

THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION IN GERMANY 1918-1922

By early November 1918 it was obvious that Germany had lost the war, and on the 9th of that month the Kaiser and Crown Prince fled into exile in The Netherlands. On that same day Germany was declared a republic under the leadership of Friedrich Ebert of the Social Democratic Party. However, the far left wanted a Communist government and set up a Workers & Soldiers Council in Berlin in imitation of the Russian soviets. The revolutionaries even went as far as to occupy the chancellery and take Ebert prisoner on 23 December. (He was rescued on the following day by troops from the Potsdam garrison.)

Then, in early January 1919 there were mass demonstrations in Berlin in an attempt to overthrow the government. However, volunteer forces headed by Gustav Noske entered the city on the 11th and, after heavy street fighting, took control by the 15th. The two leading Communists, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were arrested and subsequently murdered. Thus, the Communist Revolution failed at the national level, clearing the way for the creation of the Weimar Republic.

In addition to the attempted takeover in Berlin, however, Communists were active in most other parts of Germany, creating local and regional Workers & Soldiers Councils. A broad selection of philatelic memorabilia related to these activities is shown on the ensuing pages.



Contemporary picture postcard showing Red Guards in a Workers & Soldiers Council truck with mounted machine guns driving through the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. This card was franked with a 5 Pf. Germania stamp to pay the printed matter rate to Rotterdam. It was postmarked in Berlin on 23 November 1918.

None of the Communist philatelic material shown in this exhibit is listed in any of the specialized catalogues, nor has the exhibitor been able to find any significant literature available on the subject. Moreover, collectors in Germany seem extremely disinterested in such items. It should be pointed out, however, that the ownership of such material would have been considered politically incorrect in the extreme during the National Socialist regime from 1933 to 1945. As a result, it can be assumed that a substantial number of relevant stamps, covers and articles were destroyed during this period. Indeed, it has taken several decades of hunting merely to assemble the modest amount of material shown here.

After a long and frustrating war, the German sailors were especially vulnerable to left-wing propaganda. As a result, the Communist revolution in Germany actually began with a mutiny in the fleet at Kiel on 3 November 1918 and spread from there to other areas, including Berlin.

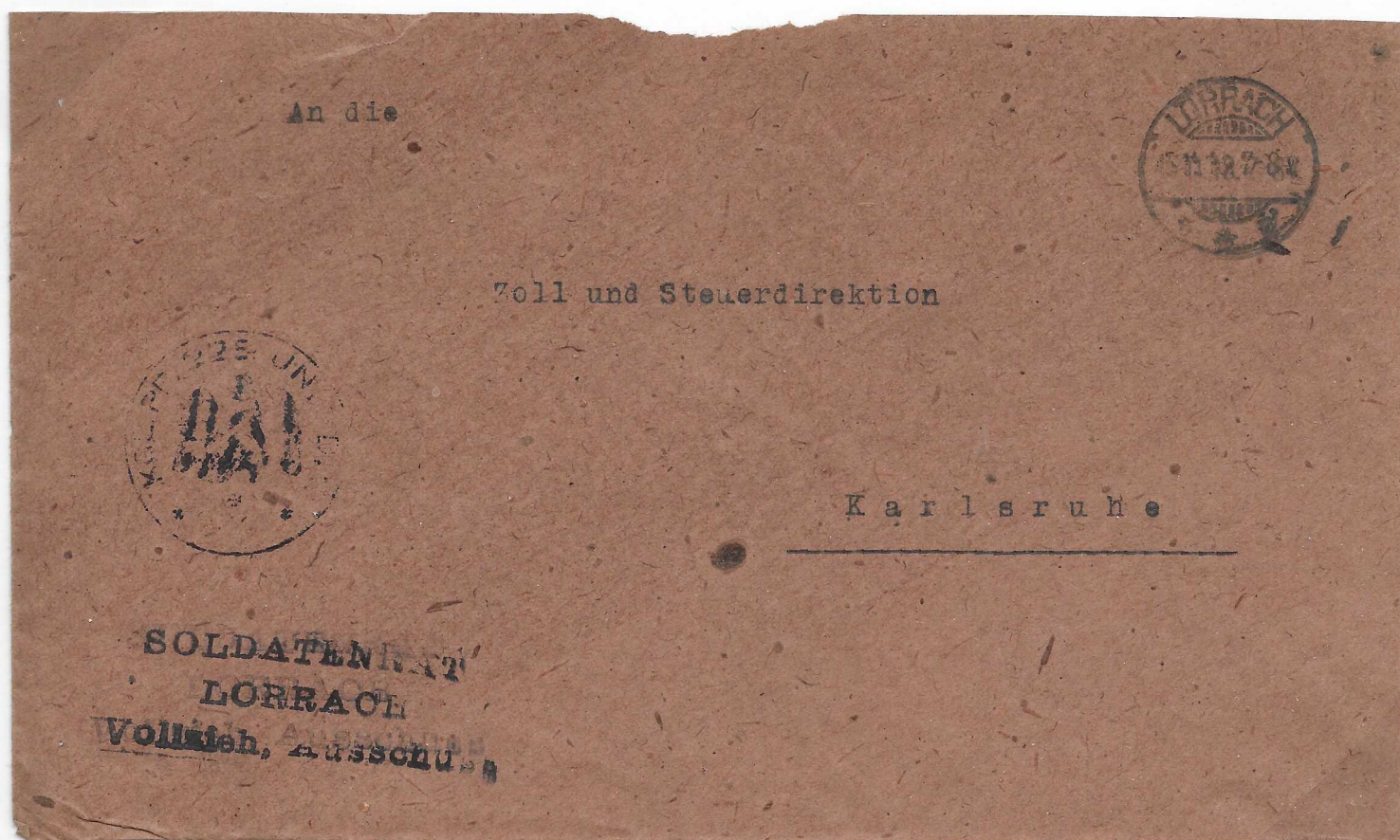
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Postal card uprated to the fee of 10 Pf. that became effective 1 October 1918. Note that a modified cachet of a naval unit was used as a censor marking by the Marinerat (Sailors Council). In this case the word "Kaiser" was excised from the cachet which originally read "Imperial Navy." The charity label overprinted with a red hammer and sickle had no philatelic significance; it may have been a reflection of Communist sympathies on the part of the sender or could have been added later.

**WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL
IN BADEN**

In confirmation of the widespread nature of the Communist revolt, there was a Soldiers Council operating at least briefly in Lörrach, Baden, just north of the Swiss border.

Lörrach
15 November 1918



Official envelope sent from the "Soldatenrat" in Lörrach to the Customs & Tax Office in Karlsruhe. Not subject to payment of postage.

WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL IN BAVARIA

As the war ground to a close, King Ludwig III of Bavaria saw the handwriting on the wall and abdicated on 8 November 1918. An Independent Socialist, Kurt Eisner, immediately declared a "Volksstaat (Peoples State)" to replace the monarchy. The Communists were opposed to this solution and wanted to establish Workers & Soldiers Councils to rule the country. They initiated three waves of revolution in Bavaria: the first immediately following the abdication, the second in the spring of 1919 and the third in 1920. Although unsuccessful in each case, they resulted in an extended period of political turmoil.

In the first instance, a group of revolutionary soldiers took control of the post office branch located in the railway station of Augsburg on Sunday morning, 9 November. Although most of the material related to the former monarchy was destroyed, a few stamps were spared and turned into a local revolutionary issue by affixing circles of pink paper to blot out the royal portrait. Eight different denominations have been reported, all cancelled with the Augsburg 2 postmark on that day. However, the quantities that survived are believed to be extremely small.

Augsburg
9 November 1918



Even less is known about a provisional handstamp of "Republik," apparently produced at the same time in the Passau, presumably by leftist revolutionaries desiring to indicate the downfall of the monarchy (ex Koerber).

Passau
9 November 1918



WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL IN BAVARIA

Eisner was murdered in February 1919, and there ensued a battle for control between the Independent Socialists, Socialist and Communists. By 7 April, the far leftists had seized control in Munich and established a "Räte Republik (Communist Republic)." This group was, in turn, suppressed upon the arrival of 30,000 men of a rightist paramilitary organization (Freikorps) sent from Berlin at the beginning of May.

During their period in power, the Communists ordered stamps depicting King Ludwig III to be overprinted "Räte-Republik Baiern" by the Parcus Brothers printing works. However, most of these were destroyed when the Freikorps arrived and only an estimated 10 copies are believed to have survived.

München
30 April 1919
1 May 1919



The Communist takeover disrupted normal mail service in Bavaria, as indicated by the postcard shown below. It was mailed from Nuremberg on 10 April 1919 but returned because communications had been cut off. Note that "Munich" was crossed out with a blue crayon and the marking "Zurück Gesperrt" applied.

Nürnberg
10 April 1919



WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL IN BAVARIA

The Communists also provided a second type of overprint during their period in power in the spring of 1919, when Comrade Egelhofer was the City Commandant of Munich. These provisionals involved the Ludwig III issue handstamped with "R.R.B. (for Räte-Republik Baiern)" and a violet circle to blot out the portrait of the former King. Denominations from 2 1/2 to 25 Pf. have been reported, some with a prior overprint "Volkstaat Bayern" and some without. As with the previous issue, most of these were destroyed, and only a small quantity is believed to have survived.

Dachau
25 April 1919



Actual mail showing use of the Räte-Republik stamps is exceedingly elusive. This postcard was sent by a member of the Red Guard (indicated by the return address) to a comrade in Munich. The typed message on the reverse describes a meeting with Egelhofer who provided some of the the new stamps. Note handstamp marking that reads "Headquarters/the Red Army/Dachau."

WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL IN BAVARIA

In the aftermath of the violent inflation that gripped the country, the German foreign minister, Walther Rathenau, was assassinated in June 1922. Popular support again developed for extremist parties on both ends of the political spectrum. For their part, the Communists tried for a third time to create a Bavarian Soviet Republic but were thwarted by the government under Count Hugo von Lerchenfeld. Later, a right-wing coup d'etat in Munich by Hitler and Ludendorff was defeated on 9 November 1923, and order was restored once more.

Munchen
27 October 1922



Two German stamps were perforated with crossed hammers in 1922, reportedly intended for use on official mail of the Bavarian Soviet Republic. Actual covers showing use of such stamps are not recorded, so the issue may be a Cinderella (ex Koerber).

**WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL
IN BERLIN**

The Communists were especially anxious to take over the municipal government in Berlin, which would give them control of the streets. The national government, of course, was equally determined to prevent this. The struggle for power lasted until 15 January 1919 when the Communists were defeated.

Berlin
26 November 1918

Vollzugsrat des Arbeiter- und Soldatenrats in Berlin

Dem

*Deutschen Zentralbura
vom Raten Krieg*



Reichsdienstfache!

*Berlin
Am Karstadt*

The above example is an official envelope (Reichsdienstsache) of the Workers & Soldiers Council in Berlin, sent during its brief period in power in the city.

WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL IN EAST FRISIA

Elsewhere along the North Sea, Workers & Soldiers Councils took control in Emden and Norden, as confirmed by the cachets on the postcard below.

Dornum
23 December 1918

Absender: { Dienstgrad Hauptmann Euden
 Name 1601 (X 40.) }
 (Nachfolgende Spalten genau nach der vom Truppenteil gegebenen
 Anweisung ausfüllen.)
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Fieldpost card send by a captain in an Oldenburg battalion (probably in the process of demobilization) to Bad Harzburg. No postage charged due to military use. The "Arbeiter und Soldatenrat" cachets presumably represented a form of censorship by the Communists.

WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL IN HAMBURG

The Communists were particularly strong in the port areas along the North Sea. Thus, it was logical that Workers & Soldiers Councils would be created in those areas. In Hamburg, the period of Communist power lasted from November 1918 until February 1919 when it was suppressed by troops sent from Berlin.

Hamburg
13 December 1918
14 January 1919

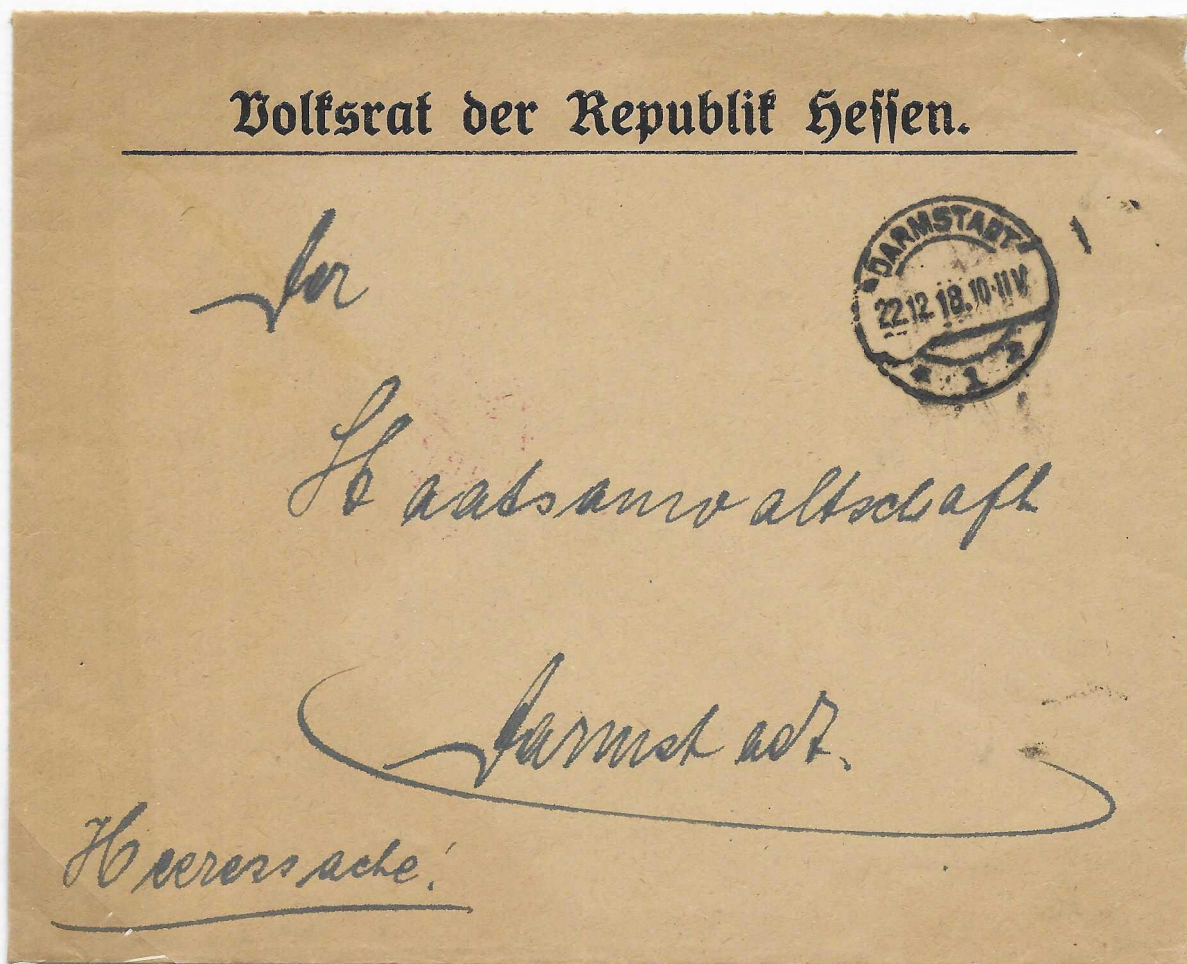


The above examples are official army envelopes (Heeressache). Note use of "Soldatenrat" in the return addresses and the cachets of the "Arbeiter und Soldatenrat" with handshake that confirmed that the covers were entitled to be forwarded free of postage.

PEOPLES COUNCIL
IN HESSE

As Communist power spread to other areas of Germany, additional left-wing Councils sprung up to take control of city and state governments. In this case, the state authority in Hesse was involved.

Darmstadt
22 December 1918



Official army envelope (Heeressache) sent within Darmstadt from the "Volksrat der Republik Hessen." On the reverse is a red circular cachet with this same wording that permitted the cover to be sent free of postage.

WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL
IN POMERANIA

Communist agitation also occurred in areas of Prussia, including Pomerania, most of which is now a part of Poland lying along the Baltic Coast.

Stargard
30 January 1919

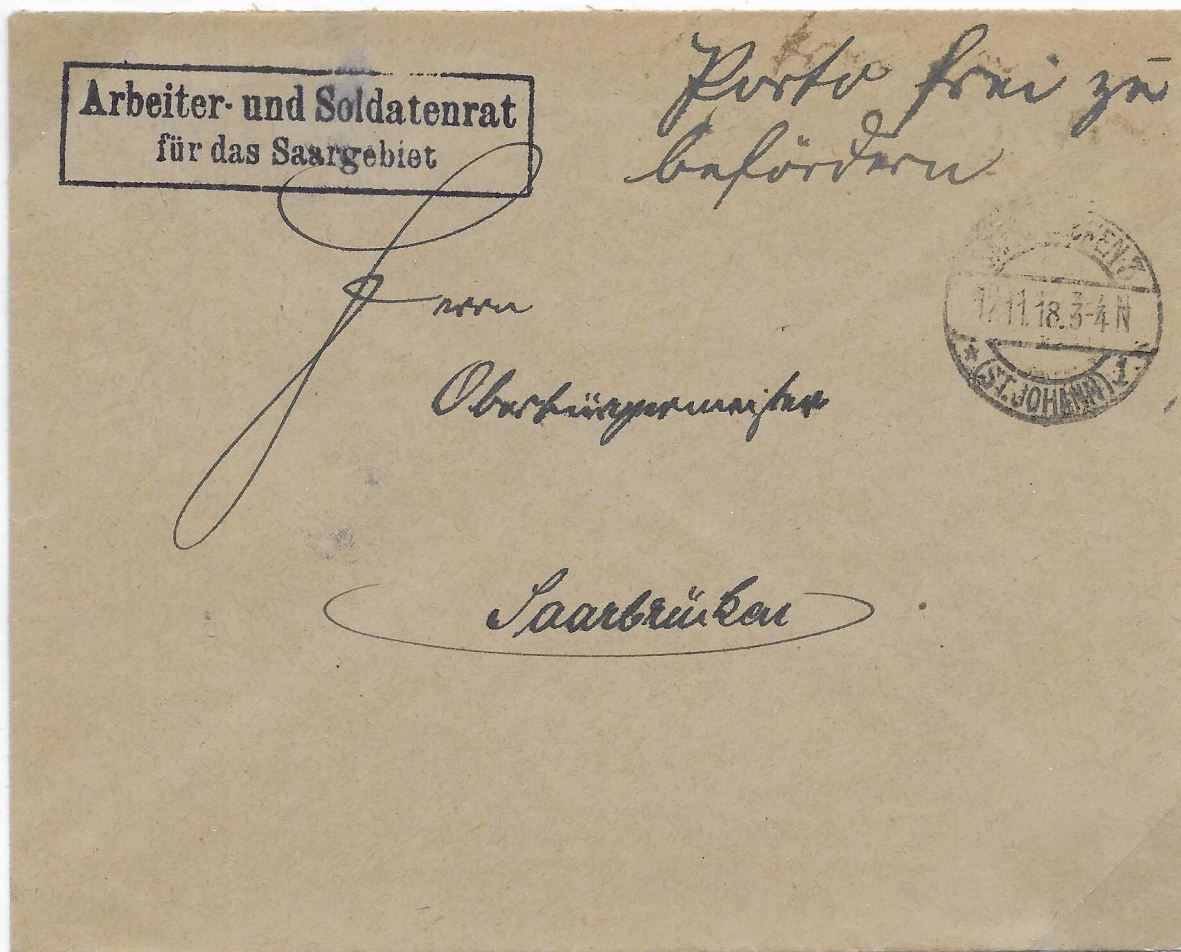


Official army envelope (Heeressache) sent from the "Arbeiter und Soldatenrat" in Stargard to Greifswald. The violet cachet permitted the cover to be sent without paying postage.

WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL IN THE SAAR TERRITORY

In the Saar, political leftists declared a Workers and Soldiers Council on 9 November, the same day as the Kaiser abdicated and went into exile in The Netherlands. By the 12th, they had taken control of the capital of the province, Saarbrücken, and in the days following extended their reach to other cities in the Saar. Under the terms of the Armistice with the Allies, all German military forces had to withdraw east of the Rhine, so they were not in a position to interfere, and the evacuation of Saarbrücken took place on 17 November. French occupation troops commanded by General Gregoire arrived on the 22nd and quickly moved to displace the Communists. Thus, the rule of the Workers & Soldiers Council ended on 23 November 1918, after a life of only two weeks.

Saarbrücken
17 November 1918



The above official cover from the Workers & Soldiers Council to the Major of Saarbrücken was mailed free of postage on 17 November 1918 from branch post office #3 in the district of St. Johann. It is the only recorded example of such usage during the period of Communist control in the Saar.

**WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL
IN SAXONY**

In the spring of 1920, one final Communist effort in the far southern reaches of Saxony, just to the west of the Czech Republic, was recorded philatelically. Little is known about the historical background of this movement, but, as shown, some Germania stamps were overprinted "Räte-Republik Vogtland." (This latter wording refers the name of this mountainous borderland.) Adorf and Bad Elster, where these covers were postmarked, are two small villages that can just barely be found on a highly detailed map of the area.



As both of these covers are locally addressed, they were not backstamped to prove that they were actually mailed. Unlisted in any of the specialized catalogues, it is likely that these overprinted stamps are a private -- although highly interesting -- creation.

WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL IN WÜRTTEMBERG

The Communist revolution was unsuccessful in Württemberg. However, there are philatelic remembrances of the effort. The postal system in the Kingdom had been integrated with the Reichspost in 1902 so, unlike Bavaria, only regular German stamps were in circulation at the end of the war. However, the state organs did have official stamps that were still in use. Below is shown a set of such stamps overprinted "A.S.R. (Arbiter & Soldaten Rat)" in a circle. It was reported by Dr. Friedrich Hederer in Lorch that sets of official stamps had been so overprinted by Communists in the Rotebühlkaserne (barracks) in Stuttgart in November 1918. (Each of the stamps shown here has Dr. Hederer's expertization mark on the reverse.)

Rottenburg (Neckar)
24 November 1918



Cover mailed from the Soldatenrat in Rottenburg on the Neckar in Württemberg to Berlin. Cachet of military unit.

WORKERS & SOLDIERS COUNCIL
IN WESTFALIA

A Communist government assumed temporary power in Ibbenbüren, a city in what is today the province of North Rhine-Westfalia in West Central Germany.

Ibbenbüren
28 November 1918



The above example is an official envelope of the "Arbeiter u. Soldatenrat/Ibbenbüren," as indicated by the straight-line and circular cachets which entitled it to be sent postage free.