionen Flugblätter,” *Die Rote Fahne*, July 29, 1932, 4. Although these are figures publicized in the KPD’s major newspaper, they are plausible when set against figures for other parties. The SPD, for example, printed 3,358,600 posters for the September 1930 election. See Vorstand der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (ed.), *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Sozialdemokratie für das Jahr 1930* (Berlin: Vorwärts Buchdruckerei, [1931]), 220.

<sup>40</sup> “Das Plakat ist unersetzlich, wenn man zur Masse sprechen will!,” *Seidels Reklame. Jahrgang 16, Heft 7* (July 1932), 251. Cf. Paul, *Aufstand*, 149.

districts and Communist “mass organizations” took note, for they dug deep into their own limited resources to supplement the central party’s materials. Saxony District’s leadership, for example, printed 1.8 million flyers and 400,000 handbills. It also had manufactured 1.7 million *Streuzettel*—small paper strips with slogans or ditties on them—scattered to catch proletarians’ attention, and even 20,000 small flags for children to wave, with slogans urging the grownups to vote KPD.<sup>41</sup> Party instructors wanted to see posters “on every tree or barn or telegraph pole,” praised groups which immediately tore down rivals’ propaganda and were scathing toward activists who hung no posters for fear of opponents.<sup>42</sup>

Party District propaganda was valuable, not just because it supplemented central material but because it was responsive to local conditions. The Central Committee recognized this virtue and, during the presidential elections in the spring, had issued flyer templates and instructions to adapt them to the circumstances of the area.<sup>43</sup> District *Agitprop* leaders were important figures in organizing the printing and distribution of election materials. Hans Fladung, the Lower Rhine District’s *Agitprop* Leader, enjoyed use of a print works equipped with a modern rotary press and run by a manager and workforce sympathetic to the Communist cause. With much of the labour supplied free, the branch was able to produce its propaganda very cheaply, and released a wide range of election materials, from tri-colour posters and special election editions of the local KPD newspaper *Freiheit* to a set of brochures, each aimed at a specific voter demographic. Striking though, is the thrift with which Fladung and other *Agitprop* leaders distributed their material. Brochures were sold, not gifted, because

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<sup>41</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/27: fo. 4: “Die Einschätzung des Wahlergebnisses im Bezirk” [Saxony], August 1932.

<sup>42</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/21: fo. 327: “Bericht vom Versammlungstournee zur Reichstagswahl vom 1. Juli bis 30. Juli 32” (W. Hein) and SAPMO–RY1/27: fo. 246: “Wahlinstrukteur–Gesamtbericht” (Fritz Leiter).

<sup>43</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/852: fo. 11: *Rundschreiben Nr. 1. Anweisungen des Sekretariats*, Feb. 5, 1932.

propagandists calculated that a purchased text was more likely to be read. Flyers were never scattered willy-nilly on the streets—“for that the material was too expensive”—but sealed in envelopes and delivered door-to-door to houses and factories.<sup>44</sup>

Despite all the efforts of their Central Committee and the district parties, the Communists, especially in the weaker branches, were never able to match Nazi or Social Democratic print propaganda output. One impediment—though surely not unique to the KPD—was inefficiency within its centralized organization. In mid-June 1932, the party’s printer, the International Workers’ Press, attempted to head off a repeat of past failures by writing to the Secretariat. “In the last three elections,” the press’s functionaries admonished, “because manuscripts were delivered too late, a whole group of the election brochures arrived in the districts only eight days before polling day.” Some had reached activists only after the votes.<sup>45</sup> Yet the primary problem, as ever, was the KPD’s poverty. Party districts found themselves vastly outspent. The Chemnitz Subdistrict, for example, complained that summer that its 700 Mark-budget for posters had been less than a tenth of the funds spent by rival Social Democrats. Local Nazis had been even more profligate, spending 11,000 – 12,000 Marks to smother the subdistrict’s advertising pillars.<sup>46</sup> In Pomerania, Communists were so short of official propaganda by the

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<sup>44</sup> BArch: SAPMO–SgY30/1694: Johan Fladung, memoir, fo. 288-90. Also, BArch: SAPMO–SgY30/802: Herbert Kleye, memoir, fo. 138-47.

<sup>45</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/27: fo. 608: Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag to Sekretariat des ZK, June 14, 1932. For an example of complaints about the late arrival of flyers in July 1932, see, BArch: SAPMO–RY1/27: fo. 214-15 “Bericht über die Parteiarbeiterkonferenz am 3.8. in Freiburg.”

<sup>46</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/27: fo. 199: “Bericht des UB Chemnitz zur Durchführung der Reichstagswahl am 31. Juli 1932,” August 6, 1932.



last week of the July election that they resorted to subverting opponents' placards, so that—through adding or partly covering words—they supported the Communist cause.<sup>47</sup>

### III.

Had the KPD been just a heavily centralized, Stalinist monolith, it would have fared badly in Weimar's elections. These intense contests starkly exposed the party's financial weakness, and the mismatch between the Secretariat's totalizing ambitions and the resources available to achieve them. However, the KPD possessed huge strength in its vision of mobilized masses, in the culture of intense commitment that it cultivated among its activists, and in its leadership's overlooked but pragmatic keenness to encourage individual independence and initiative.<sup>48</sup> Communists in the summer of 1932 knew that they could not match what one propaganda guide called the SPD's and NSDAP's "American advertising." Leaflet-dropping aircraft, fleets of lorries with billboards, or even just dominating city advertising pillars with its posters were out of reach "for a revolutionary party ... based on the poorest masses." Instead, as the guidance advised, the KPD sought victory through "Bolshevik methods."<sup>49</sup>

These "Bolshevik methods" depended on a core of dedicated activists backed by proletarian masses. The streets were their canvas, and their objective was to claim territory and display Communist power. The Nazis and Social Democrats also fought this contest, and the battle

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<sup>47</sup> BArch: R58/2509: KPD Bezirksleitung Pommern, circular to all Unterbezirks- und Ortsgruppenleitungen, July 25, 1932.

<sup>48</sup> Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 257-63.

<sup>49</sup> BArch: SAPMO-RY1/27: fo. 144: "Weg mit der Agitation und Propaganda des sozialdemokra. Wahlvereins! In jeder Kampagne bolschewistische Methoden anwenden!," June 1932.

for public space reached its apex in the summer of 1932. The KPD appealed incessantly for “Red Election Helpers” (*rote Wahlhelfer*). These volunteers—many of them unemployed men but also female and juvenile activists—were split into specialisms for the struggle. “Technical sections” manufactured banners, posters and other propaganda. “Agitation groups” canvassed worker apartments or factories or spread out into the countryside on widely publicized “Red Rural Sundays.” “Sticking and painting columns” were tasked with not only hanging posters but also graffitiing slogans and symbols on houses and factories.<sup>50</sup> Even the party’s heavies were drawn into the flurry of Bolshevik election-time handicrafts. As an open letter to “*Kampfbund* comrades” enthused: “Now there’ll be mobilizing, drumming, collecting, organizing, gluing, postering, painting, coloring!”<sup>51</sup>

Far from being monolithic, as the Stalinist reputation of the KPD would imply, Communist activist propaganda was distinctive for its ethos of edginess and improvisation. The party fervently encouraged this, even issuing in the spring of 1932 a manual, *Technische Winke für die Agitation* (“Technical Tips for Agitation”), full of useful ideas and practical advice for political agitators with few resources.<sup>52</sup> The manual explained how to manufacture stencils and mix cheap oil paints and identified the best locations to graffiti: street intersections, places visible from trains, and workers’ commuter routes. It was typewritten with linocut headlines and illustrations in order to model what could be achieved in this medium. The

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<sup>50</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/3129: fo. 61-2: *Zentralkomitee des Kommunistischen Jugendverbands Deutschlands*, memorandum on agitation, July 31, 1930. Also, LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: fo. 75: police report on UB Nordost Secretariat meeting, June 6, 1932.

<sup>51</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21708: fo. 233 (reverse): “Offener Brief an alle Kampfbundkameraden und Kameradinnen!”

<sup>52</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21688: fo. 133-9: *Technische Winke für die Agitation. No 1 Betriebsagitation* (spring 1932).

KPD placed great value on factory and apartment block newspapers, but its worker cells rarely had access to a Rotaprint machine—the technology of choice for small format offset printing. Waste lino could be bought cheaply from flooring shops and, as the manual explained, only basic tools were needed to cut it in mirror image and create a print block. The technique resulted in a highly distinctive product, amateur yet attention-grabbing, and Communist propagandists made it their own, deploying it widely in combination with type print for flyers announcing local meetings and small factory or house cell newspapers.<sup>53</sup>

“Technical Tips” also encouraged activists to be audacious. Cells were to use their imagination and independence to weaponize their surroundings. Activists in factories were encouraged to hoist piles of flyers up into the air on cranes, so that when the cranes were set in motion, it would snow propaganda. Municipal transport offered unrivalled agitational possibilities. A placard hung from the back of a tram or bus could spread a Communist slogan across much of a big city before officialdom spotted and removed it. Such ideas inspired and mobilized the Communist rank and file. At the start of July, one Berlin cell hired a small motorboat and hung from its side an eight-metre-long banner bearing the slogan “Down with the Papen Government.” Heading south-east from Hallischer Tor, the Communists and their oblivious captain steamed happily for an hour and a half through working-class districts until a police boat halted them and confiscated the banner.<sup>54</sup> Around the same time, a meeting of Berlin street cells liked the notion of graffitiing trams and buses

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<sup>53</sup> For one of many examples, see Institut für Zeitgeschichte [IfZ], Munich: ED994/10: Nachlass August Eicheler: handbill “Mord! Mord,” July 1932. A particularly fine example is in IfZ, Munich: MA1261, fo. 2779904-15: RGO Agitprop-Reichskomitee, “Die Gewerkschaften der Sowjetunion beim sozialistischen Aufbau. Material zum 15. Jahrestag der Oktober Revolution,” Oct. 1932.

<sup>54</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21684: fo. 40 and 43: Police reports, July 2 and Sept. 21, 1932.

but came up with their own ideas too. The wackiest was to daub a hammer and sickle on every dustbin in Greater Berlin over a single night. At first, the excited cells felt that “the impact will be exceptionally great,” especially on housewives. Yet the plan was never tried, for not only was it grossly impracticable but activists must have realized that there were downsides to associating Communism with rubbish.<sup>55</sup>

The KPD’s extra-parliamentary campaign, Antifascist Action, supercharged activists’ efforts on the streets that summer. The movement was centred on public spaces as places of power and protest, was framed always in militant language and fuelled a wave of demonstrations so severe that Prussia’s Interior Minister saw it as “a political weapon for the acceleration of the revolutionary crisis.”<sup>56</sup> It sharpened Germany’s tribalism in every way. Its “fighting symbol,” two Red Flags in a circle emblazoned with *Antifaschistische Aktion*, was introduced to the public on June 21. It also had its own quasi-religious “fighting oath.” Supporters vowed to work “with body and soul” for the “Antifascist mass struggle,” to oppose “the fascist mortal enemy of the working people” and to strive “for the common red unity, for the freedom of the working class [and] for the defense of the Communist Party.” “Fighting actions” and “political mass strike against the fascist rulers” would accelerate the rise of a “free Socialist Germany” led by a “government of workers and peasants.” The oath ended with the salute of the banned Red Front-fighters’ League; a rousing cry of “Red Front!”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21721: fo. 365-7: Police report on Antifascist Action and Antifascist defense squads, June 27, 1932.

<sup>56</sup> GStPK, Berlin: I HA, Rep.77, Tit.4043, Nr.225: fo. 81 (reverse): Minister des Innern, memo, July 9, 1932.

<sup>57</sup> LA Berlin: F Rep.240, A15: *Antifaschistische Aktion. Flugschrift Nr.1* [July 1932].

Having inflamed this passion, the KPD strove to mobilize it for the battle to dominate the street scene: “Every Antifascist a Red Election Helper for List 3 KPD,” went the party’s call.<sup>58</sup> Antifascist Action not only brought to life “Unity Committees” but also boosted the party’s flailing efforts, ongoing since February, to build “Red Mass Self-Defense” formations in worker communities. The KPD’s paramilitary arm, the *Kampfbund gegen den Faschismus*, was put in charge of this initiative as it was intended to bring more muscle into the movement, which had never recovered from the banning in 1929 of its militant Red Front-fighters’ League. Aggressive political activism, not just defense against Nazi incursions, was core to the Red Mass Self-Defense. Its members protected protest marches and Communists speaking at rivals’ political meetings, resisted the eviction of defaulting tenants, sold political literature and conducted “revolutionary mass propaganda.”<sup>59</sup> When, on July 19, the Central Committee ordered a late push for votes, directing all activists to focus their whole attention on the upcoming Reichstag election, the Red Mass Self-Defense was set to mass producing flags and banners and stationed by advertising pillars to exhort neighbours that “voting for [Communist] List 3 is revolutionary duty!”<sup>60</sup>

The months during that Reichstag election were the bloodiest of the late Weimar Republic. From mid-June until the end of July, 105 people were killed in political clashes; a shocking increase over 1929-31, when political fatalities had averaged 6.5 per month.<sup>61</sup> Historians

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<sup>58</sup> Advertisement in *Die Rote Fahne*, July 14, 1932, 4.

<sup>59</sup> See “Richtlinien für den Massenselbstschutz,” *Der Bolschewistische Kurs* and draft police report [c.1932], both in GStPK, Berlin: I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 4043, Nr. 225: fo. 40-1 and 111-12.

<sup>60</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/20: fo. 7-15: “Rundschreiben der Org-Abteilung des ZK an alle Bezirksleitungen,” July 19, 1932.

<sup>61</sup> D. Schumann, *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic 1918-1933: Fight for the Streets and Fear of Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), 261.

have rightly pointed to the Papen government's lifting of the ban on the SA, in force since April, as a key cause of the bloodshed. The Republic's police also contributed: the notorious massacre of eighteen people in Altona on July 17, "Bloody Sunday," was blamed on the Communists but mostly perpetrated by panicking officers.<sup>62</sup> Three days later, the Papen cabinet unconstitutionally removed Prussia's SPD-led government and imposed a week-long state of emergency over Berlin and Brandenburg. The KPD's main newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne*, was temporarily forbidden, and the party undertook a hurried internal reorganization to prepare for illegality while calling vainly for a general strike.<sup>63</sup>

To blame the Nazis alone for the election's violence tells, however, only half a story. Militant Antifascist Action members also had blood on their hands. Surviving police reports covering the final week and a half of the election record 317 cases of political violence in Prussia, of which slightly more (38.5 percent as opposed to 35.9 percent) were blamed on Communists than on their opponents.<sup>64</sup> Although the police were probably biased, Antifascist Action fighters were unquestionably out in force on the streets, taking evening "strolls" in which they flashed their badges and barked "Red Front" salutes to supporters and—in line with the KPD's "unity policy"—also to anyone wearing the three arrows of the Social Democrat-led "Iron Front."<sup>65</sup> Nazis were attacked: in Berlin, violence over the election campaign's final twelve days saw KPD men breaking into an apartment to tear down a swastika flag and

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<sup>62</sup> L. Schirmann, *Altonaer Blutsonntag 17. Juli 1932: Dichtungen und Wahrheit* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse, 1994).

<sup>63</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21708: fo. 21-6 and 213-18: BL Ruhrgebiet Sekretariat to subordinate groups, July 27, 1932; police report on UB Charlottenburg Orgleiter and Instruktore conference, July 18, 1932.

<sup>64</sup> GStPK, Berlin: I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 4043, Nr. 126: fo. 1: Minister des Innern, memo, 23 Nov. 1932.

<sup>65</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: fo. 145: UB Nordost Sekretariat, memo to all Polleiter und Instruktore, mid-July 1932.

people beaten for wearing NSDAP badges or reading Nazi newspapers. A full third of the thirty-three political cases of violence attended by Berlin police were Communist assaults on Nazi election leafleteers.<sup>66</sup>

The KPD was clearly not alone in its attempts to claim street scenes through graffiti, flags and banners, but semi-legal or illegal agitation was far more central to its image and appeal than for its opponents. For the Nazis, daubing walls was widespread but less important for occupying public space than party posters, which were often pasted in groups of up to five, better to attract attention. Social Democrats were latecomers to graffiti, worrying about its legality, but in 1932 launched a “chalking campaign” to assert their dominance by defacing Nazi swastikas with their own “three arrows” symbol.<sup>67</sup> The Communists, in part because they had fewer options, were simply more imaginative. Instructors systematically collected and spread grassroots innovation in agitation to fulfil the wish that “slogans for Antifascist Action” should be “everywhere to read.” Street signs were covered over with the names of revolutionary heroes. Communist slogans could even be written on fields with the help of a large watering can and fine chalk.<sup>68</sup> Befuddling police patrols, activists carried old briefcases

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<sup>66</sup> GStPK, Berlin: I. HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 4043, Nr. 126: fo. 18-20: Polizeipräsident, Abteilung I, Berlin, “Schwere Überfälle auf politisch Andersdenkende,” Oct., 5, 1932.

<sup>67</sup> Paul, *Aufstand*, 150 and 177-9. Also D. Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 187-90.

<sup>68</sup> BArch: SAPMO-RY1/27: fo. 144: “Weg mit der Agitation und Propaganda des sozialdemokra. Wahlvereins! In jeder Kampagne bolschewistische Methoden anwenden!,” June 1932.

with paint-soaked sponges cut into letters nailed to their bases, and strolled the sidewalks surreptitiously stamping election slogans.<sup>69</sup>

Above all, graffiti was quintessentially Communist because, like the extra-parliamentary struggle itself, it was a protest which projected proletarian power and assaulted the capitalist system. Activists strove to place their symbols high up, where they had some permanence and visually and metaphorically dominated the neighborhood. Whether working-class people understood the rooftop slogans as triumphant blows against bourgeois oppressors is an open question, but red activists were assured that a broken leg was a price worth paying for such “real proletarian heroism.”<sup>70</sup> Werner Eggerath, head of the KPD’s Wuppertal Subdistrict in 1932, was certainly keen in his fictionalized autobiography to cast such daring and defiant propaganda as emotionally powerful. When, in his story, one night Communist activists scale the six chimneys of one of the city’s biggest factories, hang a red flag from each and paint in meter high letters “Thälmann is coming!,” the act stirs the workers below. The news jumps from house to house, calls pass from window to window. “Women and men stand in their work clothes. Their eyes speak volumes. Joy radiates from them.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21721: fo. 365-7: Police report on Antifascist Action and Antifascist defense squads, June 27, 1932 and BArch: SAPMO-RY1/27: fo. 3: “Die Einschätzung des Wahlergebnisses im Bezirk” [Saxony], Aug.1932.

<sup>70</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21721: fo. 367: Police report on Antifascist Action and Antifascist defense squads, June 27, 1932.

<sup>71</sup> W. Eggerath, *Die Stadt im Tal* (Berlin: Dietz, 1952), 275-7.



Communist graffiti made its point not just with words (“Proletariat awake! Down with the wastrels, Germany for the producers!”) but through its location.<sup>72</sup> Buildings were targeted not only because of their height but still more because of what they symbolized. In Leipzig and other cities in Saxony, the summer of 1932 was the first time when “public buildings in places visible far away” were graffitied “on a really large scale.” Elsewhere, factories—as at Wuppertal—and churches were vandalized as centres of bourgeois power. KPD functionaries revelled in the middle-class anger this propaganda generated. The Leipzig actions, for example, were judged a “success” because, as the district reported, “the entire bourgeois and Social Democratic press wrote quite outraged reports, in various cases even with photos, about the ‘scrawlings’ of the Communists and thereby made the best agitation for us, as our slogans were reproduced word-for-word in the reports.”<sup>73</sup> When, one morning in early June, the small Mecklenburg town of Boizenburg awoke to find that the slogan “Vote KPD” had been painted in huge letters on its church’s tower, the good burghers were, according to an activist report, similarly sent into a “frenzy.”<sup>74</sup>

The KPD’s “Bolshevik methods” of agitation channelled the party’s complex organizational culture. Though a centralized, highly bureaucratic movement, embracing Stalinist ideological rigidity and discipline, the party had a revolutionary vision supercharged that summer by the

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<sup>72</sup> For the slogan, see LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21708: fo. 155: Reichsleitung des Kampfbundes gegen den Faschismus, “Reichstagswahlkampf im Zeichen der Antifaschistischen Aktion,” June 1932.

<sup>73</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/27: fo. 2 (reverse): “Die Einschätzung des Wahlergebnisses im Bezirk” [Saxony], Aug. 1932.

<sup>74</sup> BArch: SAPMO–RY1/5, fo. 375-6: Wilhelm Koenen’s “Bericht über Wahlversammlung in Mecklenburg” to Sekretariat des Z.K., June 6, 1932. For the KPD’s vandalism of churches, see C. Striefler, *Kampf um die Macht: Kommunisten und Nationalsozialisten am Ende der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main and Berlin: Propyläen, 1993), 272-6.

Antifascist Action campaign. Recent historiography's stress on how tightly Communist activists' lives and interests were rooted in their neighborhoods rather than party politics misses that, especially in elections, both could converge. The KPD's election propaganda was rooted in local street activism, facilitated by the leadership's pragmatism—necessitated by resource limitations—in permitting considerable improvisation and freedom for followers. Herein lay the party's impressive ability to mobilize proletarians: “the activity of the masses has been put to use,” trumpeted *Die Rote Fahne* as election day drew close. “Berlin is red.”<sup>75</sup>

#### IV.

Weimar election landscapes were staked out and fought over not just visually—the sensory plain on which most historiography has concentrated—but also auditorily. Sound can carry immense emotional significance and persuasive power, and it contributed enormously to the impact and image of Germany's Communists. Indeed, one can argue that the KPD had a particular ideological affinity for sound. First, the KPD's self-image as a rational movement grounded in Marxist dialectical materialism gave its leaders, who passed through ideological training at the MASCH party school or in Moscow, supreme confidence in their ability to win workers over through appropriately pitched explanatory dialogue.<sup>76</sup> Second, sound was a potent medium through which to represent proletarian unity. It was especially suited to a movement poor in financial resources yet rich in human activism. German working-class culture had a long musical tradition, and this was co-opted by the KPD. Its *Sprechchöre* (mass chanting choirs) embraced a distinctive new style, with singers intoning in unison

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<sup>75</sup> “Unser Rot siegt im Flaggenkrieg,” *Die Rote Fahne*, July 29, 1932, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 258-9.

political slogans.<sup>77</sup> Third, the KPD used sound to disrupt. Loud Communist demonstrations, often filled with the unemployed, effectively weaponized sound to challenge and shatter bourgeois peace and order. The desperate and dispossessed occupied acoustically, if transitorily, city quarters and villages whose own habitual soundtracks were hostile to Communist ideology.<sup>78</sup>

Ironically, the major auditory innovation of the election in the summer of 1932 was one from which the KPD was excluded: the opening up of radio for political campaigning. The new Papen cabinet lacked both popular support and any commitment to democracy. Radio offered its ultraconservatives a highly symbolic means of speaking over parliament directly to the German people. At the time, this powerful new medium could reach into over two million households.<sup>79</sup> On June 11, a week and a half into his tenure, the new Interior Minister, Wilhelm von Gayl, ordered a half-hour slot to be reserved daily between 6.30 and 7.30pm for the government to explain its goals and actions. At the Nazis' request, radio was also made available to the parties. The NSDAP's Gregor Strasser was the first to speak on June 14. A second government instruction, also issued on the eleventh, set out plans for a series of election broadcasts over the final six days before the vote on July 31. Parties holding at least fifteen seats in the Reichstag were each offered a twenty-five-minute slot between 7-8pm,

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<sup>77</sup> W.L. Guttsman, *Workers' Culture in Weimar Germany: Between Tradition and Commitment* (New York: Berg, 1990), 154-74 and 248.

<sup>78</sup> For the importance of different soundscapes in invisibly but tangibly zoning and defining modern cities, see M.M. Smith, *Sensory History* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 48-56 and T. Edensor, "The Social Life of the Senses: Ordering and Disordering the Modern Sensorium," in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Modern Age*, ed. D. Howes (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), esp. 33-8.

<sup>79</sup> M. Adena, R. Enikolopov, M. Petrova, V. Santarosa and E. Zhuravskaya, "Radio and the Rise of the Nazis in Prewar Germany," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130, no.4 (2015): 1899.

with the strongest parties speaking last. Speeches were to be submitted for pre-approval. However, the cabinet explicitly excluded the Communists—Germany’s third most popular party—from speaking. Against bitter accusations that such blatant discrimination was unconstitutional, and protest chants of “Radio free for List 3” (*Rundfunk frei für Liste 3*), von Gayl held firm.<sup>80</sup>

The streets were the key field of battle for political parties in 1932, and sound was potent in conveying rival movements’ identities and values. Joseph Goebbels had ordered that the Nazis’ campaign that summer should place its “main emphasis ... on mass demonstrations and SA marches.”<sup>81</sup> The Communists and the Social Democrats’ Iron Front were also out in force. Far from being alike, however, the opposing processions had a completely different aesthetic. Police remarked on the exclusively military character of Nazi processions; most were literally “marches” by uniformed SA and SS men. Moreover, even when the Nazis did substitute uniforms for working clothes to stage worker protests, their orders clarified that “naturally” wives and children were not to be brought along.<sup>82</sup> Communist and Iron Front processions were more inclusive, signalling embrace of the whole proletariat or democratic citizenry. Strongmen and disciplined paramilitaries gave them shape and protection, but the columns were filled with working people, women and children. The cadence of their steps

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<sup>80</sup> The Reichsminister des Innern orders of June 11 are in BArch: R78/619, fo. 44 (opening radio for the parties) and 45 (for a government slot). See also *ibid.*, fo. 47 permitting the Nazis use of radio. For criticism of the government for excluding the Communists, see the cutting “Gleiches Recht für alle!,” *Der Funke*, June 29, 1932 in BArch: R58/4180, fo. 278 and Guttsman, *Workers’ Culture*, 262.

<sup>81</sup> Noakes, *Nazi Party*, 216.

<sup>82</sup> IfZ, Munich: MA 738: Propagandaleiter, Gau München-Oberbayern, July 18, 1932, 2.

told a very different story of their movements' values from the martial stamp of the SA's studded boots, stepping in time toward the future.<sup>83</sup>

Sounds of protest and defiance defined the Communist movement in the summer of 1932. Antifascist Action promoted upheaval in Germany's cities; a grim and noisy backdrop to the Reichstag election. This was the season of cacophonous "lightening demonstrations" designed to overwhelm the police. Communists lit bonfires at road intersections to distract security personnel and cause traffic pile-ups. Shouts of "Hurrah for the Antifascist Action groups!" rose above the chaos. Games of cat and mouse were played, as activists exploited the disruption to march around neighboring streets singing the *Internationale* until they heard the shrill of whistles; a warning by Red Front-fighter men stationed on rooftops to disperse because the police were approaching.<sup>84</sup> There were rent strikes, violent resistance to house evictions and bloody clashes with political opponents. With six million out of work and the Papen government cutting benefits, the KPD easily mobilized the unemployed for protest. Notices scrawled in chalk on the pavement giving the time and place sufficed to draw careworn crowds to market squares and town halls. Then, desperate shouts of "Hunger! Hunger!" would reverberate before being replaced by cries of fear, pain and rage as charging police served "rubber truncheon soup."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: reverse of fo. 4: Württemberg Police report for period June 25 – July 15, 1932, 6.

<sup>84</sup> BArch: SAPMO–SgY30/801: Ernst Langguth, memoir, fo. 13-14. Cf. LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21721: fo. 365-7: police report of June 27, 1932.

<sup>85</sup> Deutsches Tagebucharchiv, Emmendingen: 3902-1: Karl Friedrich S. in Chemnitz, diary entries for May 23 and 29, 1932.

Antifascist Action burnished the KPD's credentials to be defenders of the working classes. Protest was propaganda, but so too were countless small everyday acts by KPD supporters to assert ownership of their cities. Proletarian districts were claimed and Communist solidarity and resolve expressed by patrols of workers, who made the party's clenched fist salute and shouted "Red Front!" *Rote Fahne* urged readers to seize control of the audio sphere with this greeting, arguing that "a decisive public demeanour" was "an effective weapon against the Nazi terror."<sup>86</sup> It also served to shut out Nazi activists. That summer of 1932 witnessed both the NSDAP and the KPD make unprecedented effort to canvass voters in housing blocks, at welfare offices and outside factories. In the capital, the Communists ran a sophisticated operation, organizing canvassers into large groups of 20-40, so that "no single house, no single apartment in Berlin may be left unapproached."<sup>87</sup> Each group was allocated several house blocks and ordered to keep card catalogues on their residents' political sympathies. Based on this information, Communist brochures were selected for distribution. Sales of KPD literature would be higher, activists were shown, if they bantered and adapted their pitch to residents' individual circumstances. Selling to sympathizers was not enough: "if every brochure is to be a bomb [make an impact], one must get into every worker apartment."<sup>88</sup>

To draw attention to their proselytizing, the Communists made striking and distinctive use of music. Their signature chanting choirs and *Agitprop* troupes were posted outside factories—

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<sup>86</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: fo. 76 and 86: Police report on UB Nordost Secretariat meeting, June 6, 1932, and the communication to the Unterbezirk's activists on June 8. Cf. *Die Rote Fahne*, July 10, 1932, 13.

<sup>87</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: reverse of fo. 92: Police report on UB Northwest's party worker conference of 8.6.32, 19 June 1932.

<sup>88</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21721: fo. 290, 292-3: "Bomben in jeder Arbeiterwohnung" (Summer 1932).

which as centres of production were the KPD's main target, as well as a source of weakness and frustration—to catch workers as they changed shifts.<sup>89</sup> The activists' chants and ditties skewered fascist and democratic alternatives and pithily broadcast the KPD's utopian vision:

Not “Third Reich,” not “Second Republic”

But Soviet Republic.

Proletarian, you will only be free

If you vote on July 31 for [Communist] List 3.<sup>90</sup>

On “Red Rural Sundays” held once or twice monthly to whip up support in the countryside, music was similarly prominent. The Communists became inextricably associated with the piercing, somewhat dissonant whine of the *Schalmei* (Martinshorn), an inexpensive, easy-to-learn wind instrument resembling several motor horns welded together. *Schalmei* bands were the star attraction at “dance evenings,” staged to win over rural youth to the Marxist cause. Their repertoire of martial-sounding leftist hits like *Der rote Wedding* was also guaranteed to draw a crowd to a small-town market square, although the music could provoke opposition. The *Agitprop* Leader Hans Fladung recalled a veritable acoustic battle in the Lower Rhine town of Weeze highly revealing of the political significance of sound. Fladung had arrived with a band to canvass the town. However, when the Communist musicians started their set on the market square, the bells of the nearby Catholic Church began to ring. The *Schalmei*, whose sound represented an alien urban, atheistic ethos, were challenged by loud tones

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<sup>89</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21708: fo. 205. Kampfbund gegen den Faschismus, Abteilung Frauen [July 1932].

<sup>90</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21742: fo. 137: Confetti sheet with Communist slogans.

intimately bound up with the tradition and hierarchy of a pious community. It was an unequal struggle, and the Communists withdrew.<sup>91</sup>

For all its focus on public spaces, the open meeting where politics was debated and rhetoric mattered was still central to Communist strategy in the summer of 1932. The primary aim of Antifascist Action was to build proletarian solidarity under the KPD, and this could be done only by bringing together workers. Some 14,000 meetings in welfare offices, house blocks and industrial plants were held during the campaign's apex on July 10-17, the "Antifascist Week of Struggle."<sup>92</sup> The KPD's Central Committee took close interest in how local branches ran political meetings. Venues were to be decorated with red banners and posters. Communist and Social Democratic workers were to rub shoulders, making the proletarian "unity front" of the KPD a physical reality. At the heart of any meeting was the speaker, whose argumentative force would win over the audience.<sup>93</sup> All levels of the party invested heavily in this form of engagement and the top speakers were in great demand. The KPD leader in North Bavaria, Jacob Boulanger, remembered 1932 as "a year of greatest exertion," in which he and other speakers "were on the days Friday, Saturday and Sunday continually underway in meetings." On one Friday in June, he spoke at six different gatherings, hurtling between them in a motorcycle sidecar.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> BArch: SAPMO-SgY30/1694: Johan Fladung, memoir, fo. 291 and 293-5. More generally, W. Hinze, *Die Schalmei: Vom Kaisersignal zum Marschlied von KPD und NSDAP* (Essen: Klartext, 2003).

<sup>92</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21708: fo. 159: Reichsleitung des Kampfbundes gegen den Faschismus, "Reichstagswahlkampf im Zeichen der Antifaschistischen Aktion," June 1932.

<sup>93</sup> See BArch: SAPMO-RY1/5: reports written by speakers to the Communist Central Committee in the summer of 1932.

<sup>94</sup> BArch: SAPMO-SgY30/90: Jacob Boulanger, memoir, fo. 105.



One meeting held at a pub in Dachau on July 5 might stand as representative for the many thousands of small local events run by the KPD at election time. The meeting was scheduled for 8pm, but it began late because at first the crowd was so small. After forty-five minutes, 200 people had turned up; mostly Communists but with a smattering of Iron Front supporters among them. The speaker, who had travelled in from nearby Munich, addressed the usefully vague topic of “Who rules in Germany?” The policeman sent to listen noted disdainfully that he “did not keep factually to this theme but covered everything else imaginable.” The officer was, however, impressed by the “special passion” with which the speech was delivered. The content adhered tightly to the approved attack lines in the central party’s *Referentenmaterial*: declamation of bitter struggle against Capitalism, rejection of Papen’s exploitative “government of the property-owning class,” criticism of its enablers, the SPD’s treacherous leaders, the “Papen soldiers” of the Nazi SA and the Church, and a forceful appeal for proletarian unity behind the KPD. The speech concluded with a panegyric to the Soviet Union, and an admonition to the German working class to follow the Soviet model.<sup>95</sup>

While SPD leaders contrasted their own “sober, factual statements” with the radicals’ “mass suggestion” and modern historians have taken up this characterization, arguing that the far left and right “unequivocally focused on hearts over minds,” this was not at all how Communists regarded their agitation.<sup>96</sup> The message from the very top of the KPD was that calm, rational and logical discussion was the way to build Antifascist Action’s proletarian unity. Thälmann himself warned that it was not enough “to denounce unswervingly the treachery of the SPD.” Communists must simultaneously work “continuously to convince in

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<sup>95</sup> SA Munich: LRA 127715: Gendarmerie–Hauptstation Dachau to Bezirksamt Dachau on “Öffentliche Volksversammlung der K.P.D.,” July 6, 1932.

<sup>96</sup> Braun, *Von Weimar*, 374 and Ross, *Media*, 234.

a comradely fashion the Social Democratic workers that we are the only antifascist party ... and ... the only party of Marxism and the proletarian revolution.”<sup>97</sup> So strong was Communist functionaries’ belief in their own powers of logical persuasion that they even tried to turn policemen.<sup>98</sup> They also risked life and limb by speaking at Nazi meetings. Radicals on the far left and the far right attended each other’s events but, at least in KPD functionaries’ minds, their objectives fundamentally differed. The SA’s purpose was to disrupt and silence, through noise, stink bombs and, most usually, physical violence. By contrast, KPD activists strove to “unmask” Nazi ideology and enlighten people they regarded as dupped proletarians in brown shirts.<sup>99</sup>

The greatest spectacle of all major parties’ election campaigns in 1932 was the mass rally, and here too sound was central; such enormous events would have been impossible without the invention of the electric microphone. The KPD scheduled big rallies that summer to showcase high profile speakers and publicize both the extra-parliamentary Antifascist Action and the Communist Reichstag election campaign. The rally held by the KPD at Elberfeld Stadium in Wuppertal, in the Lower Rhine district, on July 12, 1932 offers a good example of such a flagship event. It was enormous: the 70,000 participants claimed by the Communist

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<sup>97</sup> Thälmann, “Strategie und Taktik,” 98. This admonition was echoed by functionaries lower in the hierarchy. See, for example, LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21721: fo. 285: “Zur Einheitsfront!!!” issued by the KPD’s Berlin and Brandenburg District.

<sup>98</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21629 contains examples of these subversion efforts.

<sup>99</sup> This attitude appears repeatedly in Communist writings. See, for example, the cutting from *Die Arbeiterin. Die Zeitung aller werktätigen Frauen von Berlin u. Brandenburg*, July 1932, 8 in LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21720: fo. 185. More generally, T.S. Brown, *Weimar Radicals: Nazis and Communists between Authenticity and Performance* (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 85.

press matched the audiences of many of the most hyped Nazi and Iron Front rallies.<sup>100</sup> The Wuppertal rally also bore similarity to National Socialist events by promoting a personality cult. Ernst Thälmann took centre stage and spoke for more than an hour and a half. The KPD Chairman's entry into the stadium took the form of a victory lap to music, which later hagiographies insisted was a spontaneous response to the adulation of assembled workers. In the following days, fawning press coverage celebrated Thälmann as the Communist Party's "*Führer*."<sup>101</sup>

The rally's political message was sugared by entertainment, which itself carried ideological meaning. A football match between the Communists' *Dynamo Düsseldorf* and a Social Democratic team from Wuppertal thrilled spectators before Thälmann's arrival and offered a neat allegory of Antifascist Action's core refrain: that there was always a place for ordinary Social Democrats in the heart of the Communist movement, despite their friendly rivalry. Music played a powerful role throughout the festivities. The KPD's Lower Rhine District had twenty *Schalmei* bands for its propaganda activities. Five hundred musicians played in the opening concert, and there was more music later, with battle marches, "mass song" by a 1000-strong worker choir and chanting by the district's *Agitprop* troupe. Sound was a powerful medium for demonstrating Communist worker unity and creativity, and for

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<sup>100</sup> For comparison, Hitler's third "Deutschlandflug," a series of 50 rallies in the second half of July 1932, claimed an average audience of over 60,000 people, though the largest rallies exceeded any the Communists could stage. See Paul, *Aufstand*, 207.

<sup>101</sup> L.A. Büchner and F. Zimmermann, "Thälmann-Kundgebung 1932 in Wuppertal," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 30, no. 1 (1988): 57-61. This article reprints extracts from the local Communist newspaper, *Freiheit*. See also "Größte Kampfkundgebung seit Kapp," *Die Rote Fahne*, July 14, 1932), 1 and BArch: SAPMO-SgY30/1694: Johan Fladung, memoir, fo. 271-3 and 291.

enflaming emotions, from sorrow and solemnity when the roll of Communist fallen was read to excitement and solidarity as the party's functionaries paraded.<sup>102</sup>

The other salient feature of the Wuppertal rally was its transience. For all the excitement and noise on the day, the crowd would finally recite Antifascist Action's solemn oath of struggle and then fade into the night, like the dying note of a *Schalmei*. On the morrow at the stadium, the red bunting was gone and in its place were hung swastikas, ready for a National Socialist rally. Joseph Goebbels, the meeting's speaker, recorded in his diary the danger he faced in reaching the venue. "The approaches to the stadium were completely blocked," he wrote. The Communists had circulated flyers warning that the Nazis would not come away alive. Thälmann's event had clearly succeeded in whipping up resistance. Only through luck was Goebbels not recognized. Nevertheless, though only 15,000 supporters showed up to listen to the top propagandist, the Nazis had their meeting. Germany at election time was a place of political impermanence, and propaganda the stuff of fleeting sights, sounds and sensations.<sup>103</sup>

## V.

The KPD leadership was triumphant when the results of the July 31, 1932, election were announced. The Communists' vote had risen by one-fifth over the 1930 Reichstag election, winning them 89 seats. This was far behind the massive increase the Nazis registered, from

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<sup>102</sup> Other Communist rallies followed similar programmes. See, for example, LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030

Tit.95, Nr. 21742: fo. 139: poster for Niederrhein Stadium rally in Oberhausen on July 27, 1932.

<sup>103</sup> Fröhlich (ed.), *Tagebücher, Teil I, Band 2*, 196-7 (entry for July 14, 1932). Goebbels gave no attendance estimate. The figure of 15,000 comes from the local press: *Solinger Tageblatt*, 163. Jahrgang, Nr. 124 (July 14, 1932), 2. The Communists claimed just 6,000 had attended: "Goebbels-Parade in Wuppertal von Antifaschistischer Aktion verhindert," *Die Rote Fahne*, July 14, 1932, 2.

107 to 230 seats, making the NSDAP the Reichstag's largest party. KPD propagandists insisted, however, that this did not matter: "We Communists," they asserted firmly, "are the sole victors of this election campaign."<sup>104</sup> The Nazis had failed in their bid to win a majority and had merely concentrated the protestant bourgeois vote. The important fact for KPD activists was that they had drawn 600,000 proletarian voters away from the SPD. A full third of Berlin had voted Communist and support for the party had risen in rural areas. "Despite the state of emergency, despite the ban on [our newspaper] *Rote Fahne*, despite the bar on speaking on the radio, despite terror everywhere, the KPD advances," crowed its publicists.<sup>105</sup> Thälmann claimed that the leadership's course was vindicated, trumpeting Antifascist Action as "the most important source of our election victory on July 31."<sup>106</sup>

The KPD's campaign that summer offers a window into the party's culture. As a Stalinized organization, with power concentrated at the top and exercised bureaucratically, the party ran a centrally managed campaign with tight control over ideological messaging. It competed with its major rivals using modern advertising, putting on large rallies and waves of political meetings and distributing millions of posters and print propaganda to advertise its cause. What is surprising in the context of the historiographical debate on Stalinization, however, is that the KPD was not monolithic. Stymied by financial weakness, its leaders pragmatically tapped the party's culture of revolutionary activism to fight a campaign on more favourable ground: the streets. All Weimar's major political parties took part in the "Battle of Symbols"

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<sup>104</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21721: fo. 272: "An alle sozialdemokratischen Wähler!," early August 1932.

<sup>105</sup> LA Berlin: A Pr. Br. Rep.030 Tit.95, Nr. 21683: fo. 167: KPD flyer to Nazi proletariat, early Aug. 1932.

<sup>106</sup> H.A. Winkler, *Der Weg in die Katastrophe: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1930 bis 1933* (Berlin and Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz, 1987), 683-94.

in 1932, but the KPD had a special affinity for its guerrilla-style propaganda, illegal publicity and violence. Under the heightened mobilization of Antifascist Action, its graffiti politicking was a proxy assault on the bourgeois capitalist system. Moreover, it fused high politics with the parochial identities which Pamela Swett's work has shown to be central to activists, enabling them to lay visible claim to their neighborhoods.

How effective the KPD's campaign was in winning over Germans can only be speculated. However, it does seem clear that the campaign projected the party's image as very different from both radical and democratic competitors. Though similar tools were available to the KPD, NSDAP and SPD, the distinct ways that they were used should not be ignored and sent clear messages to voters. The Antifascist Action campaign set the tone for the Communists' distinctive election appeal in the summer of 1932. If the Nazi movement's soundtrack was the heavy, disciplined tread of marching SA men—terrifying or reassuring depending on a German's class and political sympathy—then that of the Communists was shouts of protest.<sup>107</sup> The Communist campaigning did not achieve its leadership's hopes of crushing the Social Democrats or of conquering the factories. It did, however, inadvertently play into the Nazis' hands, lending visceral credibility to their polarizing warnings of "red civil war."<sup>108</sup> Protest cries faded and graffiti was soon washed away. What small triumphs the KPD won with its daring visual propaganda and angry auditory appeals proved illusory and short-lived.

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<sup>107</sup> P. Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone: Geschichte der SA* (Augsburg: Bechtermünz, 1988, 1999), 116-17.

<sup>108</sup> Paul, *Aufstand*, 102.